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The Utility of Suspect Race for Identification in Crime Stoppers
and Similar Broadcast Descriptions

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ABSTRACT

Local news programs across the country regularly broadcast descriptions of criminal suspects received from law enforcement agencies. Such descriptions are often vague and racially explicit: “Police describe the suspect as a white male in his mid-forties, about 230 pounds and 6 foot 2 inches tall. He had a moustache and goatee and wore a red t-shirt and jeans.” Do such descriptions really help viewers envision or recognize the correct suspect? This study compares the effectiveness of racially explicit descriptions, those that state a suspect’s race, to racially implicit descriptions, those that describe a suspect’s skin tone. Results indicate that viewers were more likely to correctly identify a tanned White man or a light-skinned Black man as the suspect when the description detailed the suspect’s skin color rather than stating his race. Racial descriptors generally led viewers to focus on race, sometimes ignoring other characteristics, like age, also provided in the description. Such descriptors particularly encouraged biased identification of dark-skinned African Americans. Based upon these findings, the author urges broadcasters to avoid including race in any descriptions because it appears to confuse viewers.

Do Racial Descriptors Confuse Viewers?

The Utility of Suspect Race in Crime Stoppers and Similar Broadcast Descriptions

Since its inception in 1976, Crime Stoppers has grown into a program that helps police identify criminal suspects around the world (Crime Stoppers USA, 2009a). The 979 Crime Stoppers programs across the United States have helped police solve more than 820,000 cases and recover more than \$4 billion in stolen property and illegal drugs (Crime Stoppers USA, 2009b). Each program uses the same two strategies to solve cases: publicizing an unsolved crime through the media, and encouraging tips with cash incentives and witness anonymity. Since authorities often publicize details of unsolved crimes through television stations that participate in the program, Crime Stoppers has become an important component of local television news (Rosenbaum, Lurigio, & Lavrakas, 1989). Although both authorities and the media prefer to use photographs or video of suspects, such resources are not always available, and the program has helped make verbal descriptions of suspects common in local crime news.

While some in the media have expressed concerns about partnering with police to solve crimes, journalists generally do not appear to question the use of suspect descriptions to help police catch criminals (Rosenbaum et al., 1989). Commentators affiliated with the Poynter Institute and the Radio and Television News Director's Association have expressed specific concerns about using race in suspect descriptions, but they recognize that vague descriptions including a suspect's apparent race, age, weight, and height—but little else—are used commonly in the news (Habib, 2002; Hair, 2004; Rosenberg, 2002; Woods, 1999, 2002). These organizations, however, remain concerned that using race in suspect descriptions may perpetuate negative minority stereotypes without effectively assisting police.

Despite such concerns, no empirical research has specifically investigated the utility of vague, race-dependent suspect descriptions in the broadcast medium. By manipulating the description of a wanted suspect in a news story, this research attempts to understand the utility of racial descriptors and explores one alternate method of description. The research tested explicitly and implicitly racial descriptions of two men (one White and one Black) purportedly wanted by authorities as suspects in connection with a convenience store robbery. The descriptions were manipulated so that while each suspect's race was explicitly stated in one of his descriptions, only an account of his skin tone—merely implying a racial categorization—was used in another description. In order to assess whether the various descriptions affected White and Black viewers differently, the researcher sought to include both White and Black participants, an effort which required intense recruitment of Black participants from the pool of participants available on a predominately White university campus.

The Effects of Mediated Racial Primes

Priming theory suggests that when people come in contact with a racial stereotype, particularly when the contact is innocuous, that stereotype will prime them to react to later events differently, often in prejudicial ways (Devine, 1989). This phenomenon has been found to occur both when people are primed by actual events or conversations in their daily lives and when they are primed by mediated events, such as a suspect description in the news that refers to the suspect's race (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Dillman Carpentier, 2002). As the description of priming suggests, stereotypes and prejudice are not synonymous. While stereotypes are generally considered cognitive structures—specific beliefs one has about the traits of a group—prejudice directly involves emotion. An early investigator, Allport (1954/1966) defined prejudice as:

An antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group as a whole, or toward an individual because he is a member of that group. The net effect of prejudice, thus defined, is to place the object of prejudice at some disadvantage not merited by his own misconduct. (p. 9)

According to modern cognitive theory, stereotypes are schemas everyone uses to interpret new information from the world (Devine, 1989; Hamilton & Trolier, 1986). Stereotypes allow people to “spontaneously categorize individuals on the basis of their immediately apparent physical features” (Stangor, Lynch, Duan, & Glass, 1992, p. 215). Despite their potential to encourage prejudice and racism, these schemas do serve useful functions. Lippmann (1922/1965) explained that the world is too rich and diverse for people to instantly use all the knowledge available to them, nor can people directly experience everything they would like to know. This diversity requires that people use all possible sources, including the media, to acquire information about the world. Once the information is acquired, it must be economized for easy access. Stereotypes serve this exact purpose:

There is neither time nor opportunity for intimate acquaintance. Instead we notice a trait which marks a well known type, and fill in the rest of the picture by means of the stereotypes we carry about in our heads. . . . [Despite their limitations, the stereotypes] are uniformities sufficiently accurate, and the need for economizing attention is so inevitable, that the abandonment of all stereotypes for a wholly innocent approach to experience would impoverish human life. (Lippmann, p. 59-60)

Because we learn new information from media (Bandura, 2002), media producers—particularly those within the news media—have a responsibility to attempt to portray reality accurately. This is a responsibility urged by a plethora of sources in connection with negative

stereotypes. Multiple researchers who have analyzed local news and local news processes have found that the media perpetuate criminal stereotypes, usually targeting the African American community in particular, without providing substantive counterstereotypical information, and have urged broadcasters to take more care (Campbell, 1995; Dixon & Azocar, 2006; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman, 1990, 1992; Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, & Wright, 1996; Heider, 2000; Poindexter, Smith, & Heider, 2003; Romer, Jamieson, & de Coteau, 1998; Turk, Richstad, Bryson, & Johnson, 1989). Political scientists exploring the consequences of priming have found that broadcasting negative stereotypes of minorities can have unexpected consequences upon the way Americans vote, view social welfare issues, and support punitive versus rehabilitative crime measures (Gilens, 1999; Gilliam et al., 1996; Gilliam, Valentino, & Beckmann, 2002; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997, 1998; Kuypers, 2002; Peffley, Shields, & Williams, 1996; Valentino, 1999). Finally, publications from a variety of professional journalism organizations indicate that broadcasters themselves are concerned about the potential negative impact of mediated stereotypes upon audience prejudice (see Habib, 2002).

Racial Descriptors Do Not Necessarily Improve Descriptions

Not only may racial suspect descriptions yield negative social ramifications, but their ability to help viewers accurately identify a suspect is open to question. Research certainly indicates that reliance on racial descriptions can be counterproductive at other stages in the criminal justice process. Psychologists have conducted a number of studies to determine how others are categorized during initial encounters (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Gaertner, Mann, Murrell, & Dovidio, 1989; Hutter & Crisp, 2005; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000; Macrae, Bodenhausen, & Milne, 1995; Malpass & Kravitz, 1969; Moskowitz, 1993; Pavelchak, 1989; Quinn & Macrae, 2005; Sani, Bennett, & Soutar, 2005; Smith & Zarate, 1992; Wit & Kerr,

2002). Such research indicates that the urge to categorize a person along racial lines is strong (Stangor et al., 1992). One focuses on differences within one's own racial ingroup and focuses on similarities within another racial group (the outgroup). This can increase one's dependence upon stereotypes of that outgroup. Once a person perceives and categorizes another into a racial outgroup, the perceiver begins to focus on the features that the other person shares with the outgroup, while paying less attention to those features that differentiate the individual from other members of the outgroup (Stangor et al., 1992).

This tendency toward racial categorization has had detrimental effects both on the rights and liberties of minorities and on police efficiency. Time and again, when suspects belong to an ethnic or racial minority, police become distracted examining innocent people as potential suspects. Boston's Stuart murder case could be one of the most alarming examples (Jackson, 1990; Murphy, 1989, 1990). The victim's husband was the only witness and claimed a Black man in a jogging suit with red stripes killed his wife. Police held one Black man in jail for weeks because he had a jogging suit with white stripes. Police identified another innocent Black man as the suspect when, among other things, the victim's husband and the only murder witness had a "strong physical reaction" to the man's photograph. Numerous other Black men were randomly questioned by police in connection with this crime, yet it turned out that the "suspect" was a fictitious invention by the victim's husband, who later admitted to the murder in a suicide note. Walker (2003) reviewed a number of similar cases, including one in which Ann Arbor, Michigan police arbitrarily acquired DNA samples from more than 150 Black men. She explains the problem as follows: "Ultimately, use of such categorization only results in giving law enforcement officers broad powers to take into custody individuals whose physical characteristics vary widely from those of the alleged perpetrator" (p. 671).

Research in psychology, law, and journalism shows that such racial bias is not limited to police officers, but can also cause problems for witnesses. Witnesses are less likely to identify the wrong person as the suspect when the criminal is a member of the witness's own racial group and more likely to identify the wrong person when the criminal is part of an outgroup (Bartolomey, 2001; Behrman & Davey, 2001; Doyle, 2001; Evans, Marcon, & Meissner, 2009; Mac Lin, Mac Lin, & Malpass, 2001; Wells & Olson, 2001) Additionally, a variety of research suggests that even when the perpetrator is White, people who witness a crime or learn about it through the news may incorrectly recall the perpetrator's race as African American (Oliver, 1999; Oliver & Fonash, 2002; Oliver, Ronald, Moses, & Dangerfield, 2004; Walker, 2003).

While the research detailed above provides evidence that minorities can be unfairly persecuted by the judicial system because racial categorization impairs the judgment of both police and witnesses, no research has yet investigated the role played by racial descriptions used in Crime Stoppers programs and similar broadcast descriptions of criminal suspects. A number of commentators urge news broadcasters to avoid vague, racial descriptions of potential criminal suspects. Some suggest that references to the race of suspects be replaced with some form of description based directly on skin color or tone (Habib, 2002; Hair, 2004; Rosenberg, 2002; Woods, 1999). However, these commentators have not analyzed the utility of broadcast racial descriptions or of the available alternatives. Do descriptions that state a suspect's race aid in the identification and eventual apprehension of the suspect, or does a focus on race prime stereotypes that lead to confusion and misidentification? In a preliminary attempt to answer this question, the present research investigates what effect racial descriptions have on a viewer's ability to accurately identify a suspect. The research was conducted in conjunction with another study examining the psychological impact that varying descriptions had on viewers. The research

reviewed here, however, simply examines the ability of viewers to pick out a suspect from among a group of photographs based upon a description in a local news broadcast. The research compares racially implicit descriptions, which describe a suspect's skin complexion and hair color, with racially explicit descriptions, which directly state the suspect's racial affiliation. This comparison should help identify which description best helps news viewers identify the suspect. Because race has been found to profoundly inhibit accurate perception and fair treatment of individuals, the researcher began the study with the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis: Racially implicit descriptions will improve the participant's ability to identify the suspect more than racially explicit descriptions.

This hypothesis is tested by a chi-square analysis and cross-tabulation. Those statistical computations show how many respondents were correct and how many were incorrect in identifying the suspect described when given an implicit description and when given an explicit description.

Taking advantage of the diverse sample of undergraduates who participated in the experiment and the differing racial identities of the two suspects that the descriptions are based upon, the experiment additionally examines the interaction of race and description type with the following research questions:

RQ1: Will the effectiveness of implicit descriptions vary with the suspect's race?

A chi-square analysis and cross-tabulation that considers the type of description used (explicit/implicit), the suspect's race, and whether or not respondents chose the correct or incorrect suspect based upon the description examines this research question.

RQ2: How will the viewer's race interact with his or her ability to identify the suspect, depending upon the racial explicitness of the description and the race of the suspect?

One chi-square analysis and cross-tabulation considers the type of description used (explicit/implicit), the respondent's race and the respondent's accuracy in identifying the suspect described. Another analysis explores the question further by examining the specific suspect chosen and the specific description given, in addition to the viewer's race.

Methods

Experimental Design

The researcher compared different variables to test the hypothesis and examine each research question. For the hypothesis, the researcher compared the frequency with which participants picked the right suspect when the description specified complexion versus how often they were right when the description specified race in a 2 (right/wrong suspect) X 2 (racially implicit/explicit description) between group factorial design. Although respondents had five suspects they could identify as the suspect described, all wrong answers were collapsed into the wrong suspect category for analysis. This data adjustment did take into account the fact that which suspect was correct depended upon whether the story described the White or the Black suspect. To answer the first research question, the researcher compared how often respondents picked the right suspect depending upon the description type and the suspect's race in a 2 (right/wrong suspect) X 2 (racially implicit/explicit description) X 2 (White/Black suspect) chi-square analysis. The second research question was initially explored with frequency comparisons that examined the suspect chosen (right/wrong suspect) with the description used (racially implicit/explicit description) and the participant's race (White/Black participant). The researcher further explored the question by comparing which specific photograph the participant identified as the suspect (respondent picked suspect A/B/C/D/E) according to which description type was used (racially implicit/explicit description), which suspect was described (White/Black suspect

described), and to which race the participant belonged according to self-classification (White/Black participant). Respondent's race was used to determine which cell to assign each respondent, so that White and Black respondents were evenly distributed between cells.

Participants

The research is based upon responses collected in 2004 and 2005 from a convenience sample of 228 [Southeastern university's name withheld for review] students. The participants were primarily undergraduates but some were getting jurist doctorates or master's degrees at the time. Nine people recruited could not be included in these analyses because of various problems in data collection.

This sample included slightly more women (58.4%) than men and more Caucasians (58.8%) than African Americans (37.6%). Eight students (3.6%) who self-identified with a different racial group participated in the study. Their responses were used only in analyses that did not consider the race of the respondent. One student identified as both Caucasian and African American, and one student wrote in "Mulatto". For the purposes of this research, both were coded as African American participants since both notations include that ancestry.

Participants ranged in age from 18 through 35, but 50% of respondents were only 18 or 19 years old. The 20 year olds made up another 18% of respondents. Less than 7% of respondents were more than 24 years of age.

Respondents also identified their political beliefs and their parents' or guardians' income. As with many Southern populations, most respondents did not identify themselves as liberal. Instead, 40% reported being conservative, and 29% chose a neutral rating in the middle of the scale. In addition, the sample was made up largely of respondents from socio-economically advanced families. While the average median income in the state for 2000 to 2002 was \$36,771

(DeNavas-Walt, Cleveland, & Webster, 2003), only 23% of respondents said they grew up in households with incomes under \$40,000. About 47% of respondents claimed household incomes of \$40,000 to \$90,000 growing up, and more than 28% of respondents said they grew up with an annual household income of more than \$90,000.

Procedure

Respondents participated in research sessions singly and in groups as large as 25. They read an informed consent form before sitting down at a desk with the preliminary questionnaire that identified descriptive variables for the sample. After everyone completed the first questionnaire, they watched a simulated news segment and completed a second questionnaire of about five to ten minutes in length. All but the last question were relevant to separate research. The end of the questionnaire listed letters “a” through “e”, but directed participants to get the final question from the researcher, which measured the one dependent variable by asking participants to identify the suspect described in the news segment.

The sessions were held in five different rooms on campus that allowed participants to sit in the audience to watch the news segment. Most respondents viewed the segment on a 6’ x 8’ Stewart sound screen, others only watched on a 19” television screen, but all sat where they could easily see and hear the news segment.

Experimental Materials

Manipulation. The manipulated news segment used the video and the script of four stories taken from actual local news broadcasts. While the local news stories used voice-overs that a local reporter recorded for the researcher, a CNN news package included in the news segment used the originally recorded voice of CNN reporter Jeanne Moos. The stories appeared in the following order: a national news story that discussed a recent cat show featuring cloned cats and a cat named Colin Powell; a story that showed the devastation left in cities on the Gulf

of Mexico after Hurricane Ivan and asked for viewer donations; a story on a local lawsuit in which county voters fought against having their districts changed between a primary election and a general election; and a manipulated local crime story. The manipulated story told respondents about an armed convenience store robbery committed the night before. Each story was separated by a short fade to black.

When the video faded up on the robbery story, all participants saw the same file footage of the convenience store. The video came from a similar crime story that aired on a local television station. Participants also all heard that police needed their help to find the armed man who had committed the robbery. The video then changed to a full screen graphic describing the suspect. There were four different suspect descriptions, each with a separate full-screen graphic and an individual anchor narration. The multiple descriptions allowed the researcher to manipulate the two independent variables: the suspect's race (White or Black) and the explicitness of his race (stated or implied). Respondents in the racially explicit cells learned that the suspect was a (white/black) male and were told his age (mid-forties/mid-twenties), weight (230/180 lbs) and height (6'2"/6'1"). Respondents in the racially implicit cells also learned the suspect's age, weight and height and were told that the suspect had (black/brown) hair and a (tan/coffee colored) complexion, but respondents heard no explicit racial categorization in this description. All the descriptions put the suspect in the same clothes with long hair, a moustache, and a goatee.

Suspect Photographs. Although many researchers have used graphical software to adjust the skin tone and other race-related features of one person who fits multiple racial categories after manipulation (Dixon, 2006; Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Gilliam et al., 1996; Maddox & Gray, 2002), such software was not available for this study. Instead, the researcher used mug shots

available on the web at America's Most Wanted (n.d.) and the local sheriff's office. Although this method meant that the Black and White suspect descriptions—whether implicit or explicit—described people who were about twenty years different in age, age was the only contrast easily evident in the mug shots aside from race. Using actual mug shots of fugitives also allowed the researcher to bring a little more realism into the experiment.

To show respondents a variety of potential suspects in the final question, the researcher chose five separate mug shots that fit the two racial categories manipulated in this study and represented a variety of skin tones. These photographs are available in Table 1. The White suspect description was based upon Suspect D, and the Black suspect description was based upon Suspect E. Neither man that the researcher used as a basis for the suspect descriptions was particularly light-skinned or particularly dark-skinned, except possibly within his racial ingroup. Out of the total five suspects, three of them (A, C, and D) were identified by authorities as White. Of those three, two have easily identifiable Caucasian features and skin tone. One, Suspect C, was either overexposed in the picture and/or had particularly pale skin. The other obviously White suspect (A), had a darker complexion but generally Eurocentric features. In the researcher's opinion and the opinion of various people whom the researcher questioned, the third White suspect (D) appeared less Eurocentric than the other two—again this is the man who was used as a basis for the White description. Using Suspect D as a racially ambiguous target, the researcher also chose the photographs of two Black men of very different complexions. Across the board, the extreme close-ups used in the mug shots showed the men were varying ages, but no one man was obviously thin or obviously obese. Additionally, as stated earlier, they all had goatees, mustaches, and long hair. The two suspects described were almost the exact same

height, and had such a small difference in weight that the difference was not apparent in the headshots shown to participants.

Measurement. The second questionnaire consisted of a number of questions directed toward separate research to be reported elsewhere. The final direction on the questionnaire asked respondents to see the researcher for their final question. This question measured the only dependent variable used in this study: a respondent's ability to correctly identify the suspect. In order to ensure that every respondent saw a clear, color copy of the possible suspects, only the researcher had a copy of the mug shots that respondents could use to identify the suspect described in the news segments. The individual questionnaires only had lettered choices that respondents could circle as answers to the final question. Before answering the final question, the researcher told each respondent that the robbery story in the news segment was fictional. The researcher then showed each respondent the final question, which had five photos identified with the letters "a" through "e" (as they are identified in Table 1), and explained that the pictures showed people wanted locally and across the United States for questioning in various crimes. The question asked respondents to identify, from among the five mug shots, the suspect that they thought best fit the description of the man described in the crime story.

Findings

As suggested by the first hypothesis, the implicit description significantly improved viewers' abilities to correctly identify the suspect, $\chi^2(1, N = 219) = 5.7, p = .02$. Only 30% (33 viewers) of those who saw an explicit description picked the right suspect, while 45% (49 viewers) of those who saw the implicit description picked the right suspect. Alternatively, 78 viewers, or 70%, who saw the explicit description chose the wrong suspect, and 59 viewers, or 55%, who saw the implicit description chose the wrong suspect.

In regard to the first research question, the data reveals that while the implicit description significantly improved viewers' ability to identify the correct White suspect, $\chi^2(1, N = 111) = 6.17, p = .01$, it did not significantly improve viewers' ability to identify the correct Black suspect, $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = .73, p = .39$. The full crosstabulation is in Table 2.¹ Computing the percentages in the table reveals that, if one compares correct identifications of the White suspect, the implicit description yielded a 22 percentage point increase over correct identification with the explicit description. However, the implicit description only improved viewers' ability to identify the Black suspect by 8 percentage points.

The first set of results examining the impact of the viewer's race indicate that the type of description did not significantly improve White viewers' ability to identify the suspect, $\chi^2(1, N = 128) = 1.44, p = .23$, but the implicit description did significantly improve Black viewers' ability to correctly identify the suspect, $\chi^2(1, N = 82) = 3.77, p = .05$, demonstrating a 20 percentage point improvement over the explicit description. Examining the crosstabulation in Table 3 reveals that White viewers were generally better at identifying the correct suspect. The implicit description only increased their ability to correctly identify the suspect described by 10 percentage points.

While all previous chi-square tests have had adequate observed cell frequencies (ranging from 8-78 across all three tests), a final analysis that considers precisely which mug shots viewers chose as the wanted suspect in conjunction with viewers' race and the specific description seen by viewers does not fulfill this requirement for strong chi-square analyses. Nonetheless, this analysis is valuable to develop some preliminary ideas on how the suspect's race, the viewer's race, and the type of description used fully interacted. The analysis serves an

¹ The total number of respondents is higher in Table 2 than in Tables 1 or 3 because Table 2 includes respondents who did not identify themselves as White or Black,

important function by revealing the foils that participants incorrectly identified as the suspect, even though the analysis is too weak to be definitive.

Table 1 shows which person White and Black viewers identified as the suspect, depending upon which of the four descriptions they received. Although this is a weak test with large degrees of freedom and low cell frequencies, the test did show significance for both racial subgroups of participants, White viewers: $\chi^2(15, N = 129) = 107.03, p = .00$; Black viewers: $\chi^2(15, N = 83) = 75.04, p = .00$.

Table 1 shows that the implicit description improved viewers' ability to identify the correct White suspect by 20 (White viewers) to 24 (Black viewers) percentage points. The tables also show that the implicit description barely improved White viewers' ability to identify the Black suspect, but improved Black viewers ability to identify the correct Black suspect by 13 percentage points. What is particularly intriguing about this analysis is what it reveals about viewers' chances of identifying the wrong Black suspect. Both racial subgroups were more likely to incorrectly identify suspect B, the darkest man in the photo line-up, when the Black description explicitly stated race. For both racial groups, the percentage of respondents who picked B as the suspect rose by approximately 40 percentage points when respondents received the explicit Black description instead of the implicit Black description.

The crosstabulations in Table 1 reveal specific foils for each description. When viewers were told that police were searching for a white male in his mid-forties weighing about 230 pounds and standing 6 foot 2 inches tall with a moustache and goatee, most viewers thought the suspect with the palest apparent skin color was the criminal, Suspect C. When viewers were told that police wanted a racially unidentified man with a tan and the same physical attributes, respondents did not revert to the "whitest" suspect. Instead, 50% of White respondents identified

the correct suspect (D), while another 37% incorrectly identified Suspect A as the man described. Black viewers who were presented with the implicit White description incorrectly chose Suspect A as the criminal most often, though they correctly identified suspect D nearly as often (9 chose A, 8 chose D, and suspects C and E were each chosen by 2 Black viewers).

Examining the Black suspect descriptions, the explicit description led more than 50% of each subgroup of viewers to identify the man with the darkest apparent skin color, Suspect B, as the culprit (see Table 1). When both sets of viewers saw the implicit Black description, they usually identified the correct suspect (15 Whites and 8 Blacks got the identification correct). However, the person viewers of the implicit Black description were most likely to incorrectly identify as the suspect was Suspect D (chosen by 10 Whites and 6 Blacks). As stated earlier, Suspect D was the man described in both White suspect descriptions and originally identified by the researcher as a racially ambiguous person.

Discussion

To review, chi-square testing and related crosstabulation for the hypothesis reveals that the implicit description did improve viewers' abilities to correctly identify the suspect described. While this improvement does not appear to significantly affect viewers' abilities to identify the correct Black suspect when the two Black descriptions are compared alone (RQ1), it did appear to prevent viewers from incorrectly identifying a prototypical Black man as the suspect—an important finding when one considers the racial imbalance in the American justice system (Norton, Sommers, Vandello, & Darley, 2006; Walker, 2003). The implicit description in this study clearly did assist viewers who received saw the White suspect's description (suspect D in Table 1). Additionally, when examining the differing responses of the two racial groups of

viewers, the implicit description significantly impacted Black viewers but not White viewers (RQ2).

A weak chi-square test to examine the interaction of the race of the suspect, the race of the viewer, the type of description, and the resulting suspect chosen provides some clues to help understand the above findings. Again, the implicit description assisted viewers in identifying the correct White suspect, but not the correct Black suspect. It appears that many viewers of the implicitly Black description incorrectly identified a racially ambiguous man—Suspect D, who police identified as White—as the “coffee-colored” suspect. While the implicit Black description led viewers incorrectly towards a White man as the suspect, it also led them away from incorrectly identifying a Black man with a dark complexion as the suspect. More than 50% of each group (27 viewers total) thought Suspect B was the criminal described in the explicit Black description, but only 12% to 19% of the two groups of viewers thought he was the criminal if they received the implicit Black description (8 viewers total). It appears Suspect D’s racially ambiguous features also confused respondents who saw the implicit White description (which described Suspect D), because 20 out of those 50 respondents incorrectly thought the man described was Suspect A (see Table 1).

Because the judicial system is more likely to find African Americans guilty and to punish them more severely than Whites (Walker, 2003), it behooves American society to do its utmost to prevent innocent African Americans from being falsely accused. Therefore, although the finding needs further tests, the implicit description did work well in this respect—it reduced the chances that the wrong Black man was identified. It also significantly helped viewers to identify the right suspect in general. However when the correct identification was examined for each suspect, the implicit description only significantly helped viewers when the suspect was White.

The precise descriptive terms and the suspect pictures used in this study may very well explain part of the discrepancy between a respondent's ability to correctly identify the White versus the Black suspect. In particular, the Black implicit description may not have been specific enough for the purposes of this study. During the study, the researcher realized that "coffee colored" was not necessarily giving respondents a good idea of the African American suspect's skin color. When respondents answered the last question in front of the researcher, they often worked out their answers verbally and many commented on not understanding the reference to a "coffee" complexion. For instance, one respondent asked the researcher what was meant by that descriptor: "Black coffee or coffee with cream?"

Additionally, the researcher chose the White suspect for the news story because, despite a police description of "White", the suspect initially appeared non-White to the researcher. This ethnic appearance may be just what made respondents discount this suspect when looking for a "White male" but choose him as the correct suspect when looking for a "coffee-colored" suspect. Such a possibility means that future research into racially implicit suspect descriptions requires pretesting to ensure that the non-racial descriptions are as specific and helpful as possible.

Whether or not the implicit description helped each racial subgroup identify the correct suspect, the implicit description did significantly help viewers overall. Although the use of photographs of different people for such experiments has been questioned (e.g., Dixon, 2006; Gilliam et al., 1996), the differing ages, heights and weights of the suspects did not seem to impact the audience. Examining the photographs chosen based upon each description, the Black descriptions of a "male in his mid-twenties" led viewers to select the photograph of an apparently older Black suspect (Suspect B in Table 1) only when race was explicitly stated. Although using two separate descriptions for Whites and Blacks may not provide strong tests of

racial effect for some studies, the fact that an explicit statement of race apparently led viewers to target a much older suspect than described only strengthens the claim that race misled viewers in this news description.

So, the implicit description used here may not have specifically aided identification of the correct Black suspect, but it did generally help viewers identify the man fitting the age, height, and weight described. Such a finding suggests that further research into describing suspects for television newscasts and police work in general can decrease false identifications of criminal suspects. Naturally, the extent of the problem of false identification is unknown, but wrongful convictions certainly have occurred. The Innocence Project counts 238 wrongful convictions that have been overturned through post-conviction DNA testing and claims that tens of thousands of suspects have been cleared before conviction only because of DNA evidence (Innocence Project, n.d.). More than half of those exonerated were African Americans. Innocence Project statistics indicate that the great majority (74%) of these wrongful convictions are a result of misidentification by witnesses.

Although many news scholars discourage the use of race as a descriptor, they do not suggest a specific alternate descriptor (e.g., Habib, 2002; Hair, 2004). Some suggest only using race when there are additional, very specific descriptors available, such as a particular get-away vehicle or a tattoo (Rosenberg, 2002). Unfortunately, news writers already appear to have a difficult time ascertaining when race is a useful descriptor and when it is not. Journalism articles note the prevalence of racial descriptions when only age, height, and weight are additionally present (Hair, 2004; Rosenberg, 2002). A guideline that simply emphasizes using race when necessary leaves a lot of unanswered questions as to when race is necessary and relevant. Rosenberg, a news writer with KTTV in Los Angeles, suggests not broadcasting criminal

descriptions at all, unless they include “a scar, a limp, unusual clothing, or other unique characteristics that significantly narrow the search parameters.” If race is known, then Rosenberg will include it along with these “unique” descriptors, but do these descriptors truly qualify as unique? Mentioning the color, year, make, and model of the car that a suspect drives may seem to reduce the potential suspects, but there are quite a number, for instance, of silver 2003 Honda Accords on the road.

Indeed, the use of race appears to distract people from other, more specific, descriptive information. To look at a concrete example, a cut on a suspect’s hand may seem to be highly specific information, but police in Oneonta, New York treated race as if it were a much better descriptor. An elderly woman told police that an apparently young and Black male assailant cut his hand while fighting with her. Instead of looking for a Black man with a cut hand, police looked for Black men in general. According to one columnist:

After hearing that a black man had committed a crime, the cops went after every black man they saw walking the streets. They dragooned black men and boys (and at least one black woman!) who were trying to use public transportation. They pulled over black guys riding in cars. They went to the State University of New York at Oneonta and got a list of all the black students in the school, and they went after them. (Herbert, 1999)

Police checked the hands of these Black “suspects” for cuts only after finding and accosting the individuals. Apparently this description was not televised, but if it was used inappropriately by police, certainly news viewers are just as apt to make such mistakes. This calls into question the value of using racial descriptions even when accompanied by more specific information.

Woods (1999), a writer at the Poynter institute, argues against ever using race in a description on the grounds that it provides absolutely no information about a person’s

appearance—only their bloodlines or heritage—while reminding minorities of the days when journalists used “a person” to describe Whites and only noted the ethnicity of minorities.

Woods also points out that while Blacks, Latinos, and Asians are described by their ethnicity, Jews and Italians are not. This incorrectly suggests that race is not relevant for the latter groups but does help describe the former groups. Woods suggests that only descriptions of complexion are appropriate in suspect descriptions. However, the present study suggests that descriptions of skin complexion may be difficult for witnesses, police, journalists, and viewers to agree upon.

One law review author has proposed a specific method of describing skin tone—a Universal Color Complexion Chart (Walker, 2003). Such a chart would include as many as 20 different skin tones that could be combined. A witness could identify a suspect as color #2 or #3, for instance, and police could then look for suspects with skin tones 1 through 5, thereby allowing for witness error. Such a scheme would not allow officers to focus on race, because race would not be part of the description. This would eliminate descriptions covering all members of a particular race and instead focus searches for criminals on individuals from a variety of racial/ethnic groups who happen to have a specific shade of skin.

This Universal Color Complexion Chart may not be the answer, but the present research, though limited, suggests that alternatives to explicitly racial descriptions are necessary. Even when the implicit description used here did not assist viewers in identifying the right suspect, it apparently did help them eliminate suspects implicated solely by the racial descriptors. More research is necessary in order to collect more recent data and find a sample more representative of the nation or the national local news viewing audience. Additionally, future research can refine the implicit description or test the use of a Complexion Chart while also limiting non-racial suspect differences, such as differences in age or weight. In the meantime, news

broadcasters should weigh the confusion that race can cause in a suspect description and consider either refusing to air suspect descriptions until police develop better descriptors or urging police to provide additional details that may help remind viewers that individual “Blacks” and “Whites” can possess a wide variety of features.






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Table 1

<i>Frequency Each Suspect Was Chosen by Racial Subsamples</i>						
	Suspect chosen					
						
	A	B	C	D*	E*	Total
White viewers						
Implicit White description	11	0	3	15	0	29
Explicit White description	9	2	14	11	1	37
Implicit Black description	2	4	2	10	15	33
Explicit Black description	1	15	0	0	13	29
Black viewers						
Implicit White description	9	0	2	8	2	21
Explicit White description	5	0	12	3	1	21
Implicit Black description	2	4	0	6	8	20
Explicit Black description	1	12	1	1	5	20

Note. Suspect D was described in the White implicit and explicit description. Suspect E was described in the Black implicit and explicit description.

Table 2

<i>Frequency of Correct and Incorrect Suspect Identification by Suspect's Race</i>			
	Suspect identified		
	Correctly	Incorrectly	N
White suspect			
Race implied	24	28	52
Race made explicit	14	45	59
Black suspect			
Race implied	25	31	56
Race made explicit	19	33	52

Table 3

<i>Frequency of Correct and Incorrect Suspect Identification Within Racial Subsamples</i>			
	Suspect identified		
	Correctly	Incorrectly	N
White viewers			
Given implicit description	30	32	62
Given explicit description	25	41	66
Black viewers			
Given implicit description	16	25	41
Given explicit description	8	33	41