

Paving the way for conversation on race

June 6 2016, by Jacqueline Mitchell

An increasing number of white Americans agree that the "nation needs to make changes to achieve racial equality," according to a [2015 Pew Research Center](#) report. However, many also say they avoid talking about bias with blacks out of fear of being perceived as racist.

To encourage more whites to talk about race, and perhaps nudge the needle toward more equality, Tufts psychologists Keith B. Maddox and Heather L. Urry and their colleagues tested an [intervention](#) for setting up such conversations. They recruited 157 white college students and randomly sorted them into two groups: one assigned to talk about racial discrimination, the other assigned to discuss bias based on sexual identity. All the students were asked to choose either a black or white conversation partner.

Prior to choosing a partner, half of the students were given the intervention, which explicitly addressed potential anxiety about interracial interactions. The intervention cited research that found that engaging in such discussions now encourages future conversations about race. The other half of students did not receive the intervention.

More students who were given the intervention chose to have a discussion about [racial discrimination](#) with a black partner than those in the control group. Also, students who received the intervention less often cited concerns about appearing prejudiced than those who did not.

Potential applications for such an approach, the researchers say, could be in the judicial system. Research has shown that blacks are detained,

arrested, convicted and incarcerated at higher rates than whites. The researchers also note that such interventions could be used in any organization that seeks to improve communications around race and foster an inclusive culture. Their work appeared in *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* in December 2015.

Tufts Now asked Maddox, who is director of the Tufts University Social Cognition Lab, and Urry, who directs the Emotion, Brain and Behavior Lab, to tell us more about what they learned. They responded jointly via email.

Tufts Now: Why did you choose to focus on mitigating whites' anxiety for this study?

Keith Maddox and Heather Urry: We know from previous research that many whites get anxious about interracial interactions for fear of appearing racist, so they are reluctant to be a part of those conversations. If white anxiety is an impediment, then addressing it represents a potential way to increase their willingness to be a part of the conversation.

How would you respond to critics who might say, "Really? We have to worry about whites' anxiety in these interactions? Why is this always about the majority group having hurt feelings?"

First, it's important to note that our goal in designing this intervention was not merely to reduce whites' anxiety. These conversations are going to be difficult and challenging, but they must occur in order to mitigate the effects of past and present racism. Our goal was to find a way to motivate white people to approach rather than avoid intergroup conversations, especially those focused on race. Moreover, white individuals are the majority in this country, and interventions that cause

them to enter interracial conversations potentially could have even greater impact by sheer numbers alone.

Second, whites aren't the only ones who experience anxiety about intergroup interaction. Black individuals do, too, most often about possibly being the target of racial bias. We also see hope for developing interventions to encourage black individuals to approach interracial interactions to talk about race. Some other research suggests that racial and ethnic minorities who talk about race issues are often dismissed by members of the majority as complainers, which can discourage blacks. So we also see benefit in developing interventions that will not only encourage interracial interaction, but also empower individuals to feel that their voices will be heard.

Your study rests on many whites' fear of appearing racist, but what about people who are explicitly racist? Are they still concerned about appearing so?

People who are more explicitly prejudiced are likely not concerned about appearing prejudiced to the same degree as people who consider themselves egalitarian. As such, our intervention might not be as effective for them. But we suspect that there are situations in which even explicitly prejudiced individuals would be reluctant to reveal their prejudice to others. If the intervention could be implemented in those situations, it's possible that it could help to bring them to the interracial table. Still, it's unclear as to whether it would lead to the positive engagement we observed.

Were you surprised you were able to get people to talk across racial lines with this relatively simple intervention?

We both thought it was really cool, but as experimentalists, we're trained to figure out the specific whys. It's possible our participants may have more frequently chosen to have a conversation about race with a black rather than white person because they gleaned that this is what they were supposed to do—a phenomenon researchers call a demand characteristic. But even if that's true, it's a total win that this intervention made it more likely that white and black folks were coming together to have a conversation about race. It's satisfying to know that just getting more people to make a choice that they otherwise would have avoided can have some positive consequences for interracial interaction.

Other than white anxiety, what's another factor that you might tackle to make these interactions happen more frequently and/or have better outcomes?

Jennifer Perry, a graduate student in our labs, is interested in exploring the role that empathy for members of other [racial groups](#) can have on our perceptions of them. Research suggests that there is a gap in the level of empathy that we feel for people who belong to other racial groups, and we suspect that this lack of empathy can lead to decreased helping behavior, or even the dulled perception of pain in others. Thus, any attempts to bridge this gap could also help to encourage whites to better see and help limit the societal ills experienced by blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities.

We're exploring ways to empower people to confront when and where they see the need to do so. Another graduate student, Chelsea Crittle, is working to understand the reasons why black and [white](#) individuals may or may not choose to confront [racial bias](#) in situations where it is observed. Much of this comes from concerns about what others will think about them should they choose to challenge what they see as injustice.

Provided by Tufts University

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