Reframing Anxiety to Encourage Interracial Interactions

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Racial bias against Black Americans is a continuing problem in the United States. Although interracial dialogue is generally accepted as an effective method to combat racial bias, such dialogues are often avoided because they can make White Americans anxious and are accompanied by negative outcomes. Therefore, in the present study, we tested a simple intervention designed to (a) increase Whites' willingness to choose to enter a situation in which they would interact with a Black partner and (b) reduce the negative outcomes typically found in these interactions. One hundred fifty-seven White participants were randomly assigned to have a conversation with an interaction partner on one of two topics, racial discrimination or sexual identity discrimination. They were further assigned to one of two groups: an intervention group or a control group. The intervention group was told that people tend to avoid interracial interactions because these interactions are anxiety provoking but that choosing instead to approach interracial interactions may help to reduce future feelings of anxiety. The control group received no such guidance. Results demonstrated that, compared to the control group, participants in the intervention group were more likely to choose to interact with a Black partner over a White partner and showed more positive nonverbal engagement during the interracial interaction. We discuss the implications of this work for the development of strategies to increase Whites' engagement in interracial dialogue.

Keywords: interracial interactions, emotion regulation, interventions, intergroup relations

Although the United States is becoming increasingly racially and ethnically diverse (U.S. Census, 2012), racial bias against Black Americans is a continuing problem (Pearson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2009). As such, it is important to identify effective ways to reduce racial bias—particularly that of White Americans, who represent the country's most dominant racial group. Intergroup contact across racial groups has been proposed as one effective candidate in

this regard (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In theory, intergroup contact promotes meaningful interaction and conversation across racial and ideological boundaries, providing the opportunity for individuals to learn the perspectives and opinions of others. Without quality contact and communication, much of our behavior toward outgroups stems from our (mis)conceptions of them, thus maintaining the status quo (Shelton & Richeson, 2005).

Unfortunately, a fundamental problem with relying solely on increasing opportunities for intergroup contact to reduce racial bias against Black Americans is the fact that White Americans tend to avoid interracial interactions for two primary reasons. First, many people expect these interactions to result in negative outcomes (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). Although both Whites and Blacks expect to have a negative experience, Whites often appraise interracial interactions as self-threatening (e.g., Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009), sometimes more so

when race is a salient feature of the interaction (e.g., Goff, Steele, & Davies, 2008). This stems from the fact that Whites are often concerned that they might be viewed as prejudiced, which leads them to monitor their own behavior in interracial settings in an effort to appear less prejudiced to their interaction partners (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Richeson & Trawalter, 2005). Second, the fear of being viewed as prejudiced makes Whites anxious (e.g., Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Richeson & Shelton, 2003; Toosi, Babbitt, Ambady, & Sommers, 2012). Whites find interracial interactions sufficiently stressful that, in fact, they tend to avoid them even when race is not the focus of their dialogue (Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; Plant, 2004). If Whites avoid intergroup contact, they do not stand to benefit from the bias reduction that would accrue by virtue of positive intergroup contact.

To redress the problem of avoidance of interracial interactions, researchers have worked to identify strategies that can reduce many of the expected negative outcomes of interracial interactions for both majority and minority group members (e.g., Babbitt & Sommers, 2011; Gaither & Sommers, 2013; Kawakami, Phills, Steele, & Dovidio, 2007; Mallett, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008; Pettigrew, 1998; Pinel & Long, 2012; Trawalter & Richeson, 2006). For example, instructing White participants to work toward a positive exchange (promotion focus) versus to avoid prejudice (prevention focus) can lead to less cognitive depletion after an interracial interaction (Trawalter & Richeson, 2006). Additionally, asking Whites to either focus on the similarities they have with a Black interaction partner (Mallett et al., 2008) or on the particular qualities their interaction partner may have outside of their social group membership (Blair, 2002) can also lead toward more positive expectations and attitudes surrounding those interactions. Last, prompting White participants to adopt a multicultural approach (i.e., acknowledging or celebrating group differences) during an interracial interaction also leads toward higher levels of interest and positive attitude changes in those interactions (Verkuyten, 2005; Vorauer, Gagnon, & Sasaki, 2009).

In theory, reducing anticipated or actual negative outcomes could promote greater intergroup contact. In practice, however, all of the aforementioned studies that seek to redress negative outcomes of interracial interactions involve interracial contact that is structured by the research context. This raises concern that, when we attempt to translate such findings into real-world settings, we will naturally be thwarted by Whites' tendency to avoid interracial interactions in the first place. With this in mind, it is important to examine strategies that increase the likelihood that Whites will voluntarily choose to engage in interracial interactions. Given the role that anxiety seems to play in Whites' avoidance of interracial contexts, it may prove useful to consider the role that emotion regulation processes play in supporting this goal.

Emotion regulation refers to "the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, especially their intensive and temporal features, to accomplish one's goals" (Thompson, 1994, pp. 27–28). The process model of emotion regulation suggests five families of strategies, each of which targets a particular component of the emotion-generative cycle: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation (Gross, 1998). Research has shown that people can regulate their emotions in stressful situations with even brief instruction using a variety of strategies (for a review, see Gross & Thompson, 2007). Because our goal is to encourage people to voluntarily choose to engage in interracial interactions, we focus on situation selection.

Situation selection is an emotion regulation strategy in which one chooses which situations to approach or avoid depending on the potential of those situations to prompt desired emotions (Gross, 1998; Gross & Thompson, 2007). In the context of the current work, situation selection is reflected by the choice to avoid interracial interactions in order to reduce anxiety. The problem we seek to address is that situation selection in this context—that is, avoiding interracial interactions—quite obviously lessens the opportunity for positive intergroup contact and the dialogue that is needed to improve race relations. From our perspective, it is important to test interventions that prevent avoiding interracial interactions by using a situation selection emotion regulation strategy. Instead, we seek to encourage Whites to choose to approach interracial interactions despite anticipated anxiety.

In the present study, we tested an intervention that was designed to encourage White participants to choose to interact with a Black partner. Using a 2×2 between-subjects design, participants were told that the interaction would focus either on a race-relevant topic (racial discrimination) or a race-neutral but still socially sensitive topic (sexual identity discrimination). In addition, they were assigned to either an intervention group or a control group. Participants in the intervention group received an instructional manipulation in which it was acknowledged that interracial interactions can be anxiety provoking. The instructions also highlighted that anxiety prompts people to avoid interracial interactions but that choosing to approach interracial interactions instead may be beneficial in reducing future feelings of anxiety. Participants in the control group received no such guidance. Participants in both groups were then asked to choose a Black or White interaction partner, a dichotomous dependent variable. These interactions were video-recorded so that we could code the extent of positive nonverbal engagement during the interaction, a continuous dependent variable.

Relative to the control group, we hypothesized that the intervention group would (a) more frequently choose to interact with a Black partner relative to a White partner (logistic regression and chi-square analyses) and (b) display greater signs of positive nonverbal engagement during the interaction (general linear model [GLM] analyses). Based on the literature reviewed above, it was possible that these effects would be more pronounced in the race-relevant context.

Method

Participants

White undergraduates ($N = 157$; 96 female; $M = 19.47$ years old; $SD = 1.44$) participated in exchange for course credit.[1] With our sample size and design, we had .80 power to detect an effect size of $w = .22$ for chi-square analyses and $f = .23$ for GLM analyses. The number of participants in each group is recorded in Table 1.

Design and Procedure

Upon arrival, participants learned that they would be participating in a study about social interactions. Those who provided informed consent were randomly assigned to one of four groups according to a 2 (Group: intervention or control) $\times$ 2 (Discussion Topic: race-relevant or race-neutral) between-subjects design. The race-relevant topic focused on racial discrimination, whereas the race-neutral topic focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) discrimination, a similarly sensitive social issue. All participants were told that they could choose to have a discussion about the selected topic with either a Black or White partner and then asked for their choice. Intervention participants received the following additional instructions immediately prior to this:

> Sometimes people feel anxious about interacting with a person from another race. To reduce this anxiety, they might choose to avoid situations in which a cross-race interaction is likely because avoiding that situation reduces your anxiety. However, research suggests that choosing to put yourself in situations in which you interact with a person from another race actually helps to reduce future feelings of anxiety. With this background in mind . . .

After participants made their choice, they completed a preinteraction questionnaire while the experimenter left to get their partner (a same-sex confederate consistent with the participant's choice). The dyad then completed a video-recorded mock interview. Confederates, blind to study hypotheses and intervention condition, were trained to respond comparably across participants. The confederate asked the participants 10 questions about the topic (e.g., "Do you support affirmative action [LGBT equality acts] in educational settings in terms of admission decisions?"). After 8 min, or whenever the pair had completed all questions (whichever came first), participants completed a postinteraction questionnaire, were fully debriefed, and then dismissed.

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[1] Eleven additional participants were excluded either because they were not White ($n = 2$) or because they had a previous relationship with their selected interaction partner ($n = 9$).

Table 1
Distribution of Partner Choices as a Function of Group and Discussion Topic

	Intervention		Control		z test significance for intervention-control difference	Pearson χ^2 results
	n	% within topic	n	% within topic		
Race-relevant topic						$\chi^2(1, N = 76) = 5.23^*$
Selected Black partner	27	69.2	16	43.2	*	
Selected White partner	12	30.8	21	56.8	*	
Total	39		37			
Race-neutral topic						$\chi^2(1, N = 81) = .297$
Selected Black partner	18	45.0	16	39.0	ns	
Selected White partner	22	55.0	25	61.0	ns	
Total	40		41			
Across topics						$\chi^2(1, N = 157) = 3.99^*$
Selected Black partner	45	57.0	32	41.0	*	
Selected White partner	34	43.0	46	59.0	*	
Total	79		78			

* $p < .05$. *ns* signifies $p > .05$.

Dependent Measures

Our two primary dependent variables were partner choice (Black or White) and positive nonverbal engagement during the interview.[2] To measure positive nonverbal engagement, recorded interactions were coded for nonverbal behaviors, which are more difficult to monitor and control than verbal behaviors (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997). Four coders blind to the hypotheses watched each interaction without audio with only the participant visible and rated the extent to which participants appeared pleasant, enthusiastic, interested, alert, excited, engaged, and tense (reverse scored) and how much they smiled, made eye contact, and moved in an engaged manner. The coders were high in interrater reliability across all characteristics (ICC = .92). Ratings were averaged into a positive nonverbal engagement composite score with high internal consistency reliability (α = .88).

At the end of the experiment, participants explained the motivation for their partner choice. Using a 0–7 scale, four coders rated these open-ended responses for the extent to which participants were motivated by random factors (e.g., randomly selected the first one; ICC = .86), free choice (e.g., it's what I wanted; ICC = .78), feeling compelled (e.g., it's what I had to do; ICC = .75), race topic concerns (e.g., it can get very heated; ICC = .79), LGBT topic concerns (e.g., a sensitive issue;

ICC = .84), concerns about appearing prejudiced (e.g., ICC = .75), concerns about comfort level (e.g., I would be more comfortable; ICC = .84), and helping with bias reduction (e.g., foster open dialogue; ICC = .76). If a rating did not mention one of these categories, it was coded as 0.

Results

Partner Choice

The odds of choosing a Black partner over a White partner within each cell of the design are presented in Figure 1; partner choices by group and discussion topic and associated chi-square results are presented in Table 1. Using logistic regression, we tested the hypothesis that intervention participants would choose a Black partner more frequently than a White partner compared to control participants, $\chi^2(3) = 8.93$, $p = .030$. This analysis included three predictors: group (parameter coding: 0 = intervention, 1 = control), discussion topic (0 = race relevant, 1 = race neutral), and their interaction. The dependent variable was partner choice (1 = Black, 0 = White). The constant indicated that

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[2] In addition to the items listed, participants also completed several measures of pre- and postinteraction emotions, as well as expectations/perceptions of their partner and the interaction. Analyses showed no evidence that these measures were sensitive to the manipulations. A list of these items is available from the last author upon request.
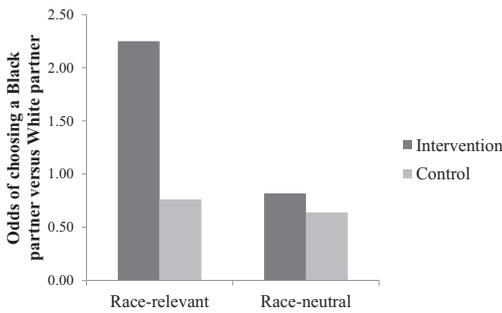
Figure 1. This figure depicts the odds of selecting a Black partner versus a White partner as a function of Group (legend) and Discussion Topic (x-axis). The odds were calculated as the percentage of participants who selected a Black partner divided by the percentage of participants who selected a White partner. Deviations from a value of 1 signal an uneven distribution of choices as a function of race.

participants who received the intervention and discussed the race-relevant topic were more likely to choose a Black partner than a White partner, $B = .81$, $SE = .347$, Wald's $\chi^2(1) = 5.46$, $p = .019$.

Consistent with the hypothesis, control participants were less likely to choose a Black partner than a White partner relative to intervention participants, $B = -1.08$, $SE = .480$, Wald's $\chi^2(1) = 5.08$, $p = .024$, $\exp(B) = 0.339$, 95% CI [.13, .87]. In addition, participants discussing the race-neutral topic were less likely to choose a Black partner than a White partner relative to participants discussing the race-relevant topic, $B = -1.01$, $SE = .471$, Wald's $\chi^2(1) = 4.62$, $p = .032$, $\exp(B) = 0.364$, 95% CI [.15, .91]. The interaction between group and discussion topic was not significant, $B = .84$, $SE = .659$, Wald's $\chi^2(1) = 1.62$, $p = .204$, $\exp(B) = 2.531$, 95% CI [.64, 8.40]. Nevertheless, Figure 1 strongly suggested that the pattern described above is specific to the race-relevant topic, a conclusion supported by the within-topic chi-square analyses presented in Table 1.[3]

Nonverbal Engagement

A 2 (Group) × 2 (Topic) between-subjects GLM revealed support for the hypothesis that intervention participants, $M = 4.39$, $SD = .60$, would display more positive nonverbal engagement compared to control participants, $M = 4.09$, $SD = .57$, $F(1, 147) = 9.850$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$.[4] No other effects reached significance.

Motivation for Partner Choice

Separate 2 (Group) × 2 (Topic) analyses of variance assessed the coded motivations for selecting a Black or White partner.[5] Focusing on the group effects of primary interest, intervention participants, $M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.73$, were more likely to cite bias reduction as their motivation than control participants, $M = 1.84$, $SD = 1.16$, $F(1, 153) = 9.56$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .059$. Moreover, they were less likely to mention concern about appearing prejudiced, $M = 1.88$, $SD = 1.38$, or their comfort level, $M = 2.41$, $SD = 1. 85$, than control participants, $M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.51$, $F(1, 153) = 8.68$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .054$, and $M = 3.02$, $SD = 2.02$, $F(1, 153) = 4.16$, $p = .043$, $\eta_p^2 = .026$, respectively. Importantly, participants in the two groups were equally likely to cite random factors, feeling free to decide, or feeling compelled (all Fs < 2.3, ns).[6]

Discussion

Summary and Implications

Our emotion regulation–inspired intervention successfully encouraged White participants to

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[3] Despite loss of statistical power, the interaction was significant when dummy-coded gender and confederate predictors (24 of them to Model 25 confederates) were included in a follow-up analysis, $B = 3.51$, $SE = 1.681$, $p = .037$. Group and topic were not significant but both $ps < .10$.

[4] Data from six additional participants were missing due to equipment failures. Note that neither of these effects was significant when including dummy-coded gender and confederate predictors, potentially due to loss of power.

[5] We suspected that differences in motivation might vary as a function of partner choice. However, because partner choice was determined by participants themselves (and, thus, was not under experimental control), we did not include partner choice as an independent factor or covariate in any of our analyses.

[6] Analyses revealed several significant main effects for topic. Participants in the race-neutral topic condition were significantly more likely to mention random factors, forced choice (compulsion), and LGBT relations topic concerns. Participants in the race-relevant topic condition were significantly more likely to mention free choice (desire), race relations topic concerns, appearing prejudiced, comfort concerns, and bias reduction. There were no significant interactions. Note that the intervention-control effects on bias reduction, concerns about appearing prejudiced, and comfort were no longer significant when including dummy-coded gender and confederate predictors, possibly due to loss of power.

more frequently choose to interact with a Black partner instead of a White partner. This effect was most prominent when the topic of conversation between partners was racial discrimination; the intervention did not affect partner choice when the topic of conversation was LGBT discrimination. Importantly, regardless of topic, the intervention promoted more positive nonverbal engagement during the interaction. Moreover, intervention participants more often cited bias reduction and less often cited concerns about appearing prejudiced and their comfort level as their motivations for choosing an intergroup interaction. To date, research has suggested that Whites typically avoid interracial interactions because entering these contexts comes with the short-term cost of increased anxiety. Our intervention seems to effectively counteract the tendency to avoid interracial interactions by prompting consideration of the long-term anxiety-reducing benefits of approaching intergroup interactions instead.

Practically, the potential utility of an intervention like this is strong. Although many corporate diversity training programs have highlighted positive attitudinal changes at the individual and managerial levels (Ellis & Sonnenfield, 1994; Hanover & Cellar, 1998), these programs lack incentives for initiating race-relevant dialogue—the step that people tend to often avoid—resulting in less inclusive workplace environments. Relatedly, the average student still has very few interactions with diverse populations before starting college, where racial diversity is on the rise (Frankenberg & Lee, 2002; Mouw & Entwisle, 2006; Stearns, Buchmann, & Bonneau, 2009). Although exposure to interracial interactions can improve social interactions between White and Black college students (Gaither & Sommers, 2013), challenges associated with getting students to willingly enter these interracial settings have yet to be documented. Moreover, other work in health-related fields has highlighted that interactions between White doctors and Black patients often have the worst outcomes because of the anxiety associated with the interracial nature of that interaction (Perloff, Bonder, Ray, Ray, & Siminoff, 2006). Using some variant of the intervention we have documented could be useful to increase the productivity of different organizations, enhance the experiences of college students, and improve the success of doctor-patient relationships.

Our intervention targeted White participants in the context of the White-Black racial divide that is so prevalent in the United States. It is possible that these intervention effects would generalize to minority group members and to other intergroup contexts in which anxiety fosters avoidance of outgroup members. However, the intergroup literature has shown that different racial groups are anxious about interracial interactions for different reasons. Racial minorities are anxious about being the targets of prejudice, whereas White individuals are anxious about being perceived as prejudiced (Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005). Therefore, the present intervention might be most effective among individuals who are anxious about being perceived as biased compared to those who are anxious about experiencing discrimination. Moreover, although it might be tailored to address the latter, this type of intervention may not be effective for people who avoid intergroup contact for reasons unrelated to negative affective states.

Those who seek to generalize our findings should consider the intervention in the context of the experimental conditions under which it was tested. First, the present intervention occurred in an unfamiliar environment for participants (i.e., a research lab) and between individuals who did not know each other; the implementation and effects of this intervention may vary depending on the specific context and the individuals involved. Relatedly, although not directly tested in the present study, we speculate that interventions like this should come from a source that is perceived as having credible knowledge of the potential benefit of intergroup engagement for anxiety reduction (e.g., a psychologist or citation of documented research). Additionally, although undesirable in many ways, it may also be necessary for the conversation to have some type of structure that sets limits on the timing and context of contributions.

Most important, our findings suggest that the intervention should present itself as a choice rather than a mandate. In fact, choice has been shown to be an important variable in motivating thoughts, feelings, and behavior. For example, in cognitive dissonance research, people change their attitudes to be consistent with their behavior when they believe they themselves chose to enter into a specific situation (Festinger & Carl-

smith, 1959). In line with those findings, the intervention used here was designed to facilitate this choice by reframing interracial anxiety, which we argue is at least one pathway that can help make interracial interactions more positive. However, in some organizations or situations, people may be unable to choose whether to enter a discussion about race (e.g., mandatory diversity training). We suspect that an emotion regulation perspective could still be beneficial in promoting more active engagement in mandatory interactions by targeting other forms of emotion regulation. Furthermore, although we believe that reframing anxiety may be the mechanism by which the intervention works, other mechanisms are possible. For example, getting individuals to focus on the long-term rather than the short-term effects of intergroup interaction may be the mechanism. Additional research that identifies the mechanism(s) is needed.

Limitations

Although our method has many desirable features, three key limitations bear consideration. First, our intervention may have created a demand characteristic encouraging the selection of a Black partner. However, our concern about the effect of that demand is mollified to some extent by the favorable nonverbal evidence, which is less subject to intentional distortion (Dovidio et al., 1997). Second, our results lack direct evidence for an emotion regulation account due to the absence of baseline measurements of intergroup anxiety prior to partner selections. Partner selection may have influenced levels of anxiety, or vice versa, so we cannot draw definitive conclusions about the influence of our intervention on participants' emotional states. Third, following established methods within the interracial interaction literature (for a review, see Shelton & Richeson, 2006), our study involved a structured interview interaction with a confederate participant. Future work should examine this intervention's effectiveness in less structured dyads, as well as larger interaction groups.

Conclusion

In sum, this work demonstrates the successful application of emotion regulation principles to the design of an intervention that promotes in-

terracial interactions. Our paradigm is unique in providing participants with the choice to engage in an interracial dialogue, whereas others have focused on interracial interactions that are engineered through random assignment. Participants who received our intervention more often chose to interact with a racial outgroup member and subsequently displayed more favorable nonverbal outcomes during the interaction. This work thus represents an important proof of concept, underscoring the potential value of future studies that similarly marry the emotion regulation and interracial interaction literatures with real-world applications. For example, we believe that Starbucks Corporation was on the right track in attempting to increase the amount of dialogue about race through their "Race Together" campaign but, through the lens of our findings, their effort was deficient in a few areas. For example, public perception was that an organization with little credibility on the topic of race was encouraging their uninformed and untrained employees to corner customers into unwanted conversations. We suggest that a relatively simple instruction that normalizes interracial anxiety and highlights the longer term anxiolytic benefits of intergroup contact can be a component of efforts to promote intergroup engagement and ultimately more positive intergroup relations. Additionally, it may be crucial to focus on the anticipated anxiety associated with these interactions, the promise that this anxiety may lessen with engagement over time, and the choice of whether or not to engage, which were approaches Starbucks did not utilize.

Polling in the United States suggests that Whites and Blacks differ greatly in their views about the prevalence of racial prejudice (Pearson et al., 2009), which is known to affect voting behaviors and policy development and support. In addition, the well-publicized incidents of violence toward Black men such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Freddie Gray have led to a growing awareness of the disparities in the treatment and experience of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States and the need for racial policy discussions. Therefore, now is the time to pinpoint interventions that can increase the number of individuals of all races willing to enter these types of discussions.

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