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Jessica D. Remedios, Alison L. Chasteen & Elvina Oey

University of Toronto

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“Unskilled” Workers: Social Skills Stereotypes Affect Evaluations of Biracial Job Applicants

Jessica D. Remedios, Alison L. Chasteen, and Elvina Oey
University of Toronto

Why do Black/White workers earn wages similar to Black workers ($6.30 less per hour than White workers), despite encountering less negative, anti-Black sentiment from others? We propose that Black/White workers must contend with stereotypes suggesting that biracial people are socially unskilled. In the present study we observed that, regardless of whether job candidates were rejected for external reasons (interviewer prejudice) or whether candidates acted in undesirable ways (claimed discrimination), participants rated Black/White applicants as less socially skilled and as more likely to have demonstrated poor interview skills than Black applicants. Implications for biases against hiring biracial people are discussed.

For the United States to meet the competitive demands of modern industry, it is crucial that employers empower both White and minority employees to be productive and successful in the workplace. Nevertheless, wage discrepancies between White and minority workers continue to exist (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Researchers have identified social factors, such as race-based discrimination, as contributing to these income disparities (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). Since 2000, when Americans were first able to identify with multiple racial groups on the census, wage discrepancies have also been found to exist between White and biracial Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Specifically, census data reveal that biracial men of Black and White racial heritages (i.e., Black/White) report earning, on average, $6.30 less per hour than White men. This wage gap is statistically similar to the wage gap dividing White and Black male workers, and research shows that Black/White Americans report incomes commensurate with Black Americans (Fairlie, 2009).

It is not the case, however, that Black/White and Black people encounter equal amounts of anti-Black sentiment. Indeed, research shows that people expect Black/White individuals to have lighter skin than individuals described as having only Black ancestry (Sanchez, Good, & Chavez, 2011). Light-skinned people, furthermore, are less likely than their dark-skinned counterparts to be perceived in terms of negative Black stereotypes (Maddox, 2004; Maddox & Gray, 2002). Given, then, that Black/White Americans may escape some of the negative, anti-Black sentiments that Black Americans face daily, how can research explain census data showing that Black/White and Black workers earn similarly low wages?

According to Fairlie (2009), the assumption that Black/White people are treated less favorably than White people, but more favorably than Black people, implies that Black/White workers should earn significantly more than Black workers. Census data do not support this prediction and show, instead, that Black and Black/White workers earn similar wages. We propose that, despite facing less anti-Black stereotyping than monoracial Black people, Black/White workers encounter prejudice based on biracial stereotypes that Black people do not face and that contribute to the disparate treatment of White and Black/White individuals. Perceivers stereotypically assume that biracial people are socially awkward and maladjusted (Chelsey & Wagner, 2003; Jackman, Wagner, & Johnson, 2001; Sanchez & Bonam, 2009) because they are rejected by both majority and minority groups in society (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Such stereotypical inferences likely affect how Black/White people are perceived in workplace environments.

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1This document did not report analyses including female workers. Correspondence should be sent to Jessica D. Remedios, Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, 100 St. George Street, Toronto, ON M5S 3G3, Canada. E-mail: jessica.remedios@utoronto.ca
and particularly in interview settings, given that initial rapport-building predicts hiring decisions and employment outcomes (Barrick, Swider, & Stewart, 2010).

**STEREOTYPES ABOUT BIRACIAL PEOPLE**

Do stereotypes about poor social skills characterize perceptions of Black/White job applicants? In other words, are perceivers more likely to infer that a job applicant has poor social skills if the applicant is Black/White as opposed to Black? Research has yet to examine this possibility despite evidence that widespread immigration and the increased acceptability of interracial relationships has resulted in a rising number of Americans who identify themselves as mixed-race (Shih & Sanchez, 2009). Indeed, biracial people are currently recognized as one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States (Shih & Sanchez, 2009) and are projected to account for approximately 21% of the American population by the year 2050 (Smith & Edmonston, 1997). We address this gap in the literature in the current article by examining individuals’ perceptions of biracial job applicants. Using procedures developed by Kaiser and Miller (2003) to study attitudes toward job candidates, we test whether Black/White candidates are perceived as less sociable than Black candidates during an ostensibly genuine interview process. We hypothesize that people perceive Black/White applicants as socially unskilled primarily because of applicants’ biracial status, above and beyond any effects that undesirable actions (such as claiming discrimination) may have on applicants’ perceived sociability.

As we mentioned previously, past research suggests that Black/White people experience less anti-Black prejudice than their Black counterparts. According to the Black Ancestry Prototype model, Black/White people are viewed as relatively poor matches with Black prototypes in terms of their appearances, traits, and experiences (Sanchez et al., 2011). In support of this model, research shows that as Black/White targets are described to have more Black ancestry (i.e., described as 25% vs. 50% vs. 75% Black), they are perceived to better align with Black prototypes. Increased Black ancestry relates to increased perceptions of Black/White targets as having dark skin, possessing stereotypically Black traits (i.e., athleticism), and encountering more stereotypically “Black” experiences (i.e., discrimination; Sanchez et al., 2011). Furthermore, minorities whose physical appearances are less phenotypically prototypical of their racial groups tend to be treated more positively by social perceivers (Maddox, 2004; Maddox & Gray, 2002; Wilkins, Kaiser, & Rieck, 2010).

As a result of their biracial status, however, Black/White people are targeted by negative stereotypes about mixed-race individuals. According to past research, perceivers often infer that mixed-race individuals are awkward in social situations, are rejected by majority and minority group members, and will experience difficulties in adjustment during adulthood (Chelsey & Wagner, 2003; Jackman et al., 2001). To examine whether these attitudes reflect objective differences in adjustment between biracial and monoracial individuals, Shih and Sanchez (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of existing research. The authors concluded that although biracial individuals experience unique developmental challenges with which monoracial people do not have to contend, biracial people tend to be just as well adjusted as their monoracial peers. Nevertheless, Sanchez and Bonam (2009) discovered that negative attitudes continue to dominate general perceptions of biracial individuals. The authors asked undergraduate students to evaluate candidates for a minority scholarship. All of the target candidates were described as excellent students; however, the researchers manipulated whether the candidates were revealed to be Whites, monoracial minorities, or biracials. The authors discovered that both Black/White and East Asian/White candidates were judged as less worthy of receiving the minority scholarship than were Black and East Asian candidates, respectively. Sanchez and Bonam (2009) also found that participants perceived biracial candidates as less warm and sociable than their monoracial minority counterparts and that these perceptions partially explained ratings of low scholarship worthiness. Therefore, although past research suggests that both Blacks (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) and Black/Whites (Chelsey & Wagner, 2003; Jackman et al., 2001) are perceived as cold, the previous study directly compared these groups and showed that Black/White people are judged less positively than Black people. These findings support our prediction that Black/White job applicants will be viewed less as less sociable than Black job applicants.

**WHEN AND HOW DO BIRACIAL STEREOTYPES BIAS PERCEPTIONS?**

It is also important to distinguish between the content of Black and biracial stereotypes in order to understand why Black/White job candidates should be disadvantaged relative to Black job candidates during interviews. Black people tend to be stereotyped, specifically, as hostile and aggressive (Devine, 1989), whereas biracial people tend to be stereotyped as awkward, shy, and anxious (Chelsey & Wagner, 2003; Jackman et al., 2001). Stereotypes about poor social skills may be particularly likely to bias interviewers’ perceptions and lead to negative evaluations of candidates because candidates’ interpersonal styles (e.g., ability to comfortably make
“small talk”) factor heavily in employers’ hiring decisions (Barrick et al., 2010). We expect that observers are more likely to infer that biracial job applicants, as compared to monoracial minority job applicants, exhibit awkward social behavior during interviews. Whereas social awkwardness is perceived as highly relevant to interview performance (Barrick et al., 2010), it is unlikely that perceivers view job interviews as contexts in which applicants are likely to express hostility and aggression. Black stereotypes, in contrast, may be more likely to bias perceivers’ reactions to Black targets in highly threatening contexts in which targets are apt to aggress against perceivers (e.g., Correll et al., 2007).

Social skills stereotypes may bias observers’ perceptions of rejected job applicants, leading people to assume that rejected biracial applicants were not hired because of their poor interview skills. There are circumstances, of course, under which minorities are clearly denied employment for reasons other than their objective interpersonal and professional skills. Racial minorities face varying degrees of discrimination in work environments, ranging from obvious to more subtle. This source of unequal treatment causes minorities to lose out on professional opportunities regardless of their qualifications and skills (Clark et al., 1999; Dion, 2002). According to Kaiser and Miller (2001, 2003), whose primary goal was to examine reactions to Black discrimination claimants, observers are generally insensitive to the amount of prejudice faced by Black job applicants who claim to have been discriminated against. The authors discovered that participants perceive discrimination claimants as troublemakers even when they are clearly rejected because of their race (Kaiser & Miller, 2003). Likewise, we reasoned that if observers strongly believe that biracial individuals’ interpersonal skills contribute to their inabilities to obtain employment, this belief should persist even when biracial job candidates face certain prejudice and claim to have been discriminated against.

STUDY OVERVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

The goal of the present study was to investigate whether stereotypes about poor social skills characterize perceivers’ impressions of biracial job applicants. We were interested, in particular, in whether such stereotypes bias perceptions of biracial applicants when it is clear that prejudice motivated the interviewer to render an unfavorable hiring decision. We compared perceivers’ perceptions of a Black and a Black/White job applicant who faced either a certain (high) or an ambiguous (low) amount of prejudice from a White interviewer. Job applicants, in addition, either acknowledged that they were not hired because of their own interview skills or claimed that discrimination had prevented them from obtaining the position. The main dependent variables of interest were participants’ ratings of how sociable the applicant seemed, as well as participants’ opinions regarding why the applicant was not hired.

We hypothesized that (a) participants would perceive the Black/White candidate as less sociable than the Black candidate, reflecting general stereotypes that mixed-race people are socially unskilled, and (b) participants evaluating a Black/White candidate would be more likely than those evaluating a Black candidate to assume that the candidate was not hired because of his poor interview skills. We expected these effects to be robust, furthermore, and to occur regardless of whether the applicants faced certain prejudice or claimed to have been discriminated against.

METHOD

Participants and Design

Participants were 162 undergraduate students (110 female, 52 male) enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Toronto who took part in the experiment for partial course credit. The majority of the participants were East and Southeast Asian (n = 70) and White (n = 50). Of the remaining participants, 15 were South Asian, 11 were Middle Eastern, 8 were Black, 3 were Latin American, and 2 were Pacific Islanders. Three participants (1.9%) did not specify their race. The participants’ average age was 18.90 years (SD = 1.70). The experiment adopted a 2 (race of candidate: Black or Black/White) × 2 (interviewer prejudice: low or high) × 2 (candidate attribution: interview skills or discrimination) between-subjects design.

Procedure

Participants completed the experiment in groups of up to four people while seated at private computer terminals. At the beginning of the session, the experimenter informed participants that their task would be to evaluate an employment interview process. After providing informed consent, participants viewed an introduction screen explaining that a portfolio describing an actual job interview process would be selected at random and that they would be asked questions about this portfolio after reading the provided information (Kaiser & Miller, 2003).

All of the participants first read a job description for a retail sales manager position that outlined qualifications for the position as well as information about salary and benefits. Next, participants read about the person who conducted the job interview. As in Kaiser and Miller (2003), participants learned about the interviewer’s professional background and his appearance (blond hair
and fair skin, indicating that he was White) as well as the questions he asked during the interview. Participants read, for example, that the interviewer asked the applicant to describe his relevant work experience and discuss how it prepared him for the position. We did not provide participants with the applicant’s answers to the interview questions. Participants also read a description of the room in which the interview was conducted.

The participants then viewed information about the job candidate, including his qualifications for the position. The candidate’s previous work experience was matched to the requirements detailed in the job description, and his application was noted as being “above average” in overall quality. Instead of including a photograph of the job candidate as in Kaiser and Miller (2003), we included a demographic questionnaire that had been ostensibly filled out by the candidate. The form, which had been completed on paper, scanned, and inserted into the computer program as an image, listed several ethnic categories. The category selected by the candidate constituted our manipulation of candidate race. The form revealed that the candidate had checked either the “Black” or “Multiracial/Mixed-Race” category to describe himself. In the latter case, the candidate further specified, in handwriting, that he was Black/White.

Next, participants reviewed the interviewer’s hiring decision and comments and learned that the candidate was not offered the job. The interviewer’s explanation for this decision was manipulated to reflect varying levels of prejudice. We retained Kaiser and Miller’s (2003) low-prejudice condition; however, we created our own high-prejudice condition that included less transparently prejudiced remarks than in the original study (see materials). Given that modern forms of bias are often subtle (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), presenting less overtly prejudiced interviewer comments to participants increased the ecological validity of the manipulation. Participants then learned about the job candidate’s attribution for why he was rejected by the interviewer and completed questions about the candidate, the interviewer, and the interview process. Finally, the experimenter debriefed participants, described the true nature of the study, and thanked them for participating.

Materials

**Interviewer prejudice manipulation.** Participants in the low-prejudice condition viewed the following comments purportedly made by the interviewer:

I do not recommend that the company hire this applicant. Although the candidate had pretty good credentials, I decided to offer the job to another candidate who seemed to have more potential to successfully manage the retail sales team.

In the high-prejudice condition, participants viewed the following interviewer comments:

I do not recommend that the company hire this applicant. Although the candidate had pretty good credentials, I decided to offer the job to another candidate who seemed to have more potential to successfully manage the retail sales team. Recently I’ve had bad experiences with people from this group. Although some people like him work out well, it’s still a big financial risk. It takes a lot of effort to train a new manager, and I’m not willing to invest that time into someone unless I’m certain that they will succeed.

**Candidate attribution manipulation.** Information about the candidate’s attribution was conveyed through a survey completed by the job candidate about the interview process. The candidate rated the extent to which six possible factors, including discrimination and his personal interview skills, affected the hiring decision. The attribution scales ranged from 0 (not at all) to 10 (very much). The candidate rated only one factor as the main reason for his rejection; some of the participants saw that the candidate rated his interview skills, and some saw that he rated discrimination as highly responsible (i.e., 8). All other factors were rated by the candidate as not responsible (i.e., 1 or 2) for his failure to obtain the position.

**Manipulation checks.** To examine the effectiveness of our prejudice manipulation, we asked participants to rate the extent to which they believed that the interviewer was racist. We also asked participants whether the candidate attributed his failure to get the job to discrimination or to his interview skills. These items assessed participants’ sensitivity to the attribution manipulation. All ratings were made on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

**Ratings of the job candidate.** All ratings of the job candidate were made on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Participants were asked to provide their own opinions regarding why the candidate was not hired by rating: “In your opinion, to what extent was the quality of the job candidate’s interviewing skills responsible for the decision not to hire him?” ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.61$). We also asked participants to rate the extent to which the job candidate was sociable (i.e., the job candidate seems sociable, likeable, easy to get along with, considerate, and good to have as a friend; $z = .70$, $M = 4.50$, $SD = .78$). Following the measures administered by Kaiser and Miller (2003), we asked participants to rate the extent to which the job candidate was a troublemaker (i.e., the job candidate seems hypersensitive, like a complainer, irritating, like
a troublemaker, and argumentative; $z = .75, M = 3.34, SD = .98$). Critically, we did not expect perceptions of the Black/White and Black candidates to differ with respect to troublemaker evaluations. Instead, based on Kaiser and Miller’s (2001, 2003) findings, we predicted that all discrimination claimants, regardless of their race, would be perceived as troublemakers. We included this measure in order to replicate past research and to establish sociability as the critical dimension on which perceptions of biracial and monoracial targets differ.

**RESULTS**

In all of the analyses reported next, we conducted 2 (race of candidate: Black or Black/White) × 2 (interviewer prejudice: low or high) × 2 (candidate attribution: interview skills or discrimination) analyses of variance to examine our research questions.

**Manipulation Checks**

**Interviewer prejudice manipulation check.** The results revealed a significant main effect of interviewer prejudice on participants’ ratings of the extent to which the interviewer seemed racist, $F(1, 154) = 8.40, p = .004, \eta^2_p = .05$. Participants in the high-prejudice condition ($M = 5.22, SD = 1.63$) rated the interviewer as more racist than participants in the low-prejudice condition ($M = 4.46, SD = 1.72$), indicating that our manipulation was successful in establishing that the job candidates faced different amounts of prejudice. We also found a significant main effect of candidate attribution, $F(1, 154) = 7.41, p = .007, \eta^2_p = .05$. Participants in the discrimination attribution condition believed more strongly that the candidate had attributed his failure to get the job to his interview skills ($M = 5.01, SD = 2.12$) than those in the discrimination attribution condition ($M = 2.35, SD = 1.54$), $F(1, 154) = 86.06, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .40$. Similarly, participants in the discrimination attribution condition believed more strongly that the candidate had attributed his rejection to discrimination ($M = 6.63, SD = .88$) than those in the interview skills attribution condition ($M = 3.40, SD = 1.63$), $F(1, 154) = 244.82, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .61$. We did not find main effects of candidate race or interviewer prejudice, nor did we observe any interactions.

**Candidate attribution manipulation check.** Next, we examined participants’ sensitivity to the candidate attribution manipulation. The results revealed that, as expected, participants in the interview skills condition believed more strongly that the candidate had attributed his failure to get the job to his interview skills ($M = 5.01, SD = 2.12$) than those in the discrimination attribution condition ($M = 2.35, SD = 1.54$), $F(1, 154) = 86.06, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .40$. Similarly, participants in the discrimination attribution condition believed more strongly that the candidate had attributed his rejection to discrimination ($M = 6.63, SD = .88$) than those in the interview skills attribution condition ($M = 3.40, SD = 1.63$), $F(1, 154) = 244.82, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .61$. We did not find main effects of candidate race or interviewer prejudice, nor did we observe any interactions.

**Dependent Measures**

**Opinion regarding candidate rejection.** Next, we examined the extent to which participants believed that the quality of the candidate’s interview skills contributed to his rejection. Consistent with our predictions, we observed a main effect of candidate race, $F(1, 154) = 7.61, p = .007, \eta^2_p = .05$. Participants who read about a Black/White candidate believed more strongly that he was not hired because of his poor interview skills ($M = 4.09, SD = 1.70$) than participants who read about a Black candidate ($M = 3.40, SD = 1.51$). We also observed a marginal main effect of candidate attribution, $F(1, 154) = 3.55, p = .06, \eta^2_p = .02$, such that participants were more likely to believe that the candidate who blamed rejection on his interview skills was, in fact, more likely to have been rejected due to the quality of his interview skills ($M = 3.96, SD = 1.69$) than the candidate who claimed to have been discriminated against ($M = 3.51, SD = 1.57$). We did not observe a main effect of interviewer prejudice, nor did we uncover any interactions. This finding supports our hypothesis that participants evaluating a Black/White candidate would be more likely than those evaluating a Black candidate to assume that the candidate was not hired because of his poor interview skills.

**Sociability rating.** The results also yielded a main effect of candidate race on perceptions of how sociable the candidate seemed, $F(1, 154) = 4.06, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .03$. Participants evaluated the Black candidate as more sociable ($M = 4.63, SD = .81$) than the Black/White candidate ($M = 4.37, SD = .74$). In addition, a significant main effect of candidate attribution emerged, $F(1, 154) = 4.36, p = .04, \eta^2_p = .03$. Similar to Kaiser and Miller’s (2003) findings for evaluations of niceness, participants in the discrimination attribution condition rated the job candidate as less sociable ($M = 4.37, SD = .85$) than participants in the interview skills attribution condition ($M = 4.63, SD = .70$). There was no main effect.

3We did not separately examine responses to Kaiser and Miller’s (2003) niceness measure as sociability and niceness are likely very highly related.

3As in Kaiser and Miller (2003), in the current study we examined whether participants felt that the job candidate had been true to himself (the job candidate seems true to himself, tackles problems head on, believes that expressing his true opinions is important; $M = 4.78, SD = .88$). Given the poor reliability of this scale ($\alpha = .54$), however, as well as low correlations among the separate items ($rs = .18–.37$), we did not submit these items to statistical analysis.
of interviewer prejudice, nor did we observe any significant interactions.

Troublemaker rating. The results revealed a significant main effect of candidate attribution on participants’ ratings of the extent to which the candidate was a troublemaker, $F(1, 154) = 40.21, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .21$. Participants rated the job candidate as more of a troublemaker when he claimed that his rejection was due to discrimination ($M = 3.79, SD = .85$) than when he blamed his interview skills ($M = 2.91, SD = .91$). No other significant main effects or interactions emerged in this analysis. Regardless of whether the candidate faced low or high levels of prejudice from the interviewer, he was rated as more of a troublemaker when he claimed to have been discriminated against than when he invoked his own skills as the reason that he did not get the job. This finding replicates results reported by Kaiser and Miller (2003).

DISCUSSION

The present study demonstrates that Black/White people are more likely than Black people to be perceived as lacking the interview skills necessary to obtain employment. Observers reviewed a portfolio describing a job interview process involving either a Black/White or Black applicant who was denied employment by a White interviewer. The results revealed that observers perceived the Black/White candidate as less sociable than the Black candidate overall, in line with stereotypes that biracial people are awkward in social situations. The findings also indicated that participants who evaluated a Black/White applicant were more likely than those who evaluated a Black applicant to believe that the applicant was rejected because of his poor interview skills. Participants attributed the interviewer’s unfavorable hiring decision to the Black/White applicant’s interview skills regardless of whether there was a clear, alternative reason (i.e., the interviewer was racist) that the applicant was not hired, and regardless of the candidate’s own attribution for why he failed to attain the position.

It is important to note that we observed that the interviewer prejudice and candidate attribution manipulations worked as intended; participants perceived more racism in the high (as opposed to low) interviewer prejudice condition and were aware that at times the candidate attributed rejection to discrimination and other times attributed rejection to his interview skills. We are confident, therefore, that participants explicitly disregarded both the presence of racism and the candidate’s own appraisal of the interviewer’s decision when rendering judgments about the Black/White applicant’s poor interview skills. Given that we did not test whether participants correctly recalled the race of the candidate at the end of the study, we were not able to exclude data from participants for whom candidate race was not salient. The observed bias against Black/White applicants, therefore, may well be conservatively estimated. The current study is the first, to our knowledge, to examine how social skills stereotypes impact perceptions of biracial people in job interview settings. We provide evidence that stereotypes affect observers’ appraisals of biracial job applicants, biasing perceivers’ opinions regarding why mixed-race individuals encounter rejection in the job market. The findings present implications for understanding social factors that affect biracial people seeking employment and underscore the importance of studying perceptions of biracial people in settings that require exceptional interpersonal skills. In addition, we replicate past research showing that discrimination claimants are perceived as troublemakers, regardless of whether they face apparent prejudice from authority figures (Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003). Although the current study focused on the consequences of biracial stereotypes and not on perceptions of discrimination claimants per se, this replication effect serves as a striking reminder of the social costs of claiming discrimination!

The present study was inspired by evidence of a wage gap between White and Black/White Americans. Examination of the 2000 census data reveals that, indeed, Black/White men report earning significantly less than White men (controlling for age, educational attainment and region of employment). No wage disparities emerge between Black and Black/White male respondents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Fairlie (2009) noted that, if we assume that Black/White people are treated less favorably than White people but more favorably than Black people, we would expect Black/White workers to earn significantly more than Black workers. The prediction that Black/White people should report higher wages than Black people is also consistent with research suggesting that Black/White people face relatively little anti-Black stereotyping both because of their partial White ancestry (Sanchez et al., 2011) and their low phenotypically Black appearances (Maddox, 2004). According to census data, however, this prediction does not hold. As a result, we turned to research on stereotypes regarding mixed-race individuals’ poor social skills (Chelsey & Wagner, 2003; Jackman et al., 2001; Sanchez & Bonam, 2009) to examine ways in which Black/White job applicants may be disadvantaged relative to Black job applicants. Indeed, we observed that social skills stereotypes influence perceptions of Black/White people who are denied employment, leading observers to believe that biracial job applicants are likely to have been rejected because of their poor interview skills.
Limitations and Future Directions

In the current study we investigated perceptions of job applicants who were not hired, as opposed to examining opinions regarding who should be hired, because we were concerned that research participants would be reluctant to make unfavorable “do not hire” decisions when the race of a minority candidate was salient. Social norms dictate that minorities (particularly Blacks) should be treated positively, and people comply with these norms whether they personally value egalitarianism or believe that political correctness is necessary to avoid social sanctions (e.g., Devine, 1989; Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005). Investigating hiring decisions, as a result, is complicated by potential social desirability biases toward making “hire” judgments that can obscure race-related differences in perceptions of the applicants’ interpersonal skills. Instead, we examined perceptions of candidates who faced certain discrimination as compared to those who were rejected for ambiguous reasons. The present results provide compelling evidence that participants will disregard obvious situational explanations (i.e., the interviewer is racist) for candidate rejection in favor of their own stereotypical attitudes that biracial people are socially unskilled. Given this result, we hypothesize that observers, including actual interviewers in workplace contexts, are likely to perceive the social skills of Black/White people in biased ways. Such biases may lead employers to rate Black/White applicants as less hirable and Black/White employees as less suited for working in highly interpersonal environments (e.g., retail settings as in the current study, as well as positions emphasizing relationship building with clients). Ultimately, it is will be important for future research to examine the attitudes and behaviors of interviewers in actual workplace settings; therefore, additional work is needed to investigate the previous claims.

It will be important, in addition, for future research to test whether biracial people are perceived to be more sociable in the context of some work environments and not others. Work environments in the United States are becoming more and more diverse, and researchers have started examining whether some people are better equipped than others to cope during interracial interactions (e.g., Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009). It may be the case that biracial workers’ own complex racial backgrounds make them particularly suited to dealing with social issues of diversity and interracial harmony (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Past research suggests that biracial people are, in fact, more comfortable engaging in interracial interactions than White people and monoracial minorities (Bonam & Shih, 2009). It remains unclear, however, whether observers take this comfort with interracial environments into account when evaluating the social skills of biracial job applicants. In particular, it would be interesting to test whether the negative consequences of social skills stereotypes dissipate in the case of biracial people seeking positions that emphasize the importance of skillfully negotiating interracial interactions.

The present findings are limited, however, by the direct way in which we revealed the applicant’s biracial status to participants. Outside of the lab, mixed-race job applicants most likely do not disclose their biracial status in such an overt way. Surprisingly little research has examined whether people can infer biracial status during face-to-face interactions (as in interview situations); however, researchers generally agree that racial ambiguity is correlated with biraciality (Pauker et al., 2009; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008; Remedios & Chasteen, 2011). Racial ambiguity, therefore, may be used by perceivers to infer biraciality when race is not disclosed. In addition, our direct manipulation of biracial status is consistent with other work in this domain (Sanchez & Bonam, 2009; Sanchez et al., 2011) and, despite its practical limitations, allows for experimental control that is particularly important in the early stages of examining perceptions of biracial people. In light of the current research it seems as though biracial people who are able to conceal their mixed-race heritages from interviewers should do so in order to escape biased judgments based on negative stereotypes. According to past research, however, biracial individuals who disclose information about their race to others experienced improved psychological well-being (Sanchez & Bonam, 2009). Mixed-race job applicants, therefore, may find themselves forced to choose between making good first impressions during interviews or feeling good about themselves.

Conclusion

The present research shows that social skills stereotypes affect evaluations of Black/White people who are denied employment. Black/White job candidates were rated as less sociable than Black job candidates overall and participants were more likely to infer that Black/White job applicants were rejected by interviewers because of their poor interview skills. We observed these stereotypical attitudes, it is important to note, even among participants who acknowledged that the interviewer was racist and who understood that applicants attributed their own rejection to discrimination. The current findings further our understanding of the social factors that may contribute to disparities in the treatment of Black and Black/White job applicants. By demonstrating that biracial people are perceived to perform more poorly than monoracial minorities during job interviews, we raise the possibility that people exhibit biases against hiring mixed-race job applicants. Additional research is needed to examine the contribution of anti-biracial prejudice to hiring and wage disparities.
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