



FlashReport

When the half affects the whole: Priming identity for biracial individuals in social interactions [☆]

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Here we prime one half of a biracial Black/White individuals' racial identity.
- ▶ Behavioral changes in interactions with Black or White confederates are measured.
- ▶ We show priming biracial's racial identity significantly affects social behavior.
- ▶ Interactions were more positive when priming the same identity as the confederate.

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ABSTRACT

In two studies we investigate how the fluid identities of biracial individuals interact with contextual factors to shape behavior in interracial settings. In Study 1, biracial Black/White participants ($n=22$) were primed with either their Black or White identity before having a race-related discussion with a Black confederate. Study 2 ($n=34$) assessed the influence of our prime on racial self-identification and examined interactions with a White confederate. Self-reports and nonverbal behavior indicated that when the primed racial ingroup matched that of an interaction partner, biracial participants behaved much like participants in same-race interactions in previous studies, exhibiting lower levels of anxiety. Priming the opposite racial identity, however, led to greater signs of anxiety, mimicking past interracial interaction findings. These results extend previous findings regarding the influence of contextual factors on racial identification for biracial individuals, and are the first to demonstrate the implications of these effects for behavioral tendencies.

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Introduction

It is well established that interracial interactions are fraught with the potential for anxiety and miscommunication (e.g., Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Kawakami, Dunn, Karmali, & Dovidio, 2009; Plaut, 2010; Richeson, Trawalter, & Shelton, 2005; Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005a; Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005b; Toosi, Babbitt, Ambady, & Sommers, 2012; Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009; Vorauer & Sakamoto, 2006). Past studies show that White individuals often enter interracial settings concerned about being viewed as prejudiced (e.g., Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Plant & Butz, 2006; Plant & Devine, 1998; Richeson & Shelton, 2003), whereas Black individuals frequently worry about being targeted by prejudice (e.g., Mendes, Major, McCoy, & Blascovich, 2008; Richeson et al., 2005).

These expectations shape interracial interactions in negative and positive ways (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Plant, 2004). But how do interracial interactions proceed for multiracial individuals whose identity is represented by multiple racial groups?

Although the multiracial population in the United States has increased by 32% since 2000 (the highest percentage being biracial Black/White; U.S. Census, 2010) and is predicted to comprise 21% of the population by 2050 (Smith & Edmonston, 1997), no research to date has examined biracial individuals' behavior in interracial settings. Past studies demonstrate that social context can alter the perceptions of biracial Black/White individuals, forcing them to navigate between different racial identities (e.g., Cheng & Lee, 2009; Chiao, Heck, Nakayama, & Ambady, 2006; Sanchez & Bonam, 2009), but comparable effects have not been studied within actual social interactions (Ross, Xun, & Wilson, 2002). Making particular social identities salient has can have behavioral effects on *monoracial* individuals, however. For example, in an investigation of social identity threat and math performance, Asian females' performance on math tests was found to vary depending on whether their gender or ethnicity was primed (Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999): gender priming activated negative stereotypes about math skill, negatively affecting performance, while

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ethnicity priming activated positive stereotypes and improved performance. This study demonstrates the potential for contextual factors and flexible identity to shape behavior.

The goal of the current studies was to examine the impact of racial-identity priming on biracial Black/White individuals' behavior. Specifically, we examined the behavioral tendencies of individuals with one Black and one White parent when interacting with either a Black (Study 1) or a White (Study 2) partner. We tested whether making salient different racial identities affects how multiracial individuals behave within social interactions. We hypothesized that participants primed with the same racial group membership as their interaction partner would exhibit lower levels of anxiety (similar to results from same-race interactions; Richeson et al., 2005) and those primed with the opposite racial identity as their partner would exhibit higher anxiety (similar to findings from cross-race interactions; Richeson & Shelton, 2003). In short, the present studies examined whether making salient different racial identities of multiracial individuals influences their subsequent behavior and interaction outcomes, exploring potential top-down identity influence on behavioral tendencies.

Study 1

Method

Twenty-two biracial Black/White participants (11 females, $M_{age} = 23.14$) were recruited via online postings. All participants self-identified as having one White and one Black parent. Before the study, participants provided the following demographic information: name, age, gender, and the race of their mother and father.

Participants were greeted by a non-Black experimenter before one of four Black confederates entered. Confederates were gender-matched to the naïve participant, blind to study condition, and trained to respond comparably to each participant. The experimenter stated that they would be having a conversation together, but that first they needed to complete an individual computer task. The participant stayed in the room while the confederate left, ostensibly to complete the task elsewhere. Participants were asked to write about the ethnic identity of either their mother or father (depending on the prime condition to which they were randomly assigned) and the role it played in their lives: those in the White-prime condition wrote about their White parent and those in the Black-prime condition wrote about their Black parent. Participants were told to write for 7 min (see Chiao et al., 2006).

Next, each participant completed a pre-interaction questionnaire assessing their expectations concerning getting along with their partner and their current emotional state (adapted from Shelton et al., 2005a). The confederate then returned and through a rigged drawing was always assigned to the role of interviewer, and the topic of discussion was always "Affirmative Action," which has been shown to heighten the salience of race during interactions (Shelton et al., 2005a, 2005b; Sommers, Warp, & Mahoney, 2008). The confederate received a written set of questions (e.g., "Do you support affirmative action?"; "Do you think affirmative action effectively helps overcome past or present discrimination?") and was told to read each question to the participant. This 5-minute interaction was videotaped.

At the conclusion of the study, 4 coders (3 females, 1 male) blind to condition and hypotheses rated each participant's nonverbal behavior. Past studies show that people tend to monitor nonverbal behavior less effectively than verbal behavior and that nonverbals exert great influence on how we evaluate others (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997). Coders watched each interaction without audio where only the participant was visible, and used a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) to rate how participants behaved during the interaction (see Dovidio et al., 2002; Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006; Shelton et al.,

2005a, 2005b). Lastly, coders rated participants on their outward racial appearance using a scale of 1 (*very White*) to 7 (*very Black*). To assess the valence of the parental experiences described during the priming task, 4 additional coders (3 females, 1 male) evaluated how positive and happy the content of each essay was using a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

Results & discussion

A total of 10 participants were primed with their White identity (7 wrote about their mother), 12 with their Black identity (3 wrote about their mother). There was no evidence of significant differences by participant gender or gender of parent primed on any of the variables measured. Additionally, participants did not differ between conditions in terms of how "White" or "Black" they appeared to others, $t(20) = 1.33$, $p = .20$. Therefore, apparent phenotypicality and skin tone appeared equivalent between the two groups.

Pre-interaction ratings

Compared to White-primed participants, Black-primed participants expected to get along better, communicate better, and like their Black interaction partner more ($F_s > 4.43$, $p_s < .05$; see Table 1 for means). There were no significant differences regarding self-reported emotions felt before the interaction ($F_s < 1.72$, $p_s > .21$).

Nonverbal behavior

An average rating was calculated for each coded item (intraclass $r = .79$). Black-primed participants were rated as significantly more interested, more alert, more engaged, and less tense than White-primed participants ($F_s > 4.36$, $p_s < .05$). Additionally, Black-primed participants were rated as making significantly more eye contact and moving their bodies more ($F_s > 5.65$, $p_s < .03$), behaviors that in the past have been shown to predict more positive interactions (Dovidio et al., 2002; Norton et al., 2006; Richeson & Shelton, 2003; Shelton et al., 2005a, 2005b). There were no significant differences on perceived enthusiasm, excitement, anxiety or smiling ($F_s < .66$, $p_s > .42$; see Table 1 for means).

Essay content

An average rating was calculated for each coded item (intraclass $r = .84$) and ratings for positivity and happiness were averaged into a composite score ($\alpha = .81$). There were no significant differences

Table 1
Outcomes for biracial participants based on racial priming.

	Primed identity—Study 1 (Black confederate)		Primed identity—Study 2 (White confederate)	
	Black	White	Black	White
<i>Participant self-report</i>				
Expect to communicate well	5.92 (.90)	4.60 (.96)**	4.28 (1.36)	5.18 (.83)*
Expect to get along	6.08 (.79)	5.00 (1.56)*	4.65 (.70)	5.31 (1.02)*
Expect to like partner	4.42 (1.73)	2.80 (1.55)*	4.94 (.83)	5.56 (.89)*
<i>Nonverbal behavior</i>				
Enthusiastic	3.42 (1.51)	3.00 (.53)	3.46 (1.17)	4.28 (.89)*
Interested	4.28 (.82)	3.64 (.49)**	3.62 (.94)	4.38 (.79)**
Alert	3.91 (.19)	3.33 (.20)*	3.87 (.63)	3.97 (.52)
Excited	2.56 (1.07)	2.33 (.33)	3.27 (1.14)	3.44 (1.04)
Engaged	5.17 (.60)	4.48 (.38)**	4.52 (1.08)	5.20 (.76)*
Tense	2.13 (.39)	2.58 (.61)*	2.60 (.66)	2.58 (.88)
Anxious	2.43 (.59)	2.63 (.76)	2.36 (.39)	2.42 (.85)
Smile	3.52 (1.32)	3.45 (1.20)	3.68 (1.71)	3.75 (1.41)
Eye contact	4.40 (.57)	3.81 (.74)*	4.15 (.77)	4.67 (.64)*
Moved body	3.52 (.82)	2.73 (.56)**	2.81 (.96)	3.55 (.96)*

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses; higher numbers reflect greater endorsement of the item.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .02$.

on overall positivity by priming condition, $t(19) = .89, p = .38$, ruling out the possibility that the valence of the priming essays written drove between-group differences in interaction behaviors and ratings.

Overall, both participant self-reports and nonverbal behavior supported the hypothesis that biracial Black/White individuals would behave more positively with a Black confederate when primed with their Black versus their White identity. These results are consistent with past interaction studies involving monoracial participants, in that biracial participants primed with one aspect of their racial identity behaved like previous monoracial individuals of the same racial group as that prime (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2002; Plant & Butz, 2006; Plant & Devine, 1998; Richeson & Shelton, 2003). That making salient different aspects of biracial Black/White individuals' identities altered their interactions with a Black partner demonstrates the intersection of social context and racial identity on interracial interaction experiences for multiracial individuals.

Questions remain, however, regarding why these specific behavioral changes occurred. One possibility is that racial priming temporarily changes a biracial person's level of racial identification. Furthermore, knowing the race of one's interaction partner before the racial priming may be a necessary precondition for such effects. To address these possibilities, Study 2 sought to replicate (and extend) our basic priming results with another sample of biracial participants and an interaction involving a White partner.

Study 2

Method

Thirty-four additional biracial Black/White participants (23 females, $M_{\text{age}} = 24.88$) were recruited as in Study 1. The methods were nearly identical to Study 1: participants were greeted by a non-Black experimenter and asked to write about the ethnic identity of either their mother or father. In this study, however, participants did *not* meet their interaction partner before the priming manipulation. Also different from Study 1, we directly assessed whether the racial priming manipulation affected levels of racial identification by asking participants to rate themselves on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) to indicate how much – at that very moment – they identified with biracial Black/White people, Black people, and White people.

Next, the experimenter brought in one of four White confederates who were gender-matched to the naïve participant. After the individually-completed pre-interaction questionnaire, the participant and confederate engaged in the same 5-minute video-taped interaction as in Study 1. After the study, 4 new coders (3 females, 1 male) rated each participant's nonverbal behavior and 4 additional coders (3 females, 1 male) rated essay positivity and happiness using the same scales as in Study 1.

Results & discussion

A total of 16 participants were primed with their White identity (12 wrote about their mother) and 18 with their Black identity (7 wrote about their mother). There was no evidence of significant differences by participant gender or gender of parent primed on any of the variables measured; there were no differences in how "White" or "Black" participants in the two conditions appeared, $t(31) = .185, p = .85$.

Racial identification

Regarding self-reported identification with other biracial Black/White individuals, there were no significant differences between White-primed ($M = 5.44, SD = 1.32$) or Black-primed ($M = 5.61, SD = .92$) participants, $t(32) = .451, p = .66$. However, White-primed participants reported identifying significantly more with other White individuals than Black-primed participants, ($M_{\text{Whiteprime}} = 4.44, SD = .63$;

$M_{\text{Blackprime}} = 3.78, SD = .94$), $t(32) = 2.37, p < .03, r = .39$. These results also emerged for Black identification: Black-primed participants reported that they identified more with other Black individuals than White-primed participants, ($M_{\text{Blackprime}} = 5.06, SD = 1.06$; $M_{\text{Whiteprime}} = 4.06, SD = 1.08$), $t(32) = 2.47, p < .02, r = .40$.

Pre-interaction ratings

As predicted, compared to Black-primed participants, White-primed participants indicated that they expected to get along better, communicate better, and like their White interaction partner more ($F_s > 4.30, p_s < .05$). There were no significant differences regarding self-reported pre-interaction emotions ($F_s < 2.25, p_s > .14$; see Table 1 for means).

Nonverbal behavior

Coder ratings were averaged for each item assessed (intraclass $r = .88$). White-primed participants were rated as significantly more enthusiastic, interested, and engaged than Black-primed participants ($F_s > 4.42, p_s < .05$). Additionally, White-primed participants were rated as making significantly more eye contact and moving their bodies more ($F_s > 4.54, p_s < .05$). There were no differences on perceived alertness, tenseness, anxiety or smiling ($F_s < .25, p_s > .62$; see Table 1 for means).

Essay content

An average rating was calculated for each coded item (intraclass $r = .79$) and ratings for positivity and happiness were averaged into a composite score ($\alpha = .82$). As in Study 1, there were no significant differences on overall essay positivity by priming condition, $t(32) = 1.63, p = .11$; if anything, participants wrote marginally more positive essays in the Black prime condition despite the finding that interactions with the White confederate went more smoothly in the White prime condition.

In summary, these results support our hypothesis and extend findings from Study 1 to include interactions with a White partner, demonstrating that racial identity plays a significant role in behavior during social interactions with both Black and White individuals. Participant self-reports and nonverbal behavior showed that among biracial participants interacting with a White confederate, those primed with their White identity had more positive expectations and behaviors compared to Black-primed participants. Furthermore, these results highlight that priming one aspect of biracial individuals' identity did not make them feel less identified with being biracial, but did alter their racial identification with their primed racial ingroup, underlining both the fluidity and coexistence of their racial identities. Combined with Study 1, these findings demonstrate that not only does context play an important role in biracial individuals' racial identification, but it also affects behavior in social interactions with both White and Black individuals.

Conclusions

The multiracial population faces unique experiences in navigating social situations. Indeed, multiracial individuals have reported that the constant social pressure of having to "choose" one of their racial group affiliations is a primary source of psychological conflict (e.g., Sanchez & Bonam, 2009; Shih & Sanchez, 2009). It has also been demonstrated that multiracial individuals adopt specific cognitive strategies that enable them to associate more with one race based on context (Chiao et al., 2006). The results from the present studies extend this work by providing evidence of identity flexibility and its relationship to behavior during interracial interactions. The present results also highlight that the additional burden of having to choose an identity could actually be a benefit within social interactions if biracial individuals are aware that they can activate specific racial identities within certain contexts. Notably, though, these studies only include biracial Black/White individuals; it is imperative to study other mixed-race combinations to

investigate whether these findings apply more generally. Future work should also explore whether biracial individuals can knowingly activate one racial identity over another, as well as what individual differences predict these behavioral outcomes.

Overall, these results underscore the importance of examining the role that intersecting racial identities play within social environments, especially for multiracial individuals who may exhibit different behavioral strategies based on salient identities. These findings add to a growing, but still limited literature regarding the psychological experiences and behavioral tendencies of multiracial individuals, one of the most rapidly growing segments of contemporary society. To date, the extant literature on interracial interactions has largely conceptualized race as an either/or construct, and since social behavior affects our daily lives and well-being, it is essential for research to explore behavioral tendencies among multiracial individuals.

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