

Negotiating Interracial Interactions

Costs, Consequences, and Possibilities

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ABSTRACT—*The United States is becoming increasingly diverse, yet interracial contact continues to be awkward, if not stressful, for many. Indeed, recent research suggests that individuals often exit interracial interactions feeling drained both cognitively and emotionally. This article reviews research examining how interracial encounters give rise to these outcomes, zeroing in on the mediating role of self-regulation and the moderating influence of prejudice concerns. Given that interracial contact may be the most promising avenue to prejudice reduction, it is important to examine factors that undermine positive interracial contact experiences, as well as those that facilitate them.*

KEYWORDS—*interracial interactions; self-regulation; prejudice*

As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, contact with individuals of different ethnicities, races, and cultures will no longer be rare. Although increased contact may have positive effects over time (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), there is reason to believe that increased interracial contact may initially result in a host of negative side effects. Research has found, for instance, that interracial interactions induce a relatively malignant form of cardiovascular reactivity in most White individuals (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001). Similarly, contact with Whites can impair racial minorities' psychological and physiological health (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). Indeed, interracial interactions are often a source of distress for both Whites and racial minorities (Vorauer & Kumhyr, 2001).

Motivated in part by this work, we began to explore potential cognitive consequences of the stress of interracial contact. This investigation built upon previous research examining the effects

of exposure to stressful stimuli on cognitive functioning. Performance on tasks that require what is often called cognitive or executive control—for instance tasks that require individuals to ignore distracting information or to inhibit habitual or otherwise automatic reactions—is known to suffer after acute stressful experiences. If interracial interactions are stressful, then they too should impair performance on these tasks.

In order to test this hypothesis, we examined White and Black individuals' performance on a task that is known to require executive control—namely, the Stroop color-naming paradigm—after a brief, interview-like interaction with either a White or Black experimenter (Richeson & Shelton, 2003; Richeson, Trawalter, & Shelton, 2005). Prior to the interaction, participants completed a measure of implicit racial bias (the Implicit Association Test, IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), which assessed the relative ease with which they could associate positive versus negative words with the White and Black American racial categories; this task is thought to reflect subtle forms of racial bias of which individuals may be unaware. The Stroop task required participants to report the font color (e.g., blue, red) in which a series of words that were also names of colors (e.g., “blue,” “green”) were presented on a computer screen. The task assesses executive control when the color names are presented in conflicting font colors (e.g., “blue” in green font) because individuals have to inhibit their dominant tendency to report the color name (i.e., “blue”) in favor of the correct response, the font color (i.e., green).

Consistent with the prediction that interracial contact stress will undermine subsequent executive control, White individuals, on average, performed more poorly on the Stroop task after contact with a Black experimenter than they did after contact with a White experimenter. Furthermore, the greater White participants' implicit racial bias, the poorer their Stroop performance after interracial interactions (Fig. 1). Black participants revealed a similar pattern. The more negative participants' attitudes were toward Whites, the poorer was their performance after interracial, but not same-race, interactions (Richeson et al.,

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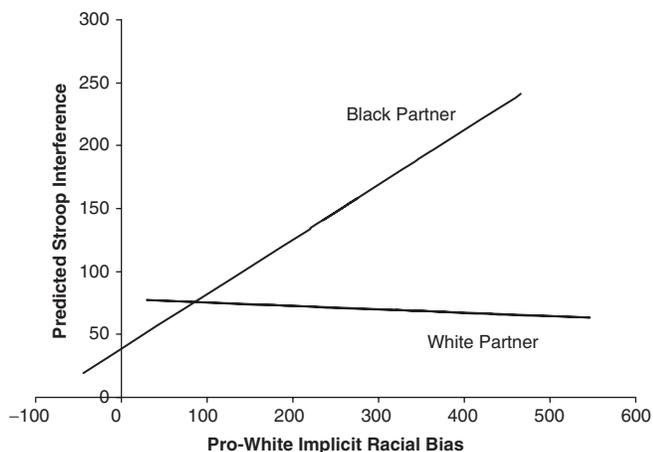


Fig. 1. Predicted Stroop interference as a function of implicit racial bias in favor of White participants in same-race (White partner) and interracial (Black partner) interactions. Stroop interference scores were calculated by subtracting participants' mean reaction latencies to name the font color of control stimuli (a string of Xs) from their mean reaction latencies to name the font color of interference stimuli (the color names "red," "blue," "yellow," or "green" presented in mismatching font colors). Higher numbers reflect poorer task performance. Pro-White implicit racial bias scores reflect the facility (in milliseconds) with which participants could associate White American names with pleasant words compared with unpleasant words on the Implicit Association Test, relative to the ease with which they could associate Black American names with pleasant compared with unpleasant words (see Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Positive values reflect greater pro-White/anti-Black racial bias.

2005). Taken together, this work suggests that, like other stressors, interracial interactions can be cognitively costly.

Although provocative, this research does not address *how* interracial contact undermines subsequent cognitive functioning. We have pursued this question as part of a larger research program investigating dynamics of interracial interactions. One of the insights from this work is the critical role of self-regulation during interracial interactions. In the sections that follow, we review research regarding the mediating role of self-regulation, and the moderating influence of prejudice concerns, in shaping individuals' experiences. We close our review with a discussion of potential implications of the findings for efforts to create positive contact experiences.

A PROCESS MODEL OF INTERRACIAL CONTACT

Figure 2 depicts a working model of interracial contact dynamics that integrates biopsychosocial models of interracial interactions (Blascovich et al., 2001; Clark et al., 1999) with recent theories of executive control (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Furthermore, the model combines the largely separate literatures regarding racial majorities' interracial contact experiences and those of minorities. According to the model, interracial contact is often perceived as a stressor, triggering involuntary physiological and behavioral reactions. To cope with

these stress reactions and successfully negotiate the interaction, individuals deploy self-regulatory effort.

According to recent models of executive control, however, engagement in one task that requires self-regulation (e.g., inhibiting behaviors, thoughts) impairs performance on subsequent tasks tapping the same resource (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). That is, effortful self-regulation (i.e., self-control) draws upon a central executive attentional resource that can be depleted temporarily. Based on the model, therefore, interracial contact impairs performance on tasks that require executive control because individuals engage in self-control during the interaction, which depletes their executive attentional capacity. In other words, negotiating interracial interactions may leave individuals ill-equipped to perform optimally on any task that requires executive control, including the difficult cognitive tests college students often face but also the multitude of tasks that require willpower and persistence for successful completion.

Initial support for this resource-depletion model was garnered from a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study in which White participants were shown facial photographs of Black and White males (Richeson et al., 2003). Although the task involved little executive attentional demand, several brain regions thought to be involved in the inhibition of habitual or dominant responses (e.g., the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex; DLPFC) were relatively more active during exposure to Black faces than they were to White faces. What was most intriguing, however, was that neural activity in response to Black faces in one region of the right DLPFC predicted the extent to which the same individuals were impaired on the Stroop task after an interracial interaction that had occurred more than 2 weeks prior. In other words, when exposed to Black male faces, those individuals who revealed the greatest activity in a brain region known to be involved in executive control were most likely to be impaired on an executive control task after an actual interracial interaction. These results provide compelling evidence for the role of self-regulation during interracial contact in subsequent executive-control failures.

Interracial Contact Concerns

As shown in Fig. 2, many dispositional and situational factors are likely to moderate the effects of interracial contact on cognition. For instance, race-related attitudes, previous contact experiences, and participants' situational roles can either increase or decrease the stress of the interaction, as can the need, desire, or ability to regulate one's stress reactions. To date, our research has largely focused on the influence of individuals' interracial contact concerns. Specifically, White participants in interracial interactions are often concerned about appearing prejudiced, whereas racial minorities are often concerned about being the target of prejudice and/or about confirming negative group stereotypes. Below, we offer a partial review of our research on the effects of these concerns.

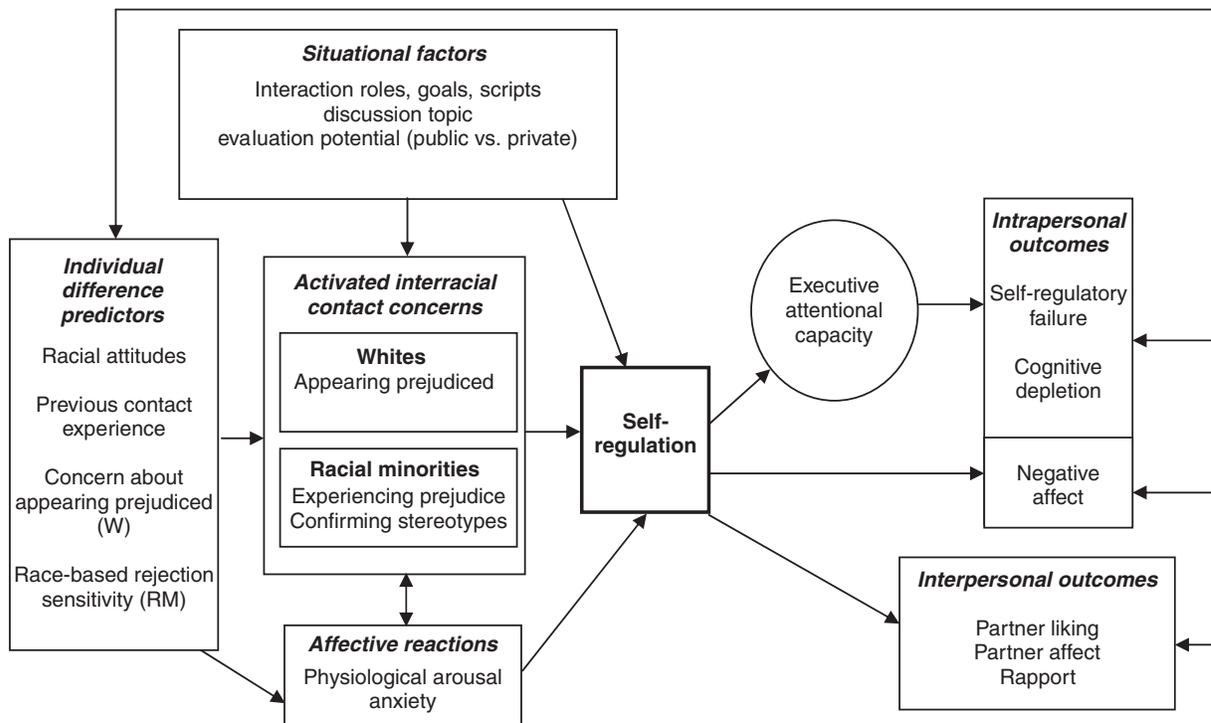


Fig. 2. Working process model of interracial contact. The model depicts the proposed pathway through which interracial contact results in divergent intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes. Individual-difference and situational factors moderate the extent to which interracial interactions activate anxiety, physiological arousal, and relevant prejudice concerns for racial minority and majority individuals. These affective reactions and activated interracial contact concerns instigate the deployment of self-regulatory strategies that result in a host of negative intrapersonal outcomes, including cognitive depletion. The same self-regulatory efforts, however, can also give rise to positive interpersonal outcomes, including increased partner liking and positive affect.

Majority Perspective

Members of dominant groups often experience anxiety during interracial interactions because they are concerned about behaving in prejudiced ways (Vorauer & Kumhyr, 2001). In order to avoid expressing prejudice, individuals carefully monitor their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. That is, they engage in self-control. Our model predicts, therefore, that the more concerned about appearing prejudiced White individuals are during interracial interactions, the more depleted they will be afterwards.

We tested this hypothesis in a study in which White undergraduates first took the IAT, a measure of subtle racial bias; engaged in a brief, ostensibly unrelated interaction with either a White or Black experimenter; and then took the Stroop task to measure cognitive depletion (Richeson & Trawalter, 2005). We manipulated individuals' prejudice concerns through false feedback regarding their IAT performance. Specifically, participants in the heightened-concerns condition were given explicit negative feedback regarding their level of prejudice. They were told, "most people are more prejudiced than they think they are." Control participants were similarly provided with negative performance feedback, but the feedback did not explicitly refer to race or prejudice. They were told, "most people perform worse than they think they did." Consistent with predictions, participants who received prejudice feed-

back were more disrupted on the Stroop task after interracial interactions than control participants were. Activating prejudice concerns did not affect Stroop performance after same-race interactions, however. Building on this experiment, subsequent studies found that reducing prejudice concerns attenuates post-contact Stroop impairment (Richeson & Trawalter, 2005), offering substantial support for the role of prejudice concerns in shaping Whites' cognitive outcomes of interracial contact.

One troubling implication of this work is that efforts to control prejudice can backfire in the form of cognitive depletion. This possibility is particularly troubling given that prejudice control is known to be a necessary step toward prejudice reduction. Trawalter and Richeson (2006) sought to examine a potential route through which individuals can avoid prejudice without the accompanying cognitive depletion. We drew upon regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998), which argues that there are two approaches to goal attainment: promotion focus and prevention focus. Whereas promotion focus is associated with the eager pursuit of goals, prevention focus is associated with the vigilant detection of possible threats to one's goals. Within the context of interracial contact, therefore, the goal to avoid appearing prejudiced could be pursued with a prevention focus, in which individuals vigilantly attempt not to say or do the wrong thing (e.g., by suppressing stereotypical thoughts). Or, alternatively, it could

be pursued with a promotion focus, wherein (for instance) individuals seek opportunities to find connections with cross-race interaction partners.

Given that vigilance and suppression are particularly effortful self-control strategies, they should deplete executive attentional resources more than seeking opportunities to find common ground with one's interaction partner. Not surprisingly, therefore, we found that individuals who were encouraged to "avoid prejudice" during an interracial interaction (i.e., a prevention strategy) performed more poorly on a subsequent Stroop task than did individuals who were encouraged to focus on "having a positive intercultural exchange" (i.e., a promotion-like strategy). Interestingly, prevention participants performed no worse than control participants, for whom neither regulatory focus was introduced. Prevention, in other words, seems to be the default strategy with which White individuals enter interracial interactions. Accordingly, interracial interactions are more cognitively depleting than same-race interactions for most White individuals. Consistent with the working model, furthermore, these findings suggest that it is not the goal to control prejudice per se that results in cognitive depletion but, rather, the cognitive processes that individuals employ (i.e., vigilance, suppression, effortful self-presentation) to avoid appearing or behaving in prejudiced ways.

Minority Perspective

Because experiencing prejudice is a stressor, minorities are often concerned about being the target of prejudice (Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005). Consequently, they engage in self-control during intergroup interactions in order to cope with, and whenever possible to avoid, being targeted. One way racial minorities attempt to achieve desired outcomes, despite potential prejudice from interaction partners, is through the use of compensatory strategies such as behaving especially positively in order to foster a smooth interaction (Miller, Rothblum, Felicio, & Brand, 1995). For instance, we (Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005) found that ethnic minority first-year students who were chronically concerned about being the target of prejudice self-disclosed more—a behavior known to promote interpersonal intimacy—with White, but not with ethnic minority, roommates. Furthermore, racial minorities who were primed with racial prejudice put forth more effort during interactions with White partners, compared with participants who were primed with prejudice against older adults. Specifically, trained judges' ratings of the videotapes of these interactions revealed that racial minority participants who were expecting racial prejudice were more engaged during the interactions (e.g., they were more talkative, solicited their partners' perspective more, smiled more, and leaned forward more) than racial minority participants in the control condition were.

These findings suggest that when concerned about being the target of prejudice, racial minorities engage in self-control. According to resource-depletion theory, self-control stemming

from prejudice concerns should temporarily deplete individuals' attentional resources. Although we have not yet tested this hypothesis directly (cf. Richeson et al., 2005), we have found that engaging in compensatory strategies seems to be associated with negative affective outcomes. Indeed, the more racial minority students were concerned about being the target of prejudice, the less authentic and genuine they felt after interactions with White, but not racial minority, roommates and the more negative affect they reported after interacting with a White partner in the lab (Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005). This work suggests that self-regulatory effort in response to the threat of being the target of prejudice may result in a host of negative affective experiences.

Interpersonal Outcomes

Although we have described largely negative outcomes of individuals' self-regulatory efforts, such efforts may yield positive interpersonal outcomes, at least under certain circumstances. For instance, there is substantial evidence that self-regulation during interracial interactions depletes White individuals' executive functioning. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that White participants who are more depleted after interracial interactions—e.g., those with higher levels of subtle racial bias—also engage in greater self-control during those interactions. Consistent with this hypothesis, Black participants in interracial interactions judged White partners that were higher in subtle racial bias to be *more* engaged during the interactions than less-biased White partners (Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005). Furthermore, the more engaged participants were, the more their Black interaction partners liked them. Consequently, higher-bias Whites were liked more by Black interaction partners than lower-bias Whites were (see also, Vorauer & Turpie, 2004).

Hence, our work suggests that self-regulation in the service of negotiating interracial interactions often results in negative cognitive and affective experiences for the self but also relatively positive interpersonal outcomes. Indeed, this work implies a fairly provocative dynamic in which positive interpersonal outcomes come at the hand of the very self-regulatory efforts that give rise to negative intrapersonal outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS

Given that racial diversity both is the reality and is desirable in most social arenas (e.g., school, businesses), our findings take on particular significance. This work has implications for efforts to promote positive interracial contact experiences. For White individuals, effective interventions may involve steering the effort to avoid appearing prejudiced away from what appears to be a default strategy of suppression and behavioral control toward more approach behavior, such as intercultural learning, friendship development, and honest dialogue in the service of

mutual understanding. For racial minorities, on the other hand, situations that communicate that their group memberships are valued are most likely to obviate the need for compensatory strategies that would, in turn, result in negative affective and cognitive outcomes. This is particularly relevant in educational contexts in which racial minorities often face negative stereotypes regarding their potential for success. Even without these interventions, however, interracial interactions may become less depleting the more experience individuals have with them (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Hence, promoting racially and culturally diverse environments whenever and wherever possible, as early as possible, may, ironically, be the best prescription for the development of positive interracial contact experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

Contact across racial lines remains disquieting for many. We argue that in order to understand why this is so, it is important to study both sides of interracial interactions. From the research reviewed, it is clear that both racial-minority and White individuals bring to such interactions important concerns that affect their own experiences and those of their interaction partners. Our research suggests, furthermore, that although individuals' self-regulatory efforts are likely to leave them feeling cognitively and emotionally drained, these efforts can also result in positive interpersonal outcomes. The most pressing direction for future research, therefore, is the identification of strategies that promote positive intrapersonal *and* interpersonal experiences for all involved.

Recommended Reading

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