



Bridging racial divides: Social constructionist (vs. essentialist) beliefs facilitate trust in intergroup contexts[☆]



Franki Y.H. Kung^{a,*}, Melody M. Chao^b, Donna J. Yao^b, Wendi L. Adair^a, Jeanne H. Fu^c, Kevin Tasa^d

^a Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue W., Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1, Canada

^b Department of Management, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Clear Water Bay, Kowloon, Hong Kong

^c Department of Management, Hang Seng Management College, Hang Shin Link, Siu Lek Yuen, Shatin, Hong Kong

^d Schulich School of Business, York University, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Trust serves as the foundation for social harmony and prosperity, but it is not always easy to build. When people see other groups as different, e.g., members of a different race or ethnicity, the perceived boundary often obstructs people from extending trust. This may result in interracial conflicts. The current research argues that individual differences in the lay theory of race can systematically influence the degree to which people extend trust to a racial outgroup in conflict situations. The lay theory of race refers to the extent to which people believe race is a malleable social construct that can change over time (i.e., social constructionist beliefs) versus a fixed essence that differentiates people into meaningful social categories (i.e., essentialist beliefs). In our three studies, we found evidence that social constructionist (vs. essentialist) beliefs promoted interracial trust in intergroup contexts, and that this effect held regardless of whether the lay theory of race was measured (Studies 1 and 3) or manipulated (Study 2), and whether the conflict was presented in a team conflict scenario (Study 1), social dilemma (Study 2), or a face-to-face dyadic negotiation (Study 3). In addition, results revealed that the lay theory's effect on interracial trust could have critical downstream consequences in conflict, namely cooperation and mutually beneficial negotiation outcomes. The findings together reveal that the lay theory of race can reliably influence interracial trust and presents a promising direction for understanding interracial relations and improving intergroup harmony in society.

1. Introduction

Trust, defined as “positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998), is known to be one of the most crucial ingredients for successful conflict management and social harmony. High trust results in higher relationship reconciliation and satisfaction (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Rubin, 2010; McAllister, 1995), more cooperative groups and organizations (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Kramer & Cook, 2007), and even more prosperous nations (Putnam, 1993). Low trust, however, heightens concerns about being exploited, hurting cooperation and conciliatory processes and escalating social conflicts (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996).

Unfortunately, distrust between racial and ethnic groups has prevailed throughout history. Consider recent U.S. history: in 1942, just

two months after World War II, distrust of Japanese led to the internment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans, one of the most “shameful” and “flagrant” intergroup transgressions in American history (Foner & Garraty, 1991; Terkel, 2016). More recently, race-based distrust between police and the Black community has also escalated into severe violence. In 2015 alone, police killed more than 100 unarmed Blacks, five times the rate at which police killed unarmed Whites (Mapping Police Violence, 2016), resulting in large-scale anti-police protests, with extremists killing multiple police officers during one of those protests (Ellis & Flores, 2016). Racial issues and distrust of foreigners also colored the 2016 presidential election. During his presidential campaign, President Donald Trump openly expressed his distrust toward Mexicans and stated that he would build a wall along the Mexican border if he won the election (CBC News, 2015). Low trust

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, 200 University Ave. W., Ontario N2L3G1, Canada.
E-mail address: franki.kung@uwaterloo.ca (F.Y.H. Kung).

toward outgroup members is at the heart of these racial divides and tensions.

As with the United States, modern multicultural societies will function more harmoniously with trust across racial groups, but trust tends to be lower in intergroup (vs. intragroup) settings (Brewer, 1979; Brewer & Silver, 1978; Kramer & Carnevale, 2008). Notably, people living in communities with higher racial diversity tend to report lower trust toward each other (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002; Putnam, 2007). The lack of trust may, over time, result in misunderstanding and misperceptions, escalating interracial conflicts (e.g., Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2002; Fiske, 2002; Kramer & Carnevale, 2008; Terkel, 2016). To promote social harmony and to de-escalate conflicts, it is critical to build interracial trust (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Fiske, 2002; Turner, West, & Christie, 2013). Particularly, more research is needed to uncover the antecedents of interracial trust in heightened conflict settings in which the fear of exploitation and the desire to protect self-interest loom large (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013).

Building on research on lay theories (e.g., Hong, Chao, & No, 2009), the current studies examine how individual differences in the lay theory of race can systematically influence the degree to which people extend trust to a racial outgroup in conflict settings. The lay theory of race refers to the beliefs about the fixedness and malleability of racial attributes. These beliefs in fixedness and malleability lie at two ends of a continuum. At the one end, essentialist beliefs refer to the conviction that race reflects an inalterable essence that is indicative of traits and abilities. At the opposite end, social constructionist beliefs about race refer to the conviction that race is a malleable concept, which might be construed differently depending on the social and political situations (Hong et al., 2009). Given that social constructionist (vs. essentialist) beliefs about race tend to be associated with a lower tendency to engage in racial categorization (Chao, Hong, & Chiu, 2013) and a stronger motivation to connect with racial outgroups (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008), we argue that social constructionist (vs. essentialist) beliefs will help promote interracial trust in conflict settings and may have important implications for conflict resolution in intergroup contexts. Past research on the lay theory of race has examined its impact on intergroup contact and forgiveness (e.g., Halperin, Russell, Trzesniewski, Gross, & Dweck, 2011; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). Yet, despite recognizing its important role in intergroup relations, no known study has examined the effect of the lay theory of race on interracial trust in conflict situations.

In the current research, we tested the hypotheses that social constructionist (vs. essentialist) beliefs about race are associated with higher trust toward racial outgroups in intergroup contexts, which may then translate into more positive outcomes in conflict situations. We will first discuss the role of trust in intergroup contexts, and then we explain how individual differences in the lay theory of race may influence interracial trust. We will then present three studies testing the hypotheses across different interracial-ethnic contexts. Finally, we will discuss the implications of the findings for understanding and improving intergroup relations.

1.1. Trust in intergroup context

Trust tends to be lower in intergroup contexts, in which group membership is highly salient (Brewer, 1979; Brewer & Silver, 1978; Kramer & Carnevale, 2008). The group memberships of individuals provide an important source of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social identity provides individuals with a sense of groupness, accentuating differences between groups and similarities within groups (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). This categorization process turns the concept of “me” into “us,” and highlights the difference between “us” versus “them.” This we-versus-they differentiation increases the salience of intergroup boundary, setting the ingroup apart from the outgroup. Individuals are motivated to perceive the self and the group that they identify with in a positive

light (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Messick & Mackie, 1989). Although ingroup love does not equate to outgroup hate (Brewer, 1999) and individuals may not actively seek to harm outgroups (Weisel & Böhm, 2015), people often refrain from extending positive attitudes or gestures (e.g., helping behavior) toward outgroup members (Weisel & Böhm, 2015). The tendency to extend positive treatment to the ingroup and withhold positivity from the outgroup is pervasive (Greenwald & Pettigrew, 2014).

Trust involves extending positive expectations toward another (Rousseau et al., 1998). In interpersonal contexts, trust toward a person would be low if there is low positivity toward that person (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). In intergroup contexts, intergroup bias is prevalent and positivity toward outgroup members tends to be low (Hewstone et al., 2002). With low positivity toward an outgroup, all else equal, individuals tend to expect members of the outgroup (vs. ingroup) to treat them less fairly and less positively (e.g., Foddy, Platow, & Yamagishi, 2009; Platow, Foddy, Yamagishi, Lim, & Chow, 2012). Therefore, trust between (vs. within) groups tends to be low (Brewer, 1979; Brewer & Silver, 1978). This applies especially when the group boundary is perceived as impermeable and group membership as immutable (Miller & Prentice, 1999).

Race and ethnicity are salient attributes that define groups in society (Birnbaum, Deeb, Segall, Ben-Eliyahu, & Diesendruck, 2010; Deaux, 2006; Gil-White, 2001). Due to its association with observable distinctions in phenotypes (e.g., skin color), race is often portrayed as a stable and meaningful social category (or “social kinds”; see Miller & Prentice, 1999; Chao & Kung, 2015). In fact, race is seen as a more useful category in differentiating people than other demographic characteristics, such as age, sexuality, and religion (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Prentice & Miller, 2007). In neutral and cooperative settings, people reported lower trust and motivation in forming interracial vs. same-race friendship (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2002; Shelton, Richeson, & Vorauer, 2006). In competitive contexts, intergroup trust is even lower (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Brewer, 1979) because people tend to assume that the interests of the different others are in conflict with the interests that one would like to pursue (Thompson & Hastie, 1990). Such perceived conflicting interests create an additional barrier to interracial trust. Therefore, individuals tend to trust the outgroup even less and become even more competitive when conflict occurs. Not surprisingly, low trust in interracial (vs. same-race) settings often trickles down and results in negative conflict resolution outcomes, such as lack of cooperation and poor negotiation outcomes (e.g., Adair, Okumura, & Brett, 2001; Cheng et al., 2011; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2011).

To promote social prosperity and better intergroup conflict resolution outcomes, we need to promote interracial trust and better understand the possible antecedents that contribute to intergroup trust (e.g., Turner et al., 2013). Yet, more research is needed to serve these goals. Compared to other topics in the intergroup literature (e.g., prejudice), the research on trust is relatively scarce (Dovidio et al., 2008), and we know little about intrapersonal factors that influence intergroup trust (Stanley, Sokol-Hessner, Banaji, & Phelps, 2011). Moreover, although accumulated evidence suggests positive intergroup contact can promote trust (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), its effectiveness may depend on optimal situations (e.g., equal status, cooperative environment) (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003). In suboptimal situations, such as during an intergroup conflict, the possibility and utility of positive intergroup contact would be constrained, and more research is needed to explore factors influencing intergroup trust in heightened conflict situations (Hameiri, Porat, Bar-Tal, Bieler, & Halperin, 2014). Our research therefore aims to address this gap and contribute to the literature by examining a psychological factor that may influence intergroup trust in conflict situations.

Intergroup research suggests that trust between groups is low because individuals tend to categorize and differentiate the ingroup from the outgroup, and refrain from extending positivity toward those who

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