Reports

On the ideology of hypodescent: Political conservatism predicts categorization of racially ambiguous faces as Black

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HIGHLIGHTS

• We examined the relation between political ideology and racial categorization.
• People categorized morphed faces that ranged from 100% Black to 100% White.
• Conservatism (vs. liberalism) was associated with the tendency to categorize racially ambiguous faces as Black.
• Relation between ideology and categorization was mediated by opposition to equality.
• This research helps to explain the ideological underpinnings of hypodescent.

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ABSTRACT

According to the principle of hypodescent, multiracial individuals are categorized according to their most socially subordinate group membership. We investigated whether the tendency to apply this principle is related to political ideology. In three studies, participants categorized a series of morphed faces that varied in terms of racial ambiguity. In each study, self-reported conservatism (vs. liberalism) was associated with the tendency to categorize ambiguous faces as Black. Consistent with the notion that system justification motivation helps to explain ideological differences in racial categorization, the association between conservatism and hypodescent was mediated by individual differences in opposition to equality (Study 2) and was stronger when U.S. participants categorized American than Canadian faces (Study 3). We discuss ways in which the categorization of racially ambiguous individuals in terms of their most subordinate racial group may exacerbate inequality and vulnerability to discrimination.

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Introduction

Barack Obama (2004) jokingly describes his mother as "White as milk," but the fact is that he is seen as the United States' first Black president. Following the repeal of anti-miscegenation laws and the gradual normalizing of interracial relationships, the United States of America has become an increasingly multiracial society, with a 32% increase in the number of citizens identifying with more than one race over the last decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Nevertheless, monoracial labels are frequently applied to multiracial individuals, and "White" is rarely applied to persons of mixed racial heritage (Hirschfeld, 1995).

The tendency to categorize multiracial individuals according to their most socially subordinate racial group membership reflects the principle of hypodescent, which is closely associated with the notorious "one drop rule" in American history (Banks & Eberhardt, 1998; Hollinger, 2003). From the earliest days of American slavery through the Civil Rights Era, this principle was formally employed to subjugate individuals with any non-White heritage by denying them full rights and liberties under the law. For instance, individuals who had lived in the United States for years but were one-quarter or even one-eighth Japanese were forced to live in internment camps during World War II (Werner, 2000).

Social psychological research reveals that the principle of hypodescent characterizes racial categorization even today. When research participants are presented with images of Black/White biracial targets, they are more likely to classify them as Black than White (e.g., Halberstadt, Sherman, & Sherman, 2011; Ho, Sidanius, Levin, & Banaji, 2011; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008). Furthermore, it appears to take fewer minority characteristics (e.g., facial features or ancestors) to be judged as "Black," compared with the proportion of majority characteristics it takes to be judged as "White" (Ho et al., 2011).

One prominent explanation for the phenomenon of hypodescent emphasizes basic attentional processes that are related to exposure to different types of faces. For instance, studies suggest that perceivers allocate more attention to the salient features of relatively unfamiliar minority groups as a way of distinguishing between in-group and out-group members (Halberstadt et al., 2011). However, a purely attentional account cannot explain why hypodescent occurs even in the absence of visual perception, as when participants categorize an *unseen* child with two White and two Black grandparents as Black (Ho et al., 2011). Attentional and ideological explanations are by no means mutually exclusive; indeed, they may work together to produce hypodescent. Thus, it appears that multiple factors may contribute to observed patterns of hypodescent in race categorization.

In this article, we focus on the possibility that biased racial categorization is related to ideological motives. Prior research has indicated that race perception and categorization may be influenced by a number of factors, including social identification (Knowles & Peng, 2005) and biological essentialism (Plaks, Malahy, Sedlins, & Shoda, 2012). Furthermore, Caruso, Mead, and Balcetis (2009) found that political conservatives were more likely to believe that a darkened photo of Barack Obama represented his actual appearance, as compared with liberals and moderates. These results are broadly consistent with public opinion data revealing that among White Americans, 38% of Republicans state that President Obama is Black rather than mixed-race, vs. 33% of Democrats and 30% of Independents (Pew Research Center, 2011). In the current research, we explored whether liberals and conservatives would differ in their categorization of racially ambiguous individuals in a nonpolitical context and examined potential psychological mediators of this proposed relationship. More specifically, we conducted three studies to investigate the hypothesis that there would be ideological differences in biased racial categorization.

There are several possible explanations for why conservatives might be more likely than liberals to categorize a biracial person as a member of their most socially subordinate race. One possible explanation concerns *cognitive style*. Conservatives exhibit stronger preferences for order, structure, and closure, and greater intolerance of ambiguity in comparison with liberals (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Given these differences in cognitive style, conservatives might be more motivated to resolve racial ambiguity and to resolve it in the most common or culturally-accessible manner (see Chiu, Morris, Hong, & Menon, 2000)—in this case, according to the principle of hypodescent. Consistent with this supposition, several studies demonstrate that individuals who score higher on the Personal Need for Structure scale tend to rely more heavily on social stereotypes (e.g., Neuberg & Newsom, 1993; Schaller, Boyd, Yohannes, & O'Brien, 1995). Therefore, to the extent that ideological differences in racial categorization are attributable to differences in cognitive style, we would hypothesize that they would be mediated by individual differences in personal need for structure. This possibility was investigated in Study 2.

Another possibility is that differences in the *contents* of ideological beliefs affect racial categorization (Jost, 2006). Compared with liberals, conservatives are more supportive of traditional arrangements and more accepting of inequality (Jost et al., 2003), more likely to exhibit implicit and explicit racial bias (e.g., Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996), and score higher on measures of social dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). To the extent that ideological differences in racial categorization are attributable to the specific contents of ideological beliefs and values, we hypothesize that they would be mediated by individual differences in Social Dominance Orientation (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994).

Social Dominance Orientation is an ideological disposition that comprises two distinct factors or dimensions: *group-based dominance* and *opposition to equality*. According to Jost and Thompson (2000), these two dimensions are linked, respectively, to (a) group justification motives to maintain and defend the interests and esteem of the in-group (sometimes at the expense of the interests and esteem of competing out-groups) and (b) system justification motives to maintain and defend the legitimacy and stability of the overarching social order or social system (sometimes at the expense of the interests and esteem of the in-group). Subsequent research has empirically validated this conceptual distinction, demonstrating, for instance, that group-based dominance is more strongly associated with in-group favoritism, out-group hostility, and other social identity motives than is opposition to equality, whereas the latter is more strongly associated with the endorsement of political conservatism and other system-justifying attitudes (e.g., Ho et al., 2012; Jost & Thompson, 2000; Kugler, Cooper, & Nosek, 2010).

Ho et al. (2012) proposed that group-based dominance and opposition to equality could both be related to biased racial categorization.

Perceiving mixed-race individuals as belonging more to their subordinate parent group (i.e., according to a rule of *hypodescent*) might entail the belief that the subordinate parent group is inferior but at the same time constitute a relatively subtle means of maintaining status boundaries (p. 595).

Although group-based dominance and opposition to equality would both clearly predict the tendency to categorize racially ambiguous faces as Black, we believe that there are a few important reasons to hypothesize that opposition to equality would be more likely to mediate the effect of ideology on racial categorization. First, as noted above, opposition to equality is more strongly associated with political conservatism than is group-based dominance (Kugler et al., 2010). Second, and more importantly, Ho et al. (2011, pp. 504–505) discovered that members of racial minority groups (i.e., Blacks and Asians) were just as likely as Whites to apply the principle of hypodescent in making racial judgments. This suggests that biased racial categorization is not simply a group-justifying bias exhibited by Whites, such as the "ingroup overexclusion" effect (Castano, Yzerbyt, Bourguignon, & Seron, 2002; see also Knowles & Peng, 2005). Rather, it would appear to have more in common with system-justifying biases, insofar as members of both advantaged and disadvantaged groups maintain traditional boundaries associated with the hierarchical social order (Jost et al., 2004). Therefore, we hypothesized that ideological differences in racial categorization would be mediated by opposition to equality rather than group-based dominance. This prediction was tested in Study 2.

Finally, we reasoned that U.S. conservatives should be more motivated than U.S. liberals to maintain racial divisions that are part of the traditional American social system, but they should not necessarily be more motivated to maintain or justify aspects of an irrelevant system. Therefore, in Study 3, we activated system justification concerns directly by manipulating the salience of the American (vs. Canadian) social system and examined the relationship between ideology and racial categorization. We hypothesized that the relationship between ideology and biased racial categorization would be stronger when participants were classifying "American" than "Canadian" faces.

Study 1

To test the basic hypothesis that conservatives would be more likely than liberals to categorize a morphed Black/White face as Black, we first examined the relationship between participants' political ideology and the extent to which they categorized a series of racially ambiguous and unambiguous faces (defined objectively in terms of the two parent faces) as either Black or White.

Method

Participants

We recruited 31 participants (18 female; mean age = 37 years) through Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid them $.50 for participation. All self-identified as White.