The effect of adultification on empathy for Black individuals

Aye Ochai, McNair Scholar:
The Pennsylvania State University

McNair Faculty Research Adviser:
José Soto, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
College of the Liberal Arts
The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract

Empathy is fundamental in our interpersonal and prosocial interactions, as it allows us to share and understand others' experiences vicariously. Cameron et al. (2019) assessed the cognitive perspective-taking facets of empathy and found that when attempting to empathize with someone, it can be seen as effortful or difficult and this can lead to greater empathy avoidance. The present study examined whether the motivation for empathy with Black girls would be lower than for Black boys, men, and women because adultification of Black girls. Adultification refers to the stereotype of how adults perceive children as less innocent and more adult-like (Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017), which might lead society to see these young women as needing less help or support. We tested this by asking 147 White Penn State students to complete the *Empathy Selection Task* (Cameron et al. 2019), which asks participants to select between *empathizing* with or *describing* Black target individuals varying in age and gender (boys, men, girls, and women). The findings showed that Black girl and boy targets engendered more empathy approach in comparison to Black men and women. However, it was Black women that engendered the least empathy across the four targets, contrary to our hypothesis. We discuss the possibility of the strong Black woman stereotype as a potential driver of this phenomenon.

Introduction

Empathy plays a critical role in our behavioral, moral, and cognitive interactions as it heightens one's engagement with others by allowing them to build an emotional bridge. (Zaki, 2014; Batson, Darley & Coke, 1978). Empathy allows a person to emotionally and cognitively perceive another person's emotion, situation, and perspective as their own (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). But in today's society, there's a broken bridge of empathy between Black individuals and their counterparts. We are continually bombarded with news headlines of Black individuals who are not afforded the benefit of empathy; these images show Black people constantly being dehumanized and treated in an animalistic manner. Slavery, which is perhaps the most apparent illustration of the dehumanization of Black people, left a legacy of unequal treatment which until this day can be seen in the injustice and inequity manifest toward African Americans and Blacks in almost every social institution (e.g., legal, health, and educational systems).

In recent news, we have seen how Black individuals such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Elijah McClain have been murdered with little to no justice for their killers and with what appeared to be little sense of empathy extended toward these individuals by their attackers (i.e., the police).

The media has categorized the inequality of Black People as Black person issue, when in reality it is a White problem, that affects Black lives. However, this impact may not be felt equally among members of the Black community. Inequality has a different impact on Black men and women. When dealing with racial issues, these differences are important to understand because Black women do not experience racism the same way as Black men (Crenshaw, 1991; Davis 1983). Black women have two salient identities, being a woman and being Black, both of which are seen or categorized as inferior (Crenshaw, 1991). This intersectionality leaves Black women uniquely struggling with racism and sexism and having to adapt to the perspective that society constantly throws at them. "The image of the Black woman is the opposite of the colonizer. She is not male, she is not White, and she is generally not affluent" (Hairston, 2008). Davis (1983) explains that both men and women slaves endured abuses, however, "women suffered in different ways as well, for they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatment that could only be inflicted on women." Today, Black men uphold a dominant role relative to Black women within society (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). In this paper we examine how the relative expectations and stereotypes of Black men and women, across development (adults vs. children), impact willingness to engage in empathy with Black individuals.

Adultification of Black girls

Black women continue to find their emotional, social, and educational intelligences challenged, while also having to constantly maneuver and overcome identities of race and gender in America (Carter, 1994). This issue starts at a very young age as Black girls are viewed by adults to be less innocent and more adult-like than their White counterparts, which is known as adultification. Adultification refers to "children functioning at a more mature developmental stage because of situational context and necessity, especially in low-resource community environments" and represents a stereotype of how adults perceive children (Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017). Black girls are not given the same opportunity to have a childhood as their non-Black peers. As a result of their battling with racial inequality and bias, Black girls are deprived from the innocence to make mistakes and to learn, grow, and benefit from correction (Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017). Recently, we have seen the popularized images of seven-year-old Wynta-Amor Rogers all over social media, as she was marching at a Black Lives Matter protest in New York chanting, "no justice, no peace" with her fists up and pointed to the camera, and individuals all over social media are commending her and other younger black girls for their strength and passion (Harris, 2020). However, this is stripping Black girls of the transition into womanhood and the "traditional" femininity that comes with it, while emphasizing the narrative society enforces on them as strong. In regard to Wynta-Amor Rogers' image, Rogers' mother and different journalists stated that young black girls need to be heard, seen, and need to learn about the world. However, they don't need to learn about the world this way, as this symbolizes a loss of innocence and pushes the narrative of strong Black women on them at a young age. Girls like Wynta-Amor Rogers are still children that need to be at home being nurtured and protected, not on the front line fighting for racial inequality.

In order to effectively combat inequality, we may need to address the different needs of those who are victims of inequality. The root of the problem may be due to the fact kids are normally seen as vulnerable and vulnerability leads to empathy. However black girls may not be given the same treatment as they are seen as less weak and vulnerable and more adult-like than they actually are (Bagattini, 2019). The current paper examines whether adultification of Black girls might lead to lower empathy towards Black girls.

Adultification and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype

In order to understand how it is that people perceive young Black girls, we have to understand how society perceive Black women. The perception of Black girls is linked with society's perception of Black women and stereotypes around Black women. Stereotype of Black or African American women intersect with their race and gender roles and most often are characterized as hypersexualized (jezebel), angry (sapphire), sassy, and strong (Collins, 2000; West 1995). Black women have been sexualized since the beginning of slavery, which has resulted in fetishizing and dehumanization of Black Women bodies (Jones, 1982). Black women are often painted as angry, hysterical, or aggressive when they show the slightest emotion, offense, or discomfort. Black women in the media are portrayed as individuals who are loud, always finger clicking and rolling their necks (Herro 2015).

Black women are also portrayed to be strong at all times despite any obstacle they face (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). These stereotypes manifest itself in many ways such as racial bias, adultification of Black girls, and so on. However, for the purpose of this paper, our main focus is on how the stereotype of Strong Black women and the adultification of Black girls can be harmful. The Strong Black Woman (SBW) stereotype is the expectation for Black Women to remain in the constant state of strength and self-sacrificing, while assuming multiple roles- such as caretaker and provider. In a recent study, Woods-Giscombé (2010) described SBW as an obligation to manifest strength, an obligation to suppress emotions, resistance to being vulnerable or dependent, determination to succeed (despite limited resources) and an obligation to help others, while neglecting themselves. This idealization leads to African American Women viewing themselves as individuals who are required to always remain independent and resilient, even at times when their White counterpart women are encouraged to seek support and help (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). The idea of Strong Black Women has been dated back to the years of slavery, as we see Black Women such as Harriet Tubman and Mary Prince celebrated for preserving through adversity and having strength. Black women were seen to embrace strength as a way to mask their emotion and insulate themselves from further abuse (Thompson, 2000; Romero, 2000).

These expectations of strength, while seemingly positive, can also be highly destructive and passed down to Black girls, especially those from low-income families. Black girls at an early age assume the role of possessing strength by taking on adult-like roles of responsibility to meet family needs, such as caregiver to their younger siblings and cousins. These may lead to children gaining adult knowledge, behaving more maturely, and displaying greater resilience than their peers (Blake & Epstein, 2019). From age one and onward, Black parents practice racial socialization which they believe will help young Black girls to buffer against the negative/harsh messages and experiences they may encounter; however, this may have an adverse outcome as it

forces Black girls to mature, possess "strength" and act independently at a younger age (Adams, 2010; Blake & Epstein, 2019). The idea of strength and resilience may have a positive effect on children, more generally, but when applied to Black girls it has led to harsher treatment, judgement and burden (Blake & Epstein, 2019). The possession of maturity, strength and independence has also led to Black girls being perceived by society to be less innocent, less in need of protection and nurturing, to be more aware of adult topics and sex than their white counterparts (Blake, Epstein & González, 2017). All of these may result in less empathy shown toward Black girls.

This paper focuses on the racial aspect of adultification. Dr. Monique W. Morris observed that "the assignment of more adult-like characteristics to the expressions of young Black girls is a form of age compression. Black girls are likened more to adults than to children and are treated as if they are willfully engaging in behaviors typically expected of Black women. This compression [has] stripped Black girls of their childhood freedoms [and] renders Black girlhood interchangeable with Black womanhood…" (Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017). The issue of adultification can be extremely problematic as it may lead others to empathize or sympathize less with Black girls. Epstein et al (2017) both demonstrated how adultification can be a contributing cause to harsher treatment of Black girls and lead to them being perceived as more problematic by authority figures when compared to their white counterparts of the same age. The treatment Black girls receive may be subconsciously influenced by the femininity stereotypes of older Black women, which mean that adult would more likely view black girls as more culpable for their actions and punish them more harshly despite their status as children (e.g., the Sapphire and Jezebel). The typical traditional role of femininity is to encourage girls to mask their emotions, be reserved and not voice their opinion, while Black girls at a young age are taught to be assertive, independent, and emotionally intelligent (Morris 2007; West 1995). Blake & González (2019) showed that black girls are two times more likely to be disciplined for minor infractions like dress-code violations or loitering, two-and-a-half times more likely to be punished for disobedience, and three times more likely to be cited for being disruptive due to the presumed bias of individuals. So, when engaging in empathy with young Black girls, it may seem to be difficult because individuals would have to work harder to counteract the subconscious stereotypes.

Present work

To date, no study has examined how adultification may engender lower empathy engagement with Black girls. Cameron et al. (2019) assessed the cognitive perspective-taking facets of empathy and found that when attempting to empathize with someone it can be seen as effortful or difficult and this can lead to greater empathy avoidance. This was noted when participants completed the Empathy Selection Task (EST), a free-choice response procedure that assess one's motivation to engage in empathy. Participants are shown images of different people and the participants are given the choice to empathize (feel) with the target and attempt to feel the target's emotions or objectively describe (describe) the target focusing on external features such as age and gender. We utilize a modified version of the EST, asking participants to empathize with or describe pictures of Black individuals varying in age and gender (boys, men, girls, and women).

Our main hypothesis is that motivation for empathy with Black girls will be lower than for the other conditions because adultification of Black girls might lead society to see these young women as needing less help or support.

Methods

Participants. Participants for the study were 147 White Penn State students, ages 18-25, who completed the study for course credit. Participants had to be US citizens and over the age of 18. The final sample had an average age of 19.1 (*sd* = 2.34). The percentage of participants who reported that they had completed the EST task as part of a previous study was approximately 20%. Result of our analyses were the same whether these individuals were included or not, so all participants were included in the final analyses for greater power.

Modified Empathy Selection Task (EST). Our study was modeled after Cameron at el. (2019), making use of the empathy selection task (EST). For the purpose of this study, we used a modified version of the EST in which participants are specifically presented with 20 pictures each of a distressed Black girl or boy or a Black woman or man (4 conditions for a total of 80 trials) with brief vignettes stating that the person in photograph has been struggling. Next, participants were asked to choose between engaging in empathy (FEEL option) or remaining objectively detached (DESCRIBE option). We then calculated the percentage of trials that the participant selected empathy (over describe) as the primary dependent variable.

NASA Task load index. After completing the EST, Participants completed the NASA task load index which measures the participants perceived cognitive cost associated with each choice. The NASA task load index included questions regarding the degree of mental demand ("How mentally demanding was this option?"), effort ("How hard did you have to work to accomplish your level of performance with this deck?"), efficacy ("How successful were you in accomplishing what you were asked to do in this deck?"), and stress ("How irritated, stressed or annoyed were you by this option?). These different questions allowed us to examine how distinct facets of cognitive work might relate to empathy avoidance (Cameron et al, 2019).

Demographics. After participants completed all 80 trials, they proceed to answer questions about their demographics, such as gender, country of birth, political leaning, and age.

Additional Measures. Our survey incorporated additional measures that were not used in the current study. Participants completed the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) which comprised of personal distress (PD) and Empathic Concern Scale (subscale of the interpersonal Reactivity Index) which measures participants' feelings of warmth, compassion, concern for others (Davis, 1980) and the Identification with All Humanity Scale (IWAH).

Procedures

Participants was recruited from the psychology department subject pool to complete an online survey via Qualtrics. The first screen presented to the participant was the informed consent form and participants indicated their consent by continuing with the study. Once consent was obtained, the participants were given task instructions informing them that they would

complete a series of trials in which they would be asked to make decisions. Participants then completed the modified Empathy Selection Task. Next, they completed the demographics questions along with additional measures. After the survey, a debriefing was provided to explain the purpose of the study to the participants.

<div align="center">

Results

</div>

Data Analytic Approach

The main dependent variable for the study was *empathy choice*, calculated as the percentage of total trials where participants chose to feel empathy over describe, calculated separately for each of the four stimulus conditions (Black Boys, Black Men, Black Girls and Black Women). The mean empathy choice across these four conditions was subjected to a one-way ANOVA to determine whether the means differed. We also tested whether the mean empathy choice score for each condition was significantly different from .50 using a one-sample t-test to indicate if there was evidence of empathy avoidance (or approach) for each stimulus condition.

Preliminary Results

Table 1 presents the mean level of empathy choice across the four stimulus conditions. Overall, we found a significant effect of empathy choice in the Black women condition, $F(3, 438) = 4.65, p < .03$), with the results denoting that individuals were more likely to choose to empathize with Black boys, Black men and Black girls than they were chose to empathize with Black Women. Contrary to our hypothesis, empathy choice was highest for Black girls relative to the other three stimuli conditions, though this difference was only significant when compared to Black Women.

Table 1

Mean (standard deviation) empathy choice scores across four stimulus conditions

Black Boys	.55 (.29) [a]
Black Men	.54 (.30) [a]
Black Girls	.56 (.29) [a]
Black Women	.51 (.30) [b]

Note. Means that do not share the same footnote differ significantly from each other.

Using a one-sample *t*-test, we also tested the differences from .50 (probability of choosing either empathy or describe if choosing at random) for each condition. The findings showed that Black girls and boys engendered empathy approach (significantly higher empathy choice than .50), while Black men and women did not.

However, Black men still engendered more empathy approach than Black women. This difference in empathy choice across conditions might be associated with how effortful or difficult they found the task or how efficacious participants felt in empathizing with the various targets. Table 2 presents how overall effort was related to empathy for each stimulus category. The level of effort was significantly associated with empathy choice for each empathy choice variable; however, it was less strongly correlated with Black women choice. Interestingly, efficacy was unrelated to empathy choice across all four stimulus conditions meaning that their selection of empathy or describe was unrelated to how good participants felt they were at empathizing.

Table 2

Correlations between effort, efficacy and empathy choice across the four conditions.

	Effort	Efficacy
Black Boys Choice	-.269	.130
Black Men Choice	-.264	.029
Black Girls Choice	-.275	0.74
Black Women Choice	-.211	-.011

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to evaluate whether empathy approach would be significantly lower for Black girls in comparison to other groups due to adultification. Black girls are stripped of their childhood and are often treated and viewed like they are older than they are. Somewhat unexpectedly, our results show that empathy motivation across the four conditions varied significantly, with Black girls engendering *more* empathy approach than any other group (counter to our prediction) and Black women engendering greater empathy avoidance than any other group.

In Blake & Epstein's focus group study, they asked Black girls and women ages 12-60 about their real-world observations and found that adults had less empathy for Black girls than their White counterparts, due to them being viewed as less innocent and needing less protection and comfort (2019). However, in our study Black girls engendered more empathy approach than any other targets. One key difference in our study relative to Blake and Epstein was the utilization of the EST task, which is a more quantitative assessment of motivation to empathize from the perspective of the perceiver. In Blake and Epstein, the perspective was from that of the target (i.e., Black girls felt they received less empathy than did their White peers) and these two perspectives may not match up, given that motivation to empathize may not translate to actual empathizing.

Furthermore, our study examined motivation to empathize (or remain objective) with Black Girls *relative* to Black Boys, Black Men, and Black Women, not in contrast to White individuals. In this context, the drive to empathize might be more driven by youthfulness and vulnerability, given that young girls are often viewed as more vulnerable and in need of protection and support than those who are older. Thus, the adultification bias seen with Black girls may be most pronounced when in comparison to young girls who are White or from other ethnic/racial groups.

Although none of the targets in our sample were associated with empathy avoidance—our participants' empathy choice scores were more indicative of empathy approach with scores above the .50 chance level—Black women targets evinced the least amount of empathy approach relative to the other targets. In fact, participants chose to empathize with Black women and Black men at levels that did not differ significantly from chance, though Black women were the closest to chance levels. Individuals might have been relatively less willing to empathize with Black women due the perceived cognitive effort involved in empathizing with the stereotyped image of the Black woman. Malcom X stated that "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman." Stereotypes of Black women include them being hypersexual (jezebel), angry (sapphire), and sassy. Participants may feel too different or removed from these stereotyped personas to connect with their lived experience (necessary for empathy) and the effort needed to counteract these stereotypes may be too great. Indeed, we saw a significant correlation between perceived cognitive effort and empathy choice. In comparison to their counterparts, the societal image of Black women also emphasizes their strength and less need for support and protection (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). These views of Black women might have affected the motivation to empathize with them as participants may have seen them as resilient and able to endure painful experiences.

Limitations and Future Directions
Our study had several limitations that are important to acknowledge. Due to the survey being a within-subjects design, fatigue might have been a factor in participants response over time as they may have become exhausted and uninterested toward the end of the 80 trials. If the study had utilized a between-subjects design, that might have minimized the learning and transfer across conditions and participants would have experienced less burnout since the session would have been shorter (only 20 trails), but we would have lost out on the increased power gained from this approach.

In the future, we aim to study individual tendencies in being empathic (using the empathic concern subscale of the interpersonal Reactivity Index) and how that might affect empathic choice. We also aim to include a more diverse participant pool and include a Black only participant pool. Future studies should also examine how the intersectionality among participants relates to the level of empathy avoidance/approach that's given to Black girls and women. We need to examine how situational vulnerabilities affects adultification for Black girls and ways that this influences the perception that others hold towards them.

Conclusion

      Ultimately, our study highlights the complex situational vulnerability towards Black girls and women, when it comes to empathy. The empathy that Black girls are given might be associated with different contexts such as how empathy is measured (perspective of the targets vs. motivation of the perceiver to empathize) and who Black girls are being compared to (e.g., their White peers vs. Black boys or Black Adults). Our study also highlights the continued relevance that in comparison to their counterparts, Black women are often not given the same kindness and treatment. This study finding adds to previous research that pertain to the adultification of Black girls and perception of Black women. By investigating these through the lens of empathy, the present study fills a gap in the literature that has not examined how empathy motivation may differ between different segments of the Black population**.** Additionally, the current study better contextualizes the complexity of factors (e.g., race, age, gender) that might contribute to understanding vulnerability and the motivation to empathize with diverse others.

References

Adams, P. E. (2010). Understanding the different realities, experience, and use of self-esteem between Black and White adolescent girls. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *36*(3), 255-276.

Bagattini, A. (2019). Children's well-being and vulnerability. *Ethics and Social Welfare, 13*(3), 211-215. doi:10.1080/17496535.2019.1647973

Batson, C. D., Darley, J. M., & Coke, J. S. (1978). Altruism and human kindness: Internal and external determinants of helping behavior. *Perspectives in Interactional Psychology,* 111-140. doi:10.1007/978-1-4613-3997-7_6

Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (2009). Behind the mask of the strong Black woman: Voice and the embodiment of a costly performance. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (2007). You have to show strength: An exploration of gender, race, and depression. Gender and Society, 21(1), 28-51.

Blake, J. J., & Epstein, R. (2019). *Listening to Black Women and Girls: Lived Experiences of Adultification Bias*. Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, Initiative on Gender Justice & Opportunity.

Brah, A., & Phoenix, A. (2004). Ain't IA woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *Journal of international women's studies*, *5*(3), 75-86.

Cameron et al. (2019). Empathy is hard work: People choose to avoid empathy because of its cognitive costs. *Journal of Experimental Psychology, no volume or page specified.* Doi: https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fxge0000595

Carter, B. (1994). *Gender and Society, 8*(1), 133-136. Retrieved March 20, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/190078

Collins, P. H. (2000). Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241. doi:10.2307/1229039

Davis, A. Y. (1983). *Women, race & class*. London: Women's Press.

Eisenberg, N., & Fabes, R. A. (1998). *Prosocial development.* In W. Damon & N. Eisenberg (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Social, emotional, and personality development* (p. 701–778). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Epstein, R., Blake, J., & González, T. (2017). Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3000695

Guy-Sheftall, B., & Maria K. Mootry Ikerionwu. (1983). Black Women and Feminism: Two Reviews. *Phylon (1960-), 44*(1), 84-86. doi:10.2307/274371

Hairston, K. R. (2008). Dehumanization of the Black American Female: An American/Hawaiian Experience. *Spaces for Difference: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1(1). Retrieved from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/72m382mk

Harris, M. (2020, June 09). Viral images of children at nationwide protests are sparking debate about what role kids should play in political activism. Retrieved August 06, 2021, from https://www.insider.com/viral-photos-and-videos-of-child-protesters-spark-debate-blm-2020-6

Herro, S. (2015). Representations of African American Women on Reality Television After the Great Recession.

Jones, J. (1982). "My Mother Was Much of a Woman": Black Women, Work, and the Family under Slavery. *Feminist Studies, 8*(2), 235-269. doi:10.2307/3177562

Miller, P. A., & Eisenberg, N. (1988). The relation of empathy to aggressive and externalizing/antisocial behavior. *Psychological Bulletin,103*(3), 324-344. doi:10.1037//0033-2909.103.3.324

Morris, E. W. (2007). "Ladies" or "loudies"? Perceptions and experiences of Black girls in classrooms. *Youth & Society*, *38*(4), 490-515.Romero, R. E. (2000). The icon of the strong Black woman: The paradox of strength.

Thompson, C. L. (2000). *African American women and moral masochism: When there is too much of a good thing.* In L. C. Jackson & B. Greene (Eds.), *Psychotherapy with African American women: Innovations in psychodynamic perspective and practice* (p. 239–250). Guilford Press.

West, C. M. (1995). Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical images of Black women and their implications for psychotherapy. Psychotherapy, 32, 458–466. doi:10.1037/0033-3204.32.3. 458

Woods-Giscombé C. L. (2010). Superwoman schema: African American women's views on stress, strength, and health. *Qualitative health research*, *20*(5), 668–683. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732310361892

Zaki, J. (2014). Empathy: A motivated account. Psychological Bulletin,140, 1608–1647. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0037679