Perception is in The Eye of the Beholder: 
Examining How Contact Shapes Perceptions of Racial Threat

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Introduction

When it comes to Black-Latino relations, whether, and to what extent, these two groups interact with each other, can have a major impact on the perceptions they hold about each other. Perceptions, more than reality, are used by individuals to inform them about other racial groups and how they may relate to one another. In other words, when individuals think about other racial groups, the perceptions they hold about another group can dictate the attitudes they hold toward outsiders, the likelihood that they will want to interact with individuals from the other group, the extent to which they believe the presence of the other group is a threat to their own group, and even policy preferences that may affect that outside group. For this paper, I will argue that contact can impact and shape the perceptions individuals have of other racial groups. While external forces such as media and political rhetoric, can produce blanket negative perceptions groups hold about one another, contact can either reinforce or diminish those negative perceptions.

There are four particular aspects of contact and the underlying literature that I will focus on: 1.) This discussion will focus on contact between two marginalized groups: African Americans and Latinos. The vast majority of the literature on contact deals with the effects of contact on white attitudes (Dixon 2006; Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004; Pettigrew 1998; Allport 1979, Blalock 1967). In other words, how dominant groups’ attitudes change once they interact with different marginalized groups. 2.) I argue that the amount of contact with ones own group can inform the effects of out-group contact. For example, a Latino individual who has a large number of Latino friends but only has one or two African American friends can be greatly influenced by his larger in-group relationships. If the majority of those Latino friends have positive or neutral perceptions of African Americans, then the individual’s propinquity with his
African American friends can diminish any previous negative perceptions. If the Latino friends, however, have negative perceptions of African Americans, this may cause the positive effects of the contact to take longer or not have an effect on group perceptions at all. 3.) As various other scholars have noted, the type and quality of contact also matters (Dovidio et al. 2003; Forbes 1997; Pettigrew 1998). While some individuals choose to maintain close relationships with people from other racial groups, others may find themselves obligated to interact with individuals of an out-group. I will refer to these two processes as, voluntary and involuntary contact, respectively. Finally, as previously mentioned, perceptions can also be used as information shortcuts for various forms of political behavior, such as voting. I hypothesize that perceptions of racial threat have a strong influence on Blacks and Latinos policy preferences, especially for issues they believe will mostly affect the other group. Therefore, it is important to understand the extent to which contact can either, increased or help decrease, negative out-group perceptions.

In essence, I argue that contact does have an effect on our initial perceptions of other racial groups. The extent to which that contact matters, also depends on other factors such as the type of contact they have with outside groups (voluntary or involuntary), as well as the type of contact they have with their own racial group. While there are various types of perceptions that can have an impact on intergroup relations, I will focus on perceptions of racial threat and its potential impact on policy preferences.

**Background**

To start, it is important to outline the relationship between Blacks and Latinos in the literature. For the most part, scholars have maintained a focus on the notion of scarce resources
and conflict between these two communities to discuss the social and political implications of their social locations. Analyzing the different interactions that exist between African Americans and Latinos can help explain how groups that have various similarities (i.e., low socioeconomic status and disproportionate rates of incarceration and police brutality\(^1\)) can end up viewing each other as enemies instead of allies.

At the other end of the spectrum are those scholars who believe that, in fact, conflict between Blacks and Latinos does not exist and that both the media and scholars have overemphasized any animosity between the two groups (Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Barreto and Sanchez 2007). In a study on the extent to which members of different racial groups view other groups as threats to their political and economic well-being, Matt Barreto and Gabriel Sanchez find that African Americans are not inclined to perceive Latinos as a political and economic threat any more than they do Whites or Asians. Specifically, Barreto and Sanchez find that African Americans are more likely to believe that Asians are an economic threat, while Latinos view other Latinos to be their greatest competitors in the job market. These findings lead Barreto and Sanchez to conclude that there is no real competition between the two groups. However, the authors make a strict assumption that political and economic competition are the only factors that would lead to conflict, thereby conflating competition and conflict. Clearly, other factors, such as negative perceptions, can still have an effect on the relationship between African Americans and Latinos.

Similarly, survey data used to explain Black and Latino relations have led scholars to conclude that tension does not exist between Blacks and Latinos since the evidence points to the

fact that the majority of African Americans do not see Latinos as an immediate threat (Sawyer et al. 2007). Studies using the 2007 Los Angeles County survey show that African Americans believe that the top three problems they are generally faced with are 1) unemployment (20.7 percent), 2) education (20.7 percent), and 3) race relations/discrimination (12.4 percent). Because none of the answers included immigration, researchers conclude that they do not perceive Latinos or immigration as a threat or as having a negative impact on their lives.

However, the authors fail to mention that the percentage of individuals who believed immigration was an important factor increased when asked what they believed were the three most important problems facing Los Angeles, specifically. According to the data, 10 percent of respondents believed that immigration was Los Angeles’ number one problem. This came second only to crime, which 14 percent of people believed was the number one problem. The fact that immigration is a salient issue to African Americans in the local arena should not be ignored.

More importantly, while on the surface it may seem like African Americans who answered the survey were not directly concerned with Latinos or immigration, it can also be argued that, if not all three (unemployment, education and race relations/discrimination), some of the variables mentioned can easily be conflated with immigration. For instance, a concern for unemployment is not mutually exclusive from concerns on immigration or immigrants. It is possible to perceive the lack of available jobs as related to the influx of Latino immigrants into the community. A similar argument can be developed with education, since it has also been argued that educational resources for African Americans diminish when a high concentration of Latino students are also in the same school district. Meier and Stewart (1991) argue that education can be seen as a zero-sum game, where an increase in African American students,
teachers and administrators leads to a decrease in the number of Latino students, teachers and administrators, and vice versa.

At the same time, findings from the Black Youth Project (2007, P.I Cathy J. Cohen) show that when specifically asked about immigration, 48 percent of African American youth believe that “the government treats most immigrants better than it treats most Blacks in this country.”\(^2\) Clearly, it is impossible to conclude that African Americans are not concerned with Latino immigration/immigrants simply because one survey was not able to pick up on such a variable.

Undoubtedly, understanding race relations is a difficult task. When it comes to Black and Latino relations it is impossible to say that one argument is better suited to understanding all of the nuances that entail such a relationship. Those who argue that a sense of competition does not actually exist among Blacks and Latinos fail to acknowledge the existence of tension between the two at all—painting a picture of race relations between Blacks and Latinos as generally positive and/or unproblematic, and sweeping under the rug (or dismissing as misrepresentation) those incidents that challenge this viewpoint.

If media and political elites are able to convince African Americans that Latinos are encroaching on resources and opportunities to which they are entitled to, particularly when Latinos are racialized and defined as “illegal immigrants,” then African Americans concerns about losing material resources to Latinos are embedded in a fear of being overlooked as citizens in favor of those who do not belong. Therefore, African Americans and Latinos’ political opinions can potentially be influenced in ways that make Blacks and Latinos appear to be in direct opposition to each other.

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\(^2\) While it may appear that the question is asking a broad question of immigration, a presentation of the findings to the community at the Chicago Urban League in October of 2007 demonstrates how conflated the term immigration has become to “Latino.” While discussing the findings on this particular question, various students’ parents and panelists continually referenced Latino immigrants and Spanish speaking bilingual programs as major problems for African Americans in the community and at schools.
In order to understand the shape of African American and Latino relations, we cannot just look at the competition for material resources between the two groups—we must also understand what sort of discourses contextualize those moments of apparent threat and conflict. In politics, voters are likely to believe that their social and economic fates are linked to the conditions of their racial group as a whole (Dawson 1994). Regardless of the real conditions, if individuals perceive that the political fate of their racial group is being threatened by an out-group, they will behave in accordance to what they believe is most beneficial to their own group. That is why it is important to understand not only whether the beliefs are accurate or not, but if members of distinct racial groups perceive those threats to be true.

**Theoretical Framework**

Contact theorists are broken into two different camps; those who argue that an increase in day-to-day interactions with out-groups can help breed harmony among different racial groups (Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004, McLaren 2003, Yancey 1999, Powers and Ellison 1995), and those who believe that, under certain conditions, contact can actually increase prejudice (Pettigrew 1998; Oliver and Wong 2003). What all of these scholars have in common however, is their belief that racial threat itself is a distinct process to creating prejudices between two racial groups. In other words, in order to explain the impact of prejudice on race relations, some scholars analyze racial threat theories, while others use contact theories. What I argue is that perceptions of racial threat can be shaped by the various forms of contact I outlined above. Contact and Racial Threat are not two separate processes, but rather, they are a function of each other.
In order to see the political structures that are in place between different racial groups there are two terms that are essential for a discussion on race relations: racial threat and power. In other words, racial threat and power get at a deeper understanding of how two groups can develop perceptions of each other that will then dictate their behavior towards one another in the social and political realms. Specifically, political scientists have tried to make sense of race relations and its impact on various forms of political behavior (Hopkins 2010; Tolbert and Grummel 2003; Campbell et al. 2006; Gay 2006; Tolbert 2003; Hajnal and Baldassare 2001; Cain et al. 2000; Bobo 1999).

On the one hand, scholars who discuss multiracial interactions in terms of racial threat theories argue that threat is caused by group animosity (Blalock 1967; Meier and Stewart 1991; Enos 2009). Within this line of inquiry, some scholars make a case for the development of coalitions between Latinos and Whites, or Blacks and Whites (Kaufmann 2001; McClain 2004; Vaca 2004). On the other hand, researches have countered racial threat arguments by providing evidence that increased contact with out-groups lead in-groups to see their struggles as the same, therefore decreasing their sense of out-group threat (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998). Still other scholars argue that racial tensions between African Americans and Latinos are not common and have simply been exaggerated by scholars and the media (Barreto and Sanchez 2007). I contend that both racial threat and contact theories ignore the driving forces that create positive or negative perceptions among members of one group toward those of another. Similarly, scholars who argue that negative perceptions are not commonplace between African Americans and Latinos also ignore the potential factors that can produce tension between individuals in both racial groups.
Immigrant Racial Threat

In an effort to unpack one realm from which racial groups can obtain the information necessary to develop perceptions of other racial groups, I introduce *immigrant racial threat* as a conceptual tool that identifies how anti-immigrant rhetoric, along with notions of citizenship status, are used to position Blacks and Latinos against each other.

It is precisely this idea of racial threat that help push forward an understanding of how power can be used between oppressed groups. According to V.O. Keys work on the South, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949), racial threat is “about the loss of political power” (657). Moreover, when groups feel that their political power is threatened by the presence of another group, they are likely to change their political behavior in order to maintain the status quo. It is imperative that we understand how racial groups, that are oppressed and dominated differently, within a structure of white supremacy, react to the presence of each other. This is particularly important, since marginalized racial groups in inner cities tend to be concentrated together, and located in areas with minimal resources and away from white residents. Moreover, when we acknowledge how media sources and political elites contribute to the discourse on how the bodily presence of one group is a racial threat to another, then we have located a point in the social structure of race relations where oppression and domination reproduce negative perceptions of distinct racial groups.

The racial threat literature tends to use a zero-sum model in its discussions of material resources such as jobs, housing, and educational benefits (Blalock 1967; Blumer 1958). For example, since both Blacks and Latinos have a high percentage of individuals that fall below the poverty line, job obtainment is a major concern for both groups. Under the zero-sum analysis, a job for an individual of one group (Latino or African American) means the loss of a position for
an individual in the other group. This argument, however, does not take into consideration other factors that would counteract the effects of a zero-sum environment. As noted above, scholars have discovered, Latinos and African Americans are not actually working within the same job sectors (Barreto and Sanchez 2007; Pastor 2014). Moreover, in many situations, the presence of one group actually improves the social condition of the others. As Pastor states,

“Economists generally agree that immigrants provide both labor complements and substitutes and that the complementary effect – enhancing the U.S – born labor market and keeping industries alive in the United States – dominates, yielding employment and income gains for the native-born” (47)

In one particular study conducted by Ong and Valenzuela (1996), they found that increases in immigration patterns actually increased the availability of jobs in the public sector – the sector within the job market in which African Americans are most concentrated (49). Other studies suggest that an increase in Latino immigration actually has the most negative effects on other Latino immigrants, since new arrivals tend to join a job sector established by earlier Latino immigrants (Barreto and Sanchez 2007). Since employment competition between Blacks and Latinos is more perception than true, it is important that our discussions of these two groups move away from the scarce resources paradigms and into an analysis of how Blacks and Latinos perceive each other as competition, when that may not be the case entirely.

There are also those scholars that discuss the importance of building political alliances in an effort to obtain “power” and material resources for all of the racial groups involved (Kaufmann 2001; Dzidzienyo and Oboler 2005; Sawyer 2005; McClain et al. 2006; Zamora 2011). Some argue it is in the interest of the different racial groups to form political alliances with Whites (Kaufmann 2001), suggesting that the greatest benefit for Blacks, Latinos or Asians can only be achieved when they align with White Americans, rather than each other. This argument, however, fails to recognize that Blacks and Latinos can conceptualize amicable
relationships that fight for the expansion of resources for both groups. While it is important to
analyze and discuss how material resources affect Black and Latino relations, the story does not
end there. The belief that groups are in competition for resources is only one piece of the puzzle
of race relations.

Public Opinion and Political Behavior

It is important to acknowledge that core beliefs and values play a central role in
intergroup relations, regardless of elite cues or media influences (Abrams and Hogg 2006;
Huddy 2004; Turner and Reynolds 2001; Jost and Major 2001; Tajfel and Turner 1979). I argue
that while the messages political elites produce are important in influencing public opinion,
individuals already hold strong beliefs and perceptions about other racial and ethnic groups
(Dawson 2001; Harris-Lacewell 2004). When political elites tap into the beliefs and values of
constituents, public opinions on issues relating to or about other racial groups are simply
highlighted and appear more significant than they truly are. More importantly, since the media
serves as the intervening source that primes and frames information, it is through the distribution
of elite cues in the media that public opinion on out-groups is highlighted.

This same relationship between political elites, media, and political attitudes holds true
when it comes to Black and Latino relations. Black and Latino residents do not always need to be
informed about their perceptions of one another. To some degree, the process of public opinion
and political attitude formation is well underway due to the simple fact that Black interaction
with Latinos informs their perception of Latinos (even when there is geographic segregation,
there are places like job sites, where individuals have to interact involuntarily). Nonetheless,
political leaders are still in positions to build linkages that unify the Latino and African
American communities (Hattam 2007). They have the ability to communicate to community members what the important issues are and they have the ability to influence the reactions of individuals to certain policies depending on how they frame it. The position held by political actors allows them to have an influence on the perceptions these two groups have of each other and how they relate to issues in their communities. If they can get the African Americans and Latinos to perceive greater commonality, the likelihood of them forming political alliances increases.

**NEXT STEPS:**

Other than filling in the gaps that we discuss in the workshop, I want to outline some of the ideas I have about moving forward with the project.

- Outlining the perceived racial threat I believe Latinos feel towards African Americans
- Linking the discussion between perceptions and its implications on policy preferences
- Defining the methods and data sources
REFERENCES


