



Looking Black or looking back? Using phenotype and ancestry to make racial categorizations[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine the effects of racial ancestry and phenotypicity on race categorization.
- Both factors influence categorization, but phenotypicity effects are larger.
- Low Black phenotypicity targets were perceived as warmer and more competent.
- Bias against low Black phenotypicity targets was perceived as less discriminatory.
- All biracial targets were categorized as biracial.

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to the racial categorization of biracial individuals, do people look at phenotypicity (i.e., a race consistent appearance) for clues, or do they look back at racial ancestry? We manipulated racial ancestry and racial phenotypicity (using morphed photos) to investigate their influence on race categorizations. Results indicated that while ancestry and phenotypicity information both influenced deliberate racial categorization, phenotypicity had a substantially larger effect. We also investigated how these factors influenced perceptions of warmth and competence, and racial discrimination. We found that Black–White biracials with low Black phenotypicity were perceived as warmer and more competent than biracial targets with moderate and high Black phenotypicity. Moreover, given identical instances of racially discriminatory treatment, low Black racial phenotypicity targets were significantly less likely to be perceived as victims of racial discrimination. Our findings shed light on how ancestry and phenotype influence perceptions of race and real world social judgments such as perceptions of discrimination. Previous studies have shown that low minority ancestry biracials are presumed to have experienced less discrimination; our findings indicate that racial cues impact perceptions of discrimination even in incidences of known racial discrimination.

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Nearly 3% of the US population identifies as biracial (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011) and that number is expected to grow as interracial marriages become increasingly common (Wang, 2012). Thus, there is a critical need for psychologists to understand the factors that influence racial categorizations of biracial individuals. Moreover, knowing just how these factors influence attitudes toward the distribution of minority resources (e.g., legal protection, minority scholarships) will become

increasingly important. Previous research indicates that people use racial phenotypicity information (e.g., skin tone, shape of eyes and nose) to make social categorizations (e.g., Ho, Sidanius, Levin, & Banaji, 2011; Maddox & Gray, 2002). The more racially phenotypical a target's features, the greater the extent to which they are categorized as members of that racial group. People also tend to look back at racial ancestry to make racial categorizations, and those with more minority racial ancestry are more likely to be categorized as minority group members (Ho et al., 2011; Sanchez, Good, & Chavez, 2011). While these findings provide valuable insight into the perceptions of biracials, in the real world people often have multiple sources of information (e.g., phenotypicity and ancestry) from which to draw conclusions. Thus, it may be more appropriate to investigate the impact of these factors simultaneously in relation to social perceptions and categorizations of race.

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Phenotypic features

The more race prototypical a target's features, the more closely aligned they are perceived to be with that racial group (Maddox, 2004). Maddox and Gray (2002) found that participants use racial phenotypicity information (i.e., skin tone) to make social categorizations. Faces with more Afrocentric features are more readily categorized as Black, in comparison with faces with fewer Afrocentric features (Blair, Judd, Sadler, & Jenkins, 2002). Another study, manipulating hairstyles, showed that identical targets presented with hairstyles stereotypical of either Blacks or Latinos were perceived to possess more attributes consistent with that group (MacLin & Malpass, 2001). Ho et al. (2011) presented participants with morphs of Black–White biracial faces in constant 1% and 5% intervals. The White–Black biracial target faces used by Ho et al. were categorized as White when Black phenotypicity was below a threshold of 34.8% to 44.7%. Although these findings suggest some level of hypodescent, the tendency for biracial individuals to be assigned the label of the lower status racial group, they provide overall support for the notion that phenotypicity influences racial categorization. Taken together these findings indicate that the more racially phenotypical a target's features, the greater the probability they will be categorized as members of the corresponding racial group.

Racial ancestry

Historically, racial categorization in the U.S. was based almost entirely upon racial ancestry. The “one-drop rule” stated that even one drop of Black blood (i.e., any known amount of Black ancestry) made an individual categorically Black (Hickman, 1997). Thus, racial categorization was largely independent of actual appearance, or phenotypicity. Hirschfeld's (1995) investigation of the development of racial categorizations over the lifespan indicated that young children (2nd graders) base racial categorizations of mixed race children on the race of the mother. Older children and adults, on the other hand, are much more likely to show a pattern of hypodescent in their categorizations. In fact, given the categorical options “Black,” “White,” and “something else” all adults in the sample ($N = 43$) categorized the child of a Black–White interracial couple as Black. Interestingly, Hirschfeld also found that while the child of a same race couple was expected to equally resemble both mother and father, the child of an interracial couple was expected to show a greater resemblance to the Black parent. This pattern did not emerge for 2nd graders, but both 5th graders and adults believed that the child of a mixed race couple would look more like the Black parent. Therefore, when making racial categorizations young children appear to initially use intuitive theories of biology. They predict that offspring will look like a mix of both parents or more closely resemble the mother—who physically carried and bore the offspring. However, as children age, social learning appears to lead to the development of hypodescent.

To determine whether race is perceived as a unique biological concept Hirschfeld (1995) also investigated the predictions associated with another hued physical feature (i.e., hair color). Across both age groups (2nd and 5th graders), children were equally likely to predict that the child of a light haired parent and a dark haired parent would have light hair, dark hair, or mixed color hair. This is in contrast to the results regarding skin color (i.e., race) predictions, in which dark features were expected to be dominant. Thus, the social relevance of race appears to be driving these effects rather than beliefs about the biology of mixing light and dark features.

The one-drop rule would suggest that all individuals with any Black ancestry would equally be labeled as “Black.” However, more recent studies have shown an incremental effect of parental ancestry on racial categorization—such that the degree of minority ancestry

predicts the extent to which participants categorize biracial individuals with minority labels (Ho et al., 2011; Sanchez et al., 2011). Sanchez et al. (2011) found that participants perceived targets that were described as having more racial minority ancestry as more categorically Black, even after controlling for perceptions of phenotypicity. Although perceptions of phenotype were statistically controlled, it's likely that perceptions of phenotype and racial ancestry are highly correlated. Therefore, it is important to simultaneously examine the influence of phenotype and racial ancestry. Indeed, several researchers have suggested that future research should independently manipulate these variables (Good, Sanchez, & Chavez, 2013; Sanchez et al., 2011), as we have done in the current study.

Racial ancestry vs. racial phenotypicity

Although both phenotypicity and ancestry have been used as biracial manipulations, the two have never been manipulated simultaneously. Ho et al. (2011) investigated both racial phenotypicity and racial ancestry, finding that both impacted race judgments. However, they did not manipulate ancestry and phenotypicity simultaneously in a single sample; thus, it is not clear which has a stronger influence or whether they interact to impact race determinations. Colloquial beliefs about the strong impact of visual information, as demonstrated by the old saying “a picture is worth a thousand words,” would suggest that racial phenotypicity information would dominate racial categorizations. This is supported by findings from neuroscience research, which indicate that target faces are categorized by race within a half a second after visual presentation. For example, using event related potentials (ERP) Willadsen-Jensen and Ito (2006) found that within 200 ms after stimulus presentation participants' brain waves differentiated White targets from Black targets. Later in the waveform (~500 ms after stimulus presentation), ERP amplitude differentiated White faces from racially ambiguous faces. Thus, there is evidence that the brain makes nearly instantaneous racial categorizations based on phenotypicity information.

However, there is evidence that racial ancestry information may moderate the effect of racial phenotypicity information on racial categorizations. For example, Peery and Bodenhausen (2008) found that when participants were required to make fast reflexive race categorizations, mixed race target photos were more likely to be categorized as Black when presented with information about mixed racial ancestry. On the other hand, when participants were allowed time for thoughtful deliberation, information about mixed racial ancestry increased categorization as both Black and White (i.e., multiracial). Although these findings are informative for determining how biracials in general may be perceived relative to monoracials, it is not clear how these results apply to variations among biracials. For instance, will information indicating that a target has 75% Black ancestry influence the way a low Black phenotypicity target will be categorized? According to lay genetic theories of race (the theory that genetic differences underlie racial differences; Jayaratne, Sheldon, Brown, Feldbaum, & Petty, 2006), it stands to reason that ancestry and phenotypicity would interact. High Black phenotypicity targets would likely be categorized as Black regardless of ancestry, while the categorization of low Black phenotypicity targets would likely depend upon ancestry. Yet the most recent evidence suggests that genetic theories of race have largely fallen out of favor. In a large sample of White Americans 74% indicated that genetic factors had very little or no influence on perceived racial differences in things like math ability and tendency to act violently (Jayaratne et al., 2006). Given that most Americans do not endorse lay genetic theories of race we predicted that ancestry and phenotypicity would largely operate independently.

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