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The Hard Facts: The Influence of Crime and Education on Public Perceptions of Criminals



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Introduction

Stigma places a negative identifier on individuals which distinguishes them from other members of society (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Along with the stigma associated with having a criminal history, the societal view that criminals are bad has been instilled into US culture, resulting in a negative influence on their lives. This is especially true for those who have been convicted of a violent crime versus those who have been convicted of a nonviolent crime (Ott & McTier, 2019).

The use of educational interventions has demonstrated the potential to change a person's view on a stigmatized group or individual that they've never met (Theriault, Krause, & Young, 2017).

Hypotheses

Violent Criminals will be rated significantly less attractive on task and social attraction scales than nonviolent criminals

Those who view the educational video will view criminals significantly better than those who do not watch the educational video

There will be an interaction between these two variables such that the impact of educational video will be stronger for violent than non-violent criminals

Materials

Educational Video

A 4-minute-long publically available educational video created and posted by *vlogbrothers* on Mass Incarceration in the US.

Vignettes

Vignettes that described a violent crime or a nonviolent crime were used. The vignettes were adapted from the vignettes used by Snow and Warren (2018) to capture a gender neutral criminal.

Measures

Social & Task Attraction Measure (S&T AM)

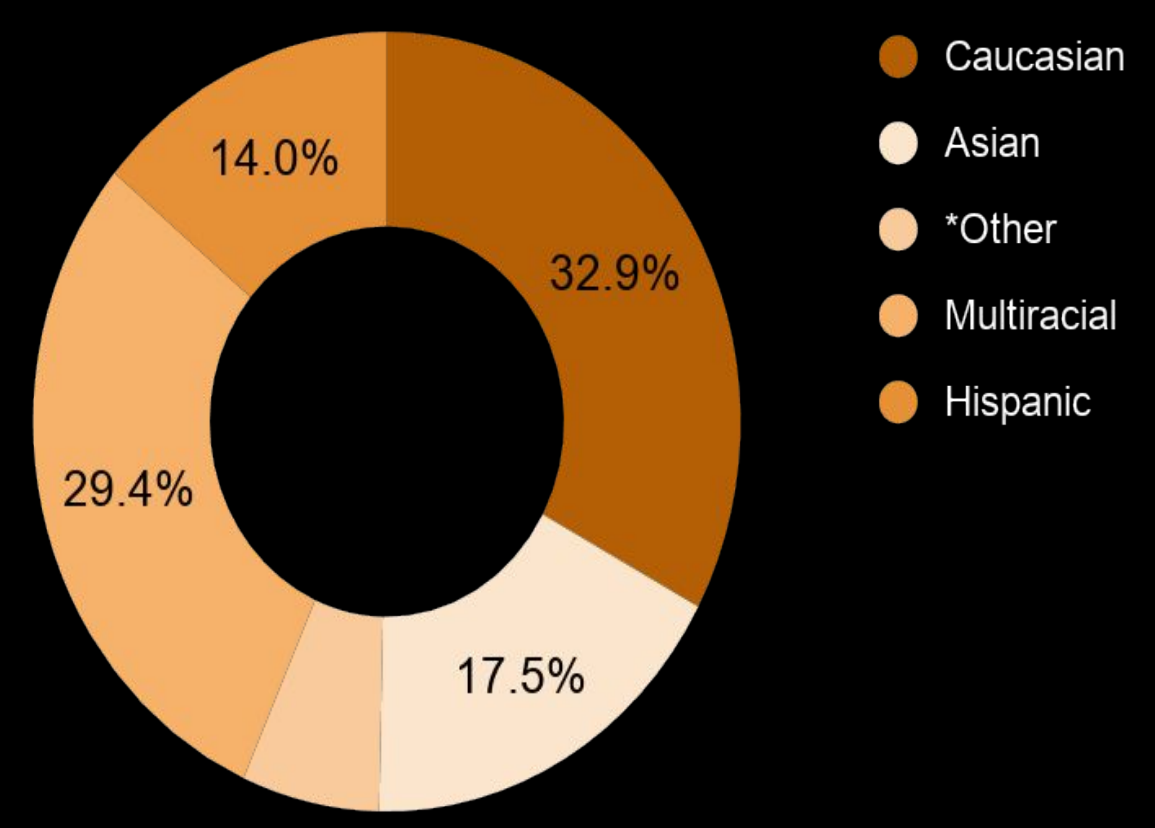
Social and Task attraction of a criminal was measured using the Social and Task Measurement of Interpersonal Attraction (McCroskey & McCain, 1974).

Attitudes Towards Prisoner Scale (ATPS)

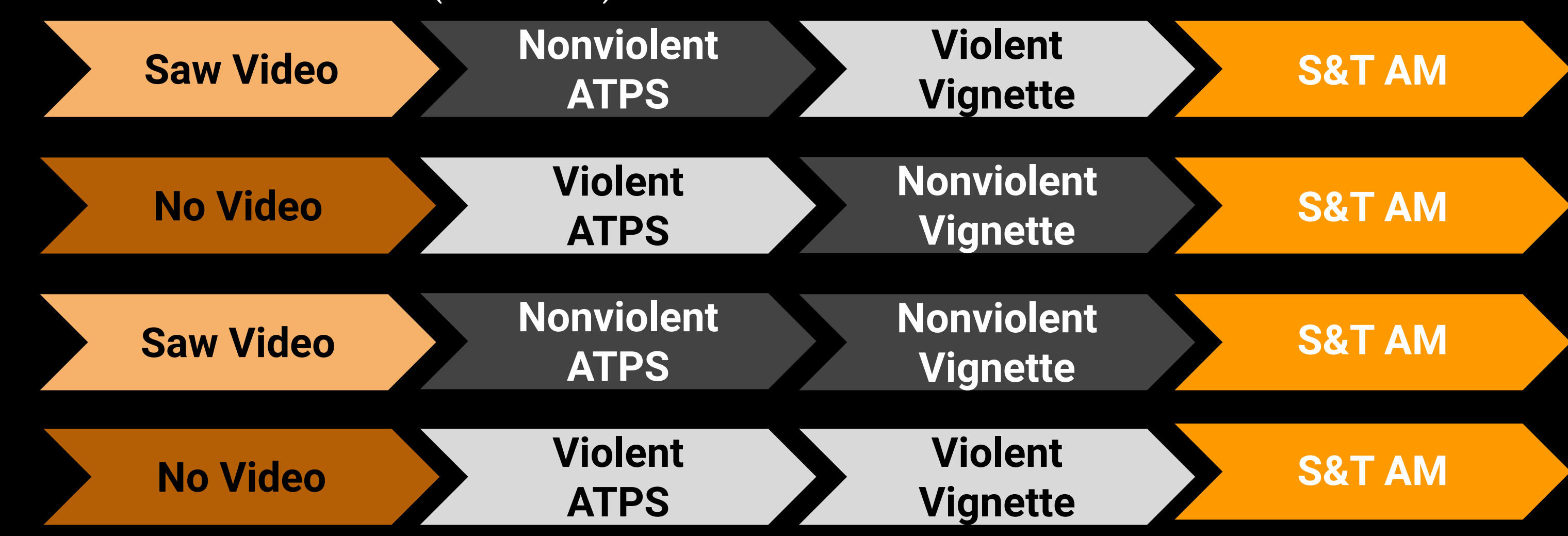
Perceptions of criminals was measured using adapted versions of the Attitudes Towards Prisoner Scale (Melvin et al, 1985).

Method

A two by two factorial design was used to test these hypotheses. The independent variables included crime type (violent criminals vs. non violent criminals) and exposure to an educational video, and the dependent variable was perception of a criminal.



A total of 141 participants completed the study. 81.8% identified as females, with a mean age of 28.45 ($SD=12.73$)



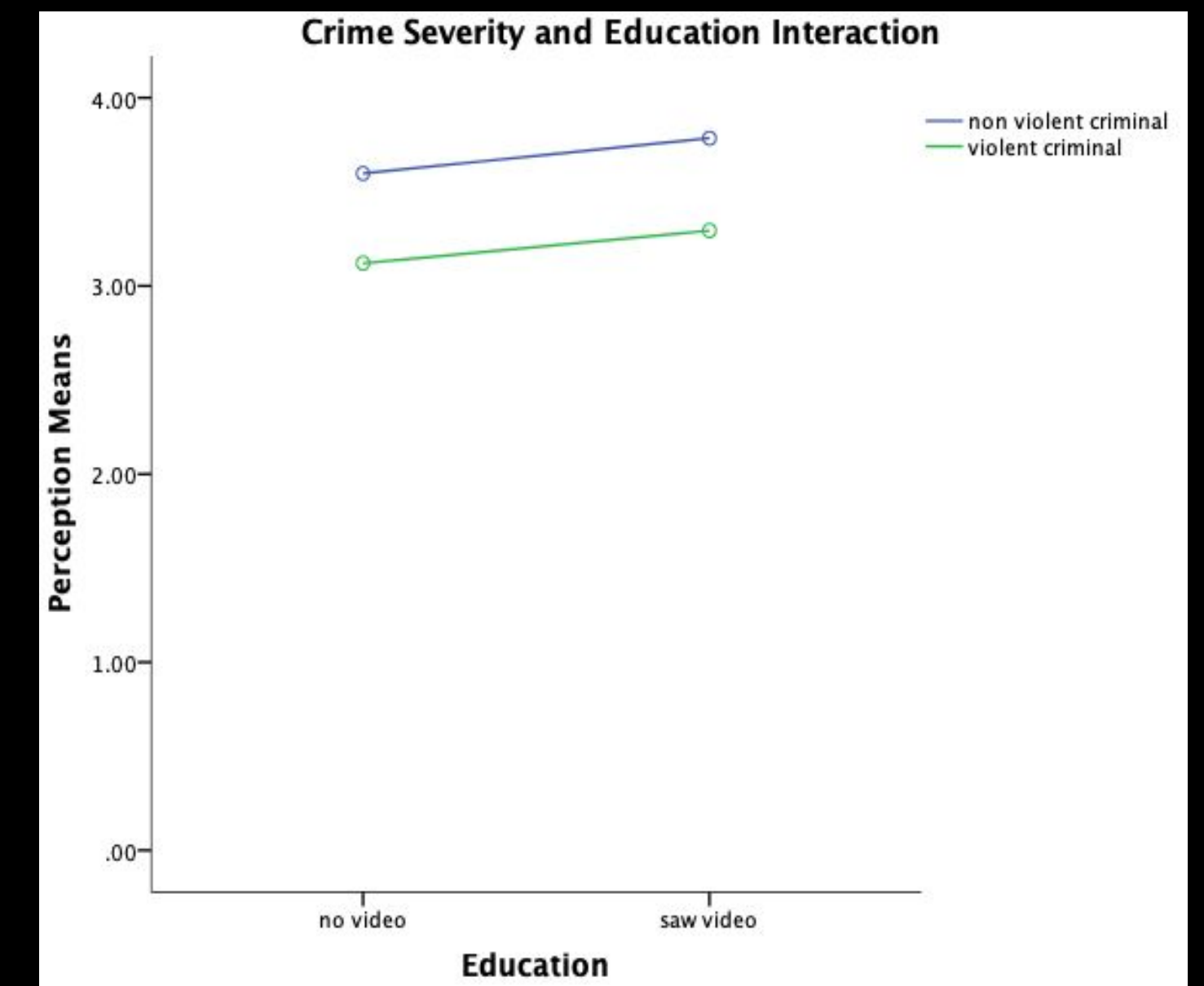
* Other accounts for 6.3% of participants who identified as Black, North Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander & Other

Results

Two independent samples *t* tests demonstrated that non-violent criminals were **significantly** more task attractive ($t(141)=2.176, p=.031$) and socially attractive ($t(141)=2.105, p=.037$) than violent criminals.

An independent samples *t* test demonstrated a no significant difference in the social ($t(141)=1.918, p>.05$) and task ($t(141)=1.022, p>.05$) attraction of criminals between those who viewed the educational video and those who didn't.

A 2x2 between subjects factorial ANOVA demonstrated no significant interaction between perceptions of criminals and the viewing of the educational video ($F(1,139)=.007, p>.05$). A **significant** main effect for crime type was found ($F(1,139)=33.310, p<.001$). A **significant** main effect for education was also found ($F(1,139)=4.633, p<.05$).



Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of crime severity and education on the perceptions of criminals held by the public.

The results demonstrate that non-violent criminals are significantly more task and socially attractive than violent criminals. However, the use of the educational video demonstrated no difference among task and social attraction between those who watched the video and those who didn't.

The results did however show that crime severity and education, separately, had a significant positive impact on the perceptions of criminals. These findings support prior research suggesting that violent criminals face harsher perceptions than nonviolent criminals (Ott & McTier, 2019) and that education can reduce negative views towards stigmatized populations (Corrigan et al., 2004; Lam et al., 2019; Theriault et al., 2017).

Limitations

Unequal amount of participants in each level of the educational video condition. Only 66 participants watched the educational video, whereas 77 participants did not watch the video.

The survey was based on self-reported perceptions and attitudes. There is a possibility that the participants wanted to give the "right" answer, given the strength of some of the statements. It could be that we don't know their true perceptions, just their self-reported attitudes.

Future Directions

Future researchers should aim to:

- Further examine the relationship between age and perceptions of criminals.
- Ask participants if they have had any prior contact with a criminal, and operationally define "contact".
- Examine the most effective educational measure and the length in which perceptions are changed.