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An in-group advantage in detecting intergroup anxiety

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Abstract

We examined the possibility of an in-group advantage in detecting intergroup anxiety. Specifically, we videotaped White and Black participants while they engaged in same- or interrace interactions. Then, we asked White and Black observers to view these videotapes (unaware of the racial context) and provide their impressions of participants' anxiety. Two results pointed to an in-group advantage in detecting intergroup anxiety. First, only same-race observers perceived a modulation of participants' anxious behavior as a function of racial context. This held true not only for relatively subjective perceptions of global anxiety, but also for perceptions of single, discrete behaviors tied to anxiety. Second, we found that only same-race observers provided descriptions of anxiety that tracked reliably with participants' cortisol changes during the task. These results suggest that White and Black Americans may have difficulty developing a sense of shared emotional experience.

An in-group advantage in detecting intergroup anxiety

Presidential hopeful Barack Obama recently suggested that there is a "chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races." Could this be true? Is it more difficult for different-race individuals to understand, perceive, and detect each others' emotions and intentions? In this paper, we explored whether the ability to detect intergroup anxiety declines when perceptions are made across the racial divide.

Although intergroup interactions are becoming increasingly more common, they remain a source of anxiety for many people. Both majority group members (e.g., Whites in the United States) and minority group members (e.g., Blacks in the United States) show cognitive impairment and negatively-toned emotional and physiological responses during and after intergroup encounters (Mendes, Major, McCoy, & Blascovich, 2008; Richeson, Trawalter, & Shelton, 2005). For both groups, anxiety may stem from a concern about confirming negative stereotypes (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995; Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). These anxious feelings can "leak out" via relatively uncontrollable behaviors (Waxer, 1977), including physical distancing, fidgeting, and vocal tension (Goff, Steele, & Davies, 2008; Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005; Weitz, 1972).

This investigation focuses on observers' impressions of intergroup anxiety. Similar to the concept of an in-group advantage in recognizing emotions within cultures (see Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002; cf. Nowicki, Glanville, & Demertzis, 1998), we questioned whether there may exist an in-group advantage in detecting intergroup anxiety. Although many studies have examined observers' perceptions of intergroup anxiety (e.g., Vorauer & Turpie, 2004; Mendes, et al., 2008; Shelton et al., 2005), none, to our knowledge, have directly compared perceptions of same- versus different-race observers. Therefore, this experiment examined the extent to which

White and Black observers are differentially attuned to intergroup anxiety among members of their own racial groups.

We asked White and Black participants to complete a stressful task in the presence of a panel of White or Black interviewers, thus manipulating intergroup context. We videotaped participants' reactions to this situation. Then, we asked White and Black observers to view the videotapes and gauge anxiety unaware of the racial context of the situation. We were interested in perceptions of (a) general anxiety and (b) two specific behaviors: vocal tension and reassurance seeking. Vocal tension is an unintentional sign of intergroup anxiety (Weitz, 1972). Reassurance seeking is a relatively uncontrollable activity expressed by those who are anxious and fear negative evaluation (Heerey & Kring, 2007; Joiner, Katz, & Lew, 1999). No work, to our knowledge, has explored the potential for an in-group advantage in the description of single, concrete behaviors such as these, which are ostensibly measured objectively (Burgoon & Baesler, 1991).

We indexed attunement to intergroup anxiety in two ways. First, we questioned whether observers detected a modulation of participants' anxious behavior as a function context (i.e., whether participants were being interviewed by a panel of same-race or different-race individuals). Second, we examined the extent to which observers' ratings predicted participants' objective stress responses, measured with cortisol changes. By examining correspondence between observers' ratings of anxiety and participants' cortisol reactivity, we could determine the relative accuracy of observers' ratings without concern for participants' attempts to present a more favorable image via self-report.

Method

Participants

We recruited Boston-area men and women (N = 193) between the ages of 18 to 55 who identified as White/Caucasian or Black/African-American, who were evenly distributed in gender (54% female), and on average just past young adulthood (age: M = 28.7, SD = 10.6). *Procedure*

All participants were scheduled for afternoon appointments to control for diurnal fluctuations in cortisol. Following initial consent, participants viewed a neutrally-affective nature documentary video to allow 30 minutes of quiet rest before collection of the first (baseline) saliva sample. Next, the experimenter informed participants that they would be preparing and then delivering an eight-minute speech to a panel of interviewers, which would be videotaped. The participants were instructed to imagine that they were interviewing for a desirable job and to describe the qualities that made them well-suited for the job.

At this point, the interviewers entered the room. Depending on condition assignment, participants were evaluated by either two White or two Black interviewers (one male, one female). After the brief introduction, the participant was left alone to prepare the speech (2 min). The interviewers then re-entered the room and instructed the participant to begin the speech. After eight minutes had elapsed, the experimenter returned to the room and ended the speech task. Participants completed an additional 5-min stressor task and then provided the second (reactivity) saliva sample. After 30 minutes had passed, the participant provided the final (recovery) saliva sample. Participants were thoroughly debriefed, paid, and thanked.

Neuroendocrine measures. We obtained saliva samples using IBL SaliCap sampling devices, which were later assayed for salivary-free cortisol using commercial immunoassays kits (IBL-Hamburg, Germany). Intra- and inter-assay coefficients of variance were less than 10%. For each participant we calculated two cortisol change scores by subtracting baseline levels from

both reactivity and recovery period samples. We averaged these two values to provide a proxy area under the curve or total amount of cortisol secreted as a consequence of the stressful task.

Observers' ratings. Self-identified White/Caucasian (n = 11) and Black/African

American (n = 8) undergraduate research assistants (observers) were trained to code the videotaped performances of the speech delivery task. All observers were trained by the same research assistant. During training, observers and the research assistant together viewed 10 pilot participants, and the research assistant discussed how to code the various outcome measures.

Once the research assistant was satisfied with the quality of the coding, observers completed the coding independently. Each videotape was coded by at least one White and one Black observer. Observers made a global assessment of participants' anxiety, responding to the item "The subject seemed anxious during the speech" on a scale from -4 (strongly disagree) to +4 (strongly agree). When making ratings of anxiety observers viewed the videotapes silently. Observers also coded the extent to which participants displayed vocal tension and reassurance seeking throughout the speech delivery on a scale of -3 (not at all) to +3 (very much). When making ratings of these variables, observers viewed the videotapes with the sound turn on.

Results

Data Analytic Strategy

We questioned whether observers of the same race as the participant would be more likely than observers of a different race to detect a modulation in intergroup anxiety. Therefore, we explored the 3-way interaction between the participant's race, interviewers' race, and the match between the observer's and participant's race. For each dependent variable, we conducted a 2 (Observer Race: same or different than participant) by 2 (Participant Race) by 2 (Interviewers' Race) mixed-model ANOVA, with repeated measures on the first factor. We

decomposed significant 3-way interactions by examining the effects of interviewers' race and the match between the observer and the participant separately for White and Black participants.

Significant 2-way interactions were further examined by conducting simple effects tests within the repeated measures variable—the match or mismatch between participants' and observers' race.

Global Anxiety

Observers' global impressions of anxiety yielded the expected 3-way interaction, F (1, 138) = 9.15, p_{rep} = 0.99. A significant 2-way interaction emerged for ratings of White participants, F (1, 138) = 3.89, p_{rep} = 0.88. White observers perceived more anxiety among White participants interacting with Black interviewers (M = 0.85, SEM = 0.30) than with White interviewers (M = -0.47, SEM = 0.36), F (1, 138) = 8.18, p_{rep} = 0.99. However, Black observers did not observe this difference, F (1, 138) < 1 (Figure 1a). The 2-way interaction was also significant for ratings of Black participants, F (1, 138) = 5.31, p_{rep} = 0.93. From the perspective of Black observers, Black participants appeared more anxious when their interviewers were White (M = 0.05, SEM = 0.39) than when their interviewers were Black (M = -1.03, SEM = 0.41), F (1, 138) = 5.17, p_{rep} = 0.93. White observers failed to detect this difference, F (1, 138) < 1 (Figure 1b).

Vocal Tension

Analysis of vocal tension ratings revealed a significant 3-way interaction, F(1, 85) = 8.80, $p_{rep} = 0.99$. When we restricted the analysis to White participants, a significant 2-way interaction between Observer Race and Interviewer Race emerged, F(1, 85) = 11.07, $p_{rep} = 0.99$. White observers perceived more tension in the voices of White participants who were being evaluated by Black interviewers (M = -0.17, SEM = 0.35) than by White interviewers (M = -1.20,

SEM = 0.33), F(1, 85) = 9.71, $p_{rep} = 0.99$. However, Black observers perceived more tension in the voices of White participants who were being evaluated by White (M = 0.00, SEM = 0.32) than by Black interviewers (M = -0.80, SEM = 0.34), F(1, 85) = 4.52, $p_{rep} = 0.89$ (Figure 2a). The 2-way interaction was not significant for Black participants, F(1, 85) = 1.14. $Reassurance\ Seeking$

Ratings of the tendency to seek reassurance during the speech revealed the expected 3-way interaction, F(1, 86) = 6.68, $p_{rep} = 0.95$. Simple effects tests revealed no significant differences for ratings of White participants. However, for ratings of Black participants, the 2-way interaction was significant, F(1, 86) = 5.35, $p_{rep} = 0.93$. From the perspective of Black observers, Black participants were more likely to seek reassurance when their interviewers were White (M = -0.60, SEM = 0.33) than when their interviewers were Black (M = -1.80, SEM = 0.36), F(1, 86) = 4.58, $p_{rep} = 0.91$. White observers did not detect this difference, F(1, 86) < 1; (Figure 2b).

Correspondence of Anxiety Ratings and Neuroendocrine Reactivity

Our results show strong effects for the in-group advantage such that when observers' and participants' race matched, the observers detected modulation of anxiety based on the social context (the racial composition of the interview). But to what extent were observers' perceptions of participants' anxiety accurate? To address this question, we examined the extent to which observers' perceptions of anxiety predicted participants' changes in cortisol during the course of the experiment. We examined two predictors of participants' average cortisol secretion: global anxiety ratings from race-matched and race-mismatched observers.

We observed a significant overall model, F(2, 131) = 3.08, $p_{rep} = .88$. When participants' race and observers' race were different, observers' anxiety ratings were *negatively* related to

participants' cortisol increases, b = -0.49, $p_{rep} = .91$. In contrast, ratings of anxiety made by race-matched observers were in the expected direction, such that higher observer ratings predicted greater cortisol increases (b = 0.39, $p_{rep} = 0.85$) (Figure 3). That is, participant-observer matches resulted in correspondence between anxiety ratings and cortisol responses, but participant-observer mismatches resulted in significant effects in the opposite direction.

Discussion

This study revealed an in-group advantage in recognizing intergroup anxiety. Race-matched observers—who were not aware of the racial context of the interviews—detected an increase in anxiety during intergroup encounters; however, race-mismatched observers were insensitive to this distinction. Race-matched observers appeared to draw upon subtle nonverbal indicators of intergroup anxiety that were undetectable to race-mismatched observers. Moreover, only race-matched observers were sensitive to cortisol reactivity, an internally-generated response to stress.

The finding of an in-group advantage in recognizing intergroup anxiety is consistent with the broader notion that emotion recognition is diminished when perceivers are asked to identify emotions expressed by members of a different cultural group (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002; Nowicki et al., 1998). The in-group advantage has been attributed to nonverbal "accents," subtle differences in the appearance of emotional expressions of emotion across cultures (Marsh, Elfenbein, & Ambady, 2003). While the general language of emotion expression may be universal, members of a single cultural group appear to develop a defining style. As with verbal accents, out-group members may have difficulty interpreting communications expressed in this unique style.

Examination of vocal tension ratings provides support for this explanation. White observers detected an increase in vocal tension when White participants were faced with an interracial encounter, and Black observers sensed the opposite pattern. This is interesting because vocal tension may be an especially diagnostic indicator of Whites' intergroup anxiety. The voice is a highly "leaky" channel of communication in that it readily transmits a signal that the expresser would prefer to conceal (Ekman & Friesen, 1969), and vocal negativity has been identified as a relatively uncontrollable indicator of Whites' discomfort during interracial interactions (Weitz, 1972). Together with more controllable signs of racial tolerance (e.g., increased smiling to Black interaction partners), vocal tension may constitute a pattern of "repressed affect," or tension that one would prefer to disguise as positivity (Shelton, Richeson, & Vorauer, 2006; Weitz, 1972). Here we demonstrate that only White observers detected the genuine sign of discomfort. Perhaps Black observers took controllable positive behaviors at face-value and perceived *more* positivity—and therefore less vocal tension—among Whites who were being interviewed by Blacks (Shelton et al., 2006; Vorauer & Turpie, 2004).

Ratings of reassurance seeking resulted in a different pattern: Black observers detected an increase in reassurance seeking among Black participants paired with White interviewers, but White observers failed to make such a distinction. Reassurance seeking is a compulsive "checking" behavior designed to forestall the occurrence of a feared outcome, such as a negative evaluation (Heerey & Kring, 2007). While both Whites and Blacks often enter intergroup encounters fearful of confirming negative stereotypes, the stereotype they fear confirming is race-specific: while Whites are concerned about appearing prejudiced and unfair (Sommers & Norton, 2006; Vorauer et al., 1998), Blacks are anxious about appearing unintelligent and incompetent (Aronson, 2002; Richeson & Shelton, 2007; Shelton et al., 2005; Steele & Aronson,

1995). Because the stereotypes are different, the expressions of intergroup anxiety may be different, resulting in greater vocal tension for White participants who feared appearing prejudiced and greater reassurance seeking for Black participants who feared appearing unintelligent and incompetent. The current study reveals that only in-group observers were sensitive to these manifestations.

In sum, this work adds to a growing body of research addressing the emotional, rather than cognitive, side of intergroup perceptions. Past work has demonstrated that people are reluctant to attribute to out-group members a full range of emotional experiences, with harmful consequences for helping, empathy, and other aspects of intergroup behavior (Cuddy, Rock, & Norton, 2007; Leyens et al., 2001; Tam et al., 2007). Similarly, relative insensitivity to the emotional states of out-group members may make it difficult to develop a sense of shared emotional experience (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). We suggest that future work should investigate the extent to which sustained and meaningful interracial contact, which has the potential to reduce racial prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), contributes to a reduction in the emotion recognition gap.

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Footnote

1. Reductions in sample size resulted from a video malfunction, which reduced the sample size available to code.



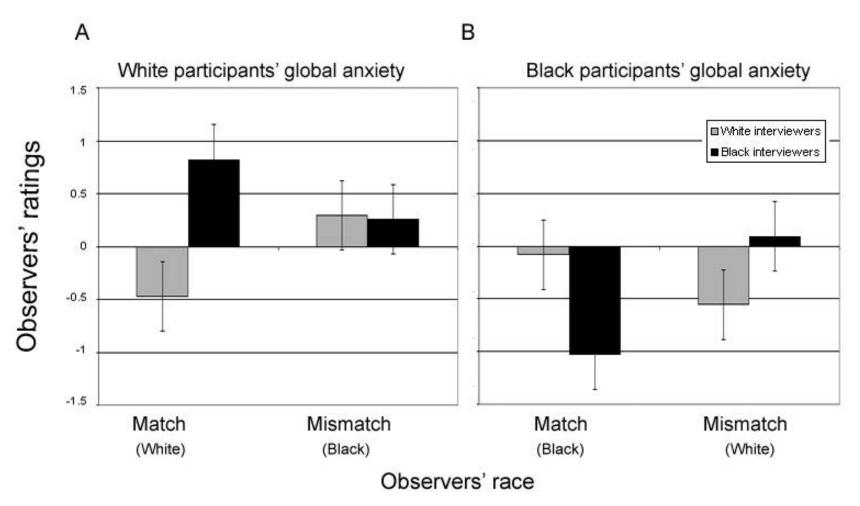
Figure Captions

Figures 1a and 1b. White and Black observers' ratings of (A) White participants' and (B) Black participants' global anxiety. Separate bars are used to indicate participants who were evaluated by White and Black interviewers.

Figure 2a and 2b. White and Black observers' ratings of (A) White participants' vocal tension and (B) Black participants' reassurance seeking. Separate bars are used to indicate participants who were evaluated by White and Black interviewers.

Figure 3. Average change in cortisol secretion (n/mol) as a function of participant/observer race matching plotted at \pm 1 SD at the mean of global anxiety ratings.

Figures 1a and 1b.



Figures 2a and 2b.

