The pervasive implicit association of “Weapons” with “Black Americans”

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News of police officers tragically misidentifying harmless objects as weapons when held by Black Americans suggests that the association of African-Americans with weapons is widely learned (Correll et al., 2002, Greenwald et al., 2003, Payne et al., 2002). 18,000 implicit association tests (IATs) of this stereotype were completed at the website www.tolerance.org between November 2001 and February 2003. Stimuli for the IAT included archaic weapons not stereotypically associated with Black Americans (e.g., mace, cannons, swords) as a tougher test of the hypothesis than stereotypic weapons (e.g., handguns). Yet participants automatically associated weapons more with Black than White Americans ($d = 1.03$). Although all groups showed this bias, Blacks showed the weakest bias ($d = 0.59$), and Asians ($d = 1.01$) and Whites ($d = 1.17$) showed the strongest biases. Contrary to these data, explicit reports of the Black+weapons stereotype were small ($d = 0.25$). This effect varied by group membership, level of education, and political identification, such that African-Americans, highly educated respondents, and liberals were less likely to explicitly report the stereotype. The correlation between explicit and implicit stereotypes was negligible for all participants except Black Americans -- 25–29 year olds, respondents with no college experience, and conservatives all showed correlations $> .30$.

Beyond ethnicity of respondent, other demographic variables (e.g., age, education) did not appear to directly moderate the implicit effect. Although political identification (liberal-conservative) predicts implicit attitudes toward a variety of social groups, the Black+weapons implicit stereotype appears to be unrelated to stated political orientation.