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Authors

Steiner, Nicole
Tillman, Katharine A

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

Nicole Steiner

The University of Texas at Austin, AUSTIN, Texas, United States

Katharine Tillman

UT Austin, Austin, Texas, United States

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.