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# The Impact of Topic Valence on Interracial Interaction Outcomes: An Honors Thesis in Psychology

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Psychology

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Abstract

Intergroup interactions, specifically interracial interactions for the purposes of this study, have the ability to act as the foundation for friendships and the association of positivity with the outgroup as a whole. Despite the presence of obstacles such as intergroup anxiety and the overall reluctance to participate in intergroup interactions, these interactions also have the ability to reduce or mediate prejudice. Positive affect plays a role in this by influencing how an interaction with an "other" might be interpreted. We studied how positive versus negative conversation topics would affect White attitudes toward their Black conversation partner. While we hypothesized that positive topics would result in overall positive partner associations, results found that participants came to more negative impressions of their partner in this condition than did participants who discussed negative topics.

*Keywords*: interracial interactions, topic valence, positive affect

## The Impact of Topic Valence on Interracial Interaction Outcomes

When studying relationships between groups, the interactions that take place can determine the starting place of the relationship and how it will proceed. Interracial interactions between individuals have implications for the groups as a whole, as a positive interaction has the potential to create a foundation for friendships, improve intergroup attitudes, and reduce prejudice (Olson et al., 2018). Intergroup interactions are a complex field of study, and while one positive interaction may seem simple enough to achieve, there are many challenges associated with forming relationships.

At the very base of the interaction, intergroup anxiety exists, which increases difficulty for the initial contact. Intergroup anxiety, first defined in a study by WG Stephan & CW Stephan (1985) as the anxiety that many individuals experience during their interactions with outgroup members, analyzes the behavioral consequences for the self as well as fear of negative evaluations by ingroup or outgroup members. According to this same study, factors that determine the level of anxiety an individual will experience include intergroup cognitions, prior relations between the groups, personal experience, and the structure of the situation including levels of contact with outgroup members. Stephan & Stephan (1985) also propose that if an individual experiences high levels of intergroup anxiety, they will be more likely to exhibit behaviors that are seen as socially acceptable, experience information-processing biases such as assuming two traits predict each other than more than they do, have intensified self-awareness which can also lead to resistance to persuasion and conformity, and exaggerate their evaluations of outgroup members as with misattribution of their negative traits. Another challenge is the general reluctance to engage in intergroup interactions. Individuals are

generally more comfortable interacting within their own groups, and as such, there is no way to guarantee that an organic intergroup interaction will be positive, as this is where conflict and prejudice are most likely to be established.

However, despite the challenges they may present, intergroup interactions are still a worthy subject of study. They have the potential to reduce prejudice such as through the contact hypothesis, which focuses on the possibility that with the correct circumstances, bringing together members of a group that are experiencing conflict can reduce this conflict, and possibly prejudice as well. In particular, friendship has the ability to mediate prejudice. In a 1998 study, Pettigrew comments on friendship within the context of Allport's contact hypothesis, noting that equal group status within the contact, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and authority support are all factors that provide optimal contact. Pettigrew's research finds that improved contact through intergroup exposure has the potential to reduce prejudice. Contact such as this is particularly important not only the improvement of relationships, but also by acting as a condition to make experimentation such as evaluative conditioning possible.

*Changing Evaluative Associations*

Evaluative conditioning, or changing the valence of a stimulus through pairing it with a different positive or negative stimulus, plays a role in intergroup interaction content as well. A 2006 study by Olson & Fazio tested the effects of pairing Black individuals with positive words such as "magnificent" or "amazing" and positive images such as puppies or flowers. Findings showed that White individuals associating positivity with Black individuals can make them less prejudiced, even if temporarily so. This phenomenon seen in intergroup interactions has been

documented within romantic relationships as well. In one study, participants made associations between their romantic partner using positive stimuli. This change in positive affect through associating these stimuli with their partner and learning to correlate them with positivity in general was shown to have the potential to strengthen the overall relationship (McNulty et al., 2017). This study also shows the potential lasting effects of the positive associations.

The implicit misattribution model was devised as a result of the observed occurrence where people make incorrect associations between their psychological experiences and the causes of them, particularly during the evaluative conditioning process. This model relies on the three main premises of attributional thinking generally existing on an unconscious level, affective experiences generally being unconscious as well, and the fact that these errors of automatic and unconscious processing can result in affect being misattributed and one object taking on the affected actually produced by another (Jones et al., 2009). This model ultimately determines that existing affect from an interaction can be misattributed to other factors, which in the case of this thesis study would be one's intergroup interaction partner.

*Positive Affect*

Positive affect is the human condition in which one experiences positive emotions more frequently. This can be a natural state, or it can be manipulated by experimentation. In one such experiment, subjects were assigned to positive affect or affect control conditions. In the positive affect group, participants were given a candy bar, and then the two groups watched the same video and completed questionnaires. The results of the study showed that positive affect increases the extent to which subjects form inclusive group representation (Dovidio et al., 1995). Another similar study by Ensari and Miller (2002) found that friendships strengthen

through disclosure, particularly when one are both parties are divulging intimate details (Ensari & Miller, 2002). Overall, it has been found that associating an "other", regardless if this other is an outgroup member or someone in a close relationship with the subject, with positive stimuli can change attitudes for the better. As previously discussed, this particular study will examine conversations as the source of positive affect, i.e. discussing happy and pleasant topics. Each of these studies supports our hypothesis that a White subject talking about happy topics rather than a neutral topic with a Black partner will increase their positive associations and therefore their attitudes toward this outgroup member. This positive association could potentially generalize to the entire group, resulting in reduced prejudice.

To test this hypothesis, participants filmed a short video discussing either positive or negative topics with a Black conversation partner. Their partner did not exist, and was created for the purposes of the study to match the general demographics of the college-aged students who were the participants. The participants were told the study was to examine first impressions, so shortly after filming their video with the partner they were asked to answer some questions about what they believed his personality traits to be. They then completed other measures to test their prejudices and views of various outgroups. We predicted these measures would show that participants who discussed a positive topic would be more likely to associate their partner with more positive traits.

**Methods**

*Participants*

We conducted studies with 58 total participants. Two participants were omitted from the results due to technological issues and computer failure. Eleven Black participants were

excluded from the analysis due to a focus on the attitudes of White individuals . Our

participants were from first-year psychology classes at a large public university and received

course credit after completion.

*Procedure*

For our study, White participants were paired with a Black conversation partner.

Participants believed they were having a conversation with their partner when in reality, their

partner did not exist. They were told this study was on how individuals form first impressions,

particularly in online environments, so they would be exchanging video messages with another

participant in the same study. First, we collected their demographic information, including race,

age, occupation, and political orientation. Every participant was then given a photo of their

partner "Michael", a Black 24 year-old male student. They were then randomly assigned to

either positive or negative conversation topic conditions, each of which included three

questions they could choose for their conversation. Positive questions included: "What do you

like to do on weekends?"; "Talk about one of your favorite childhood memories."; and "What

is one of your favorite hobbies? Why do you like it?". Negative condition questions were the

following: "What subject do you have the most trouble with?"; What was your biggest

childhood fear?"; and "What is your biggest pet peeve?". They were asked to choose one of the

three and write some notes about what they would like to discuss with Michael, and they were

shown his photo again as they took notes. The experimenter set up a webcam and then left the

room while the participant recorded their video for Michael that they believed he would view

shortly after.

After recording the video, they completed several dependent variable tests after being reminded by the experimenter that people are generally very good at reading people based on little information from first impressions. The first DV was a partner impressions test in which they rated Michael from 0 (Not at All) to 6 (Very Much) on the traits of Trustworthy, Intelligent, Judgmental, Honest, Anxious, Warm, Prejudiced, Sincere, Competent, and Avoidant. They then completed a priming measure of automatic prejudice (see Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995). An explicit prejudice test was also given in the form of a Feeling Thermometer, in which participants rated groups including Black and White as well as filler groups (i.e. lawyers, Muslims) on a scale from 0 to 100 with 100 showing the greatest preference.

Finally, the participants completed manipulation checks and misattribution test items. The two manipulation check questions were "How pleasant or unpleasant were the topics you discussed with your partner?" and "Do you remember the race of your interaction partner?". To check for misattribution, participants answered the following three questions: "How comfortable is this room?"; "Have you had any difficulties with the webcam set-up?"; and "Has the switching between programs been distracting?". By including questions to check this, it was possible to test if participants were placing any of their discomfort from interacting with a Black partner onto features of the procedure. For instance, a participant might believe they are experiencing negative emotions because of inconveniences with the experiment software when in reality they are uncomfortable having a conversation with an outgroup member. The participants were then debriefed and given their SONA credit for compensation.

**Results**

*Manipulation checks.* Every participant was able to correctly recall the race of their partner. Participants in the positive topic condition also reported more positive impressions of the topics they discussed ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .88$) than did participants in the negative topic condition ($M = 3.45$, $SD = .80$, $t(43) = 2.35$, $p = .02$), indicating that we successfully manipulated conversation topic valence.

*Partner impressions.* Ratings of positive partner traits were highly correlated ($\alpha = .87$), and so their mean was computed. The same was true of negative partner traits, $\alpha = .80$. Participants in the positive topic condition ($M = 4.10$, $SD = .74$) and negative topic condition ($M = 4.19$, $SD = .65$) did not differ in their positive impressions of their partner, $t(43) = -.42$, $p = .68$. Participants in the positive topic condition ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.07$) came to slightly more negative impressions of their partner than did those in the negative topic condition ($M = 1.55$, $SD = .92$), $t(43) = 1.64$, $p = .11$.

*Feeling thermometer (explicit prejudice).* A feeling thermometer difference score was computed such that higher numbers indicated more positive attitudes toward White people over Black people (i.e., White – Black). The positive topic condition ($M = -4.35$, $SD = 21.50$) and negative topic condition ($M = -4.55$, $SD = 21.54$) did not differ on this variable, $t(43) = .03$, $p = .98$.

*Evaluative priming (implicit prejudice).* Automatic prejudice estimates were calculated by subtracting the mean raw response latencies of prejudice-congruent prime-target trials (i.e., Black-negative and White-positive trials) from prejudice-incongruent prime-target trials (i.e., Black-positive and White-negative trials), after excluding error trials, trials with extreme

latencies (i.e., < 300 ms or > 2000 ms), and 2 participants whose overall error rates was greater than 25%.  The data from 2 additional participants was not recorded due to computer error. The automatic prejudice estimate from those in the positive topics condition ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 58.45$) did not differ from those in the negative topics condition, $M = -2.36$, $SD = 72.24$, $t(39) = .39$, $p = .70$.

     *Misattribution of discomfort.*  Recall that we speculated that White individuals, in often being uncomfortable in interracial interactions, might misattribute their discomfort to aspects of the experimental setting.  We also wondered whether their discomfort (and thus their misattribution of it) might differ by experimental condition.  Participants in the positive topic condition ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .99$) relative to those in the negative topic condition ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.06$) did not report greater discomfort with the room, $t(43) = -.07$, $p = .94$.  However, Participants in the positive topic condition ($M = 1.52$, $SD = .85$) relative to those in the negative topic condition ($M = 1.09$, $SD = .29$) were more likely to express difficulties with the webcam setup, $t(43) = 2.26$, $p = .03$. Participants in the positive topic condition ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.34$) relative to those in the negative topic condition ($M = 2.05$, $SD = .84$) were also somewhat more likely to report that switching between the software programs was distracting, $t(43) = 1.55$, $p = .13$.

## Discussion

     Through testing conversations as the source of positive affect, we hypothesized that a White subject talking about happy topics rather than a neutral topic with a Black partner will increase their positive associations and therefore their attitudes toward this outgroup member. We also believed this could also result in reduced prejudice through unconscious generalization

of the positive association to the entire group. However, the findings of our study did not support our hypothesis. Rather, we found that participants who had positive topic conversations viewed their partner more negatively than did participants who were assigned to the negative topic condition. Our study included manipulation checks in which every participant accurately recalled the race of their partner as well as confirmed our manipulation of topic valence. This allowed us to confirm both that the participants did come to their impression of their partner while taking race into account and that they viewed their topics in the way we intended. Our explicit prejudice measure, the feeling thermometer, showed no difference in how participants in each condition rated their attitudes toward White and Black people. Our implicit prejudice test of prime-target trials also found no difference in automatic prejudices between the positive and negative topic conditions.

In regards to our misattribution measures, we suspected that in some cases, White participants could ascribe their discomfort from having an interracial interaction to some feature of our experiment. The first misattribution question regarding the comfort of the room found no differences between the two conditions. However, the next two questions of difficulty with the webcam setup or distractibility of switching between programs were more likely to be reported as true by participants in the positive topic condition than those in the negative topic condition. These misattribution results, in combination with the partner impression questions, show that participants were more likely to report discomfort when having a positive conversation with their Black partner, as well as describe liking their partner less.

We theorized that these results could be due to a couple of potential factors. First, White individuals might experience guilt when discussing positive topics with their Black partner,

potentially from societal stereotypes of Black people living in poverty versus their own white

privilege. As a result of these negative stereotypes, they could believe Black individuals are

less likely to relate to positive experiences. If this is the case, then the effect might be

moderated by the stereotypes people have about Black individuals and their experiences with

poverty or other negative life experiences. Another possibility stems from the fact that many

White Americans are prejudiced against Black Americans, and they may experience

inconsistency between the positivity of the topic and their attitude toward someone against

whom they feel innately biased. In this case, the effect should be moderated by White

individuals' general attitudes towards Black individuals. Despite our hypothesis not being

supported by the results, these findings have implications for future research. Intergroup

interactions are an important base for friendship formation and prejudice reduction, and it

knowing how to foster positivity in these interactions is valuable knowledge.

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