The Effect of Identity Salience on Asian Women's Prejudice Attributions to Racism and Sexism

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Abstract

Past research has generally asserted that women of color internalize and react more negatively to prejudice that is ethnically motivated than prejudice that is gender-based, but no one has examined whether this is true across contexts (King, 2003; Remedios et. al, 2012). Identity salience may act as moderator of the effect of rejection type (race or gender-based) on perceptions of prejudice by women of color. The goal of the current study is to examine whether identity salience affects the way Asian women attribute ambiguous, negative feedback which contains stereotypes applicable to both race and gender to racism or sexism. We predicted that Asian women will be more likely to perceive prejudice as sexist if their gender identity is salient, but more likely to attribute prejudice to racism if their racial identity is salient. The study design also answers the call for a more integrative perspective on the experience of minority women who face both sexism and racism, not always exclusively.

Consider that the author of *The Handbook of Diversity in Feminist Psychology* conducted a literature search on the popular database PsycINFO, and found that "at the time of this writing, 1,338 articles included the terms 'gender discrimination' or 'sexism,' or 'sexist events' or 'sexist discrimination' in their abstracts. Of these articles, only 160 (12%) mentioned 'African American' or 'Black.' Notably smaller proportions mentioned 'Asian' or 'Asian American' (25 articles, 2%)…" (Landrine, 2010). The book was published just four years ago.

To date, there is an absence of research on the experiences of individuals who are members of multiple stigmatized groups. Members of stigmatized groups are believed to have an attribute or characteristic that marks them as different and devalues them in the eyes of others in particular social contexts, such as belonging to marginalized gender or racial groups (Major & O'Brien, 2005). In the realm of social psychology and related fields, members of multiple stigmatized groups are often rendered invisible, non-prototypical, or are highlighted to represent a single social identity (Purdie-Vaughns & Ebach, 2008). Because the intersections of race[1] and gender are rarely evaluated simultaneously in the context of social stigma, women of color[2] represent one major group which falls victim to this omission. Past research has generally asserted that women of color react more negatively to and internalize prejudice that is ethnically motivated to a greater extent than prejudice that is gender-based, but no one has examined whether this is true across contexts (King, 2003; Remedios et. al, 2012). Identity salience may affect women of colors' perception of prejudice. Shih, Pittinisky and Ambady (1999) found that even when making a particular social identity salient on an implicit level, this altered the effects of stereotype threat on Asian women by changing the direction of their performance to be in line with the stereotype associated with the primed identity. In the case when Asian women could have been affected by the content of two stereotypes (women having poor math skills or Asians

having superior math skills), identity salience dictated which stereotype threat the individual experienced.

The goal of the current study is to examine whether identity salience affects the way Asian women perceive ambiguous prejudice as "racist" or "sexist". In this context, ambiguous prejudice is defined as a scenario in which Asian women encounter negative feedback that contains negative stereotypes that are applicable to both Asian women's race and gender, without an explicit reference to either. By examining contexts in which the stereotype content overlaps, we can better parse out how Asian women will make attributions to one or both stigmatized groups based on identity salience. We predicted that identity salience will lead to increased prejudice attributions towards the primed identity; Asian women will be more likely to perceive prejudice as sexist if their gender identity is salient, but more like to attribute prejudice to racism if their racial identity is salient. By merely heightening salience of a particular identity that is vulnerable to social identity threat, the author expected that a participant was more likely to perceive ambiguous prejudice representing rejection based on the primed identity.

Findings of this research will contribute to the gap in literature on members of multiple stigmatized groups and offer greater insight into how gender and race both influence decision making and prejudice attributions of women of color contextually and fluidly. The study design acknowledges that women of color face both racism and sexism that cannot be disaggregated. Under this insight, we should avoid taking into account the experiences of women who face prejudice without also giving attention to their race.

Approaches to Understanding Women of Colors' Experiences of Prejudice

Researchers should make a conscious effort to resist perpetuating "intersectional invisibility" by making women of color visible in their research. These individuals, who possess multiple stigmatized identities, have the unique, under-examined experience of facing both racism and sexism, not always exclusively. For women of color, prejudice against their racial or gender identity can be a habitual occurrence that significantly impacts outcomes in their life experiences. One can consider any number of high profile legal cases, such as the cases of Jean Jew or Rosalie Tung[3], to see examples of discrimination that targets marginalized individuals based on both their gender and race. Rosalie Tung, a highly appraised Asian American professor at the Wharton School of Business, was blocked from receiving tenure by her chair after she denied his sexual advances. The rationale for the rejection of the highly qualified professor stated that "The Wharton school is not interested in China related research" (Cho, 1997). In this situation both Rosalie's gender and race were discriminated against, but overlapping stereotypes about Asian women specifically led this *racialized sexual harassment*. In her analysis of this case and the gravity of its consequences, Sumi Cho concluded:

> "In light of the prevalent and converging racial and gender stereotypes of Asian Pacific American women as politically passive and sexually exotic and compliant, serious attention must be given to the problem of racialized sexual harassment revealed by the two cases discussed. On a theoretical level, new frameworks that integrate race and gender should be developed to take account of the multidimensional character of racialized sexual harassment that occurs and is challenged across races, social classes, and borders. The law's current dichotomous categorization of racial discrimination and sexual harassment as separate spheres of injury is inadequate to respond to racialized sexual harassment" (Cho, 1997).

Although there is no *one* term to address such prejudice, such discrimination is sometimes referred to as racialized sexism or gendered racism-- discrimination in which we acknowledge the unique targeting of women of color based on assumptions and stereotypes

about their race and gender identities. In another supporting example, Moradi and Subich (2003) assert from their research that the experiences of oppression faced by African American women are more closely aligned with their unique position on a matrix of social organization--a bold critique of the traditional dichotomy of racism and sexism in the experiences of women of color. This position is contrary to the additive model of double jeopardy hypothesis, which states that a person possessing two stigmatized identities will experience the sum of each distinct form of oppression. Alternatively, the interactionist model suggests that various locations of oppression (racism and sexism) intersect synergistically to create a unique positioning on the matrix, rather than exist in separate dimensions. If the interactionist model is accepted, empirically examining ambiguous prejudice scenarios serves to reflect the reality that experiences of racism and sexism may be subjectively fused by women of color.

Prejudice expectations

Past literature on social stigma from a target's perspective generally concerns how women of color have perceived discrimination against their identities and their expectations regarding such prejudice. Two main hypotheses offer rationales for how ethnic minorities and women may expect to face discrimination in relation to each other. *The ethnic prominence hypothesis* reports that women of color will expect to experience the same amount of general disadvantage as men in their ethnic group because their expectations of general discrimination are more closely linked to their perceptions of ethnic discrimination than to their perceptions of gender discrimination (Levin et. al, 2002). Alternatively, the *double jeopardy hypothesis* reports that because ethnic-minority women are targets of both gender and ethnic discrimination, they will expect to experience greater general disadvantage overall than ethnic-minority men, white women, and white men. However, both hypotheses assume that gender and racial identities of

women of color are stable across time and context, and also that discrimination against race and gender occur separately. Other findings take an "interactionist" perspective (Moradi & Subich, 2003), which supports claims that racism may qualify sexism (Gonzales et al., 2002) or that *ethgender* prejudice enhances the distress of the target (King, 2003). Members of multiple stigmatized groups must be viewed through a similar framework which recognizes that individuals must make decisions about how to interpret experiences of prejudice based on contexts in which one or both of their identities is targeted.

Prejudice from a target's perspective

Not only do we know that women of color may expect to face prejudices targeting both their gender and race, but we also know that women of color also experience prejudice towards their racial identity and gender identity differently. Remedios et al., (2012) found that Asian women perceived more racism than sexism in their environments and reported that experiences of racism were more salient to them than experiences of sexism, suggesting that Asian women are more vulnerable to experiences of race-based rather than gender-based rejection. Furthermore the women also internalized race-based rejection and felt more negative affect than in gender based rejections. Evidence also supports the hypothesis that African-American women have different reactions to racism and sexism, presenting a strong correlation between stress and attributions to racial prejudice or "ethgender" prejudice (consisting of both racism and sexism), but showing no significant correlation between *gender* prejudice and stress (King, 2003). Black women also reacted less strongly to prejudice perceived as gender motivated than ethnically motivated, but this raises the question of what factors influence how women of color decide to make prejudice attributions in different contexts.

Identity Salience and Social Identity Threat

While research has generally asserted that women of color react more negatively to and internalize prejudice that is ethnically motivated to a greater extent than prejudice that is gender-based, no one has examined whether this holds true across contexts. Identity salience has been shown to change one's experience of stereotype threat (Shih, Pittinsky & Ambady, 1999) but can priming one identity also cause an individual to make attributions to prejudice as racist or sexist depending on which identity is emphasized? Identity salience becomes important in determining how to interact appropriately towards someone as "which identity becomes most salient in a situation provides information pertinent to behavioral patterns or attitudes that might be expected within an encounter" (Wiley & Alexander, 1987). Randel (2002) used gender in an examination of group dynamics to show how the *salience* of gender rather than the mere presence of gender diversity within a group helped to explain the prevalence of conflict. If the gender or racial identity of women of color can be salient across different contexts and each identity uniquely positions the subject as a potential target, than these individuals must make multiple decisions when attributing prejudice to either facet of their identity.

After all, other findings suggest that stigmatized individuals are already vulnerable to experience "automatic" social-identity threat, which causes them to be attentionally vigilant towards cues threatening their social identity (Kaiser, Vick & Major, 2006). Making either gender or racial identity salient should then increase vigilance towards threatening cues and lead to increased attributions to prejudice in the direction of the primed identity. Priming one identity may be enough to induce a greater likelihood of social identity threat, through which members of stigmatized groups develop belief systems about being devalued and may become triggered by situational cues as they are hyper-vigilant about this devaluation (Steele et al, 2002). It is also

important to note that because attention is a limited resource, attention allocated towards cues that are threatening to social identity comes at the expense of attention that could be allocated toward other tasks (Kaiser et al., 2006). This point becomes highly pertinent when we consider that women of color can become attentionally vigilant to threats against more than one of their stigmatized social identities, and therefore risk expending more of this limited resource.

Method

Participants

Seventy-eight self-identified East and Southeast Asian/Asian American women participated for either research credit or monetary compensation of $10. Participants were both undergraduate students at Tufts University and community members aged 17 to 40 (M=20.05, SD=3.09)[4]. There were 26, 27, and 25 participants in the gender prime, race prime, and control condition respectively. South Asian women were excluded from this study because there is insufficient evidence to conclude that South and East Asian American women are targeted by similar stereotypes that are used in this methodology.

Materials

Stimuli consisted of a computer task with three different prompts and a vignette. In the gender-salience condition, the prompt read, "Write about what it is like to be a member of your gender and its significance to you". In the race-salient condition, "race" replaces gender. In the neutral condition, participants were asked to write about the events that occurred in their lives the previous day.

The next vignette instructed participants to imagine that they created an online profile on a networking website such as LinkedIn. It claimed that an employer had reviewed her profile (which includes work experience, a short bio, and a color photograph) and offered feedback

about whether they would hire the participant in their company. The feedback says: “Imagine that you have written an online profile of yourself on a networking website, such as LinkedIn. A potential employer has reviewed your profile and submitted feedback about you. The employer says 'Your work experience and skills are impressive. However, I prefer someone assertive to work in my company, and I know from experience that people like you are more submissive or passive. I’m not sure if you would be right for the leadership style we are looking for.'"

Procedure

Participants were seated at individual computer terminals and were informed by the experimenter that they would be completing two separate tasks as a part of the study examining narrative processing skills. After answering a set of questions about demographics, the participant was instructed to write her response to the prompt on the computer screen under a 4 minute time constraint. After four minutes, the computer ended the priming task and presented the vignette. In all three conditions, participants read a vignette containing a scenario in which the participant imagines experiencing prejudice. The participant then filled out a post-vignette survey that measured attributions made to sexism, racism, internal and external causes. At the completion of this task, the participant was debriefed and thanked for her time.

Measures

Prejudice attributions

Following the measures of Remedios et al. (2012), as well as Schmit and Brandscombe (2002), discrimination attributions were measured by asking all participants to rate the extent to which the employer seemed sexist (“The employer’s actions were due to gender discrimination”, M=4.06, SD=1.67; “The employer is sexist”, M=4.40, SD=4.40) and racist (“The employer is racist”, M=4.08, SD=1.689). A second item to measure race attributions was omitted due to

computer error. The gender attributions did not correlate significantly with one another, and were therefore examined separately during analyses (r(78)=-.10, p=.372).

Internal attributions

The measure of internal attributions consisted of two items: "The employer gave me negative feedback because of something about me", and "The employer gave me negative feedback because of who I am", r(78)=0.29, p = .01, M=3.98, SD=1.46).

External attributions

The measure of external attributions consisted of two items: "The employer gave ne negative feedback because of something about him" and "The employer's decisions were due to his personality", r(78) = 0.66, p <.001, M=3.78, SD=1.52).

Group Identification

Measures of racial group identification (α =.85, M=4.74, SD=1.18) and gender group identification (α =.79, M=5.12, SD=1.54) were assessed using four items each from the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992),

Results

A one-way 3(salience: race, gender, or control) between-subjects ANOVA revealed that there were no significant differences between groups on prejudice attributions towards race, F(2,75) = 2.27, p = .11 (Figure 1), or gender F(2,75) = .120, p=.89 (item 1); F(2,75) = .667, p=.52 (item 2) (Figure 2). Although non-significant, the mean attribution to racism was marginally higher in the race-salient group (M=4.48, SD=1.76) than the gender-salient(M=4.19, SD =1.41) and control (M=3.52, SD=1.78) groups. The race-salient, gender-salient and control groups did not differ significantly on internal attributions (F(2,75)=1.49, p = .23, or external attributions, F(2,75)=.49, p =.618 (Figure 2). There was also no significant effect of identity

salience condition on gender group identification, $F(2,74)=.53$, $p=.60$, or ethnic group identification, $F(2,74)=.12$, $p=.89$ (Figure 3).

Discussion

The race salient, gender salient, and neutral groups did not significantly differ on race or gender prejudice attributions. The results show that identity salience had no effect on the participants' self-reported prejudice attributions to racism or sexism; participants were equally likely to think the employer seemed racist or sexist across conditions. These results did not support the study hypothesis. However, the mean attributions towards racism were somewhat higher in the race-salient condition than the gender-salient or control conditions. Perhaps a larger statistical sample would clarify this effect. One explanation is that identity salience, despite support from the literature, has no effect on perceptions of prejudices; alternatively, the priming task for creating identity salience may have failed to actually induce identity salience despite its validated effectiveness on biracial samples (Chiao et. al., 2006).

Identity salience also had no significant effect on either the internal or external attributions made by participants in any condition. If the manipulation was effective, we would expect to find a higher mean internalization of the negative feedback in the race-salient group than the gender-salient and neutral condition. Our non-significant finding is somewhat inconsistent with past research that shows that Asian women internalize racist prejudice more than sexist prejudice (Remedios et. al., 2012). If priming racial identity even on an implicit level appears to cause increased internalization by the participants across otherwise identical conditions, then the priming method should have replicated this finding. An improvement to this portion of the study design would include a manipulation check to measure implicit consciousness of the primed identity. A word stem completion task consisting of gender and race

related words would offer direct feedback to determine if the identity prime heightened the participants' attention or consciousness towards race or gender related cues as intended.

An alternative possibility is that identity salience, which brings a heightened consciousness to the primed identity, is really a method that attempts to temporarily manipulate the level of group identification of the primed identity. Group identification also acts as a moderator of the effect of ambiguity of a perpetrator's motives on perceptions of prejudice. A high ethnic identification is positively associated with heightened sensitivity to race-related related information, and particularly prejudice that is subtle or ambiguous (Operario & Fiske, 2001). If group identification is a stable trait, then manipulating identity salience failed to actually change group identification and produce the predicted outcome. This means that the current study's definition of identity salience lacked construct validity. Although this was not the initial intention of the study, future studies may wish to examine the relationship between identity salience and group identification.

Future studies should continue to expand on this topic and the rationales behind the research questions. While identity salience was a variable manipulated in the lab, it raises the question of whether women of color are motivated to view themselves in terms of one identity or another outside of the lab--thereby invoking salience and sensitivity to social identity threat without controlled manipulation. For example, identity salience that would prime a temporary raise in group identification might enable a target to use a discounting strategy in order to protect her self-esteem by dismissing negative feedback and attributing it against the relevant social identity (Crocker & Major, 1989). On some level, however, targets of prejudice do internalize negative feedback even when it is perceived as prejudice. Since there is a difference in the impact of ethnically motivated and gender motivated prejudice on targets, a woman of color

could potentially reduce the harmful internalization of prejudice by viewing it as targeting her gender identity as opposed to her racial identity. Similarly, the internalization and effects on self-esteem are not limited to negative feedback: (Crocker et al., 1991) showed that Blacks suffered a decrease in self-esteem when their racial identity appeared to play a part in positive feedback. Cheryan & Bodenhausen (2000) also found that inducing positive stereotype consciousness in Asians on a diagnostic math task actually worsened performance. I am not suggesting women lie to themselves about being targets of serious bias, but I am arguing that the way women make decisions about how to attribute prejudice may also be influenced by motivation to avoid internalization of the more harmful discrimination. In our everyday environments, identity salience can then be the result of a heightened consciousness or an avoidance of an identity for those with multiple stigmatized identities.

According to Kaiser and Miller (2001; 2003), oppressed group members tend to minimize their experience of oppression rather than exaggerate it. In that sense, the low prejudice attributions recorded by the participants were standard, but the stigma of reporting discrimination could dilute the extent of the attributions. New experimental designs may take into account alternative ways to measure prejudice attributions in lieu of self-report.

Future studies should also use a different demographic pool to examine if the predicted results of this study could be reproduced with Black or Latina women. Asian women were chosen for this study due to demographic availability and because there is overlap between stereotype content about women and Asians, which helped create ambiguous prejudice scenarios. An expansion of demographics in the participant samples, a manipulation check, and alternative priming tasks would all serve to improve this experimental design and validate the results of this study.

Although our hypothesis was not supported by the data, this study design answers the call for a more integrative perspective on the experience of minority women who face both sexism and racism. Not until recently have psychologists focused on a genuine understanding of the psychological effects of social stigma (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Whereas research on race and gender are usually regarded as separate bodies of research, more must be done to hold each concomitantly. Research questions centering the experience of women of color through an "interactionist" lens should continue to a priority, not a side note or omission, in the field of social psychology and stigma.

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Footnotes

[1] This author acknowledges that race, as a socially constructed category to used to disadvantage subordinate groups, is not synonymous with ethnicity. This study uses race as a variable of interest. The terms race and ethnicity will only be used interchangeably to reflect the language used by previous authors in reference to specific study conclusions.

[2] This term is more consistently referred to as "minority women" in literature on social stigma

[3] Rosalie Tung and Jean Jew represent two court cases in which Asian American female professors were the target of racial discrimination combined with sexual harassment (Cho, 1997)

[4] One participant was excluded from the reported mean age due to entering a value of 1

Figures

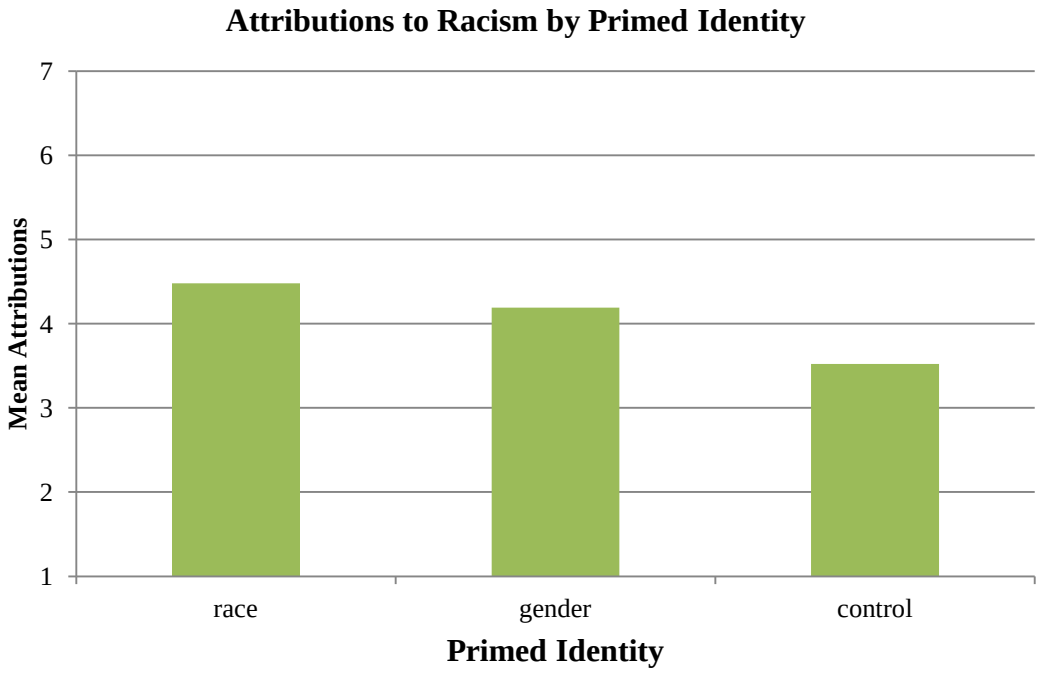

Figure 1. p > .05

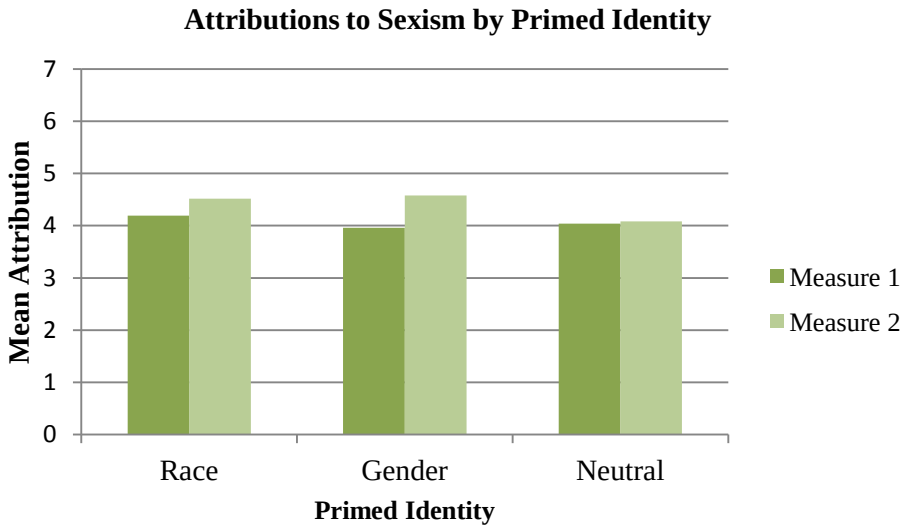

Figure 2. p > .05

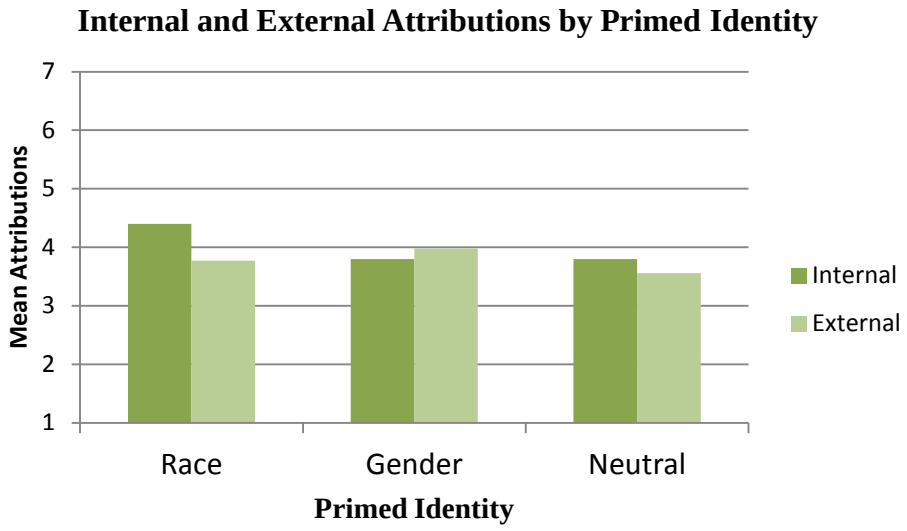

Figure 3. $p > .05$

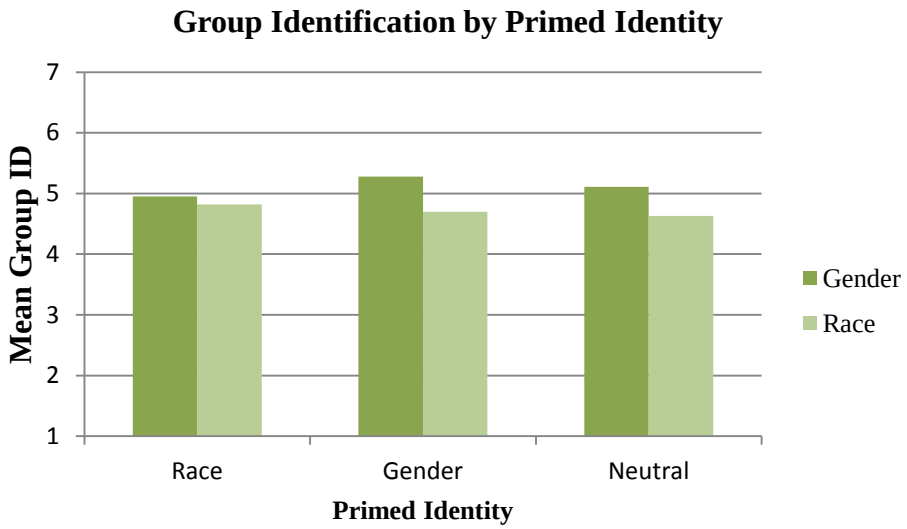

Figure 4. $p > .05$