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Running Head: Identity and Personal Experience Redefining Concepts of Race

Identity and Personal Experience Redefining Concepts of Race

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Abstract

At one time, Americas tended to assume that race was immutable and biologically based. In the (give year) US Census, for example, citizens were required to describe themselves as either White, Negro, or Asian—no compromises permitted. Today, however, on the US Census as in life, it is now possible (and even common) for multiracial individuals to self-identify with more than one race. How do such social changes affect American's concept of race? Do most Americans now think of race as a social construction? As a biologically based construct? In Study #1, we set out to find out.

In Study #1, in a survey of monoracial and multiracial participants, it was found that multiracial individuals are more likely (than their monoracial peers) to view race as a social construct. In fact—depending on the questions asked—many multiracial college students were more likely to perceive race to be a social rather than a biological construct.

Currently, Americans generally still think of race as immutable and biologically based. The media reflect that reality. TV shows further such perceptions with depictions of “racial profiling.” Commercial projects invite people to “find out what race you really are,” and to “track your ancestors to see if you are related to Ghengis Khan.” America is changing, however, and as America comes to include more and more mixed race individuals, however, society's perceptions (and media depictions as to the nature of race) might be expected to change, as well. In the short run—as most people continue to think of race as a biological construct—the multi-racial may find themselves increasingly out of step with the definitions of their monoracial peers.

Is change possible? In a second study, we measured the degree to which the concept of race could be experimentally manipulated. We found that exposure to either a biological or social constructionist view of race significantly impacted participants' own conceptions of race.

Identity and Personal Experience Redefining Concepts of Race

Tiger Woods created his own racial identity, Cablinasian, to embody his Caucasian, Black, Indian, and Asian background (Kamiya, 1997). This independent control over one's racial identity may be spurred by the affordance of the 2000 United States Census allowing multiracial individuals to classify themselves in any way they considered appropriate. In the 2000 Census, multiracial individuals could report all their racial backgrounds, as opposed to previous Census reports, which only afforded the choice of one racial group. While this is a somewhat new phenomenon for mainland United States (US) multiracial individuals, for many decades people in the Hawaiian Islands have routinely used numerous and multiple racial labels to identify themselves. It is becoming more acceptable for many US multiracial individuals to consider all of their various racial backgrounds. What is the psychological importance of possessing a multiracial identity. In a comprehensive report by Shih and Sanchez (2005), little

difference in terms of psychological well-being was found between mono- and multiracial youths. However, this is not to aver that there are no differences between mono- and multiracial individuals. The experience of looking like and identifying with various racial backgrounds has spurred a “chameleon” effect for many multiracial individuals. In a qualitative study, multiracial individuals spoke of their ability to identify with more than one racial group depending on their social circumstances (Miville, Constantine, Baysden, & So-Lloyd, 2005). A multiracial with a Chinese mother and German father, for example, may see herself as Chinese amongst her Asian family, but German amongst her Caucasian family. Crossing these ethnic boundaries seems easier and more commonplace for self-identified multiracial individuals. This finding sparks an interesting question as to how multiracial individuals might construe or conceive of the concept of race. Considering that many multiracial individuals can easily transgress racial boundaries, their concept of race may be different from those individuals who see their racial identity as immutable and unaffected by their social situations.

The concept of race itself is always evolving. Debates about race being either a socially constructed or a biologically grounded concept are ongoing in various fields, including anthropology (Smedley & Smedley, 2005), sociology (Guillaumin, 1980), history (Malik, 1996), and psychology (Helms, Jernigan, & Mascher, 2005). But these debates have only recently reached mainstream audiences and usually through limited forms of media, like PBS (PBS, 2000). However, given that more and more multiracial individuals are embracing a multiracial label and experiencing this “chameleon” effect, changes in how race is construed may be happening very organically—at least for multiracial individuals.

Race Ascription

Theorists have observed that people can use a variety of indicators for assessing their own and other's race. They can use genetic background (Brace, 2000; Entine, 2000; Nature, 1998; Rushton, 2001), physical appearance (Goffman, 1959; Rockquemore, 1998; Stone, 1962), cultural background (Lopez, 2003), language (Delpit, 1988; Smitherman, 1975), or—if we allow the possibility that a person can “choose” their racial identity—can even choose not to possess any identity. They might, for example, consider themselves to be a citizen of the world (Rockquemore, 1998; Rockquemore, 2003; Xie & Goyette, 1997).

Using genetic background as an indicator for assessing race is employed primarily in the sciences. In attempts to map out racial “genomes” and frequency of various diseases, the distinction between ancestry and racial appearance becomes obfuscated. Using appearance is probably one of the most common and convenient forms of assessing race. Although appearance is malleable (in that people can change their hair style and skin color quite easily), it is still used as a form of identity negotiation. Today, anthropologists and forensic scientists still use color charts and photographs to identify people's racial background and more recently, geneticists have begun to use DNA profiling to learn more about ancestry and “lost cultures.” Cultural background—or more importantly social environment—has been declared by many theorists to be the primary determinant of racial identity for mixed or “biracial” individuals. Studies have shown that depending on the ethnic composition of the environment, most mixed individuals will adapt that racial identity that is most congruent with their environment. Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2002) talk of a *protean identity* in which people can change their racial identification to suit the needs or the appropriateness of the situation—thus allowing them to “choose” their identity. Choice can even be used to dismiss the idea of racial identity, as the authors discuss

transcendent identity, in which an individual does not consider race to be a viable aspect of his/her identity.

These different theories about identity formation stand in sharp contrast to typical studies concerning racial identity formation in monoracials. Hirschfeld (1996) has shown that current folk ontology considers race to be immutable and inheritable. According to the authors, the concept of race is a product of innate cognitive construals that help people organize the world into discrete and understandable categories. Specifically, he claims that an essentialist mentality assigns an “essence” to various groups of people. This habit of mind helps children and adults formulate useful and meaningful categories (Medin, 1989). People also see those around them as possessing a certain “essence.” Some “essences” are similar across individuals, and those who share similar “essences” are grouped together to form a racial group. This type of categorizing should be helpful in predicting future behavior or interactions. Hirschfeld’s chapter on how children are able to make racial distinctions—and ground race into a biological concept consistently by the age of four—is very convincing until one considers that the children themselves may (or may not) be monoracial, since their race is never stipulated, or may not identify with a multiracial background (Hirschfeld, 1996, pp. 83-119).

Other research with multiracial children as participants has demonstrated that multiracial children do not develop a concept of race as early as do their monoracial peers (Johnson, 1992). Consequently, their concept of race may fluctuate dramatically over time and with experience. Many multiracial children do not possess a fixed or stable racial identity as they develop into adulthood. Although there are many different theories as to how multiracial individuals develop a racial identity (Poston, 1990; Kich, 1992; Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995), Root’s (1996; 2002) theory takes into consideration that not all multiracial individuals accept a multiracial identity.

Specifically, some multiracial individuals may experience certain social interactions that warrant the adoption of a multiracial label, while others do not. This type of reasoning stems from a symbolic interactionist approach that explains how an individual's identity may be construed differently depending on their personal interactions with their social environments (Blumer, 1969).

In light of these developmental and identity disparities between multiracial individuals and monoracials, it is of interest to see if one's personal experience with race can affect one's cognitive conception of race. The implications of possessing either a social constructivist or a biological view of race, are not entirely clear. Although it has been posited that the social constructivist view of race advocates a less "racist" mentality, this has not been formally tested, and no clear evidence suggests that racism would be attenuated by a social constructivist view. Instead, it is more obvious that a social constructivist view of race would facilitate a concept of race that is mutable, dynamic, and dependent upon the social situations encountered by individuals. Given this perspective, it seems appropriate to hypothesize that multiracial individuals (who self-assert a multiracial label) would be more likely to adopt a social view of race, while their monoracials peers would be more likely to adopt a biological view of race. In order to test this hypothesis, two university-age samples from diverse parts of the US were surveyed about their views of race. Two measures were used to help assess whether individuals supported a more social or a more biological view of race.

Method

Study 1

Participants

Students from the University of Texas at Austin (206: 119 women and 87 men) and the University of Hawai'i at Manoa (140: 107 women and 33 men) participated for a total of 346 participants. Participants were recruited from these two geographical areas in the hopes of surveying mono- and multiracial individuals from various cultural contexts. The racial breakdown of individuals from each area was as follows. The University of Texas at Austin: 37% White, 19% Hispanic, 11% Multiracial (belonging to two or more racial groups), 7% Black, 7% Asian, 7% Hispanic-White, 7% Asian-White, and 5% Black-White and from The University of Hawai'i at Manoa: 61% Asian, 17% White, 11% Asian-White, 7% Multiracial (belonging to two or more racial groups), 2% Black, 1% Hispanic-White, and 1% Black-White. The combined samples contained: 72% Monoracials (38% Asian, 38% White, 15% Hispanic, and 9% Black) and 28% Multiracial individuals (36% Multiracial with two or more races, 30% Bi-Asian, 18% Bi-Black, and 16% Bi-Hispanic). Multiracial participants were heavily recruited either through pre-testing or by posting advertisements around campus inviting multiracials to take part in this study, so these racial demographics are not indicative of the usual racial makeup of each campus.

Measures

Participants were asked two questions designed to ascertain the extent to which they favored a social or a biological view of race: "Do you believe race is a social construct?" and "Do you believe race is a biological construct?" Possible Likert-scale answers ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The RACE (Racial Assessment Construct Evaluation) consists of eight items designed to provide a nuanced measure of the extent to which participants possess a social or a biological view of race. The RACE was developed in stages. First, we conducted two focus groups with participants (10 people each) from a variety of racial backgrounds. They were asked what they

thought the term “race” meant, as a social and a biological construct. On the basis of the groups’ answers, 40 questions (designed to reflect their views) were constructed. We then asked 30 more participants to take the measure. On the basis of such testing, the questionnaire was reduced first to 10 items and then to the eight items that were voted the most comprehensible by the focus groups. The items in the final version of the RACE are shown in Table 1 as well as the factors on which the items loaded. Possible Likert-scale answers ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree):

Insert Table 1 about here

Participants completed a variety of other measures, including Singelis’ Self-construal measure (1994); those results will not be reported here.

Procedure

Participants (regardless of their ethnicity) were invited to meet at the University, where they could complete our survey on a university computer, or (if they choose) they could stay at home and complete the survey on any computer with an active Internet connection. Since monoracial participants were in the majority, they need not be recruited. To increase the participation of multiracial individuals, in addition to interviewing those secured in the normal course of events, additional participants were recruited in the following way: posters advertising “Do you consider yourself multiracial? Then please take this survey” were posted around the campuses involved in the study. Additionally, the University of Texas at Austin utilized a pre-testing method in which participants who “agreed” or “strongly agreed” to the phrase “Do you

consider yourself multiracial?” were asked via email to participate. No monetary compensation was provided to participants; only class credit or extra credit was granted. All participants were treated in accordance with American Psychological Association ethical standards.

Results

Scale Structure

RACE items were subjected to a principal-components factor analysis with varimax rotation (all factors solution specifying an Eigenvalue greater than one). As predicted, two factors—Social and Biological—were extracted. Both factors accounted for 56% of the total variance. Table 2 illustrates the loadings.

Insert Table 2 about here

Multiracial and Monoracial Differences

A within-subjects design was used for both the RACE and the more face-valid, single item questions. Figure 1 shows a significant within-subjects interaction ($F(1,363) = 4.10$, $p=.03$), confirming our hypothesis that that multiracial individuals were more likely to agree that race is a social construct than were their monoracial peers.

Insert Figure 1 about here

When we consider the two individual questions (“Do you believe race is a biological construct?” and “Do you believe race is a social construct?”), a slightly stronger result appears. Figure 2 shows the same significant within-subjects interaction ($F(1,363) = 5.60$, $p=.01$); however, not

only were multiracial individuals more likely to endorse the belief that race is a social construct (than were their monoracial peers), but they were also more likely to see race as a social rather than a biological concept.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Intra-racial differences

Although we posed no specific hypotheses concerning intra-racial differences in how race would be construed, it is important to note that there was significant variety in both the multiracial and monoracial groups in the perception of race. To discover if any differences in the concept of race existed within multiracial and monoracial groups, *post hoc* tests were conducted for the RACE (shown in Figure 3) and the two single-item questions (shown in Figure 4). For the RACE questionnaire, no significant intra-racial differences were secured. However, for the one-item questions, the Biracial Hispanics (half Hispanic and half White) were more likely to see race as a social construct than were any of the other multiracial individuals. Biracial Blacks (half Black and half White) were the least likely to view race as a social construct, and more likely to see race as a biological construct than their multiracial peers. Amongst monoracials, Whites were more likely to see race as a social construct than were their monoracial peers.

Insert Figures 3 and 4 about here

Study 1 Discussion

From the data, it is clear that multiracial individuals and monoracials differ in how they construct the concept of race. This supports current findings by Rockquemore (1998), Rockquemore and Arend (2003), and Milville et al. (2005), who found that multiracial individuals possess protean identities or display a “chameleon” effect which allows their racial identity to fluctuate depending on the social situation and circumstances. It also suggests that the current view of race as an immutable and inheritable aspect may not hold for as many multiracial individuals as it does for monoracials. The consequences of this cognitive view (i.e., believing race is a social *versus* a biological construct) cannot be answered by the research presented here. (Research has demonstrated that one’s racial identity and how it is accepted in different situations affects both cognitive and achievement measures, see Aumer-Ryan & Bigler, 2009). However, the current research does indicate that racial policies based on biological determinism may not be as applicable to multiracial individuals, who see race as a transitory and socially constructed concept.

How changeable are people’s views of the nature of race? To explore the extent to which exposure to different conceptions of race can (or does not) affect people’s personal racial ideologies, we conducted a second study.

Study 2

Participants

Two hundred and thirty six students (116 women and 120 men) were recruited from the University of Texas at Austin to participate in a survey. Participants were primarily students, with an average age of 20.5. Due to the small sample size of multiracial individuals (n=20), we only included in our analysis the surveys of monoracial individuals, with a final sample size of 216.

Procedures

When participants arrived, they were greeted by an experimenter, who informed them that they would be asked to complete a battery of surveys. They were warned that a few of the questions would be repetitive. Given to the number of surveys to be completed, they would be allowed to take a break during the testing. Participants were then seated at a table, on which a variety of pamphlets and “props” were placed. The experimenter noted that she and a fellow graduate student shared the research space. The materials had been left by her colleague’s group and they could ignore them. Participants were then led into private cubicles so they could complete the first battery of surveys. After about 30 minutes, all participants returned to the experimental room. There they met the experimenter and her “colleague” (a confederate)—the one who had left the pamphlets and props that littered the table. Participants were asked if they were interested in hearing a bit about the colleague’s project, since the group’s leader had arrived to collect his/her pamphlets and props. She/he was also recruiting people for her project. All participants agreed to hear the group leader’s presentation. In condition (1) participants were handed a pamphlet which described how one could discover one’s ancestry through DNA testing. Participants also saw q-tips and saliva sample bottles on the table. In condition (2) participants were handed a pamphlet on the Hida Collective Program, which described the Hida people (no such group exists), a South Pacific group that was attempting to save their cultural heritage. They were recruiting people from around the world to learn about their language, skills, and food. Participants also saw photos of “Native-Americans” engaging in various ceremonial practices. In condition (3), or the “control” condition, participants were handed a pamphlet describing the UT Austin Book Bag Study, a project ostensibly designed to promote the use of students’ book bags in order to improve student health. In every condition the

pamphlets were read to students and they were asked if they wanted to participate in or learn more about the program. If they were interested in participating in the project, they were invited to give the group's leader their name and email address. In all three conditions students were offered an incentive to participate: in condition (1) participants were told they would later meet with the group's leader have saliva taken with a q-tip, and be given a free analysis of their heritage. In condition (2) participants were told they would later meet with the group's leader and arrange for a partially paid-for trip to the Hida Islands where they could learn more about the Hida culture and officially join a Native American tribe. They would also have the chance to apply for Native American scholarships. In condition (3) participants were told they would later meet with the group's leader and have their bag and body measured and complete a survey on book bag usage. For their participation, they would receive a certificate for a free bag from bags.com. Across all conditions, an average of 20% of participants gave their name and email to the group's leader, thus asking for further information. After the presentation, participants were then give a second packet of surveys and escorted back into their respective (separate) rooms.

Measures

Packet 1 consisted of Singelis' (1995) Self Construal measure, Spencer-Rodgers et al.'s (2004) Dialectical Thinking scale, the NEO, and the RACE measure. Packet 2 consisted of Gosling, Rentfrow and Swann's (2003) TIPI, McConahay's (1986) Modern Racism Scale, and the RACE measure. Scales were chosen to provide the illusion of a repetitive theme; many of the scales asked for similar questions about one's self: personality, identity, and thinking styles.

Results

Of the 216 participants, only two suspected that they were being deceived during the presentation by the confederate "group leader." Their answers were not included in the following

analyses. Participants' scores on the RACE at Time 1 (before exposure to any brochures) averaged 4.5 on both the biological and social factors of race. Change scores on the RACE for the biological and social factors from Time 1 and Time 2 (after exposure to the brochures) were analyzed using a within groups ANOVA. A statistically significant within-groups interaction was found across groups—specifically, assignment to Condition 1 (DNA-heritage brochure) produced a higher endorsement on the biological factor of the RACE and a significant decrease in endorsement on the social factor of the RACE at Time 2. Similarly, assignment to Condition 2 (Hida-initiation brochure) yielded a significant decrease in endorsement on the biological factor of the RACE and a significant increase in endorsement on the social factor of the RACE ($F(2,211)=16.2, p<.001, \eta^2 = .13$). Participants in the Book bag condition had no change in their endorsement of either the biological or social factors of the RACE. On average, participants in Condition 1 (DNA-heritage), increased their endorsement of a biological view of race by 1 point (from 4.5 to 5.5) and decreased their endorsement of a social view of race by .5 (from 4.5 to 4). Participants in Condition 2 (Hida-initiation), increased their endorsement of a social view of race by .8 point (from 4.5 to 5.3) and decreased their endorsement of a biological view of race by .5 (from 4.5 to 4). Participants in Condition 3 (UT Bookbag study) did not change their endorsement of either biological or social view of race from Time 1 to Time 2.

Overall Discussion

Obviously, there is no “correct” answer to the question: “Is race a social or a biological construct?” Race is obviously a socially constructed concept rooted in naturally observable phenomena. Race is a form of social classification that allows people to negotiate their social worlds. What we (and probably most psychologists, researchers, and lay people) are interested in are the factors that shape people's views as to the nature of racial classifications. We are also

interested in people's ability and willingness to change their views, when appropriate. From Study 1, it seems that those who possess a multiracial identity are more likely to find both socially constructed and biological views of race to be equally compelling. Their monoracial peers were more likely to endorse a solely biological view of race. There are many potential explanations for these results. Two theories are proposed: (1) Multiracial individuals' experiences in social settings may have made them hyper-vigilant to the fact that racial categorizations are often in the eye of the beholder. As many multiracial participants noted in their surveys, their racial identity often depends on who they were with (e.g., family or friends) and on the racial identity of these group members. A mixed Chinese and White individual spending Christmas with his or her White family may feel, act, and identify with being White, but when he or she is shopping in Chinatown with his/her Chinese family, he/she may feel, act, and identify with being Chinese. Hence, multiracial individuals may be very aware of the fluidity and social nature of their racial membership, but also be aware that this racial membership is inherited from their different families. Another explanation, not independent of the first, is that (2) multiracial individuals are practiced at making compromises and think creatively about the concept of race because the race relations between their dual group members often requires negotiation and cooperation. For example, a mixed Chinese and White individual may note that there is often a conflict in values between his/her Chinese and White family members. He/she may need to craft creative solutions or compromises to ease tensions between the two groups (e.g., foretelling the need to have his/her White family take off their shoes when visiting the Chinese family's home). Thus, seeing race as both a social and biological concept is a compromise, similar to the compromises that many multiracial individuals must foster in order to deal successfully with their multiracial families.

As more multiracial individuals comprise America, society's definition of race may change. The nature of this change is difficult to predict. Currently, the messages consumers get from, say, advertising, entertainment, and the daily news concerning race, are mixed. As TV shows and forensic psychologists further the notion of "racial profiling," and commercial projects encourage people to "find out what race you really are," and to "track your ancestors to see if you are related to Ghengis Khan," people may be persuaded that a the biological view of race is ultimately the most compelling. On the other hand, as globalization advances and people have more experience with those from various cultures, they may recognize that social factors shape racial classifications too. Today, celebrities as Tiger Woods, Barack Obama, Vanessa Williams, and Van Diesel have added complexity to America's once simple view of race. One might suspect that as the number of interracial friendships and intermarriages increase, Americans may begin to look at racial classifications in a new way. After all, it was not very long ago that Irish and Germans in the US identified themselves as separate races. Yet, today, most Irish and German citizens see themselves as just "White" (c.f., Alba, 1992). Conceptions of race can change over time, depending on one's reference groups. It is of great importance to be aware that the validity of race as either a biological or social concept is probably not as important as the awareness of the concept's malleability. Personal experience, exposure to different advertisements and media, and globalization will all contribute to how race is conceptualized in the future. Additional research should be conducted in order to discover the specific factors that shape people's conceptions of race and influence those conceptions' malleability.

As is always the case, research always sparks more questions than answers. A few examples, given our findings: What is the general consensus in America as to whether racial

classifications are socially or biologically determined? How do different views as to the nature of race affect race relations? Does a view of race as a social *versus* a biological construct spark more (or less) tolerance and/or prejudice? To what extent is the welfare of multiracial individuals affected by society's acceptance of various racial groups (Aumer-Ryan & Bigler, 2009)? Why are certain racial groups accepted into the mainstream while others are not? And most importantly, how do various definitions of race affect the welfare of those who have been included or "forgotten," given the accepted categories of race? Only subsequent research will help answer these questions.

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Table 1
Hypothesized Factors and Items in RACE

<i>Hypothesized Factors</i>	<i>Items in RACE</i>
Biological	<i>Everyone has a race</i>
	<i>Every racial group has their own unique genetic makeup.</i>
	<i>One can only genetically inherit his/her racial background.</i>
	<i>Race is determined by one's genes.</i>
Social	<i>If someone lives amongst a group of people long enough, he/she can adopt their racial background.</i>
	<i>One's race can be determined by his/her adoptive parents.</i>
	<i>One can choose his/her racial identification.</i>
	<i>Depending on the context, one's race can change.</i>

Table 2
Factor loadings (Varimax Rotation) of RACE items

<i>Items in RACE</i>	Factors	
	Biological	Social
1. <i>Everyone has a race</i>	.85	.11
1. <i>Every racial group has their own unique genetic makeup.</i>	.82	-.06
1. <i>One can only genetically inherit his/her racial background.</i>	.69	-.27
1. <i>Race is determined by one's genes.</i>	.61	-.23
1. <i>If someone lives amongst a group of people long enough, he/she can adopt their racial background.</i>	.03	.82
1. <i>One's race can be determined by his/her adoptive parents.</i>	-.05	.71
1. <i>One can choose his/her racial identification.</i>	-.30	.64
1. <i>Depending on the context, one's race can change.</i>	-.26	.52

Note: only values $\geq .50$ are in bold.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Average scores on the RACE factors: biological and social for both monoracial and multiracial individuals.

Figure 2. Average scores on the face valid questions of race being a biological and social construct for both monoracial and multiracial individuals.

Figure 3. Average scores on the RACE factors: biological and social broken down by specific racial groups.

Figure 4. Average scores on the face valid questions of race being a biological and social broken down by specific racial groups.

Figure 1

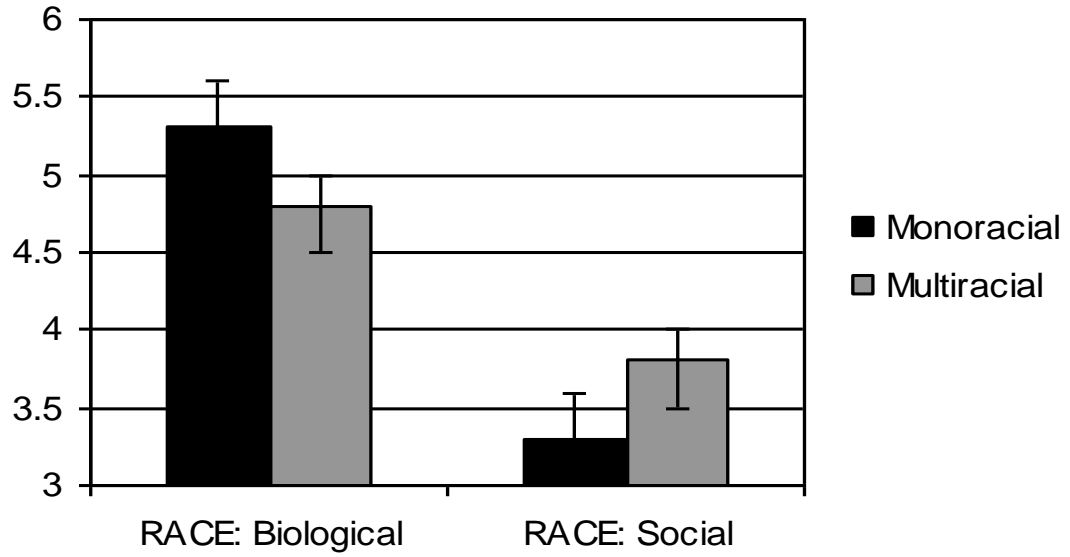


Figure 2

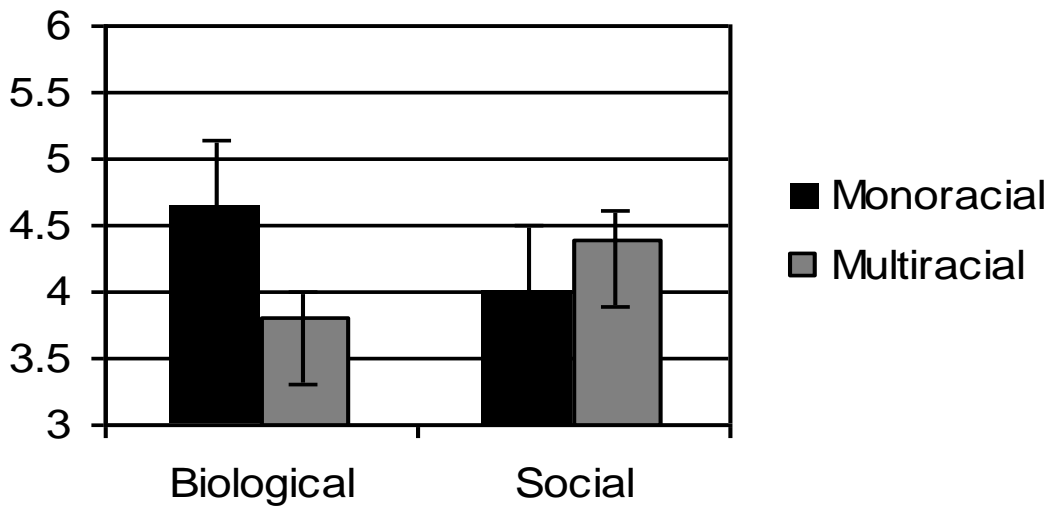


Figure 3

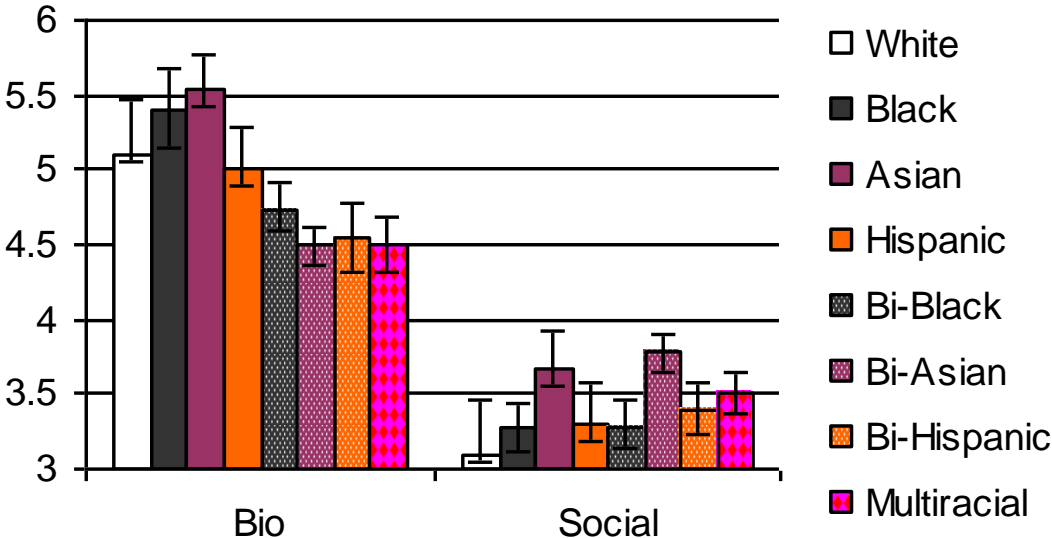
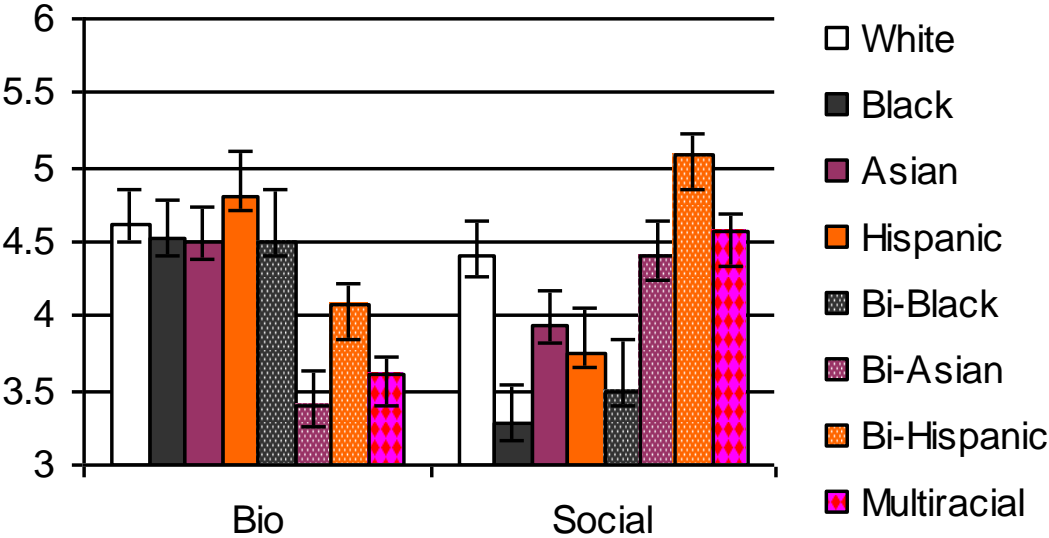


Figure 4



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