Fluid racial presentation: Perceptions of contextual "passing" among biracial people

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ABSTRACT

Existing monoracial identity frameworks fail to capture the experiences of biracial people, for whom racial identification may depend on the social context. Though biracial people can vary their racial identity, the social consequences of context-dependent racial self-presentation remain underexplored. Five studies examined how contextual racial presentation among biracial people is perceived by high status groups. White participants read vignettes describing a biracial person contextually presenting in an academic situation and evaluated the target's character and behavior. Asian/White or Black/White biracial students who contextually presented as monoracial (compared to biracial presentation) were evaluated more negatively because they were perceived as less trustworthy (Studies 1–5). The effect of White contextual presentation was mediated by endorsement of stereotypes that biracial people are confused about their racial identity (Studies 4–5). Responses were robust to the status of the monoracial identity (Studies 1–2) and intention to benefit (Study 5), but varied by the availability of choice (e.g., conditions of forced choice; Study 3). The results suggest contextually choosing an identity carries social repercussions because it can activate explicit negative stereotypes about biracial individuals.

1. Introduction

Biracial identity can be fluid. Although approximately 9 million people selected multiple racial identifications in the 2010 United States Census, many mixed-race adults do not identify as "biracial," and approximately 30% report having changed their identification throughout their lives (Jones & Bullock, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2015). However, the existing psychological literature has largely applied monoracial frameworks to understand biracial people, thereby viewing biracial identity as fixed. Yet, biracial identity may vary situationally. For example, biracial people's identity choices can change ephemerally in response to a social situation or be influenced by long-term experiences such as family connections (Davenport, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2015). Thus, we propose the term *Contextual Racial Presentation* (CRP) which describes identity changes that are influenced by the immediate context. In this paper we define individuals who contextually present their racial identity as those who personally identify a certain way but regulate their public racial presentation according to the demands of the context or situation.

Referred to in other literatures as "passing", CRP research suggests contextually presenting as another race is commonplace through history into the present and has been negatively received. For example,

racial minorities historically presented as White to derive contextual benefits through both identification and physical changes including surgical or skin lightening procedures (Daniel, 1992; Davis, 2003; Hall, 1995; Kennedy, 2003). Sometimes presenting as White involved actively denying another racial identity, as did *New York Times* writer Anatole Broyard, who concealed his Black ancestry to avoid being seen as simply a "Black writer" (Staples, 2003). Societal norms, rooted in historically essentialist conceptualizations that suggest race is determined by the genetics of one's parents (Prentice & Miller, 2007), typically prohibit CRP and consider it a misrepresentation of oneself (Kennedy, 2003; Sasson-Levy & Shoshana, 2013). However, given biracial people's full membership in their respective racial groups, a contextual presentation of their identity is not truly dishonest because biracial people often view themselves as full members of both groups. Thus, identifying with one identity in the moment (a common occurrence) is not necessarily considered a misrepresentation, at least within the multiracial community (Khanna & Johnson, 2010).

Though legal history indicates negative perceptions of CRP, no work to date has examined how modern-day CRP by biracial people is perceived by others. Therefore, the present research addressed (a) how biracial people who contextually present are perceived by others, and (b) whether the target or choice context influenced this effect. The

present studies do not address whether contextual presentation is acceptable or not, but rather whether it is perceived as such by others. CRP is possible due to the flexibility of biracial identity, and perceptions of it may be influenced by norms of racial identification, existing stereotypes of biracial people, and the choice architecture of a given context. We explore these variable contexts in the sections that follow.

1.1. Evidence of CRP

Biracial people may contextually present because their membership in multiple racial groups grants them a choice in their identity (Sanchez, Shih, & Wilton, 2014; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). As a result, many biracial individuals experience a dynamic racial identity, changing their identification across time (Lou, Lalonde, & Wilson, 2011; Sanchez & Garcia, 2009; Sanchez, Shih, & Garcia, 2009; Wilton, Sanchez, & Garcia, 2013). For example, adolescents who once identified as multiracial were four times more likely to change their identity five years later than to maintain the same identity (Hitlin, Brown, & Elder, 2006). Multiracial identity can also be influenced by the immediate context. Adolescents fluctuated between a monoracial and multiracial identification when interviewed at home versus at school, suggesting that the social context can make one racial identity more salient (Harris & Sim, 2002). Similarly, Black/White biracial adults reported contextually presenting as Black when they were in mostly Black social situations to fit in or avoid stigmatization from African Americans (Khanna & Johnson, 2010).

Despite the fluidity of biracial people's identity, CRP may have specific consequences for the development of trust because it may be seen as a lack of self-disclosure. Trust, or holding positive expectations and confidence in another person's intentions and behaviors, is an important aspect of interpersonal relations as it promotes cooperation and reduces conflict (Tropp, Boatswain, Stout, Wright, & Pettigrew, 2006). Self-disclosure promotes more trusting relationships, while withholding information may hurt them (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997). Therefore, contextually selecting a single racial identity may signal that biracial people are hiding information about themselves which may arouse skepticism (John, Barasz, & Norton, 2016). Moreover, trust between outgroup members tends to be lower than between ingroup members, suggesting that perceptions of trust may be influenced by group identity (Kramer & Carnevale, 2008). Indeed, people who follow the social norms of a group are seen as more prototypical and are trusted more (van Knippenberg, 2011). Given the lack of self-disclosure and adherence to norms for a biracial person choosing only one identity, it is expected that biracial individuals who contextually racially present will be perceived as less trustworthy, and therefore be evaluated more negatively.

1.2. Stereotypes of biracial people

Because biracial people have multiple identities, they are often stereotyped as being confused, conflicted, and unsure of their own identity (Jackman, Wagner, & Johnson, 2001; Remedios, Chasteen, & Oey, 2012). Initial identity theorizing approached biracial identity from a problem perspective, focusing almost exclusively on biracial experiences of identity confusion and conflict (see McRoy & Freeman, 1986; Park, 1928). Though identity models have evolved to include more positive aspects of biracial identity (see Gaither, 2015; Shih & Sanchez, 2005), the perception of biracial people as conflicted about their identity persists. Indeed, some work suggests biracial people are expected to be less socially adept (Remedios et al., 2012) and are evaluated as less warm than their monoracial counterparts (Sanchez & Bonam, 2009). We posit that CRP may activate stereotypes about biracial people as conflicted and confused about their own identity, which may contribute to negative perceptions of biracial people who contextually present. Because those people are seen as vacillating between two identities, people who contextually present may be viewed as having a fragmented, incoherent identity that would activate the confused stereotype. Therefore, we tested the hypothesis that a biracial person who contextually presents may activate an explicit "confused" biracial stereotype, with implications for trustworthiness and downstream evaluations. Given that little research exists on stereotypes of biracial people, the present study will contribute to our understanding of when the stereotype of biracial people as confused about their identity is activated.

1.3. Norms of racial identification

CRP may be penalized because biracial people who engage in it are perceived as breaking social norms and withholding information. Societal preferences for single categories create a norm of single, stable racial identification (Sanchez & Garcia, 2009). For example, widely endorsed essentialist beliefs about the biological underpinning of racial categories assume that people cannot be members of two racial groups or change their identity (Ho, Roberts, & Gelman, 2015). Essentialist views continue to be widely held in society and create expectations of how people should identify (Kung et al., 2018). Furthermore, the history and persistence of hypodescent in the U.S. may also influence perceptions of CRP. The one-drop rule of the Jim Crow era has become a heuristic wherein Black/White biracial people are automatically classified into the lower status group, regardless of other ancestry, phenotypic presentation, or personal identification (Chen & Ratliff, 2015; Hickman, 1997; Kahn, Ho, Sidanius, & Pratto, 2009; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008; Sanchez, Good, & Chavez, 2010). Given the continued documentation of hypodescent, the present studies examined CRP as minority or White for Black/White and Asian/White biracial targets. Because presenting as White violates historical hypodescent and allows an individual to attain greater privilege, it may engender social penalties. However, presenting as Black or Asian complies with hypodescent. Therefore, we predicted that contextually selecting a White identity would be evaluated more negatively than contextually presenting as a low status group member, or not contextually presenting.

1.4. Choice context

Evaluations of CRP may depend on the availability of choices as a signal of intentionality. Biracial people are often unable to choose more than one identity on major demographic forms, such as Medicaid applications, many college applications, and until recently, the U.S. Census (Department of Education, 2008; Jones & Bullock, 2012). These contexts that restrict choices essentially force biracial people to pick only one of their identities. In contrast, contextually selecting only one identity in situations where one has the ability to select multiple racial identities signals volition. According to attribution theory, chosen behaviors are perceived to reflect people's true motivations and dispositions, while unchosen behaviors can be explained situationally (Jones, 1976). It follows that harmful behavior perceived to be intentional is viewed as more negative than accidental harmful behavior (Cushman, 2008). Similarly, contextually selecting one race within a multiple-choice context where a biracial person had the ability to select their full identity may be seen as more intentional and less trustworthy than doing so in a forced-choice scenario, where the choice architecture limited the person's ability to authentically identify (Sanchez, 2010). By altering the choice context of the scenarios, we tested the hypothesis that CRP would be evaluated more negatively when the biracial person was able to select multiple identities compared to when they were unable.

1.5. Overview of studies

Little is known about perceptions of CRP, yet research shows biracial individuals commonly engage in CRP (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003;