

Juvenile Justice for Some

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Nancy Eisenberg

I have known Sandra Graham's work nearly my entire career, for years before I met her. She is a leader among developmental scientists studying aggression, educational outcomes, social cognition, and issues related to the role of ethnicity/race in diverse development processes and outcomes. In this column, Graham shares some of her personal thoughts and insights as a psychological scientist regarding the recent killings of unarmed Black adolescent males.

-Nancy Eisenberg

Trayvon Martin, 17, as he walked home after buying snacks at a local convenience store; Michael Brown, 18, after an altercation with a police officer in a patrol car; and Tamir Rice, 12, as he waved a toy gun in a park 100 yards from home. The American public has been riveted by the lethal shootings of these unarmed Black youth — Trayvon at the hands of a private citizen “standing his ground,” Michael and Tamir at the hands of trained police officers.



Sandra Graham

As an African American mother of two young adult sons, I feel the pain of the mothers of these three slain boys. I also shudder at the thought that it could have been one of my own sons — good kids, maybe a bit reckless at times in their teen years, but never a danger to anyone and never armed. These killings of unarmed Black male youth seem so random but recurring, in good neighborhoods as well as bad; it could happen to anyone's Black male child.

As a developmental psychologist, I am compelled to turn to our science — two literatures in particular — to help me make sense of these horrific events. One literature is at odds with the treatment of Black youth like Trayvon, Michael, and Tamir, and the other tells me why that might be so.

The Adolescent Brain

The last 2 decades of research on adolescent psychosocial and brain development have helped to reconceptualize adolescence as a period of increased vulnerability (Steinberg, 2014; Casey, 2013). The science of adolescent development documents that youth between the ages of 10 and 20 are biologically and psychosocially less mature than adults. Stimulated by the hormonal change of puberty, their brains are undergoing a period of great plasticity in which the socioemotional system that controls emotions and sensitivity to rewards is developing more rapidly than (or “hijacking”) the cognitive control system that regulates planning, thinking ahead, and self-control. These asynchronously developing brain systems in part account for why many adolescents are risky decision makers, impulsive, quite susceptible to peer influence, and not very future oriented. Individual differences aside, the general consensus is that adolescence is a period of life characterized by vulnerability, malleability, and immaturity in judgment.

The new science of adolescent development is having a profound impact on perceptions of adolescent criminal culpability, which moves us closer to the contexts in which Trayvon, Michael, and Tamir lost their lives. If adolescents are biologically less mature than adults, then they should not be held to the same standards of culpability as adults who commit similar crimes. Three transformative Supreme Court decisions of the past decade have drawn explicitly on this science: *Roper v. Simmons* in 2005 outlawed the juvenile death penalty, *Graham v. Florida* in 2010 banned life sentences for juveniles convicted of crimes other than homicide, and *Miller v. Alabama* in 2012 struck down the use of mandatory life sentences without possibility of parole for juveniles convicted of murder. Even recent reforms of the juvenile justice system have taken a developmental approach in support of policies that are more rehabilitative than punitive (National Research Council, 2013).

The fates of Trayvon, Michael, and Tamir are completely misaligned with the new science of adolescent development. In the moments before each one's death and in the aftermaths, none of these boys was seen as vulnerable and immature. Who could forget George Zimmerman's attorney in closing arguments portraying Trayvon as so sinister, threatening, and with adult-like criminal intent that his client had no choice but to shoot in self-defense? Who did not feel outrage at the Ferguson County police officer who told a grand jury he felt “like a 5-year-old” being pummeled by Hulk Hogan, and who likened Michael Brown to a “demon”? And who did not listen with disbelief as the officer who fatally shot Tamir claimed that from a distance he thought the boy was about 20 years old? Dangerous, demonic, bigger, and older seeming than they are — that was the collective portrayal of Trayvon, Michael, and Tamir.

Troubling Associations

Why the misalignment between developmental science and the perceptions and treatment of these young Black victims? Here is where social psychological literature on racial stereotypes becomes relevant. Even though privately held beliefs about African Americans have become more positive over the last 50 years, studies of racial stereotypes continue to show that respondents from many different backgrounds associate being Black (and male) with hostility, aggressiveness, violence, and danger (Jones, Dovidio, & Vietze, 2014). Moreover, racial stereotypes often are activated and used outside of conscious awareness (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). By automatically categorizing people according to racial stereotypes, perceivers can manage information overload and make decisions more efficiently.

Although primarily studied with adults as targets, implicit racial biases can shape judgments of Black youth. In my own research (Graham & Lowery, 2004), I used a priming methodology with police officers and probation officers in the juvenile justice system to examine implicit racial stereotypes about adolescent males. Participants in whom racial stereotypes were subliminally primed judged a hypothetical Black adolescent offender as more dangerous, responsible, and blameworthy for his alleged offense than did participants in an unprimed control condition. In a provocative set of studies, Goff and colleagues (2014) presented college students and police officers with vignettes that manipulated the age of Black, White, or Latino boys ages 10–17 who had allegedly committed a felony or a misdemeanor. Participants perceived the alleged Black felons, compared to White or Latino felons, as older than they were (by as much as 4 years), less innocent, and more culpable for the same crime. And in Rattan, Levine, Dweck, and Eberhardt (2012), simply priming participants to think about a Black rather than White juvenile offender resulted in less support for legislation to ban life sentences for juveniles convicted of crimes other than homicide (*Graham v. Florida*, 2010). These studies tell us that, when it comes to young Black males, the view of adolescents emerging from developmental science (that they are less mature and less culpable than adults) may be superseded by more pernicious implicit beliefs (that they are violent, dangerous, and possess adult-like negative intent).

I believe findings from the science of adolescent development and the science of implicit racial bias can aid our understanding about next steps to prevent situations like those that took the lives of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice. If we think about law enforcement and the justice system as critical points of contact, then new efforts are needed to educate critical stakeholders (police officers, defense attorneys, prosecutors, and judges) about the science of adolescent development as well as the meaning and function of implicit racial bias. Just because biases get activated outside of conscious awareness does not mean that they cannot be changed. The empirical literature on reducing implicit racial bias is sufficiently large to inform us about what types of interventions appear to be most effective (see Lai et al., 2014). Tailoring these interventions for law enforcement and juvenile justice stakeholders will require teams of developmental psychologists, social psychologists, curriculum specialists, and stakeholders themselves working together as partners in translational research.

But let me not overstate the importance of psychological science. Understanding and ameliorating conditions that led up to the tragedies of Trayvon, Michael, and Tamir will require confronting issues of race and crime in this country that are far beyond the range of convenience of psychological theory. What our science does offer is a framework for asking some of the right questions about ways to foster a justice system that is fair to everyone.

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