

CHAPTER 7

“If Only He Didn’t Wear the Hoodie . . .”

Selective Perception and Stereotype Maintenance

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On February 26, 2012 in Sanford, Florida, during halftime of the television viewing of the National Basketball Association’s all-star game, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin (who was on the phone with a friend) was walking back from a local convenience store to his father’s girlfriend’s apartment with a bag of Skittles and a bottled iced tea. There was a light rain in the air and Martin had on a jacket with a hood, commonly called a “hoodie.” George Zimmerman, who was the self-appointed neighborhood watchperson, thought Martin looked suspicious and began following him. Zimmerman then called 911 and reported that a police

officer should be sent to the apartment complex because he saw a suspicious man walking around. When he reached a 911 operator, Zimmerman was specifically instructed to stop following Martin and wait for police to arrive. Minutes later, an altercation ensued between Zimmerman and Martin leaving Zimmerman bruised and bloodied and Martin shot dead.

Zimmerman, who had a gun permit and was previously arrested for assaulting a police officer, was arrested for questioning and later released under Florida's Stand Your Ground law. The law allows individuals to defend themselves by using deadly force if they feel their life is in danger (Cheng & Hoekstra, 2012). Zimmerman claimed he felt his life was in danger and had no other choice but to shoot Martin. For Martin, his body was initially labeled a "John Doe" and not identified until the following day when his father filed a police report. Calling this incident a national tragedy, President Barack Obama stated, "When I think about this boy, I think about my own kids . . . If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon."

Following the shooting death of Martin, a national uproar with racial undertones ensued that ultimately led to Zimmerman being charged with second-degree murder. Zimmerman, who is perceived by some as phenotypically White, has a White father and Peruvian mother and identifies as Hispanic. Martin's mother and father are Black. Some in the media claimed that if Martin had not been wearing the hoodie, he would not have looked suspicious. Among those was Fox News host, Geraldo Rivera (2012), who stated

I am urging the parents of Black and Latino youngsters particularly not to let their children go out wearing hoodies. I think the hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin's death as George Zimmerman was . . . Trayvon Martin, God bless him, an innocent kid, a wonderful kid, a box of Skittles in his hands. He didn't deserve to die. But I bet you money, if he didn't have that hoodie on, that nutty neighborhood watch guy wouldn't have responded in that violent and aggressive way.

Rivera's statement proved controversial in its effort to remove blame from Zimmerman and transfer it to Martin for choosing to wear a hoodie in drizzling weather.

As the case reached a level of national conversation, many argued that Zimmerman targeted Martin solely because he was Black. This argument asserts that there is something unique about being a Black male that results in individuals being perceived as suspicious, untrustworthy, and dangerous. Zimmerman refuted the claim that he targeted Martin because of his race but did report that a series of break-ins occurred in the complex and the perpetrators were believed to be Black males. As Benjamin Crump, lawyer for the Martin family claimed in a September 29, 2012, interview with the Orlando Sentinel, race was "the elephant in the room." A Washington Post-ABC Poll taken in April of 2012 ultimately supported his statement, as it found that 80% of Blacks believed that Martin's killing was unjustified, compared to about 40% of Whites. Concepts from the social psychology of race can help us better understand these kinds of significant racial differences in perceptions and attitudes.

The Social Psychology of Racial Stereotyping

Prominent sociologists, Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) note that we often use physical attributes including articles of clothing like a hoodie as mental shorthand for racial scripts. However, it is important to note that our racial cues are not limited to a hoodie or other articles of clothing. We use physical attributes, such as skin tone, facial features, and hairstyles to make racial assumptions. Accordingly, the social psychological processes described here relate to other forms of stereotypical thinking, such as assuming anyone who looks "Mexican" is "illegal," that all Asians are good at math, that most Arab Americans are terrorists, or that all Native Americans are alcoholics. These are *stereotypes* or an oversimplified set of beliefs about members of a particular group.

Negative attributes are often placed on Black men who wear hoodies because of their race and gender. In this context, the negative attribute in question is anticipated crime that leads to these group members being perceived as suspicious and dangerous to others. These attributes are not simply impromptu. Rather, they stem from intergroup attitudes that are formulated via broader sociohistorical contexts. In other words, the hoodie combined with Blackness and maleness triggers certain stereotypes based on preexisting "knowledge" about group members. Knowledge, in this context, does not refer to education, actual facts, or reality. Instead, it refers to the conventional wisdom that individuals use to make sense of personal interactions (see also Harris and McClure, Essay 1). I address this point more directly below.

Thomas F. Pettigrew's (1979) research suggests that individuals who perceive Black men with hoodies as a threat commit the *ultimate attribution error*. Ultimate attribution error asserts that undesirable characteristics exhibited by out-group members (e.g., Blacks and other people of color) are more likely to be perceived by those in the in-group as innate and a part of one's personality. In other words, negative behaviors are perceived to be biological or rooted in the culture of the group (see Buffington, Essay 4; Meanwell, Patel, & McClure, Essay 13; and Zhou, Essay 8 for further discussion). On the other hand, positive characteristics (e.g., being a law-abiding citizen) are attributed to factors external to the individual like education. In addition, out-group members who are perceived positively are viewed as exceptions to the norm of "bad" behavior from their group.

Pettigrew (1998) highlights that attribution error occurs due to limited information about a particular group. As more information is obtained about out-group members, individuals are less likely to exhibit prejudiced attitudes because they come to view out-group members as more heterogeneous instead of more homogenous. As I will show later, the type and quality of information is key for changing prejudiced attitudes. Stereotypes about certain groups largely stem from public discourses. Public discourses can be conceptualized as mainstream narratives that become assumed facts about a particular group or how society operates. For example, during his 1976 presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan stating the following about an alleged woman on Chicago's South Side:

She has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veteran's benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income is over \$150,000.

Although the woman associated with this infamous overexaggeration was convicted of less than \$10,000 in fraud, this statement led to Black women being stereotypically associated with the infamous "welfare queen" much more than White women (Gilliam, 1999). Discourses transform language beyond the boundaries of words and sentences to have a real impact on policies and also on how individuals interact with each other.

Media play a dominant role in formulating stereotypical discourses in part because there is a limited amount of interaction across racial and social class divides. U.S. neighborhoods and schools are just as segregated today as they were in the 1950s (Dixon, 2006). Therefore, social media, television, movies, and music are dominant forms of public discourse that often portray people of color in stereotypical ways. For example, some movies suggest that the sexual predator a woman should be afraid of is a male stranger walking down a dark street possibly wearing a hoodie, when research shows that women are more likely to be raped by someone they know (Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2006). News media, in particular, can play a critical role in this perception, where communication scholars Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki (2000) found that Black suspects and criminals are more likely to be featured on the news than White suspects and criminals. With limited interpersonal interactions across racial divides, these images lead to stereotypical thinking that all Black men are dangerous and threatening. For example, though more Whites commit violent crime, respondents estimated that Blacks commit 40% more violent crime than they actually do (see Entman & Rojecki, 2000).

Hogg (2000) highlights the importance of *subjective uncertainty*, which asserts that when there is minimal understanding about how someone should be categorized (e.g., individuals with hoodies or Black males), individuals express a "state of subjective uncertainty" where they infer stereotypes and, in turn, exhibit some form of discrimination against the person in question (Hogg, 2003). When individuals are categorized largely by group membership (under conditions of subjective uncertainty that are largely due to limited interpersonal interaction), others evaluate and interact with them based on the scripts perceived to be associated with that group.

Similarly, individuals engage in *selective perception* by only seeing the types of behaviors that confirm their stereotypes and not those that refute them. In other words, even when individuals encounter a man in a hoodie or a Black man walking down the street and nothing happens (or if they have a positive interaction), the combination of selective perception (i.e., only seeing what we want to see), subjective uncertainty (i.e., categorizing people inaccurately due to limited information about other groups), and ultimate attribution error (i.e., believing that undesirable characteristics are an innate part of out-group members such as "all Black men with

hoodies are dangerous") mean that positive interactions mostly lead to in-group members ignoring that example or perceiving it as an "exception to the rule." This process is an attempt to avoid cognitive dissonance and maintain stereotypical thinking.

Defined as aligning one's beliefs in order to avoid disharmony or inconsistency (Festinger, 1957), *cognitive dissonance* can lead to irrational behavior. For example, individuals who hold prejudiced attitudes about Blacks being criminal may have a normal, satisfying, and uneventful social interaction with a Black man in a parking lot but not include this positive interaction into their knowledge base to evaluate the next Black man they encounter in a parking lot. Instead, their resolution of the cognitive dissonance will tell them to be afraid just as before. Another example is a person who interacts with a Latino person and finds out that person was born in the United States. Instead of thinking that the next Latino they encounter could also be a U.S. citizen, the person continues to assume they are an "illegal" immigrant, failing to take the previous experience into account.

Taken together, all of these processes are connected to arguments about why Martin was followed by Zimmerman. Below, I dissect the arguments about whether Martin was followed because of a hoodie or his Blackness.

If He Hadn't Been Wearing a Hoodie . . .

In order to investigate the role the hoodie actually played in the Zimmerman case, we must examine a series of underlying assumptions and claims. The first claim is that a hoodie, and thus anyone wearing it, is suspicious. In other words, there is something about a hoodie that makes someone threatening. One approach to test this claim is to look at other social contexts where individuals wear hoodies to see if they are perceived as suspicious or innocuous. One person who wears a hoodie frequently is Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg. Zuckerberg wears hoodies during casual encounters and even professional business meetings. However, he is not perceived as suspicious. Instead, as Benjamin Nugent's May 2012 CNN article states, "The hooded sweatshirt [is] a symbol of his independent-mindedness, his youth, his authenticity, his loyalty to the culture of Silicon Valley." At worst, Zuckerberg is regarded as "immature," but definitely not suspicious.

Another example is New England Patriots head football coach Bill Belichick who can be seen on the sidelines of every game in a hoodie. He is never regarded as suspicious or less than a coach because he wears a hoodie. In fact, he is evaluated only by his team's success and not his clothing or by the behavior of fans who may have on a hoodie and engage in violent or illegal behavior.

In addition to celebrities like Zuckerberg and Belichick, college students often walk around campuses with hoodies representing their university or favorite team. When it rains, snows, or is simply cold, individuals in public spaces wear hoodies to protect themselves from the weather. These groups of people are generally not regarded as suspicious or threatening unless there is another attribution placed on them that implies danger. We also know that Zimmerman, who was 28 at the time

of the incident, thought Martin was older. As he said during his arraignment: “I did not know how old he was. I thought he was a little bit younger than I am, and I did not know if he was armed or not.” Zimmerman’s own statement implies that there was at least one additional attribute besides the hoodie that led to Martin looking suspicious. Even Rivera’s statement about hoodies draws upon another attribute: race. In his statement, he specifically references “Black and Latino youngsters” and excludes White and Asian youth from his statement about who should and should not wear hoodies. While Asians have their own stereotypes such as being unassimilable, passive, and unable to lead, Blacks and Latinos are more likely to be stereotyped as criminal than Whites and Asians.

Collectively, the hoodie argument simply does not hold. Individuals wear hoodies regularly and are not followed or perceived as threatening. Instead, placing the focus on the hoodie not only moves the blame to Martin for wearing the hoodie, but it also allows individuals to avoid admitting their own racial prejudices.

Maybe It’s Because Trayvon Was Black . . .

Given the previous discussion of racial stereotyping, a second claim that must be examined in looking at the role of the hoodie in the Zimmerman case is that perhaps the hoodie wasn’t really the major factor in Martin being followed; perhaps Zimmerman targeted Martin because he was a Black male. Given that Blackness is at the center of this argument, one appropriate way to explore this perspective is to determine whether Black men not wearing hoodies are considered suspicious. Below, I provide examples where Black men are perceived as suspicious in various social contexts.

New York City (NYC) is notorious for its stop and frisk program (Center for Constitutional Rights, 2012; see also Doude, Essay 19). In 2011, NYC police officers performed nearly 700,000 stops. Blacks represented over one half of these stops compared to one third for Latinos and less than 10% for Whites. Over one half of all stops involved frisks. Of the nearly 140,000 times that force was used, Blacks represented roughly 55%. Obviously, we would assume from these statistics that the overwhelming majority of individuals who were stopped, frisked, and exposed to force were engaged in criminal activity. However, this is not the case. Only 2% of the nearly 700,000 stops resulted in the discovery of contraband (Center for Constitutional Rights, 2012). This means that over 9 out of 10 Black and Latino men stopped by the police were innocent and engaging in no wrongdoing.

Despite the very low numbers of individuals who are actually engaging in illegal activity during a stop and frisk, and the fact that in 2013 the stop and frisk program was ruled unconstitutional under the Fourth Amendment and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, the perception is that Black and Latino men are dangerous. (As of publication, the Second U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals has put a hold on Scheindlin’s District Court ruling of unconstitutionality; final disposition is pending.) In fact, NYC Mayor Bloomberg in a WOR-NY radio interview on June 28, 2013, stated, “I think, we disproportionately stop Whites too much and

minorities too little." As a result, some Black and Latino men have a difficult time engaging in activities that every U.S. citizen is granted—the ability to walk down a street, breathe air, or catch a cab. In the early 2000s, former-mayor Rudolph Giuliani of New York introduced a sting operation to confirm the discrimination Black men encounter when trying to catch a cab. Giuliani set up undercover operations to fine taxi drivers for passing Black riders. One may initially think, why is this an issue? Well, cab drivers and Black men have a long, contentious history where cab drivers have been suspected of skipping Black men as potential passengers because they perceive they will be robbed. The sting operation implemented by Mayor Giuliani stemmed from a lawsuit by actor Danny Glover (most known for his role in *Lethal Weapon* films) after he claimed that at least five taxicabs passed him, his daughter, and her roommate. Then, the taxicab that stopped refused to allow Glover to sit in the front seat.

Some may still say, if Glover and other Black men had on hoodies, it is understandable that the cabs passed them up. They look suspicious. But what if the Black men are wearing business suits? On the 2008 Presidential campaign trail, President Barack Obama was continuously asked if he identified as Black. His response was a colloquial, "The last time I tried to catch a cab in New York City . . ." His statement implies that he has difficulty catching a cab because he is a Black male. President Obama is not the only notable Black man to make this claim. Dr. Cornel West, formerly of Harvard and Princeton Universities, wrote in the preface of his acclaimed book, *Race Matters* (1994), that when he was going to finish his deal with the publisher, he was late for the meeting because he could not catch a cab while wearing a suit. He mentions that 10 cabs passed by him. Below, I detail a few more examples of Black men in different social contexts who did not have on a hoodie but were considered suspicious, threatening, or dangerous.

In 2009, Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Harvard University W. E. B. Du Bois Professor of African American Studies, returned from a research trip in China to find his front door jammed shut. He and the driver of his car proceeded to force it open. A neighbor called 911 to report a breaking and entering in progress. After police arrived, events ensued that ultimately led to the arrest of Gates in his own home. This incident culminated in what is now known as the "Beer Summit" where President Obama invited Dr. Gates and the arresting officer to the White House for a beer to discuss the incident and race relations more broadly.

In another example, in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, in 2012, police officers were in pursuit of what was described as a young, Asian male. Officers came upon Joseph Sushak, a Nigerian-born, 58-year-old graduate student, who was about to change the oil of his truck in his driveway. Upon seeing Sushak, the police officers started asking him a series of questions about his whereabouts. Within a matter of seconds, Sushak was beaten, handcuffed, and face down on his own property. He suffered injuries and had to go to the emergency room. When Sushak claimed he had been a victim of police brutality, the case against the police was ultimately dismissed.

Finally, on December 31, 2008, at 2 a.m., Robbie Tolan, a Black minor league baseball player, was driving home with his cousin from a night on the town celebrating the New Year. As they pulled into Tolan's driveway, a police car pulled up, asked the men what they were doing there, and made them lie face down on the

ground. At this time, Tolan's parents came out of the house trying to determine what was going on and began explaining to the officers that their son lived there. One of the officers aggressively approached Tolan's mother. Tolan proceeded to get off the ground to protect his mother and was shot. Tolan's house was in a predominately White, upper middle-class neighborhood in Houston, Texas. The officer who shot Tolan was brought up on charges but ultimately acquitted.

Given these examples, it becomes clear that it is not the hoodie that made Trayvon Martin look suspicious. Similar to these men, it was his Blackness and maleness. As mentioned above, Black men are not the only ones who are victimized by stereotypical thinking. There are numerous incidents of Latino men being arrested, held in prison for months, or even killed for suspicion of "illegal" immigration (Golash-Boza, 2012). Furthermore, Asian Americans are victimized for posing an economic threat to some American workers. The tragic death of Chinese American Vincent Chin in 1982 highlights the most visceral type of stereotypical thinking. Chin was viciously murdered by White autoworkers in Detroit, Michigan, after being confused as Japanese at a time when Detroit was laying off its auto workers as a result of Japanese automakers' dominance in the market.

Since 9/11, Arab Americans have been profiled and discriminated against in airports and other public venues. In 2013, Atif Irfan and his wife Sobia Ijaz, along with six relatives, were trying to decide where to sit on an Air Tran flight from Washington DC to Orlando, Florida, for a religious conference. Another passenger overheard this conversation and before the family knew it, they were escorted off the plane by security. Air Tran then removed all passengers to sweep the plane and rescreen all baggage. After hours of questioning and the children being unable to eat, the FBI released the family stating it was simply a misunderstanding. Air Tran refused to rebook the family on another flight (instead giving them a refund), thus forcing the family to book a flight on another airline for double the cost. All of the family members were born in the United States except one and Irfan is a lawyer from Detroit, Michigan. In these ways, many people of color find themselves the targets of racism and discrimination due to a variety of different attribution errors. As the Irfan and Ijaz case shows, there are many costs to those individuals victimized this way, including financial costs. Yet, the costs may be far greater than this. In the next section, I use the role of criminalization in Black men's lives as a case study for how groups of color are affected by these patterns.

Black Male Criminalization and its Effects

Criminalization is the inability to separate a person from criminality based on their group identity. In this case, Black male criminalization is the inability to separate Black males from criminals (Muhammad, 2010). These stereotypes are evident when women clutch their purses when they see a Black man or when Whites scurry to the other side of the street or out of purview of an approaching Black man (Feagin, 2001). Criminalization is something that is all too common for Blacks as Black mothers responded to Martin's death with statements such as "that could

have been my son." Black men commonly made statements like "that could have been me." Following the Zimmerman verdict, in fact, President Obama stated, "Trayvon Martin could have been me, 35 years ago." In the case of Martin, his life ended tragically before his 18th birthday. However, even Black men who are not killed still suffer psychologically, educationally, economically, and physically from criminalization.

Psychologically, Black men have to deal with the effects of criminality and come to terms with the fact that socioeconomic status (as highlighted by the experiences of President Obama and Drs. West and Gates) does not protect them from being perceived as suspicious and threatening. As a result, they have worse mental health outcomes than similar Whites (Jackson, 1997). Educationally, Ferguson (2000) shows that Black boys in grade school are perceived by teachers as troublemakers, reprimanded more severely for the same behaviors as White students, and more likely to be suspended thus impacting their educational outcomes. Economically, Pager (2003) shows a staggering trend. Comparing the job prospects of Black and White men (some with a criminal record and some without), she found that not only were White men without a criminal record hired more often than Black men, but White men with a criminal record were hired more than Black men without a criminal record. Physically, Black men's health suffers. My research on the effects of the racial composition of neighborhoods on physical activity finds that Black men in predominately White neighborhoods are significantly less likely to be physically active than Black men in predominately Black neighborhoods. Black men in predominantly White neighborhoods are less likely to exercise because of their experiences with and fear of criminalization and the psychological processes with which they must engage when they leave their homes.

The question remains, what do we do about racial stereotyping? Research suggests that there are various ways to decrease stereotyping. Most of these ways involve some social interaction with people of different racial groups. For instance, *contact theory*, asserts that when a sizable proportion of a minority group is present, there are increased opportunities for contact between majority and minority group members. Gordon W. Allport (1954) argues that the effects of contact on prejudice depend on the *quality of contact*: (1) Is the contact voluntary or involuntary? (2) When majority and minority group members come in contact, are they of equal status? and (3) Does the contact occur in competitive or collaborative environments? Contact that is voluntary, equal, and collaborative should lead to less prejudicial attitudes. Along these lines, the *type of contact* also matters. Friendships among majority and minority group members decrease prejudice, while acquaintanceships moderately decrease prejudice. Repetitive, positive, informal contact at times decreases prejudice (i.e., in a dorm or classroom of students), while the more rigorous conditions required for equal status contact are usually effective but rarely met.

Significantly, Jackman and Crane (1986) find that the effect of contact on reducing prejudicial attitudes varies by socioeconomic status. Specifically, Whites' negative attitudes toward Blacks become relatively obsolete when they have higher status Black friends. Unfortunately, as Jackman and Crane note, rarely do higher status Blacks interact with lower status Whites in meaningful ways. Additionally,

having Black friends and acquaintances hardly affects Whites' policy attitudes about race-based policies. As a result, they conclude that the *diversity of contacts* is more important than the intimacy of contacts because diversity contributes to changing stereotypes of the entire group compared to just changing stereotypes of a particular individual. This distinction is important considering that Lawrence Bobo's (2012) research finds that Whites' positive interactions with Latinos and Asians alter their perceptions of the entire race, while positive interactions with Blacks only alters their perception of that individual (see Bobo & Hutchings, 1996). This finding further illuminates ultimate attribution error.

In sum, this research suggests that the quality, type, and diversity of contact across racial divides can facilitate meaningful conversations and knowledge exchanges about race relations. If contact facilitates more accurate knowledge about the lives of people of color, it will ultimately help Whites reassess their own group, form affective social networks with people of color, and perhaps decrease their prejudices and tendency to stereotype.

Conclusion

Ultimately, George Zimmerman was found not guilty of second-degree murder and manslaughter despite evidence that suggested he followed (or "profiled") Trayvon Martin. In the court of public opinion, however, Americans are still clearly conflicted. Zimmerman received an outpouring of financial support from individuals wanting to help with his defense. On the other hand, hundreds of thousands have marched or shown solidarity with the Martin family by wearing hoodies on specified days. The hoodie has been transformed into a symbol of protest even though it had very little to do with why Trayvon Martin was killed. The hoodie was simply a scapegoat for those trying to reconcile (their racial) cognitive dissonance. Most Black men, similar to most White men, are not criminals or untrustworthy; they are law-abiding citizens. Individuals must recognize significant and meaningful non-verbal cues and symbols, instead of ubiquitously categorizing Black men as dangerous. These changes in individuals' perceptions could go some way toward reducing the criminalization of Black men and the stereotyping of all marginalized groups.

Suggested Additional Resources

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Websites

Center for Constitutional Rights: <http://stopandfrisk.org>

Harvard's Implicit Association Tests: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo>

Audio/Visual

Peters, W. (Director), & Cobb, C. (Writer). (1985, March 26). A Class Divided [Television episode]. *Frontline*. Boston, MA: Public Broadcasting System.

Questions for Further Discussion

1. What, if any, conversations have you had about the Zimmerman case? Have they included people whose background and racial group membership is different from your own? Why or why not?
2. Based on this review, do you think conflict is inevitable when distinct groups interact? Why or why not?
3. Given the author's discussion of contact, how do we encourage meaningful, equitable social interactions across racial groups?
4. How do we encourage candid conversations across racial groups about how race/ethnicity, racism, discrimination, and White privilege impact people's lives?

Reaching Beyond the Color Line

1. Consider examples from your own life and how stereotypical thinking might have shaped your perceptions. What could you do differently in the future, when faced with similar situations?
2. Watch these two scenes from the movie *Crash* and reflect on the social interactions.
 - a. "Hey Osama: I'm an American Citizen!"
 - i. What is the conflict and source of conflict?
 - ii. Does the gun store owner engage in subjective uncertainty?
 - b. "I want the locks changed in the morning: Your Amigo is going to sell our keys to one of his homies!"
 - i. Is the wife prejudice or are her attitudes justified? Is she trying to be color-blind?
 - ii. Did the wife perform ultimate attribution error?
 - iii. What did this robbery do to the stereotypical thinking about Blacks/Latinos/Asians/Whites?

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