



'Criminal face' bias influences police lineup choices

By E. J. Mundell

MIAMI, Jun 12 (Reuters Health) - Do some people look more 'criminal' than others? Researchers say mental stereotypes of the 'criminal face' can lead witnesses to pick the wrong person in standard police lineups.

"In some individual lineups we find the disturbing result that, in fact, the person who has the highest criminal (-face) index is actually chosen the most frequently," explained Dr. M. Kimberley MacLin of the University of Texas, El Paso. She presented the findings here Friday at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Society.

Nineteenth-century theorists helped popularize the notion of a 'criminal physiognomy'--facial features that set felons apart from law-abiding citizens. Although this notion has since been repudiated, contemporary films, TV crime shows and other media continue to reinforce the image of the criminal as a scowling, unattractive threat to society.

MacLin, along with colleagues Drs. Roy Malpass and Vivian Herrera, sought to determine if the stereotype of the 'criminal face' remains embedded in our psyche, and if it might affect real-life choices as witnesses pick suspects from police lineups.

In their study, the researchers first had a set of lay 'judges' look at a group of six young adult male faces, asking them to "decide to what extent he looks like a criminal" on a scale of 1 to 9. The judges were also asked to rate these same faces as to how closely they matched a police description of a person not specifically associated with a crime (i.e. 'white, late 20s, blue eyes, brown hair, moustache').

A second group of people looked over the same photos. This time, participants were given just the physical description, or they were given the physical description plus the fact that they were 'looking for an armed robber.'

The result? When given only the physical description, subjects usually picked the photo that the judges had also rated the best match.

But when they were also instructed to look for a robbery suspect, subjects began to favor the photo of the man previously designated as looking 'most criminal' by the judges.

The tests were repeated seven times with seven different groups of photos. MacLin reports that, "in general, the physical target is chosen less frequently and the criminal target is chosen most frequently--much more frequently than is warranted."

The bottom line, she said, "is that the 'criminal' information is contaminating a fairly simple (intellectual) process--picking out someone based on factual information."

Although the experiment did not investigate the origins of the 'criminal face' stereotype, MacLin believes that "people certainly do have distinct impressions of who looks like a nice guy and who doesn't."

Face biases may work the other way, as well. MacLin said upcoming research will focus on "what happens when you have a person who has a baby-face, or looks very sweet--how does that impact the decision process?"

Efforts to educate police on these types of hidden biases are underway. Study co-author Malpass, for example, is currently helping the US Justice Department devise training programs that will help police officers across the country set up fairer lineups. But MacLin stressed that "police officers are not the bad guys here. It's not that they're doing it all wrong. They don't want to waste their time and have cases thrown out of court, either, so if there's a way to make the process more fair for everyone involved, and more accurate, then that's obviously a good thing."

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