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Race of Interviewer Effects: What Happens on the Web?

Maria Krysan[1], Mick P. Couper[2]

[1]University of Illinois at Chicago, [2]University of Michigan

Abstract: This paper builds on a surprising finding in an earlier laboratory experiment studying race of interviewer effects in live as against "virtual" interviews where videos of an interviewer reading the questions are played to respondents on a laptop computer (Krysan & Couper, 2003). Unexpectedly, Whites in the virtual interviewer condition gave more racially conservative responses to the Black as compared to the White interviewer. Our post-hoc interpretation was that negative stereotypes are triggered when subjects are presented with an image of the target group, and thus the virtual Black interviewer, rather than suppressing racial prejudice with social presence, instead activated negative attitudes. We tested this hypothesis with a Web survey-based experiment using a representative sample of White respondents (Knowledge Networks panel, $n = 1120$). A 2×2 between-subjects design manipulated race of interviewer and social presence versus mere presence, using images of Black or White persons. Findings indicate mixed support for the hypothesis that mere presence may activate negative attitudes, while social presence may lead to censoring or editing or these negative attitudes.

Keywords: Racial attitudes, social presence, interviewer effects

Introduction and Background

Much of what we know about racial attitudes comes from surveys. Yet it is widely acknowledged that the expressions of such attitudes in surveys are shaped by the interviewer's race. Several studies have found race of interviewer effects on racially loaded issues to be pervasive and powerful. While critics point to such findings as reason enough to dismiss altogether survey data on racial attitudes, we take the perspective that survey data are not inherently problematic simply because of this feature. Instead, in our larger research agenda on this topic (see, for example, Krysan & Couper, 2003), we exploit this very characteristic of social surveys and ask what experimental manipulation of survey interactions can reveal about the structure of racial attitudes and the dynamics of cross-race interaction.

In this paper we build on an earlier small-scale laboratory study that we conducted at the University of Michigan (Krysan & Couper, 2003). In that study, we developed a new method for studying race of interviewer effects with a computer-assisted self-interviewing (CASI) system that used a video of an interviewer reading the survey questions and contrasted that with a live interviewer condition. The results were intriguing, complex, and somewhat unexpected. First, we found that Whites and Blacks responded differently to the two interview conditions. African Americans, as expected, provided more conservative racial attitudes to White interviewers

Direct all correspondence to Maria Krysan, Department of Sociology (MC 312), University of Illinois at Chicago, 1007 West Harrison Street, Chicago, IL 60607, USA. E-Mail: krysan@uic.edu, Phone: +1 312 / 996 5575, Fax: +1 312 / 996 5104.

in both the live and virtual interviewer condition. In the live interviewer condition, Whites also gave more conservative answers to the White interviewers. But, in the virtual interviewer condition, unexpectedly, Whites gave more racially conservative responses to the Black virtual interviewers than to the White virtual interviewers. In this paper, we conducted a Web-based survey experiment in order to further explore the causes underlying this puzzling finding among Whites.

Our earlier experiment was based on the possibility that race-of-interviewer effects may be a function of either (or both) social presence or what we will refer to as mere presence. The first hails back to early race of interviewer studies and emphasizes the effects arising from the social interaction involved in a survey interview. Schuman and Converse (1971) sum it up nicely: "To accept a guest into your house and then proceed to explain that you neither trust nor feel friendly toward people of his race probably takes more chutzpah than the average respondent possesses" (p. 58). In essence, respondents seek to avoid offending an interviewer of a different race.

This interpretation of race of interviewer effects hinges on the social interaction between respondent and interviewer that is inherent in a face-to-face or telephone survey interview, thus making the possibility of race of interviewer effects where there is no live face-to-face interaction (which is the case in our various virtual or Web interviews) seem remote. However, there are two reasons why race of interviewer effects may also occur in a virtual setting (where human social presence is reduced or absent). First, a growing body of research finds that people treat computers more like social actors than inanimate tools (e.g., Kiesler, Sieff, & Geary, 1992; Nass et al., 1997; Nass, Isbister, & Lee, 2001). This work concludes that the more salient the human dimensions of the computer are made, the more "human" the interaction. Thus, a virtual interviewer may trigger responses that more closely mirror social interaction, so that respondents will treat a virtual interviewer much like they would treat a live interviewer.

Second, as early as 1966, Summers and Hammond demonstrated the effect of the "mere presence" of a person of another race on racial attitudes. They found that undergraduates who completed an anonymous, self-administered questionnaire expressed lower levels of racial prejudice when one of the two administrators of the survey (who simply distributed the questionnaire, and to whom the respondent was not required to report their answers) was Black, as compared to the condition in which both study administrators were White. Both of these bodies of research suggest that virtual interviewers may generate race of interviewer effects similar to—but maybe not as large as—live interviewers. In this case, the social presence and the mere presence interpretation predict shifts in the same direction: both the social and mere presence of an African American should generate more liberal racial attitudes. In our initial study (Krysan & Couper, 2003), the results for the Black respondents were consistent with this interpretation: Blacks reported more conservative racial attitudes to the White virtual interviewer than to the Black virtual interviewer, similar to the effect found for live interviewers.

However, neither of these explanations offers much guidance for the puzzling findings among White respondents interviewed by a virtual interviewer, since the virtual Black interviewer created more conservative racial attitudes. This directed our attention to another possibility. The "mere presence" features of the virtual interviewer do not operate in the same direction (towards more liberal responses) as social presence. Rather, the psychological concept of "activation" would suggest the opposite. Specifically, activation effects operate as follows: subjects are presented with an image of a Black person or some other reference to Blacks—subliminal or otherwise—and negative stereotypes and sentiments about Blacks are thereby triggered. Once activated, these stereotypes influence subsequent judgments by the individual (Devine, 1989; Dovidio et al., 1997; Wittenbrink et al., 1997). Thus, when Whites are interviewed by a virtual Black interviewer, rather than suppressing negative racial prejudice, as social presence would predict, the image of the Black interviewer increases expressions of negative racial attitudes.

Drawing on the concept of activation effects, we propose that in our laboratory study the combination of privacy afforded by the virtual interview condition and the racial stimulus provided by the image of a Black interviewer may have activated stereotypes resulting in more negative racial attitudes when Whites were interviewed by a Black virtual interviewer than when interviewed by a White virtual interviewer. It is this tentative conclusion, based on a laboratory-based experiment with a small sample size, that we sought to explore in more detail in our Web-based survey experiment. Our study had three specific goals: (1) to see if the "virtual" interviewer effect we observed in the White respondents replicated on the Web with a larger sample size; (2) to extend and develop the virtual interviewer technique outside of the laboratory, using a representative random sample, in a Web-based medium; and, importantly, (3) to clarify the theoretical interpretation of the effects observed in the laboratory by isolating the role of social versus mere presence (with the latter including a hypothesis of activation effects) for White respondents.

Methods

We conducted a 2 × 2 between-subjects experimental design, with a control condition, as outlined in Table 1. We manipulated race of the images in the survey (Black versus White) and the type of presence (social presence versus mere presence). Social presence was conveyed by using varying still photographs of a Black or White "interviewer". These images appeared at several points in the interview, and were accompanied by text intended to enhance the social presence through the use of interviewer feedback and commentary, such as: "Hi, I'm your interviewer," "Thank you for your answer", and "I appreciate your answering these questions for me" (see Figures 1a and 1b). The mere presence condition (hypothesized to activate negative stereotypes) was conveyed using a photograph of a group of (Black or White) persons at the start of the survey (see Figures 2a and 2b). For cost reasons, and because our laboratory study raised the most puzzling questions about White responses, the sample was restricted to White respondents. The survey was Web-based, and consisted of persons 18 years or older, using Knowledge Networks' Web-enabled panel. Details of the Knowledge Networks methodology are described in Krotki and Dennis (2001; see also www.knowledgenetworks.com). A total of 1500 panel members were contacted for the survey. Of these, 1120 completed the survey for a completion rate of 75 percent. The survey was conducted in January 2003.

Table 1
Experimental Design and Number of Subjects per Cell

Photo conditions	Respondents
White social presence (individual photo, feedback)	226
Black social presence (individual photo, feedback)	224
White mere presence (group photo)	221
Black mere presence (group photo)	223
Control (no photo)	226
Total	1120

Note. All respondents were White.

The survey contained questions covering several racial attitude dimensions, including social distance, racial policies, stereotypes, perceptions of discrimination, race-associated policies, and one non-racial question (see Krysan & Couper, 2003). See appendix for exact question wording. For ease in presentation, and to increase statistical power, summary scales were constructed for several of the attitude dimensions: race-associated policies, stereotypes, perceptions of discrimination, and racial policies. We also examined each of the component items individually. The remaining dimensions (non-racial and social distance) had too few questions to warrant the construction of a scale. For the construction of scales, we converted the items to a 3-point scale, reversed the scoring (where necessary) such that a high score (3) indicated more negative attitudes, and then simply summed the items. We then ran a series of ANOVAs, with each of the scales in turn as the dependent variable. For these analyses we dropped the control condition, and tested both the main and interaction effects of the two key manipulations (race and type of presence).

In this paper, we test three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Respondents in the White image conditions will report more conservative racial attitudes than those in the Black image conditions.

Hypothesis 2: Respondents in the mere presence conditions will report more conservative racial attitudes than will respondents in the social presence conditions.

Hypothesis 3: Controlling for the main effects of race and type of presence (social versus mere), there will be an interaction effect between type of presence and race of images.

This implies three sub-hypotheses:

(a)   Respondents in the Black image mere presence condition will report more conservative racial attitudes than will respondents in the Black social presence condition.
(b)   Respondents in both of the White image conditions (social and mere presence) will fall in between: they will be more conservative than the Black social presence condition, but less conservative than the Black mere presence condition.
(c)   Respondents in the White mere presence condition will report more conservative responses than those in the White social presence condition.
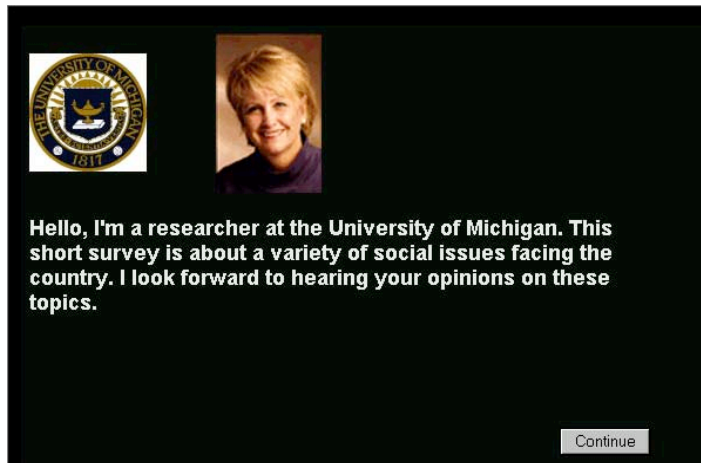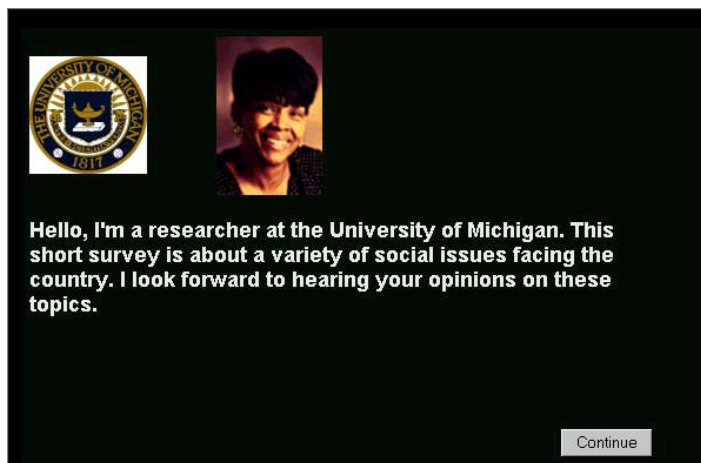
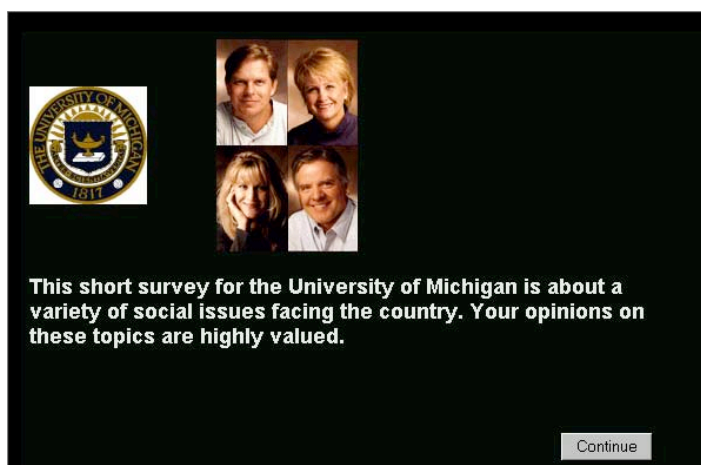*Figure 1a.* White Social Presence.

Figure 1b. Black Social Presence.
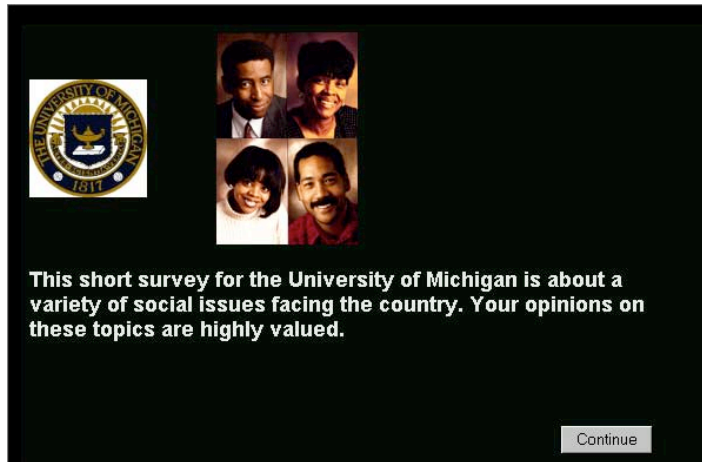

Figure 2a. White Mere Presence.

Figure 2b. Black Mere Presence.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Overall Effect of Race of Image

Table 2 summarizes the ANOVA results, including mean scores for various experimental conditions, and tests of statistical significance for the direct effects of race of image, type of presence, and the interaction between the two (note that the single item measures did not show significant effects in any analysis, and for ease in presentation, these results are not reported but are available from the author). Of the four racial attitude scales, only the stereotype scale showed a statistically significant effect of the race of the image ($p < .01$). When White respondents were presented with images of African Americans (regardless of mere versus social presence), their endorsement of negative stereotypes of African Americans was lower (3.11) than when presented with images of Whites (3.32). In addition, the control condition—which had no images of people—was closer to the mean for the White image conditions (3.30). Thus, the racial context of the interview setting did shape the responses to a series of questions in which respondents were asked to give negative characterizations of African Americans in a direction predicted by social desirability theory.

Table 2
Means, Standard Errors, and ANOVA Results for Summary Scales of Racial Attitudes by Experimental Condition

Scale (and range)	Social Presence (individual photo)		Mere Presence (group photo)		Control (no photo)
	White	Black	White	Black	
Stereotypes (2-6)	3.28	3.06	3.37	3.17	3.31
Model $R^2 = .01$; $p_R < .01$; $p_P =$ n.s.; $p_{RP} =$ n.s.	(0.074)	(0.073)	(0.081)	(0.080)	(0.083)
Discrimination (3-9)	6.96	6.74	6.81	7.02	6.92
Model $R^2 = .004$; $p_R =$ n.s.; $p_P =$ n.s.; $p_{RP} < .10$	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.11)
Racial policies (3-9)	7.09	6.80	7.00	7.05	7.05
Model $R^2 = .01$; $p_R =$ n.s.; $p_P =$ n.s.; $p_{RP} < .10$	(0.086)	(0.093)	(0.098)	(0.090)	(0.090)
Race-associated policies (2-6)	4.20	4.22	4.09	4.18	4.15
Model $R^2 = .001$; $p_R =$ n.s.; $p_P =$ n.s.; $p_{RP} =$ n.s.	(0.083)	(0.084)	(0.088)	(0.092)	(0.085)

$p_R =$ probability value for race; $p_P =$ probability value for presence; $p_{RP} =$ probability value for interaction of race and presence. A higher score indicates a more conservative response.

Hypothesis 2: Overall Effect of Social versus Mere Presence

Across all of the different racial attitude dimensions, there was no sign of an independent effect of the social as against mere presence of the images presented to respondents. Overall, then, whether or not the images presented in the survey were designed to mimic social interaction, or were merely brief images of individuals on the first screen of the survey instrument, did not influence responses independent of race of the images.

Hypothesis 3: Interaction Between Race of Images and Type of Presence

While Hypotheses 1 and 2 are of interest, they do not get to the heart of the research questions motivating this experiment. That is, our hypothesis was that respondents would give more negative racial attitudes when negative stereotypes were activated vis-à-vis the mere presence of African Americans in particular. By contrast, when presented with the social presence of African Americans, the effect would be the opposite: Whites would give more liberal racial attitudes. We test for this more complex hypothesis by including in the model an interaction between the race of the image and whether that image conveyed a social presence or a mere presence. The mere and social presence of White images in the web survey, as well as a control condition in which there was no presence at all (no images of people), are included to provide a relevant comparative context.

As is clear from Table 2, the scales measuring attitudes toward race-associated policies and stereotypes showed no evidence of the hypothesized interaction effect. The single item social distance questions and non-racial questions also did not show statistically significant variation across experimental conditions (results for single items not shown).

Summary scales measuring perceptions of discrimination and attitudes toward race-targeted policies both showed interaction effects of borderline statistical significance ($p = .06$). In order to facilitate interpretation, we have graphed the results in Figures 3 and 4. First, in Figure 3, the Black social presence condition generated the lowest levels of denial that African Americans faced racial discrimination (and, conversely, rejected that reverse discrimination against Whites was a problem). All other experimental conditions generated somewhat more conservative responses. Thus, Whites in the Black social presence condition were the least likely to deny racial discrimination. There are some signs, then, that Whites were influenced by the social presence (in the Black image condition). There is also a hint of the "activation" effect for the Black mere presence condition. That is, the Black mere presence condition reported the most denial of racial discrimination, but only slightly more so than both White image conditions and the control group.

A series of questions about policies intended to redress racial inequality also showed a similar pattern, and is illustrated in Figure 4. Specifically, the interaction effect was of borderline statistical significance ($p = .06$) and the pattern was similar, though with even less of a sign of "activation" effects in the Black mere presence condition. That is, those who were the most supportive of these policies were in the "virtual Black interviewer" condition. But this time, the Black mere presence condition was indistinguishable from the other three conditions.
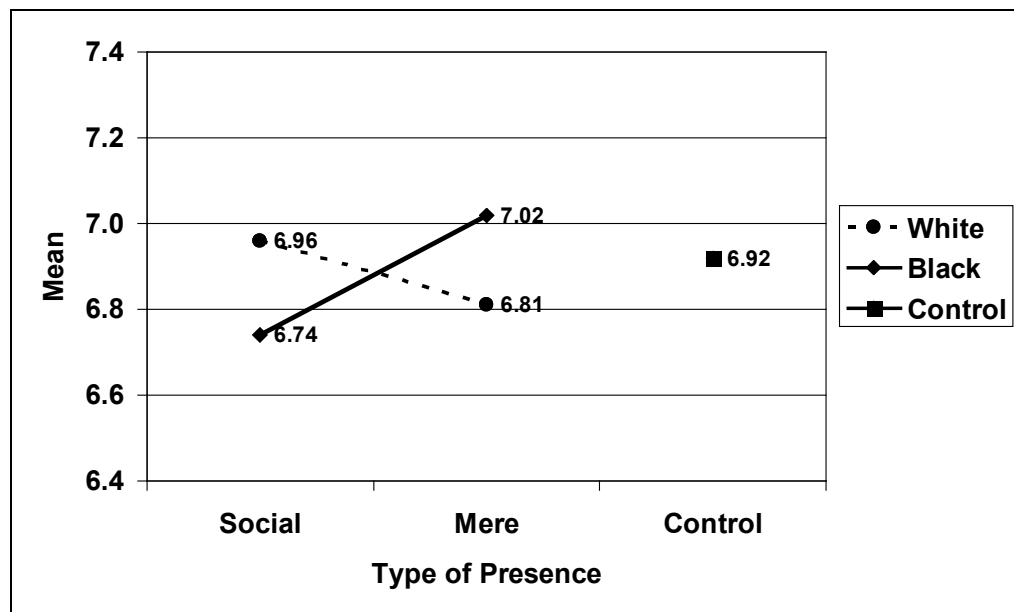

Figure 3. Mean Score on Perception of Discrimination Scale, by Race of Image and Type of Presence.

A CloserLook

In this last section, we take a closer look at the three dimensions of racial attitudes that showed statistically significant effects in this experiment, to assess whether any particular group is more or less likely to be influenced by the experimental manipulation. To do this, we are guided by a large body of research on White racial attitudes that has identified age, education, and gender as strong predictors of racial attitudes in general: those who are younger, have more education, and are female, typically report more liberal racial attitudes than their older, less well-educated, and male counterparts (Schuman et al., 1997). We conducted additional analyses (complete data not shown) of the three racial attitude scales that showed significant effects: stereotypes, perceptions of discrimination, and racial policies. The question we asked was: are the observed effects more pronounced among particular sub-groups in the population? For example, are the old or the young more likely to show the effects of "activation" or "social desirability"?

We began this additional analysis by first confirming that these demographic variables did have direct effects, as the literature would suggest, on responses to the racial attitude questions. The results (not shown) were as anticipated: being a woman, highly educated, and younger resulted in more liberal racial attitudes across all three scales of interest. We then tested for the three-way interaction between race of the image, type of presence, and each demographic variable (age, gender, education). We found that men and women, the less well-educated and the better-educated, and the young and the old were, for the most part, similarly influenced by the experimental variations. However, there were two exceptions, such that the three-way interaction was statistically significant.
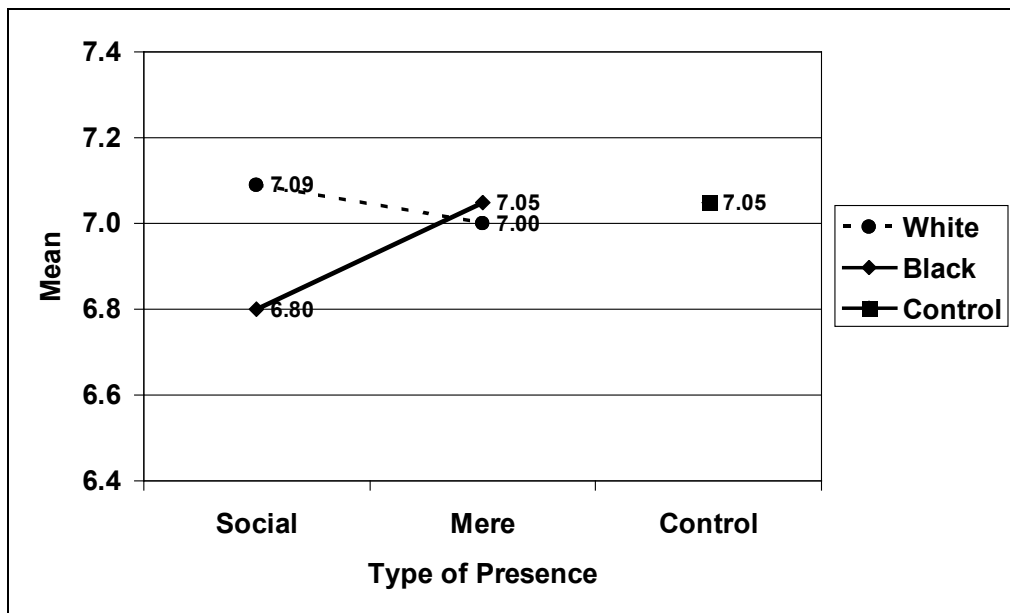

Figure 4. Mean Score on Racial Policy Scale, by Race of Image and Type of Presence.

Stereotypes, Racial Images, and Education.
Recall that the stereotype scale was the instance where race of the image (regardless of whether it was a social presence or a mere presence) was statistically significant (Hypothesis 1). Specifically, White respondents exposed to the Black image conditions were less negative in their stereotyping of African Americans than were respondents exposed to the White image conditions. This pattern held across different gender and age groups, i.e., the three-way interaction was not statistically significant. However, respondents with different levels of education responded differently: those who were the least and most educated showed the effects of race of interviewer most clearly. These results are shown in Figure 5. In short, the difference in the means between those in the White vs. Black image conditions were .04 and .05, respectively, for those either with a High School diploma or some college. Respondents at the two ends of the educational spectrum (less than High School and a College degree or higher), by contrast, showed a greater difference between the White and Black image conditions. Among these two educational groups, those in the White image conditions scored 1/3 to 1/2 a point higher on the stereotype scale than those in the Black image conditions.

Perceptions of Discrimination, Race and Presence of Images, and Age.

The only other three-way interaction of (borderline) statistical significance (p = .11) was for the perceptions of discrimination scale. Examination of the specific results revealed that it was those who were 30-44 years old who were most influenced by the experimental manipulations in the manner anticipated by Hypothesis 3. Figure 6 shows the pattern of results for this age group alone.
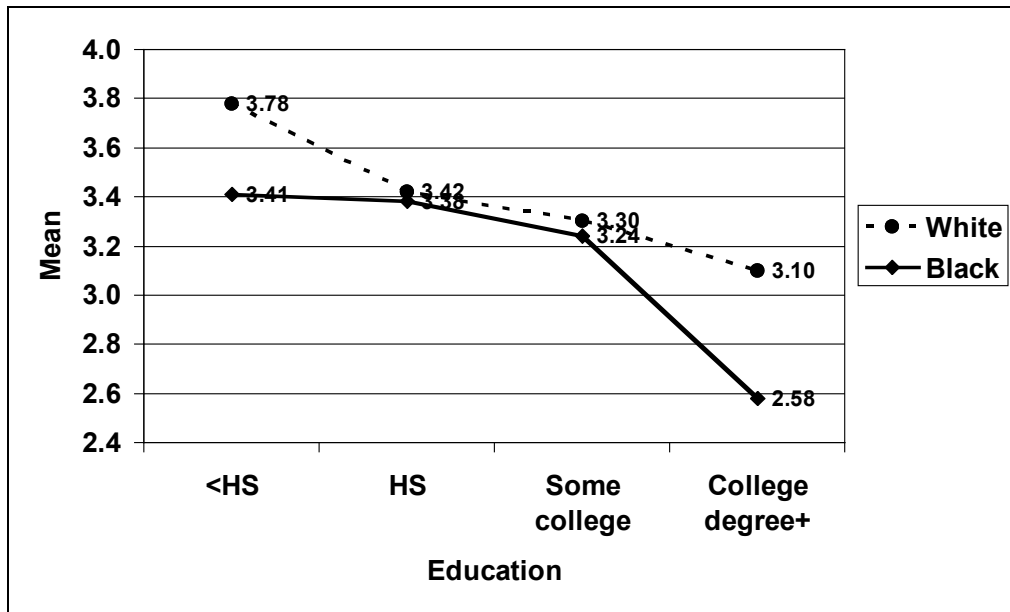

Figure 5. Mean Score on Stereotype Scale, by Race of Image and Education.

Here we see that, in addition to the Black social presence condition showing the most liberal responses (lowest levels of denial of discrimination), there is also the most clear-cut evidence of the activation effects in the Black mere presence condition: those in this category are the most likely to deny discrimination against African Americans. As would have been predicted by Hypothesis 3b and 3c, these rates are higher, even, than the White image conditions (both social and mere presence).
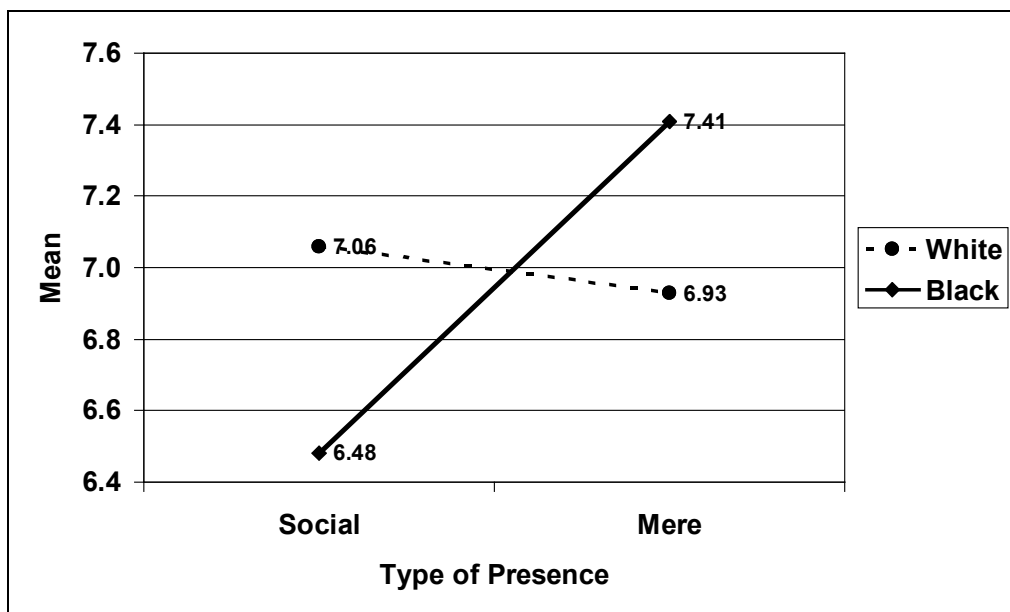

Figure 6. Mean Score on Perception of Discrimination Scale, by Experimental Conditions, Ages 30-44 Only.

Conclusions

The results of our web experiment were not overwhelming in their support for our hypotheses. The focus of our investigation was on the hypothesized interaction between race of the image and the type of presence. We found the barest of hints of this complicated relationship among the larger population. Interestingly, it was for the same two categories of questions that have repeatedly been shown to be susceptible to interview context effects: racial policies and perceptions of discrimination. Each of these are "hot button" issues pertaining to race in the contemporary racial climate, and so the fact that they are, again, shown to be subject to these kinds of effects is not entirely surprising. For the most part, inspection of the patterns in the overall population suggested support for the effects of the Black social presence condition: that is, respondents in this group stood out as scoring the most liberal (as expected by a social desirability hypothesis) among the various conditions.

There was little evidence, however, for the complicated findings reported in our earlier laboratory study. Specifically, it was not clear that the Black mere presence condition was, in fact, triggering (activating) negative racial stereotypes that would then translate into more conservative attitudes toward racial policies and more denial of racial discrimination. More detailed analyses did suggest that respondents aged 30-44 did seem to respond to the experimental condition in this way. Though we can only rely on post-hoc speculation, this finding is consistent with a hypothesized backlash among this cohort of White adults. That is, there has been the suggestion that this cohort of Americans, "came of age" during an era of increasingly conservative racial policies (e.g., that began with Reagan's dismantling of affirmative action), and thus may have created conservative attitudes of a particular type. This heightened sensitivity to the Black mere presence condition may reflect this backlash. Clearly such a hypothesis would need considerably more analysis and replication.

One other noteworthy finding in our experiment was with the racial stereotype scale: in this case race—independent of whether it was social presence or mere presence—shaped the responses to the questions. Whites who were in the Black image condition reported fewer negative racial stereotypes than those in the White image condition. These findings are in the direction of the social presence effect, as opposed to the activation of negative racial stereotypes predicted by the "mere" presence hypothesis. Further analyses suggested that these effects were most salient among those with the highest education (College degree or higher) and lowest education (less than High School). The fact that the most highly educated were most susceptible to this shift is consistent with other results demonstrating that the most highly educated respondents are more influenced by social desirability effects of this sort (Krysan, 1998). However, the finding among those with less education is more of a puzzle in need of explanation.

Notwithstanding these hints of significant results, our experimental manipulations were largely under-whelming in their effects. We now consider three reasons why this may have occurred.

Effects of Knowledge Networks Panel

One explanation is that the study was conducted among a group of persons who regularly receive and complete surveys as part of the Knowledge Networks panel. Given their ongoing interaction with Knowledge Networks, they may be inured to manipulations such as these, ignoring the introduction and other images, and focusing merely on the content of the survey, in order to complete the task. A related possibility is that the social presence manipulation (the individual photographs of the "interviewer") was not credible, given their knowledge of how the Knowledge Networks panel may work. It is possible that the manipulation would be more effective in a less Web- and survey-savvy sample.

Social Presence Can Occur in Various Ways

On the one hand, social presence may be the presence of real people mediated by the technology (as in computer-mediated communication). On the other hand, social presence may be the presence of actors created by the computer (see Lee, 2004, for a discussion of presence). Our manipulation was of the first type. Social presence only works to the extent that the recipient (respondent) believes there is a real person with whom they are interacting. There may be large individual differences in the perception of social presence. While large effects of both types of social presence on both attitudes and behavior have been demonstrated in laboratory settings, efforts to replicate these findings in survey settings have so far proved elusive (see Tourangeau, Couper, & Steiger, 2003).

The Mere Presence Condition Was Too Subtle

In this experiment, the manipulation (display of a montage of four photographs) for the mere presence condition was limited to the introductory screen. This may have been too little to have activated the stereotypes—or, if

they did, their effects did not persist past the introductory screen. Related to the earlier point, it is also possible that the ongoing relationship with Knowledge Networks may have contributed to the editing of the introductory screen information. That is, the "context" generated by the survey was not as "anonymous" as that conveyed through a one-shot mail or self-administered survey.

The Mere Presence Condition Creates Competing Effects

Alternatively, it may be that some respondents react to the mere presence condition in the direction of social desirability (as the earlier Summers & Hammonds, 1966, research demonstrated), while for others the mere presence activates negative racial attitudes that translate into shifts in responses in the opposite direction (towards more conservative racial attitudes). Such cross-pressures may serve to muddy the waters when examining the effects among the general population. Future research should begin think seriously about how our theories and knowledge about race relations might usefully predict who would be influenced by these various "presences" in the interview in one direction as opposed to the other.

Measuring racial attitudes remains a tricky undertaking, because the expression of such attitudes (especially negative ones) is tied up in the social interaction of the survey interview. Studying how such attitudes may be activated, but subsequently edited or suppressed, because of social presence is an important step in developing better methods to uncover the underlying attitudes.

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Appendix

Social Distance

Trust White People

Do you feel you can trust most White people, some White people, or no White people?

Trust Black People

Do you feel you can trust most Black people, some Black people, or no Black people?

Stereotypes

Difference Due to Less Ability

On the average, Blacks have worse jobs, income, and housing than White people.
Do you think these differences are because most Blacks have less in-born ability to learn?

Differences Due to Motivation

On the average, Blacks have worse jobs, income, and housing than White people. Do you think these differences are because most Blacks just don't have the motivation or will power to pull themselves up out of poverty?

Racial Policies

Job Training and Educational Assistance for Blacks

Some people feel that because of past disadvantages, there are some groups in society that should receive special job training and educational assistance. Others say that it is unfair to give these groups special job training and educational assistance. What about you? Do you strongly favor, favor, neither favor nor oppose, oppose, or strongly oppose special job training and educational assistance for Blacks?

Quotas for Black Students

Some people say that because of past discrimination it is sometimes necessary for colleges and universities to reserve openings for Black students. Others oppose such quotas because they say quotas give Black students advantages they haven't earned. What about your opinion—do you favor strongly, favor not strongly, oppose not strongly, or oppose strongly quotas to admit Black students?

Preferences in Hiring and Promotion

Some people say that because of past discrimination, Blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion. Others say that such preferences in hiring and promotion of Blacks is wrong because it gives Blacks advantages they haven't earned. What about your opinion—do you favor strongly, favor not strongly, oppose not strongly, or oppose strongly preferential hiring and promotion of Blacks?

Race-Associated Policies

Spending on Food Stamps

If you had a say in making up the federal budget this year, do you think federal spending on Food Stamps should be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?

Spending on Welfare

Again, if you had a say in making up the federal budget this year, do you think federal spending on welfare programs be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?

Perceptions of Discrimination

Differences Due to Discrimination

On the average, Blacks have worse jobs, income, and housing than White people. Do you think these differences are mainly due to discrimination?

Differences Due to Lack of Chance of Education

Do you think these differences are because most Blacks don't have the chance for education that it takes to rise out of poverty?

Chance of Reverse Discrimination

What do you think the chances are these days that a White person won't get a job or promotion while an equally or less qualified Black person gets one instead? Is this very likely, somewhat likely, or not very likely to happen these days?

Non-Racial Question

Favorite Actor/Entertainer

First, could you tell me who are your three favorite actors or entertainers?