

Facecraft: Race Reification in Psychological Research With Faces

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Abstract

Faces are socially important surfaces of the body on which various meanings are attached. The widespread physiognomic belief that faces inherently contain socially predictive value is why they make a generative stimulus for perception research. However, critical problems arise in studies that simultaneously investigate faces and race. Researchers studying race and racism inadvertently engage in various research practices that transform faces with specific phenotypes into straightforward representatives of their presumed race category, thereby taking race and its phenotypic associations for granted. I argue that research practices that map race categories onto faces using bioessentialist ideas of racial phenotypes constitute a form of racecraft ideology, the dubious reasoning of which presupposes the reality of race and mystifies the causal relation between race and racism. In considering how to study racism without reifying race in face studies, this article places these practices in context, describes how they reproduce racecraft ideology and impair theoretical inferences, and then suggests counterpractices for minimizing this problem.

Keywords

racecraft, face perception, essentialism, antirealism

Physiognomic practices treat faces as legible surfaces of the body that reveal deep truths about others (Celis Bueno, 2020; Todorov, 2017). Facial physiognomy also occurs within perception-research practices. Researchers who study race and racism¹ often present participants with face stimuli or develop face sets that presumably resemble a particular race category because of a specific phenotype. Faces then become transformed into straightforward representatives of their presumed race category, as evidenced by discussions of “black faces”² or “white faces” within publications. I make the case that unfortunately these research practices often fall short of illuminating the operations of racism (and often obfuscate them) because they themselves constitute a form of racecraft (K. E. Fields & Fields, 2012), a reproduction of racist ideology that reifies race, in this case through bioessentialist beliefs about phenotypes that are used to map race categories onto people. I arrived at this perspective as a social-cognition researcher who engages with external literatures (e.g., in philosophy, sociology, history, black studies, and critical theories) that challenged me to reflexively grapple with these tensions in my research. In considering outside perspectives, the commonsense practices that often get taken

for granted in face studies became salient and led me to wonder how one might study racism and racialization without reifying race in the process. Therefore, in this article, I combine interdisciplinary insights to set the foundation for how to think about these practices in context, provide reasons for why they reproduce racecraft ideology and how this impairs theoretical inferences, and suggest counterpractices for minimizing this problem.

The Laboratory as an Extension of Society

Ecological-validity critiques of laboratory experiments highlight how contrived settings become an inferential barrier from the operations of “the real world.” However, this critique downplays how laboratory studies are actually embedded in society and thus not immune from societal dynamics (Gergen, 1973; Latour, 2005, 2011). Permeability between the laboratory and society

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suggests we need to develop reflexive practices that consider how study designs might be shaped by the same social forces one is studying and, in turn, how these studies reproduce those forces.

For instance, societal discourses often influence experimental design and inference. Marginalized people often engage in population politics (e.g., the construction and framing of demographic categories and statistics) to gain recognition (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2021). This contributes to changes in the official census race and ethnic categories (Pew Research Center et al., 2020) that psychologists often use as options in their race measures. Through public and institutional influences on measurement practices, dominant conceptions of race facilitate psychologists' racialization of participants as codified in demographic variables, study designs, and publications (James, 2008). Laboratories, in turn, influence societal discourses. For example, psychological studies on race differences produce statistics that operate as a form of "racial knowledge" for scholars and the public, in the process constructing understandings of race(s) (Goldberg, 2000). This intimate exchange between laboratory and society influences what race is believed to be and how it should be measured or studied (Eberhardt & Randall, 1997; Helms et al., 2005; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Zuberi, 2000). Therefore, it remains critical to monitor the metaphysical assumptions about race that guide psychological-research designs (Hochstein, 2019; Teo, 2011).³

Race Realism in Psychology

The assumed existence of race as a *real* biological (e.g., genetic-phenotypic clusters) or social (e.g., politicocultural groups or identities) kind has been hotly debated (see Hochman, 2020; Morning, 2011; Msimang, 2022; Spencer, 2018a, 2018b), even within psychology (Goodman, 2017; Helms et al., 2005; Tate & Audette, 2001; Teo, 2011; Zuckerman, 1990). The stakes are high because each position can be used to (de)naturalize racism in some manner. Recent psychological scholarship summarizing the state of this debate has rejected biological understandings of race toward viewing race as a real social kind that produces real consequences (Richeson & Sommers, 2016; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021), an influence from constructionist theories that posit that social-political-historical processes produce *races* that people live by, defend, reject, or transform (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Golash-Boza, 2016; Omi & Winant, 2015).

Social-race realism, which posits that races socially exist, has two consequences within psychology. First, it fails to address well-developed challenges theorizing race as illusory (Hochman, 2020). From this perspective, race realism obfuscates the relation between racism and

race by treating them as separable (Cazenave, 2016; K. E. Fields & Fields, 2012). The literature on race relations and prejudice reduction, for example, discusses race as if it were a field of identities that transcend racist practices (B. J. Fields, 2001; Saucier & Woods, 2016). Instead, racism is theorized to require and produce the *belief* in races through repeated colonial practices and ideologies (K. E. Fields & Fields, 2012; Hesse, 2007, 2016) that place people within or outside of modernity's biocentric genre of Man (Weheliye, 2014; Wynter, 2003, 2005). This mythology, which defines what it means to be human, generates racialized taxonomies of humanity, asserts itself as natural and universal, and emerged through racism, capitalist relations, and Darwinian notions of evolution, competition, and fitness (Weheliye, 2014; Wynter, 2003, 2005, 2015). By treating the myth of race as a real entity, race is granted unmerited causal power over psychological phenomena rather than theorized as an illusory product of the *actual* causal force: racist practices (Holland, 2008; Zuberi, 2000). Treating race as explanatory therefore propagates the race-racism evasion that "transforms *racism*, something an aggressor does, into *race*, something the target is" (K. E. Fields & Fields, 2012, p. 17).

The second consequence is race essentialism in theorization and analyses, whether intentional or not (Brubaker, 2004; Gillespie et al., 2012; Loveman, 1999; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Sen & Wasow, 2016; Williams, 2019). How this reification occurs is multidetermined. One reason may be that dominant quantitative methods in psychology require classifying people into imagined statistical groupings (Igo, 2007; Sysling, 2021), such as comparing averages that appear to summarize putatively static and discrete racial groups (Martinez & Paluck, 2020; Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2021). A related reason is the slippery application of "groups" and "identity" terminology to race, whereby race is granted a semblance of realness by being transformed into a natural demographic or individual characteristic. "Racial groups" can confuse race *categories* for homogeneous and stable *groups* infused with a collective agency and shared interests, even though there is considerable heterogeneity and ambivalence in the ways people adopt, reject, or redefine imposed race categories (Brubaker, 2004; Cikara, 2021; Lee, 2008; Magubane, 2022; Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2021; Wimmer, 2015), whereas "racial identity" can conflate self-understandings developed in response to racism as evidence for the realness of imposed race categories (Blum, 2010; Brubaker, 2004; B. J. Fields, 2001). One final reason may include worries about propagating color-blind ideologies such that rejecting race as real is equated to rejecting the existence of racism. Here, defending the reality of race becomes a requirement for fighting racism.

However, there is an alternative: Be antirealist about both biological and social race but realist about racism and racialization,⁴ “which do not require races, but only the belief in races” (Hochman, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021, p. 34). Contrary to constructionist thinking that theorizes how *races* are socially formed (e.g., Omi & Winant, 2015), this view argues that what is formed are not *races* but rather *racialized groups* “mistakenly believed to be races” (Hochman, 2021, p. 32). In this formulation, *races* do not and have never existed (for comprehensive arguments against biological and social race realism, see Hochman, 2017, 2020; I reflect on potential concerns social scientists might have with race antirealism in Box 1). As Hochman (2019, 2020) highlighted, common race talk largely references biological race; therefore, race antirealism is partly a pragmatic call to keep race a biological concept that refers to nothing that exists while ensuring that realism does not get injected into this biological definition through interference from definitions of race as socially real. Part of what makes social-race realism seem useful is that it enables discussion and analysis of how people who share racial classifications could and often do build a groupiness through shared experiences or histories of discrimination. However, this benefit can become a double-edged sword when race categories get naturalized and essentialized, as is bound to happen when biological and social understandings of race collide. The terminological and ontological shift from social races toward *racialized groups* enables the same discussions yet makes clear these groupings are not actual races (Hochman, 2019), which is a step toward minimizing notions of biological and psychological racial essences (Blum, 2010). Furthermore, the switch from race (which emphasizes a trait-like status) to racialization (which emphasizes action) asks us to trace racialization processes within our experiments: how people become misperceived as belonging to a biological race and treated as such through the contextually shifting significance that racism places on fluid assemblages of features such as phenotype, apparel, genetics, religion, speech, ancestry, national origin, legal documents, cultural practices, material property, physical environments, and more (Ásta, 2018; Bonam et al., 2017; Flores & Schachter, 2018; Hochman, 2017; Rosa & Flores, 2017; Saldanha, 2006; Schachter et al., 2021; Sen & Wasow, 2016; Sims et al., 2020). In this way, racialized groups become seen less as transhistorical monolithic entities and more as events made possible by processes that generate momentary or enduring context-specific relations between human, more-than-human, discursive, and material elements (Cikara et al., 2022; Price-Robertson & Duff, 2016).

Like witchcraft, in which witches and magic are assumed to exist and treated as real entities that can explain and produce social phenomena, racecraft ideology conjures race(s) with similar properties (K. E. Fields & Fields, 2012). Rather than taking race(s) for granted as a predetermined entity that exists biologically or socially, the racecraft by which race becomes treated as such by psychologists needs to be identified and addressed. The costs of failing to do so are great: It can contribute to psychology’s history of aiding the discipline and control of society by reifying classifications and their consequences through scientific authority and practices (Dixon-Román, 2017; Gergen, 1973; Gillespie et al., 2012; Stainton Rogers et al., 1995), it can bolster the pretense of scientific objectivity such that concerns for researchers’ ethical responsibility for the authoritative cuts they make in society vanish behind normative scientific procedures (Barad, 2003), and it threatens the theoretical validity of proposed psychological mechanisms, as discussed in the next section.

Assessing Racecraft and Putative Solutions in Experimental Psychological Science

The following study designs and practices for studying races and faces are common in social and cognitive psychological science yet propagate race realism and racecraft, in other words, *facecraft*, which I use to refer to the practices and supporting ideologies (e.g., racecraft) that mobilize faces and their features to serve as representations of or evidence for the realness of social categories while obscuring the processes that map categories onto faces. Here I focus on race; however, facecraft could also occur for other classifications (i.e., gender, sexual orientation, nationality) that have also been projected onto faces through varied and overlapping histories.

Research designs often use racialized features that are read as phenotypic signs of race to map race categories onto faces. The operating physiognomic assumption is that race can be read *from* a face instead of acknowledging that racialized meanings are read *into* a face through its features. This occurs in social-perception research that relies on virtual or real faces that, according to the assumptions of the researchers, signal a specific race category such as implicit-association tasks, memory and recognition tasks, classification tasks, interpretation tasks (e.g., reading the mind in the eyes), neural decoding of social categories, the development of stimulus sets, face morphs, and even in-person confederate studies. Racializing assumptions already shape researchers’ investigative questions before these studies begin. Although the face is only

Box 1. Potential Concerns With Adopting Race Antirealism

The following questions reflect potential concerns that may arise for readers who worry about the implications of adopting a race antirealist stance. My hope is to show that these concerns can be alleviated and that antirealism provides a viable alternative theoretical and empirical tool kit for psychology.

1. Does antirealism disarm scholars, activists, and groups who rely on race categories to fight against racism by suggesting we eliminate all race talk in our theorizing or practice (i.e., race eliminativism)?

Various versions of race antirealism exist. This article advocates “anti-realist reconstructionism about race. The term ‘anti-realist’ indicates that race is an illusion. The term ‘reconstructionism’ adds that the groups people think of as ‘races’ are better understood to be racialized groups” (Hochman, 2021, p. 32). Unlike calls for race eliminativism (Cubelli & Della Sala, 2018), this approach “allows us to not only talk and write policies about the groups we have been calling ‘races’, but it avoids the metaphysical mistake of reifying race” (Hochman, 2017; Mavundla, 2019, p. 224). It further acknowledges that “we would still need to talk about ‘race’ even if we could all agree that race is not real” (Hochman, 2019, p. 1257). Rather than eliminating race talk, its consequences are managed more carefully through antirealist reconstructionism.

2. Is replacing “race” with “racialized group” simply a lexical swap (like replacing race with ancestry) that changes little in how we approach the study of race and racism?

Rather than a simple lexical swap, “racialized group” clarifies constitutive relationships between terms. Unlike race, racialization implies both a context—“something that is done to a group, by some social agent, at a certain time, for a given period, in and through various processes, and relative to a particular social context” (Garcia, 2003, p. 285)—and an active process—“racialized groups emerge out of the ongoing interaction between a number of factors: administrative, biological, cultural, economic, geographic, gendered, historical, lingual, phenomenological, political, psychological, religious, social, and so on” (Hochman, 2017, pp. 79–80). Swapping race (or even racialized group) with ancestry therefore narrowly emphasizes one factor to the exclusion of others because ancestry is one ingredient among many in the production of racialized groups.

3. If “race” is illusory, how should we theorize the material consequences of race?

It is important that causal language is careful and specific. “Neither ‘witch’ nor ‘pure race’ has a material existence. Both are products of thought, and of language. Having no material existence, they cannot have material causation” (K. E. Fields & Fields, 2012, pp. 22). This is “not to downplay the effects of the *idea of race*—myths can be immensely powerful” (Hochman, 2020, p. 1), but to acknowledge that the material consequences attributed to race are better attributed to the racism or racialization that facilitates *belief in race*: “The real action creates evidence for the imagined thing” (K. E. Fields & Fields, 2012, p. 22). Attributing causality to race and “locating explanations in categories allows categories to act as scapegoats for the social practices (such as racism, racialization or gendering) that are actually producing the consequences and illusory naturalness of categories in the first place” (Cikara et al., 2022, p. 539).

4. Are racialized identities and subjectivities also considered illusions or fraudulent?

Antirealism “is not in tension with personal identity in the way it might initially appear—it just needs to be combined with realism about racialized groups” (Hochman, 2020, p. 9). In this way, antirealism does not deny the felt impact of racism, as “the experience of being racialized—of being classified as belonging to this or that ‘race’—is certainly real. The experiences of living in a racist society are also real” (Hochman, 2020, p. 5). The fraudulence here “lies in the beliefs that have rationalized one’s people’s plight” (Hochman, 2020, p. 9). At the same time, it is important to be careful with how categories of social and political practice become categories of analysis (Brubaker, 2004; Loveman, 1999). Rather than theorizing the races or identities posited by race and identity talk as referring to “things in the world,” they can be understood as “perspectives on the world” (Brubaker, 2004, p. 4), perceptions that can be immensely powerful, as noted above.

5. Are other social categories also illusory? What are the implications for studies of category interrelations (e.g., psychology’s uptake of intersectionality theory)?

Antirealism has clearer compatibility with scholarship that studies category interrelatedness while simultaneously questioning humanism’s ontological assumptions. Critiques of our biocentric account of what it means to be human (modernity’s genre of “Man”) understands its classification systems (e.g., race, gender) as myths or stories through which we get instituted as humans in relation to Man (Hvenegård-Lassen & Staunæs, 2020;

(Continued)

Box 1. (Continued)

Weheliye, 2014; Wynter, 2003, 2005). Contrary to humanist approaches that fight oppression by “rehumanizing” people through legible subject positions (e.g., woman, latina, gay), counterhumanist approaches highlight how access to Man’s classification systems is not universal, violently regulated, and may instead require interventions aimed at historically specific Man itself (i.e., develop new conceptions of what it means to be human; Bey, 2022; Erasmus, 2020; Jackson, 2020; Lugones, 2020; McKittrick, 2015; Spillers, 1987; Wynter, 2015). Delineating the full implications of antirealism for category interrelations requires a more comprehensive interrogation of psychology’s “huManist” foundations.

6. If understandings of “race” remain stubbornly biologized, will not “racialization” be similarly biologized?

A challenge of race talk among scientists is the attempt to resignify its firm biological realist associations (Obasogie et al., 2015). Racialization is not as biologized, so it currently holds strategic value as a concept for speaking clearly about the social reality of racism. Whether it is robust to biologization is not known. Racialization does include biology as a factor in the racialization process, which could make it vulnerable; however, it also makes clear that “racialized groups do not form valid biological categories” (Hochman, 2017, p. 84). Moreover, racialization also implies a context and active construction process and thus requires people to fill in the blanks, the necessary contextual elaboration that could defend against biologization.

7. How can antirealism account for the way race gets embodied “under the skin”?

Rather than race itself, it is social inequalities (i.e., racism) that can “shape the biology of racialized groups, and embodied inequalities perpetuate a racialized view of human biology” (Hochman, 2020, p. 4). Embodiment therefore reflects how racialization processes spread racist mythologies through various avenues that are granted direct or epistemological access to our biology to act on it (Weheliye, 2014). Avenues include biometric technologies (Browne, 2010) or scientific discourses (Jackson, 2020; Wynter, 2015). These processes could also be understood as forms of racecraft that attempt to “transform racism, something an aggressor does, into race, something the target is” (K. E. Fields & Fields, 2012, p. 17).

8. Racisms are theorized as dynamic and multilevel. How is racialization linked to various manifestations of racism (e.g., institutional, structural, systemic, interpersonal)?

Racialization should be understood as “a general concept which points to something unified—a form of biologization—taking place in multiple contexts and through multiple mechanisms. Determining the specific mechanisms involved in particular cases of racialization is up to the researcher; it is not something the concept can achieve” (Hochman, 2021, p. 36). Therefore, researchers of racism will need to fill in the blanks (e.g., a target, “an action by some social agent, at a certain time, for a given period, in and through various processes, and relative to a particular social context”; Garcia, 2003, p. 285) as appropriate given one’s respective theoretical orientations.

9. What are some relative benefits of antirealism over realist social constructionism for psychological science?

Beyond conceptual issues with various social-constructionist theories of race (Msimang, 2022), pragmatic reasons include how antirealism attempts to diminish the reification of race that is possible through social-constructionist theorizing (Brubaker, 2004; K. E. Fields & Fields, 2012; Hochman, 2022), and antirealism is clearly incompatible with biological-race realism, whereas social-constructionist stances can be compatible with biological-race realism despite how they are assumed to be at odds (Hochman, 2022). However, given the unfamiliarity of race antirealism in psychology, its translation into an empirical tool kit needs development as attempted here and in related work (Martinez & Paluck, 2020).

10. Are racecraft practices localized only to certain regional or disciplinary contexts that study race and racism a certain way?

When it comes to faces, I have encountered facecraft practices in articles that originate from or collect samples in various countries (e.g., France, Egypt, Malaysia, the United States, India) that use a variety of methodologies and designs (e.g., neuroscientific studies of race or culture that use the same face stimuli as social psychology and are at greater risk of biologizing race given the combined levels of analysis; see, e.g., Kaiser Trujillo et al., 2022; Martínez Mateo et al., 2012) and that originate from different disciplines (e.g., development of algorithms within computer and data science that locate race *in* the face: Fu et al., 2014; Gabani et al., 2020). Although a comprehensive analysis is needed to understand where facecraft is thriving or how these practices get spread, facecraft does occur across national, disciplinary, and methodological contexts and needs to be addressed no matter where it is practiced.

one of many potential inputs to racialization, the (disembodied) face is often treated as the dominant site of racialization in perceptual studies of racism (Kaiser Trujillo et al., 2022). Rarely is this assumption interrogated within the investigated context: Are faces heavily involved, or do they take precedence, and if so, in what ways? Even if we grant the emphasis on faces as a reasonable starting point, racializing assumptions continue into the experimental design. Researchers a priori assign the race classification of the face stimuli (e.g., black, white, multiracial), often on the basis of certain facial features (e.g., skin tone, feature shapes), and assume this assignment will remain consistent throughout the study and for every participant, which subsequently influences how the results are interpreted and portrayed. For instance, there is an important difference between discussing “the white faces” versus “the faces with [list of shared facial features] perceived to be white by X% of the sample.” In the former case, the researcher actively racializes the faces, treats their race classification as a fact by which to interpret the resulting data, and overlooks the possibility of disagreement in how those faces are racialized by the sample or future readers of the research. The latter case comes closer to understanding racialization as a process and exposing how it is manifesting in the context of their study by focusing on how many or few participants share a racialized construal of faces within the stimulus set. By a priori collapsing race categories with their presumed constitutive features in study designs and data interpretation (e.g., dark skin represents a black person), dominant ideologies that created those mappings in the first place are reproduced. Interpretive processes within experimental designs in this way can tacitly reinforce racist ideologies (Teo, 2011).

These practices do not take into account that the same face can be reclassified as a different race depending on surrounding contextual features (Freeman et al., 2011; Nicolas & Skinner, 2017) and that consequential variation in facial features exists within every racialized group such that similar features can exist across groups (Maddox, 2004; Monk, 2022; Msimang, 2022). Although racialized groups can differ in (arbitrary) visual features, a fact that is understood by social constructionists and race antirealists alike (Hochman, 2014), visible distinctions should not be interpreted as essential. Rather, average visual differences between racialized groups can be attributed to how “our (non-racial) biological diversity still plays a role as one of the interactants in the racialization process, because racialized groups have biological inclusion criteria, vague and arbitrary as they may be” (Hochman, 2017, pp. 62–63). One might interpret this as implying that faces exhibiting the inclusion criterion (e.g., a certain skin tone or facial

morphology) should therefore elicit consensual race classifications from others, enough to be able to a priori assign a face stimuli’s race.⁵ However, researchers cannot rely on average visual distinctions for this purpose not only because of the variation described above but also because inputs to racialization are not always visible biological features. Context changes which features get used for classification and by whom (Ásta, 2018; Hochman, 2017; Msimang, 2022).

For studies that rely on manipulating “race cues” such as faces as a way to quantify racist discrimination (Sen & Wasow, 2016), ensuring that face stimuli reflect intended race categories is a difficult problem. Some solutions that exist within the literature include collecting faces from people who self-identify as a particular race (or races) and use those as labels as their race classification (e.g., “mixed-race faces”), relying on normed ratings from previous samples (e.g., face databases), or collecting race classifications of the faces directly from the study’s participants. Each of these designs have critical issues worth considering.

The self-identity approach reintroduces the reification problem. When a racialized identity is used as an a priori indicator for the race of that person’s face in an experimental task, it propagates the illusion that racialized self-understandings are evidence of race in itself and its phenotypic foundations such that a congruent mapping between the racialized identity, the face, and race classifications of the same face can be taken for granted (Roth, 2016). It is important to keep in mind that racialized identities are not evidence of race in itself but of self- and collective understandings developed in response to racism (Blum, 2010; Brubaker, 2004; B. J. Fields, 2001). Racialized self-understandings can also shift with life events such as wanting to signal political alliances (Egan, 2020) or being incarcerated (Penner & Saperstein, 2008; Saperstein & Penner, 2012), complicating general relationships between racialized self-identity and facial appearance. As such, even faces meant to represent their owners’ racialized identities are beholden to perceptual racialization processes that are context- and perceiver-specific and thus must also be traced within an experiment.

Some studies rely on aggregate norming, in which trait and category ratings are collected for a set of faces from an external sample that are then used by subsequent studies that require specific kinds of face stimuli (e.g., “trustworthy” and “white”). Although these ratings offer researchers a convenient method for selecting a stimulus set, it is often the case that hypothesized psychological mechanisms require showing that participants in the current sample perceive the face as intended. If a normed rating suggests that a face supposedly represents a particular race category yet participants

racialize that face differently (and this goes unmeasured because researchers rely on the normed rating), then one cannot infer that a proposed mechanism is actually at play—such as assuming that specific in- and out-group or within- and between-race dynamics are occurring between participants and stimuli or between stimuli. This inferential gap between norming data and participant perception may be amplified when the sample that provided the normed ratings is dissimilar from future participants that are shown the stimuli and for faces that show more disagreement in their given classifications. When this gap exists, normed images can propagate a regulatory and overgeneralized caricature of what races are supposed to look like.

Instead of relying on a prior sample's ratings, some studies directly collect race classifications of the faces from the current sample, yet this introduces additional considerations. First, given that the propagation of racism requires strategic fluidity of race categories' construction and manifestations (Bashi Treitler, 2013; Wolfe, 2016), there exists no standard for choosing categories for classification. The researcher's choice of categories and the label or level at which they are presented (e.g., brown vs. latina/o/x/e vs. Mexican vs. other) can change classification responses (Nicolas et al., 2019) and can prioritize the researchers' own presumptions of which race categories are active in a context. Although researchers could rely on official census categories as one indicator of salience, institutionalized categories do not ensure they are used by people to structure their personal social worlds because people can resist or modify their meanings or engage in completely different race talk (Brubaker, 2004; Loveman, 1999; Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2021; Spencer, 2019). For example, Middle Eastern and North African individuals are expected to officially classify themselves as white even though many reject that classification and may not be perceived by others as such (Maghbouleh et al., 2022). Second, face classifications often exhibit some level of variation, even in faces whose features match the presumed appearance of a race category (Feliciano, 2016), which introduces a classification problem—what is the perceived race of each face? This could be solved by choosing the average or modal classification as the perceived race of a face; however, the analytic choice to collapse classification variation becomes another way research practices racialize faces.

Altogether, these designs cannot avoid facecraft because they do not consider that “race is not in the eye of the beholder or on the body of the objectified” (Hesse, 2016, p. viii). Perceiving race is instead mediated and regulated by colonially inherited racist practices and is therefore “an effect of a regime of social power” (Inoue, 2003, p. 157). Recognizing the

embeddedness of perception within contexts of power, that regimes enable and proliferate modes of sensory experience (Smith, 2006), requires a different approach to the study of racism and faces⁶ (for exploratory case studies, see the Supplemental Material available online). Given that faces are not the only or most important feature used in racialization across contexts, the same problems can occur with other perceptual features that are mobilized for racialization and used as experimental stimuli such as speech (Rosa & Flores, 2017) or names (Landgrave & Weller, 2022).

Minimizing Racecraft

To minimize racecraft in psychological research, we need to institute practices that keep clear the relation between racism and race, that attend to racialization as a key process that can occur within the experimental context (including by researchers) in conjunction with wider contexts, and that acknowledge classification variation arising from context and perceiver specificities. The following counterpractices range in required effort with the recognition that change needs to occur at every step of the research process—from conceptualization to methodology to interpretations.

Fundamentally, psychologists who study racism will need to reflexively consider their self-positioning—not simply in terms of identity but in the epistemologies provided by their respective training. One way I was able to arrive at this perspective was through struggled and sustained engagement with various disciplines that do not treat the face as a simple stimulus that naturally emanates social classifications but that rather place the face and other racialized features in their political context as effective canvases that have been continuously (re)signified by regimes of power (Blas & Gaboury, 2016; Celis Bueno, 2020; Edkins, 2015; Hall, 2021; Rosa & Flores, 2017; Weheliye, 2014).

Working through the implications of these connections can help psychologists understand how race and race categories should not themselves be used as explanations of psychological phenomena; rather, we need to explain their impact through the context-specific processes that dynamically connect categories, features (e.g., faces), consequences, politics, and people together (Cikara et al., 2022; Edkins, 2015). This can involve asking critical questions at the study-design phase. How can a stimulus become perceived to represent a particular race? What processes are manifesting a race category in a particular experimental or wider context? Who is facilitating racializations—the sample, an institution, a confederate, an event, the researcher, or another authority? Which stimuli elicit which categories, and to whom? What features, facial or otherwise, are being mobilized

for racialization in a context? How stable or fleeting is the racialization of specific features within and across contexts? Are there competing racializations of the stimuli among participants or between participants and the researcher? Tracing racialization processes in this way can help identify points of disruption.

Study designs must also account for inference-threatening racializations imposed by researchers themselves. Methodology becomes one point of intervention if we consider that “social psychologists can also repurpose current tools (including statistical tools) to improve understanding of the underlying social processes that seem to give categories their explanatory power” (Cikara et al., 2022, p. 542). Rather than researchers operating from their a priori conceptions of race, statistical tools can be used to trace processes of racialization. This can be done, for instance, by transforming race categories from predictors into dependent variables and quantifying the features most associated with various categories through regressions or data-driven modeling (e.g., Flores & Schachter, 2018; Quintana, 2022; Schachter et al., 2021; Sims et al., 2020).

Data-driven models contain conceptions of race because they encode racist ideologies. This is highlighted by scholars warning against the use of biased algorithms that reflect and propagate societal oppressions (Arcas et al., 2017; Benjamin, 2019a; Noble, 2018). However, that same encoding opens opportunities to reverse the algorithmic gaze back at oppression. Understanding how these models represent race can inform us about how race categories are being constructed (Kahn, 2021; Meyerend, 2023); they become a window from which to observe patterns of racialization through the features that are given significance by racism. This window is what is offered by visualization techniques whereby people help build image representations that reflect their visual understandings or stereotypes of a target (e.g., race) category (Dotsch & Todorov, 2012; Peterson et al., 2022). When deployed in a context-informed manner (Cikara et al., 2022), these techniques can help identify the facial features used to map race categories onto people within a context. For these models to be context-informed, people’s varied understandings need to be centered in the analysis (Albohn et al., 2022; Martinez & Todorov, 2021). Attending not just to sample-averaged representations as currently practiced but to the heterogeneity of visual features used by different people for the same category within and across contexts is critical to not reify the average representation as a generalizable racialization that operates for everyone but to instead map topographies of racializing processes. There is always a danger in face studies of treating the face as an isolated and determining component of race classifications (which can biologize race); therefore, the development of models that attend

to wider kinds of visible features could help identify different material inputs to racialization (e.g., Caplette & Turk-Browne, 2022).

This approach is a reorientation against how data-driven models are typically used to physiognomically “detect” or “accurately learn” the race of a face with the goal of subsequently classifying people (e.g., Fu et al., 2014; Gabani et al., 2020). Attempts to reclaim models commonly used for physiognomy is risky because it requires (a) very careful management of the facecraft problems outlined above and in the supplementary material cases; (b) reflexive investigations into assumptions about the relationships between racialized mental representations, their algorithmic measurement at individual and aggregate levels, their societal sources, and researchers’ values and epistemologies that get embedded into and become shaped by data-driven algorithms (Hong, 2020); and (c) considerations for how this kind of research gets applied or appropriated within profit economies and translated into the public space as systems of social control (Celis Bueno, 2020; Deleuze, 1992; Hong, 2020; Iveson & Maalsen, 2019). After all, these models and their output can be treated as contextual artifacts that reflect not only the racializing processes they are made to capture but also the scientific assemblage that led to their development (e.g., funding sources, researchers, disciplinary knowledges, desired applications).

Ultimately, the dichotomous framing of data-driven algorithms as benign tools of discovery versus malicious “incubators of existing social strife” requires more interrogation (Dixon-Román & Amaro, 2021). However, until more demonstrations for how to responsibly reclaim these models in face research arise (see Todorov et al., 2022), the risks involved in intentionally creating biased models meant to identify the inputs and outputs of racializing processes may be perceived too difficult to avoid (Benjamin, 2019b). Face researchers will need to concurrently develop advancements in this area and different methods that attend to the issues raised above and remain critically aware of their own gaze, assumptions, production, limitations, and entanglements with ethical and political concerns.

A final action worth highlighting is the need to be careful with causal language, exemplified by studies that label their results as resulting from “race effects.” With the understanding that race is an illusory product of racism, discussions of race effects naturalize race by providing “it” with causal powers (Holland, 2008; Zuberi, 2000). Rather than race itself, beliefs in race can be considered causal, but only indirectly through actors that act on, spread, and naturalize the belief (see Box 1). A focus on racialization and racism therefore forces researchers to be careful about this distinction and to trace the effect not to race but to processes in which

race categories and their consequences are mapped onto and through individuals, faces, objects, collectives, or institutions. This causal obfuscation is why scholars have been advocating a move from “racial” (i.e., racial disparities) toward “racist” (i.e., racist disparities) labels (Hochman, 2020).

Conclusion

Psychological researchers must take a reflexive look at the unexamined metaphysical race assumptions that guide their research practices. Unfortunately, common research practices within psychology both naturalize race and obfuscate the racializing role of racism, particularly when it comes to studying racialized social stimuli such as faces. The pervasive ideology of racecraft in this way continues a long-standing history of psychology acting as an authoritative classification machine, threatens research validity, and will need to be continuously and carefully tackled from many angles.

Transparency

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Supplemental Material

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Notes

1. Following K. E. Fields and Fields (2012), I understand “racism” to be

the practice of applying a social, civic, or legal double standard based on [race classification] and to the ideology surrounding such a double standard” (p. 17), and “race” as “the conception or the doctrine that nature produced humankind in distinct groups, each defined by inborn traits that its members share and that differentiate them from the members of other distinct groups of the same kind but of unequal rank” (p. 16).

Elaborating on this definition and following Hochman’s rejection of race as either biologically or socially real (Hochman, 2020), race here is understood as a biological category that fails to refer to anything existing in this world. “Racialization” refers to a process by which a group becomes misunderstood as being a biological race (Hochman, 2019), although it can also be applied to individuals, objects, or structures. “Racial” is

simply used as an adjective that denotes a relation to the concept of race. “Race categories” refers to the classification labels used by racism to hierarchically sort people.

2. I make the deliberate choice to not capitalize race labels as my small linguistic intervention to practice the racecraft perspective advanced in this article.

3. Similar warnings have problematized investigations of gender (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018), socioeconomic status (Antonoplis, 2023), groups (Brubaker, 2004; Cikara, 2021), and identity (Brubaker, 2004).

4. It should be noted that the definition and value of “racialization” for theory and practical action has been highly contested and defended for various reasons (Hochman, 2019, 2021; Uyan, 2021). Two points of contention are useful to consider. Critics see racialization as an attempt to eliminate talking about race and as a failed theory because it does not denote a precise historical actor or action. In defense, Hochman stated that it does not replace the need to discuss “race,” even if as a myth, and the lack of specific historical actor or action is an intended feature that renders the concept flexible for scholars to fill in the blanks. Following his proposal, racialization is used here as a descriptive conceptual tool that “offers a way of talking about the various processes through which groups come to be understood as races without implying that they actually are races” (Hochman, 2021, p. 32).

5. Agreement between people’s racializing schemas (e.g., high consensus in race classifications of the same set of faces driven by shared classification rules and criteria) could indicate that there exists enough of a general relationship between facial appearance and classifications that researchers could assign a priori classifications for face stimuli. However, it is possible that the available research does not have the necessary combination of study design, stimuli, and measures to know the extent to which people agree in their race classification of faces across contexts. Studies of agreement have shown high agreement in judgments of “race typicality” on a diverse set of faces (Hehman et al., 2017); however, this does not capture whether people are making the judgment with the same category in mind. High agreement has been shown using race-category judgments (Feliciano, 2016), yet racialized self-identifications were displayed alongside the faces, likely increasing agreement. Studies of race-classification accuracy in humans and machine-learning algorithms are not considered here because they suffer from facecraft: “Accuracy” requires the faces to already be classified by an a priori race taxonomy (Kahn, 2021). Unsupervised clustering algorithms that instead check whether similarities between faces recapitulate ostensible race groupings also suffer from facecraft: Cluster interpretations must eventually submit to the logic of racialization—they must also be compared against an a priori race taxonomy.

6. Although this critique is focused on face research that explicitly studies race, the proposed shift toward racialization also calls into question the “race-neutral” frame that gets attached to research that uses face stimuli but does not study race (e.g., models of trait impressions or affective image sets). In these works, there is a tension between the intended and supposed nonracialized neutrality of the researchers’ understanding of the faces and the way participants may themselves be understanding and racializing the faces in ways unexpected by the researchers. To the extent that face researchers do not account

for racialization processes that center the participants' understanding of the stimuli, study interpretations can be haunted by the unexamined specter of racism.

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