

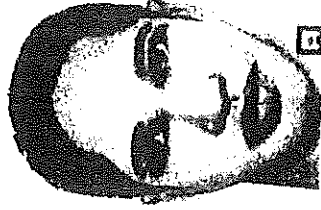
hers do not. Rather, it is a universal function of the brain that allows us to organize and manage the overload of stimuli that constantly bombard us. It's a system that brings coherence to a chaotic world; it helps our brains make judgments more quickly and efficiently by instinctively relying on patterns that seem predictable.

But categorization also can impede our efforts to embrace and understand people who are deemed not like us, by tuning us to the faces of people who look like us and dampening our sensitivity to those who don't.

Our awareness of racial categories can determine what we see, not just in the research laboratory but in the settings we find ourselves in every day. My college friend Marsha is African American and has a sister who is so fair-skinned she passed for white for much of her life as a young adult. Sometimes that sister worried that Marsha's presence might ruin her charade. She didn't want her friends or coworkers to realize she was black, so when she and Marsha were together, she never mentioned they were related. And no one caught on. Marsha was always amused by the look of panic on her sister's face whenever a co-worker saw them simply standing near each other, but she never thought to "out" her. She understood the social dynamics that motivated her sister's choice. Because the coworkers' thought of Marsha as black and presumed her sister was white, they were oblivious to the many physical resemblances—the eyes, forehead, and nose—between the two women. To be honest, I don't know if I would have pegged them as sisters if I hadn't been previously known. Once we've decided on the category, our perceptual system adjusts to suit the label we've settled on.

The effect is so strong that we can look at the same face and identify it differently, depending on whether we believe that

person to be one of us or an out-group member. In one study conducted by researchers at the University of Texas in El Paso, Latino participants were shown a set of computer-generated faces designed (using a facial composite construction kit) to be racially ambiguous. The researchers displayed the same faces with hairstyles typically worn by African Americans or hairstyles typically worn by Latinos. When asked later which faces they recognized, the participants were better able to remember the ones with the Latino hairstyles—those faces that they perceived as belonging to their own group. Simply presenting them as in-group members allowed the study participants to remember their faces more readily than they remembered those same faces when the hairstyles suggested those people were black.

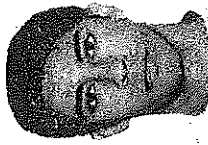


The impact categorization has on us is so strong that it too makes its mark on our neurons. For example, in one study I conducted with Brent Hughes, Nicholas Camp, and other colleagues at Stanford, we found that white participants exhibited less brain activity in brain areas that specialize in processing faces when shown black faces than when shown white faces. I was struck by the dampened response to black faces because it suggests the brain registered those faces in categorical terms.

that looked "more black" than the face on their computer screen. Likewise, those who had been told that the person on the screen was white drew a face that looked "more white" and was later recognized by other participants as white. Their perceptions moved to line up with the label assigned to the face.

But among the participants who thought of traits as malleable, the opposite occurred. Those who had been told the face was black drew a face that appeared more recognizably white. And if they had been told that the face was white, they drew a face that appeared more recognizably black. These people reacted against the stereotypical image the label suggested. Our findings show that what we perceive is influenced not only by the labels we are provided but by our own attitudes about the rigidity of categories. Although we tend to think

Ambiguous Target Face



"Black" Drawing



"White" Drawing



about seeing as objective and straightforward, how and what we see can be heavily shaped by our own mind-set.

In fact, the swirl of social judgments that flow from categorization is so strong it affects not only how we see others but how we perceive ourselves. That's the premise of one of my favorite novels. The renowned playwright Arthur Miller wrote *Focus* in 1945. It was his first novel and one of the first books to focus on American anti-Semitism—in the wake of the Nazi regime's systematic murder of European Jews. The story is set in New York City. World War II is drawing to a close. The protagonist, Newman, is a white Christian man charged with making sure that Jews who are attempting to pass as Christian are not hired at his company. He takes great pride in protecting the company from the scourge of Jews. In fact, he is one of the best in the business.

Then his eyesight begins to fail, rendering him less able to categorize people efficiently. At the urging of his boss, he purchases eyeglasses and gets back to work immediately. Yet the glasses create a much bigger problem for Newman: To the people around him, he suddenly resembles the sort of person he's supposed to protect them from. His neighbors, his co-workers, people on the street—all begin to suspect that *he* is Jewish. He is mortified at the thought and responds by letting people know in every way he can that he certainly is not Jewish, not even a little bit. Yet the suspicion lingers. There is nothing he can say to dissuade people from how he is seen.

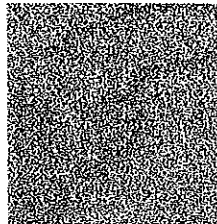
In fact, when he catches a glimpse of himself in the bathroom mirror with his glasses on for the first time, he sees the face of a Jew looking back. Alarmed, he snatches the glasses off, but he cannot undo what's already been decided. Rumor has spread, and no one can un-see the Jewish identity that's now assigned to him.

protect herself before that gun emerged and was fired at her. This raises yet another set of questions. Typically, we think of stereotypes as influencing how we see people. Could stereotypes also influence how we see objects?

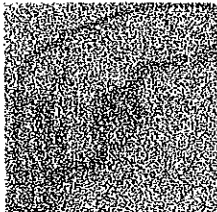
Long before the Crutcher incident, I worked with a number of colleagues at Stanford to understand how the black-crime association could affect the perception of weapons. In a laboratory study, we used a subliminal priming procedure to expose undergraduates to either a series of black male faces, a series of white male faces, or no faces at all. Next, we asked those undergraduates to participate in an object-recognition task. We exposed them to a series of objects that appeared on the computer screen one at a time. The image of each object started out as grainy, and in forty-one frames the object became less and less grainy.

We told our study participants that their goal was to indicate (with a button push) the moment at which they could detect what each object was. Some of these objects were related to crime (for example, guns and knives), and others were completely unrelated to crime (for instance, staplers and cameras).

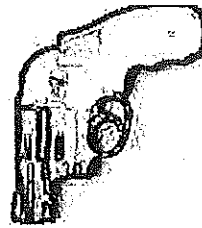
We found that the face priming had no impact on participants' ability to detect the objects that were unrelated to crime. Those participants



Frame 1



Frame 20



Frame 41

thousands of black men whose most common offense was moving suspiciously. Furtive movement is no longer considered a legitimate reason to make a stop in New York City. Perhaps as a consequence of this action (along with a series of other reforms), the number of stops NYPD officers make per year has fallen dramatically.

When we step back to look at the high-profile shootings across the country over the past two decades, we see that body movement is often at the center of the case. The act of reaching down to retrieve his wallet led to the shooting of Philando Castile in 2016; the officer thought Castile might be reaching for a gun. An unarmed Oscar Grant was shot to death at an Oakland transit station in 2009, after an officer yelled out "GUN!" when he saw Grant's hands move near his waistband. In Cincinnati, Timothy Thomas had unpaid traffic tickets and was trying to evade an officer who stopped him in 2001, when he was shot to death because he made a quick movement that "spooked" the cop into pulling the trigger. And in what's become the most infamous case, Amadou Diallo was shot forty-one times by NYPD officers in 1999 as he stood unarmed in the vestibule of his Bronx apartment. The officers said Diallo was looking up and down the street and moving suspiciously, "like he was trying to hide from us." The gun they thought he had in his pocket turned out to be a wallet.

And Officer Shelby said she had never been so afraid in her life as she was during that night she encountered Terence Crutcher—a black man walking away slowly with his hands stretched high above his head in the universal sign of surrender.

Act 4: Unarmed but Dangerous

But where was he walking? Officer Shelby was afraid that Crutcher was headed to his car to retrieve a gun. She needed to be ready to

AN IMPERFECT SHIELD

LeRonne Armstrong grew up in the 1980s in West Oakland, in an all-black neighborhood known mostly to outsiders for its high crime and housing projects. The only white people he saw regularly were teachers and police officers, and neither seemed to care very much about boys like him. In fact, young LeRonne feared the police more than he feared the criminals. You could avoid gang members' wrath by knowing what colors not to wear, what streets you shouldn't cross, which blocks to avoid. But the police were unpredictable and often seemed intent on inflicting misery. The only rule that made sense to him was what the old folks used to say: if you see the cops, you run as fast as you can and hope you don't get caught.

"Growing up there, some of the most violent people I've seen were actually police officers," Armstrong told me. "The way they used to jump out on people and just beat people up. You were scared of what could happen to you. . . . You would live your life fearing law enforcement. 'Don't talk to them. Don't look at them.' That's what you were told."

By the time he was ten, he was primed to panic at the sight of a patrol car. Whenever he and his buddies saw a cop car slow down, they would take off. "We were young boys not engaged in criminal activity, and we just made a decision that we were going to run. Because we were afraid they'd get out and maybe grab us and slam us on the car."

By the time he was thirteen, the crack cocaine epidemic had upped the ante. Drug sales, turf wars, raging addicts, and thieves made the neighborhood more dangerous and a bigger target for police. Residents were faced with a sort of Hobson's choice: endure the daily dangers of the violent drug trade or seek help from brutal and

BIASED



perception may be. Many officers who patrol diverse, high-crime communities come to view the racial disparities in policing as the sole result of who commits the crimes. People who live in those communities view those disparities as a result of police bias, because they know that the majority of their neighbors are not criminals.

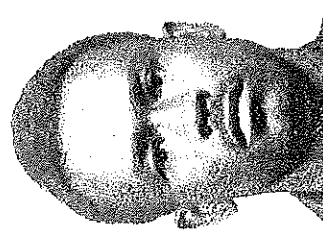
In procedural justice training, officers are taught to reorient their view—to think about every interaction with the public as they would a bank transaction. They can use that interaction to make a deposit that will increase trust and improve police-community relations, or they can allow it to become a withdrawal, decreasing trust and increasing police-community tension. Each interaction has the capacity to influence people well beyond the individual officer and resident directly involved, and has the potential to strain relations between police departments and entire communities in ways that harden over time and are tough to rectify.

sentenced to death. But more than 57 percent of the “highly stereotypical” black defendants were sentenced to die for their crimes.

Looking “more black” more than doubled their chances of being sentenced to death, even though we controlled for factors like the severity of the crime, aggravating circumstances, mitigating circumstances, the defendant’s socioeconomic class, and the defendant’s perceived attractiveness.

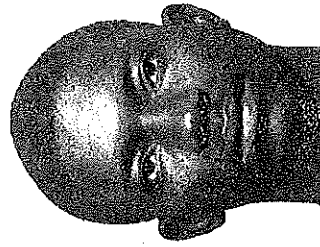
That takes implicit racial bias to a whole other level. It’s not just group membership that influences perceptions; it’s whether an individual’s physical appearance triggers the sort of pernicious stereotypes that suggest that blacks are inherently so dangerous they deserve extermination. That’s a sign that our perspectives, our criminal justice process, and our institutions are still influenced by primitive racial narratives and imagery.

Robbed Pharmacy
and Killed Owner



Life

Robbed Beauty Shop
and Killed Owner



Death

Two death-eligible defendants from the Baldus database. Although the defendants committed similar crimes, the defendant on the left received a life sentence, whereas the defendant on the right received a death sentence.

Indeed, concessions to implicit bias and bigotry have been incorporated over the years into our national perspective on fairness and liberty.

In a 1987 Supreme Court ruling upholding the death penalty for Warren McCleskey, a black Georgia man who killed a white police officer, the court considered a Baldus study of twenty-five hundred Georgia cases, which documented dramatic racial disparities in death penalty sentencing.

Justice Lewis Powell, writing for the five-member majority, acknowledged “a discrepancy that appears to correlate with race.” But he dismissed the statistical evidence because “disparities in sentencing are an inevitable part of our criminal justice system.”

The ruling came under heavy criticism from legal scholars and civil rights activists; it was even called “the Dred Scott decision of our time.” The concern was that it made institutional racial bias simply part of the status quo. And its impact persists today, making it difficult to challenge racial bias in any phase of the justice system without proof of deliberate discriminatory intention.

Powell worried that ruling otherwise would have opened the door to discrimination claims related to all manner of “arbitrary” variables, “even to gender,” he wrote. Or to “the defendant’s facial characteristics.”

Two months later, Justice Powell retired from the Supreme Court. He would later say that his decision in this case—which allowed McCleskey’s execution—was the only Court ruling that he ever regretted.