

CROSS-CULTURAL RACIAL INTERACTIONS

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Abstract: *This article examines the complexity of cross-cultural racial interactions, highlighting the psychological, social and cultural factors that shape relationships between individuals belonging to distinct racial groups. Grounded in theoretical frameworks such as racial identity, implicit bias, and stereotype threat, the analysis seeks to understand how past experiences, socio-cultural norms, and internalized representations influence perceptions and behaviors in interracial contexts. The paper emphasizes the ambivalent nature of such interactions: depending on the specific context and the quality of contact, they may lead either to prejudice reduction and increased empathy or to the reinforcement of existing tensions and stereotypes. Through a critical review of relevant empirical research, the article proposes practical directions for improving intergroup relations, including structured intergroup dialogue, cooperative interdependence, and the promotion of an authentic multicultural framework. The findings support the importance of sustained, intentional and reflective contact in fostering social cohesion and racial equity.*

Keywords: interracial interactions, stereotype threat, intergroup relations, multiculturalism

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural racial interactions involve communication between members of different racial or ethnic groups [1]. They are becoming increasingly common for many people who formerly interacted only with members of their own ethnic group. Toosi et al.'s (2012) meta-analysis of studies of interracial interactions demonstrates the extent of the trend. Trawalter et al. (2009) found that people often experience interracial interaction as a threat. They feel threatened, for instance, by the possibility of becoming the targets of racial stereotypes, or of being drawn into racially motivated confrontations. The resulting stress triggers coping responses in threatened individuals. Gibb (2007) explains how people who feel threatened in

cross-cultural conversations resort to defensive communication. They fail to listen properly and instead spend much time thinking of what they could say or do to impress the other person. This defensive behaviour triggers a defensive response in the other person so that the communication becomes increasingly forced and strained. Appropriate training can increase an individual's competence and confidence when communicating with members of other racial groups. Bernstein and Salipante (2015) found that participants feel confident during interracial interactions when they know they are competent to communicate and behave with culturally dissimilar others in various contexts. This kind of confident knowing is learned over time and in particular contexts. In a sense it is the key

to successful interracial encounters since it enables competent, confident individuals to produce reciprocating action in the other person.

Race plays a central role in interracial interactions, and successful outcomes may depend on the participants overcoming years of exposure to negative stereotypes and misinformation about each other's racial groups. Explicit attitudes towards members of other races have greatly improved over recent decades and become increasingly egalitarian, the improvement being largely due to changing social norms. This study used a theoretical approach based on an extensive review of interdisciplinary literature in social psychology, communication studies, and race relations. The methodology includes the critical analysis and synthesis of existing empirical research, theoretical models, and meta-analyses relevant to cross-cultural racial interactions. Sources were selected from journals, academic books, and institutional reports, ensuring the thematic relevance. The research does not involve primary data collection but relies on secondary data to identify key psychological constructs — such as implicit bias, stereotype threat and intergroup anxiety — and their influence on interracial dynamics. Comparative analysis of various theoretical frameworks is used to highlight their applicability and limitations in contemporary contexts.

2. Threat in cross-cultural racial interactions

People may experience interracial interaction as a threat. They may feel threatened, for instance, by the possibility of becoming the targets of racial stereotypes [2]. Gibb (2007) points to factors in interracial interactions that create a sense of threat and which trigger a defensive response [3]. First is evaluation - if one of the partners seems to be evaluating or judging the other, then the other person may respond defensively. Next is

superiority - if one participant communicates, verbally or nonverbally, that she feels superior in social status, intellectual ability, physical appearance or in some other way to the other, the other person is likely to respond defensively. Another response is control - if one person tries to control, convince or dominate the other person, this will create a defensive climate and distort the communication. All attempts to control the other person imply that the other is ignorant, uninformed, immature, or has the wrong attitude.

When participants feel threatened during cross-cultural racial interactions they fail to grasp the other person's feelings, motives and values. To that extent, they fail to communicate effectively across the racial gap. Instead of trying to make contact with the other person, they are always thinking in terms of the threat lurking behind the person's words and thoughts. Instead of focusing on the topic of discussion they are thinking about how the other person perceives them, about what they should say or do to be perceived more favourably by the other person, thereby lessening the perceived threat.

There are four basic strategies [4] for coping with perceived threat in interracial interactions identified by Trawalter et al. (2009). *Antagonism* is when some individuals respond to threat by expressing anger or making prejudiced remarks. In interracial encounters they may antagonize the other person in order to bolster, protect or repair their sense of self-worth. They will accuse the other, for instance, of being malicious, unfair or incompetent. Other individuals respond to threat by enthusiastically *engaging* in the conversation by asking questions, showing interest in their partner's opinions and displaying positive, nonverbal behaviour, such as smiling and frequent head nods. This kind of engagement is designed to fend off threat. Individuals whose resources are insufficient to meet the demands of an interracial encounter may adopt an

avoidance strategy. Instead of focusing on the conversation or the other person they distract themselves with other thoughts. Or they use other avoidance behaviours such as avoiding eye contact and giving brusque replies to the other person's questions. Individuals who feel strongly threatened and whose resources are too low to meet the demands of the interaction may simply *freeze*. They become immobile and silent during the interaction.

2.1. Stereotype threat and its behavioural implications

A potent source of threat in interracial encounters is stereotype threat, which is a disruptive psychological state that people experience when they feel they are the targets of negative stereotypes associated with their race or ethnicity [5]. Stereotype threat can increase blood pressure and trigger aggressive behaviour [6]. It can also impair intellectual performance. For instance, white men with strong mathematical skills performed worse than control participants on a mathematics test when they knew that their performance would be compared with that of Asians - a group stereotypically portrayed as mathematically gifted [7]. African-Americans taking the SAT reasoning test used for college entrance in the United States often underperform. The effect is triggered by the stereotype that African-Americans are less intelligent than other racial groups. Asking test takers to indicate their race before the test is all that it takes to activate the stereotype [8].

Racial stereotypes are strongly-held beliefs regarding the attributes and behaviour of various racial groups. The stereotypes are used to predict the behaviour of the stereotyped person or group and may be used to justify racial discrimination on the assumption that the stereotype reflects inherent characteristics of the stereotyped group. Explicit attitudes towards members of other races have greatly improved over recent decades because of changing social norms. However, race continues to play a

central role in interracial interactions, and successful outcomes may depend on the participants overcoming years of exposure to stereotypes and misinformation about each other's racial groups.

People feel threatened when they are being stereotyped if they believe the stereotype applies to them personally. They may internalize the negative assessment and sometimes they consciously or unconsciously adjust their behaviour to match the stereotype [9]. Alternatively, they may try to disprove the stereotype by behaving in a counter-stereotype fashion. The continual stress of guarding against negative racial stereotypes can lead stereotyped individuals to avoid situations where the stereotype could be used against them [5]. They may decline to apply for a job, for instance, or drop out of an academic course. Goff, Steele and Davies (2008) gave participants in a research study observation-and-learning goals during interracial interactions [10]. These tasks insulated them against stereotype threat. Simply by adopting learning goals, the participants became more at ease - in spite of the potentially powerful threat of being evaluated in a negative way by the other-race partner.

However, racial stereotypes are not always negative. Sometimes they play a positive role, as when they facilitate initial communication between people from different racial groups. When a Nigerian first meets a Russian, or an Australian first meets a Brazilian, the only basis the two people have for communication may be the stereotype held by each person about the other person's racial group.

3. Race, perception and the mechanisms of social avoidance

Most people who regularly interact with members of other racial groups wish to be perceived as unbiased [11]. They are strongly motivated to control any biased feelings they have about each other and to not let them disrupt the communication.

Sometimes they may use a race-avoidance strategy in interracial encounters by avoiding all mention of race or racial topics, the underlying assumption being that someone who does not even notice a person's race cannot be racist. Norton et al. (2006) found that when trying to describe another person who was not present, people would avoid mentioning the person's race and, instead, would refer to the missing person's hair or eye-colour [12]. But using a race-avoidance strategy can have unintended consequences. Roberson and Kulik (2007), for instance, found that race avoidance impairs communication performance and that the individual using the strategy often performs poorly on tasks carried out jointly with other-race partners [13]. Thompson and Jenal's (1994) study gives insights into what can happen when a race-avoidance strategy is followed. The study involved four counsellors (two black and two white) holding counselling sessions with black female college students who had been asked to participate in a study of the concerns of women on campus [14]. The counsellors were instructed to avoid race or racial issues during the counselling sessions. As a result, some students perceived the counsellors as denying the negative impact that race had on the students' day-to-day lives. Some students responded by themselves avoiding racial matters - an approach that kept the peace but at the price of self-censorship. Several students spoke openly and assertively about the racial inequities present on campus - and in society generally. When this happened, some counsellors felt they were losing their authority as therapists and became derailed as a result.

Two main kinds of motivation to control racial bias in interracial encounters are identified by Plant and Devine (1998) [15]. First of all, it is about *external motivation*. Some people are externally motivated to control their racial bias in order to avoid social disapproval. For example, in interracial interactions they carefully

monitor their own words and behaviour in order to avoid being perceived as prejudiced. But people who are motivated to respond without bias for external reasons will regulate expressions of prejudice only when in the presence of others who they assume to be non-prejudiced. Externally motivated people are unlikely to regulate bias when there is no threat of social disapproval. Secondly, we are talking about *internal motivation*. Some individuals are internally motivated to behave in a friendly and egalitarian way during interracial interactions. Internally motivated individuals, Plant and Devine found, wish to be unbiased because it is important to their self-concept. They try to make their interaction partners feel comfortable by being friendly and egalitarian. Such individuals often adopt an approach (liking) strategy, as described below.

3.1. Approach behaviour in interracial interactions

Interracial encounters are more likely to be successful when the participants are genuinely interested in each other, when they talk freely about themselves and are willing to self-disclose. Such activities are examples of approach behaviour. Approach behaviours in cross-cultural racial interactions include close seating proximity, physical touch, smiling, gazing at the other person, leaning forward, consciously displaying moderate body relaxation, using 'open' body positions and back-channelling responses that signal interest and attentiveness. Richeson and Shelton (2007) found that whites, anxious to avoid displaying signs of racial bias in interracial encounters, engage in increased smiling, laughing, and other kinds of approach behaviour [16]. Sometimes these attempts backfire, as blacks may judge their efforts to be insincere and offensive.

Approach and avoidance are two basic modes of coping with stress [17]. People approach what they like and avoid what they don't like. A member of one racial group will avoid members of another racial

group if their words and behaviour are perceived as threatening in some way. Approach strategies are often followed by whites in interracial situations [16]. Thus a white waitress might be strongly motivated to adopt a friendly, approach strategy with black customers as this kind of behaviour would lead to a positive outcome - the customers would leave good tips.

Both approach and avoidance strategies are used in multiracial organizations [18]. Approach strategies include personal recognition (e.g. by addressing minority group employees by their first names); inclusiveness (e.g. by inviting members of racial minorities to participate in workplace activities); and openness (e.g. by making sure that minority group employees are informed of what is happening in the organization. Examples of avoidance strategies are cutting a minority employee off short instead of listening to him properly; and talking to him in superficial terms only and never personally.

3.2. Unconscious racial biases

Unconscious racial biases are habits of mind, learned through repeated personal experiences and cultural socialization that are highly resistant to change [19]. Examples of unconscious racial biases that may emerge during interracial interactions are those held by whites of whites as intelligent, successful and educated; and of blacks as aggressive, impulsive and lazy [20]. They make an impact on interracial encounters by distorting the interaction and affecting the outcomes - for example, by making the participants wish to avoid future interracial contact.

Objective measures of racial bias such as Greenwald et al's (1998) implicit-association test are sometimes used in training programmes to reveal trainees' unconscious racial biases [21]. The implicit-association test uses implicit measures of attitudes and behaviour which theoretically bypass conscious control. It is a scientifically grounded online test that measures the strengths of implicit

associations that influence behaviours and that reveals unconscious biases.

3.3. Nonverbal behaviour

Unconscious racial biases are often expressed nonverbally. For instance, when two people from different racial groups first meet they may unconsciously convey their suspicion and distrust of each other by avoiding eye-contact, standing or sitting at a great distance from each other and by other nonverbal signals. Posture, facial expression and body-tension are harder to control than verbal communication and so are more reliable indicators of attitude and feeling. Nonverbal behaviour in interracial encounters may express unconscious, automatically activated racial biases. In Goff, Steele and Davies's (2008) study, whites who expected to discuss a racially contentious topic (racial profiling) with black counterparts, feared being perceived in accordance with the 'white racist' stereotype [10]. They unconsciously expressed their fear through distancing behaviour. This consisted of moving their chairs farther away from the chairs of their black partners. The more the white participants thought the white racist stereotype would be applied to them, the farther away they moved their chairs.

Nonverbal signals make a powerful impact in cross-cultural racial interactions because of their immediacy (Chartrand and Dalton, 2009) [22]. Members of all racial groups react immediately and strongly to nonverbal messages sent by their other-race partners. They abstract meaning from even very brief exposure to facial expressions, gestures and postures which express liking, hostility, suspicion and other strong emotions. Nonverbal signals communicating attitudes of superiority, for instance, are immediately picked up and elicit defensive responses. That is why it is important to be aware of the impact made by one's own nonverbal behaviour in interracial encounters and to make on-course corrections if necessary.

4. Cross-cultural racial communication competence

Interracial communication, sometimes used interchangeably with interethnic communication, refers to communication between people from different races or different ethnic groups [1]. Interracial communication competence contributes to successful interracial interactions. Bernstein and Salipante (2015) found that people feel confident in interracial interactions when they feel competent - that is, know how to communicate and behave with culturally dissimilar others in various interracial contexts [23]. This kind of competence - confident knowing - is learned over time and in particular contexts, and it can be enhanced by means of appropriate training. Confident knowing is the key to successful interaction since it enables the individual to produce reciprocating action in the other person. By contrast, incompetent participants often experience acute psychological discomfort during interracial interactions. The discomfort is triggered by the perception that one is at risk of being treated by the other person in a racially

biased way or according to a negative racial stereotype [5].

5. Conclusions

A notable aspect of cross-cultural racial communication competence is the ability to distinguish between superficial and meaningful interracial conversations [23]. Less competent participants tend to mistake superficial interaction for meaningful interaction. Meaningful interracial interactions are those in which the participants engage in serious conversations about their personal backgrounds and life experiences. A way of reducing the stress in interracial encounters is to engage in more contact with members of other racial groups. Long-term, informal contact between racial groups leads to each group obtaining information about the other group's values, lifestyles and experiences. Such information is usually accurate and favourable in content. The information is then converted into more positive perceptions of the other racial group, countering pre-existing prejudice and stereotypes.

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