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Research Statement

The United States is becoming more racially and culturally diverse than ever. People regularly interact with individuals with different backgrounds, experiences, and appearances from their own. Unfortunately, despite good intentions, these social interactions can be awkward, intimidating, or unpleasant. Broadly, my research investigates the perceptions and expectations that guide diverse social interactions, with the goal of promoting positive intergroup relations via comprehensive understanding of intergroup differences. Specifically, I examine social perception and relationship processes with the theoretical perspective that they are best understood in light of their social and cultural contexts.

Social Perception of Individuals and Groups

My primary line of research investigates perceptions of social diversity. I have pursued several projects that investigate how social context, perceiver attributes, and their interaction affect person and group perception processes.

The Social Perception of Race

One of the newest topics in intergroup relations is the perception and treatment of multiracial people, who represent one of the fastest growing populations in our country. I am interested in how perceivers’ reactions to multiracial people can shed light on the assumptions and beliefs that they hold about race, and I am interested in understanding the implications of this demographic shift for our country’s race relations. The body of research on multiracial person perception is small but growing exponentially. To date, others’ research on multiracial categorization has focused on majority group social perceivers (i.e., White Americans), demonstrating that they (a) typically categorize Black-White multiracials according to a rule of hypodescent, associating them more with their lower status parent group than their higher status parent group, and (b) do so at least in part to preserve the hierarchical status quo. I have extended this literature in several ways.

In societies with increased numbers of multiracial people, perceivers often adopt novel racial categories to accommodate these demographic changes (e.g., Brazil). However, due to the culturally reinforced view of existing monoracial categories as mutually exclusive and legitimate, I predicted that perceivers would have difficulty using a “multiracial” category in person perception. Across six experiments (Chen & Hamilton, 2012), I demonstrated that perceivers did not categorize multiracial faces as reliably as they categorized Black, Asian, and White faces. Participants in these experiments viewed a series of monoracial and multiracial faces one at a time. Their task was to categorize the faces as quickly as possible using a three-choice response option: Multiracial, White, and Black or Asian. On average, perceivers categorized multiracial faces as Multiracial approximately 65% of the time – significantly above chance but also significantly below the rates at which monoracials were categorized as monoracial (about 90% of the time). In addition, Multiracial categorizations took significantly longer than Black, White, or Asian categorizations. To further distinguish between the two processes, I manipulated participants’ cognitive load in one experiment and time constraints in
another. Only Multiracial categorizations were disrupted by these two manipulations, providing strong evidence that they are less spontaneous than monoracial categorizations. Furthermore, I showed that perceivers used the Multiracial category less after reading a news article stating that race differences are genetically based. These results show that perceiving monoracial categories as legitimate and important inhibited use of the Multiracial category. Altogether, this work shows that perceivers do not experience the Multiracial category on par with White, Black, and Asian categories, and its use is further inhibited by the perception that monoracial categories are important, meaningful, and legitimate.

In follow-up research (Chen, Moons, Gaither, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2014), I found individual differences in the use of the Multiracial category to categorize multiracial people. In four studies, we found that having strong internal motivation to control prejudice predicted increased use of the Multiracial category when categorizing multiracial individuals. Internal motivation to control prejudice did not play a role in how perceivers categorized Black or White individuals; however, participants who were high in internal motivation to control prejudice were more likely to categorize multiracial targets as Multiracial, above and beyond differences in explicit and implicit prejudice, interracial contact, and external motivation to control prejudice. These results demonstrate that people who are intrinsically motivated to behave in racially non-biased ways are more likely to correctly use the Multiracial category in social perception.

In addition to my research on the categorization of multiracial individuals, I was the first to examine how perceivers implicitly and explicitly evaluate Black-White biracial individuals. Chen and Ratliff (2015) is the only social psychological work to date that examines Black individuals’ perceptions of biracials. In three experiments with large, national samples, we demonstrated that White perceivers readily transfer their negative implicit attitudes from one Black person to other Black people and Black-White biracial people, whereas Black perceivers did not transfer negative implicit attitudes from one Black person to anyone else. This work is the first to demonstrate the downstream consequences of hypodescent in facilitating negative evaluations of biracial individuals. These findings are particularly important given that White perceivers transferred negative implicit attitudes to a biracial person in the absence of any negative information about that person and because implicit attitudes are difficult to control or change.

Next, my doctoral student and I published a peer-reviewed commentary (Chen & Norman, 2016) on a recent article on impressions of multiracial individuals’ deservingness for affirmative action resources (Young, Wilton, & Sanchez, 2015) in which we outlined important future directions for this field. Namely, we called for additional understanding of minority perceivers’ impressions of multiracial people and integration of research findings across different types of methodologies used to study multiracial person perception (e.g., use of facial photographs versus resumes and profiles).

Furthermore, consistent with the points that we made in Chen and Norman (2016), I published new work (Ho, Kteily, & Chen, in press) in which we examined whether members of an ethnic minority group, Black Americans, also associate Black-White multiracials more with their minority versus majority parent group and if so, why. The first two studies (1A and 1B, including a nationally representative sample of Black and White Americans) directly compared Black and White Americans, and found that although both Blacks and Whites categorized Black-White multiracials as more Black than White, Whites’ use of hypodescent was associated with intergroup anti-egalitarianism, whereas Blacks’ use of hypodescent was associated with intergroup egalitarianism. Studies 2-3 revealed that egalitarian Black Americans use
hypodescent in part because they perceive that Black-White biracials face discrimination and consequently feel a sense of linked fate with them. (Three additional studies provided converging evidence and were placed in Supplemental Material to streamline the manuscript.) Thus, across seven studies, our research establishes that the use of hypodescent extends to minority as well as majority perceivers but also shows that the beliefs associated with the use of hypodescent differ as a function of perceiver social status. In doing so, we broadened the social scientific understanding of hypodescent, showing how it can be an inclusionary rather than exclusionary phenomenon.

My research on racial categorization processes carries broader implications for basic understanding of the social construction of race and other social categories. For example, one of my publications investigated the psychological link between racial and gender categorization processes (Carpinella, Chen, Hamilton, & Johnson, 2014). Although race and gender are obviously independently occurring categories in the real world, we showed that these social group memberships are inextricably linked in the minds of perceivers. We conducted four experiments presenting participants with faces varying in their gender prototypicality and racial ambiguity. Participants more readily categorized feminine faces as White and more readily categorized masculine faces as Black. This research has theoretical implications for existing models of social categorization, which have largely treated categorization processes as independent from each other, and stereotyping, suggesting a perceptual mechanism for the formation of gendered race stereotypes (e.g., “Black women are masculine”). Our findings also have practical implications for the perception of multiracial individuals, suggesting that the experiences of racially ambiguous individuals may depend highly on their gender group (e.g., Black-White men being more likely than Black-White women to be seen as Black).

Further emphasizing the social construction of race, in Chen, de Paula Couto, Sacci, and Dunham (in press), we proposed that cultural forces shape the conceptual, perceptual, and ideological construal of racial categories, and that these cultural influences have implications for cross-cultural differences in race perception. We ran three experiments in the U.S. and Brazil to illustrate the cultural nature of racial categorization. In Experiment 1, a target’s racial ancestry influenced Americans’ categorizations but had no impact on Brazilians’ categorizations. Experiment 2 showed cultural differences in the reliance on two phenotypic cues to race; Brazilians’ categorizations were more strongly determined by skin tone than were Americans’ categorizations, and Americans’ categorization were more strongly determined by other facial features. Experiment 3 demonstrated cultural differences in the motivated use of hypodescent, such that only anti-egalitarian Americans, and not anti-egalitarian Brazilians, engaged in hypodescent when the racial hierarchy was threatened. These results are consistent with the historical differences in the countries’ treatment of racial difference. Historically, hypodescent rules (such as one-drop rule laws) were created to preserve the current racial hierarchy in which White Americans were advantaged and Black Americans were subordinate. By classifying a person of mixed-race ancestry based on the race of the more socially subordinate parent (i.e., hypodescent), perceivers are protecting the size of the more advantaged class. These findings broaden the field’s understanding of factors that influence how multiracial people are perceived and on specific ways in which race is constructed. This work also sparks a discussion on the need for increased understanding of intergroup relations from a cultural psychological perspective.

The Formation and Application of Social Stereotypes
Classic social psychology focuses on how people form impressions of others. This literature has always focused on how perceivers glean trait information about individuals from observing their behaviors (e.g., Jane helped the old lady cross the street → Jane is nice). I extended this literature in two ways. First, although trait information is important because it enables perceivers to understand and anticipate others’ behavior, individuals’ social roles also provide valuable information about their goals, beliefs, and behaviors. In three experiments (Chen, Banerji, Moons, & Sherman, 2014), we documented that perceivers spontaneously and efficiently infer an individual’s social role from a single role-implying behavior (e.g., John motivated the group to tackle the problem → John is the group’s leader). Second, I documented that perceivers also spontaneously infer trait information about groups (STIGs; Hamilton, Chen, Ko, Winczewski, Banerji, & Thurston, 2015). Across five experiments, we examined the formation of spontaneous trait inferences about groups (STIGs) and their downstream consequences. For example, perceivers learning that a group of friends wanted to play tackle football instead of touch football unintentionally and efficiently infer that the group is aggressive. STIG formation led perceivers to rate groups as higher on the specific trait exhibited by their behavior (e.g., aggressive) compared to equally negative traits (e.g., unintelligent). Further, these trait inferences readily transferred to an individual joining the group after the trait-implying behavior occurred. The documentation of STIGs provides a novel mechanism by which people form impressions of groups and apply these impressions indiscriminately to its members, in other words, the formation and application of stereotypes.

Second, I documented a novel type of spontaneous inference (Chen, Banerji, Moons, & Sherman, 2014). I reasoned that, in addition to their dispositions, individuals’ social roles are an important predictor of their future behaviors. As such, I hypothesized that perceivers would spontaneously infer an individual’s social role from a single role-implying behavior (e.g., John motivated the group to tackle the problem → John is the group’s leader). As expected, two experiments demonstrated that perceivers spontaneously infer individuals’ social roles from minimal behavioral information.

In another paper, I examined how existing stereotypes can influence intergroup interactions even before they begin (Moons, Chen, & Mackie, 2017). Past research has shown that Black men are associated with anger more than White men are, and that White men are associated with anger relative to White women. Our research was the first to investigate the impact of emotion stereotypes on empathic forecasting (predicting others’ emotional reactions to future events). In two studies, we showed that these emotion stereotypes influence perceivers’ expectations of a future interaction. Namely, perceivers expect a Black person to react more angrily than a White person in response to the same negative event. These expectations are particularly concerning because they lead perceivers to the desire to avoid the Black person more than the White person. Further, our findings suggest that, if an interaction is unavoidable, the documented race-based expectations can lead self-fulfilling prophecies and, therefore, stereotype confirmation.

Majority-Minority Differences in Social Groups

Another subarea of my research focuses on the expectations and experiences of individuals in historically majority-dominated contexts, such as academia and business. In one project, I documented a novel process by which minority underrepresentation within a domain discourages interest from potential outsiders (e.g., why there are still so few women in business;
Chen & Moons, 2015). Whereas past research has documented that minorities experience a lack of belonging in settings where they are underrepresented, I found that the lack of representation also leads minorities to doubt whether they will have interpersonal power, the ability to influence others, in those settings. Specifically, learning about an MBA program with few female students led female undergraduates to infer that they would have low interpersonal power in the program relative to an MBA program with equal gender representation. Women’s anticipated lack of power mediated the effect of underrepresentation in the MBA program on women’s disinterest in the program and in MBA programs in general. Therefore, a single exposure to underrepresentation was sufficient to decrease women’s interest in and intentions to approach the business domain because they expected to have low power in that context.

In another paper, I examined lay definitions of racial diversity from the perspective of Whites and racial minorities. Although some studies have found that Whites and minorities differ in the specific group properties that provide the basis for diversity judgments, I proposed and tested a novel conceptual framework of “diversity” in two studies (Chen & Hamilton, 2015). I hypothesized that “diversity” has two components: the numeric representation of minorities and the social acceptance of minorities within a group. Numeric representation refers to the extent to which minorities are statistically represented in the group, whereas social acceptance refers to the extent to which minority group members feel valued, respected, and comfortable in the group. My key prediction was that social acceptance is more strongly associated with diversity among racial minorities than majorities. Study 1 showed that social acceptance was a stronger predictor of perceived diversity of the university for minority students than for White students. On the other hand, representation of minorities was a stronger predictor of perceived diversity for White students than for minority students. Study 2 extended these results to show that increases in a company’s representation and social acceptance independently led to increases in perceived diversity of the company among Whites. Among non-Whites, representation and social acceptance only increased perceived diversity of the company when both qualities were high. Together these findings support a two-component model of diversity in which representation is a necessary but not sufficient quality for a group to be perceived as diverse by both Whites and minorities. Furthermore, this work highlights conditions under which Whites and minorities are likely to differ in their perceptions of the group’s diversity level (i.e., when it is high in representation but low in social acceptance).

Cultural Shaping of Relationship Processes

My second area of research examines cultural differences in close relationship processes. When coping with negative events, people across the world rely on their close others for social support. I argue that the specific way in which people derive benefits from their relationships varies cross-culturally.

The majority of research on social support does not incorporate a cultural psychological perspective. Yet, to provide social support successfully, an individual must balance between communicating interdependence and respecting the other’s personal autonomy. Given that the relative importance of maintaining interdependence versus autonomy varies across cultures, a person’s cultural background can influence the social support they tend to give. People in individualistic cultures generally value high self-esteem, positive affect, and personal freedom more than do people in collectivistic cultures. In line with these cultural differences, I predicted
that people in individualistic cultures would provide support that affirmed the recipients’ self-worth and increased their positive affect without infringing upon their autonomy.

My previous work (Chen, Kim, Mojaverian, & Morling, 2012) has documented that European Americans are more likely to seek and provide explicit support (support that directly addresses the stressor or the recipient’s emotional response to it) to their close others than are East Asians. Extending this research, I hypothesized that the provision of explicit support during stressful times would be diagnostic of high quality friendships among European Americans but not among East Asians (Chen, Kim, Sherman, & Hashimoto, 2015). In a questionnaire study, European Americans reported providing more explicit support in higher quality relationships whereas this association was weaker among Japanese. In a second study, I replicated this finding by using a laboratory stress induction and observing support provision. European Americans provided more explicit support to their high quality friends, but this association was absent among Asian Americans. The third study in this paper revealed that Asian Americans were more likely than European Americans to provide more indirect forms of social support, such as providing companionship, to their high quality friends. My research highlights the important role that culture plays in shaping close relationships and social support processes.

Finally, in Pauketat, Moons, Chen, Mackie, and Sherman (2016), we showed that self-affirmation impacts individuals’ predictions of how they will feel following a negative event. Self-affirmation occurs when the self-concept is bolstered by reminders of alternative self-resources that can be used to cope with a threat, such as a reminder of individuals’ important values and how they live up to those values. It is a motivational tool that is frequently used to buffer individuals from the psychological consequences of actual negative experiences such as stereotype threat. We extended this literature by showing that self-affirmation can also reduce the predicted impact of negative events, potentially decreasing individuals’ averseness to taking risks. In two studies, self-affirmation reduced the unpleasant affect that participants expected to experience following a negative event but did not impact anticipated pleasant affect for a hypothetical positive event. These findings support recent theorizing that self-affirmation activates or enhances the psychological immune system, increasing people’s ability to cope with negative events and also, as we documented, their anticipated ability to cope with future negative events.