

A sociohistorical model of intersectional social category prototypes

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Abstract

Every person belongs to multiple social categories, such as those based on gender, race, or ethnicity, yet researchers have traditionally studied beliefs about each of these groups in isolation. Theoretical perspectives have emerged that aim to outline how people's mental representations of gender and race or ethnicity are systematically intertwined. These intersectional perspectives have been generative, but there remain areas of ostensible disagreement that create conceptual confusion. In this Perspective, we suggest that a sociohistorical approach can help to reconcile these differences by highlighting how previous theories offer complementary, rather than conflicting, insights into the structure of social concepts. Specifically, we propose that a sociohistorical model integrating research across social science fields (history, anthropology, sociology and psychology) could illuminate how people construct mental representations that align with their surrounding social and cultural systems, which reflect the goals of the dominant gender and ethnic or racial group. By encoding these cultural ideals in mental representations of what members of social categories are like, people's prototypes reinforce social hierarchies.

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Introduction

All theories of social categorization recognize that category representations are often systematically graded. That is, people think of some category members as clear, central representatives (prototypical) and others as more peripheral¹ (for reviews, see refs. ^{2,3}). For example, many people think of a robin as being more prototypical of birds in general than an ostrich is. Prototypes are fundamental to how people use categories to understand the world around them – shaping everything from which category members come to mind³ to whose features generalize to other members of the category⁴. Although the graded structure of categories can be important for learning^{5–8}, the cognitive processes that give rise to these representations can lead to systematic biases when applied to society more broadly. For example, in the United States, when people think of a leader, they might more readily call to mind a white person⁹, a man¹⁰, or a white man specifically¹¹, thereby perpetuating status asymmetries.

Moreover, people belong to multiple social categories simultaneously (for example, those based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation or political affiliation), and the intersection of these categories influences mental representations. For example, Blackness is often considered masculine in the USA¹², which might lead to the inference that a Black man will be perceived as more prototypical (that is, representative) of what men in general are like. However, empirical evidence shows that this is not the case: Black men are not consistently perceived as representative of men¹³. Moreover, the biases perpetuated at the intersection of multiple social categories are often unique, rather than an average or summation of how inequality is perpetuated for each separate category^{14,15}. For example, Black women are not considered prototypical of either their gender category or their racial or ethnic category, rendering them conceptually ‘invisible’ – a unique form of bias¹⁶.

Although there are older empirical articles that take an intersectional perspective without explicitly saying so¹⁷, the majority of work on intersectionality has occurred within the past 15 years. However, the psychological theories on intersectionality that have emerged during this time and the empirical work based on these theories often conflict, leaving researchers confused as to what to expect and when to expect it. For example, gendered representations of people of Asian descent sometimes reflect masculine stereotypes (Asian people are viewed as competent¹⁸) and sometimes reflect feminine stereotypes (Asian people are viewed as submissive¹⁹).

In this Perspective, we review the three theories of intersectional social prototypes (intersectional invisibility theory¹⁶, gendered race theory¹² and the theory of gendered prejudice²⁰) that have received the most empirical attention, highlighting where they converge and diverge. Prior reviews have noted some of the discrepancies²¹ across these theories in their specific predictions about the graded structure of gendered-racial concepts and what processes give rise to this structure, but no review has systematically integrated these theories. We focus on prototypes (summary representations of the categories themselves²²) rather than stereotypes (beliefs about specific features associated with categories; Box 1) because category prototypes encompass stereotypes of all forms. We then propose a sociohistorical model that integrates existing theories and generates testable hypotheses that could provide insights into the structure of social prototypes. We focus on the intersection of gender and race or ethnicity because these categories are common to all the main theories that are relevant to intersectionality within social psychology: the intersection of race and gender was the central nexus for the Black feminist theorists who originally developed

the concept of intersectionality^{15,23}, and race and gender are among the earliest-emerging social categories^{24,25}, making them fundamental to how children learn to navigate the social world.

The work reviewed here generally assumes that people broadly recognize and use gendered and racial or ethnic categories as though they are coherent, homogeneous and categorical – even though in reality there is massive heterogeneity within these groups. To the extent that people view racial categories as a meaningful way to divide up the social world, they are likely to minimize variation in ethnic backgrounds and centre their representations around the most historically prominent ethnic group or groups within a racial category. For example, although Indian people are from Asia, Americans are less likely to categorize them broadly as Asian than people from East Asia²⁶. This assumption is important, particularly for groups such as Latinx people, where the lines between ethnicity and race become even more blurred – both psychologically and in official contexts like the USA census. Although we use race and ethnicity somewhat interchangeably throughout this Perspective, there are specific instances in which we use one term over the other. When we use the term ‘race’ alone, we refer to a psychological construct that people use to group different kinds of people (typically based on perceived physical similarities); when we use the term ‘ethnicity’ alone, we refer to a representation of a group based on shared national origin or cultural background²⁷.

Theories on intersectional social prototypes

Here we review the three theories on intersections between gender and race or ethnicity that have received the most empirical attention (Table 1), highlighting their similarities and differences.

Intersectional invisibility

According to intersectional invisibility theory¹⁶, whenever a category dimension is unmarked, people fill it in with the cultural default identity. These cultural defaults are based in broader system-maintaining ideologies, including androcentrism (which centres men), ethnocentrism (which centres dominant racial or ethnic groups), and heterocentrism (which centres straight people). In a USA context, the prevalence of these ideologies means that maleness, whiteness and straightness are the default identities.

For gender categories, when race or ethnicity is not specified, intersectional invisibility theory predicts that people’s prototypes will be centred on the dominant racial or ethnic group (for example, in the USA, white women would be considered to be more prototypical women^{28,29}). Similarly, racial or ethnic prototypes will be male when gender is unmarked (for example, in the USA, Black men and Asian men would be viewed as more typical of Black people and Asian people, respectively³⁰). People with multiple subordinated identities (for example, Black women) would therefore be invisible – not prototypical of either their racial or their gender group. On the flipside, for superordinate categories where all dimensions are unmarked (for example, ‘people’), people would most readily think of straight white men³¹.

Empirically, some of the strongest support for intersectional invisibility comes from studies looking at descriptive, prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes (Box 1). In terms of descriptive stereotypes, the stereotypes people generate when thinking of ‘men’ and ‘women’ are most closely aligned with the stereotypes of white men and white women (versus men and women of colour)³⁰. Similarly, when considering proscriptive stereotypes, people are more likely to punish a white woman for acting agentically (a proscriptive gender stereotype) than a Black woman³². These findings support intersectional invisibility

theory: when people are asked to consider what a generic woman should or should not be, they are likely to fill in the unmarked racial category with the cultural default by thinking of a white woman, and therefore apply their beliefs about the category more strongly to her than to a Black woman³².

Gendered prejudice

Although the theory of gendered prejudice is primarily concerned with intergroup processes and outcomes (for example, discrimination), it nonetheless still invites consideration of what group prototypes come to mind when considering the ingroup–outgroup dynamic. The theory of gendered prejudice^{20,33} makes the same predictions as intersectional invisibility theory – that the prototype of subordinated racial or ethnic groups should be men – but differs in its reasoning. Rather than relying on cultural defaults to fill unmarked categories, the theory of gendered prejudice suggests that men are prototypical of subordinated racial or ethnic groups because of intrasexual competition over resources²⁰. By contrast, subordinated women are seen as less prototypical of their racial or ethnic categories because they are neither the primary source of competition for resources nor is their utility in ensuring reproductive fitness unique (given the presence of ingroup women).

The theory of gendered prejudice makes clear predictions for how gender shapes the representation of subordinated racial or ethnic groups. However, it is less clear on how race or ethnicity might shape the representation of subordinated gender groups. Because the theory of gendered prejudice is based on social dominance theory³⁴, according to which only gender and age are fundamental social cleavages across all cultures, one possibility is that because race and ethnicity are culturally specific arbitrary hierarchies, they do not affect gender concepts in a systematic way. Another possibility is that the racialization of gender prototypes is defined by the dominant racial or ethnic group. In either case, the mechanism proposed by the theory of gendered prejudice differs from intersectional invisibility theory by focusing on group competition, rather than broader cultural ideologies.

Empirical support for the gendered nature of racial or ethnic subordination has been demonstrated both in the laboratory and in broader society. For example, racial- or ethnic-minority men are more likely to experience hate crimes than racial- or ethnic-minority women³⁵, supporting the notion that outgroup men are perceived to be a greater threat than outgroup women and therefore experience more discrimination. Field experiments that examined the interaction between gender and ethnicity in the Danish labour market found that ethnic-minority men were less likely to get a callback for a job³⁶ than both ethnic-minority women and ethnic-majority men. This finding underscores how minoritized men are more heavily penalized than ethnic-minority women in competitive contexts. Even children have been shown to demonstrate biases in line with the theory of gendered prejudice: four-year-old (predominantly white) children implicitly and explicitly disfavoured Black boys relative to Black girls, white boys and white girls³⁷.

Gendered-race theory

Finally, according to gendered-race theory, category prototypes are shaped by the degree of overlapping content in racial and gender stereotypes as well as perceptions of gendered phenotypic facial cues^{12,38,39}. Thus, this theory suggests a bidirectional relationship between gender and race. Gendered-race theory agrees with both intersectional invisibility theory and the theory of gendered prejudice in its prediction

Box 1

Definitions

Prototype

A summary representation of what a category is like in general, which people construct based on feature frequency plus background knowledge and beliefs.

Descriptive stereotype

A feature associated with a category that people believe broadly characterizes and describes members of the group.

Prescriptive stereotype

A feature that people think members of a category in general should share.

Proscriptive stereotype

A feature that people think members of category in general should not share.

Ideal

A belief about what something should be like relative to some desired goal or state of the world.

that Black men are viewed as prototypical of Black people. However, gendered-race theory diverges from the other theories in its explanation of why this is the case. Specifically, gendered-race theory suggests that the gendered representation of Black people is male because there is greater overlap between the stereotypes of Black people and the stereotypes of men (versus other racial groups) and because people perceive Afrocentric facial features as more masculine.

Gendered-race theory departs even more starkly from intersectional invisibility and the theory of gendered prejudice in its prediction about the gendered representation of Asian people. According to gendered-race theory, Asian women (and not Asian men) are seen as prototypical of Asian people in general because the feminine stereotypes of Asian people cohere with the feminine stereotypes of women. Furthermore, because the relationship between race and gender is bidirectional, the prototype of a subordinated gender category (for example, ‘woman’) should also be Asian.

Empirically, gendered-race theory has been supported by the gendered nature of racial stereotypes³⁸ and in the racialization of gender categorizations¹². For example, in the USA, people are more likely to use masculine (versus feminine) stereotypes to characterize Black people, and to use feminine (versus masculine) stereotypes to characterize Asian people³⁸, highlighting how the overlap in gender and racial stereotypes shape perceptions of these groups. These gendered-racial dynamics even emerge in intimate settings like romantic relationships. Compared to Black men and Asian women (whose gender and racial stereotypes overlap, that is, the stereotypes for Black people and men are similar, and the stereotypes for Asian people and women are similar), Asian men and Black women (whose gender and racial stereotypes conflict) are less likely to receive responses to romantic overtures in the online dating market⁴⁰.

Table 1 | Prominent social psychological theories that incorporate intersectionality

Theory	Predicted racialization of subordinated gender group	Predicted gendering of subordinated racial group	Mechanism	Examples of empirical support
Intersectional invisibility theory	White woman	Black man Asian man	Default centring of cultural ideologies that centre men, racially advantaged groups and straight people	28–30,138
Theory of gendered prejudice	(unspecified woman prototype)	Black man Asian man	Inter- and intragroup competition over resources and reproductive fitness	37,139–141
Gendered-race theory	Asian woman	Black man Asian woman	Stereotypic and phenotypic overlap between race and gender categories	12,38,39,142

Theory summary

As Table 1 indicates, there are many areas of apparent disagreement between the theories outlined above. Some of these disagreements are about what the predicted prototype (and therefore basis for stereotypes) might be, such as a prototype for Asian people. Other disagreements are about which mechanisms underlie construction of intersectional prototypes. Furthermore, research on intersectional prototypes and stereotypes can often be interpreted as support for multiple possible mechanisms and theories. For example, the finding that Black men and white women are punished more than Black women for displaying dominance in a leadership role³² could be interpreted as supporting an intersectional invisibility account – Black women are not seen as prototypical of either their racial or gender groups, so they are less constrained by the proscriptive stereotypes associated with those groups. However, the same evidence could also be interpreted as support for a theory of gendered prejudice – outgroup men, but not outgroup women, are punished for asserting dominance. And it could also be interpreted as support for gendered race theory – the mismatch between gender and racial stereotypes of Black women makes them more suitable for leadership positions³⁸, which are increasingly undifferentiated by gendered traits⁴¹.

These differences between theories and the fact that multiple theories can account for the same empirical results have the unfortunate effect of confusing researchers seeking to incorporate intersectionality into their work and might lead to a misunderstanding of intersectionality as a theoretical framework⁴². Researchers considering how to incorporate intersectionality theory must also determine which theory of intersectionality to adopt when generating new predictions to test. Choosing which theory to adopt is especially challenging because all three theories have gaps. For example, these theories often fail to account for how perceivers think about other racialized groups in the USA such as Native Americans and Latinx people⁴³. These considerations suggest that a new framework is needed.

A sociohistorical model

We propose a sociohistorical model of social prototypes (Fig. 1) that integrates elements of all the theories outlined above with insights from across social science disciplines (such as history and sociology) and subdisciplines of psychology (such as social, cognitive and developmental psychology). This model could help to reconcile diverging predictions in the theories of intersectional social prototypes reviewed above and extend them by incorporating evidence from the broader literature on category representations and the social sciences.

Key premises

People's prototypes for a range of non-social categories are shaped by descriptive information (like the relative frequency of category features^{1,3}) and by how people think category members should

be, relative to some idealized representation. The ideal could be defined relative to the perceiver's own goals^{44–49} (for a similar proposal with respect to interpersonal invisibility, see ref. ⁵⁰), or relative to someone else's goals⁵¹. Crucially, this definition of 'ideal' (Box 1) does not rely solely on individual goals, but rather captures people's sensitivity to the forces in a system that shape categories over time^{52,53}. Imagine, for example, how a cow might think of itself. It might consider its mouth or multiple stomachs as most crucial for its survival. Yet people might be more likely to think of a cow in terms of its udders because a cow's milk production system is more important to human nutrition goals. People's prototypes of cows might centre around udders even if they do not themselves drink cow's milk because of their awareness of the cultural representation of cows^{54–56}.

The central argument of the sociohistorical model applies this logic to social categories: people's prototypes for any given social category are shaped by ideals (what members of social categories should be like) as defined by the dominant cultural perspective within their society and their historical origins (see also ref. ⁵⁷ for evidence of a similar phenomenon in children). Thus, the history of subordinated groups' exploitation is encoded in people's social prototypes as they internalize the dominant cultural view in their social context, which reinforces existing social hierarchies. We further propose that the dominant group enforces its cultural worldview by directly (through blatant and often violent oppression of minoritized groups to prevent their upward mobility) and indirectly (through stereotyping these groups relative to the ideals and motivations of the dominant group⁵⁸) governing which social roles minoritized groups occupy. By considering the sociohistorical context within which people learn about different groups, this model is generative and can be extended to representations of subordinated groups that have not been previously addressed, and that cannot be accounted for by the existing theories.

For example, a sociohistorical model suggests that in the USA prototypes should reflect the fact that society is structured to prioritize the goals of white men. This assumption is based on the historical foundation of white men colonizing the USA in pursuit of material wealth and resources. In building out colonial society, white men were able to set many of the norms and structures of cultural institutions in society to benefit their ingroup (for example, only white men were allowed to own land and vote for much of USA history⁵⁹). The social structures and norms that build on this historical foundation persist today, and continue to favour white people^{11,60} and men⁶¹. Moreover, white men have often directly restricted the social roles that minoritized groups can hold⁶² (for example, in the destruction of Black Wall Street in Tulsa, Oklahoma⁶²), and people across society reinforce these views indirectly by knowing and using stereotypes of minoritized groups⁶³.

Relationship to other theories

By highlighting how people internalize historical oppressive systems, the sociohistorical model is an extension of social role theory⁶⁴, which suggests that gender stereotypes are learned in part through the gender differentiation of labour. According to this theory, women are stereotyped as communal because of their traditional and historical roles at home, whereas men are seen as agentic because of their traditional roles as breadwinners. The sociohistorical model extends social role theory to information about what people are like at the intersection of different stereotypes and historical forces. However, the sociohistorical model diverges from social role theory by acknowledging that dominant groups actively enforce oppressive structures to maintain a social hierarchy that favours them. This perspective is akin to ambivalent sexism theory⁵⁶, according to which women's status and social roles are limited directly by men and indirectly through people's use of stereotypes about what men and women are like.

The sociohistorical model also moves beyond existing theories in its predictions of the mechanisms through which people distill cultural information when learning and forming social prototypes. Specifically, we propose that people construct prototypes based on the statistical regularities they encounter in their daily lives (for example, the distribution of people across identities in various social roles), and how they interpret these regularities based on their existing causal beliefs and worldviews^{54,65,66}. For example, consider a Black child growing up in a majority Black environment in the USA, who consumes white-centred cultural products (mainstream television shows, movies or children's books). Despite seeing a high frequency of Black people in her local environment, she might nevertheless come to view white men and women as more representative of their gender categories as she adopts and internalizes the dominant cultural view presented in the media¹³. She might also come to view Blackness as masculine because she assumes that the overrepresentation of Black people in stereotypically masculine social roles that she observes across society is not random. As she seeks to explain and understand why different racial groups are distributed unevenly across different roles, she might draw on her existing causal beliefs and worldviews⁶⁵. For example, unless she is given explicit information to the contrary, she might assume that a person's group membership or role position reflects something inherent⁶⁷. In this way, people integrate the dominant culture's ideology into their own worldview, which shapes their representations of what social groups are like and reifies the status quo⁶⁸. Thus, the distribution

of roles provides a basis for learning the default structure of social concepts. By specifying the learning mechanism by which social prototypes are acquired, the sociohistorical model moves beyond defining what they are to instead focus on how they come to be. Focusing on the learning mechanisms allows greater consideration of individual and context-specific differences in social prototypes.

Moreover, the idea that social prototypes are defined relative to cultural ideals generates predictions about how and when they will vary by context – a feature of the current model that diverges from existing theories. That is, according to the sociohistorical model representations are historical and context-dependent because the perceived utility of subordinated groups can shift and change across history and contexts. For example, contact between white people and subordinated groups occurred at different points in USA history in different ways, with important consequences for people's resulting prototypes (Table 2). Indeed, as the ideological underpinning of a society changes, so do the stereotypes⁶⁹.

Finally, although the sociohistorical model suggests that subordinated racial and gender groups might generally be represented from the dominant view, prototypes can also be flexible. That is, what a perceiver calls to mind can also be influenced by their goals when interacting with the category⁷⁰. For example, in the context of choosing romantic partners, desired features (perceptual or conceptual) might become more salient, leading people to think of category members who display those features as more representative of the category in general. Thus, when choosing a romantic partner one might consider the extent to which a woman has stereotypically feminine features (for example, long hair⁷¹) and trait attributes (for example, submissiveness¹⁹). In this way, even though the dominant prototype of women centres white women, people might more readily call to mind an Asian woman in certain contexts because they believe Asian women to be hyperfeminine, exotic and particularly desirable⁷². This diverges from existing theories, which take more of a top-down approach in considering how prototypes are constructed.

Preliminary support

There is already support for some aspects of a sociohistorical model – specifically, that people's stereotypes and attitudes respond to historical events that have led to changes in cultural institutions. One useful tool to examine stereotype consistency and change is the Princeton Trilog, which is a stereotyping measure whereby participants are asked to

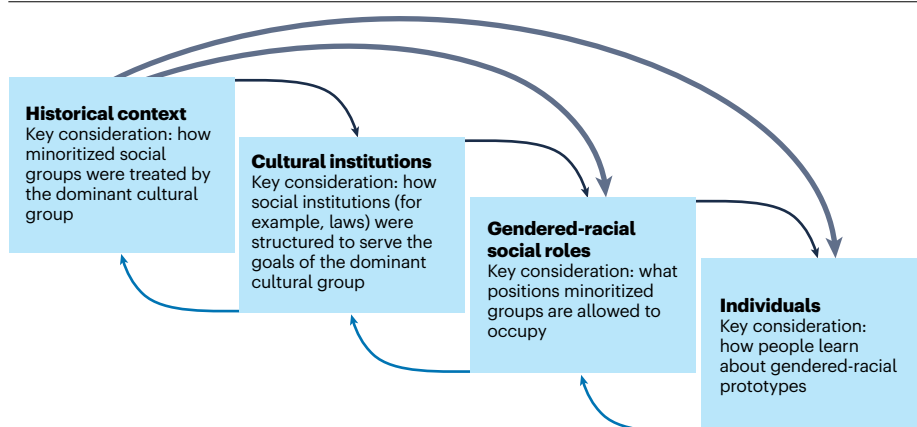


Fig. 1 | A sociohistorical model of social prototypes. Sociohistorical contexts shape cultural institutions, which ultimately affect how individuals form social prototypes. The blue arrows indicate how individuals learn about these prototypes and reify them to maintain the status quo.

Table 2 | Predictions of social group prototypes in the USA based on a sociohistorical model

Subordinated group	Predicted prototype	Defining period	Rationale	Advantages of the sociohistorical model
Black people	Black man	Defined primarily in early American history (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries)	Black people were brought over as slave labourers; production of goods (that is, labour) was their primary utility	Integrates across all three theories of intersectionality
Asian people	Asian woman	Defined primarily through immigration exclusion acts and contact through wars in Asia (such as the Korean war)	Because Asian people were viewed as perpetual foreigners (and thus potential competition), their unique utility for white men was not labour (although they were used as a source of cheap labour); instead, their primary use for white men was sexual	Integrates across all three theories of intersectionality; explains how intergroup competition led to cultural stereotypes
Latinx people	Latinx man	Defined primarily in the twentieth century with free-trade policies	Latinx people were perceived as competition for jobs after free-trade policies provided for more free movement of labour	Accounts for representation of Latinx people
Native American people	None/invisible	Defined primarily during period of American expansion	Native American people were not needed; white settlers primarily needed their land	Accounts for invisibility of Native American people
Women	White woman	Largely consistent throughout American history	Interdependence between genders reflects consistent need to ensure reproductive fitness for white men	Incorporates intersectional invisibility and theory of gendered prejudice

indicate which traits are most indicative of different groups⁷³. The Princeton Trilogy has been repeated with great fidelity over eight decades and can therefore be used to examine changes in stereotyping over time.

One such study examined how stereotypes of different ethnic groups might have changed between 1933, 1951 and 1967 (ref. ⁷⁴). Re-examination of these data suggests that the percentage of white respondents who checked a given trait for a given group was responsive to changes in laws and major sociohistorical events. For example, the percentage of participants who indicated that people of Chinese heritage were ‘loyal to family ties’ jumped to 50% in 1967, from 35% in 1951, and 22% in 1933. From the perspective of the sociohistorical model, this shift in stereotype endorsement probably reflected cultural reactions to a structural change in USA immigration policy (the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, which removed legal barriers against immigration from Asia) rather than any real demographic shift, because the rate of immigration from Asia did not begin to actually change until 1970 (ref. ⁷⁵). As another example, positive impressions of people of Japanese heritage were generally high in 1933 and 1967, but plummeted in 1951, perhaps due to Japan’s position as an enemy in World War II (1941–1945); this decrease in positive impressions (and increase in negative ones) might have been used to justify the internment of Japanese American people⁷⁴.

Of course, these data do not empirically test the hypothesis that historical events shape laws that dictate the roles occupied by different racialized groups, which ultimately shape group prototypes. Nonetheless, they do suggest that historical events can affect individual beliefs. To more precisely test our sociohistorical model, future work should examine whether the strength of gendered-racial prototypes differ across contexts where laws and cultural institutions differ.

Gender-race prototypes in the USA

Adopting a sociohistorical model of social prototypes has several benefits. First, it underscores that race and gender are socially and historically constructed^{27,76}, even though these constructions have very real contemporary impacts on the people being gendered and racialized⁷⁷. Second, even though the sociohistorical perspective makes claims about how

people represent subordinated groups in general, situating prototypes within a culturally informed learning process leaves room for contextual and regional variability⁷⁸. Third, the sociohistorical model provides a framework for integrating across multiple levels of analysis – from macrolevel cultural ideologies to the microlevel cognitive processes that shape how people think of categories and concepts. Fourth, this model clearly outlines the directionality of influence in intersectional social concepts – that is, how gender influences prototypes of racial groups, and how race influences prototypes of gender groups. Finally, this model accommodates unique or emergent stereotypes that exist only at the intersection of multiple subordinated groups.

In this section we apply our sociohistorical model to specific social prototypes in the USA to illustrate these benefits in more detail.

Prototypes of Black people

Similar to all three theories outline above, a sociohistorical model of gendered racial representation predicts that the dominant gendered prototype for Black people is Black men. However, we extend beyond these theories to suggest that the true source of this prototype is the history of slavery in the USA, which gave rise to perceptions of Black people as masculine. White slaveowners racially subjugated Black people and used them for their unwilling and uncompensated slave labour. Black men were forced to work in fields to produce crops and other goods, which fulfilled white men’s goals of securing and increasing wealth⁷⁹.

Although people often believe that Black women were primarily house servants or held more traditionally feminine and less manually intensive labour, this was not necessarily the case⁸⁰: most enslaved people of all genders were field workers⁸⁰. Viewing Black women as unfeminine aligned with white men’s goals by validating their use as manual labourers^{79,81}. Un-feminizing Black women as merely a means of production also disassociated them from the moral considerations of motherhood, thereby justifying white slave owners’ goals to separate them from their children in order to sell the children for profit⁸⁰.

We argue that the historical context of slavery has created a social structure that communicates and reinforces cultural stereotypes of Blackness as masculine. Over the past 100 years people in the USA

have consistently reported awareness of masculine Black stereotypes (for example, that Black people are aggressive), even as their personal endorsement of these stereotypes has changed⁸². Even in early childhood, children perceive Black men as particularly masculine, and Black women as less feminine⁸³ (compared to white men and women), suggesting that these cultural stereotypes are learned early and then rehearsed over a lifetime as children observe that both media and the adults in their communities use masculine Black stereotypes in everyday situations⁸⁴.

Prototypes of Asian people

Like gendered-race theory, the sociohistorical model suggests that the dominant gendered prototype of Asian people in the USA is an East Asian woman. Historically, policies in the USA justified excluding East Asian people by portraying them as sexually deviant and wily⁸⁵ – traits that are considered particularly negative for women. For example, the first immigration ban in the USA (the Page Act) targeted Chinese women to prevent them from immigrating to the USA because they were declared to be immoral prostitutes who carried venereal diseases that threatened the sanctity of white Christian marriages^{86,87}. The legislation that followed (the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Immigration Act of 1924) greatly limited immigration from Asia and led to a gender imbalance with many more East Asian men than East Asian women. Although this imbalance could have resulted in an East Asian male prototype, many East Asian men turned to laundering and cooking⁸⁸ (positions that are stereotypically feminine) when railroad construction work ended and they could not find other employment. Finally, the feminization of Asian people was further reinforced when (white male) American soldiers in the Korean and Vietnam wars considered Asian women as sexual objects of conquest and brought Asian war brides back to the USA⁸⁹. These gendered roles probably reinforced the cultural stereotypes of Asian people as feminine⁹⁰, thereby perpetuating the emasculation of (East) Asian men and the hyperfeminization of Asian women^{72,85}.

The feminization of Asian people also served to create greater contrast between minority groups and to reinforce whiteness at the top. Psychologically, prototypical category members share more features with other members of their categories, and share fewer features with non-members (the concept of family resemblance^{1,91}). Thus, idealized category members are often viewed as more prototypical when they are helpful for differentiating categories from one another, especially at early stages of concept acquisition^{51,91–94}.

In the context of intersectional social prototypes, prototypes of Asian people might have accentuated femininity compared to Black Americans, who were already seen as more masculine by virtue of their (historical) slave labour, as well as white Americans, who might have adopted an ideology of Orientalism (stereotyped representations of Asia that embodies a colonialist attitude), which feminizes East Asian cultures and masculinizes the Western worlds⁹⁵. In this way, a feminine East Asian prototype is more ideal for white American goals because emphasizing more feminine traits and values, such as commitment to family and nonviolence⁸⁹, casts East Asian people as a diligent and docile ‘model minority’ in society⁹⁶ compared to Black Americans. This feminine prototype also aligns with the goal of viewing East Asian people as insufficiently agentic (a stereotypically masculine trait) to occupy positions of leadership and status in society, unlike white Americans⁹⁷.

Prototypes of Latinx Americans

Relative to prototypes of Black and Asian Americans, gendered representations of Latinx Americans are not well studied. However, a sociohistorical model predicts that the dominant prototype of a Latinx

person would be a Latino man. We contend that white men primarily thought of Latinx people in terms of their labour utility, similar to how white men viewed Black people. Evidence for this premise comes from institutionalization of guestworker programmes (such as the Bracero programme) that allowed Mexican labourers to work in the USA on short-term contracts to address labour shortages⁹⁸.

Several unique features of the guestworker programmes contribute to a male prototype of Latinx people in the USA. First, more Mexican men were recruited to work in the USA than Mexican women – a gender divide that has increased since the 1970s⁹⁹. Second, short-term contracts meant that Mexican workers moved regularly across borders and so were not forced into feminized sectors of work to survive (unlike East Asian people, who took on more feminized roles when physical labour opportunities decreased). Thus, East Asian men were feminized, whereas Latino men were not. Indeed, when people are asked to attribute traits to Latinx people in general, Latino men and Latina women, the top ten traits attributed to Latinx people in general (such as poor, dark-skinned and day labourers) overlap more with the specific traits attributed to Latino men than with traits attributed to Latina women³⁰.

On the surface, the masculinization of Latinx people might seem inconsistent with the goal of contrasting racial groups to maintain white supremacy, because both Latinx and Black people are masculinized. However, adopting a multidimensional framework of the racial hierarchy helps to identify how Black and Latinx groups are considered differently. Latinx and Black people are both masculinized, whereas only Latinx people – but not Black people – are cast as foreign^{43,100}. Indeed, even Black Americans espouse more conservative views, including on policy items that are more exclusive of immigrants, when the growth of the Latinx population in the USA is made salient¹⁰¹.

Prototypes of Native American people

Similar to representations of Latinx people, none of the existing theories explicitly account for prototypes of Native American people, and we will not try to extrapolate what the theories might predict or contort them to make a prediction. Instead, we suggest that much of the existing work on perceptions of Native American people highlights their invisibility in modern American society^{102,103}. We argue that part of the reason that prototypes of Native American people remain frozen in time (that is, unchanged from a historical stereotype) and why they are psychologically invisible (for example, an absence of representation in society) is because Native American people provided no perceived utility to white colonists; rather, what these settlers needed was the land on which Native American people had built their communities. The ideal Native American person relative to the goals of the dominant group was therefore one that did not exist at all, providing no obstacle to white American territorial claims.

Support for the premise that, to a white person, the ideal Native American person was one that did not exist comes from the existence of ‘blood quantum’ laws (laws in the USA that define Native American status by fractions of Native American ancestry) which minimize Native identity and citizenship and thereby reduce USA obligations to Native peoples^{104,105}. This strategic use of blood ancestry codified into law is similar to the ‘one-drop’ rule (the assertion that any person with a single Black ancestor is considered Black) that led to perceptions of hypodescent (that is, that a mixed-race person is non-white) for people with Black ancestry¹⁰⁶. However, unlike the one-drop rule that used ancestry to exclude people from a racial ingroup (that is, white people), blood quantum laws limited who could be defined as sufficiently ‘Indian’ – that is, excluding Native American people from

racial outgroups¹⁰⁷. Although the use of these laws might seem inconsistent across racial groups, they make sense from the sociohistorical view outlined above: these laws reflect how people's category structure shifts to align with the interests of the white men who dominate and structure society.

Prototypes of women

Thus far, we have discussed how gender influences representations of subordinated racialized groups. In considering how race shapes prototypes of subordinated gender groups, we marry perspectives from the theory of gendered prejudice and intersectional invisibility. More specifically, we argue that the dominant prototype of women, who comprise a subordinated gender group, is white. Because of the unique circumstances of interdependence between men and women^{64,81,108}, women's perceived utility to men is primarily as wives and mothers. From a heterosexual white man's perspective, the social calculations involved in affiliating with a marriage partner, and securing high-quality childcare labour for any children, probably outweigh women's biological reproductive capabilities in determining who is considered a prototypical woman. Specifically, we predict that the utility of women to white men will place more weight on their contribution to how men are perceived socially, in terms of winning esteem and being viewed as responsible and interpersonal¹⁰⁹ (that is, high in both competence and warmth). Indeed, having a wife and family can often serve to increase a (white) man's income^{110,111}. Furthermore, women's utility as mothers also rests on their social status, because their access to resources is passed on to their children.

Given the importance of these social calculations, where constructing the 'right' kind of family can earn a white man greater status in the social hierarchy, we contend that the prototype of women is more likely to be a white woman than a woman of colour. Historically, formal laws prohibiting 'miscegenation' (marriage between a white person and a non-white person) codified this marginalization of women of colour until 1967, and biased social norms portraying interracial marriage as unnatural persist today¹¹². Negative stereotypes of women of colour (for example, as promiscuous¹¹³) further minimize their perceived fitness as marriage partners, perpetuating the centring of white women as representative of women in general. Indeed, stereotypes of what makes for a good mother differ by race: for white women, a good mother is one that stays home to take care of children, whereas for Black women a good mother is one who works¹¹⁴.

Generalizability

We have focused primarily on how people represent race and gender in the USA. However, we expect that a sociohistorical framework can be usefully extended to intersections of other identities and in other macro contexts.

Generalizability across social identities

One intersection that might be fruitfully analysed using the proposed sociohistorical framework is race and social class. Existing intersectional theories disagree in their predictions for this intersection of identities. Specifically, intersectional invisibility predicts that a subordinated class-based category (such as poor people) would still retain whiteness and maleness as default characteristics, resulting in a white male prototype of poor people in general. Although gendered-race theory does not explicitly consider the intersection between race and class, the principles underlying gendered-race theory might predict that a poor category should reflect shared stereotypes between poor

and Black categories (such as struggle, hardship and laziness)^{18,74} that would probably result in a Black male prototype of a poor person. However, the growing literature on the intersection of race, gender and class indicates that prototypes of poor people are often Black and female¹¹⁵.

This gendered-racial prototype of poor people is hard to reconcile without adopting a sociohistorical view that considers how subordinated groups are defined by the dominant group. Historically, racial groups were a construct by which wealthy, land-owning white men in colonial America helped to create a social hierarchy that divided the larger lower-class groups to dilute their collective power¹¹⁶. Thus, class has always been racialized in American society. Social class has also been gendered: women were legally financially subordinate to men in the USA well into the twentieth century¹¹⁷. Thus, a sociohistorical perspective helps to make sense of why the prototypical poor person would be a Black woman¹¹⁵.

Although we have largely focused our discussion on how race might shape representations of women, the sociohistorical model can also be useful in thinking about how race shapes representations of other subordinated gender groups, such as gender non-binary and transgender people, as well as minoritized sexual identity groups, such as lesbian, gay and bisexual people. There is again agreement between the sociohistorical model and some of the existing theories on prototypes of gender diverse and minoritized sexual identity groups, although the proposed processes that give rise to them differ.

For example, intersectional invisibility holds that the prototype of a gay person would retain white and male defaults – resulting in a white gay male prototype – because subordinated gender groups are unmarked categories that are not bound to another subordinated identity. Moreover, it is more difficult to visually assess sexual orientation than more perceptually salient minoritized identities like race (although people still try to do so)¹¹⁸. Consistent with this account, learning that a racial minority man is gay leads him to be 'whitened' in people's mental representations, suggesting that the whiteness of a gay prototype can shift the racial representation of a person¹¹⁹.

However, a white gay male prototype and racialization of gay people as white can also be explained via a sociohistorical process. Gay white men, who would be at the top of the social hierarchy except for their sexual minority identity, would not want to relegate sexual minority groups – and therefore themselves – to the same status as racial minority groups. Thus, the goal of an otherwise dominant group was to mainstream homosexuality, making it more culturally accepted¹²⁰. This manifested in the one of the quickest shifts in public opinion in the USA on a social issue (that is, on the acceptability of gay marriage); in comparison, it took the country nearly 200 years to overturn miscegenation laws¹²¹. Indeed, who 'comes out' as a member of a gender or sexual minority category is often biased by social capital¹²², and part of the reason that racial minorities are 'whitened' when participants learn they are gay is that the gay group membership also conveys status information¹¹⁹.

Generalizability across social contexts

The USA is among the world's most racially and ethnically diverse countries, and race in the USA is in many ways a unique construct. For example, adult immigrants from other countries often go through a racialization process that is unique to the USA¹²³. In other contexts, such as western Europe, considerations of 'race' have largely been replaced by ethnicity and/or nationality¹²⁴. Moving beyond western Europe, many countries are more homogeneous than the USA (for example, China is 91% Han Chinese¹²⁵), with relatively few ethnic minority groups¹²⁵,

so race might have a less central role in everyday cognition than other forms of group-based discrimination. The sociohistorical framework presented here is grounded in how race operates in the USA, but future work might extend it to other cultural contexts.

Indeed, there is already some evidence that social prototypes can vary across countries and regions owing to the unique sociohistorical construction of category prototypes. For example, an 'Asian' prototype in the USA is more likely to be reflective of an East Asian person (that is, from China, Korea or Japan) than it is in the UK¹²⁶. This difference reflects the sociohistorical patterns of migration and colonization between the USA and the UK, with more South Asian people immigrating to the UK and more East Asian people immigrating to the USA¹²⁷. According to a sociohistorical model, these regional variations should lead to differences in prototypes both because of the statistical regularities in the environment (for example, there are more South Asian than East Asian people in the UK) as well as the sociohistorical context that shaped these groups' roles in different countries. For example, South Asian people played a more central role in the UK labour force and were therefore of greater utility to the dominant group, whereas in the USA, East Asian people had a more central role in the labour force and the industrialization of the USA; growth of the South Asian population only increased substantially after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (ref.¹²⁸).

Conclusion

A greater understanding of how people come to represent social categories in overlapping ways is imperative given the growing diversity of society in the USA. In this Perspective, we have reviewed three

prominent theories of how race and gender intersect and suggested a sociohistorical model of prototypes that integrates ideas of intersectionality in people's mental representations. This sociohistorical model extends beyond theories of gender–race overlap by accounting for how other racial minority groups within the context of the USA (such as Latinx people and Native American people) are represented in shared cultural prototypes.

Additionally, we argue that understanding the gendered nature of racial prototypes, as well as the racialized nature of gendered prototypes, in the USA requires an understanding of the historical position of these groups relative to white men in American society. In this way, social prototypes might be better thought of as reflecting both the descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes endorsed by the dominant group that are preserved and reinforced through cultural practices that shape basic cognitive processes. Moreover, incorporating gender into an understanding of how the American racial hierarchy operates and is maintained is a theoretically important element of the sociohistorical model. For example, white women receive harsh penalties for having an other-race partner, whereas men and Black women experience no such penalty¹²⁹. Socially sanctioning a white woman's interracial relationship in this way communicates that she has violated a norm that maintains the racial hierarchy and operates as a caution against others who might do the same.

The fundamental proposal that social prototypes are shaped by the goals, structures and norms established by the dominant group – white men in the society of the USA – also invites the question of what the goals of white men in the USA might be. Thus far, we have argued that these prototypes serve the goal of creating and

Box 2

Example research questions derived from the sociohistorical model

Variation by racialized group

Gendered prototypes of racialized groups that are newer to the USA should be more variable across contexts than those that have been in the USA for longer. We reason that this might be the case because it takes time for cultural prototypes of racial groups to crystallize within the dominant worldview. For example, we predict greater variability in the masculinity or femininity of the stereotypic traits listed for people from Latin America than for Black people, whose cultural representation has long been defined by white people in the USA.

Variation within the USA

Variability in patterns of historical contact between racial or ethnic groups should be correlated with regional variation in gendered-racial prototypes (similar ideas have examined how history influenced modern racial attitudes⁷⁸). For example, people in cultural contexts where Latinx people's utility to the dominant group centres on feminine social roles (for example, as nannies or housekeepers) might hold a female Latina prototype, whereas people in contexts where Latinx people's utility centres on masculine roles (for example, as farmworkers or day labourers) might hold a male Latino prototype.

Developmental consistency

Children should show patterns reflecting the predictions of a sociohistorical model of social prototypes even in the absence of any direct teaching of stereotypes. Culture is learned and transmitted indirectly, and children are motivated to understand how to navigate the social world they inhabit. As such, children pay attention to distributions of racial and gender representation in society (which favours white people and men^{61,143}). Thus, we predict that children develop prototypes in line with those held by the adults in their communities. For example, children might develop feminine or masculine Latinx prototypes depending on context – even if the children themselves do not have any direct contact with Latinx people in these roles. There is some evidence to support these hypotheses. For example, children – including children of colour – develop social prototypes that centre whiteness¹³. Research on intersectional prototypes should include more diverse samples of participants to test better how direct experience and cultural learning interact across the development of these representations.

reinforcing a gendered-racial social hierarchy with white men at the top^{130,131}. This might certainly be the motivation of some white men, but many white men have the opposite motivation – to dismantle systems of oppression. Although both groups of white men might share the same prototypes of subordinated groups, they might differ in their endorsement and explanation of how those prototypes came to be (for a similar argument for stereotypes, see ref.⁶³). Future work should consider this possibility. More broadly, we suggest that a sociohistorical perspective would be useful for conceptually organizing and accounting for several disparate lines of work in the literature on intersectional gendered-racial representations, and for generating novel empirical predictions that could be explored in future work (Box 2).

Our focus has primarily been on how race and gender intersect for prototypes of subordinated groups. However, the sociohistorical model could also help researchers to understand the implications for non-prototypical members of groups. Although all non-prototypical group members might share some similarities in outcomes such as psychological invisibility^{28,39}, the nature of that invisibility might differ (for a similar proposal, see ref.⁵⁰). For example, although both Asian men and Black women are more psychologically invisible in general relative to their group prototypes (that is, Asian women and Black men), Asian men might be less invisible than Black women in certain contexts (such as in technology industries¹³²) because of their utility to the dominant group. Understanding how subordinated group prototypes are constructed can help to clarify when invisibility manifests for non-prototypical members and the nature of that invisibility.

Another important limitation to note is that we have considered intersectionality only from the perceiver's perspective. This limitation omits intersectional perspectives and theories that consider the unique experiences of people with multiple subordinated identities, such as the double jeopardy hypothesis¹³³ (according to which people who have multiple subordinated identities experience compounding discrimination as a result of each subordinated identity) and the ethnic prominence hypothesis¹³⁴ (according to which subordinated ethnic identity is the primary predictor of the amount of discrimination experienced). For example, white women and Black women conceive of and experience womanhood in different ways, with Black women incorporating a theme of inner strength in a way that white women do not¹³⁵. This example highlights the importance of understanding the lived experiences and perspectives of people with multiple subordinated identities, which should be incorporated into future work on this topic. However, the conceptual representation and use of social categories can emerge even before children identify with these categories¹³⁶. Thus, our focus on understanding how social categories are perceived and represented is important for potential interventions to create a more equitable society.

Ultimately, how social categories are represented and perceived has important implications, including how we feel about and behave towards the people around us – and ourselves. Psychologists are increasingly advocating for a more historically informed psychological science¹³⁷. Our sociohistorical model of how race and gender intersect in people's representations demonstrates how insights from history and the social sciences can shed light on how psychological processes function in society, advancing both psychological theory and our understanding of the increasingly diverse world around us.

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