“Shopping While Black”: Examining Racial Discrimination in a Retail Setting

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To investigate racial discrimination in the marketplace, we conducted a field experiment to examine both overt and subtle forms of retail discrimination. “Customers” browsing in high-end retail stores asked a salesperson if they would remove a security sensor from a pair of sunglasses prior to trying them on in front of a mirror. Although the request to remove the sensor was granted in all conditions, the salespersons showed greater levels of suspicion (i.e., staring, following) in the Black conditions, especially in the male-group condition. These findings are consistent with current field research examining subtle biases toward other stigmatized groups.

Racial profiling continues to be a major problem facing Blacks today (Dabney, Dugan, & Topalli, 2006; Gabbidon, 2003; Harris, Henderson, & Williams, 2005; Lee, 2000). According to ACLU lawyer Reginald Shuford, “Racial profiling—equating race with crime and using it in lieu of probable cause—is so deeply woven into the fabric of American society that it is everywhere” (as cited in Gardiner, 2000, p. 18). One common form of racial profiling is the practice of singling out Black drivers to have their vehicles checked for drugs, often referred to in the literature as driving while Black (Gabbidon, 2003; Harris et al., 2005; Williams, Henderson, & Harris, 2001). Traffic-violation statistics typically reveal that Black drivers are stopped by state troopers in much higher proportion than White drivers (Gabbidon, 2003). In fact, one poll showed that more than half of Black men reported that they had been subjected to racial profiling while driving (Williams et al., 2001).

Another form of racial profiling that has recently garnered attention involves retail discrimination, often referred to as shopping while Black (Fifield, 2001; Gabbidon, 2003; Williams et al., 2001). Numerous qualitative studies that have involved interviewing Black shoppers about their shopping experiences have concluded that Blacks are treated differently than Whites in

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retail encounters and that consumer racial profiling may be more pervasive than driving while Black (Harris et al., 2005). For example, Black customers from several large U.S. cities interviewed about their shopping experiences in predominantly White communities complained of being ignored, treated rudely, and that “merchants uniformly follow them as they browse in stores to ensure against customer theft” (Lee, 2000, p. 361). In another study, 10 high-status Black males were interviewed about their marketplace experiences, and the results showed that oversurveillance of Blacks was a common occurrence (Crockett, Grier, & Williams, 2003).

Besides qualitative research, there is also extensive legal evidence supporting the shopping while Black experience. For example, Harris (2003) examined the phenomenon of shopping while Black through a detailed case study in which a Black couple suffered racial discrimination (e.g., forced to wait for service longer than White customers, harassed by a White server) while patronizing a national chain restaurant. In addition, archival analysis of false arrests in state and federal court cases showed numerous cases of racial profiling in retail settings between 1973 and 2001 (Gabbidon, 2003). Indeed, in many of the federal court cases involving customer allegations of racial profiling in the marketplace, White employees admitted that they were asked by their supervisors to “shadow” Black customers to reduce the likelihood of stealing (Harris et al., 2005).

Typically, retailers justify violations against Black customers as a necessary precaution to fight the war on shoplifting (Williams et al., 2001). As a result of legitimate concerns that retailers have over the billions of dollars they lose each year to shoplifting (Asquith & Bristow, 2000), detection and apprehension of suspected shoplifters usually falls on the shoulders of the retail store’s security personnel and sales staff (Dabney, Hollinger, & Dugan, 2004). Given the limited anti-theft training many staff receive, however, they are often forced to rely on socially constructed, stereotypical profiles of Black shoppers (Gabbidon, 2003). For example, in one study, a majority of students described as “managers of tomorrow’s retail establishments” exhibited racial bias in their perceptions of the typical shoplifter by indicating that the typical shoplifter was a young, Black male, even though law-enforcement statistics in the area in which the study was conducted actually showed that the typical shoplifter was a White female (Asquith & Bristow, 2000). Another study found that even trained observers oversampled shoppers on the basis of race when given the opportunity to deviate from a random-selection protocol (Dabney et al., 2006). Thus, it is not surprising that the unsystematic anti-theft practices that are used often in the retail industry have led to serious allegations of consumer racial profiling.

Although there is considerable evidence of retail discrimination conducted in both the sociological and criminal-justice fields, there is very little
empirical research examining this phenomenon from a psychological perspective. In fact, an extensive review of the psychological literature yielded only a few studies that dealt specifically with retail discrimination. In one field study performed in convenience grocery stores, Black and White male and female confederates tried to purchase a product that cost between $1.15 and $1.50 for $1.00. Overall, the White clerks were considerably less helpful toward Black males (33%) than toward White males (61%), White females (70%), or Black females (69%; Brigham & Richardson, 1979). Interestingly, this bias occurred even though the majority of the clerks sampled espoused egalitarian views.

In a more recent study, confederates using a standard script requested a refund for an unopened CD they were returning (without a receipt) to the stores from where the CD was originally purchased. Although Black and White confederates were equally likely to have their request for a refund honored, the Black confederates, especially males, had to wait about twice as long in the customer-service line (even when size of line was controlled for; Ainscough & Motley, 2000).

Based on qualitative interviews, federal court decisions involving allegations of racial profiling, and empirical studies, retail discrimination appears to be a continuing problem in the American marketplace in need of scholarly attention (Gabbidon, 2003; Williams et al., 2001). Presently, there is relatively little empirical research on retail discrimination conducted in naturalistic settings (Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002). To add to the shopping while Black literature, we assessed real-world interactions between Black and White individuals. Prejudice researchers have also called for research that goes beyond the traditional focus on overt forms of discrimination and incorporates contemporary, subtle forms of discrimination (Hebl et al., 2002; King, Shapiro, Hebl, Singletary, & Turner, 2006). Indeed, in many of the federal court decisions made involving customer allegations of racial profiling in the marketplace, subtle forms of discrimination (e.g., being subjected to increased surveillance) were often the most common complaint (Harris et al., 2005). Thus, to expand upon previous research on retail discrimination, we included both overt and subtle measures of discrimination.

For our study, confederates posing as customers in high-end retail stores asked a salesperson if they would remove a sensor from a pair of sunglasses prior to trying them on in front of a mirror. We predicted that salespeople would be less likely to remove the sensors (overt measure) when the request was made by Black customers; and once the sensor was removed, Black customers would arouse more suspicion in the form of staring and following than White customers (subtle measure).

The rationale for the display of overt racial discrimination was based on previous research indicating that Whites are more likely to discriminate
against Blacks in situations in which failure to help could be attributable to factors other than the person’s race (cf. Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Saucier, Miller, & Doucet, 2005). In this case, White salespeople have a clearly acceptable reason for not helping that does not involve race; specifically, store policy prohibits the removal of security sensors. Given that several recent qualitative studies have found that Blacks often report feeling more scrutinized by store personnel (Crockett et al., 2003; Lee, 2000) and that numerous federal cases have revealed that employees were often asked by their supervisors to shadow Black customers to reduce the likelihood of stealing (Harris et al., 2005) we predict that Black shoppers will arouse more suspicion than will White shoppers.

We also designed our study to include a group-size manipulation to determine whether group size plays a role in the shopping experience. To date, we could not find any empirical studies that examined whether shopping in groups influences overt and subtle measures of discrimination. However, given that (a) shopping is often a group activity; (b) there is considerable anecdotal evidence of Blacks being refused service under the guise of “too many people in the store” (Eddings, 1995) or arousing undue suspicion when in groups (Gray, 1998); and (c) many of the cases involving false arrests of Blacks in retail settings (Gabbidon, 2003) or federal lawsuits alleging retail discrimination (Williams et al., 2001) involved Black customers shopping in groups, we felt that group size is an important variable to include in our study.

Method

Participants

Study participants were 33 White salespeople (25 female, 8 male) who worked at six high-end retail stores in Westchester County, New York. The majority (79%) of the salespersons appeared to be under 40 years of age. The stores were selected because they carried pricey sunglasses with security sensors on them. Of the six stores, four were large retail stores and two were smaller boutiques.

Materials

A coding sheet, designed for the use of two recorders, was created to record the behaviors of the salespeople once they had been approached by the “customer(s).” The coding sheet assessed whether the security sensor was
removed from the sunglasses, whether the salesperson physically retrieved the sunglasses, and whether the salesperson exhibited suspicious behavior once the security sensor was removed.

Suspicious behavior was measured in terms of staring and following behaviors. Observers were asked to determine the degree of staring, which was operationalized on five levels: 1 = continues working and pays no attention to the customer; 2 = looks up to see where the customer is but continues to work; 3 = looks up to see where the customer is and holds gaze for at least 2 seconds; 4 = looks over two or more times at the customer and holds gaze for at least 2 seconds each time; and 5 = looks over repeatedly at the customer and/or holds gaze for at least 4 seconds. Degree of following was operationalized according to four levels: 1 = continues working and pays no attention to the customer; 2 = physically leaves area and discreetly goes within eyeshot of the customer; 3 = physically leaves area and moves within 10 feet of the customer; and 4 = physically leaves area and shadows the customer while customer tries on sunglasses.

Stopwatches were used by the recorders to keep track of the time customers were followed. Any other unusual behavior was also recorded on the coding sheets for qualitative analysis.

Procedure

A 2 (Race) × 2 (Gender) × 2 (Group Size: alone or in pairs) randomized factorial design was used for the present study. The study took place over 3 months in six retail stores. The “customers” (confederates) were 12 college-aged students (3 Black men, 3 Black women, 3 White men, and 3 White women) who were blind to the purpose of the study.

For all confederates, a casual dress code consisted of solid shirts, jeans, and shoes. The women all carried small purses, while the men had no bags of any sort. The two recorders placed themselves strategically in the store to record the event independently on the coding sheets.

For each condition, the confederate(s) would enter the store and browse the sunglasses display for approximately 2 min. After selecting a pair, the confederate approached the salesperson and asked, “Excuse me, can you take this tag off so I can try these glasses on?” If the request was granted, the confederate was trained to go to the nearest designated standing mirror. After looking in the mirror for 1 min, the confederate returned the sunglasses to the salesperson and left the store. The procedure was identical in the group conditions, except the second confederate helped the confederate who was trying on the sunglasses.

During each trial, the two independent recorders recorded the event. Posing as shoppers, they discreetly planted themselves where they could
record the encounter without being suspected. They recorded whether the request to remove the sensor was granted, level of staring, level of following, whether the salesperson retrieved the sensor or waited for the confederate to return it, and any other unusual behaviors.

After the confederate(s) left the store, the recorders waited a few minutes before leaving to avoid arousing suspicion. To avoid detection (as well as to maintain independence across conditions), a concerted effort was made to ensure that the same salesperson was not used in more than one condition. If the same salesperson was present, we returned to the store at a different time.

**Results**

Of the possible 48 trials in this study, complete data for only 33 trials were available. This is because either the store had only minority salespeople working near the sunglasses display or, as in one case, the store was so small that the staff began to recognize the recorders.

We predicted that White salespersons would be less likely to remove the security sensors from the sunglasses in the Black conditions. Contrary to our prediction, the salesperson removed the security sensor in each of the 33 trials. In addition, the salespersons retrieved the sunglasses in 12% of the trials ($n = 4$), and retrieval occurred equally in the Black and White conditions.

While our more direct measure of discrimination (i.e., removal of the security sensor and retrieval of the sunglasses) was not exhibited by the salespeople, indirect or subtle discrimination was evaluated through an examination of salespeople's following and staring behavior. Because the interrater agreement for following (82%) and staring (68%) was somewhat low, these measures were recoded as dichotomous variables. When following behavior was recoded into *no following* and *following*, and staring behavior was recoded into *low staring* and *high staring*, interrater agreement was a respectable 89% and 93% for following and staring, respectively.

It was hypothesized that Black customers would arouse considerably more suspicion than White customers, and, as predicted, this was supported. More specifically, after removing the sensor, salespeople stared at Black customers more often than at White customers, $\chi^2(1, N = 33) = 5.66, p < .02, \phi = .41$ (see Figure 1). There was also a trend for salespersons to follow Black customers more than White customers $\chi^2(1, N = 33) = 2.70, p < .10, \phi = .29$ (see Figure 2). In fact, in the four trials in which the salesperson physically left his or her area to follow the customer, the customers were always Black. Analyses also show that male and female salespersons were equally likely to engage in subtle forms of discrimination.
Because of small cell sizes, we could not determine whether there were any significant interactions between race, gender, and group size. It should be noted, however, that a high degree of staring was most prevalent in Black male groups (100%), as compared to White male (50%), Black female (40%), and White female groups (25%). The same pattern emerged for degree of following: Black male groups (60%) were followed more than were White male (50%), Black female (20%), or White female groups (0%). The data also reveal a strong gender effect for staring and following, indicating that salespersons were more suspicious of male shoppers.

Qualitative analysis also provides supporting evidence of retail discrimination. For example, in one Black male group trial, after removing the sensor, the salesperson said “Make sure you give it right back.” In two other Black male group trials, the salesperson walked around the counter and
stood right next to the customer the entire time he tried on the sunglasses. In several other Black conditions, the salesperson told the confederate which mirror the confederate should use. Neither a high degree of following nor specific instructions on which mirror to use were demonstrated in the White conditions.

Discussion

Contrary to our expectations, salespeople were not less likely to grant the request to remove the security sensor in the Black conditions. Although we hypothesized that salespeople could attribute their lack of helping to a reason that did not involve race—specifically, that store policy prohibited it (cf. Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000)—overt discrimination was not displayed by any salespeople. Perhaps, overt discrimination was not shown because the cost of removing the sensor was perceived to be relatively low. For example, in a recent meta-analysis on race and helping behavior, researchers found that as the costs of helping (e.g., time, effort, difficulty) Blacks decrease, the likelihood of Whites helping increases (Saucier et al., 2005). Given the apparent ease of removing the sensor, the salespeople may have perceived the request as requiring minimal effort (i.e., cost). Of course, it is also possible that the salespeople granted the request in order to avoid appearing racist and challenging their non-prejudiced self-concept (Frey & Gaertner, 1986).

Although the more direct form of discrimination was not found in our study, there was considerable evidence of more indirect (i.e., subtle) forms of discrimination. Across all trials, Black customers aroused considerably more suspicion than did White customers. After the sensor was removed from the sunglasses, White salespersons were more likely to look over repeatedly at the Black customers, as well as to follow the Black customers more closely as they tried on the sunglasses.

Overall, our findings are consistent with current field research examining subtle biases toward other stigmatized groups (Hebl et al., 2002; King et al., 2006). For example, research on obese customers has indicated that although sales personnel did not formally discriminate against obese customers, these customers did face more interpersonal discrimination, such as less eye contact, more rudeness, and shorter interaction time, as compared to average-weight shoppers (King et al., 2006). Similarly, Hebl et al. (2002) found that confederates who were perceived to be gay who applied for jobs in local stores did not experience more formal, overt forms of discrimination involving callbacks or hiring. However, they did experience considerably more subtle, interpersonal discrimination, such as length of interaction and perceived negativity displayed by the store manager.
Applying Hebl et al.’s (2002) terminology to our study, removing the sensor from the sunglasses may be considered a formal behavior in the sense that it is mandated by the job, whereas staring and following are more interpersonal in nature. Together, these studies show the importance of examining subtle discrimination in stigmatized groups.

Our findings are also consistent with self-report data that portray the shoplifting population as disproportionately comprised of young Black males (Klemke, 1992). According to research on racial profiling (Gabbidon, 2003), store clerks have repeatedly “tagged African Americans as criminals who require additional scrutiny because of their criminal label” (p. 347). Given that one of the most common negative attributes associated with Black individuals is “criminal” (Devine & Elliot, 1995), this negative stereotype may remain highly accessible in the minds of salespeople.

As for suspicion levels in the group conditions, typically the degree of staring and following was highest in the Black male condition. These findings are consistent with anecdotal evidence of Blacks arousing undue suspicion when in groups (Eddings, 1995; Gray, 1998). These findings also support research showing that false arrests of Black customers in retail settings often involve people in pairs or small groups (Gabbidon, 2003).

There were several limitations to the present study. One problem is that one of the smaller stores became suspicious of the recorders, so we were not able to get complete data for this store over the eight trials. Another problem (for us, in any case) is that in several cases, there were only minority salespeople working near the sunglasses display. Together, these two issues prevented us from collecting data over the full 48 trials. Another limitation is that we did not control for the number of shoppers in the store; however, we did make sure the salespeople were free before approaching them.

Another concern is that the recorders were not blind to the purpose of the study. Initially, we opted for a double-blind study, but it quickly became apparent that the recorders could guess the true purpose of the study. Thus, it is possible that the recorders were imposing their own expectations on their interpretations of suspicious behavior exhibited by the salespeople. In an attempt to alleviate this problem to some degree, we always paired one Black recorder with one White recorder.

Finally, it is possible that the staring and following displayed by the salespersons toward the Black customers could be interpreted as providing more customer assistance, rather than evidence of suspicious, discriminatory behavior. While a White customer may interpret following behavior as helping behavior, a Black customer may be more likely, because of past experience and expectations, to interpret the same behavior as more prejudice-driven. Thus, although meaningful differences were observed between the Black and White customers, whether true discrimination
occurred is partly based on individual expectations in these situations. In order to examine this possibility further, qualitative research with both the customers and salespeople is warranted.

For a follow-up study, it may be useful to code for verbal behavior during the social encounter. Given that researchers have found that Whites may use a more hostile tone, make more speech errors, and appear less engaged in the conversation (Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005; Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974), perhaps examining verbal interactions may also show signs of retail discrimination. Another possible study could include a follow-up interview with the salespeople in order to assess their own interpretations of their behavior. It may be interesting to examine whether minority salespersons show the same pattern of subtle discrimination against Black customers as did the White salesperson in the present study.

Recently, criminal-justice researchers have suggested that who is perceived to be shoplifting may be more a reflection of surveillance bias than actual shoplifting behavior. As to which comes first, they conclude, “It may be that Black individuals are disproportionately represented in the apprehension statistics not because they shoplift more often than Whites, but because they draw more attention from security personnel” (Dabney et al., 2004, p. 696). To determine the demographics and behavioral characteristics of people who steal, Dabney et al. examined shoplifting by subtle observation with a camera system installed in a suburban retail drug store. Overall, Blacks were no more likely than were Whites to steal merchandise. In fact, while some demographic characteristics of the shopper were important for predicting who shoplifts, the data clearly indicate that behavioral variables (e.g., leaving the store without making a purchase, keeping track of security measures, carrying large bags) are much more significant predictors than race (Dabney et al., 2004). In our study, the confederates did not exhibit any of these behaviors, yet Black customers still aroused more suspicion.

Together, these studies raise serious questions about the racial profiling of suspected shoplifters. Given the compelling scientific evidence collected by law-enforcement agencies showing that racial profiling is an ineffective practice, despite the erroneous assumption of many security professionals that it works, researchers have concluded that the practice of racial profiling needs to be changed radically (Harris, 2002; Withrow, 2006).

The cumulative effects of retail discrimination can take a heavy psychological toll on Black shoppers, who must always remain hypervigilant when shopping at high-end retail stores (Feagin, 1991; Gray, 1998; Swim, Hyers, & Cohen, 2003). In addition to the psychological effects, racism-related stress (e.g., retail discrimination) has been found to increase physiological stress, which is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease in Black women (Lepore et al., 2006) and Black men (Pieterse & Carter, 2007).
To improve intergroup relations, retail service providers must be made aware that their “subtle” attempts to deter theft are clearly perceived by Black customers as discriminatory. Retailers and employees also must realize that they may be predisposed to profile shoplifters based on race (Asquith & Bristow, 2000). To ensure a more diversity-friendly environment, Harris et al. (2005) have suggested that retailers implement sensitivity and diversity training to make employees aware of their hidden biases and then follow that training with active monitoring of customer–salespeople interactions.

References


