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Negational racial identity and presidential voting preferences

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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that narrow identification with one's own racial group impedes coalition building among minorities. Consistent with this research, the 2008 Democratic primary was marked by racial differences in voting preferences: Black voters overwhelmingly preferred Barack Obama, a Black candidate, and Latinos and Asians largely favored Hillary Clinton, a White candidate. We investigated one approach to overcoming this divide: highlighting one's negational identity. In two experiments simulating primary polling procedures, Asians and Latinos randomly assigned to think of and categorize themselves in negational terms (i.e., being non-White) were more likely to vote for Obama than participants focused on their affirmational identity (i.e, being Asian or Latino), who showed the typical preference for Clinton. This shift in voting preference was partially mediated by warmer attitudes towards other minority groups. These results suggest that negational identity is a meaningful source of social identity and demonstrate that whether one thinks about "who one is" versus "who one is not" has far-reaching impact for real-world decisions.

Cooperation between minority racial groups has been rare despite sharing similar experiences with discrimination (e.g., Johnson & Oliver, 1989; McClain & Tauber, 1998). For example, nearly 57 percent of Latino immigrants who participated in a recent survey felt that few or almost no Blacks could be trusted and nearly 59 percent believed that few or almost no Blacks were hardworking (McClain et al, 2006). Similarly, Asian–Americans are often seen by other minority races as "unscrupulous, crafty, and devious in business" (National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1994). Lacking positive attitudes toward each other, Asians, Blacks, and Latinos in the United States often compete over material and political resources, preventing them from formally and informally building coalitions (e.g., Meier & Stewart, 1991; Kim & Lee, 2001). In fact, in one survey both Blacks and Latinos felt closer to Whites than to each other (Dyer, Vedlitz, & Worchel, 1989). In the 2008 Democratic primary, despite minor differences in the political agenda of the two frontrunners, Black voters overwhelmingly preferred Barack Obama, a Black candidate, whereas Latinos and Asians largely favored Hillary Clinton, a White candidate (Goldstein, 2008).

Scholars have explained the dearth of alliances among racial minorities through processes of social identification. Sociologists, such as Blumer (1958), have focused on beliefs about the rights and resources that group members are entitled to based on their group's perceived social standing and past injustices (see also Bobo & Hutchings, 1996); members of a minority group may believe that they have been uniquely oppressed and demand commensurate redress for their particular group. Psychologists, most notably social identity theorists, have emphasized the processes through which identification with social categories induces intergroup behavior, with mere membership in a group driving in-group favoritism (e.g., Tajfel, Billing, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Still others have linked interracial competition to group size, suggesting that members of numerical minorities display both higher in-group identification and more intergroup discrimination (e.g., Leonardelli & Brewer, 2001).

From these perspectives, narrow identification with one's own group can be an obstacle to interracial cooperation among minorities. Consequently, one strategy for increasing cooperation involves offering competing groups a superordinate identity (Sherif, 1966). Gaertner, Mann, Murrell, & Dovidio (1989) found that creating a superordinate identity for two competing teams, by asking participants in both teams to create a unique name for themselves, significantly reduced inter-group bias in later group interaction. This recategorization strategy, however, has not always been effective at the societal scale. For example, the superordinate identity "Democrats" failed to unite a racially fragmented constituency in the 2008 Democratic primary. Indeed, a Gallup poll in March 2008 showed that 28 percent of Clinton supporters and 19 percent of Obama supporters indicated they would vote for Republican candidate John McCain over their fellow democrat in the general election (Newport, 2008).

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Negational identity and coalition formation

In the present research, we propose a different approach for dealing with narrow racial identification in a sociopolitical context. Recent research suggests that affirmational identity—who or what we are—may not be the only source of identification. Groups to which we do not belong may be equally informative to our sense of self, with individuals being able to identify *negationally* by focusing on what they are not. Thus, an individual could focus on being Black, an affirmational identity, or on not being White, a negational identity (Zhong, Phillips, Lenardelli, & Galinsky, 2008). For example, Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) found that for some individuals, the negational identity of "not being a member of the NRA (National Rifle Association (NRA)", a non-profit organization in the United States dedicated to defending the right of individuals to bear arms, itself carried significant meaning. Similarly, using a modified twenty statements test where participants listed what they are or what they are not (Kuhn and McPartland, 1954), Zhong et al. (2008) found that negational identities comprise a significant part of self-identity. Even though the total number of negational identities generated was smaller compared to the number of affirmational identities, the content of those negational identities captured significant political (e.g., not a Republican), social (e.g., not a sorority member), and religious contexts (e.g., not an evangelical Christian).

Unlike affirmational identity, which leads to in-group bias by causing people to assimilate to the in-group (Turner, 1987), negational identity leads people to differentiate from a common out-group, making the out-group the central focus and psychologically primary. By drawing attention away from one's own group, negational categorization may offer a route for coalition building among groups that share the same non-membership—i.e., a negational racial identity that emphasizes not being a member of the majority group may break down the racial divide among minority groups and unite them into a common cause.

History is replete with examples of people, nations, and civilizations uniting around who and what they are not. Even if individuals cannot agree on who they are, they can often agree on who or what they are not: they are not the barbarian, the primitive, the Oriental, or the fundamentalist (Purdue, 2005). In one captivating historical example, the role of negational identification has been seen as a critical force driving major shifts in the Iranian political identity, first as non-Sunnis in the 16th century and then as non-Jews with the emergence of Israel (Duara, 1997). The construction of Israel as the common enemy allowed previously competing groups (pre-Israel Shiites and Sunnis) to bond and relate to each other. This example demonstrates that negational identification can be a significant prelude to cooperation among formerly warring factions.

Overview

We predicted that when negational identities are made salient (e.g., not being White), members of racial minorities will be more likely to support a political candidate from other racial minority groups relative to a candidate from a majority racial group (i.e., White). Further, we expect this difference to be driven by warmer attitudes towards other minority groups when negational racial identities are salient. The 2008 Democratic primary offered a unique opportunity to test the power of negational identity to unite minority voters around the racial minority candidate, Barack Obama. Between October 16 and December 17 in 2008 (before the first Democratic Party contest, the Iowa Caucus), we conducted two experiments that simulated political polling and tested whether Asians (Experiment 1) and Latinos (Experiment 2) were more likely to vote for Obama when their negational racial identity (i.e., non-White), as compared to their affirmational identity (i.e., Asians or Latinos), was made salient.

Experiment 1

Methods

Participants and design

Participants were 38 Asian undergraduates from Northwestern University who were born or had lived in the United States for at least 3 years (23 male; average age 19.71). The experiment consisted of two between-subjects conditions: *affirmational identification* condition and *negational identification* condition.

Procedure

Participants came to the lab and were told that they would engage in a number of unrelated tasks.

Racial identification manipulation. The first task asked participants to think and write about their experiences living in the United States. In the *affirmational condition*, participants were asked to write about how being *Asian* has affected their life in the United States. In the *negational condition*, they wrote about how being *not a Caucasian* has affected their life.

Presidential voting preference. Participants next completed an ostensibly unrelated survey about the 2008 Presidential primary. They read, "If the Democratic Presidential Primary or Caucus in your state were being held today to select a Democratic candidate and your choice for the Democratic nomination were just Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, which one would you vote for if you had to decide today." They checked the box next to the preferred candidates or uncommitted. Participants were fully probed for suspicion, debriefed, thanked, and paid. None of the participants recognized a link between the identification manipulation and the voting preference measure.

Results

We predicted that the Asian participants in the negational condition would report being more likely to vote for Obama than participants in the affirmational condition. Indeed, participants who wrote about not being a Caucasian were more likely to vote for Obama than participants who wrote about being an Asian, $\chi^2 = 5.22$, $p = .022$[1] (Table 1). Thus, the affirmational condition replicated the voting pattern among Asians in the California primary (a significant preference for Clinton), whereas activating a negational racial identity increased Asian participant's willingness to vote for Obama, the racial minority candidate.

Experiment 2

The purpose of Experiment 2 was twofold. First, we sought to replicate the pattern from Experiment 1 with a different minority group, Latinos. Second, in addition to examining voting preferences, we measured attitudes toward racial minorities as a possible mechanism underlying the effect of negational identity on voting preferences. We predicted that Latinos who thought about their negational identity would express more positive feelings towards other minority groups in general and this greater warmth may

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[1] In both experiments, the χ^2 analysis contrasted Obama versus Hilary and uncommitted.

Table 1
Voting preferences as a function of negational & affirmational racial identity (percentage within condition in parentheses)

	Obama	Clinton	Uncommitted
Experiment 1			
Affirmational (Asian)	5 (26%)	13 (68%)	1 (5%)
Negational (non-White)	12 (63%)	5 (26%)	2 (11%)
Experiment 2			
Affirmational (Latino)	5 (26%)	11 (58%)	3 (16%)
Negational (non-White)	11 (58%)	7 (37%)	1 (5%)

explain the increased preference for the racial minority Presidential candidate.

Methods

Participants and design

Participants were 38 Latino students from UCLA who were born or had been in the United States for at least 3 years (25 female; average age 20.74). The experiment consisted of two between-subjects conditions: affirmational identification condition and negational identification condition.

Procedure

The procedure was identical to Experiment 1, except participants responded over the Internet. After indicating their voting preferences, participants rated their attitudes toward African Americans and South and East Asians on 100-point thermometer scales (1—cold–100—warm; Bobo and Hutchings, 1996). We averaged these ratings to form a composite measure of attitude towards other minorities ($\alpha = .84$).

Results

The results replicated Experiment 1: participants in the negational condition were more likely to vote for Obama than participants in the affirmational condition, who again preferred Clinton, $\chi^2 = 3.89$, $p = .049$ (Table 1). In addition, participants in the negational condition rated other minority groups ($M = 83.07$, $SD = 17.29$) more warmly than those in the affirmational condition ($M = 69.75$, $SD = 18.83$), $t(36) = 2.27$, $p = .029$, $d = .74$. These attitudes predicted voting for Obama in a binary logistic regression, ($B = .04$, SE = .02, Wald (1) = 4.10, $p = .04$). Further, when both categorization and attitudes were included in the logistic regression, categorization no longer predicted voting preference, $B = 1.0$, $SE = .74$, Wald (1) = 1.80, $p = .18$; however, the effect of attitudes on voting preference also no longer reached conventional levels of significance, $B = .03$, $SE = .02$, Wald (1) = 2.45, $p = .12$. These results are suggestive of partial mediation—negational racial categorization improved attitudes towards other minority groups which affected Latinos' willingness to vote in favor of Obama. However, this conclusion should be interpreted with caution given the small sample size.

Discussion

The present work was partially inspired by the 2008 Democratic Primary, which was marked by racial differences in voting preferences (Goldstein, 2008). This pattern reflects a long standing divide among minority racial groups in the United States—instead of combining strengths, various minority groups often view each other as a source of competition over social and political resources, weakening the political power of minorities relative to the White majority (e.g., Meier & Stewart, 1991; Kim and Lee, 2001).

Whereas conventional appeals to common experience of discrimination or superordinate identities such as party affiliations have not been very successful in overcoming group barriers among minority racial groups, we found that highlighting one's negational identity as non-White increased Latino and Asian support for a Black Presidential candidate, even without any coordination of interests (given the minor differences between the two front runner's policy). Further, we found that activating a negational racial identity made Latinos' attitudes toward other minority groups more positive and these attitudes partially drove their shift in voting preferences in favor of Obama. Given that the mediation results were not conclusive, future studies are needed to better understand the precise mechanisms underlying negational categorization. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that negational identity may be a non-intrusive intervention to reconcile differences and distrust among racial minority groups.

Negational identification, recategorization, and common enemies

Our conceptualization of negational identification shares theoretical connections with intergroup theories of recategorization and common enemies. Unlike the recategorization schemes that have been previously examined in the literature (Gaertner et al., 1989), which tend to focus on highlighting similarities through common membership, negational identification highlights distinctions and non-membership. Negational identification can be seen as an alternative form of recategorization: former out-groups are united around non-membership and as a result become in-group members. Our results demonstrate that negational categorization can be a powerful force in social interaction, even compared to the more conventional categorization strategies that focuses on affirmational ties (e.g., we are all Democrats).

We also see negational identity as tightly intertwined and reciprocally coupled with the notion of a common enemy. The presence of a common enemy can certainly trigger negational identification. In the example of Iranian identity, negational national identity as non-Sunnis or non-Jews was triggered by the presence of Sunni neighbors and Israel. However, we think that negational identification can be a cause and not just a consequence of having a common enemy that unifies warring factions. In fact, previous research has found that people who were simply categorized as not a member of a certain group (e.g., you are not a member of group M) displayed greater animosity towards that group (the out-group) compared to the level of out-group derogation by those who were categorized affirmationally (e.g., you are a member of group M; Zhong et al., 2008). Thus to some extent activating negational identification can also "create" the common enemy.

Negational identification and political mobilization

The implications of negational identity are not limited to racial context. Now that the Democratic primaries are over and Obama has emerged as the Democratic presidential candidate, negational identification (e.g., I am not a Republican) may help ameliorate the rift between Obama and Clinton supporters that intensified during the Democratic primary (Newport, 2008). However, it is important to note that appealing to negational identities is not a panacea; for example, our manipulations of negational racial identity could place a strain on the relationship between racial minorities and the White majority as previous research has shown that negational categorization tends to intensify out-group derogation (Zhong et al., 2008).

Even if such costs are dismissed, questions remain as to the appropriateness of using negational racial identity in political activities. Many people advocate that political alliances be based on issues and policies and not merely on social group memberships

(though the latter can be a useful heuristic for shared values and interests). However, appeals to negational racial identity may not inspire thoughtful consideration of specific issues and policies. Future research should explore whether negational categorization changes the type of issues brought to bear on voting preferences or induces automatic and emotional shifts in voting preferences. We also hope that by demonstrating the powerful effect of negational identity, we may increase the likelihood that voters will recognize such tactics and resist being manipulated.

Regardless of the potential problems and controversies associated with using negational identity to lessen divisions among minority racial groups, it is important to acknowledge that negational identity is an important force for social identification. Simply reminding people of what they are not can transform attitudes towards different groups, shift loyalties and political preferences, and thus drive coalition building. Future research should explore the robustness of negational identification on racial coalition formation, its effect on hostility towards the White majority, and whether it can inspire increased equality for all.

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