

Kellogg Insight Podcast Transcript

How the Boston Marathon Bombing Created a Rorschach Test for Perceptions of Race

Jessica LOVE: In 2013, Nour Kteily was finishing his PhD in Boston when he learned that there had been several explosions at the Boston Marathon.

Nour KTEILY: I never thought that I would see images like this, this is just less than two miles where I lived. A SWAT team, FBI all over the place.]

LOVE: This audio is from a lecture he gave to Kellogg students in September. Anyway, you may remember, shortly after the bombing, the FBI released surveillance images of the suspected perpetrators.

Brian WILLIAMS: Take a good look: The FBI today unveiled Suspect Number One and Suspect Number Two...

LOVE: Over the next couple days, the suspects were identified as Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev. But even though the police now knew their names, some big questions still lingered about their identities.

KTEILY: I remember a headline at the time asking, “Are the Tsarnaev brothers white?” There was a lot of confusion about, could they be considered white? On the one hand, you had people that were pretty clear that these were not white Americans. They didn't look like your prototypical white American. But on the other hand, they literally immigrated from the Caucasus, which is the very region that gave rise to the term “Caucasian.”

LOVE: So were they white? And was that really important? As Kteily was about to find out, the answer to these questions just might be a matter of life or death. And his work would end up playing a role in a major criminal trial.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

LOVE: Welcome to the *Kellogg Insight* podcast. I'm your host, Jessica Love. Humans often sort one another into groups. We see other people as either like us or *not* like us. But what's the psychology behind those classifications? And when we think people are not like us, how do we treat them? Today on the podcast, what happened when Nour Kteily, an associate professor at Kellogg, decided to find out. Or, Kteily likes to put it...

KTEILY: How I ended up embroiled in the trial of the Boston Marathon bombers.

LOVE: Producer Jake Smith has the story.

SMITH: First, some background. In the past, white Americans have generally had a high bar for who they consider “white.” For instance, it was once widely believed that

if you had any African-American ancestors, no matter how many generations back, then you were considered black. This was actually codified in a federal policy, called the “one drop rule.” And in his research, Kteily has found that these perceptions haven’t really changed.

KTEILY: Black-white multiracials have tended to be categorized as “more” black than white, with a whole host of consequences.

SMITH: And that high bar for being considered white isn’t limited to black-white biracial people. Research shows that white people apply that same standard to racially ambiguous folks of all kinds. But here’s the thing: Kteily didn’t think these kinds of perceptions were universal. In fact, he thought that some people may be more likely to view the Tsarnaev brothers as white, and that he could predict which people based on certain psychological traits. So shortly after the bombing, he and some colleagues launched a study.

KTEILY: We got data from about 251 white American participants. So we collected a battery, a variety of different psychological measures. And we just showed them these photographs that had been released by the FBI, and asked them to rate on a zero to one hundred scale, how white they thought the suspects looked in these photographs.

SMITH: The researchers’ theory about who would see the brothers as white revolved around what they call “social dominance orientation,” or SDO. People with high SDO want to arrange society as a hierarchy, with some groups on top, and others on the bottom. And if those high-SDO people are members of a group at the top of this hierarchy, then they want to make sure their group stays there. So Kteily thought they would be pickier about who they consider part of that group.

KTEILY: So we predicted that it might be the case that, among our white American sample, given that the Tsarnaev brothers were really low-status targets, it might be the case that people who are higher in social dominance orientation—really status-sensitive, really wanting to maintain that hierarchical differentiation—would be those individuals who were least likely to see the Tsarnaev brothers as looking white in those photos that they had seen from the FBI.

SMITH: And when his team crunched the numbers, that was exactly what they found. White people who believed that some groups were superior to others were less willing to see the brothers as white—likely because they didn’t want to associate suspected terrorists with their own, high-status group.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

SMITH: Around the time of this study, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was getting ready to stand trial. His brother Tamerlan had already been killed in a shoot-out with police. Anyway, the authors wrote up their results in an academic journal, looking at the psychology behind perceptions of race, and also, how those perceptions might influence the punishment for Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. And that would usually be the end of the story. But then, something unusual happened.

KTEILY: I get a phone call from an unidentified number. I pick up and the person on the other line identifies himself as one of the lead attorneys that was defending Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, and he had somehow come across our academic work on the topic and wanted to talk. And the reason that he wanted to talk to us was actually because the United States government, as part of their case against Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, had argued that he had betrayed the United States. And the basis for this claim was that he essentially had once been a foreigner, an outsider from the group that was allowed through the process of legal immigration to become a citizen, and therefore, all else equal, his actions were that much worse than would have been true of the same person who was born in the United States.

SMITH: In other words, that his crime was more egregious just because he was *not* a natural-born citizen. Here again, the lawyers thought, Tsarnaev was being treated as less than a full member of the in-group. And that's why they wanted to talk to Kteily—because, as his research showed, this kind of “other-ing” could have extreme consequences.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

SMITH: Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's trial began in 2015. And the question on everyone's minds was, how would he be punished? Would he get life in prison, or the death penalty? It turns out, Kteily's team had looked at this, too. And they found the punishment that people wanted depended on how they saw Tsarnaev.

KTEILY: Again, consistent with our predictions, the less people thought Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev looked white, the more they were supportive of the death penalty in this case.

SMITH: Kteily chose not to participate in the trial, beyond explaining his research to the lawyers. But as you may remember, Tsarnaev ended up being sentenced to death. Now, Kteily isn't claiming that Tsarnaev got the death penalty *because* the jury saw him as less white. There's really no way to know in this particular case. But as Kteily told us in a more recent interview, his research does suggest that in future cases with a racially ambiguous defendant, when picking jurors, lawyers may want to ask questions that get at the jurors' psychological makeups.

KTEILY: Things like, “To what extent do you believe that some groups are superior to other groups? To what extent do you believe that it's okay for some groups to dominate other groups?” So, you could imagine just giving jurors four items that capture their social attitudes on the spectrum and then perhaps seeking to have a diverse array of jurors on that metric, the same way that we would think about the diversity of juries on other metrics.

LOVE: This program was produced by Kevin Bailey, Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Jake Smith, and Emily Stone. It was written by Jake Smith and edited by Michael Spikes.

Special thanks to Nour Kteily.

As a reminder, you can find us on iTunes, Google Play, or our website. If you like this show, please leave us a review or rating. That helps new listeners find us. And visit us at insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu, where you can read more about Professor Kteily's research.

We'll be back in a couple weeks with another episode of the Kellogg Insight podcast.