The demographics of pain: How age, race, and gender affect pain assessments

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Abstract

Prior studies indicate that sex, race, and age biases in assumed pain sensitivity produce treatment disparities: Women are seen as more sensitive than men; white people as more sensitive than Black people; and both seniors and infants are deprioritized. We recruited online participants (N=69) to assess fictional characters' pain in 8 scenarios. Characters varied in sex (male/female), race (Black/white), age (adult/child), and injury (e.g., bruised leg, splinter). Using a mixed effects regression, we found an effect of character age ($p<0.01$) and a marginal effect of character sex ($p=0.08$). These results suggest that adults assume children feel more pain than adults. Additionally, we found that male participants rated female characters' pain as higher than male characters' pain ($p<0.01$), whereas female participants rated male and female pain equally. Also, white participants gave lower pain ratings overall than nonwhite participants ($p<0.01$). In sum, character and participant demographics both affected pain assessment outcomes.

In J. Culbertson, A. Perfors, H. Rabagliati & V. Ramenzoni (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 44th Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society*.