Intra-minority Intergroup Relations in the Twenty-First Century

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Recent projections indicate that by the year 2050, racial minorities will comprise more than 50 percent of the U.S. population.[1] That is, during the twenty-first century, the United States is expected to transform into what some call a "majority-minority" nation. Despite this emerging trend, social psychological research on intergroup relations has focused almost exclusively on the attitudes that members of majority, high-status groups and members of minority, low-status groups hold toward one another. Less is known about the psychological dynamics that affect what we have termed "intra-minority intergroup" relations: the attitudes that members of one low-status and/or minority group hold regarding, and the behavior they direct toward, members of a different low-status and/or minority group.[2] Given the projected emergence of a majority-minority country, we believe that attention to such intra-minority intergroup relations, in tandem with research on traditional intergroup relations, is critical to our understanding of racial dynamics in the twenty-first century.

In this essay, we consider the broad question of how members of different racial minority groups may evaluate one another in a majority-minority nation. How, for instance, might a majority-minority nation affect the attitudes that Asian Americans express toward members of other racial minority groups (for example, blacks)? We begin with a review of classic social psychological theory regard-

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ing the role of social identification in shaping intergroup attitudes and bias. We then present contemporary theories from which predictions can be made regarding racial minorities' reactions to a salient majority-minority nation. Specifically, we explore two theoretical accounts that offer relatively competing predictions for how attempts to foster a common "minority" social category will affect intra-minority intergroup relations. Next, we briefly consider how white Americans may respond to a majority-minority nation, in general, and their coming numerical minority status, in particular. Drawing from reactions to Barack Obama's election as the first black president of the United States – a symbolic transformation of America's racial hierarchy – we finish by discussing the implications of the country's shifting racial demographics for the U.S. racial hierarchy.

Social psychologists have long argued that human beings are predisposed to sort people into meaningful categories and, therefore, do so spontaneously and with minimum effort or awareness.[3] Unlike the categorization of objects, however, social categorization involves a basic distinction between the category containing the self (the ingroup) and other categories (outgroups) – or between "we" and "they."[4] A wealth of research has shown that this recognition of different social categories, even when based on the most minimal of category distinctions, can influence social perception, affect, and behavior, resulting in the systematic favoring of the ingroup relative to outgroups.[5] Among other things, Social Identity Theory (SIT) posits that people derive self-esteem from group memberships and attempt to enhance their esteem by perceiving their own group (the

ingroup) more positively than outgroups.[6]

These processes stemming from basic social categorization have important implications for intra-minority intergroup relations. Recent research building on SIT suggests that how members of racial minority groups construe a majority-minority nation will shape how they respond to it and, as a result, how they evaluate members of other racial minority groups. In the paragraphs that follow, we review two theoretical perspectives – the Common Ingroup Identity Model and Social Identity Threat Theory – that offer competing predictions for how minorities are likely to respond to the emergence of majority-minority status.

The very notion of a majority-minority nation presupposes that members of different racial minority groups have a common category membership (that is, as "minorities") that distinguishes them from whites. Although such a common category may be useful for charting a U.S. population undergoing change, the implications of such a category for intra-minority intergroup relations depend, at least in part, on whether members of different racial minority groups think of themselves as members of, and/or identify with, such a collective. To the extent that they do, research in social psychology suggests that the emergence of a majority-minority nation should engender positive evaluations among members of different racial minority groups. Specifically, the Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM)[7] asserts that categorizing oneself and outgroup members in terms of a common, superordinate identity leads to more positive attitudes toward outgroup members than when individuals think of themselves as members of distinct groups.

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A common ingroup identity is thought to improve outgroup attitudes because those outgroups become included in individuals' representation of their ingroup and thus are perceived as connected to the self. Studies conducted in various situations, including a multicultural high school, an ethnically diverse workplace, and a football game, found that white individuals expressed more positive attitudes toward racial minorities when a common, superordinate identity was made salient.[8]

Given the effectiveness of a common ingroup identity in improving whites' attitudes toward racial minorities, it certainly seems possible that making a common "minority" identity salient could facilitate positive attitudes among members of different racial minority groups. Research in our lab has begun to study this possibility. We sought to examine how exposure to the discrimination that one's racial group faces in the United States affects attitudes toward different racial minority groups.[9] If exposure to group discrimination triggers a common ingroup identity, perhaps as "disadvantaged minority," then one can expect attitudes toward other racial minorities to be positive compared to when individuals are not exposed to discrimination. Indeed, this is the result we have found. In a series of studies, we asked Asian Americans (Studies 2 and 3) and Latinos (Study 4) to read about the discrimination faced by their racial groups in the United States (or to read a control article) then subsequently complete attitude measures regarding blacks, embedded among a number of other items. Results showed that compared with participants in the control condition, participants in the anti-Asian (or anti-Latino) racism exposure condition revealed more positive attitudes toward blacks on both explicit, self-report measures

(Studies 2 and 4) as well as a measure of individuals' more spontaneous and automatic racial associations (Study 3). Furthermore, and consistent with the CIIM, participants exposed to discrimination against their group rated themselves as more similar to blacks than did control condition participants.[10] In other words, reading about the racial discrimination that one's group in particular faces in the United States seems to trigger a common ingroup identity that includes members of other racial groups, presumably because these groups are also thought to be the targets of racial discrimination. Given this work, it is certainly plausible that the growing attention to and awareness of our emerging majority-minority nation will similarly engender this type of common ingroup identity – and thus more positive intra-minority intergroup relations.

A separate line of research and theory in social psychology suggests that, rather than adopting a common ingroup identity, members of distinct racial minority groups may react to the predicted demographic changes quite differently: namely, as a social identity threat. According to research on the effects of Social Identity Threat,[11] efforts to categorize at least some racial minorities as part of a new majority-minority category may actually disrupt any sense of common fate – and, thus, positive attitudes – that those minorities currently have toward members of different racial minority groups. Nyla Branscombe and her colleagues articulated four types of threats to individuals' social identities, three of which are particularly relevant to the issue of intra-minority intergroup relations in a majority-minority nation: categorization threat, distinctiveness threat, and value threat. Although the specific routes through which catego-

rization and distinctiveness threats are expected to affect intra-minority intergroup relations differ, each is predicted to have a negative effect on racial minorities' attitudes (and behavior) toward members of other racial minority groups. Both threats preclude the possibility that members of different groups will identify with a common minority ingroup and, as a consequence, harbor positive attitudes toward other racial minorities. Value threat, by contrast, can either undermine or enhance identification with a common minority ingroup.

Categorization Threat. Individuals experience categorization threat when they perceive that outgroup members are attempting to impose a category label upon them and treat them accordingly. This type of threat is thought to occur in part because individuals believe that they will be treated more negatively due to an affiliation with the undesired category membership compared with when they are categorized differently (or as an individual); but theoretically, it could also stem from externally imposed categorization into a group associated with "positive" stereotypes. In either case, categorization threat results in individuals distancing themselves from the undesired category, perhaps even going so far as to derogate the category altogether.[12] This type of threat seems particularly likely for members of relatively high-status racial minority groups: for example, East Asian and Indian Americans. Such individuals may perceive categorization into a majority-minority category particularly threatening insofar as it assumes commonality with racial minority groups that have decidedly more negative stereotypical associations, namely, Latino and black Americans. Some Latino and Caribbean black immigrants as well have been shown to hold negative attitudes toward black

Americans, identify with white Americans more than black Americans, and eschew shared racial categorization with black Americans.[13] This type of categorization threat is particularly common among more affluent Latinos and Caribbean blacks who, in terms of income and educational attainment, may indeed be more similar to non-Hispanic whites than to other racial minorities; however, it has also been found among poorer Latinos.[14] Similarly, recent work suggests that many Asian-white and Latino-white biracial individuals are choosing to identify as white rather than with a racial minority group.[15] Hence, some individuals may reject the common category implied by the majority-minority concept in favor of affiliation with white Americans or simply with their distinct racial (or ethnic) categories. In either case, the social identity threat stoked by attempts to impose a majority-minority identity upon many racial minority groups may lead members of those groups to harbor attitudes toward other racial minorities that are more negative than they would have otherwise been.

Distinctiveness Threat. Rather than, or perhaps in addition to, categorization threat, it is possible that a majority-minority category may trigger distinctiveness threat among some racial minority groups. Distinctiveness threat can occur either when individuals perceive that the boundaries between an important and self-defining social category and relevant outgroups are being blurred[16] or when a social category membership is perceived to be too big to provide a meaningful basis for self-definition.[17] It is not difficult to imagine that a majority-minority category could propel either type of distinctiveness threat. First, the fact that a majority-minority category, by definition, includes a numerical majority of the U.S.

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population may preclude it from providing a meaningful basis for self-categorization. Marilynn Brewer has argued that individuals are most likely to identify with groups that provide a balance between their needs for affiliation (protection) and differentiation (distinction).[18] Numerical majority groups are typically perceived to be insufficiently distinct and, thus, tend not to be primary bases for identity. The emergence of a majority-minority category, therefore, may actually undo any common ingroup minority identification that members of different racial minority groups currently hold. In other words, by virtue of becoming a numerical majority, racial minority or non-white status may no longer provide a psychologically useful and/or desirable basis for self-categorization; individuals may thus begin to dis-identify with it.

A majority-minority nation may also trigger the other type of distinctiveness threat in members of racial minority groups. Because it includes members of many different racial and ethnic categories, it may blur the perceived boundaries between these groups, threatening the distinctiveness of individuals' different racial/ethnic group memberships. Blacks, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans may perceive that the common minority identity undermines the recognition of what is distinct about their racial/ethnic categories. This type of distinctiveness threat typically results in members of one group attempting to differentiate themselves from the "threateningly similar" outgroup(s), either by derogating that group or by emphasizing characteristics, experiences, and/or stereotypes (positive or negative) of the "threatened" ingroup.[19] For example, to the extent that black Americans experience this form of distinctiveness threat from attempts to include them in

a majority-minority category, they may derogate Latinos and emphasize the unique experiences of blacks in the United States.[20] Given that it is the estimated rise in the number of Latinos that largely accounts for the projected rapid increase in the U.S. minority population,[21] it is entirely likely that black Americans – a group that has heretofore been the prototypical racial minority in the United States – may be particularly likely to experience this type of distinctiveness threat. Indeed, some early indications of distinctiveness threat and its negative repercussions have been found in cities such as Los Angeles, where Latinos are now the majority racial group.[22]

Value Threat. The third form of social identity threat that is likely to be triggered by a majority-minority nation is value threat. It stems from individuals' perception that their group is perceived more negatively, either in its competence or morality, relative to other groups. Whereas racial minority groups often face this type of threat, a majority-minority category may accentuate the experience of value threat. The majority-minority concept could easily call attention to the disparity between numerical majority/minority status and the power/prestige disparity between whites and racial minorities. In other words, the dawn of a majority-minority society may well serve to remind members of racial minority groups of the disparity between their numerical presence in the country and their underrepresentation in high-status, powerful roles in business, politics, and other spheres.

Unlike categorization and distinctiveness threat, however, the effects of value threat for intra-minority intergroup relations are less clear. Similar to the predicted effects of categorization threat, members of racial minority groups that are associated with relatively positive

stereotypes and high-status roles (for example, Asian Americans, in at least some domains) are likely to respond to value threat by dis-identifying with the common minority group and, perhaps, derogating members of other racial minority groups. Alternatively, value threat could serve to increase identification with a common minority category. The disparity between the numerical majority status of members of racial minority groups and their sociocultural status may serve to galvanize individuals to work for societal change. Research has found that perceived discrimination can increase ingroup identification and cohesion.[23] Indeed, the studies we carried out (described above), in which Asian American and Latino participants were exposed to the discrimination that their groups face, could be viewed through the lens of value threat.[24] Specifically, exposure to group discrimination threatens the value of one's group membership insofar as it is a reminder of the group's relatively low sociocultural status (compared with whites). We found consistent evidence that this manipulation increased both Asian Americans' and Latinos' perceived similarity to and positivity toward black Americans. In other words, the very type of value threat that is likely to be triggered by a majority-minority category – that is, the salience of racial minorities' persistently low sociocultural status despite their increased population – could foster identification with the common minority category as a means of enacting societal change.

To the extent that a new majority-minority category is construed as a threat to individuals' racial identities, it may disrupt a sense of common fate (if any such fate exists) that members of different racial minority groups may currently have; it may even foster intergroup hostility and negativity. That said,

perceived value threat stemming from a comparison with a salient outgroup to a minority category (white Americans) may serve to increase feelings of commonality among members of different racial minority groups and may encourage positive intra-minority intergroup relations. Considered in tandem with the research on CIIM, the social identity threat framework offers an important perspective on the psychological dynamics that govern for whom, under what conditions, and how the changing racial dynamics are likely to affect the attitudes that members of racial minority groups harbor toward one another, and how this relates to their ability (and willingness) to disrupt the current racial hierarchy in the United States.

Just as racial/ethnic minorities' reactions to the changing racial demographics will be shaped by their construal of what a majority-minority nation means for their self-concepts, so, too, will the reactions of white Americans. One seemingly important distinction is likely to be between white Americans who come to think of themselves as "minorities" (and/or at risk of becoming in the minority) and those who do not construe the changing demographics in this way. Although whites are projected to be in the numerical minority relative to all other non-whites (racial/ethnic minorities) by 2050, they will continue to hold a plurality of the population (46 percent): that is, white Americans will continue to be more numerous than any other single racial group.[25] Hence, just as the notion of a majority-minority nation presupposes some sense of common psychological identification among members of different racial minority groups that may or may not exist, it also requires that whites think of themselves as more distinct from various racial minority groups than

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they perceive such groups to be from one another. In other words, a majority-minority population is a construction that need not be reflected in or honored by white (or racial minority) individuals' sense of self.

Drawing on Branscombe and colleagues' Social Identity Threat model (as discussed above), however, it is likely that many white individuals who come to see themselves as minorities (or potential minorities) will experience value threat.[26] For many individuals, the shift from racial majority to minority is likely to be experienced as a loss of status and thus poses a psychological threat to the prestige of their racial group. Recall that research suggests that individuals respond to value threats by derogating members of salient outgroups; in this case, the likely targets will be members of America's current racial/ethnic minority groups. If whites begin to perceive themselves as the numerical minority, they may also begin to categorize themselves racially (that is, as white) more explicitly and to feel a sense of racial solidarity with other whites. Individuals often identify more strongly with groups that are perceived to be under threat (especially groups that are also perceived to be inescapable).[27] Consequently, rather than perceiving themselves as relatively race-less,[28] the changing demographics may inspire white Americans to acknowledge that they do indeed have a racial group membership and that they should work on behalf of it.[29]

It is possible that for at least some white Americans, such a shift in self-identification could improve relations with and attitudes toward other groups; however, it is entirely likely that such a change in identification could result in greater levels of bias against racial minorities (blacks, Asians, Latinos, Native Americans, and so on). Consider, for instance,

the reaction of conservative pundit Pat Buchanan, who declared that the projected U.S. demographic changes would result in "the death of the West," in general, and in a "third-world America," in particular.[30] Negative reactions to the increase of racial minorities in formerly predominantly white areas have similarly been found among some whites in affluent, high-achieving school districts in California, in response to the rising numbers of Asian American families and students. In a *Wall Street Journal* article from 2005, Suein Hwang described what she termed the "new white flight": white families moving their children out of the public schools as Asian American students become the majority.[31] It is not difficult to imagine similarly negative reactions to Latino Americans as their percentage of the population increases in the United States and as white Americans attempt to cope with feelings of marginality in an emerging majority-minority nation.

The emergence of a majority-minority country, and how it affects the social self-concepts of both racial minority group members and white Americans, may or may not follow the demographic shift. Consequently, there is little reason to believe that the demographic change will necessarily disrupt the current U.S. racial hierarchy. Quite the contrary, the potential rise in feelings of racial paranoia and/or collective white identity among white Americans is likely to reinforce the racial status quo, if not spark new efforts to address the specific concerns of whites.[32] Evidence for the possibility of these outcomes can be gleaned from reactions to Barack Obama's campaign for and ultimate election to the presidency of the United States, a symbolic challenge to the U.S. racial hierarchy. Recall, for instance, Hillary Clinton's

appeals to white racial solidarity in the waning days of her run against Obama for the Democratic Party's nomination. Specifically, Clinton claimed in a *USA Today* interview, "Sen. Obama's support among working, hard-working Americans, white Americans, is weakening again."[33]

These and similar episodes that equate "American" and "white" are likely the result of unconscious mental associations. Research has demonstrated that most white Americans automatically associate "American" with the racial category "white" more so than with the racial categories "black" or "Asian."[34] A majority-minority country poses a direct challenge to this pernicious equation of "American = white" and thus threatens the current racial hierarchy. Again, reactions to President Obama may provide insight into what to expect in response to the predicted racial demographic changes. Soon after his election, a very vocal minority of Americans began to engage in a number of behaviors seemingly designed to question Obama's legitimacy. Most notably, a conspiracy theory that Obama is not a natural-born citizen of the United States (a requirement to hold the office of president) gained momentum, capturing attention in the mainstream media and garnering support among some elected officials. We saw Obama's rise to the position of America's chief executive and Commander in Chief met with resistance in the form of challenges to his fundamental "Americanness." It is not unreasonable to expect that the "American = white" equation will engender similarly negative reactions to the country's demographic shift. In turn, such reactions will undermine efforts to create an equitable, just, and racially diverse society.

The United States is expected to transform into what some call a majority-minority nation during the twenty-first century. In this essay, we examined the likely reactions of racial minorities and whites to this new majority-minority nation, with a specific focus on a) intra-minority intergroup relations and b) whites' recognition of and reactions to a white "minority." Extant social psychological theory and research suggests that racial minorities may not construe themselves as having common fate with other racial minorities and thus may be particularly unlikely to behave or relate to one another as if they are part of a non-white group that holds majority status. Consequently, members of different racial minority groups may not seek to claim any additional political power by virtue of their new "majority" status. By contrast, the research and theory reviewed suggests that white Americans may be particularly likely to think of themselves as members of (or potential members of) an actual or feared white minority. Whites may experience the rising numbers of non-white Americans as an identity threat, resulting in renewed white racial solidarity and increased, intensified bias directed toward racial outgroup members. Given that whites continue to possess disproportionate social, economic, and political power in the United States, such a reaction would serve to reduce racial equality and crystallize the current racial hierarchy.

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ENDNOTES

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