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Context, Perception, and Intergroup Relations

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In the target article, Y. Jenny Xiao, Géraldine Coppin, and Jay J. Van Bavel make a compelling case for the effects of social groups on perception and intergroup relations and propose that social influences also run the other direction: from intergroup relations to perception to groups. One reason their model is compelling is that after seeing it, it seems so obvious—the mark of a sound scientific theory. Rather than being surprising or counterintuitive, it relies on two solid pillars of social sciences research. First, we have overwhelming evidence that social identity powerfully shapes attitudes and behaviors. Second, perception is easily manipulable and, yet, is an important part of our cognition and behavior—after all, we must perceive before acting. When this powerful force of identity meets something as easily manipulable as perception, we are not surprised that there is an effect.

Given this solid foundation for the model, it is useful to consider what might modify the relationship between groups, perception, and intergroup relations. In this response, I offer some thoughts on the importance of three potential contextual modifiers: time, space, and institutions. I argue that social context is a crucial element of the relationship between identity and perception, and I discuss why perception might affect certain intergroup behaviors more than others. In my examples, I focus on the political realm, both because it allows me to draw on my background as a political psychologist and because politics is at the core intergroup relations in many societies—after all, it is generally by voting that groups in democracies choose how share resources and resolve conflicts. I also discuss how the perceptual model may be useful in understanding the long-noted relationship between social geography and intergroup relations. I close by offering some thoughts on the influences of intergroup relations on perception, the relationship so far covered by less research.

Context, Perception, and Intergroup Relations

As Xiao et al. (this issue) recognize when they say "perception can be socially constructed" (p. 259), the effect of identity on perception and the influence of that perception on our behavior will vary by social and institutional context.

Institutions

Institutional rules will moderate the connection between identity, perception, and behavior. Indeed, political theorists since antiquity have incorporated naive assumptions about human nature into their designs of government institutions and their thinking about how government could constrain action. For example, the classic debates on the adoption of the U.S. Constitution were largely focused on controlling the influence of "factions" or groups (Hamilton, Madison, & Jay, 1788).

Because we know that institutions can affect intergroup relations (e.g., Sidanius & Pratto (2001)), we might also think that institutions modify the relationship between perceptions and intergroup relations and that understanding these institutional constraints can allow us to predict when identity can influence relations through perception, as Xiao et al. (this issue) propose. For example, the famous correlation between perceptions of competence from faces and election outcomes discovered by Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, and Hall (2005), which relies on the well-established tendency for humans to use faces as a heuristic for attributes, seems in fact to result not from a direct reaction to a candidate's face but rather from upstream processes wherein competent-looking candidates select into electoral contests they are more likely to win. This is perhaps because the individuals with these attractive appearances have more human capital, such as wealth and education, and prefer not to squander it on losing races (Atkinson, Enos, & Hill, 2009). Thus, the immediate influence of perception on behavior is muted.

This is not to say that inferences from faces cannot influence our decisions—of course they can—but rather that in the particular institutional context of the United States, voting behavior is highly constrained by other factors, such as who runs for office. And, upstream, who runs for office is constrained by the uncompetitive nature of elections, making many races unattractive to risk-averse people. In other contexts, in which elections are more competitive, we might suspect these inferences to have more opportunity to influence voting. Another important consideration is that partisan identity tightly constrains voting in the United States (see next), so the influence of attributes such as competence on behavior will be small. This means that politics in the United States, despite appearances sometimes to the contrary, is a relatively predictable business.[1] More interesting is to understand the role of perception on behavior in low-information environments where party is not so influential. Such systems do exist in other countries with limited campaign time or media consumption or where parties are not identity laden. In some other systems, perceptions may be

[1]A simple example of this predictability is the common practice of accurately predicting election outcomes based on simple economic indicators (e.g., Bartels, 2009).

much more influential: For example, in many countries—Ecuador and Malawi are two examples—photographs of candidates appear on the ballot and voters, if not already under the sway of other influences, may react immediately to perceptions of these faces.

But this is certainly not to say that identity does not play a role in perception and politics in the United States. In fact, it plays a powerful role. In a context like the United States, institutional rules (specifically, first-past-the-post voting that creates a two-party system; Duverger, 1959) contribute to political party membership taking the form of a social identity (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2004). These partisan social identities may affect perception. As a result, not only is intergroup bias present across party lines (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015) but party identification seems to affect even basic perceptions, including the olfactory. For example, in a provocative article, McDermott, Tingley, and Hatemi (2014) showed that partisans reacted more favorably to the odor of copartisans than that of outpartisans. The authors suggested that such perceptions could contribute to the ideological assortative mating noted in some societies. This is an example of one complete side of the Xiao et al. model: identity-drive perception affecting intergroup behavior. Other research has found that partisanship affects perceptions of physical attractiveness of other partisans (Nicholson, Coe, Emory, & Song, 2016). Moreover, there is the long-standing finding that opposing partisans have differing factual beliefs about the world; for example, Republicans and Democrats have different beliefs about whether unemployment increased during Bill Clinton's presidency (Bartels, 2002), with Republicans more likely than Democrats to believe it increased. This has been shown to be partially attributable to "partisan cheer-leading," whereby partisans tell surveyors what they think makes their party look better (Bullock et al., 2015). But group effects on perception may also explain some of these differences in factual beliefs; for example, perhaps Republicans, because of their partisan identity, perceived people—by look, smell, or some other sense—to look more poor during the Clinton administration and this influenced their beliefs on the factual matter of the unemployment rate.

Such influences are made possible by a certain institutional context, reinforced by the larger social context. In the United States, media (Prior, 2007), population sorting (Gelman, 2010), and increasingly technology-driven campaigning (Enos & Hersh, 2015) have all reinforced the socially and spatially sorted nature of political parties in a way that didn't exist 20 years ago and doesn't exist in some other societies. In other institutional contexts, such as much of Europe, where the constitutional structures favor multiparty, less identity-laden systems, we might expect such relationships between partisan identity and perception to be more muted. On the other hand, the institutional structure of the United States creates partisan identities that are powerful enough to diminish the effects of even the strongest of other social identities. Take, for example, the well-established connection between racial attitudes and voting for Barack Obama (Tesler & Sears, 2010), which relates to many of the studies covered in the target article. This relationship was probably consequential for the vote choice of only a small portion of the electorate because most voters had already sorted into one of two major political parties—partially because of

racial attitudes (Valentino & Sears, 2005)—leaving little room for racial identity to directly affect voting.

Space

We can also consider the role of space on the identity–perception link. In work cited in the target article, my coauthor and I show that segregation affects perceptions of physical difference between people (Enos & Celaya, 2015). In a larger project, I explore the myriad of group-based behaviors that, through this perceptual link, are affected by geographic space. For example, when segregation, outgroup size, and proximity increase, so do ethnically based voting and negative intergroup attitudes, whereas intergroup trust and generosity and support for redistribution all decline. Other authors have suggested that cross-national differences in social geography can contribute to large differences in economic, political, and social development because of a lack of trust and cooperation between groups (Alesina, Baqir, & Easterly, 1999; Alesina & Zhuravskaya, 2008; De Kadt & Sands, 2014; Gerometta, Haussermann, & Longo, 2005; Habyarimana, Humphreys, Posner, & Weinstein, 2007; Li, Campbell, & Fernandez, 2013; Quillian, 2014). I suggest that this demonstrates the powerful interaction of context, identity, and perception to shape behavior, even on a mass scale (Enos, 2016a). For example, I recorded the change in voting behavior of White voters in Chicago after a change in public housing policy removed a large portion of their Black neighbors. White voting behavior changed even though nothing else about their political or social context, other than the removal of their Black neighbors, had changed. This suggests that the change in the salience of the neighboring outgroup, perhaps through an effect on perception, was causing the change in behavior (Enos, 2016b). A perceptual link between a change in intergroup relations (the removal of one population) and behavior (voting) is evidence for the second side of the bidirectional model offered by Xiao et al. (this issue).

Time

The influences of space and time on this relationship are inter-related: Variation in the social diversity of a society will, of course, affect the amount of direct interpersonal interaction between groups and, therefore, how often and over what time period perceptual processes can mediate intergroup relations. Especially in modern societies, many intergroup relations are not interpersonal but rather involve exposure via mass media or interactions through formal institutions—such as voting or the initial screening processes involved in hiring from a large pool of candidates—that may not require direct contact between groups. In such cases, rather than perceived via sensory organs while a decision is being made, group members are likely to be represented in the "mind's eye" drawn from memory. In these circumstances it might actually be rare that direct interpersonal experience with an outgroup, mediated through a perceptual process, changes intergroup behavior. Some of the examples given by the authors in which perceptions immediately influences behavior—such as the decision of a police officer to fire his weapon—are limited to a small portion of the population. This is, of course, not to say that these behaviors

are unimportant (recent events have certainly underscored this point) but rather that the applicability of the perceptual model will be limited in social and institutional context in which interpersonal interactions are rare. And it goes without saying that in certain contexts—for example, on a diverse college campus—interpersonal interaction across groups is much more common than it might be for the general population.

This relates to the influence of time, because whether or not a behavior results from interpersonal experience is likely moderated by whether the perceptual process takes place immediately prior to an action or long before so that perceptions are retrieved from memory, rather than actively being formed. For most political behaviors in the United States, where a voter's decision process often unfolds over the course of months during a campaign and decisions are largely shaped by attitudes acquired earlier in life (Sears & Henry, 2003), the immediate effect of perception might have little influence. This might be true in other cases in which the action unfolds over a long period with no direct interaction with the outgroup. For example, in hiring discrimination, it is not clear where perception fits into the process, or—if it does—whether it might be overruled by other considerations existing in memory. In such cases, it is useful to ask whether and how perceptions can matter. It may be that perception influences behavior by perceptions formed far upstream being transferred to other considerations which then influence behavior, a model I consider in more detail next.

Perception to (Political) Behavior

By specifying how perception may play a role in intergroup behaviors that are temporally or spatially distant from the act of perceiving, such as those noted earlier in this commentary, we may better understand the influence of perception on intergroup relations—the part of the model that Xiao et al. see as the less researched. Doing so may also help us to explain a persistent difficulty in the study of context and intergroup relations. For example, scholars of context have long noted a connection between outgroup presence and voting behavior, often expressed in voting for candidates perceived as favoring the ingroup. Gordon Allport noted this in 1954 with the case of White voters in heavily Black counties being likely to favor the segregationist Strom Thurmond (Allport, 1954). A great deal of other research has noted similar relationships (Campbell, 2006; Carsey, 1995; Charnysh, 2015; Enos, 2011; Giles & Buckner, 1993; Hersh & Nall, 2016; Hill & Leighley, 1999; Key, 1949; Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999; Matthews & Prothro, 1963; Oliver, 2010; Spence & McClerking, 2010; Wright, 1977).

The mechanism underlying this relationship has remained obscure, with a range of alternatives offered, including instrumental behavior based on economic or political conflict (e.g., Bobo & Hutchings, 1996), but such mechanisms make little sense in many cases. In the research that I just related, for example, White voters in Chicago were influenced by the presence of their Black neighbors who had no instrumental effect on them. If there was no political or economic conflict between these voters and their neighbors, why would the neighbors' presence change how the voters voted? A perceptual model offers the possibility of a different mechanism that better fits

this situation and the others found in the literature. As noted in the target article, my research has demonstrated that changes in social geography can change perceptions. These changes in perception may lead to changes in voting behavior. For example Maddox and Gray (2002) showed that perceptions of physical difference were extended to perceptions of social difference and—relevant to the political case—Lerman, McCabe, Sadin (2015) showed that visual perceptions of difference extend to perceptions of difference in political ideology, suggesting that voters use physical cues as a heuristic for ideology.

It seems then that latent dimensions of difference, such as political ideology, may be influenced by perceptions of difference. How does this fit into the relationship between perception and intergroup relations? These perceptions of difference in ideology or other latent dimensions may drive behavior, even in situations in which the act of perceiving is spatially or temporally removed from interacting with the outgroup, as is generally the case for voting. For example, as noted in the target article, the darkening of photographs caused subjects to rate a candidate as closer to their own political party (Caruso, Mead, & Balcetis, 2009). This suggests that a visual cue (skin tone) was used either directly as a cue for membership in social identity group (party) or indirectly as a cue for similarity on another dimension (political ideology) that is correlated with membership in that group. Once this cue is transferred to party, it is easy to see that it could affect voting.

A useful way to think about this relationship might be a decision framework over alternatives associated with different utility states. In this framework, there is a latent dimension of comparison, such as ideology. A subject perceives herself and a target person as occupying two points on this dimension. Their relative positions will determine the utility of an action for the subject. For example, if she and the target are close together, the subject might think they belong in the same political party and this may affect her behavior. Political scientists often create models in these "one-dimensional" frameworks that predict actions based on placement on this dimension. For example, Downs (1957) famously arrayed political parties and individual voters on a dimension of ideology, from liberal to conservative. He showed that by invoking basic assumptions, you could use the positions on this dimension to predict behaviors such as voter turnout and vote choice. Downs postulated that voters would choose a party based on the relative closeness of each party to the voter.

This framework can easily be extended to nonpolitical intergroup relations such as negative attitudes or economic discrimination. For example, if a person uses skin color as a heuristic for competences this might affect hiring decisions and contribute to the well-documented phenomenon of intergroup bias in this domain—perhaps by the process by which a White manager, assuming herself to be competent, uses the skin tone of a minority applicant as a cue for how different the applicant is from herself, including on the dimension of competence. Incidentally, the phenomenon of intergroup discrimination in hiring has been shown to extend to political groups as well (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). In the domain of criminal justice, where skin tone is also correlated with criminal sentencing (Burch, 2015), this too could be a process by which White

judges and/or juries use skin tone as a heuristic for the latent dimension of criminality.

Some Thoughts about Behavior Reinforcing Perception

Intergroup processes, especially those contributing to social isolation, may also reinforce perceptions of difference between groups and thus create more isolation and lead to the recursive relationship proposed by Xiao et al. For example, segregation—often a result of intergroup relations—reinforces the clustering of tastes and behaviors within networks of people (Enos & Gidron, 2016; Massey & Denton, 1993). These behavioral differences may reinforce perceived differences between social groups, perhaps because of the convergence of group boundaries (Brewer & Miller, 1984), whereby an observer seeing that groups are different across multiple dimensions perceives the groups to be different on yet other dimensions.[2]

The divergence in tastes created by segregation may have consequences for perception. Different racial and ethnic groups in the United States have somewhat different preferences when it comes to television, movies, and music. It is easy to imagine that because of this convergence of taste and identity, attitudes toward social groups can be transferred to preferences for music; for example, by affecting whether one thinks songs are melodic. Food also is closely tied to social groups, with different cultures and ethnicities having different cuisines, especially across international borders. As such, intergroup processes may also change perceptions of food: For example, there is a long history of informal food boycotts due to international conflict. Might such conflicts change tastes for food?

Finally, when groups do diverge in their tastes, perceptions can follow reality, thereby reinforcing the recursive relationship. Do members of different groups smell different from each other? The evidence provided by the authors suggests that group identities might lead us to perceive this to be so, but members of different groups have different tastes in grooming products or food that will cause differences in bodily odors, even in the absence of group-based changes in perception.

In terms of intergroup harmony, this is a somewhat depressing note: Perception causes segregation, which reinforces those perceptions and likely leads to further negative intergroup processes that reinforce segregation. But on a more positive note, this helps to identify possible areas of public policy intervention because it suggests that part of the influence of social groups on perception is built into social structure. If a society can modify the social structure—such as segregation—that contributes to these perceptions, then intergroup harmony may be promoted.

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[2]This convergence of boundaries may also explain the findings just cited, in which segregation causes changes in perceptions of difference because social and geographic boundaries converge (Enos & Celaya, 2015).

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