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Metaperceptions of Interactions Between Asian and African American Adults

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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John Jay College of Criminal Justice

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a drastic increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States, as well as news stories highlighting African Americans as perpetrators of anti-Asian hate crimes. As such, the paper focuses on how Asian Americans expect to be perceived by others, and how those expectations may change depending on the race (African American or White) and gender (male or female) of the conversation partner. A survey was created, which employed deception to have participants believe that they would have a short video conversation with somebody else about a political topic, and which randomly assigned each participant a partner who was an African American man, African American woman, a White woman, or a White man. Each participant was given a profile of their conversation partner, with each profile being identical except for the profile's race and gender. The initial hypothesis was that participants would be more comfortable with women than men and that they would expect to be viewed more positively when speaking with an African American person compared to a White person. After conducting a survey with 238 Asian American people, results indicated that regardless of gender, Asian Americans were more likely to think that an African American profile would view them more warmly than a White profile. Participants also believed themselves less equipped to handle conversational challenges with a White profile than with an African American profile, and they would feel more comfortable approaching the African American profiles than the White profiles. Given that participants self-reported experiencing more discrimination from White people than African American people, this difference could be attributed to personal experiences of discrimination.

Keywords: metaperceptions, racial interactions, discrimination, stereotypes, gender

Metaperceptions of Interactions Between Asian and African American Adults

On January 15th, 2022, Michelle Go died after being pushed into an oncoming New York City subway. The details surrounding this tragedy are still mostly unknown, but the public nature of her attack, and the race of her attacker, an African American man, led to a reckoning against anti-Asian hate crimes throughout the United States (Branigan, 2022). Many Americans unfairly blamed Asian Americans for the COVID-19 pandemic, as it originated in Wuhan, China (Gover, 2020). Conspiracy theories spread which convinced some people that the Chinese government intentionally created and spread the virus (Sims et al., 2022). These conspiracy theories did incredible harm to the Asian American community, which are often considered connected to the actions of the Chinese government (Sims et al., 2022). In New York City, hate crime complaints against Asian Americans rose by 485% (New York Police Department, 2020; New York Police Department 2021), and the perpetrators of these hate crimes are not just White people. These sorts of incidents show how important it is to get a firm understanding of how Asian Americans feel in interactions with people of different races.

While race has no bearing on a person's intelligence, abilities, or worth, systemic injustice has created an extremely divided society (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). This systemic injustice was caused by white people, and has caused white people to be in many ways the center of attention (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Even in studies of social interaction between races, this holds true. Most studies regarding how people feel about conversing with someone of a different race involve white people and Black people only. While there are definitely exceptions to this rule, the study of metaperceptions involving people who are neither Black nor white is rather sparse.

In an age of freely shared information, in an age of incredible statistical knowledge, there is a dearth of research on racial relations involving Asian Americans. The goal of this study is to,

in small part, remedy that. For this reason, this study focuses on the metaperceptions of Asian Americans when interacting with African Americans. The question that guides this study is: How do Asian American people believe they are perceived when interacting with White and African American people?

Metaperception Concerns During Intragroup Interactions

Metaperceptions focus on people's concerns about how others perceive them. Ames's (2004) often cited work on the mechanisms of metaperception formation implicated a subject's perception of their perceiver's verbal and nonverbal cues as part of how metaperceptions are derived. Importantly, the projection of one's own beliefs and stereotypes was an important factor as well (Ames, 2004). Specifically, people use projection for ingroup members and assume that ingroup members will perceive them similarly to how people perceive themselves. In contrast, people rely on stereotyping when determining how outgroup members will perceive them. These stereotypes typically center around negative societal beliefs about the person's social group (e.g., Black people are lazy).

In a recent study done by Lemay and Teneva (2020), three clear types of racial metaperceptions were identified after a thorough examination of how participants felt about themselves, the racial group they were interacting with, and the racial group that they were a part of. Firstly, many participants believed that the negative bias that they held towards the group they were interacting with would be reciprocated by their partner. For example, a White person who holds negative stereotypes against African American people may assume their African American conversation partner is thinking negatively of them in turn. For another thing, many believed that the stereotypes they held about their own group would be the same stereotypes that the other person would hold about them. An example of this would be an African American

person, who knows that African Americans are stereotyped as being unintelligent, would assume their White conversation partner thinks they are stupid. Finally, participants believed that the person they were interacting with viewed them negatively in accordance with racial stereotypes, even as testimony from the other conversation (given to researchers, so as to ensure it was not impacted by social pressure) contradicted this belief (Lemay & Teneva, 2020).

While people expect others to have negative metaperceptual beliefs regarding their group, there are contextual factors that change how people expect to be perceived in interracial interaction. Some of the important environmental factors that impact feelings of out-groups towards each other included the quality of interactions with a dominant group, the dimension of prejudice a group is primed with, and the presence or absence of priming (Craig & Richeson, 2016). Finally, when primed with examples of discrimination against one's own group, stigmatized groups are generally more likely to feel comfortable with other stigmatized groups (Craig & Richeson, 2012). This mechanism is known as identity threat, and its effects have been noted in some literature. The "threat", from the term, refers to the othering of outgroups by the ingroup, and leads different outgroups to feel connected to each other (Craig & Richeson, 2016).

Part of the reason that this sense of connection is so powerful is likely that metastereotypes have a marked tendency to cause anxiety in people. While meta-stereotypes (a stereotype about how a group is perceived by an outgroup) did not impact anxiety in interactions between people of the same race, they did impact anxiety between people of different races (Finchilescu, 2010). This anxiety prompted by belief in racial metaperceptions may make somebody less likely to believe that their different-race conversation partner does not see them as a stereotype. Unsurprisingly, Finchilescu (2010) found the more a person thought that a group held stereotypes against them due to their race, the more anxious the person was in an interaction

with someone from that group. In fact, the belief that one was being perceived in a prejudiced manner seemed to impact anxiety more than if someone was actually highly prejudiced against the group they were interacting with, which once again coincides with the findings of Lemay and Teneva (2020). This can in turn lead to negative impressions received by the conversation partner, potentially damaging a social relationship (Tissera et al., 2021; Brumbaugh & Rosa, 2009). Unfortunately, these findings did not include any participants of Asian descent, let alone Asian Americans, and so their unique experiences with racial bias may differ from those in these previous studies. Additionally, different priming can overcome this feeling of identity threat. When Latine people recalled positive interactions with White people, they were then more likely to express prejudice against African Americans (Tropp et al., 2012). This demonstrates the importance of the “threat” aspect of identity threat,

What data exists on sex-related metaperceptions does paint a picture of potential significance. A survey of 328 Chinese college students, in interactions with opposite-sex partners, revealed that metaperceptions often reflected the opinion of their interaction partner (Ho & Chau, 2009). This is unlike race, where the opinion of one’s interaction partner did not impact metaperceptions. An important factor to note, however, is that these dyads had known each other prior to the study at hand, unlike the current study. But the additional metaperceptual factor of sex is interesting, as it was a variable in the current study as well.

How Asian-Americans are Perceived by Others

In order to study how Asian American people expect to be perceived, it is important to understand the stereotypes that people hold of Asian Americans. Some important research in this area comes from Zou and Cheryan’s (2017) work on the Racial Positioning Model. This model rated racial stereotypes on two axes: American-ness and social status. For example, White

Americans were considered high in both categories, whereas African Americans were seen as high in American-ness but low in social status. Asian Americans were the exact opposite; seen as high in social status but low in American-ness. This means that while African Americans are most often made to feel inferior, Asian Americans were most often made to feel foreign (Zou & Cheryan, 2017). Overall, Asian Americans are considered by Americans of other races to be strange, and a member of the outgroup, which impacts how they are treated in a variety of social situations. Because people rely on stereotypes for intergroup metaperceptions, it follows that these beliefs will be reflected in how participants expect to be perceived (Ames, 2004).

The Stereotype Content Model, in contrast, posits that many stereotypes can be categorized by two different elements; warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2002). For example, Asian American men would be stereotyped to have high competence but low warmth, while African American women would be stereotyped to have high warmth and low competence (Lin et al., 2005). Generally, men are considered higher in competence and lower in warmth, and vice versa for women (Fiske et al., 2002). Like men generally, Asian Americans generally are considered to be low in warmth and high in competence (Lin et al., 2005). No data seems to exist for where Asian American women in particular fall in this model, though in other literature they are found to be stereotyped as submissive and feminine (Connor & Fiske, 2018). This model is of particular importance, as it is considered a foundational work in the study of stereotypes, and so its findings influenced the hypothesis of the current study.

However, findings suggest that certain factors can influence how non-White people view Asian Americans. In studies of relations between African American and Asian American adults, when Asian American adults were primed with examples of anti-Asian discrimination, they felt more connected to African American people than when they had not been primed (Craig &

Richeson, 2012). Here however, this connection only exists if the dimension of prejudice (i.e., race) is the same. (Craig & Richeson, 2012). This sense of connection is again consistent with the identity threat model of metaperceptions.

Asian Americans' Metaperceptions of Other Groups

In a longitudinal study focusing on cross-racial friendships, and their impact on minority races' stances on political activism, one racial group stood out. For Latine and African American students, greater friendships with White people over time made them feel significantly less discriminated against in broader society, and less likely to support further activism for equal rights (Tropp et al., 2012). However, this was not the case for Asian American students, who supported increased activism regardless of friendships with White people (Tropp et al., 2012). These findings suggest that the experiences of Asian Americans, in terms of metaperceptions, can differ wildly from that of other minority races in America, and elucidates the importance of the further study of this population. Yet, like all racial minority groups, Asian-American participants primed with anti-Asian discrimination showed less anti-Black bias, which in turn supports the identity threat theory of metaperceptions (Craig & Richeson, 2012).

Current Hypothesis

The aim of this study was to investigate whether Asian Americans believe they are perceived differently by African Americans than by White Americans. Given that Asian Americans experience more prejudice and discrimination from White Americans than African Americans (Sims et al., 2022), I hypothesize that Asian Americans expect to be perceived more positively, and anticipate fewer challenges, when interacting with an African American partner than by White American partner. People will feel most comfortable conversing with black women, then black men, then White women, then White men, as based on the findings of Fiske

et al. (2002). Here the hypothesis is based on perceived warmth being more important factor in interracial interactions than perceived competence.

Method

Participants

This study involved surveying 238 Asian American adults ages 18-65. The sample had a median age of 29. In terms of gender, 35% of the sample identified as female, 63% of the study identified as male, and 2% of the study identified as nonbinary. The majority (87%) of the study self-identified as middle class, and the majority reported having at least one college degree (78%). The program Prolific was used to recruit participants, advertise, collect results, and distribute compensation. Prolific is an online service wherein people can sign up to make money by completing surveys, and where researchers can find participants to take their surveys, as well as compensate them for their time. The survey took on average about 9 minutes, and each participant was paid \$1.80 to complete the survey. All prospective participants who identified as Asian American, are between 18 and 65 years old, and consent to participate in the study on Prolific were included in the study, as the goal was to study Asian American adults.

Materials

This survey was created using Qualtrics, and advertised and distributed by Prolific. Participants were asked a number of questions about how they expect their conversation partner to perceive them, using a 7-point Likert scale. Overall, these questions were grouped into the categories of expectations of being perceived as warm, expectations of being perceived as competent, in accordance with the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002). Additionally, the study included questions regarding expectations of conversational challenges, ability to handle conversational challenges, willingness to approach their partner, and likelihood of

avoiding their partner. Finally, participants were asked demographic questions about their age, gender, class, ethnicity, and about their experiences of discrimination by members of various racial groups.

Experiences of Discrimination

For this measure, participants were asked “*How frequently have you experienced any form of discrimination from*” six different groups: “*White Americans*”, “*African Americans*”, “*Asian Americans*”, “*Native Americans*”, “*Hispanic Americans*”, and “*other groups*”. They could rate the frequency from “*Never*” to “*Very Often*” on a 7-point scale.

Warmth metaperceptions

For this measure, participants were asked “*How likely is it that your partner will assume that you are*” three different attributes: “*warm*”, “*friendly*”, and “*well-intentioned*”. They could rate the likelihood from 1 (*Extremely Likely*) to 7 (*Extremely Unlikely*) on a 7-point scale, reverse-coded for data analysis.

Competence metaperceptions

For this measure, participants were asked “*How likely is it that your partner will assume that you are*” three different attributes: smart, intelligent, and competent. They could rate the likelihood from “*Extremely Likely*” to “*Extremely Unlikely*” on a 7-point scale.

Interaction Challenges

Participants were asked the questions “*How demanding do you think this interaction will be?*”, followed by “*How capable are you to meet the demands of the conversation?*”. They could rate their likelihood from “*Extremely Likely*” to “*Extremely Unlikely*” on a 7-point scale.

Approach and Avoidance

To measure avoidance, participants were asked to what degree their partner would not want to talk to the participant because of the participant's race. They could answer this on a 7-point scale from "*Strongly Disagree*" to "*Strongly Agree*". Using the same scale, they were asked whether it was likely their partner would say something offensive, say something disrespectful, and devalue their opinion, each separately. They were also asked if they would prefer to avoid this interaction, and if they wished they did not have to participate in this interaction. Finally, they were asked that if they had known who their partner would be from the start, if they would have not participated in the survey, and if they would have asked for an alternative task.

To measure interest in approaching their partner, participants were asked if they were looking forward to the interaction, and if they were focused on having a good interaction. Next, participants were asked if they felt they had a lot in common with their partner, and to what degree their partner would be comfortable interacting with them. Then, participants were asked if they were looking forward to meeting their partner, if they were looking forward to getting to know their partner and whether they were looking forward to this interaction. Lastly, they were asked if they would treat their partner as they would anybody else, if they could learn a lot from their partner, and if they could learn a lot from this interaction. Again, participants were given a 7-point scale from "*Strongly Disagree*" to "*Strongly Agree*" to answer these questions.

Demographic Questions

To get a sense of the demographics of the sample, I asked participants to indicate their age, gender, ethnicity, social class background, and highest level of education. The last two measures were simply self-identification; i.e. asking someone what their social class background

was (Lower Class, Lower Middle Class, Middle Class, Upper Middle Class, or Upper Class), and their highest level of education (ranging from some high school to Ph.D.

Procedure

Participants were asked to sign a virtual consent form prior to the start of the survey. To conclude the survey, the deception was explained to them, and they were asked for their permission for their responses to be used in the study. Participants were told that they are having a conversation with a partner regarding various political issues. There was no actual conversation partner, but this deception was implemented so that the results were as accurate as possible. They were randomly assigned a profile of their conversation partner, which contains fictitious information about the person's hobbies and occupation, as well as their race and gender, so as to obfuscate the purpose of the study, and to bring a sense of realism to the experience. The profiles were exactly the same except for race, gender, and name. Then, participants were given a list of potential conversation topics, which includes controversial political subjects not directly related to race (whether people should be required to use the restroom of their sex assigned at birth, whether taxes should be increased for the wealthiest 1% of Americans, and whether voter fraud is significantly affecting election outcomes). They were then provided answers to the dependent variables. Finally, they were shown a loading screen supposedly leading up to their conversation, which told them that their conversation partner was unavailable. Participants were then debriefed and compensated for their participation. This research approach is modeled after Wout and colleagues (Green et al., 2021; Milless et al., 2022; Smith & Wout, 2019; Wout et al., 2010; Wout et al., 2014).

Results

Experiences of Discrimination

Consistent with previous research, a paired samples t-test revealed that participants reported experiencing more discrimination from White people ($M = 3.85$) than African American people ($M = 3.25$), $t(238) = 4.94$, $p < .001$, $d = .318$.

Warmth metaperceptions

A 2 (partner race) x 2 (partner gender) ANOVA on warmth metaperceptions revealed only a significant main effect of the partner's race, $F(1, 138) = 6.56$, $p = .011$, $\eta_p^2 = .027$. Consistent with my hypothesis, participants with a Black partner ($M = 4.85$) expected to be perceived as being warmer than participants with a White partner ($M = 4.61$). There was neither a main effect of gender, $F(1, 138) = 1.22$, $p = .272$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$ nor an interaction between the race of the partner and the participant's gender, $F(1, 138) = .451$, $p = .502$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$.

Competence metaperceptions

A 2 (partner race) x 2 (participant gender) ANOVA on competence metaperceptions did not reveal a main effect of the partner's race, $F(1, 238) = 2.30$, $p = .131$, $\eta_p^2 = .010$; or gender, $F(1, 138) = .04$, $p = .849$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$. There was also not a significant interaction between the race of the partner and the participant's gender, $F(1, 238) = .81$, $p = .370$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$.

Interaction Challenges

Another 2 by 2 ANOVA on the challenges that participants expect to face during the interaction revealed only a significant main effect of the partner's race, $F(1, 138) = 4.77$, $p = .030$, $\eta_p^2 = .020$. Specifically, participants anticipated interacting with the Black partner ($M = 3.15$) to be less challenging than with the White partner ($M = 3.39$). There was neither a main effect of gender, $F(1, 138) = .60$, $p = .437$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$; nor an interaction between the race of the partner and the participant's gender, $F(1, 138) = .23$, $p = .63$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$.

Approach and Avoidance

An ANOVA on participants' approach motivation revealed only a significant main effect of the partner's race, $F(1, 138) = 5.28, p = .022, \eta_p^2 = .022$. Participants reported being more willing to approach the Black partner ($M = 4.65$) than the White partner ($M = 4.32$). As with the previous findings, there was neither a main effect of gender, $F(1, 138) = 2.17, p = .142, \eta_p^2 = .009$; nor an interaction between the race of the partner and the participant's gender, $F(1, 138) = .16, p = .69, \eta_p^2 = .001$.

An ANOVA on participants' avoidance motivation did not reveal any significant results (all $F_s < 1.0$).

Discussion

The findings support the hypothesis that Asian Americans feel a greater sense of trust when interacting with African American people, above what they feel when interacting with White people, consistent with the identity threat theory of intraracial interactions (Craig & Richeson, 2012). However, results in terms of gender were not consistent with the Stereotype Content model, as that model would have predicted a significant difference in warmth, willingness to approach, and challenges across gender lines, where women would be preferred conversation partners (Fiske et al., 2002). Overall, we see how assumptions about someone's race and gender have an effect (or lack thereof, in the case of gender) on how people feel about them, especially when discussing sensitive topics.

The predicted results also show how an oft-ignored population in social psychology feels about African American people. In AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) activists' discussions, anti-Black racism is often an important topic (Litam, 2021). In some ways, this study can help to illuminate the differences between how Asian Americans feel about White people in comparison to how they feel about African American people. Given relatively recent

discussions of anti-Asian hate, a current understanding of how Asian Americans feel about African Americans is especially prescient (Gover et al., 2020). Furthermore, this study helped highlight the impacts of experiences with discrimination on metaperceptions. Additionally, while previous research into metaperceptions of Asian Americans utilized the aspect of priming, which led to various different effects, this study was done without priming, and so may showcase a more baseline metaperceptual belief. In this case, it seems that personal experiences with discrimination may be more important to the formation of metaperceptions than current events.

Limitations

This study was limited in terms of population selection. People who take online surveys for money on Prolific probably do not entirely reflect the Asian American community as a whole. The Asian American community is made up of a variety of subcommunities that may have very different perspectives on a variety of issues. For example; South Asian and East Asian communities can have vastly different cultural experiences. Even within each of those groups, people whose heritage is Chinese may have a very different perspective due to that experience than someone whose heritage is Vietnamese. Class, immigration status, and political affiliation were not screened for, amongst other factors. Such factors may well influence opinion on African Americans and White American, which may in turn impact metaperceptions. In terms of research of this kind, the sample size was rather small, and did not include an equal number of male and female participants. These disparities in the sample may have a substantial impact on its applicability to Asians Americans at large.

Future Directions

Further research could help to narrow down which factors can influence how Asian Americans see African American people, such as immigration status, nationality, heritage, class,

and political affiliation. Given the overall dearth of research regarding interracial relations between Asian Americans and other groups, this study looked at a relatively broad sample of people. Future research could also replicate this study with a larger sample size, and an equal number of men and women. Personal experiences with discrimination, and that impact on metastereotypes, may be a fruitful avenue of further exploration as well. This study chose the main factors of warmth and competence from the Stereotype Content Model, but utilizing the axes of American-ness and social status from the Social Positioning Model could be another way to expand upon the findings of this study. So could digging deeper into identity threat theory by asking more questions relating to solidarity and identity.

This study does not purport to solve the issue of systemic racism within academia, but should it provide some small context to make some small change, then its job would be more than accomplished.

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