



## Registered Report

Resolving racial ambiguity in social interactions<sup>☆</sup>Sarah E. Gaither<sup>a,\*</sup>, Laura G. Babbitt<sup>b</sup>, Samuel R. Sommers<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Samuel Du Bois Cook Center on Social Equity, Duke University, USA<sup>b</sup> Department of Economics, Tufts University, USA<sup>c</sup> Department of Psychology, Tufts University, USA

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## ABSTRACT

People take longer to categorize racially ambiguous individuals, but does this perceptual complexity also affect social interactions? In Study 1, White participants interacted with a racially ambiguous confederate who was either labeled as biracial Black/White, monoracial Black, or given no racial label. White participants in the biracial condition were significantly less cognitively depleted, less essentialist in their thoughts about race, and exhibited more accurate face memory for their partners than when partner race remained unspecified or was labeled as monoracial Black. Confederate reports and nonverbal behavior in the biracial condition were also more positive. In Study 2, White participants perceived more similarity with a biracial Black/White labeled interaction partner compared to a Black-specified or race-unspecified partner, highlighting for the first time how racial ambiguity and racial labeling affect behavioral outcomes in social interactions.

## What are you? Are you mixed? Where are you from?

These are questions often asked of people who appear racially ambiguous. Racially mixed and racially ambiguous individuals do not fit neatly into just one racial category—for example, while some of their features may suggest they are White (e.g., smooth brown hair and thinner lips), other features (e.g., dark eyes and darker skin tone) may suggest another racial background such as Hispanic, Middle Eastern, or Black. As the ubiquity of the questions above implies, perceivers often feel a strong need for closure when faced with social ambiguity (Kruglanski, 1990), and in this case, that need for closure may manifest in terms of using cues to determine how to fit another person into a pre-existing racial categorization scheme (e.g., Freeman & Ambady, 2011; Freeman, Pauker, Apfelbaum, & Ambady, 2010). Moreover, biracial individuals also feel the desire to be accurately categorized by others and prefer interactions with people who know their actual racial background (Gaither, 2015; Remedios & Chasteen, 2013). Therefore, resolving racial ambiguity seems important both for the multiracial target and the perceiver, but whether it actually improves social interactions has not been empirically tested.

Although limited, research has implied that ambiguity can negatively affect social interactions because people often incorrectly categorize racially ambiguous others, which creates the wrong set of

expectations for upcoming social interactions (Berger, 1986; Mendoza-Denton, Shaw-Taylor, Chen, & Chang, 2005). And despite the fact that racial ambiguity within social interactions has not been specifically examined to date, research regarding other types of ambiguous or concealable stigmas (such as sexual orientation) has shown that learning about a concealed identity can improve social interactions (e.g., Davis, 1961; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Hebl & Kleck, 2006). For example, one study showed that participants who interact with someone who is open about their sexual orientation actually perform better on a variety of tasks in comparison to participants interacting with someone whose sexual orientation is left unknown, because knowing someone's sexual orientation resolves ambiguity and frees up cognitive resources (Everly, Shih, & Ho, 2012).

But do all types of identity disclosure resolve all types of ambiguity equally? To date, interracial interaction research has primarily involved only unambiguous monoracial minorities, where the racial identity is clearly visible to the perceiver. This is surprising since there is known variation within racial phenotypes (e.g., Maddox, 2004). This phenotypic variation in the U.S. has led to research focusing on racial ambiguity as a visual categorization process, but not regarding racial ambiguity in interracial interactions (Chao, Hong, & Chiu, 2013; Chen & Hamilton, 2012; Freeman et al., 2010; Krosch, Berntsen, & Amodio, 2013; Sanchez, Young, & Pauker, 2015).

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Thus, the present study aims to merge findings from interracial interaction studies with findings focusing on racially ambiguous categorization by examining whether interacting with a racially ambiguous individual whose racial identity is known (thus resolving any uncertainty) positively affects social interaction outcomes and racial attitudes. Moreover, we were interested in testing whether the type of racial identity that is disclosed may differentially influence social interactions. Specifically, we explored whether knowing the racial background of a racially ambiguous individual affects White participants': 1) levels of cognitive depletion; 2) facial memory; 3) social behavioral tendencies; and 4) endorsement of racial essentialist beliefs. We provide support for measuring these variables in the sections that follow.

#### *Racial ambiguity, cognitive depletion, and face memory*

Perceivers tend to use categorical, either-or thinking about social groups (e.g., Allport, 1954; Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990), meaning that racially ambiguous individuals complicate social perception. The face is a vital clue to a person's identity. Thus, the majority of research examining racially ambiguous perceptions has utilized face categorization and memory tasks to measure whether people view racially ambiguous others as their racial ingroup versus their racial outgroup which can influence levels of social approachability. Multiracial individuals who appear racially ambiguous often report that others ask them direct questions such as "What are you?" (e.g., Gaskins, 1999; Williams, 1996), highlighting the perceptual confusion that perceivers face when trying to place racially ambiguous individuals within pre-defined racial boundaries.

Past work shows that it takes longer to categorize racially ambiguous faces than unambiguous monoracial faces (Blascovich, Wyer, Swart, & Kibler, 1997) and that perceivers are slower to categorize faces when presented with the category "multiracial," which is not thought to be as cognitively accessible as other racial categories (Chen & Hamilton, 2012). Because this perceptual ambiguity confuses perceivers, they often search for other sources of information that can be used to disambiguate targets (e.g., Chen & Hamilton, 2012; Corneille, Huart, Becquart, & Bredart, 2004; Freeman et al., 2010; Sorrentino, Hodson, & Huber, 2001). Perceivers often evaluate ambiguous faces in a piecemeal fashion, assessing physical features that may cue one social category over another (e.g., Freeman et al., 2010; Macrae, Bodenhausen, & Milne, 1995; Willadsen-Jensen & Ito, 2008). For example, Freeman, Penner, Saperstein, Scheutz, and Ambady (2011) showed that a racially ambiguous Black/White individual was more often categorized as Black when pictured wearing a janitorial outfit than when wearing a business suit—demonstrating the use of other contextual cues to aid in social categorization. This research suggests that perceivers will seek out additional information until they find an end point that resolves the ambiguity, even if those cues are unconsciously applied (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Freeman et al., 2010; Freeman et al., 2011; Freeman & Ambady, 2011; Freeman, Ambady, Rule, & Johnson, 2008; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008; Rothbart & John, 1985). We expect that the added effort associated with processing the perceptual complexity of racially ambiguous faces will lead to increased levels of cognitive depletion, negatively affecting social interaction outcomes when interacting with a racially ambiguous person.

Other work has shown that although racially ambiguous faces are remembered just as poorly as other racial outgroup faces, a racial label can significantly improve memory performance, since it resolves some ambiguity (Pauker et al., 2009). Therefore, if the addition of a racial label on a racially ambiguous face can improve facial recognition in a lab study, we predict a racial label will also aid in facial encoding during a face-to-face social interaction. To date, facial recognition studies, particularly with racially ambiguous faces, have been largely computer-based, meaning we do not know how ambiguity may impact

actual in-person face perception and memory. Here, we predict that a racial label will aid in cognitively encoding and memorizing a racially ambiguous person's face, which will result in more accurate facial recognition—particularly when a biracial racial label is applied compared to a Black racial label.

#### *Social behavior in interracial interactions*

It is well established that interracial interactions have the potential for inducing anxiety (e.g., Plaut, 2010; Shelton & Richeson, 2005; Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005; Toosi, Babbitt, Ambady, & Sommers, 2012; Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009). More specifically, past work has shown that White individuals often enter interracial settings concerned about being viewed as prejudiced (e.g., Plant & Butz, 2006; Plant & Devine, 1998; Richeson & Shelton, 2003) and that this expectation can negatively affect interracial interaction outcomes (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Plant, 2004). Nevertheless, what remains unknown is whether the same prejudice expectations occur when interacting with racially ambiguous or biracially-identified individuals. Past research has often utilized a race-salient discussion topic since it heightens interaction concerns, particularly for White individuals (e.g., Goff, Steele, & Davies, 2008). Although making race salient can result in negative interaction outcomes (e.g., increased anxiety; Trawalter et al., 2009), a meta-analysis also shows that race salient discussions can also lead to more positive attitudes (Toosi et al., 2012). In the present work, we extend this research to explore how White individuals behave when interacting with someone who is racially ambiguous in a race-salient interracial interaction. Because biracial individuals are living examples that go against society's either/or thinking about race, we predict that knowing a racially ambiguous individual's biracial background in particular may not only improve social interactions, but it also may positively shift racial attitudes. We explore this prediction further in the next section.

#### *Endorsement of essentialism*

Only one study to date has examined how biracial individuals behave within interactions (Gaither, Sommers, & Ambady, 2013). That study focused on the experience of biracial individuals within interracial interactions, and therefore did not explore how these interactions proceeded for the person who interacted with the biracial individual. What is known is that exposure to biracial individuals, who often physically represent a challenge to default either-or categorizations of race, leads to a decrease in racial essentialist thinking (Pauker, Weisbuch, and Ambady, in preparation; Sanchez et al., 2015; Young, Sanchez, & Wilton, 2013).

Racial essentialism is a concrete (as opposed to malleable) view of race, in which racial groups are perceived as naturally-occurring discrete categories based on traits such as physical appearance (e.g., Estrada, Yzerbyt, & Seron, 2004; Leyens et al., 2001; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). Past work has linked essentialist thinking to endorsement and use of social stereotypes (Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Levy & Dweck, 1999; Pauker, Ambady, & Apfelbaum, 2010). Adults who are high in essentialism believe that the boundaries between racial groups are in fact discrete (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Kalish, 2002; Plaks, Malahy, Sedlins, & Shoda, 2012), when in reality there is substantial variation and ambiguity *within* groups, especially for the multiracial population. Thus, the finding from previous research that mere exposure to a biracial individual through a photo actually reduces these engrained essentialist beliefs has important implications for future intergroup relations—it suggests that as exposure to and interactions with multiracial individuals increase, essentialist beliefs might decrease. In fact, one recent study showed that interacting with a racially ambiguous person results in lower essentialist beliefs (Sanchez et al., 2015). However, this study did not control for the level of ambiguity, nor did it

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