4-1-2008

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Abstract

The notion that context has an effect on perceptions of multiracialism was investigated. Context was manipulated in terms of exposure to interracial harmony and interracial disharmony in the form of a movie clip from the movie *Something New* (2006). The effect of the clip on participants' perceptions of multiracial people was measured by the Attitudes Toward Multiracial Children Scale, and the racial identification of the participants was measured by the Racial Identity Scale. The results from the two measures were calculated with an independent-samples *t*-test to compare the mean scores of the two groups. Results show that the mean of the group who received the disharmony clip was significantly lower than the mean of the group who received the harmony clip. The results imply an importance of the media portrayal of interracial interaction and racial stereotyping on the perceptions of society for the multiracial community.

Key Terms: Multiracialism, Contextual Ambiguity, Media, Racial Identity, Perception

The factors that affect the attitudes of people toward one another are uncertain. It is clear, however, that color and race are at once the most important and the most enigmatic (Franklin, 1993). Deters (1997) defines race as more of a social construction than a biological construction that was originally designed to separate and label the oppressed groups in society. Definitions of "Blackness" were originated during slavery because the oppressors wanted to distinguish themselves from those oppressed individuals. According to Roth (2005), the "one drop" law stated that any person with a drop of African American blood was categorized as Black by law. Rather than a tool that united groups of the same geographic location or shared culture, race has become a social tool to separate and label.

In America, race has developed as an exclusive characteristic. The social construction of race may influence an attitude that refers to race as being an exclusive category that every person in America must ascribe to. Race is therefore internalized by society as an exclusive attribute. Although society views the races as independent and

necessarily separate from each other, miscegenation and the increase of a multiracial community has brought to the forefront the controversy of an exclusive race (Deters, 1997).

Multiracialism, according to Edles (2004), is the re-evaluation of a system where people are racially defined and restricted. Multiracialism exists as a third category in the binary racial system between Black and White. As a result, multiracialism is seen as a disturbance of the stability of the racial categories (Pellegrini, 2005). However, the increase of multiracialism causes society to reassess certain notions about race and its categorization stability (Sexton, 2003). A multiracial person is an individual who is of two or more racial heritages. These multiple racial heritages allow race to be a dilemma for the development of an identity both racially and non-racially for the multiracial person (Resnicow & Ross-Grady, 1997). An important factor related to the multiracial community is the extent to which outside factors influence identity development (Jackman, Wagner, & Johnson, 2001). The multiracial person's view of self is affected by external attitudes, perceptions, and judgments about them (Chesley & Wagner, 2003). Consequently multiracial persons may identify themselves based on contact with other people (Herman, 2004). Multiracialism has brought into question how people perceive multiracial people and what affects that perception.

The racial labeling and perception of multiracial people has become an increasingly pertinent dilemma in American society (Roth, 2005). Hecker (2004) claims that context from the environment affects human perception. Taylor and Crocker (as cited in Hecker, 2004) speculated more specifically that there are certain contextual elements and schemas such as balance, reciprocity, and causation that may help to structure information and shape perception. However, both researchers claim that the more ambiguous the information, the more likely outside influences play a role in processing and understanding the information.

In the case of processing ambiguous information, context can provoke bias to the resulting structure of the information that must be processed in order to create perception. Jackman et al., (2001) also investigated perception and theorized that a person's psychosocial development is strongly influenced by environmental factors such as norms and values. Hecker (2004) regards these norms and values as external influences. Due to rigid racial categorization as a norm in American society, and the inability for a multiracial person to fit within such a norm, a person's perception of multiracial people can be regarded as the course through which ambiguous information must be structured.

The ambiguity of the information allows for context to be taken into account in the development of a perception, so that a person's perception of multiracial people is influenced. Brunsma (2005) suggests that minority schools influence the public to label students as minorities or multiracial because of the geographic location of the schools. Under Brunsma's theory, minority school environments can function as the context involved in processing or developing perceptions of multiracialism. For example, if a

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multiracial person goes to school in the Northeast he or she will be identified as multiracial since racial identification is stronger in the South than it is in the North. However, if a multiracial person goes to school in the South, where Black is the more dominant identification over multiracial, he or she will be identified as Black. These differences exist because the effect of slavery in the South resulted in more racism (Jones, 2006).

The *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision is very important to the development of school systems, which is a major factor related to multiracial people. *Brown vs. Board of Education* was a landmark decision of the United States Supreme Court, which overturned earlier rulings going back to *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. The decision declared that state laws which established separate public schools for black and white students denied black children equal educational opportunities. This decision promoted interethnic contact between the races because it obligated school districts to integrate their schools. Interethnic contact is believed to result in more racial and ethnic integration in schools (Zirkel & Cantor, 2004). Furthermore, Quillian and Campbell (2003) suggest that interracial contact increases understanding, awareness, attitudes, and relations among ethnic groups. This increase in relations among ethnic groups results in social networks. These social networks could increase life opportunities and reduce segregation (Emerson, Kimbro, & Yancey, 2002). In conceptualizing such contextual influences, Hecker (2004) proposes that cues from the context serve to activate or deactivate inferential rules that will determine guidelines for processing the perception of the person.

Perception may influence the identity of the multiracial person in that if they are regarded as the out-group in reference to their racial identity both prescribed and ascribed they may be included or excluded based on that factor. According to Parham and Helms (1990) racial identity can consist of the degree to which a person identifies with their race or the degree to which the person regards their race as apart of their general identity. The more a person identifies with their race the stronger their racial identity becomes. In the reference to perceptions of multiracialism, when people process these perceptions they can either regard the person as part of their in-group or as part of an out-group. As a result of the strong role that race plays in American society, race is commonly the factor by which people establish their in-group and can therefore result in the influence of racial identification for multiracialism.

In reference to racial identity, media has proven to be an influential entity in the portrayal of race and racial interaction. Media serves as an influential context because of its indirect contact with the audience. Media is also a more measurable case of context in that it eliminates the confounding variables that may exist in a direct person-to-person contact such as self image maintenance and explicit cognitive dissonance.

Due to the ambiguity of multiracialism, context in the form of media provides an influence on the perception of multiracial people as a result of inferential rules about racial identity that might cause a person to perceive another in a subjective manner.

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Elements such as racial interactions, therefore, can serve as the context to the perception and function as cues. Consequently interracial relationships can function as the contextual cues in racial identity perceptions for multiracial people.

Therefore, my hypothesis is that when participants are exposed to examples of racial harmony (where people from different racial backgrounds are getting along), they will have a more positive perception of multiracial people than participants who are exposed to examples of racial disharmony (where there is a relational struggle between people of different racial backgrounds). The contexts of racial harmony and disharmony will be viewed within a movie clip.

Method

Participants

Students were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes at Xavier University of Louisiana, a historically Black, Catholic university, and received course credit for their participation in the experiment. Students ranged in age from 19-22. There were 38 participants who were assigned to one of two conditions: harmony and disharmony. There were 20 participants in the first condition and 18 participants in the second condition. There were also 29 women, eight men, and one participant that did not report gender. # participants were African American, and # regarded themselves as multiracial.

Material

Each participant received the Attitudes Toward Multiracial Children Scale (AMCS), "which is intended to measure adults' beliefs about the psychosocial development of multiracial children" (Jackman, Wagner, & Johnson, 2001, p. 89). The AMCS is based on a 23-item scale and uses a 5-point response format (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Furthermore, the AMCS contained demographics such as age, ethnicity, and sex. Participants also received the Racial Identity Scale (Resnicow & Ross-Gady, 1997). The Racial Identity Scale (RIS) is based on an 18-item scale and also uses a 5-point response format (strongly disagree to strongly agree). In addition to the measures, participants were asked to report their age, gender and race. Participants were also asked to indicate whether they regarded themselves as multiracial.

Participants viewed film clips from the romantic comedy *Something New* (2006). The general plot of the movie involves a successful, Black career woman who is faced with the decision of pursuing an unexpected interracial relationship with a white landscaper in the face of derision from her friends, family and community. There were two clips, one for each condition. The clip for the harmony condition involves a 3 minute clip of the interracial couple on a generally positive romantic date with no mention of race and the couple enjoying each other's company. The disharmony clip involves the interracial couple having an argument about the obstacles they face as an interracial couple and the Black woman even claims that the relationship might not work because he

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does not understand how it feels to be Black.

Procedure

Participants entered the testing room collectively, seated themselves, and filled out the informed consent form. Participants were separated into two conditions, harmony and disharmony, based on the section they attended which was determined by the time available for the study (four sections were offered). Participants were encouraged not to talk during the experiment. Both groups were shown a three-minute clip of the movie *Something New* (2006).

The first group (experimental) was shown a clip of the main characters struggling with their biracial relationship. The disharmony clip represents racial disharmony because the main characters were arguing about how their different racial background is causing conflict within their relationship. The second group (harmony) was shown a clip of the main characters getting along in their biracial relationship. In contrast to the disharmony group, the control clip represented interracial harmony because the two main characters are shown getting along without the mention of race. After viewing the clip, the participants (all sections) filled out the AMCS and the RIS following brief instructions from the researchers.

All measures were ordered in the same way, with the RIS following the AMCS to avoid racial priming. On the demographic form, participants were asked to indicate if they, themselves, were multiracial. After completing the measures, participants were debriefed, as the researcher explained that the study was really testing the relationship between perceptions of multiracialism and portrayals of interracial couples.

Results

The statistical analysis that is appropriate is the independent-samples *t*-test. The independent-samples *t*-test is the appropriate analysis because there is one continuous dependent variable: the measurement of perceptions of multiracialism. There is also one independent variable, the movie clip, *Something New* (2006), which has two discrete levels: racial harmony and racial disharmony.

The independent-samples *t*-test compared the mean scores of the experimental group (participants who received the interracial disharmony clip) and the control group (participants who received the interracial harmony clip). Based upon the independent *t*-test, a significant difference was found between the mean of the group who viewed the interracial disharmony clip and the mean of the group who viewed the interracial harmony clip, $t(36) = -2.135$, $p < .05$. The mean of the group who viewed the disharmony clip was significantly lower ($M = 3.17$, $SD = .41$) than the mean of the group who viewed the harmony clip ($M = 3.5$, $SD = .46$). The results show that participants who viewed the interracial harmony clip reported a more positive attitude toward multiracial people than participants who viewed the interracial disharmony clip.

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The independent-samples *t*-test also compared the mean scores of participants who reported being multiracial and participants who did not report being multiracial. The analysis found a significant difference between the means of the two groups, t (36) = 2.406, $p < .05$. The mean of the group who reported being multiracial was significantly higher ($M = 3.57, SD = .424$) than mean of the group who did not report being multiracial ($M = 3.2, SD = .429$). As a result, participants who reported being multiracial had a more positive attitude toward multiracial people than people who did not report being multiracial. Results of the racial identity scale, however, did not show a significant relationship with the AMCS scale. These results support the hypothesis that when participants are exposed to examples of racial harmony (where people from different racial backgrounds are getting along), they will have a more positive perception of multiracial people then participants who are exposed to examples of racial disharmony (where there is a relational struggle between people of different racial backgrounds).

Discussion

In testing the impact of contextual influences on perceptions of multiracial people, participants exposed to positive interracial relationships had a more positive perception of multiracial people than participants who were exposed to negative interracial relationships. These results imply that context in the form of interracial portrayals affects the perception of multiracial people. The results of racial contexts on the perceptions of multiracial people support Hecker's (2004) theory that perception is influenced by the context that surrounds the individual. The results also support Taylor and Crocker's (2004) theory that the more ambiguous the information, the greater the effect of contextual influences. In regards to this study, the ambiguity refers to the indistinctness of the racial identification of multiracial people. Results possibly infer a reference to multiracialism as a symbol of interracial harmony and consequently seeing the former in disarray may affect the perception of the latter which would explain why when participants were exposed to disharmony they reported more negative perceptions of multiracial people.

The results of this study imply that the media's portrayal of racial interaction and racial stereotyping has a significant influence on perceptions of multiracial people, as well as on the racial identity development of multiracial people (Jackman, Wagner, & Johnson, 2001). The results also imply the need for social awareness about the influence of such media portrayals on the development of the multiracial community and on the development of racial identities as a whole. Implications can also reference the symbol of multiracialism as racial harmony, and so the provocation of positive perceptions of multiracialism may provide insight on increasing interracial relationships and vice versa.

As a result of the sample's derivation from a historically Black university located in New Orleans, a possible limitation of the study is the influence that the city's media portrayal following Hurricane Katrina may have had on participants. Participants'

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responses to the multiracial scale could be skewed in that heightened negative media portrayals of the Black community following Hurricane Katrina might influence participants' perceptions of race relations. . The media aftermath of Hurricane Katrina has included a racially charged atmosphere and public statements referencing race as a major factor in the recovery of New Orleans. As a result, the external validity of the study might be threatened.

The racial identity scale may have only measured one aspect of Black identity (Helms & Parham 1990). The entire theory of Helms and Parham (1990) include four stages: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion and internalization. Pre-encounter consists of a person's anti-Black, pro-White attitudes. Encounter consists of a transitional stage in which previously held anti-Black and pro-White attitudes are challenged by an event or encounter that causes the person to reflect on previously held attitudes. Immersion-emersion consists of a reversal of pre-encounter attitudes, which now become pro-Black and anti-White. Initially, this stage involves immersion in Black culture and is characterized by an emersion from this complete focus on Blackness. The final stage is internalization and consists of internal conflicts of the first three stages being resolved and the person feeling a commitment to his or her new Black identity. The Resnicow and Ross-Grady scale may have only measured one dimension (possibly the Immersion-emersion stage) of what Helms and Parham theorize about the Black identity which could have been a reason for the null interaction between the two measures. Another limitation may be that the participants did not report whether they had previously seen the movie, which may have affected the sensitivity of the prime.

In the future, researchers should manipulate other forms of media, such as literature or music, to test the extent to which media portrayals of interracial interactions affect the perceptions. As far as the future considerations for the measures, research should use a different and more comprehensive scale for racial identity. The usage of a more comprehensive scale may find s significant correlation or serve as a theory for the effect of media on participants' perceptions.

Conclusion

The way society perceives multiracial people is affected by media portrayals of interracial interaction. In this study, participants reported perceptions of multiracial people that were found to be significantly influenced by interracial media portrayals. Participants' perceptions were influenced by the portrayals of interracial relationships and imply significance on the effects of media stereotype. This study not only adds to the body of research that investigates the role of perception in the development of multiracial identities, but also investigates the factors that affect perception. This study also highlights the importance of research in race perceptions and racial identity.

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Acknowledgements

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