

Short Report

Where Do We Look During Potentially Offensive Behavior?

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Imagine (or remember) being the only member of a particular social group in the room. Someone makes a questionable remark about your group, and all eyes turn to you. If you have ever experienced this, you know that it is doubly unpleasant. Not only has your social group been besmirched, but also you have suddenly become the center of unwelcome attention. In the experiment reported here, we used eye movement recordings to investigate this phenomenon from the perspective of the people looking at the offended bystander. Our findings point toward the function of this behavior, and reveal the surprising depth of cognitive processing that is engaged by social interaction.

One explanation for this attention is that people are practicing *social referencing*—seeking out the responses of a potentially victimized group member to help them assess the situation (Crosby, 2006). Because of their personal experience with prejudice (Essed, 1992), minority-group members may be seen as experts on prejudice (Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998) and may also be seen as experts in the area of morality (Vorauer, 2006). In fact, minority-group members may have more influence than majority-group members over judgments of discrimination (Crosby & Monin, 2008). Given these findings, the responses of minority-group members may be informative as people assess controversial comments.

A simpler, alternative hypothesis is that members of relevant groups are looked at simply because of low-level associations; hearing “the economy is in the red,” one might look at someone wearing red. Eye movement studies often reveal such effects, in which words or parts of words trigger looks to potential referents (Tanenhaus, Spivey-Knowlton, Eberhard, & Sedivy, 1995), even when the referents have been removed and the locations are empty (Richardson & Spivey, 2000). This alternative *association hypothesis* predicts that the mere mention of a social group will lead people to look at a member of that group, regardless of whether the group member might provide useful information.

We tested the association hypothesis by emulating potentially offensive behavior in the lab. Four males (three White and one

Black) discussed university admissions. One of the White discussants criticized affirmative action, and we manipulated whether or not participants believed the Black discussant heard what was said. Whereas the social-referencing hypothesis suggests that he would be fixated only if he could have an informative reaction, the association hypothesis predicts that he would be fixated regardless.

METHOD

Twenty-five non-Black undergraduates participated for course credit or a payment of \$10. They sat unrestrained about 30 in. from an ASL 504 remote eye-tracking camera (Applied Science Laboratories, Bedford, MA) at the base of a 17-in. LCD display. A Dell desktop computer calculated point of gaze and passed the information every 33 ms to a PowerMac G4, which controlled stimulus presentation and collected gaze-duration data. Following a calibration routine (2–5 min), participants read: “Please watch the following discussion. At the conclusion of the discussion you will be asked questions about the discussion content and/or the discussion participants.” The prerecorded video then began (Fig. 1a), and participants’ eye movements were tracked for its duration.

At the start of the video, an off-screen voice established that either all discussants could hear each other (*headphones on*) or the bottom two discussants (which included the Black individual) could not hear the others (*headphones off*). To reinforce this information, discussants raised their hands if they could hear each other, and one affirmed, “So, it’s just two of us now?” or “So, it’s all four of us now?” The footage was otherwise identical in the two conditions.

In the video, the discussants were instructed to give their thoughts on the university’s admissions policies. The first White discussant responded that the university should consider having admission interviews. The second White discussant criticized affirmative action in a way that was potentially offensive (Fig. 1a). Whereas the association hypothesis predicted that the Black individual would be looked at more than the available White discussants in both conditions, the social-referencing

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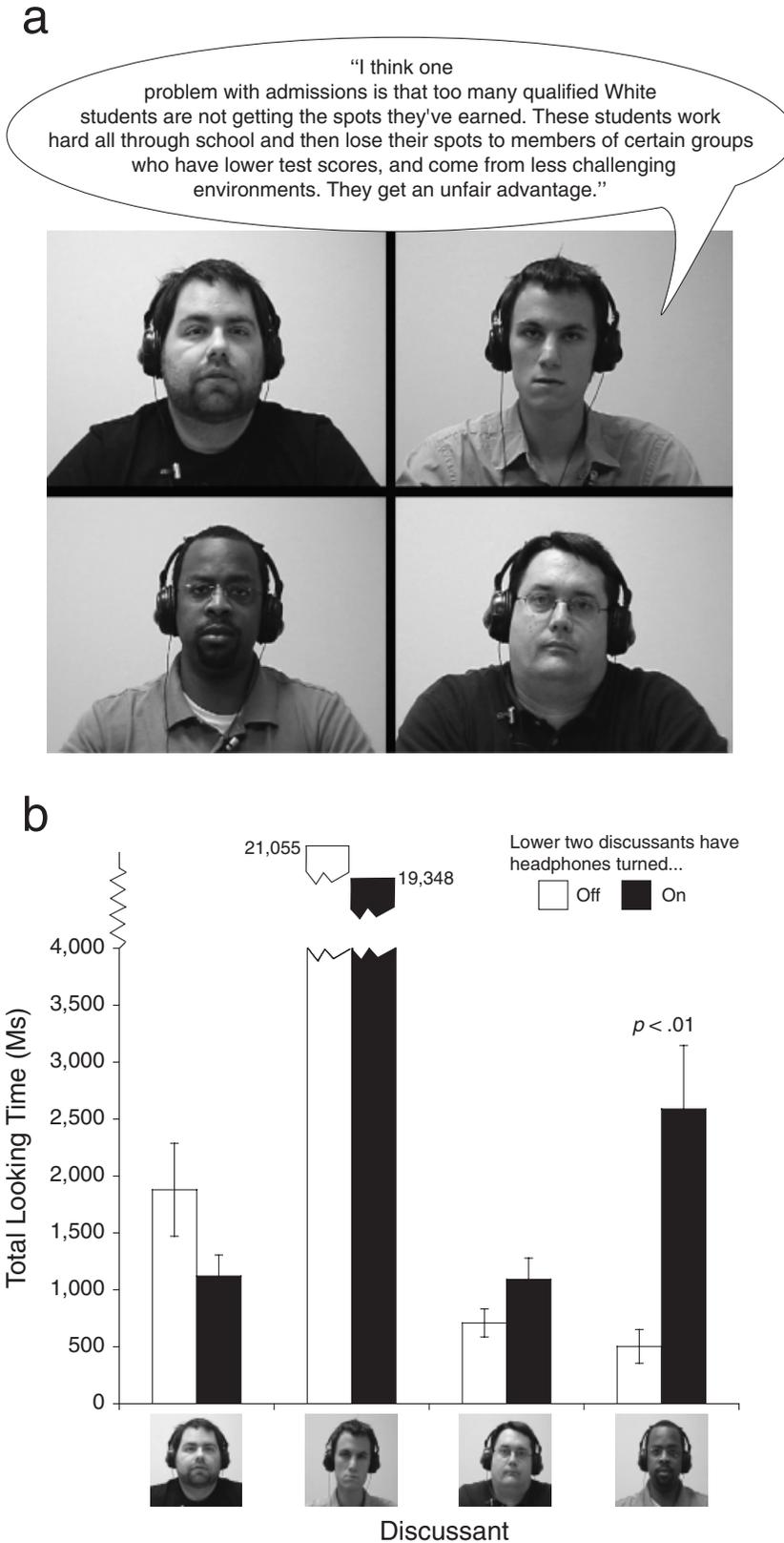


Fig. 1. The video screen as it appeared to participants (a) and mean looking time to each discussant during the potentially offensive comments (b). Results are shown separately for the headphones-on and headphones-off conditions. Error bars indicate standard errors. The p value indicates a significant effect of the headphones manipulation (Tukey honestly significant difference).

hypothesis predicted this response only in the headphones-on condition, when he could hear the remark and have a potentially informative reaction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We performed a 2 (headphones on vs. off) \times 4 (discussant) analysis of variance on the total looking times to the discussants during the potentially offensive comments and found a significant interaction $F(3, 69) = 5.15, p < .005, p_{rep} = .997, \eta_p^2 = .18$ (Fig. 1b). Specifically, participants looked at the Black individual roughly 5 times longer (Tukey's $p < .01$) in the headphones-on condition ($M = 2,588$ ms, $SD = 2,085$) than in the headphones-off condition ($M = 503$ ms, $SD = 491$). The headphones manipulation did not produce significant differences in looks to any of the White individuals. In addition, an analysis of looking times during the comments of the first, nonoffensive discussant showed that the interaction between the headphone manipulation and discussant was not significant, $F(3, 69) < 1$.

A member of a relevant minority group attracted attention during potentially offensive comments, but the association hypothesis cannot account for the pattern of results. Although the footage showing the remarks was identical in the two conditions, potentially triggering the same associations, participants showed little interest in the Black bystander when they believed that he could not hear what was being said.

From a cognitive perspective, these results reveal that participants simultaneously attend to what is said, who can hear what is said, the social identity of the listeners, and the possible reactions of the listeners, corroborating recent findings that eye movements are influenced by a range of subtle linguistic and interpersonal factors (Hanna, Tanenhaus, & Trueswell, 2003; Metzger & Brennan, 2003; Richardson, Dale, & Kirkham, 2007). From a social perspective, the finding that the reactions of minority-group members are sought out by observers raises important questions about the function of this behavior. With our paradigm, we cannot rule out the possibility that minority-group members are fixated simply because they are most likely to react, and behavior in live social interactions (in which bystanders may themselves be observed by others) may differ from

behavior in this laboratory situation. Additional research is needed to address these issues, but we believe this paradigm is rich with possibilities and can help illuminate how people go about answering the thorny question of what is appropriate and what is offensive.

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