



Whites' Desire to Affiliate and Perceived Understanding in Interracial Interactions☆



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Whites' affiliation predicts perceived understanding of Blacks' racial experiences.
- Self-image goals mediate the effect of affiliation on perceived understanding.
- Whites and Blacks disagree about how well Whites understand racial experiences.
- Differences in affiliation cause divergent perceptions of understanding.

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ABSTRACT

Four studies investigated whether the desire to affiliate with Blacks motivates Whites to perceive that they understand Blacks during discussions of racial topics. Whites' desire to affiliate predicted perceived understanding of Blacks when discussing racial topics (Study 1a), and this effect was mediated by Whites' self-image goals during the interaction (Study 3). Furthermore, Whites' desire to affiliate with Blacks created divergent perceptions of understanding when discussing racial topics (Studies 1b and 2), such that Whites felt they understood Blacks but Blacks did not feel similarly understood. Whites interacting with Black (vs. White) partners reported greater desire to affiliate during discussions about racial topics, which in turn led to greater perceived understanding of the partner (Study 4). I discuss the implications of Whites' desire to affiliate with Blacks when talking about race.

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1. Introduction

In the United States, Blacks typically experience more racial discrimination than Whites do (e.g., Feagin, 2006). Survey data reveals that 70% of White respondents (vs. 26% of Blacks) have never felt racially discriminated against (ABC News/Washington Post, 2009). Instead of viewing Whites as targets of discrimination, people tend to perceive Whites as perpetrators (Inman & Baron, 1996) and stereotype them as being prejudiced (Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). Because Whites typically do not undergo racial discrimination and tend to perceive race relations differently from Blacks (e.g., Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006), they may feel as though they do not understand Blacks' racial experiences very well.

Despite having fewer experiences with racial discrimination, when might Whites think that they do understand Blacks' racial experiences? I investigate one motivational factor that may contribute to Whites'

perceived understanding of Blacks' racial experiences. I propose that when talking about racial topics, Whites who seek to affiliate with Blacks may be motivated to think that they understand Blacks. Whites may engage in this motivated reasoning when talking about racial (vs. nonracial) topics because these topics elicit Whites' concern about appearing prejudiced (Goff, Steele, & Davies, 2008), and one way to ward off claims of appearing prejudiced may be to claim understanding. Thus, I predict that whereas Whites will generally report being less able to understand racial (vs. nonracial) topics, the desire to affiliate with Blacks will motivate Whites to claim that they understand Blacks when discussing racial topics.

Although Whites may think that they understand Blacks' racial experiences, will Blacks feel similarly understood? In addition to having different racial experiences, Blacks and Whites often have differing concerns, goals, and perspectives in interracial interactions (Shelton & Richeson, 2006). I therefore predict that Whites' desire to affiliate may lead to divergent perceptions between Whites and Blacks, such that Whites think they understand Blacks' racial experiences to a greater extent than Blacks feel understood.

Taken together, the present research highlights the importance of examining intergroup dynamics during discussions centered on race. Ongoing dialogues such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the

☆ Author Note: Studies 1a and 2 came from Deborah Son Holoien's doctoral dissertation. Other findings from Study 4 have been published elsewhere (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010; Holoien & Shelton, 2012), but the findings reported in the current manuscript have not been previously published.

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Race Card Project offer Whites and racial minorities opportunities to discuss racial issues, yet talking about race can be challenging for many reasons (e.g., Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Johnson, Olson, & Fazio, 2009; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008). The present research investigates another reason why intergroup discussions about race may be difficult: Whites who desire to affiliate with Blacks may think they understand Blacks' racial experiences, yet disagreements may arise because Blacks do not feel comparably understood. When Blacks doubt Whites' ability to understand them, Whites may object to Blacks disregarding their good intentions, whereas Blacks may see Whites as disingenuous for claiming to understand their racial problems. Such divergent perceptions may cause tensions and misunderstandings in interracial interactions, which are already more negative than same-race interactions (Toosi, Babbitt, Ambady, & Sommers, 2012). Thus, this work investigates a potential downside of Whites' seemingly good intentions to affiliate with Blacks when talking about race.

1.1. Desire to Affiliate and Perceived Understanding

People often engage in motivated reasoning to reach desired conclusions about themselves and others (Kunda, 1990). Often people want to think they understand targets of affiliation—that is, individuals with whom they seek an interpersonal connection. For example, people perceive illusory similarities—commonalities that do not actually exist—between themselves and targets of affiliation (Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002; Slotter & Gardner, 2009). These illusory similarities may lead people to overestimate how well they understand targets of affiliation.

Similarly, in interracial interactions Whites who desire to affiliate with Blacks may be motivated to perceive that they understand Blacks. The desire to affiliate is the motivation to seek a positive interpersonal connection with another person (Holoien, Bergsieker, Shelton, & Alegre, 2015). Whites tend to seek affiliation with Blacks during interracial interactions (Bergsieker et al., 2010) in part to negate stereotypes about Whites as prejudiced. Whites recognize that their group is stereotyped as prejudiced and they generally want to avoid being seen as racist (Vorauer et al., 1998). In short, Whites' desire to affiliate with Blacks during interracial interactions may reflect *self-image goals*, or the motivation to construct a desired impression on others, rather than *compassionate goals*, or genuine concern about another person's well-being (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). Although many factors may motivate people to affiliate with others, I propose that Whites' desire to affiliate with Blacks at least partly reflects the self-image goal of appearing non-prejudiced.

One way that Whites can demonstrate a lack of prejudice is by thinking that they understand Blacks. People tend to perceive racists as lacking understanding of racial minorities, characterizing them as *ignorant, naïve, insensitive, and lacking in empathy* (Sommers & Norton, 2006). More generally, demonstrating understanding is associated with being sensitive to others' emotional experiences (Goldsmith, McDermott, & Alexander, 2000) and being responsive to others' needs (Finkenauer & Righetti, 2011). Thus, Whites who desire to affiliate with Blacks may be motivated to perceive that they understand Blacks.

Whites' desire to affiliate may motivate them to perceive that they understand Blacks particularly when discussing racial (vs. nonracial) topics because under these conditions Whites experience greater risk of appearing prejudiced. The threat of appearing prejudiced is greater when Whites anticipate discussing racial (vs. nonracial) topics with Blacks (Goff et al., 2008), eliciting stereotype threat—fear of being evaluated negatively based on a stereotype about one's group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). When discussing racial topics with Black partners, Whites high in desire to affiliate may be more motivated to show that they are unprejudiced, leading to greater claimed understanding of Blacks. During discussions of nonracial topics, when the risk of appearing prejudiced is lower, Whites' desire to affiliate should not

affect perceived understanding of Blacks. Whites may feel they understand nonracial experiences fairly well because these events occur to both Whites and Blacks, whereas they are less familiar with Blacks' racial experiences. I therefore predict that Whites' desire to affiliate with Blacks will increase their perceived understanding for Blacks' racial (but not nonracial) experiences.

1.2. Divergent Perceptions of Understanding

Although Whites who desire to affiliate with Blacks may perceive that they understand Blacks when discussing racial topics, Blacks may not share this perception. Blacks and Whites often perceive race relations differently: Whites perceive greater racial progress (Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006; Eibach & Keegan, 2006), have less knowledge about racial discrimination (Nelson, Adams, & Salter, 2013), and report greater anti-White discrimination in the present (Norton & Sommers, 2011) than Blacks do. Blacks may recognize that Whites view race relations differently and as a result, feel that Whites cannot actually understand their racial experiences. Whites may also be aware of such group differences, but they are more likely to downplay these group differences and claim understanding to avoid appearing prejudiced.

During discussions of nonracial topics, however, Whites and Blacks may show more convergent perceptions. When Whites and Blacks discuss experiences that both can relate to and share in common, they may feel understood by their partner and think they understand their partner. Discussing nonracial experiences may reduce Whites' concerns about appearing prejudiced (Goff et al., 2008) as well as their desire to claim understanding to assuage self-image concerns. I therefore predict that divergence between Whites' *perceived understanding* (the extent to which Whites think they understand Blacks) and Blacks' *felt understanding* (the extent to which Blacks feel understood by Whites) will be greater when discussing racial (vs. nonracial) topics.

Indeed, prior work demonstrates that Whites may inaccurately perceive how understood Blacks feel when discussing racial topics. In one study (Holoien et al., 2015), when White participants higher in desire to affiliate with Black interaction partners discussed racial topics, their reports of how well they understood their partner correlated negatively with the extent to which Black partners reported feeling understood. The present work extends this research by establishing a psychological mechanism linking desire to affiliate with inaccurate perceptions of understanding. Although prior work theorized that Whites' desire to affiliate reflects self-image goals that can prevent Whites from accurately perceiving how understood Blacks feel (Holoien et al., 2015), the role of self-image goals was not explicitly measured. I predict that when discussing racial topics, Whites' desire to affiliate will be associated with greater self-image goals, which in turn would lead Whites to think they understand Blacks when discussing race.

1.3. Overview of Studies

Four studies tested the relationship between Whites' desire to affiliate and perceived understanding of Blacks when discussing racial and nonracial topics. Study 1a used a simulated video chatting paradigm to provide initial correlational evidence of the relationship between Whites' desire to affiliate and perceived understanding of Blacks' disclosure of racial and nonracial problems. Study 1b examined the extent to which Blacks felt understood when talking about racial or nonracial topics by Whites who varied in their desire to affiliate. Study 2 established evidence of divergence between Whites' perceived understanding and Blacks' felt understanding in intergroup friendships as a function of differences in desire to affiliate. Study 3 investigated whether self-image goals mediate the relationship between Whites' desire to affiliate and perceived understanding of Blacks when discussing racial topics. Finally, Study 4 examined the relationship between Whites' desire to affiliate and perceived understanding in interracial and same-race interactions. Together, these studies demonstrate that

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