

Bad Rap for Rap: Bias in Reactions to Music Lyrics¹

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This research examines the recent public outcry against violent rap songs such as Ice T's "Cop Killer." It was hypothesized that rap lyrics receive more negative criticism than other types of lyrics, perhaps because of their association with Black culture. Two experiments were conducted to examine the effect of musical genre and race of singer on reactions to violent song lyrics. The results support the hypothesis. When a violent lyrical passage is represented as a rap song, or associated with a Black singer, subjects find the lyrics objectionable, worry about the consequences of such lyrics, and support some form of government regulation. If the same lyrical passage is presented as country or folk music, or is associated with a White artist, reactions to the lyrics are significantly less critical on all dimensions. The findings are briefly discussed in terms of various models of racism and stereotyping.

In 1992, Ice T and his band Body Count released an album that contained the song "Cop Killer." The song tells the story of a man's plot to kill police officers. It isn't surprising that after the album began to receive airplay and notice, there was a great deal of public outcry over the lyrics (Leland, 1992). Politicians from Vice President Quayle to Jesse Jackson publicly condemned the song. Just a few weeks of threatened stock sell-offs, concerts canceled by hall owners, and even death threats prompted the artist to remove the song from the album (Leland, 1992; Light, 1993).

This is just one example of the recent debate raging over the lyrics of rap. Parents are concerned about the effects such lyrics have on their children. Police and civic leaders are concerned about the potential for such music to increase violent crimes in the schools and city streets. In the 1992 presidential race, one of the few topics both George Bush and Bill Clinton agreed on was that rap lyrics were reprehensible. Over a year before the elections, this issue was already picked up by Presidential candidate Bob Dole as a theme for the 1996 race.

In cases like the uproar over "Cop Killer," what is really driving the public outcry? Is the public objecting to a song about shooting a police officer? Surely

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any song advocating such a heinous act would be objectionable in any form. Or, are other factors such as the tag of “rap music” or the race of the singer effecting the public’s reaction to the controversial lyrics?

There is ample research in social psychology to suggest that preexisting thoughts and stereotypes can have enormous effects on how new information is perceived. This has been a dominant theme in work on person perception (e.g., Asch, 1946; Kelley, 1950), self-fulfilling prophecies (e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Synder 1984), and social cognition (e.g., Heff, 1986; Taylor & Crocker, 1981), and of course it is the central notion in the definition and study of prejudice (e.g., Allport, 1979).

Rap music, which is seen as a predominantly Black form of music,³ may be judged through the tainted lens of a Black stereotype which includes such traits as violence, hostility, and aggression (Brigham, 1971; Devine, 1989). Several studies (Duncan, 1976; Sager & Schofield, 1980) demonstrate that the same behavior is much more likely to be characterized as violent if the perpetrator is Black rather than White. Devine (1989) has demonstrated that priming of the Black stereotype can lead even unprejudiced people to interpret ambiguous scenarios as more aggressive. These findings certainly suggest that factors such as rap’s association with Blacks may cause the public to respond more negatively to rap music.

The present research seeks to examine the public outcry over rap. Are some songs getting more extreme reactions because they are rap songs, and not because of the actual lyrics involved. Two experiments were conducted to examine reactions to controversial, violent lyrics. These studies compared reactions to identical lyrical passages that were presented as either rap or nonrap (Study 1) or as sung by a Black or a White artist (Study 2).

In order to remove any effects due to actual rap lyrics, and to strengthen the argument that the public outcry is affected by the singer and type of music, no actual rap lyrics were used. Instead, the first verse of an American folk song once recorded by the Kingston Trio was slightly modified and used. The modifications were limited to changes in verb tense. This song, “Bad Man’s Blunder,” also tells the tale of a young man who hunts down and kills a police officer. The initial pretest reported here compared the modified “Bad Man’s Blunder” to the first verse of “Cop Killer” to test the feasibility of using the folk song in Studies 1 and 2.

³A simple follow-up measure was done to test this assumption. Thirty subjects, from the same community as was used in Study 2, were asked (on a 7-point scale) to what degree various ethnic groups are associated with various types of music. Rap music had a significantly stronger reported association with Blacks ($M = 6.29$, $SD = 1.10$) than either country music ($M = 1.43$, $SD = 0.63$), $t(87) = 22.10$, $p < .001$, or folk music ($M = 1.60$, $SD = 0.72$), $t(87) = 21.33$, $p < .001$.

Pretest

Method

This pretest was conducted to test whether “Bad Man’s Blunder” was instantly identified as a folk song or could be presented as a different form of music. The pretest also examined whether, stripped of all other variables, the song would be rated as offensive and dangerous as “Cop Killer.” Sixty college students from the University of California in Santa Cruz participated in the pretest as part of a class exercise.

Subjects were asked to read a lyrical passage; half the subjects read the first verse of “Cop Killer,” the other half read the first verse of “Bad Man’s Blunder.” The two lyrical passages were of similar length; each was eight lines long. Subjects then answered several questions about how offensive lyrics were, and whether the government should regulate such songs. In addition, subjects were asked to guess who the artist was and what type of music it was.

Results

First, the results indicate that the lyrics of “Bad Man’s Blunder” were not readily identifiable as a folk song. No one identified it correctly, or even mentioned that they thought it was a folk song. In fact, 84% of the subjects identified it as a rap song, and 68% said they thought the artist was Ice T. Among subjects who read the actual “Cop Killer” lyrics, 89% identified it as rap and 75% said they thought it was by Ice T. Additionally, the analysis of rated offensiveness of the songs revealed some surprising results. Subjects actually found the folk song more offensive ($M = 5.56$ on a 9-point scale) than “Cop Killer” ($M = 3.92$), $F(1, 59) = 5.79, p < .05$. Also, the folk song led to a greater call for government regulation ($M = 4.76$) than the Ice T song ($M = 3.28$), $F(1, 59) = 5.23, p < .05$.

The results of the pretest indicate that the folk song is no less offensive than “Cop Killer.” This suggests that there is no indisputable difference or solid line between the content of rap lyrics that cause public outcry and other more acceptable songs. The pretest also indicated that “Bad Man’s Blunder” was not identifiable as a folk song and could pass as a rap song. Therefore, it was determined that this song was acceptable for use in Studies 1 and 2.

Study 1

Study 1 examines whether a song will evoke harsher reactions merely by being identified as rap. It was predicted that subjects would react more

negatively if the song was identified as a rap song than if the lyrics were identified as a country or folk song.

Method

Overview. All subjects read the same song, the first verse of “Bad Man’s Blunder” as described in the pretest. The musical genre identified with the song was manipulated in a one way experimental design with three different levels (folk, rap, or country).

Stimulus material. There were three different experimental packets; each was two pages long. Page 1 contained the lyrical passage and an identification of the artist and song. The instructions asked subjects to read the lyrical passage and answer the questions on page 2. Subjects were specifically told to consider only the lyrics given when answering the questions. Page 1 was identical in all conditions, with the exception of the information about the artist and type of music. In one condition (folk), the song was accurately described as a folk song recorded by the Kingston Trio in the 1960s. In the other two conditions (country and rap), the artist was identified as D. J. Jones and the song recorded in 1991. These two conditions varied, however, in whether the song was identified as country, or rap. The three different music types (folk, country, or rap) constituted the three experimental conditions.

Page 2 of the packets contained the dependent measures and was identical in all conditions. Subjects responded to a series of questions regarding how offensive the lyrics were; whether the lyrics would lead to riots or were otherwise dangerous to society; what, if any, regulations should be put on the song; and whether they would object to a teenage son or daughter listening to the song. All responses were on 9-point scales ranging from 1 (*labeled strongly disagree*) through 5 (*labeled as neutral*) to 9 (*labeled strongly agree*).

Procedure. One hundred eighteen people, varying in ages from 20 to 84, were polled in public places in a mid-sized southwestern city. All subjects were White, as were the experimenters. Subjects were approached by the experimenter in a public place (e.g., shopping centers or coffee shops) and asked if they would complete a short survey on attitudes about music. Only people who appeared to be alone were approached. Less than 15% declined to participate. Once the subject agreed, the experimenter handed him or her one of the packets. The packets were in random order in a large envelope so the experimenter was blind to condition until the packet was handed to the subject. The packets were self-explanatory, so there was usually no interaction between the subject and experimenter while the subject completed the questionnaires. Finally, the experimenter debriefed the subjects, and thanked them for their time.

Results

Two questions (“I object to these lyrics” and “I find these lyrics offensive”) were highly correlated ($r = .970$) and combined as a measure of the song’s offensiveness. Two other questions (“Songs like this promote riots, violence, and civil unrest” and “Songs like this are dangerous or harmful to society”) were also highly correlated ($r = .968$) and were combined as a measure of the song’s threat. All other measures were single-item questions.⁴

The analysis of all measures revealed a very consistent pattern. First, a one-way (condition) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on all six dependent measures revealed a significant overall effect. Wilks’s lambda, Roy’s gcr, and Hotelling’s trace criterion all revealed F s over 2.00, $p < .05$. Univariate tests were then performed on the individual measures. Results of these tests can be seen in Table 1. As predicted, when the song was identified as rap, it was judged to be significantly more negative on all measures than when the song was identified as folk or country.

Study 2

Study 2 was conducted to examine whether the effects obtained in Study 1 could be replicated by simply identifying the artist as Black versus White. It was predicted that if the artist was Black, the song would provoke more negative reactions than if the artist was White.

Method

Stimulus material. The materials in Study 2 were very similar to Study 1. In this experiment, there were only two experimental conditions, Black or White singer. Page 1 contained the identical instructions and lyrical passage as Study 1, but there were no references to musical type. Instead, the page contained a photo of the “artist.” In one condition, the photo was of a young

⁴None of the correlations between other measures reached this high of a level (.97). They did, however, range from .36 to .87 and were significant above the .05 level. The strongest (.87) was between measures of the song’s offensiveness and feelings about whether the song could cause rioting. This correlation was not particularly consistent across the experimental conditions, however: .91 for rap music, but only .84 for country. Most of the correlations of the individual measures were between .60 and .75. Given these correlations, it seemed reasonable for the purpose of this article to look at these as individual measures rather than one global construct. It could potentially be argued that all of these measures tap into a global response (negative or positive) to the lyrics. Had this tactic been taken, the results would simply have shown that subjects had significantly more negative responses to rap than to the other forms of music.

Table 1

Mean (SD) Response to Song Lyrics as a Function of Musical Genre

	Folk	Country	Rap	Overall <i>F</i>
<i>n</i>	40	38	40	
Offensiveness	4.13 _a (2.56)	4.42 _a (2.62)	6.66 _b (2.75)	10.87**
Threat to society	3.43 _a (2.49)	3.92 _a (2.64)	6.15 _b (2.56)	12.68**
Need to regulate	4.10 _a (2.67)	4.81 _a (2.90)	6.85 _b (2.89)	10.19**
Warning labels	4.15 _a (2.74)	4.65 _a (2.93)	6.40 _b (3.13)	6.40**
Complete ban	2.37 _a (1.98)	2.36 _a (2.06)	4.47 _b (3.05)	10.00**
Child listening	5.31 _a (3.10)	5.16 _a (2.52)	7.65 _b (2.35)	10.69**

Note. Numbers that do not share a subscript differ at $p < .01$.

** $p < .001$.

Black man, in the other, a young White man. The two pictures were pulled from two separate magazine ads from the same ad campaign for insurance. Both pictures were nearly identical except for the race. Both were chest and head shots of young men with short haircuts, wearing sport coats over T-shirts. Independent judges rated both men as equally attractive (see Appendix). Page 2 of the experimental packets was identical to that used in Study 1.

Procedure. This study was conducted in a very similar manner with the exception that it was done in a midwestern city. Eighty subjects, ranging in ages from 29 to 72, completed the study. Less than 15% declined the request to participate. All subjects and experimenters were White. Assignment to condition was identical to Study 1, and the experimenter was blind to condition until after the subject agreed to participate. After completing the questionnaire, each subject was thanked and debriefed.

Results

As in Study 1, the two questions about the offensiveness of the song were combined into a scale, as were the two questions about the threat to society. Correlations within each scale were over .95. A one-way (condition) MANOVA on all six dependent measures revealed a significant overall effect. Wilks's lambda, Roy's gcr, and Hotelling's trace criterion all revealed *F*s over 1.90, $p < .05$. Univariate tests were then performed on the individual measures. As can be seen in Table 2, the results were similar to Study I on all measures. When presented with a Black singer, subjects reacted more negatively to the lyrics.

Table 2

Mean (SD) Response to Song Lyrics as a Function of Race of Singer

	White artist		Black artist		T
<i>n</i>	40		40		
Offensiveness	4.46	(2.46)	6.59	(2.59)	3.77**
Threat to society	3.99	(2.40)	5.94	(2.60)	3.48**
Need to regulate	4.85	(2.54)	7.03	(2.54)	3.83**
Warning labels	4.75	(2.62)	6.45	(2.95)	2.72*
Complete ban	2.68	(2.68)	4.70	(3.06)	3.43**
Child listening	5.43	(2.87)	7.50	(2.05)	3.72**

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

General Discussion

These studies clearly demonstrate that, even when asked specifically to judge only lyrics, other factors such as the genre of the music or the race of the singer play a significant role in reactions to musical lyrics. The exact same lyrical passage, which is acceptable as a country song or when associated with a White artist, becomes a dangerous, offensive song in need of government regulation when it is a rap song or associated with a Black artist. Even a Kingston Trio song would be threatening if it were a rap song. Interestingly, not only were the responses more negative, but the means often crossed over the midpoint of the scale. While responses to the White artist or country or folk music tended to be on the favorable side of the scale (5 being *neutral*), responses for the Black artist or rap music tended to cross over to the unfavorable side of the scale.

In addition to these findings shedding light on a particular real-world phenomenon (public reaction to rap music lyrics), they also relate to the theoretical study of stereotyping and intergroup behavior. These findings may be an indication of what has been called "subtle" racism (Pettigrew, 1987), racial "ambivalence" (Katz, Wackenhut, & Hass, 1986), or "aversive" racism (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; see Kleinpenning & Hagendoorn, 1993, for a review of how these relate to other forms of racism). All of these terms refer to a similar phenomenon, a form of racism that is not obvious (to either actors or observers) but is potentially as damaging as the "old-fashioned" racism seen in the U.S. prior to the 1960s. The racism is subtle because the judgments or behaviors in isolation may seem reasonable, but the basis of these judgments or behaviors—

race—is not. When looking at a single act, such as judging the lyrics of one song, it is not obvious whether race is even a factor in the judgment.

In the case of this study, it seems reasonable to feel that violent lyrics are harmful and should be monitored or controlled. It is also reasonable to feel that music will not seriously impact listeners or that freedom of expression is an important right in America. As such, it is wrong to try to control the content of music lyrics. These views, in isolation, are all fairly reasonable and are not driven by bias. Where the bias enters is that information about the race of the singer or the type of music is the factor that determines which of these “unbiased” and reasonable opinions one holds. This racial processing may be so subtle and automatic that those making the decision may not realize that race is an issue (Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980).⁵

The current data seems to fit especially well into the framework hypothesized by Gaertner and Dovidio (1977, 1986). These authors predict that racially biased judgments will occur when (a) norms for responses are ambiguous or conflicting, and (b) when negative responses can be justified in nonracial terms. Clearly, the present situation fits both of these features. As argued previously, public norms can support neutral *or* negative opinions about music lyrics. Also, negative reactions to the lyrics by rap artists can easily be justified on nonracial terms; subjects are objecting only to the senseless violence advocated in the song. According to this framework, the rating of music lyrics is a situation ripe for the demonstration of aversive racism, and the fact that bias was detected in this situation may lend support to Gaertner and Dovidio’s (1986) model.

Findings such as those reported here may ultimately be useful in identifying and measuring racism. Several authors (e.g., Katz et al., 1986; McConahay, 1986) have suggested that as the American culture becomes more sensitive to racism, racism will become increasingly more difficult to detect. McConahay (1986) has even referred to “ultramodern racism” as a type of racism that is almost undetectable because of the negative connotations of racism and the management it spawns. People are becoming more reluctant to make judgments due to group memberships such as race, fearing that they will appear to be racist. Judgment paradigms like the one used here may prove useful in the measurement of racism in these sensitive times.

The current findings are also interesting in terms of stereotype activation. Recent researchers (e.g., Locksley, Hepburn, & Ortiz, 1982; Smith & Zarate, 1992; for review, see Stangor & Lange, 1994) have suggested that bias judgments based on stereotypes are less likely when individuating information or

⁵An interesting footnote, in Study 1 at least one subject in both the country and the folk conditions noted that government regulation was unnecessary “for this type of music.” That suggests that some subjects are at some level acknowledging this biased processing.

other group membership information is present. It is especially interesting that some researchers (Stangor, Lynch, Duan, & Glass, 1992) have found that gender is a more important category than race in influencing judgments. In the current experimental findings, biased judgment occurred despite there being individuating information (e.g., name or picture of the artist) or other group information (e.g., gender of the artist). If individuating evidence had eliminated the group-based bias, there should have been no differences in experimental conditions. Also, if gender had been the predominant group membership that judgment was based on (all actors in all conditions were male), there should not have been significant differences across experimental conditions. Because the current findings may be seen as contradicting past research in this area, further research using the current paradigm may help shed light on when race, as opposed to other information, affects judgment.

It is obvious that the current data are related to several theoretical aspects surrounding the study of racism. There are several problems with using the current research to make strong theoretical arguments. First, it is not clear whether the findings reported here are best conceptualized as motivational (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986) or cognitive (e.g., Devine, 1989; Hamilton & Trolier, 1986). Is the bias in judgment caused by ambivalent feelings Whites have against Blacks, or an example of a purely cognitive process of activating stereotypes? The current data could be explained within either of these frameworks.

Second, in order to make theoretical arguments, it must be assumed that the bias demonstrated in these studies is due solely to rap music, but not country or folk, being associated with Blacks. There are several other possibilities that cannot necessarily be ruled out. One may be focusing on potential differences in the tone the singers use, picturing rap singers singing in an angry way versus a country song sung in a light hearted, satirical manner. Another possible difference is the intended audience. Subjects may feel rap music, unlike country and folk, is targeted towards teenagers, and that government regulations are okay for songs targeted to those under 18. Although such alternative hypotheses cannot be ruled out, they would be hard-pressed to account for all of the measures used. For example, if subjects' only concern is intended audience, there should not be any difference when subjects are specifically asked about their own children listening to that specific song. Similar weaknesses may exist in Study 2. The two photos used may vary on some dimension not obvious in the visual layout or measured in the pretest. This undetected dimension, not race, may be responsible for the differing reactions by subjects. This study could have been strengthened by using several photographs of Blacks and Whites.

To summarize, these two weaknesses put some limitations on the theoretical arguments than can be made regarding the findings reported here. It cannot

be determined whether the bias is cognitive, motivational, or both. Also, there are several alternative explanations for the findings of Study 1 and Study 2 that cannot be ruled out entirely. These weaknesses do not detract from the more specific hypotheses or conclusions drawn from this paper. Factors other than the lyrics themselves play into judgments about music lyrics. Simply identifying lyrics as rap or associating them with a Black artist can cause otherwise neutral lyrics to be perceived as offensive and even dangerous.

Finally, there are major limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn from these experiments. First, these studies do not in any way address the overall content of rap music or any other form of music. I am not attempting to make the claim that rap lyrics as a whole are no "worse" than other lyrics. Second, these studies in no way address what effects violent rap or any other kind of music may have on young listeners, either by promoting violence or by numbing listeners to the atrocities of violence.

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Appendix

Pretest of the Photographs Used in Study 2

Forty-two White subjects, ranging in age from 23 to 49, were shown one of two photos, one of a young Black male and one of a young White male. The photos are described in more detail in the text. In this pretest, subjects were asked to rate the man in the photograph on five different dimensions: How attractive he was, how friendly he looked, how intelligent he appeared to be, how trustworthy he looked, and how well-groomed he was. All responses were on a 9-point scale. As can be seen in Table A1, there were no significant differences between the photos on any of the dimensions, nor was there any obvious pattern (e.g., one photo always being slightly more positive than the other). These results (plus the visual similarity of the photos) led the author to conclude that the photos chosen would work as stimulus materials for Study 2.

Table A1

Mean (SD) Pretest Responses to Photographs Used in Study 2

Race of photo	Black	White	<i>t</i> (40) value
<i>n</i>	21	21	
Attractive	6.00 (1.41)	5.85 (1.35)	<i>t</i> = .33, <i>p</i> = .740
Friendly	5.52 (1.86)	5.33 (1.77)	<i>t</i> = .34, <i>p</i> = .736
Intelligent	5.19 (1.63)	5.42 (1.43)	<i>t</i> = .50, <i>p</i> = .618
Trustworthy	6.10 (1.22)	6.29 (1.35)	<i>t</i> = .48, <i>p</i> = .634
Groomed	4.66 (1.34)	4.71 (1.06)	<i>t</i> = .13, <i>p</i> = .899