



Social Identity and the Linguistic Intergroup Bias: Exploring the Role of Ethnic Identification in the Context of Intergroup Relations Between Hong Kong and Mainland China

Journal of Language and Social Psychology
2017, Vol. 36(4) 473–483
© The Author(s) 2017
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0261927X17695112
journals.sagepub.com/home/jls



Michael Chan¹

Abstract

Two survey experiments examined how linguistic intergroup bias (LIB) varies according to ethnic identification within a homogenous ethnic group (Hong Kong citizens). Study 1 showed that Hong Kong citizens who identified as “Hongkonger” used more abstract expressions to describe prosocial behaviors of the in-group (Hong Kong citizen) and antisocial behaviors of the out-group (Mainland Chinese); those who identified as “Chinese” exhibited less LIB. Study 2 found similar results for a context based on location of behaviour (in Hong Kong vs. in China) rather than the nationality of the protagonist. The combined evidence suggests that LIB can have an important intragroup as well as intergroup dimension.

Keywords

linguistic intergroup bias, ethnic identification, language attitudes, social identity

Because language mediates the relationship between cognition and reality, it can often reveal a speaker’s underlying attitudes toward other people and groups and in turn facilitate the transmission and maintenance of prejudicial beliefs (Collins & Clément, 2012). Over two decades of research on linguistic intergroup bias (LIB; Maass, Salvi,

¹Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, SAR

Corresponding Author:

Michael Chan, School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Humanities Building, New Asia College, Shatin, New Territories, Hong Kong, SAR.
Email: mcmchan@cuhk.edu.hk

Arcuri, & Semin, 1989) have consistently shown that individuals are more likely to ascribe positive behaviors more abstractly if they are performed by in-group members rather than out-group members, while negative behaviors are described more abstractly when performed by out-group members rather than in-group members (Sutton & Douglas, 2008). Abstract language implies both cross-situational and cross-temporal variability that is free of context (e.g., “The Japanese are polite”), which can subtly transmit and reinforce stereotypes and beliefs. An underexamined aspect of LIB research is the role of ethnic identification *within* the in-group, which is important because the social identity literature had shown that high identifiers, that is, those who incorporate the group into the self-concept more than low identifiers, are more likely to engage in discriminatory behaviors (Perreault & Bourhis, 1999) and act in accordance to group norms (Terry & Hogg, 1996).

This study examines variability of ethnic identity in Hong Kong and intergroup relations with Mainland China. Even though China has assumed sovereignty of the former colony for two decades, the notion of a “Chinese identity” is still a matter of negotiation and contestation among Hong Kong citizens (Mathews, Ma, & Lui, 2008). Only a quarter of people consider themselves “Chinese.” Another third consider themselves “Hongkongers” while the remainder lean toward either social category (HKU POP, 2013). Moreover, increased intergroup contact in the past decade through tourism and immigration has led to increased social tensions that have exacerbated underlying stereotypes that Hong Kong people hold against the Mainland Chinese. This intergroup dynamic thus provides an authentic intergroup context to examine the impact of ethnic identification on LIB.

Group Identification and Linguistic Bias

Previous LIB studies often relied on binary in-group/out-group comparisons (Reid, 2012). As Turner (1999) noted, social identity theory was not intended to provide a direct causal explanation between the need for a positive identity and in-group bias. Rather, the relationship can be contingent on several important factors, such as status differences (Moscatelli, Albarello, & Rubini, 2008) and identity threat (Maass, Ceccarelli, & Rudin, 1996). Echoing Turner’s assertions, McGarty (2001) further points out, “SIT predicts a positive correlation between in-group identification and in-group bias, not as a main effect but as an interactive outcome of several factors, one of which is identification” (p. 174). Indeed, *being* a member of an in-group is not the same as level of *commitment* to the in-group. Self-categorization theory assumes that the self can also be categorized along different levels of abstraction (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), such that high identifiers are more likely to incorporate group norms, values, and goals of the in-group into the self (i.e., “we”), while low identifiers are more likely to adhere to personal norms and goals (i.e., “I”). Systematic variations in the level of identification can thus lead to different perceptual, affective, and behavioral outcomes depending on the relative salience of such identities.

Few studies have examined the role of ethnic identification in LIB with the exception of a series of studies in Quebec, Canada. Shulman and Clément (2008) found different levels of LIB depending on whether Francophone students identified with

Anglophones or not, such that high identifiers used more abstract expressions to describe prosocial behaviors of Anglophones compared to low identifiers. A later study showed that both Anglophones and Francophones used more abstract terms describing prosocial behaviors of the in-group and antisocial behaviors of the out-group (Shulman, Collins, & Clément, 2011). This study follows on these studies but examines a context where the population is ethnically, culturally, and linguistically homogenous.

The Hong Kong Context

More than 94% of the Hong Kong population is ethnically Chinese, and many are actually the offspring of immigrants from China. Nevertheless, a long period of colonial rule by the British has engendered a unique Hong Kong identity that is highly distinctive from the mainland. For several decades before the 1997 handover of sovereignty, the “Mainland Chinese” and “China” served as the “other” in which a Hong Kong identity and a positive self-concept were developed in parallel to the economy’s rapid development into an affluent global economic hub. While those in Hong Kong saw themselves as “cosmopolitan” and “modern,” the Mainland Chinese were often stereotyped (with the help of the mass media) as “uncivilized” and “uneducated” (Fung, 2004).

Since the 1997 handover, the othering of the Mainland Chinese has since taken different forms due to increased intergroup contact through mass tourism and immigration. Because Hong Kong identity is for historical reasons *opposed* to Chinese identity, self-identification as a “Hongkonger” signifies the need to maintain one’s own culture and resist integration with the Chinese identity, whereas self-identification as a “Chinese” reflects broader acceptance of the Chinese identity (Fung, 2004). Therefore, as self-categorization with the Hong Kong identity increases, the greater the exclusion of the Chinese identity from the self-concept, and vice versa. Based on the above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: People in Hong Kong who identify themselves as “Hongkongers” will exhibit a more pronounced LIB effect when describing the Mainland Chinese or Mainland China as compared to those who identify as themselves as “Chinese.”

In other words, an interaction effect is expected, such that ethnic identity will affect the relationship between nationality and LIB. While the proposed relationships are similar to that of Shulman and Clément (2008) the underlying context is different. Rather than a majority–minority intergroup dynamic that has explicit linguistic and cultural differences, this study focuses on a relatively homogenous social group and individuals’ *psychological* self-categorizations to a particular ethnic identity.

Measuring LIB

Studies 1 and 2 adopt the same approach as previous LIB research (Maass et al., 1989, Experiment 1). Respondents were asked to make judgments on visual depictions of four prosocial and four antisocial behaviors (available from the author on request) by choosing one of four statements corresponding to different degree of language

abstractness based on Semin and Fiedler (1988)'s linguistic category model (LCM): *descriptive action verb* (DAV), *interpretive action verb* (IAV), *state verb* (SV), and *adjective* (ADJ). The Chinese language shares many of the same grammatical properties with English (i.e., nouns, adjectives, verbs, adjectives etc.) and was used in a previous LIB study by Ng and Chan (1996), so it is an applicable language to test LIB.

Prosocial Behaviors

For the train picture readers had a choice of "The person is offering a seat to a senior" (DAV), "The person is helping a senior" (IAV), "The person respects seniors" (SV), "This is a kind person" (AD). For the restaurant picture the choices were "The person is giving the waiter a tip" (DAV), "The person is rewarding the waiter for good service" (IAV), "The person understands the customs of a foreign culture" (SV), "The person is a cultured" (ADJ). For the car picture the choices were: "The person is replacing the burst tire with a new one" (DAV), "The person is assisting the family with their broken-down car" (IAV), "The person helps people when they are in need" (SV), "The person is kind-hearted" (ADJ). For the hospital picture the choices were "The person is donating blood at a hospital" (DAV), "The person is providing an essential resource for the hospital" (IAV), "The person makes a contribution to society" (SV), "The person is altruistic" (ADJ).

Antisocial Behaviors

For the street picture the choices were "The person is throwing an empty can onto the ground" (DAV), "The person is dropping trash" (IAV), "The person lacks respect for others" (SV), "The person is inconsiderate" (ADJ). For the cinema picture the choices were "The person is talking on the cell phone" (DAV), "The person is disturbing the audience" (IAV), "The person doesn't care about other people's feelings" (SV), "The person is selfish" (ADJ). For the hotel picture the choices were "The person is smoking in the hotel lobby" (DAV), "The person is causing discomfort to hotel staff" (IAV), "The person ignores and disrespects rules" (SV), "The person is inconsiderate" (ADJ). For the diner picture the choices were "The person is leaving the restaurant without cleaning up the food on the table" (DAV), "The person is leaving behind a mess at the restaurant" (IAV), "The person does not feel responsible for the comfort of others" (SV), "The person is uncultured" (ADJ).

All eight pictures and statements were extensively pilot-tested before the study. Chinese language faculty and experts helped with the phrasing of the statements, and five coders were asked to order the statements in order of abstractness for the eight pictures. Coder agreement on the ordering of DAV → IAV → SV → ADJ was 100%.

Study 1

Study 1 comprised a 2 (protagonist: Hong Kong nationality vs. Mainland Chinese nationality) × 2 (ethnic identity: Hongkonger vs. Chinese) design where protagonist nationality and ethnic identity of participants were the between-subjects factors.

Procedure

Two hundred and seventy-two English and communication undergraduate majors from four universities completed a voluntary survey at the end of class. Participants were presented with four pictures of prosocial behaviors and four pictures of antisocial behaviors and had to select one statement from each picture. The scoring scheme was “1” for DAV, “2” for IAV, “3” for “SV,” and “4” for ADJ statements (Semin & Fiedler, 1988). The four scores for prosocial behaviors were averaged to form a single measure ($\alpha = .71$) as were the scores for antisocial behaviors ($\alpha = .73$). The top of the page had the rubric: “Please look at the scenes below and choose the best sentence that you think best describes the actions of [protagonist’s name].” The name was either a Hong Kong name or Mainland Chinese name and was part of the manipulation.

Ethnic Identification

Embedded within the survey was a question on participants’ ethnic identification, which was measured based on Ma and Fung’s (2007) typology: *Hongkonger*, *Hongkonger but also Chinese*, *Chinese but also Hongkonger*, and *Chinese*. From the responses, 57 and 17 participants identified themselves as “Chinese but also Hongkonger” and “Chinese,” respectively, in the survey, and were combined in to one category ($N = 74$). Most participants’ self-identified as “Hongkonger” ($N = 165$) while a lower number identified themselves as “Hongkonger but also Chinese” ($N = 30$). Again, these two groups were combined to facilitate analysis.¹ As some students may be from Mainland China, the survey also asked whether the respondent was born in Hong Kong. Those who answered “no” ($N = 3$) were not included in the analysis.

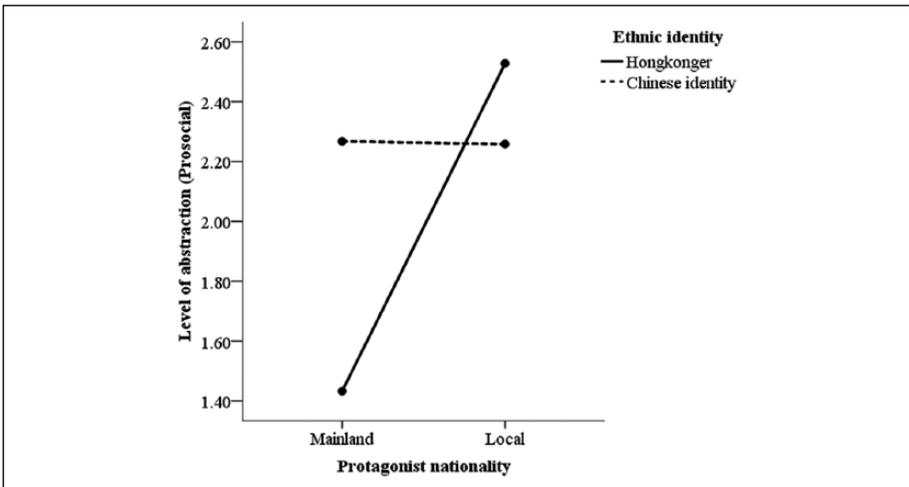
Results

Hypothesis Testing

Because correlations showed that prosocial and antisocial behavior was not correlated ($r = -.05$, $p = .42$) two-way analysis of variances were computed for each dependent variable. Cell numbers, means and standard deviations are summarized in Table 1.² For the prosocial behavior, both treatment, $F(1,265) = 30.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta = .32$ and national identity, $F(1,265) = 8.35$, $p < .01$, $\eta = .17$, had a statistically significant effect on language abstraction. Moreover, the interaction was significant, $F(1,265) = 31.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta = .33$ (see Figure 1). Post hoc tests using the Tukey criterion showed that Hong Kong identifiers used more abstract language for the Hong Kong protagonist compared to other conditions ($p < .001$). No other pairwise comparisons were significant ($p > .05$). For antisocial behavior, treatment was significant, $F(1,265) = 29.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta = .32$, but not national identity, $F(1,265) = .42$, $p = .52$, $\eta = .04$. However, the interaction was significant, $F(1,265) = 6.87$, $p < .01$, $\eta = .17$ (see Figure 2). Post hoc tests showed that Hong Kong identifiers used more abstract language to describe antisocial behaviors when the protagonist is from Mainland China as compared to those from than Hong Kong ($p < .001$) and identify as Chinese ($p < .001$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Language Abstraction of Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviors Based on Respondent National Identity and Protagonist Nationality.

	<i>n</i>	Prosocial		Antisocial	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Hongkonger identity					
HK protagonist	91	2.53	0.65	1.67	0.75
Mainland protagonist	104	1.43	0.73	2.56	0.81
Chinese identity					
HK protagonist	31	2.26	0.68	1.89	0.89
Mainland protagonist	43	2.32	0.80	2.20	0.80

**Figure 1.** Interaction plot of treatment and ethnic identity on level of abstractness describing prosocial behavior.

Study 2

Study 2 attempts to replicate the findings of Study 1 by examining whether LIB would be found for situations where ethnic identity is primed, but the context is generic and nonthreatening, and the only information provided is the *location* where the behaviors take place (Hong Kong vs. Mainland China) as opposed to the nationality of the protagonist performing the acts.

Procedure

Four hundred fifty-one Hong Kong citizens participated in an online survey administered by Qualtrics, a company that provides panels of respondents who were either invited or opted-in to participate in market research studies. Of the respondents, 53%

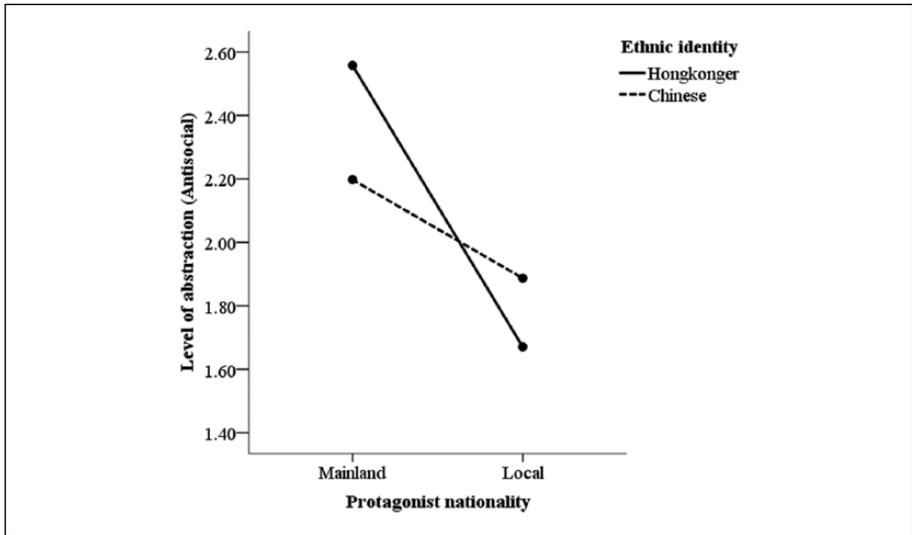


Figure 2. Interaction plot of treatment and ethnic identity on level of abstractness describing antisocial behavior.

were female with a median age of 31 years, university-level education, and a household income of HK\$30,000 to 39,999/month (approximately US\$3860-5100). Demographics were included as control variables in all statistical tests. On agreeing to participate in the survey they were presented with the same eight pictures and descriptions as in Study 1 and had to select one of the four statements for each picture. The sequence of pictures and order of the descriptions were randomized for each respondent. For the manipulation, half of the sample had the rubric “Please look at the below scene happening in Hong Kong” and the other half of the sample “Please look at the below scene happening in China.” The same material and procedures were used as in Study 1. Both measures of prosocial behaviour ($\alpha = .82$) and antisocial behavior ($\alpha = .77$) were reliable.

Ethnic Identification

As with the previous two studies respondents self-identified with one of the four identities and they were combined to form a “Hongkonger” group ($N = 231$) and a “Chinese” group ($N = 220$). Identity was primed during the screener page at the beginning of the online survey.

Results

Hypothesis Testing

Because the two dependent variables exhibited a correlation ($r = .22, p < .001$) a two-way multivariate analysis of variance was computed with ethnic identification and

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Language Abstraction of Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviors Based on Respondent Ethnic Identity and Place of Behavior.

	n	Prosocial		Antisocial	
		M	SD	M	SD
Hongkonger identity					
In Hong Kong	111	2.13	0.67	2.30	0.60
In Mainland China	112	1.63	0.58	2.52	0.67
Chinese identity					
In Hong Kong	108	1.83	0.60	2.37	0.58
In Mainland China	108	1.84	0.69	2.41	0.65

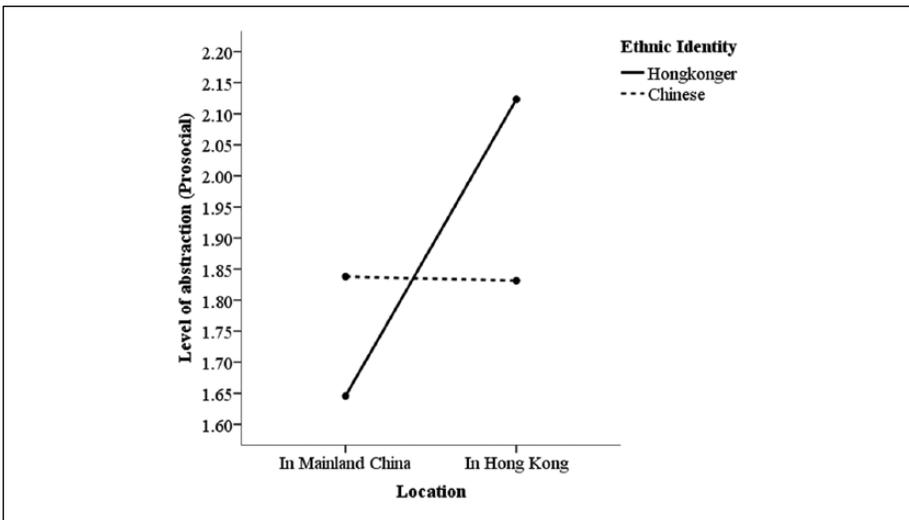


Figure 3. Interaction plot of treatment and ethnic identity on level of abstractness describing prosocial behavior.

location as fixed factors and demographics (gender, age, education) as covariates. Cell numbers, means, and standard deviations are summarized in Table 2. Multivariate results showed that there was a significant difference in perceptions of behaviors based on location of behavior, $F(2, 430) = 12.79, p < .001$; Wilks's $\Lambda = .94, \eta = .23$, but not ethnic identity, $F(2, 430) = .34, p = .71$; Wilks's $\Lambda = .99, \eta = .04$. Moreover, the interaction between ethnic identity and location was significant, $F(2, 430) = 11.06, p < .001$; Wilks's $\Lambda = .95, \eta = .22$. Examination of univariate results showed that the interaction was significant for positive, $F(1, 431) = 15.80; p < .001; \eta = .19$, and marginally significant for negative behavior, $F(1, 431) = 2.73, p < .10; \eta = .08$ (see Figures 3 and 4). Tukey post hoc tests showed that Hong Kong identifiers used more abstract language to describe prosocial behaviors committed in Hong Kong

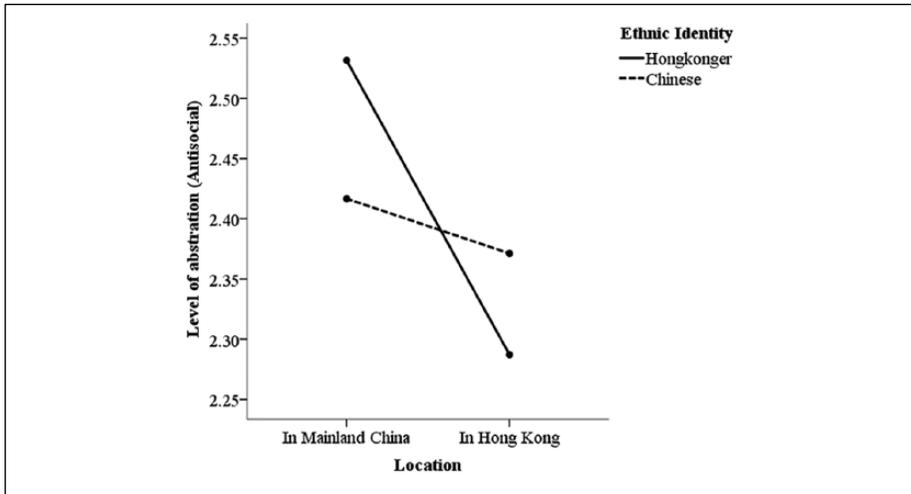


Figure 4. Interaction plot of context and ethnic identity on level of abstractness describing anti-social behavior.

than all other groups ($p < .01$) and marginally more abstract language for antisocial behaviors in Mainland China compared to Chinese identifiers ($p < .10$).

General Discussion

Studies 1 and 2 showed that the relationship between in-group membership and bias as expressed through language can vary according to the level of psychological commitment to one's in-group. This is consistent with the argument from social identity theorists that the relationship between in-group identification and bias is contingent on a variety of contextual factors. Previous studies have demonstrated the prevalence of LIB from studies that usually focused on binary groups characterized by research designs that emphasize competitive intergroup situations (i.e., conflict and difference). This study focuses on the role of ethnic identification and whether self-categorization at the psychological level is sufficient for LIB to occur. The findings suggest that there is, at least in terms of Hong Kong/China intergroup relations. Those who identified themselves as a "Hongkonger" exhibited an LIB effect, selecting abstract descriptions for prosocial actions of Hong Kong nationals and the antisocial actions of Mainland Chinese nationals while using more specific expressions to describe prosocial actions of Mainland Chinese nationals and the antisocial actions of Hong Kong nationals. As Study 2 shows, LIB not only occurs for individual's actions but also for the location in which the actions take place.

The findings for those who identify as Chinese is more intriguing. Neither study was able to exhibit a "full" LIB effect, which is typically characterized by a significant three-way interaction of identity, valance of behavior, and language abstraction. In both studies, for example, Chinese identifiers did not exhibit significantly higher

levels of language abstraction to describe prosocial behaviors of Mainland Chinese compared to Hong Kong identifiers. One possible reason is that there are few incentives for Chinese identifiers to develop positive attitudes. In contrast to the Francophone versus Anglophone dynamic where the latter is the majority and thus exerts more cultural power and prestige (Shulman & Clément, 2008), Hong Kong is traditionally perceived to be culturally superior to Mainland China (Fung, 2004).

Of course, the Hong Kong social context is hardly unique as intergroup contact and immigration are prevalent in many societies around the world and the impact of ethnic identification on LIB is equally applicable to such contexts. For example, the United States has over 20 million second-generation Americans born to immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2013). To what extent these individuals identify more with an American or native identity is worthy of examination because of the different attitudinal and behavioral outcomes that may derive from different levels of social categorization. Overall, the findings of this study highlight the importance of future LIB research to go beyond research designs that focus on binary oppositions between the in-group and out-group, and that variability of ethnic identification within the in-group may provide more nuanced findings in relation to LIB and its possible effects.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the editor Howie Giles and two anonymous reviewers who gave insightful feedback that helped improve the article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was fully supported by a grant (SS14847) from the C-Centre of the School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Notes

1. Admittedly, the unequal distribution of ethnic identification is not desirable because unequal cell sizes in may affect the power of subsequent statistical tests. Hence, the study was designed to ensure more equal cell numbers.
2. Frequency tables of each level of abstraction as a function of the factors are available on request.

References

- Collins, K. A., & Clément, R. (2012). Language and prejudice: Direct and moderated effects. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 31*, 376-396.
- Fung, A. (2004). Postcolonial Hong Kong identity: Hybridising the local and the national. *Social Identities, 10*, 399-414.
- HKU POP. (2013). *Categorical ethnic identity*. Retrieved from <http://hkupop.hku.hk/chinese/popexpress/ethnic/eidentity/poll/datatables.html>

- Ma, E. K. W., & Fung, A. Y. H. (2007). Negotiating local and national identifications: Hong Kong identity surveys 1996-2006. *Asian Journal of Communication, 17*, 172-185.
- Maass, A., Ceccarelli, R., & Rudin, S. (1996). Linguistic intergroup bias: Evidence for in-group-protective motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 71*, 512-526.
- Maass, A., Salvi, D., Arcuri, L., & Semin, G. (1989). Language use in intergroup contexts: The linguistic intergroup bias. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 57*, 981-993.
- Mathews, G., Ma, E. K. W., & Lui, T. L. (Eds.). (2008). *Hong Kong, China: Learning to belong to a nation*. London, England: Routledge.
- McGarty, C. (2001). Social identity theory does not maintain that identification produces bias, and Self-categorization Theory does not maintain that salience is identification: Two comments on Mummendey, Klink and Brown. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 40*, 173-176.
- Moscattelli, S., Albarello, F., & Rubini, M. (2008). Linguistic discrimination in minimal groups: The impact of status differentials. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 27*, 140-154.
- Ng, S. H., & Chan, K. K. (1996). Biases in the description of various age groups: A linguistic category model analysis. *Bulletin of the Hong Kong Psychological Society, 36/37*, 5-20.
- Perreault, S., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1999). Ethnocentrism, social identification, and discrimination. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 25*, 92-103.
- Pew Research Center. (2013). *Second-Generation Americans: A portrait of the adult children of immigrants*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Reid, S. A. (2012). Social psychological approaches to intergroup communication. In H. Giles (Ed.), *The handbook of intergroup communication* (pp. 19-30). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Semin, G. R., & Fiedler, K. (1988). The cognitive functions of linguistic categories in describing persons: Social cognition and language. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*, 558-568.
- Shulman, J. L., & Clément, R. (2008). Expressing prejudice through the linguistic intergroup bias: Second language confidence and identity among minority group members. *Diversité Urbaine, 109*-130.
- Shulman, J. L., Collins, K. A., & Clément, R. (2011). In consideration of social context: Re-examining the linguistic intergroup bias paradigm. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, 4*, 310-332.
- Sutton, R. M., & Douglas, K. M. (2008). Celebrating two decades of linguistic bias research: An introduction. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 27*, 105-109.
- Terry, D. J., & Hogg, M. A. (1996). Group norms and the attitude-behavior relationship: A role for group identification. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 22*, 776-793.
- Turner, J. C. (1999). Some current issues in research on social identity and self-categorization theories. In N. Ellemers, R. Spears & B. Doosje (Eds.), *Social identity: Context, commitment, content* (pp. 6-34). Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.

Author Biography

Michael Chan (PhD, CUHK) is an assistant professor at the School of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research examines the role of social identity processes in the areas of media, democratic engagement, and collective action. His works has been published in the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, *Social Movement Studies*, and the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*.