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EDITORIAL OBSERVER

## Even Now, There's Risk in 'Driving While Black'

By BRENT STAPLES

The experience of being mistaken for a criminal is almost a rite of passage for African-American men. Security guards shadow us in stores. Troopers pull us over for the crime of "driving while black." Nighttime pedestrians cower by us on the streets.

And black men who work as undercover cops are occasionally shot to death by white colleagues, as happened to a young officer named Omar Edwards when he was off duty and in plain clothes last month in New York City.

We have often been seen as paranoid for attributing these things to bias. But the racial stereotypes that link blackness and crime have recently become a hot topic in social science.

These pervasive and often unconscious biases affect social transactions of all kinds. They drive voting behavior. They make it likely that black defendants will receive longer sentences than whites for comparable crimes. They wreak havoc with the job possibilities of young black men. And they give the lie to the idea that the United States is becoming a "postracial" country.

The psychologists Gordon Allport and Leo Postman showed more than half a century ago that preconceptions about race distorted human judgment and sometimes caused people to recall things that had never happened. Their best-known study mimicked the parlor game "telephone."

In this version, subjects who often included students were shown a now-famous slide depicting typical passengers in a New York City subway car. At the center of the image stand two figures: a black man dressed in a natty suit and a white man in shirtsleeves holding a straight razor.

After being shown the slide, subjects were asked to describe it to others who had not seen it. These people then described it to others, who then passed on their descriptions as well. Those who had heard the story secondhand were then asked to recount it. More than half the time, the razor was said to be held not by the white man but by the well-dressed black man, who was sometimes described as brandishing it wildly.

This country has changed considerably in the more than 60 years since these data were published. But the mental calculus that shifted the razor into the black man's hand is still very much a part of the American scene. It comes into play every day in courtrooms, in city streets and especially in job interviews.

People who believed that racism was on the wane were mightily shocked by the research into the effect of race on hiring policies that appeared in the 2007 book "Marked: Race, Crime and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration," by the Princeton sociologist Devah Pager. After sending carefully selected test applicants to apply for low-level jobs with hundreds of employers, Ms. Pager found that criminal convictions

for black men seeking employment were, in many contexts, “virtually impossible to overcome,” partly because those convictions reinforced powerful, longstanding stereotypes.

The stigma of conviction turned out to be less damaging for whites. Indeed, white men who claimed to be fresh out of prison were just as likely to be called back for second interviews as black men with no history of criminal involvement. The young black men were best-case applicants — bright, well-spoken college students posing as high school graduates. But racial stereotypes prevented employers from seeing their virtues.

“Being black in America today,” Ms. Pager writes, “is just about the same as having a felony conviction in terms of one’s chances of finding a job.”

People who believe that blunt-force racism is a thing of the past tend to gasp when they see this data. But the findings are consistent with what black job seekers and community organizations have been saying about their experiences for a long time.

All of this should come as sobering news to people who believe that the election of an African-American president moved the country into a new phase beyond racism. We may yet reach that goal. But we won’t do it by pretending that centuries-old biases were magically swept away in a single election. We can do it only by exorcising poisonous preconceptions that go to the very heart of who we are.

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