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Let's Talk About Race, Baby! When Whites' and Blacks' Interracial Contact Experiences Diverge

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Abstract

The present study investigated whether the conditions that make interracial contact anxiety-provoking for Whites differ from those that make it anxiety-provoking for Blacks. Specifically, the present work examined interracial anxiety as a function of discussant race (i.e., White or Black) and discussion topic (i.e., race-related or race-neutral). To that end, we examined the non-verbal behavior of White and Black participants during brief interpersonal interactions. Consistent with previous research, White participants behaved more anxiously during interracial than same-race interactions. Additionally, White participants of interracial interaction behaved more anxiously than their Black interaction partners. Furthermore, whereas White participants of interracial interactions found race-related discussions no more stressful than race-neutral discussions, Black participants of interracial interactions found race-related discussions *less* stressful than race-neutral discussions. The implications of these racial and contextual differences in interracial anxiety for improving interracial contact and race relations, more broadly, are discussed.

Keywords

intergroup anxiety; race relations

A fully functional multiracial society cannot be achieved without a sense of history and open, honest dialogue. (Cornel West, 1999)

Many contemporary socio-political issues such as immigration policies, academic achievement, and health disparities are shaped by race. Accordingly, resolving these issues will require an open, honest dialogue about race, as suggested in the epigraph by Cornel West. Yet, Americans are hesitant to talk about race, particularly in inter-ethnic forums—the very forums in which such dialogue may have the most impact. One reason why people may be hesitant to talk about race in inter-ethnic forums is because such encounters are stressful. Indeed, research shows that many Whites are anxious during interracial contact (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001; Ickes, 1984; Shelton & Richeson, 2006; Stephan & Stephan, 2001), and are hesitant to mention race during these interactions, even when it is

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relevant and reasonable to do so (Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006; Pollock, 2004). Considerably less research, however, examines the extent to which racial minorities find interracial contact stressful (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002; Plant, 2004); and, even less research investigates Whites' and Blacks' experiences of anxiety during interracial contact in tandem (but see Ickes, 1984; Shelton, 2003; Shelton et al., 2005). The purpose of the present study was to examine this question: Are interracial interactions as stressful for Blacks as they are for Whites? And, does discussing a race-related topic moderate interracial contact stress?

Interracial Contact & Stress

The literature asserts that interracial interactions are stressful, especially for members of dominant socio-cultural groups. Indeed, research has found that Whites feel anxious during even brief interracial encounters (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998), in part due to negative racial attitudes and/or concerns about appearing prejudiced (Dunton & Fazio, 1997; Plant & Devine, 1998; Vorauer 2006). These anxieties can "leak" into behavior; Whites often fidget, blink excessively, increase interpersonal distance, and avert their eye-gaze during interracial, compared with same-race, encounters (Dovidio et al., 1997; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995; McConnell & Leibold, 2001; Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974).

Similarly, research suggests that interracial contact may be stressful for members of racial minority groups. Specifically, racial minorities' concerns about being the target of prejudice may trigger anxiety (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Tropp, 2003). For instance, Shelton (2003) found that Blacks who expected White interaction partners to be prejudiced against them fidgeted more during interracial interactions than Black participants not given this expectancy. Although suggestive, the extent to which racial minorities experience anxiety during interracial interactions more generally remains largely unknown. Indeed, with few exceptions (e.g., Page-Gould et al., 2007; Shelton et al., 2005; Vorauer & Kumhyr, 2001), studies have not examined both Whites' and racial minorities' responses during interracial encounters.

There is reason to predict, however, that Blacks may experience less anxiety during interracial interactions than Whites. Because Blacks are in the numerical minority in many social contexts, they should have considerably more experience with interracial contact than do Whites. Indeed, daily diary studies that document college students' interracial contact on a predominantly White campus revealed that, whereas most White students have little to no interracial contact in their day-to-day interactions, close to half of Black students' interactions are with racial outgroup members (Mallet, Akimoto, & Oishi, 2007; Nezelek, 2007). Consequently, interracial contact should be more familiar and less stressful for Blacks than Whites.

Race-related Conversations

The present work also considers the role of race-related discussions in shaping individuals' experiences. Research examining behavior during interracial interactions typically involves benign discussion topics (e.g., essential items to bring to college; Dovidio et al., 1997), interview contexts (e.g., Word et al., 1974), or game-playing (e.g., Blascovich et al., 2001; Hyers & Swim, 1998). This research suggests that race-related discussions are not necessary for Whites to experience intergroup anxiety. Nevertheless, race-related discussions might amplify interracial anxiety and make even same-race interactions uncomfortable. To the extent that Whites are concerned about appearing prejudiced, race-related discussions may present a unique opportunity to appear prejudiced and, consequently, be quite stressful.

Similarly, the effects of race-related discussions on Blacks' interaction experiences are unknown. We predict that race-related discussions may attenuate intergroup anxiety for Blacks.

Because race is a central identity dimension for Blacks (Sellers et al., 1997) and Blacks discuss race-related topics more often and in more depth than do Whites (Applebaum, 2006; *New York Times* race poll, June 2000; Tatum, 1997), Blacks may be “experts” in race-related discussions, at least relative to Whites. Similar to the effects of expert status in any domain (e.g., Roth, Breivik, Jorgensen, & Hofmann, 1996; Steptoe & Fidler, 1987), Blacks may feel more confident and, thus, less anxious during interracial interactions in which a race-related topic is being discussed.

The Present Study

The present study revisits the claim that interracial contact is stressful. Although this appears to be a settled question, it remains unclear whether interracial interactions are stressful for Whites *relative* to Blacks and whether the conditions that make interracial interactions more stressful for Whites (i.e., discussing race) are the very conditions that make them less stressful for Blacks.

Hypotheses

1. Interracial contact will be more stressful than same-race contact for White participants.
2. Interracial contact will be more stressful for White than Black participants.
3. Whereas race-related discussions will be more stressful than race-neutral discussions for White participants (H3a), race-related discussions will be less stressful than race-neutral discussions for Black participants (H3b).

Methods

Participants

Seventy-two undergraduate students participated in this study for monetary compensation. Twenty of these White students interacted with 20 White students, comprising 20 same-race dyads. Another 16 White students interacted with 16 Black students, comprising 16 interracial dyads.

Procedure

Participants were escorted to a laboratory room where a Black or White interaction partner, who was also a naïve participant in the study, joined them. Participants and partners were given three campus-related topics to discuss. The first and third topics pertained to a social life initiative regarding campus fraternities and the college’s new drinking policy, the order of which was counter-balanced across dyads. The second topic pertained to the college administration’s efforts to diversify the student population. On average, interactions lasted 10 minutes.

Clip Creation & Coding Procedures

One minute from the middle of each participant’s answer to each of the 3 questions was extracted. Hence, there were 3 clips of each participant for a total of 216 clips. The clips depicted each participant in the center of the screen, sitting in a chair against a white backdrop. Participants’ interaction partners were not visible. The clips were compiled, randomized, and rated (without sound) by 3 independent coders.

A primary coder rated all of the clips and 2 other coders rated a subset of the clips (111 and 123 clips) to obtain inter-rater reliability estimates. Recall that we were interested in behavior

reflecting anxiety. Thus, coders rated the extent to which participants appeared avoidant-fearful, anxious, frozen, gestured (reverse-coded), exhibited facial rigidity, and leaned forward (reverse-coded), consistent with Richeson and Shelton (2003; see also Mendes et al., 2007). All ratings were made on 9-point scales with anchors at 1 (not at all) and 9 (very much). The inter-rater reliabilities, computed across discussion topics, were adequate (average Spearman-Brown $R = .78$). Hence, all analyses were conducted on the primary coder's ratings. Specifically, the primary coders' ratings were averaged separately for each clip. The alpha coefficient for this behavioral anxiety composite was also adequate ($\alpha = .77$). Next, the anxiety composites for clip 1 and 3 (fraternity exclusivity and campus drinking) were averaged and compared with anxiety composites for clip 2 (campus diversity) in subsequent analyses. In other words, we compared participants' nonverbal behavioral anxiety during race-neutral and race-related discussions¹.

Results

Overall Model

To test our predictions, we employed a data analytic approach at the dyadic level similar to that of Vorauer and Kumhyr (2001). Furthermore, we controlled for participant sex given the extant literature suggesting that men and women respond differently to interpersonal interactions (Dovidio, Brown, Heltman, Ellyson, & Keating, 1988; Hall & Friedman, 1999).

We first subjected behavioral anxiety composites to a 2 (dyad type: interracial v. same-race) X 2 (person role: White participant v. partner) X 2 (discussion topic: race-related v. -neutral) mixed-model ANOVA, with repeated measures on the latter two factors, accounting for the nesting of participants and partners within dyads. Behavioral anxiety means are reported in Table 1. Results revealed a marginal main effect of dyad type, $F(1,33) = 3.79, p = .06$, a main effect of person role, $F(1,33) = 7.70, p = .01$, as well as a person role by dyad type interaction, $F(1,33) = 5.78, p = .02$, a person role by discussion topic interaction, $F(1,33) = 10.52, p = .003$, and a discussion topic by dyad type interaction, $F(1,33) = 8.13, p = .007$. Consistent with predictions, however, all of these effects were qualified by a 3-way interaction, which approached statistical significance, $F(1,33) = 3.77, p = .06$. Next, we decompose this 3-way interaction with direct tests of our predictions.

Interracial v. Same-Race Contact Anxiety

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, White participants revealed more anxiety during interracial than same-race contact, $F(1,33) = 6.85, p = .01$, during race-neutral discussions, $F(1,33) = 11.19, p = .002$, and race-related discussions, $F(1,33) = 3.72, p = .06$. These data suggest that participants were more anxious during interracial than same-race contact, regardless of discussion topic.

White v. Black Participant Anxiety

To test Hypothesis 2, we conducted an analysis of just the interracial interactions. Consistent with our hypothesis, White participants' behavioral anxiety was significantly greater than that displayed by their Black partners, $F(1,14) = 14.60, p = .002$. Although this effect was moderated by discussion topic, $F(1,14) = 8.82, p = .01$; White participants' behavioral anxiety was significantly greater than that of their Black partners during race-related and race-neutral discussions $F(1,14) = 9.06, p = .009$ and $F(1,14) = 7.92, p = .01$; respectively. We return to the interaction between participant race and discussion topic in the next section.

¹See the supplementary electronic Appendix A for a manipulation check ascertaining that participants discussed racial issues during the race-related, but not race-neutral, discussions.

Race-Related v. Race-Neutral Discussions

To test Hypothesis 3, we first consider the effect of discussion topic on Whites' and Blacks' anxiety during interracial interactions and then examine its effect on Whites' anxiety during same-race interactions.

Interracial interactions—The analyses just presented revealed a significant interaction between person race and discussion topic, $F(1,14) = 8.82, p = .01$, for the interracial interactions. Subsequent analyses of the within-race, between-topic simple effects revealed that White participants' behavioral anxiety during race-neutral and race-related discussions with a Black partner did not differ, $F(1,14) = .01, p = .91$, contrary to predictions. In support of our hypothesis, however, Black partners of these interracial interactions behaved *less* anxiously when discussing a race-related topic, compared with a race-neutral topic, $F(1,14) = 10.67, p = .006$. Taken together, these results suggest that discussing a race-related topic significantly attenuates the stress associated with interracial contact for Blacks but not Whites.

Same-race interactions—Although the main effect of interaction type was not moderated by discussion topic for the White participant sample, $F(1,33) = .89, p = .35$, we tested whether race-related topics amplify stress during same-race interactions. Analyses of Whites' behavioral anxiety during same-race interactions only revealed a reliable effect of discussion topic, $F(1,18) = 5.57, p = .03$. White participants (and partners) behaved more anxiously when discussing the race-related topic compared with the race-neutral topics. Thus, consistent with predictions, race-related discussions increase White participants' anxiety, but interestingly in same-race interactions.

Discussion

Consistent with previous research, we found that White participants behaved more anxiously during interracial than same-race interactions. Nevertheless, the present research suggests that interracial interactions are not uniformly stressful for Whites and Blacks: White participants behaved more anxiously than their Black interaction partners, especially during race-related discussions. Specifically, these White participants behaved quite anxiously during both race-related and race-neutral discussions whereas Black participants behaved less anxiously during the race-related, compared with the race-neutral, discussions. Although this effect likely reflects Black participants' greater comfort with race-related discussions, it may also reflect their relative *discomfort* discussing topics associated with the larger campus culture; discussing campus social life and drinking may have increased the salience of Black participants' marginal status on campus, increasing their anxiety. Either way, the result was a striking difference between Black and White participants of interracial interactions in which a race-related topic was discussed².

Although we believe the present findings are promising, they are limited in notable ways. First, because Black participants all interacted with a White partner, we are unable to discern whether interracial contact was more stressful for them compared with same-race contact. Because the Black student population at the college was extremely small, it was not possible to observe same-race interactions between Black students who were unfamiliar with one another. Future research is required, therefore, to examine the ways in which dyadic demographic conditions

²Interestingly, this striking difference in behavioral anxiety was not evident in participants' self-reported evaluations following the interactions. Supplementary analyses, however, revealed that partners' behavioral anxiety did predict participants' self-evaluations following interracial, but not same-race, interactions. Whereas Whites' self-evaluations after the interactions were correlated with their Black partners' nonverbal anxiety during race-related discussions, Blacks' self-evaluations were correlated with their White partners' nonverbal anxiety during race-neutral discussions. Again, these results underscore the relevance of discussion content in shaping the dynamics of interracial interactions. For more details and comments regarding these data, please see the supplementary electronic Appendix B.

and race-related discussions shape interaction experiences in general, and interracial anxiety in particular, for both Whites and racial minorities.

Second, the findings of the present work may not generalize to all interracial contexts. Indeed, the somewhat artificial laboratory setting and our restricted participant sample may limit the external validity of this work. Participants of the study were students at a predominantly White, politically liberal, and geographically isolated college in New England. Accordingly, it is possible that the White participants were especially concerned about appearing prejudiced and that the Black participants were particularly well-practiced at interracial contact. Furthermore, the discussions took place in a “safe space:” a social psychology lab on a college campus. It seems possible that the psychological safety of the lab allowed Black participants to feel more comfortable during the race-related discussion and that other public spaces would not offer such safety. Future work, therefore, should consider whether Whites’ prejudice concerns and Blacks’ practice with interracial contact indeed account for the present findings and whether these findings generalize to more diverse populations in more ecologically-varied settings.

Nonetheless, by adopting a relational approach wherein both Whites’ and Blacks’ experiences were examined, we uncovered race-related differences in the conditions that make interracial contact stressful. In so doing, this study adds to a growing body of literature noting the likelihood that racial minority and majority group members will have divergent experiences during interracial contact (see Richeson & Shelton, 2007; Shelton & Richeson, 2006 for reviews). We have argued that one reason for this divergence might be Blacks’ “expertise” with interracial contact and race-related discussions. If true, then interracial contact and race-related discussions need not be so stressful for Whites. With practice, Whites can become more expert at negotiating interracial interactions and race-related discussions, just as many Blacks are. Given the race-related and interracial issues facing our country, race-related discussions in racially diverse forums are necessary. Reducing our anxieties about these discussions may be the first step to resolving these complicated issues.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Table 1

Table of Means (Standard Errors) for Behavioral Anxiety as a Function of Dyad Type, Person, and Discussion Topic

| Dyad Type | Person | Race-neutral | Race-related |
|-------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Interracial | White participant | 5.22 ^a (.25) | 5.29 ^a (.40) |
| | Black partner | 4.62 ^c (.19) | 3.97 ^d (.23) |
| Same-Race | White participant | 4.17 ^a (.20) | 4.45 ^b (.21) |
| | White partner | 4.11 ^a (.19) | 4.30 ^b (.18) |

Note. Means sharing a common subscript within each Dyad Type (Interracial and Same-race) do not differ significantly.