

African Perceptions of Americans of African and European Descent

FRANCIS T. McANDREW
*Department of Psychology
Knox College*

ADEBOWALE AKANDE
*Department of Psychology
University of the Western Cape, South Africa*

ABSTRACT. Studies of the stereotyping of African and European Americans have relied almost exclusively on American samples. This study was a cross-cultural attempt to evaluate the generalizability of findings from this research. Two hundred ninety citizens of six African nations (Botswana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) reported stereotypes of African Americans and European Americans by responding to pairs of bipolar adjectives. Perceptions of African Americans were less homogeneous and slightly more positive than perceptions of European Americans, but identity as an American citizen was a more powerful determinant of stereotypes than was racial background.

RESEARCH COMPARING the stereotypes of African American and European Americans has traditionally revealed that African Americans suffer from a more negative stereotype (Allen, 1993). Negative stereotyping of Black Americans by Whites persists in spite of changes in the status of American Blacks over the past few decades (Stephan & Rosenfield, 1982; Weitz & Gordon, 1993). In fact, after a decline from the 1930s to the 1970s, negative stereotyping of African Americans appeared to be on the rise again during the 1980s (Gordon, 1986).

Most of these traditional stereotyping studies, however, examined the stereotypes of African Americans held by European Americans. More recent studies

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Address correspondence to Francis T. McAndrew, Department of Psychology, Knox College, Galesburg, IL 61401-4999. Electronic mail may be sent via Internet to fmcan-dre@knox.edu.

conducted with both African and European American participants confirm the importance of including both groups. The racial attitudes of African Americans have been shown to be more complex and heterogeneous than those of European Americans (Brigham, 1993); many studies that have included samples from both populations have revealed a strong in-group bias in which American Blacks and Whites hold more favorable stereotypes of their own racial group and view themselves more positively than members of the other group view them (Allen, 1993; Clark, 1985; Rickman, 1983). Race is a particularly salient cue for African Americans when making in-group/out-group distinctions (Jackson, Hymes, & Sullivan, 1987).

Yet another shortcoming of the research comparing Black and White American stereotypes is that it has been done almost entirely in the United States. At least one study (Hicks, Goldman, & Kang, 1968) has found that Chinese attitudes toward Black Americans are less favorable than their attitudes toward Whites. Because so little research has been conducted outside of the United States, it is impossible to determine how pervasive this bias is or why it exists.

It has been argued that the characteristics associated with high-status, socially dominant groups in a nation are perceived as the national characteristics or stereotype by outsiders (Eagly & Kite, 1987; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Levine & Campbell, 1972). If this is true, and the American national stereotype is synonymous with the European American stereotype, then American minority groups may assume a less American stereotype. This possibility may help to explain why there is less agreement about the stereotypes of African Americans among both White and Black Americans in studies in which the two have been compared. As compelling as this argument may be, however, a recent study by Kosmitzki, Cheng, and Chik (1994) did not indicate that correlations between self- and national stereotypes were higher for socially dominant American groups (i.e., men and European Americans).

In the present study we attempted to add to the cross-cultural database needed to supplement an understanding of the dynamics of racial stereotyping in the United States. Specifically, we were interested in the extent to which Africans would distinguish between Americans of African and European descent. The fact that Africans share a cultural heritage with African Americans but maintain out-group status on the basis of nationality made them an especially intriguing and relevant sample. Would the African participants in this study reciprocate the feelings of closeness expressed by American Blacks toward Black Africans (Thornton & Taylor, 1988) and express positive stereotypes of African Americans? If so, it would demonstrate that stereotypes of African Americans outside of the United States are not uniformly negative. Another possibility was that identity as an American might override any distinctions made on the basis of race, resulting in little difference between the stereotypes of African and European Americans.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 290 Africans (age range: 17–38 years; 95 men, 195 women) drawn from six English-speaking African nations¹: Zambia ($n = 31$), Nigeria ($n = 65$), Zimbabwe ($n = 54$), South Africa ($n = 63$), Kenya ($n = 41$), and Botswana ($n = 36$). Participants were chosen from semistratified samples designed to reflect the ethnic and religious mix of each country's population. They were university students, professionals, and embassy staff members. As a group, they were probably more highly educated and more widely traveled than would be typical of residents from their countries. All participants were provided with a letter explaining the nature of the study, along with a questionnaire. Data collection occurred between December 1992 and April 1993. All participants were unpaid volunteers.

Questionnaires

All participants received the same three-page questionnaire in English. The first page consisted of a brief introduction encouraging participation and describing the study, as well as specific instructions for filling out the questionnaire; it also requested that each individual indicate his or her sex and country of citizenship.

The next two pages were designed to measure impressions of Americans of African and European descent. The initial statements on each page were:

The adjectives on this page refer to the average or typical American of African [European] descent. African [European] Americans are generally (Circle only one X between each pair of adjectives.).

The question was followed by nine bipolar pairs of adjectives presented in an order that was random within and across pairs. These pairs were unfriendly/friendly, traditional/modern, impolite/polite, close-minded/open-minded, not religious/religious, selfish/generous, not patriotic/patriotic, aggressive/passive, superstitious/not superstitious. The adjectives were evaluated on a 5-point semantic differential scale represented by five Xs spaced evenly between the members of each pair. In the data analysis, the points of the scale were assigned the numbers 1 through 5, with 1 being paired with the adjectives listed first in the description above.

¹In all cases, the participants in this study had an African language as their mother tongue but lived in a country in which English was the language used in education and business and, hence, the lingua franca.

Results

The first stage of the analysis was to conduct 2 (sex) \times 6 (country of citizenship) factorial analyses of variance for each adjective pair. Separate analyses were conducted for the perceptions of African Americans and European Americans.

Stereotypes of European Americans

As in previous studies in the United States, there was less consensus on the stereotype of African Americans than on European Americans. There were no significant main effects on seven of the nine adjective pairs evaluating European Americans, and there were no significant interactions on any of the nine adjective pairs. These findings, in light of the generally small differences among the means, reflect substantial agreement among the residents of the six nations, as well as between men and women, on impressions of European Americans. Overall, European Americans were perceived as moderately friendly ($M = 3.51$), modern (3.69), polite (3.48), open-minded (3.62), generous (3.41), patriotic (3.39), and not superstitious (3.39). On average, European Americans were judged as being very near the midpoint of the not religious/religious continuum (3.12) and were seen as at least moderately aggressive ($M = 2.80$), where 1 represented *aggressive*. There were only two significant main effects among the nine adjective pairs, both of which were main effects for country of citizenship: perceptions of the friendliness of European Americans, $F(5, 275) = 3.67, p < .003$, and perceptions of politeness, $F(5, 275) = 3.34, p < .006$. A Fisher's PLSD post hoc analysis revealed that the differences on friendliness were due to South Africans' perceiving European Americans as significantly more friendly than did either the Nigerians or the Zimbabweans (4.27 vs. 3.48 and 3.62, respectively). The Fisher's PLSD test also revealed that South Africans perceived European Americans as more polite than did the Nigerians or the Botswanans (4.05 vs. 3.09, 2.92, respectively).

Stereotypes of African Americans

There was less agreement on the stereotype of African Americans. There were significant main effects for country on six of the nine adjective pairs, and there was one main effect for gender. African men perceived African Americans as less generous than African women did, $F(1, 278) = 5.04, p < .03$. There were no significant interactions between gender and country on any of the adjective pairs.

Overall, African Americans were perceived as very friendly (3.91), modern (3.78), open-minded (3.78), and generous (3.62). They were also perceived as moderately polite (3.47), religious (3.36), and patriotic (3.37). They were per-

ceived as being close to the midpoint of the superstitious/not superstitious continuum (3.13) and were perceived as at least moderately aggressive ($M = 2.84$, where 1 represented *aggressive*).

There were significant main effects for country on perceptions of friendliness, $F(5, 277) = 2.80, p < .02$; modernity, $F(5, 277) = 2.83, p < .02$; politeness, $F(5, 277) = 5.06, p < .0002$; religiousness, $F(5, 278) = 2.82, p < .02$; generosity, $F(5, 278) = 3.37, p < .006$; and superstitiousness, $F(5, 278) = 3.66, p < .003$. There were no significant differences between countries regarding the open-mindedness, $F(5, 276) = 1.75$, patriotism, $F(5, 276) = 0.251$, or aggressiveness, $F(5, 275) = 1.66$, of African Americans.

The Fisher's PLSD post hoc analyses revealed that the main effect for friendliness resulted from Nigerians' perceiving African Americans as significantly less friendly than South Africans did. The main effect on the traditional/modern dimension results from Nigerians' believing that African Americans are less modern than Zimbabweans did. Botswanans, Zimbabweans, and Nigerians perceived African Americans as less polite than did South Africans or Kenyans. South Africans perceived African Americans as more religious than did Nigerians or Zimbabweans, and Nigerians perceived African Americans as more superstitious than did Zambians or Zimbabweans.

Comparison of the Perceptions of African and European Americans

The stereotypes of African and European Americans on each adjective dimension were directly compared through the use of t tests. No significant differences between the stereotypes of African and European Americans were found on the following adjective pairs: traditional/modern, $t(284) = 1.29$; impolite/polite, $t(285) = 0.119$; closed-minded/open-minded, $t(283) = 1.41$; not patriotic/patriotic, $t(283) = -0.167$; and aggressive/passive, $t(282) = 0.563$.

The difference between African and European Americans on perceived generosity approached significance, $t(285) = 1.83, p < .07$, with African Americans perceived as more generous than European Americans (3.62 vs. 3.41). African Americans were perceived as significantly more friendly, $t(285) = 4.03, p < .0001$ ($M = 3.91$ vs. 3.51), religious, $t(286) = 2.21, p < .03$ ($M = 3.36$ vs. 3.12), and superstitious, $t(284) = 2.63, p < .009$ ($M = 3.13$ vs. 3.39) than European Americans.

The correlations among all the measures in this study were also computed. As in any study with a large sample and many variables, the correlation matrix yielded a large number of significant correlations. (As the data are quite extensive and add little to the other results, they are not described here.) The largest correlation coefficients, and hence the strongest relationships, were usually the correlations between the stereotypes of African Americans and European Americans on the same dimension, indicating that for the African participants in this study, national identity as an American was probably a more salient stereotyping cue than racial identity. The correlations between perceptions of African and

European Americans were as follows: friendliness ($r = .28$), politeness (.35), open-mindedness (.25), religiosity (.33), generosity (.24), patriotism (.15), aggressiveness (.24), and modernity (.29).

Discussion

In the current study we attempted to further the understanding of the basis of American stereotypes held by non-Americans by asking a large group of Africans for their perceptions of African and European Americans. Because previous studies had indicated that African Americans are usually stereotyped more negatively by others, it was important to determine the extent to which this tendency might be present even among people with whom they share a common ancestry. (No data had yet been available on this question.)

The results indicated that the Africans surveyed did not hold negative stereotypes of African Americans. Indeed, with the exception of being seen as more superstitious, African American stereotypes were more positive than those of European Americans, with African Americans perceived as more friendly, polite, religious, and generous.

Although the stereotypes of African Americans were somewhat more positive than those of European Americans, a more striking finding was the tendency to stereotype all Americans, regardless of racial background, in similar ways. In no case did African Americans and European Americans receive stereotypes that were in different segments of any of the bipolar adjective dimensions. Differences in stereotypes tended to be more subtle differences of degree rather than dramatic, stark contrasts (e.g., all Americans, regardless of color, were seen as aggressive). Although the racial background of individual Americans would clearly be a relevant cue for this group of Africans making judgments about Americans, the identity derived from being an American citizen appears to have been an even stronger cue.

There was substantial agreement among the six national samples regarding the stereotype of Americans. However, there were some differences, and these differences were related to feelings about Americans in general rather than to feelings about African or European Americans in particular. Generally speaking, this sample of Nigerians held the most negative stereotypes of Americans, and the South Africans held the most positive stereotypes, regardless of the race of the individuals in question.

Finally, this study replicated the widely reported finding that the stereotypes of African Americans are less homogeneous and consistent than the stereotypes of European Americans. Because this tendency has also been found among African Americans themselves, it should perhaps not be surprising. Nevertheless, the reason for this phenomenon remains unclear; more research needs to be done to assess whether minority groups in other countries also have less well defined stereotypes than majority groups.

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