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Advancing Our Understanding of the Interface Between Perception and Intergroup Relations

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We are delighted to have the opportunity to respond to Y. Jenny Xiao, Géraldine Coppin, and Jay J. Van Bavel's (this issue) perceptual model of intergroup relations. We see this model as filling an important void in the literature between the resurgent interest in motivated perception and the long-standing interest in social psychology in intergroup relations. Xiao and colleagues propose that social groups, identities, and contexts can alter perception across multiple modalities; in turn, these perceptions influence intergroup attitudes, judgments, and behaviors. Although noting that there is relatively little empirical support for the reverse causal pathway, they also postulate that the model may be bidirectional, suggesting that intergroup relations may influence perceptual processes, which may in turn affect social identity. Thus, the crux of the proposed model is that "social identification influences perception" (p. 257). The authors suggest that this particular link has been, until recently, understudied in social psychology, a point to which we return.

We find much to like in Xiao and colleagues' (this issue) theory. Specific to their model, we appreciated the relatively unique focus on multiple modalities. To our knowledge, no extant model of intergroup relations or social identification explicitly includes visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory perception as components. Indeed, as the authors note, much of the work in this area has focused on visual perception (e.g., Social Vision; Johnson & Adams, 2013). Nevertheless, perception is not limited to vision; therefore, any theory focusing on how perception, broadly defined, mediates the relationship between social identity and intergroup relations should be multimodal. Moreover, the focus on multiple modalities serves only to underscore the relative dearth of work in this area focusing on modalities other than vision. Related, perceptual modalities are rarely isolated in vivo, regardless of how they are studied in psychology laboratories. Hence, we appreciated the authors' inclusion of cross-modal perception in their model as well as in their review of the literature.

Second, we found the authors' review of the extant literature to be particularly inclusive and informative. The authors review the important role social identity and fundamental motivations for belonging have on cognition, as well as note that perception is socially constructed. In addition, the authors review recent research on visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory, and gustatory perception, providing a

concise summary while acknowledging where areas for future research exist.

Finally, on the whole, we believe the perceptual model of intergroup relations is defensible given the current data. Indeed much of our own work, and other related work at the interface of perception and intergroup relations, corroborates the authors' arguments. For example, speaking to the effects of social identities on perception (Pathway C), we have demonstrated that target race alters perception of physicality. White perceivers evaluate Black men as more physically formidable and as more muscular than White men matched in height, weight, and strength (Wilson, Hugenberg, & Rule, 2016). In a separate demonstration, Fincher and Tetlock (2016) provided compelling evidence for the perception to intergroup relations pathway (Pathway D), showing that perceptual dehumanization (i.e., withholding face-typical processing) facilitates extreme punishment (i.e., death penalty sentencing). Other work speaks to the proposed bidirectional nature of the model, specifically how intergroup relations can influence perception (Pathway F). Black perceivers who believe Whites are primarily externally motivated to respond without prejudice (i.e., Black perceivers who are suspicious of Whites motives) perceive White faces to be more threatening than their nonsuspicious counterparts (Kunstman, Tuschere, Trawalter, & Lloyd, 2016). This was documented both in explicit judgments of threat and in patterns of visual attention.

Inzlicht, Kaiser, and Major (2008) strengthened this intergroup relations to perception link, demonstrating that individual differences in stigma consciousness affect emotion perception. Women who expect to be treated with prejudice perceive contempt lingering on male faces. Finally, compelling evidence for the final link (perception to social membership; Pathway E) comes from research indicating that perceptual fluency facilitates ingroup categorizations and thereby ingroup advantages (i.e., liking; Claypool, Housley, Hugenberg, Bernstein, & Mackie, 2012) and that fluency can explain when prejudice arises (e.g., Lick & Johnson, 2013). Thus, taken together, we think that there is robust evidence to support many of the core claims of this model.

Although we believe the model espoused by Xiao and colleagues (this issue) is important and drives forward our understanding of the interface between perception and intergroup relations, we next note several areas where this model may be

strengthened and clarified. In particular, we offer suggestions in three broad areas. First, we explore the extent to which the proposed model is conceptually distinct from New Look–style theories, or whether it is a subset of the New Look. Second, we consider whether this model offers predictions beyond existing models of motivated perception and person construal. Finally, we note that the authors define perception loosely (which they acknowledge), often conflating percepts with judgments. We argue that social psychological theory needs specific and consistent definitions to be taken seriously by allied disciplines such as cognitive psychology and visual science; thus, we make a call for greater conceptual clarity.

Question 1: Is This Really a New Theory (Or Is It a Subset of the New Look)?

Xiao and colleagues (this issue) propose that the relationship between social identity and intergroup relations is mediated by perception. As just noted, we agree with this assertion, and the model more broadly. Much of our own work has been influenced by the New Look–style logic central to this model. Indeed, Xiao and colleagues acknowledge the New Look perspective, highlighting classic (e.g., Bruner & Goodman, 1947) and contemporary (e.g., Balcetis & Dunning, 2010) examples of how motivation influences perception (e.g., Xiao & Van Bavel, 2012) and has intergroup consequences (e.g., Caruso, Mead, & Balcetis, 2009). However, we believe that it is important to more strongly clarify how the current model is distinct from broader theories of motivated perception (such as the New Look more broadly) and from related theories of person perception that include perceptual components.

To this point, it is unclear why Xiao and colleagues' model needs to be a model of intergroup relations. Do we need multiple theories to explain why perceptual processes influence intergroup phenomena separate from how perceptual processes influence intragroup, or even intrapersonal processes? Much of the literature cited to bolster support for the model was intragroup or intrapersonal in nature. For the sake of parsimony, rather than have a perceptual model of intergroup relations, it would be preferable to have a model of motivated perception that can account for intergroup relations in addition to other documented psychological processes. Indeed, models of motivated perception (that have consequences for intergroup relations) already exist. To make the strongest case for a perceptual model of intergroup relations, highlighting how this model is conceptually distinct from other related models seems important. For instance, is a perceptual model of intergroup relations needed to explain why outgroups and outgroup members seem larger when believed to be physically or socially threatening (Wilson et al., 2016; Xiao & Van Bavel, 2012)? Or can this finding be explained by a model that also encompasses an explanation as to why spiders appear larger than life for people with spider phobias (Cole, Balcetis, & Dunning, 2013; Riskind, Moore, & Bowlby, 2006)?

In sum, although we agree that perception plays an important role in social identity and intergroup relations, we argue that a stronger case can be made for how this model is conceptually distinct from other models of motivated perception.

Question 2: Is This Really a New Theory (Does It Have Novel Predictions)?

A second question we had in reading Xiao and colleagues' model is whether it has empirical predictions that are distinct from related theories of motivated perception and of person perception. In our reading, perhaps the most novel component of this theory is its focus on multiple modalities. As we note earlier, few models of intergroup relations consider sensory properties of stimuli and how they can interact to influence how groups relate to one another.

However, extant theories of person perception include both perceptual components and a focus on multiple modalities. In particular, Freeman and Ambady (2011) proposed the dynamic interactive theory of person construal in which they argued, and provided computational evidence for, a model whereby perceptual cues and social identities interact with higher order cognitive states and beliefs to predict person perception. Like the proposed model, Freeman and Ambady's (2011) model similarly investigates multiple modalities (e.g., visual and auditory perception) and considers the roles of social identities (e.g., sex, race). Although not explicitly a model of intergroup relations (although see Question 1), the dynamic interactive theory of person construal quite explicitly considers perceptual cues, group membership categorizations, stereotype content, and higher order motives (e.g., prejudice, task instructions) as bidirectional and interactive influences on person perception.

In our reading of this model, we found ourselves wanting a series of clear, testable predictions that would not be otherwise predicted by extant theories. Xiao and colleagues (this issue) instead note that their model can be used as a "starting point" for social psychologists wishing to incorporate perception into their work on intergroup relations and for cognitive psychologists wishing to incorporate social processes into their work on perception (p. 319). We agree this model is an exciting starting place, but would be more immediately usable as such with clearer specifics on how this model can be empirically distinguished from other related theories.

To summarize, we agree with the psychological processes described in the proposed model, and we believe that specific, novel predictions for future research would help both distinguish this model from related models and provide an immediate starting point for new research.

Question 3: Is This a Model of Perception?

In our reading of the article by Xiao and colleagues (this issue), we found ourselves wondering about the authors' definitions of perception. Often social psychologists play "loose and fast" with the term *perception*. What we call person "perception" is often better termed person "construal" or person "interpretation." Similarly, many of our dependent variables that we may think are studying perception are clearly nonperceptual to perception scientists. For example, Xiao and Van Bavel (2012) convincingly demonstrated that intergroup threat can make outgroups seem closer than they actually are. It is important to note that their dependent measure is a numerical distance estimate. Although the threat changes the representation of the physical world (as shown by changes in the numerical

estimate), there is not evidence here that it changes the percept. We believe that this is more than hairsplitting. Reporting that a group or location is close or far away may be a salve to threatened egos, or of use to mobilize for intergroup conflict. But actually *seeing* a target as closer or farther than it is has different consequences. Seeing a hated Yankees fan as closer or farther than he actually is will make our barroom haymaker miss (a perceptual problem for hooligans everywhere).

A number of labs and scholars have worked hard to parse perception from judgment. Perhaps some of the best known of these are embodied measures of physical distance or angle that rely on tossing beanbags to hit targets (e.g., Balci et al., 2010; Pitts, Wilson, & Hugenberg, 2014) or using haptic measures of perceived angle (see Proffitt, 2006). Yet the validity of even these well-used measures to index visual perception is unclear (e.g., Durgin, DeWald, Lechich, Li, & Ontiveros, 2011). More important, the extent to which visual perception itself is affected by perceiver motives is a robust and ongoing debate, which needs to be taken seriously in any model of how perception interfaces with intergroup relations (e.g., Firestone, 2013; Proffitt, 2006).

Notably, other theorists have used psychophysical methods commonly employed in basic visual perception to index the interface of intergroup relations and perceiver motives. Perhaps the best known of these might be Levin and Banaji's (2006) convincing demonstration that the perceived race of a face influences the perceived skin tone of the face. In this study, changing the phenotypic features of the face, while holding the skin tone constant, changes the percept of the skin tone: Black-phenotypic faces are seen as darker than White phenotypic faces, despite that the actual skin tone was held constant. Here, the authors took great pains to demonstrate that the effects were not perceptual artifacts, nor were they likely attributable to late-stage judgmental biases, but were actually the results of a perceptual distortion. As another example, in some of our work, we have demonstrated that the perceptual boundary between social groups can be shifted by fundamental belongingness motives. Sacco, Wirth, Hugenberg, Chen and Williams (2011) found that social rejection enhanced the perceptual distinction between stimuli that signaled social acceptance (e.g., smiling faces; racial ingroups) and stimuli that signaled social rejection (e.g., frowning faces; racial outgroups) but at the cost of perceiving differences within those categories (e.g., the difference between a more or less intense smile). Here too, by using psychophysical methods (i.e., same-vs.-different perceptual discrimination tasks) we can isolate the effects to perception rather than a motivated mis-estimate.

We very much appreciate how Xiao and colleagues' model of intergroup relations takes seriously the possibility that group-related motives are both cause and consequence of perception. We also believe that a model such as this would be improved by taking more seriously the distinction between motivated judgments and motivated perception.

Conclusion

Overall, we were impressed by and very favorable toward Xiao and colleagues' (this issue) perceptual model of

intergroup relations. The authors offer a substantive review of the literature linking perception to social identity. Indeed, had this article simply served as a primer for perceptual effects in person perception, we would have been perfectly satisfied. Beyond the review, the proposed model includes a strong and well-received focus on multiple modalities, highlighting the strengths of the existing literature while underscoring important areas where research is scarce. We also find ourselves agreeing with all of the key aspects of their model.

However, we believe the model could be strengthened both by distinguishing this model from other related theories in the literature and by providing clear testable predictions for creating this distinction. Finally, we believe the model could more seriously consider the distinction between perception and judgment, thereby grounding itself more clearly in the perceptual side of this perceptual model. We sincerely hope that our suggestions and questions can help refine the model and provide invested readers with grist for future research in this exciting area.

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