



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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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.

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.

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.

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

Whites' desire to affiliate with Blacks may at times undermine positive interracial interactions by creating divergent perceptions of understanding between Blacks and Whites.

Study 1a: Desire to Affiliate and Perceived Understanding

Study 1a examined the association between Whites' desire to affiliate and perceived understanding of Black interaction partners during discussions of racial (vs. nonracial) topics. I hypothesized that desire to affiliate and topic would interact to influence perceived understanding, such that Whites' desire to affiliate would predict perceived understanding of Black partners when discussing racial (vs. nonracial) topics.

Method

Participants

Sixty-three White undergraduates (38 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.7$ years, $SD = 1.3$) participated in this study. Sample size was based solely upon the number of available students in the participant pool during the academic semester.¹

Procedure

In the laboratory, participants were told that they would be video chatting with another student seated in a different room. In reality, participants watched video clips of a gender-matched Black confederate. I used videos of two female and two male Black confederates. A pilot study of 125 participants found that in general, confederates of the same gender received comparable ratings on warmth, competence, authenticity, and attractiveness (see Supplementary Materials). First, the experimenter asked the confederate and participant three warm-up questions about their favorite class, foreign country, and holiday (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997). Next, participants learned that they would discuss a negative college experience. After a rigged lottery, the confederate spoke first and described overhearing his or her roommate say a negative racial or nonracial comment about the confederate. Specifically, the roommate disclosed feeling uncomfortable around the confederate because he or she was Black (racial) or quiet (nonracial; see Supplementary Materials). Afterwards, participants created a video response and answered survey questions.²

Measures

Participants completed the following measures (adapted from Holoien et al., 2015).³ Perceived understanding of the confederate (7 items; $\alpha = .88$; see Appendix A) was assessed with items such as: "How well could you relate to your partner?" and "How well did you know what your partner was going through?". Items used 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very*) scales and were averaged to form composites. Next, participants indicated their desire to affiliate with the confederate ($\alpha = .86$): "How much did you want to get along with your partner?", "How much did you want to have a smooth interaction with your partner?", and "How much did you like your partner?".

¹ For subsequent studies, a priori power analysis revealed an N of at least 90 would be needed for adequate power to detect a medium-sized effect. Although Study 1a is likely underpowered, I conceptually replicate this study in Study 3 with a larger sample.

² An ineffective experimental manipulation priming desire to affiliate (unscrambling words to form sentences about affiliation vs. neutral statements) did not moderate results ($p = .947$) and was dropped from analyses.

³ After completing the primary measures listed above, participants also answered exploratory questions on similarity, closeness, liking/respect goals, partner desire to affiliate, partner understanding, partner similarity, partner closeness, affect, support behavior, partner impressions, intergroup attitudes, meta-stereotype concerns, motivation to control prejudiced reactions, diversity ideology, and social desirability.

Results

I conducted a multiple regression analysis with perceived understanding as the dependent variable. Predictors included participants' desire to affiliate with the confederate (mean-centered), topic ($-1 =$ racial, $1 =$ nonracial), and their interaction. Overall, desire to affiliate positively predicted perceived understanding, $b = 0.36$, $t(59) = 2.75$, $p = .008$, and participants reported greater perceived understanding for the nonracial (vs. racial) topic, $b = 0.30$, $t(59) = 2.58$, $p = .012$. These main effects were qualified by the predicted interaction between desire to affiliate and topic, $b = -0.28$, $t(59) = -2.16$, $p = .035$ (see Fig. 1). Simple slopes tests revealed a positive relationship between desire to affiliate and perceived understanding for the racial topic, $b = 0.64$, $t(59) = 3.47$, $p = .001$, but not the nonracial topic, $b = 0.07$, $t(59) = 0.42$, $p = .677$. As hypothesized, Whites' desire to affiliate predicted their perceived understanding of Black partners when discussing racial (vs. nonracial) topics.

I probed simple effects (Aiken & West, 1991) to test whether Whites higher or lower in desire to affiliate differed in their perceived understanding of racial and nonracial topics. Participants with a lower (1 SD below the mean) desire to affiliate reported greater understanding for the nonracial (vs. racial) topic, $b = 0.55$, $t(59) = 3.36$, $p = .001$. By contrast, participants with a higher (1 SD above the mean) desire to affiliate showed no differences in understanding between the topics, $b = 0.05$, $t(59) = 0.28$, $p = .777$. Whites lower in desire to affiliate acknowledged that they did not understand the racial topic as well as the nonracial topic, but Whites higher in desire to affiliate claimed that they understood the racial and nonracial topics comparably well.

Discussion

Consistent with predictions, Whites' desire to affiliate correlated positively with perceived understanding of the Black partner only when Whites were at greater risk of appearing prejudiced (discussing a racial topic). Although Whites generally reported less perceived understanding for the racial (vs. nonracial) topic, Whites higher in desire to affiliate claimed they understood both topics equally well. Thus far, however, I have found evidence only of a correlation between Whites' desire to affiliate and their perceived understanding for the racial topic. Later, Study 3 provides a causal test of this relationship. Next, Study 1b examines the following question: Despite the positive association between Whites' desire to affiliate and their perceived understanding for racial topics, do Blacks feel more understood by Whites higher (vs. lower) in desire to affiliate when discussing racial topics?

Study 1b: Blacks' Felt Understanding

Although Whites' perceived understanding of Blacks increased with greater desire to affiliate with Blacks during discussions of racial topics (Study 1a), Blacks may not accordingly feel more understood by Whites

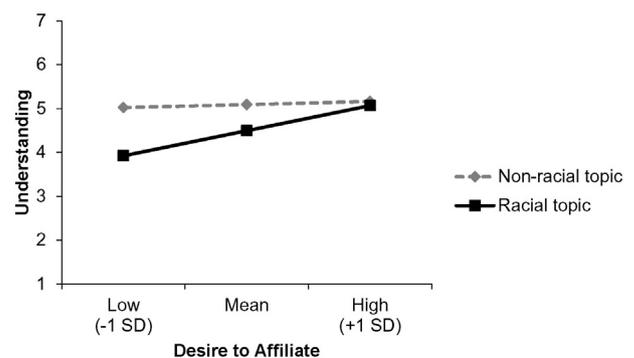


Fig. 1. Whites' understanding predicted by desire to affiliate and topic (Study 1a).

seeking to affiliate. Specifically, I hypothesized that the interaction between Whites' desire to affiliate and topic would not significantly predict Blacks' felt understanding. Instead, I predicted that Blacks' felt understanding would differ by topic, with Blacks feeling more understood by Whites when discussing nonracial (vs. racial) topics.

Method

Participants

I recruited 139 Black participants from Mechanical Turk to watch video responses created by White participants from Study 1a. Based on power analyses (see footnote 1), I aimed to analyze data from approximately 100 participants but oversampled with the expectation that some would fail attention checks. Initial screening of data affected recruitment because more participants failed manipulation checks than anticipated. I excluded participants who incorrectly recalled the contents of the videos at the end of the study ($n = 11$) or failed to take the Black confederate's perspective ($n = 12$). Participants were excluded from all four conditions: race topic/high affiliation ($n = 3$), race topic/low affiliation ($n = 3$), nonracial topic/high affiliation ($n = 8$), nonracial topic/low affiliation ($n = 9$). The final sample used for analysis included 116 participants (74 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 31.5$ years, $SD = 10.0$).

Procedure

Participants learned that they would watch videos of two students discussing college experiences. I provided demographic information of the students (race, gender) but blurred the students' faces to preserve anonymity. All participants were asked to imagine that they were the Black student (Person A). First, participants watched the Black confederate from Study 1a discuss a racial or nonracial negative roommate incident. Next, participants watched a video response created by a White participant from Study 1a. I randomly assigned participants to watch a video created by White participants low or high in desire to affiliate (bottom or top quartiles, respectively) for racial and nonracial topics, with 6 videos for each desire to affiliate/topic condition. Each participant watched 1 of the 24 possible videos. Thus, the study used a 2 (Whites' desire to affiliate: low, high) \times 2 (topic: racial, nonracial) between-subjects design.

Measures

Participants completed measures of feeling understood and desire to affiliate adapted from the previous study (see Appendix A). Items used 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very*) scales and were averaged to form composites. Participants reported their felt understanding (7 items; $\alpha = .97$) with items such as: "How much would you feel your partner knows what it's like to be in your shoes?" and "How much would you think your partner related to your feelings?". Participants indicated their desire to affiliate (3 items; $\alpha = .95$): "How much would you want to get along with your partner?", "How much would you want to have a smooth interaction with your partner?", and "How much would you like your partner?". At the end of the study I asked two manipulation check questions: "In your own words, what did Person A/Person B say in the video clip you watched?" and "Whose perspective did you take?" (Person A or Person B).

Results

Data were submitted to a 2 (Whites' desire to affiliate: low, high) \times 2 (topic: racial, nonracial) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA). The dependent measures were felt understanding and desire to affiliate with the White partner.

Felt understanding

Only a significant main effect of topic emerged: Participants felt more understood when they imagined discussing the nonracial topic ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.80$) compared with the racial topic ($M = 3.31$,

$SD = 1.75$), $F(1, 112) = 4.81$, $p = .030$, $\eta^2_p = .041$. As predicted, the interaction between Whites' desire to affiliate and topic was non-significant, $F(1, 112) = 2.38$, $p = .126$. Nevertheless, to confirm that the pattern observed in Study 1a—in which Whites higher in desire to affiliate claimed more understanding in the racial topics condition—was not reflected in Blacks' felt understanding, I tested whether Black participants' felt understanding varied based on Whites' desire to affiliate when discussing race. Consistent with predictions, Blacks reported feeling similarly understood by Whites when discussing race, regardless of whether Whites were higher ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.72$) or lower ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.86$) in desire to affiliate, $F(1, 112) = 0.34$, $p = .563$.

Desire to affiliate

Analyses failed to reveal significant effects of topic, $F(1, 112) = 0.03$, $p = .868$, desire to affiliate, $F(1, 112) = 0.36$, $p = .553$, or their interaction, $F(1, 112) = 2.64$, $p = .107$.

Discussion

As predicted, Black participants did not feel more understood by Whites higher (vs. lower) in desire to affiliate when discussing race. In addition to this predicted null interaction effect, results supported the prediction that Black participants felt more understood when discussing a nonracial (vs. racial) topic regardless of Whites' desire to affiliate. Taken together, Studies 1a and 1b suggest that Whites' desire to affiliate with Blacks may create divergence between Whites' perceived understanding and Blacks' felt understanding when discussing race. Although Whites higher in desire to affiliate feel they understand Blacks' racial and nonracial experiences comparably well, Blacks do not feel similarly well understood when discussing racial experiences.

Study 2: Divergent Perceptions of Understanding

Study 2 examined whether desire to affiliate creates divergent perceptions of understanding between Whites and Blacks. Participants imagined discussing a racial or nonracial topic with a cross-race friend. I predicted that for the racial topic only, Whites would think they understood Blacks more than Blacks felt understood. Moreover, I predicted that this mean difference in understanding would be mediated by differences between Whites' and Blacks' desire to affiliate with their cross-race friend. Thus, Study 2 examined desire to affiliate as a mediator of Whites' and Blacks' divergent perceptions of understanding, rather than a predictor as in the previous studies. For the nonracial topic, however, I predicted that Whites' perceived understanding and Blacks' felt understanding would not differ significantly.

Method

Participants

I recruited 103 undergraduate participants, aiming to analyze data from approximately 100 participants. I excluded 1 participant who did not identify as White or Black, 1 participant who could not name a cross-race friend, and 1 participant who later categorized her cross-race friend as an ingroup member. Initial screening of data affected recruitment insofar as substantially fewer Black than White participants initially participated in the study; I therefore recruited additional Black participants. Participants were excluded from the race topic/Black participant condition ($n = 2$) and the nonracial topic/Black participant condition ($n = 1$). The final sample used for analysis included 100 participants (67 female; 50 White; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.5$ years, $SD = 1.6$).

Procedure

Participants were asked to identify a same-gender friend who attended the same university and was from a different racial

background: White participants had to select a Black friend and Black participants had to select a White friend. Next, participants read a scenario (see Supplementary Materials) where they imagined conversing with their friend about a racial or nonracial negative classroom experience. White participants imagined *listening* to their friend, whereas Black participants imagined *disclosing* to their friend. White participants imagined hearing their Black friend describe feeling lonely because they were either the only Black student (racial topic) or the only student from their residential college (nonracial topic) in class, and Black participants imagined sharing this story with their White friend. Afterwards, participants completed measures on understanding and desire to affiliate.

Measures

All items were rated on 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very or extremely*) scales, unless otherwise noted, and were averaged into composites.⁴

Friendship closeness

Prior to reading the vignette, participants rated their closeness to their selected friend. Five items assessed the extent to which participants felt close to their selected friend prior to reading the vignette: “How well do you know your friend?”, “How much do you like your friend?”, “How close do you feel to your friend?”, “How similar are you and your friend?”, and “Relative to all your other friendships, how close are you to your friend?”. Participants also indicated friendship closeness using the Inclusion of Other in the Self scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) by selecting one of seven increasingly overlapping circles representing their relationship with their friend. Participants also indicated (a) how long they had known their friend using a 1 (*a few weeks or less*) to 7 (*4 years or longer*) scale, (b) how many friends they had in common on a 1 (*0 friends*) to 7 (*over 20*) scale, and (c) how they would characterize their relationship with their friend using a 1 (*acquaintance*) to 5 (*my closest friend*) scale. These items were standardized to account for scale differences and averaged to form a composite measure of friendship closeness ($\alpha = .88$).

Understanding

Participants answered the same understanding items from the previous studies. White participants—who imagined listening to their friend—reported how well they would understand their friend (perceived understanding; see Study 1a) and Black participants—who imagined disclosing to their friend—reported how well they would feel understood by their friend (felt understanding; see Study 1b).

Desire to affiliate

Four items ($\alpha = .91$) adapted from the previous studies assessed participants' desire to affiliate with their friend during the imagined interaction: “How much would you want to get along with your friend?”, “How much would you want to connect with your friend?”, “How much would you want to feel close to your friend?”, and “How much would you like your friend?”. This construct differs from friendship closeness because it captures desire to affiliate in the imagined interaction and not achieved or existing closeness to the friend in general.

Results

Data were submitted to a 2 (participant race: Black, White) \times 2 (topic: racial, nonracial) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with initial friendship closeness as a covariate (see Supplementary Materials for results excluding the covariate). Because friendship closeness is likely to be positively associated with Whites' perceived understanding and Blacks' felt understanding, I determined a priori to examine friendship closeness as a covariate. Indeed, friendship closeness significantly

predicted understanding, $F(1, 95) = 9.29, p = .003, \eta^2_p = .09$, and desire to affiliate, $F(1, 95) = 12.48, p = .001, \eta^2_p = .12$.⁵ The analyses below control for friendship closeness.

Understanding

The nonracial topic elicited greater understanding, $F(1, 95) = 24.26, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .20$. This main effect was qualified by the predicted interaction between participant race and topic, $F(1, 95) = 4.39, p = .039, \eta^2_p = .04$ (see Fig. 2). For the racial topic, White participants reported understanding their Black friend to a greater extent than Black participants reported they would feel understood by their White friend, $F(1, 95) = 4.65, p = .034, d = 0.61$. In short, White and Black participants' reports of perceived and felt understanding diverged for the racial topic, with Whites reporting greater perceived understanding relative to the extent to which Blacks felt understood. For the nonracial topic, however, understanding did not differ by participant race, $F(1, 95) = 0.63, p = .430, d = 0.22$. As predicted, White participants' perceived understanding and Black participants' felt understanding converged. Although understanding for the racial (vs. nonracial) topic was lower for both Black, $F(1, 95) = 24.16, p < .001, d = 1.40$, and White participants, $F(1, 95) = 3.93, p = .050, d = 0.56$, this difference was significantly larger for Blacks than Whites.

Desire to affiliate

No main effects reached significance, but the hypothesized interaction between participant race and topic emerged, $F(1, 95) = 11.15, p = .001, \eta^2_p = .11$ (see Fig. 2). For the racial topic, White (vs. Black) participants reported greater desire to affiliate, $F(1, 95) = 6.26, p = .014, d = 0.71$. Interestingly, for the nonracial topic Black (vs. White) participants reported greater desire to affiliate, $F(1, 95) = 4.89, p = .029, d = 0.63$. Black participants also reported greater desire to affiliate for the nonracial (vs. racial) topic, $F(1, 95) = 10.86, p = .001, d = 0.94$, whereas White participants did not differ by topic in their desire to affiliate, $F(1, 95) = 2.09, p = .152, d = 0.41$.

Mediation analysis

Using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013), I tested whether differences between White and Black participants' desire to affiliate mediated the relationship between the interaction of participant race and topic (predictors) and understanding (outcome). As noted previously, the interaction between participant race and topic significantly influenced understanding and desire to affiliate, $ps < .05$. Desire to affiliate significantly predicted understanding while controlling for the interaction between participant race and topic, $b = 0.40, t(94) = 3.82, p = .002$. Controlling for desire to affiliate, the interaction between participant race and topic no longer predicted understanding, $b = -0.11, t(94) = -0.88, p = .381$. Bias-corrected bootstrap estimates with the recommended 5,000 resamples revealed a confidence interval excluding zero, 95% CI [$-0.598, -0.101$], indicating a significant indirect path: Desire to affiliate fully mediated the interaction between participant race and topic on understanding. Furthermore, bootstrapping revealed that the conditional indirect effect reached significance for the racial topic, 95% CI [$0.026, 0.375$]. For the racial topic, White participants' greater desire to affiliate led them to report understanding their Black friend to a greater extent than Black participants felt understood by their White friend. Controlling for desire to affiliate rendered the effect of participant race on understanding for the racial topic non-significant, $b = 0.22, t(94) = 1.28, p = .203$. For the nonracial topic, as noted previously, understanding did not differ significantly by participant race ($p = .430$); nevertheless, the conditional indirect effect was significant, 95% CI [$-0.300, -0.039$].

⁴ After completing these primary measures, participants also reported affect, support behavior, intergroup attitudes, meta-stereotype concerns, motivation to control prejudiced reactions, and social desirability.

⁵ There was a marginal interaction between participant race and topic on friendship closeness, $F(1, 96) = 3.20, p = .077$.

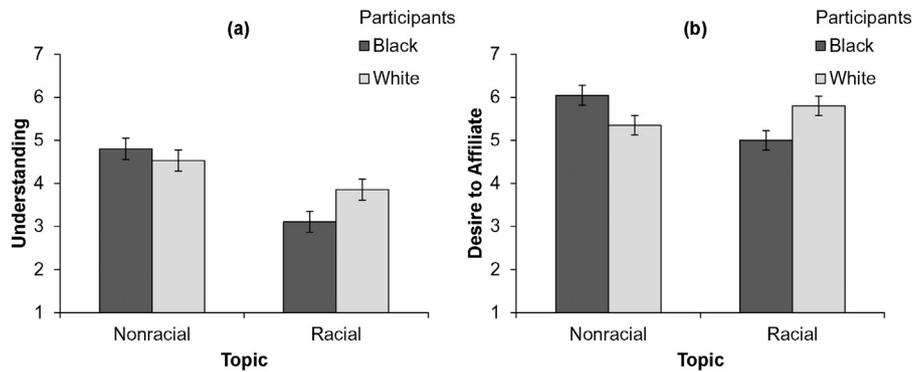


Fig. 2. Effects of participant race and topic on (a) understanding and (b) desire to affiliate, adjusting for friendship closeness (Study 2). In panel (a), Black participants' responses reflect the extent to which they feel understood by their White friend and White participants' responses reflect the extent to which they perceive they understand their Black friend. Error bars depict ± 1 SE of the mean.

Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between desire to affiliate and understanding when thinking about specific cross-race friends. Although the study did not collect responses from both members of each friendship pair, I found that on average, Whites' perceived understanding and Blacks' felt understanding diverged when discussing racial topics. Divergent understanding when discussing racial topics was accounted for by differences between Whites' and Blacks' desire to affiliate. Whites wanted to affiliate with their cross-race friend more than Blacks did, and this motive influenced Whites' perceived understanding and Blacks' felt understanding. Encouragingly, however, Whites and Blacks reported comparable levels of understanding when discussing nonracial topics, suggesting that intergroup perceptions need not always differ.

Study 3: Effect of Desire to Affiliate on Perceived Understanding

Study 3 examined the causal effect of Whites' desire to affiliate and topic on perceived understanding of Blacks. Experimenters induced White participants to have lower or higher desire to affiliate with their partner even before participants knew their partner's race or the topic of conversation. Specifically, I predicted that for racial (but not nonracial) topics, Whites induced to feel higher (vs. lower) desire to affiliate would report greater perceived understanding of Black partners. In addition, this study examined a potential mediator for the effects of desire to affiliate on perceived understanding for racial topics: self-image related prejudice concerns. When Whites risk appearing prejudiced, they may seek to affiliate with Blacks to prove that they are not prejudiced. In short, their desire to affiliate may reflect self-image goals—the motivation to manage the impressions others have of them—rather than compassionate goals—concerns about others' welfare (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). I predicted that when talking about race, Whites' desire to affiliate would reflect self-image goals, which would lead Whites to perceive that they understood their Black partner. Although Whites may want to affiliate with racial minorities for several reasons, I propose that self-image goals would be particularly heightened among those who want to affiliate with Blacks when talking about race because Whites in this condition will experience greater threat to their self-image—namely, the threat of appearing prejudiced.

Method

Participants

I recruited 138 White undergraduate participants with the expectation of analyzing approximately 100 participants. I excluded 1

participant who declined to complete the video task, 1 participant who accidentally did not receive the experimental manipulation, and 13 participants who expressed strong suspicion about the confederate. Participants were excluded from all four conditions: race topic/high affiliation ($n = 6$), race topic/low affiliation ($n = 3$), nonracial topic/high affiliation ($n = 1$), nonracial topic/low affiliation ($n = 5$). The final sample included 123 participants (75 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.3$ years, $SD = 1.5$).

Procedure

As in Study 1a, participants thought they were video chatting with another student when in reality they were watching videos of a Black confederate. Prior to watching the video, participants were randomly assigned to receive instructions inducing high or low desire to affiliate. In the *high affiliation* condition the experimenter said, "I encourage you to try hard to get along with this person and try to really connect with them. I've found that the best way to have a smooth interaction is to get this person to like you by being friendly." In the *low affiliation* condition the experimenter said, "I encourage you to not worry about getting along with this person or trying hard to connect with them. I've found that the best way to have a smooth interaction is to just focus on having a conversation and answering the questions." Participants then engaged in the same procedure as in Study 1a: They listened to the Black confederate describe a negative racial or nonracial roommate incident, created a video response, and answered survey questions.

Measures

All items used 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very or very much*) scales and were averaged into composites. Participants completed the same measures of desire to affiliate (3 items, $\alpha = .90$) and perceived understanding (7 items; $\alpha = .88$) as in Study 1a.⁶ Participants indicated their self-image goals (6 items; $\alpha = .81$) and compassionate goals (7 items; $\alpha = .89$) during the interaction using items adapted from Crocker and Canevello (2008). Examples of self-image goals include "convince the other person that you are right" and "avoid being rejected by the other person." Examples of compassionate goals include "be supportive of the other person" and "avoid being selfish or self-centered."

Results

Data were submitted to a 2 (affiliation: low, high) \times 2 (topic: racial, nonracial) between-subjects ANOVA. A manipulation check confirmed that participants in the high affiliation condition ($M = 6.40$, $SD = 0.75$) reported a greater desire to affiliate with the confederate than

⁶ I assessed the same additional measures as in Study 1a but excluded items on diversity ideology and added items on perceptions of past/present racism.

participants in the low affiliation condition, ($M = 5.80, SD = 1.00$), $F(1, 119) = 14.23, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .11$.

Perceived understanding

Analyses revealed significant main effects of affiliation, $F(1, 119) = 15.32, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .11$, and topic, $F(1, 119) = 22.36, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .16$. Participants in the high (vs. low) affiliation condition and participants in the nonracial (vs. racial) topic condition reported greater perceived understanding. These effects were qualified by the predicted interaction between affiliation and topic, $F(1, 119) = 4.26, p = .041, \eta^2_p = .04$ (see Fig. 3). As predicted, simple effects tests confirmed that for the racial topic only, participants in the high (vs. low) affiliation condition reported greater perceived understanding, $F(1, 119) = 17.73, p < .001, d = 1.11$. Perceived understanding of the nonracial topic did not differ by desire to affiliate, $F(1, 119) = 1.73, p = .192$. Participants in the low affiliation condition reported greater perceived understanding for the nonracial (vs. racial) topic, $F(1, 119) = 22.88, p < .001, d = 1.20$, whereas this difference was weaker and marginal among participants in the high affiliation condition, $F(1, 119) = 3.58, p = .061, d = 0.49$. As indicated by the significant 2-way interaction, the gap in perceived understanding for racial and nonracial topics was reduced among Whites induced to be high (vs. low) in desire to affiliate.

Self-image goals

Participants in the high (vs. low) affiliation condition reported stronger self-image goals, $F(1, 119) = 6.23, p = .014, \eta^2_p = .05$. This main effect was qualified by a marginal interaction between affiliation and topic, $F(1, 119) = 3.14, p = .079, \eta^2_p = .026$ (see Fig. 3). As predicted, simple effects tests confirmed that for the racial topic only, participants in the high (vs. low) affiliation condition reported stronger self-image goals, $F(1, 119) = 9.03, p = .003, d = 0.76$; for the nonracial topic self-image goals did not differ by affiliation condition, $F(1, 119) = 0.26, p = .608, d = 0.13$. Self-image goals did not differ by topic for participants in the low or high affiliation conditions, both $ps > .102$.

Compassionate goals

Participants in the high (vs. low) affiliation condition reported stronger compassionate goals, $F(1, 119) = 5.56, p = .020, \eta^2_p = .05$. No other significant effects emerged.

Mediation

Using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013), I tested whether self-image goals mediated the relationship between the interaction of affiliation and topic (predictors) and perceived understanding (outcome). As noted previously, the interaction between affiliation and topic significantly influenced perceived understanding and self-image goals, $ps < .05$. Self-image goals significantly predicted perceived understanding while controlling for the interaction between affiliation and topic, $b = 0.25, t(119) = 3.27, p = .001$. Controlling for self-image goals, the interaction

between affiliation and topic no longer predicted perceived understanding, $b = 0.15, t(118) = 1.60, p = .113$. Bias-corrected bootstrap estimates revealed that the indirect path reached significance, 95% CI [0.002, 0.256]. Self-image goals mediated the interaction between affiliation and topic on perceived understanding. Furthermore, bootstrapping revealed that the conditional indirect effect reached significance for the racial topic, 95% CI [0.031, 0.250], and not the nonracial topic, 95% CI [−0.048, 0.110]. For the racial topic, controlling for self-image goals, the effect of affiliation on perceived understanding was reduced but still significant, $b = 0.44, t(118) = 3.35, p = .001$. Thus, for the racial topic only, White participants' self-image goals mediated the effect of affiliation on their perceived understanding of the Black partner.

I also tested whether compassionate goals mediated the effects of affiliation and topic on perceived understanding. As noted earlier, the interaction between affiliation and topic significantly influenced perceived understanding, $p = .041$, but not compassionate goals, $p = .347$. Nevertheless, compassionate goals predicted perceived understanding while controlling for the interaction between affiliation and topic, $b = 0.25, t(118) = 3.52, p < .001$. Controlling for compassionate goals, the interaction between affiliation and topic became marginally significant, $b = 0.17, t(118) = 1.85, p = .067$. However, bias-corrected bootstrap estimates revealed that the indirect path failed to reach significance, 95% CI [−0.042, 0.234]. Compassionate goals did not mediate the effects of affiliation and topic on perceived understanding.

Discussion

Findings from Studies 1a and 3 suggest that the desire to affiliate predicts Whites' perceived understanding of Blacks when Whites experience greater risk of appearing prejudiced—namely, when discussing race. The effect of desire to affiliate on perceived understanding was mediated by increased self-image goals (but not compassionate goals) among Whites who listened to a Black confederate discuss race. In summary, impression management concerns may partly drive Whites who want to affiliate with Blacks to perceive that they understand Blacks when talking about race.

Study 4: Perceived Understanding of Black and White Partners

Thus far, the previous studies examined Whites' perceived understanding in interracial interactions only. How might Whites' perceived understanding of Black versus White partners differ? Consistent with previous work (Bergsieker et al., 2010), I predicted that Whites discussing race with a Black (vs. White) interaction partner would experience greater desire to affiliate. This heightened desire to affiliate would in turn lead to greater perceived understanding. Thus, I predicted that Whites discussing race would think they understand Black (vs.

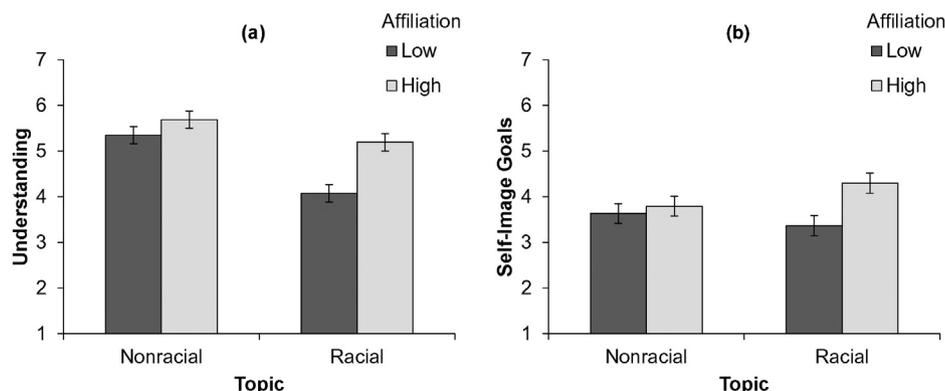


Fig. 3. Effects of experimentally induced affiliation and topic on (a) perceived understanding and (b) self-image goals (Study 3). Error bars depict ± 1 SE of the mean.

White) partners more, and this effect would be mediated by differences in their desire to affiliate with their partner.

In addition, the present study examined participants in the context of live interactions. Using videos of confederates affords tight experimental control but lacks the mundane realism of a dynamic, face-to-face interaction. Thus, Study 4 extends the generalizability of the findings established by the previous studies.

Method

Participants

I recruited 55 gender-matched dyads based on participant availability during two academic semesters.⁷ I removed 4 dyads (3 White/White dyads, 1 White/Black dyad) because participants knew each other “moderately” or “very” well before the study, leaving 28 White/White and 23 White/Black dyads for analysis.⁸ All recruitment for this study was completed prior to testing the present hypotheses (Holoien & Shelton, 2012). On average, the sample (70 women) had completed 2.5 years of college ($SD = 1.2$) at the time of the study.

Procedure

In the laboratory, participants learned that they would discuss various topics with another student. A rigged lottery determined that all participants would discuss *modern racism* and *ethnic diversity in schools* (order counterbalanced; from Holoien & Shelton, 2012):

- Racism has played an influential role in shaping American history, from slavery, anti-immigration laws, and other policies that contributed to racial disparities. Some people argue that racism is a thing of the past, whereas others believe that it continues to exist in the present day. Discuss your thoughts and opinions about the state of racism in modern American society.
- Although the population of ethnic minorities continues to grow in the United States, student populations among universities remain ethnically homogeneous. Discuss your thoughts and opinions about how universities can ensure an ethnically diverse student body.

Each discussion lasted for 5 min. After the second discussion, participants returned to separate rooms and answered survey questions.

Measures

To assess perceived understanding, participants answered on a 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much so*) scale, “During my interactions with the other person, I believe I had the ability to understand the other person’s feelings.” Five items (averaged; $\alpha = .87$) assessed desire to affiliate. Four of these items reflected the goal to be liked (Bergsieker et al., 2010): Participants rated how important it was for the other participant to see them as fair, open-minded, a good person, and kind on 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scales. Participants also rated on 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) scales how much they wanted to get along with the other participant.⁹ Analyses conducted with the different measures of desire to affiliate separately yielded similar results.

⁷ The original dataset also included White/Asian dyads (see Holoien & Shelton, 2012), but they were not analyzed in the present research.

⁸ Analyses retaining these dyads yielded similar results. White participants wanted to affiliate with Black partners more than with White partners, $p = .007$, and wanted to affiliate more than Black participants did, $p = .007$. White participants reported being able to understand Black partners marginally better than White partners, $p = .074$. Desire to affiliate predicted understanding when controlling for dyad race, $p < .001$, and Selig and Preacher’s (Selig & Preacher, 2008) Monte Carlo method revealed a significant indirect effect, 95% CI [$-0.34, -0.04$].

⁹ Additional study measures include effort, engagement, emotion regulation, perceived partner egalitarianism, affect, colorblindness, intergroup attitudes, interaction positivity, and depletion.

Results

Data were submitted to dyadic analysis (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Because participant race was a mixed variable (i.e., varies between and within dyads) and dyad members were indistinguishable, error variances for both dyad members were to be equal using a compound symmetry (CS) covariance matrix. Dyad type was dummy coded with White participants in interracial dyads as the reference group. When entered simultaneously, the *interracial* dummy code (Black participants = 1, White participants in interracial dyads = 0, White participants in same-race dyads = 0) contrasts White versus Black participants in interracial interactions and the *dyad race* dummy code (White participants in same race dyads = 1, Black participants = 0, White participants in interracial dyads = 0) contrasts White participants in interracial versus same-race interactions. All analyses controlled for an unrelated manipulation of diversity ideology (Holoien & Shelton, 2012) that did not significantly affect the reported measures. One outlier was Winsorized to be within 3 standard deviations of the mean.

Perceived understanding

Only the dyad race contrast reached significance: White participants with Black partners ($M = 6.43, SD = 1.53$) reported greater perceived understanding than White participants with White partners ($M = 5.39, SD = 2.08$), $b = -1.03, t(76.3) = -2.05, p = .044$. Within interracial dyads, White and Black participants did not differ in perceived understanding, $b = -0.04, t(50.0) = -0.09, p = .931$.

Desire to affiliate

Both contrasts reached significance. White participants with Black partners ($M = 5.74, SD = 1.10$) reported greater desire to affiliate than White participants with White partners ($M = 5.06, SD = 1.24$), $b = -0.76, t(77.5) = -2.76, p = .007$. Within interracial dyads, White participants ($M = 5.97, SD = 0.85$) wanted to affiliate with their partner to a greater extent than Black participants did ($M = 5.30, SD = 0.84$), $b = -0.67, t(50.0) = -2.41, p = .020$.

Mediation analysis

Mediation analysis tested whether White participants’ greater desire to affiliate with Black (vs. White) partners caused greater perceived understanding of Black partners. As noted previously, White participants reported greater understanding of and desire to affiliate with Black (vs. White) partners, both $ps < .05$. Desire to affiliate predicted understanding while controlling for dyad race, $b = 0.64, t(96.3) = 3.69, p < .001$. Controlling for desire to affiliate, the relationship between dyad race and understanding became non-significant, $b = -0.54, t(81.94) = -1.13, p = .260$. To test the significance of the indirect path I used Selig and Preacher’s (2008) Monte Carlo method for creating intervals for indirect effects using 5,000 repetitions, which is appropriate for dyadic data. The indirect path reached significance, 95% CI [$-0.979, -0.107$]. White participants paired with Black (vs. White) partners reported greater desire to affiliate, leading to greater perceived understanding of Black partners.

Discussion

Whites discussing racial topics with a Black (vs. White) partner experienced greater desire to affiliate and reported greater perceived understanding of their partner. Although the present study did not measure how well understood Black partners felt, Study 3 suggests that their felt understanding and Whites’ perceived understanding would likely diverge. Taken together, the results of Studies 3 and 4 suggest that divergent perceptions of understanding between Whites and Blacks may occur even after brief interpersonal encounters with a stranger.

These findings are especially striking given people's general tendency to understand ingroup members better than outgroup members. Because people typically have more frequent and intimate contact with ingroup members (e.g., Kao & Joyner, 2004) and assume more shared similarities with ingroup members (Mallett, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008), they may infer that they understand ingroup members better than outgroup members. However, Whites in the current study reported thinking they understood Black partners better than White partners when discussing race. One possible explanation for this effect is that Whites' motivated reasoning (i.e., perceiving they understand as a function of wanting to affiliate with Blacks and appear non-prejudiced) led them to believe that they understood Blacks' racial experiences even better than they understood Whites' racial experiences.

General Discussion

The present research asked: When might Whites think they understand Blacks' racial experiences? Although White and Black Americans have different racial experiences, the present studies found that when Whites desire to affiliate with Blacks, they may be motivated to perceive that they actually do understand Blacks' racial experiences. This perception, however, diverges from the extent to which Black partners feel understood when discussing racial topics. In short, Whites' desire to affiliate may have unintentional negative consequences by producing divergent perceptions of understanding between Whites and Blacks.

These findings contribute to growing research on the unintended negative interpersonal and intrapersonal consequences of Whites' desire to affiliate with racial minorities. Increased desire to affiliate prevents Whites from accurately perceiving how well understood cross-race partners feel (Holoien et al., 2015), taxes limited self-regulatory resources (Mendes & Koslov, 2013), and is associated with negative other-directed affect toward Blacks (Bergsieker et al., 2010). The present studies revealed that Whites' desire to affiliate enhances self-image goals, or concerns about maintaining a positive impression, which in turn leads to greater perceived understanding of Blacks when discussing racial topics. Collectively, this research expands the historical focus on prejudice to explain negative intergroup relations by investigating the contributions of seemingly benevolent intentions.

One implication of this work is that divergent perceptions may exacerbate already negative interracial interactions (Toosi et al., 2012) by producing disagreements about how well Whites understand Blacks, particularly when discussing racial topics. Blacks may reject Whites' claims to understand their racial experiences; indeed, preliminary research suggests that Blacks prefer for Whites to acknowledge their lack of understanding when discussing racial issues rather than express understanding (Holoien et al., 2015). Furthermore, when Whites fail to recognize that Black partners do not feel similarly understood, they may lose opportunities for relationship development because feeling understood predicts closeness in both interracial and same-race relationships (Shelton, Trail, West, & Bergsieker, 2010). Ironically, Whites who strongly desire to affiliate with Blacks may be the most at risk for thwarting positive interracial interactions and relationships because they are likely to feel that they do understand Blacks in spite of Blacks' feelings of being less understood.

The findings raise an intriguing question: Do Whites who desire to affiliate with Blacks when discussing race genuinely believe that they understand Blacks, or are they merely saying so in order to appear non-prejudiced? Although the present manuscript does not test this question directly, there are reasons to believe that Whites' perceived understanding may be genuine. People engage in motivated reasoning in order to reach desired conclusions, and this process can happen outside of their awareness (e.g., Kunda, 1990). Others have shown parallel findings that link desire to affiliate and perceived understanding: For example, people perceive greater similarities than may be warranted between themselves and targets of affiliation (Murray et al., 2002; Slotter & Gardner, 2009), which may lead to greater perceived

understanding of the target. However, even if Whites' perceived understanding is insincere, the end result is that Blacks disagree with Whites' claims to understand and these divergent perceptions may undermine interracial interactions and dialogue. Preliminary research suggests that Blacks view Whites unfavorably for claiming to understand their racial problems (Holoien, Libby, & Shelton, 2015): Specifically, Black participants felt that a Black student would feel more supported by and more interested in being friends with a White student who said he didn't (vs. did) understand the Black student's racial problems. Thus, regardless of whether Whites actually believe they understand Blacks or not, they are failing to recognize that Blacks may not necessarily want them to say that they understand.

In addition to probing the authenticity of Whites' claims to understand Blacks' racial problems, future research should investigate ways to facilitate convergence between Whites' perceived understanding and Blacks' felt understanding. Increasing Whites' focus on Black interaction partners, rather than on themselves and their own concerns about appearing prejudiced, may help Whites to better recognize the limits of their understanding. Encouraging Whites to learn about their partners (Neel & Shapiro, 2012) and see the interaction as an opportunity to have an intercultural dialogue (Trawalter & Richeson, 2006) may reduce the threats associated with a lack of understanding and allow Whites to acquire knowledge of Black partners' inner states. Education and training can assist those unskilled in a given domain to reduce the tendency to overestimate their abilities (Kruger & Dunning, 1999); similarly, teaching Whites about minorities' experiences with racial discrimination may prevent them from "overestimating" their perceived understanding of Blacks.

To summarize, at times Whites who seek to affiliate with Blacks may unwittingly undermine positive interracial interactions by contributing to divergent perceptions of understanding between Whites and Blacks. Although wanting to affiliate with Blacks is arguably more desirable compared with having prejudiced or negative attitudes toward Blacks, the present research suggests that there may be unanticipated drawbacks associated with this motive.

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Appendix A

Perceived understanding

1. How well did you understand your partner?
2. How well could you relate to your partner?
3. How well did you feel what your partner felt?
4. How well did you know what your partner was going through?
5. How well did you empathize with your partner?
6. How well did you "get" how your partner felt?
7. How well did you know what it's like to be in your partner's shoes?

Felt understanding

1. How much would you feel understood by your partner?
2. How much would you think your partner related to your feelings?
3. How much would you think your partner felt what you feel?

4. How much would you feel your partner knew what you're going through?
5. How much empathy would you feel from your partner?
6. How much would you think your partner "gets" how you feel?
7. How much would you feel your partner knows what it's like to be in your shoes?

Appendix B. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.08.004>.

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