



Concerns about appearing prejudiced get under the skin: Stress responses to interracial contact in the moment and across time

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ABSTRACT

Many White Americans are concerned about appearing prejudiced. How these concerns affect responses during actual interracial interactions, however, remains understudied. The present work examines stress responses to interracial contact—both in the moment, during interracial interactions (Study 1), and over time as individuals have repeated interracial contact (Study 2). Results of Study 1 revealed that concerns about appearing prejudiced were associated with heightened stress responses during interracial encounters (Study 1). White participants concerned about appearing prejudiced exhibited significant increases in cortisol “stress hormone” levels as well as increases in anxious behavior during interracial but not same-race contact. Participants relatively unconcerned about appearing prejudiced did not exhibit these stress responses. Study 2 examined stress responses to interracial contact over an entire academic year. Results revealed that White participants exhibited shifts in cortisol diurnal rhythms on days after interracial contact. Moreover, participants’ cortisol rhythms across the academic year, from fall to spring, were related to their concerns about appearing prejudiced and their interracial contact experiences. Taken together, these data offer the first evidence that chronic concerns about appearing prejudiced are related to short- and longer-term stress responses to interracial contact. Implications for life in diverse spaces are discussed.

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Introduction

Diversity can be tremendously rewarding. Exposure to racial diversity has many positive outcomes, including improved racial attitudes (Astin, 1993; Shook & Fazio, 2008), better leadership development (Antonio, 2001), and more complex thinking about the social world (Antonio et al., 2004; Sommers, 2006; Sommers, Warp, & Mahoney, 2008). In the words of former President Bill Clinton, diversity can be a “Godsend” for those who can “live together, learn together, work together” (1997). Not everyone fits this description, however. Many Americans are uncomfortable with diversity and prefer to live in non-diverse neighborhoods (Putnam, 2007). In fact, many individuals – especially those concerned about appearing prejudiced – find interracial contact stressful and avoid it when possible (Plant, 2004; Plant & Devine, 2003). As diversity continues to increase, however, interracial contact will become unavoidable. In the present work, we thus examine consequences of White individuals’ chronic concerns

about appearing prejudiced on their behavioral and physiological responses to interracial interactions, both in the moment and across time.

Concerns about appearing prejudiced

Interracial contact is often stressful (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Shelton & Richeson, 2006; Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009), perhaps especially so for individuals concerned about appearing prejudiced (Plant, 2004; Plant & Devine, 1998; Shelton, 2003; Vorauer, 2006). These individuals fear that prejudiced behavior on their part will lead to social censure or, worse, rejection. Their desire to respond in non-prejudiced ways is rooted primarily in external motivations not to be evaluated negatively by others, rather than internal motivations not to be prejudiced. In other words, interracial contact may be especially stressful for those high in external (vs. internal) motivation to respond without prejudice. Research has shown that Whites who are high on external motivation to respond without prejudice (EM) report feeling anxious about interracial encounters and are more likely to avoid such contact (Plant, 2004; Plant & Devine, 1998, 2003). Furthermore, external motivation to appear non-prejudiced has been shown to affect Whites’ spontaneous evaluations of Blacks (Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Devine, 2003; Richeson & Trawalter, 2008). For

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example, Richeson and Trawalter (2008) have found that high-EM Whites automatically appraise Blacks as a threat to be avoided (see also Bean et al., submitted for publication). Taken together, this research suggests that high-EM individuals are likely to experience distress during real interracial encounters.

A growing literature in psychophysiology likewise suggests that interracial contact can be distressing (Amodio, 2009; Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001; Littleford, Wright, & Sayoc-Parial, 2005; Mendes, Blascovich, Lickel, & Hunter, 2002; Mendes, Major, McCoy, & Blascovich, 2008; Page-Gould, Mendes, & Major, 2010; Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008). It remains unknown, however, whether concerns about appearing prejudiced moderate physiological stress responses to interracial contact. This gap in the literature is surprising given meta-analytic evidence that the human stress system is particularly sensitive to the threat of negative social evaluation (Dickerson, 2008; Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004). Specifically, research has found that intensely self-evaluative situations, such as interviews, activate the HPA axis, a major branch of the human stress system (Epel, Lapidus, McEwen, & Brownell, 2001; Foley & Kirschbaum, 2010; Kirschbaum, Pirke, & Hellhammer, 1993; Kudielka, Hellhammer, & Kirschbaum, 2007; Mendes, Gray, Mendoza-Denton, Major, & Epel, 2007). Some of this research has even revealed that negative self-focused social emotions, such as guilt and shame, are better predictors of HPA axis activity and immunological health outcomes than are more general negative affective states, such as distress (Dickerson, Gruenewald, & Kemeny, 2004; Dickerson, Kemeny, Aziz, Kim, & Fahey, 2004; Kemeny, Gruenewald, & Dickerson, 2004). In the present work, we thus investigate whether concerns about appearing prejudiced elicit physiological stress responses to interracial contact.

The present work

The present research considers how concerns about appearing prejudiced (i.e., external motivation to respond without prejudice, referred to as EM) shape stress responses to interracial contact in the moment – during interracial encounters – and across time. We focus squarely on external rather than internal motivation to respond without prejudice given evidence that the HPA axis is sensitive to socio-evaluative threats—threats of being evaluated negatively by others. Specifically, we investigate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Relative to low-EM individuals, high-EM individuals will experience more stress during interracial contact but not same-race contact. This momentary stress will be evident in (A) behavior and (B) physiological responses.

Hypothesis 2. Relative to low-EM individuals, high-EM individuals will experience more stress over time the more interracial contact they have. This chronic stress will be evident in physiological stress system function; it will be associated with changes in physiological rhythms over time.

Study 1: individuals concerned about appearing prejudiced exhibit heightened stress responses during interracial contact

In Study 1, we examined whether individuals' concerns about appearing prejudiced are associated with heightened stress responses during interracial contact. We assessed stress responses in two ways. First, we assessed nonverbal anxiety as an indirect measure of stress. We drew on previous work documenting the behavioral manifestations of social anxiety in general and in intergroup anxiety in particular (Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997; Jurich & Jurich, 1974; Levine & Feldman, 1997; Mendes et al., 2007; Olson & Fazio, 2007; Trawalter & Richeson, 2008; Trawalter et al., 2009). This work has found that anxiety is associated with certain nonverbal

behaviors including averted eye gaze, blinking, facial rigidity, and closed body posture. Because nonverbal behavior is notoriously difficult to control (DePaulo, 1992; Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Ekman & Friesen, 1969), behavioral anxiety provides an apt measure of individuals' spontaneous stress responses. In the present work, we thus examined participants' nonverbal behavior and changes in nonverbal behavior to assess stress and coping—that is, efforts to decrease stress (Trawalter et al., 2009). We hypothesized that high-EM participants would exhibit more behavioral anxiety during interracial than same-race interactions, relative to low-EM participants. In addition, we thought high-EM participants might have a harder time reducing their stress during interracial interactions. That is, we thought high-EM participants might cope with their stress less effectively. By coding participants' nonverbal behavior at the very beginning and middle of interactions, we were able to explore this possibility.

Second, we measured physiological reactivity as a direct measure of stress. The human stress system comprises two major branches: the sympathetic–adrenal–medullary (SAM) system and the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis. Theoretical and empirical work suggests that these two branches respond to different stressors and serve different, albeit complementary, roles (Cacioppo et al., 1998; Chrousos & Gold, 1992; Henry, 1992; Kemeny, 2003; Sapolsky, Romero, & Munck, 2000). In response to stressors of all kinds, within seconds, the SAM system is activated. Its activation results in the immediate release of epinephrine, also known as adrenaline. This “adrenaline rush” increases heart rate, lung function, and mobilizes resources such as glucose. It enables the “fight or flight” response. Under some conditions, the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis is also activated. HPA axis activation instigates a cascade of neuroendocrinological events resulting in the release of cortisol (a principal “stress hormone”) into the blood stream. This cortisol response sustains and modifies SAM system activity and modulates the activity of other physiological systems. For example, cortisol facilitates glucose mobilization into the bloodstream, providing extra energy for individuals to cope with the stressor. Of particular relevance to the present work, highly stressful social situations – particularly those that trigger concerns about being evaluated negatively – have been found to activate the HPA axis (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004; Foley & Kirschbaum, 2010). To foreshadow then, we expected that interracial contact would activate the HPA axis in high-EM but not low-EM White individuals.

To test this prediction, we measured cortisol levels in saliva. Cortisol increases are detectable in saliva 15–20 min after the onset of a stressor (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004; Kirschbaum & Hellhammer, 1994). In other words, increases in salivary cortisol levels reflect stress experienced 15–20 min prior. We predicted, therefore, that high-EM Whites would reveal increased cortisol levels 15–20 min after the start of an interracial interaction.

Study 1 methods

Participants

Forty White undergraduate students (26 women) participated in this study. They were paid \$25 for their participation.

Materials

External motivation to respond without prejudice (EM) scale

The Motivation to Respond without Prejudice Scale (Plant & Devine, 1998) measures individuals' prejudice concerns stemming from external as well as internal motivations. An external motivation (EM) item is: “I try to act non-prejudiced toward Black people because of pressure from others.” An internal motivation (IM) item is: “I am personally motivated by my beliefs to be non-prejudiced

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