

Parity of Claim: When All Groups Are Created Equal

Courtnee-Evan Spino, McNair Scholar, Penn State University

**Dr. Phillip Atiba Goff
Assistant Professor of Psychology
The College of Liberal Arts
Penn State University**

Whites experience a greater concern with appearing racist. It was hypothesized that Whites would seek to highlight similarities between social categories while engaging in racial dialogues in an effort to reduce this threat. This equating of social groups—called Parity of Claim—can trivialize issues of history and power and, consequently, harm other participants in racial dialogues. Group dialogues from Penn State's Race Relations Project (RRP) were coded for use of Parity of Claim arguments and were analyzed to test the hypothesis that Whites were disproportionately likely to use such arguments, and that these arguments were used in contexts that made salient the possibility of Whites being seen as racist. Similarly, it was hypothesized that Whites would be less inclined to mention historical events in situations when being seen as racist was made salient.

Keywords: racial dialogue, racist, stereotype threat

While in racial dialogues, Whites experience concern with appearing racist (Goff, Steele, & Davies, under review). In an attempt to inoculate themselves from this anxiety, participants may use conversation techniques designed to prevent others in a dialogue from viewing them as prejudiced. One such conversation technique, which we call Parity of Claim, equates two races or social categories to one another. While this technique may be adopted with genuinely pro-social motives, the emphasis on commonalities may effectively erase issues of history and power.

It was hypothesized that White participants would employ more Parity of Claim comments, but fewer mentions of history when Blacks were present because the presence of Blacks in the dialogue would make salient the possibility of appearing racist. Blacks may make this possibility salient because of the racial differences between the races throughout history. Because this concern is greater for Whites, it was hypothesized that they would represent a greater percentage of Parity of Claim comments and employ comments that specifically erase history and power.

The diversity of these discussion groups may make differences in power and privilege between the participants salient (Miller & Fraser, 2004) which can foster additional inter-ethnic anxiety, that is anxiety that can come from being around those that are different from oneself (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Other individuals may have prejudicial or racist views and experience anxiety when around these groups or through the ways that they try to control such views (Plant & Devine, 1998; Dutton & Fazio, 1997).

Whites' concern with appearing racist is supported by the theory of stereotype threat, in which an individual is concerned with conforming to or being evaluated in terms of a

negative stereotype about one's group (Steele, 1992; 1997). In this context, Whites will fear appearing racist while engaging in discussions about race.

If participants emphasize the commonalities that they share, then their differences and corresponding anxiety may be minimized. In an attempt to insulate against appearing racist participants may equate two races or social groups, such as through Parity of Claim comments. In this equating both groups are the same, their differences are erased, and therefore no one group has the advantage. If no group has the advantage then how can one be racist towards another? Often it is group differences in history and power that are erased. It is in this context—when the power that racial privilege bestows and the history that privilege has written are erased—that the threat of appearing racist could not exist because racism could also not exist.

Methods

For this study, sessions of Penn State's Race Relations Project were examined and coded for comments about history and Parity of Claims comments. The Race Relations Project (RRP) is run through the Sociology department and is privately funded with a mission to provide an open forum for racial dialogues. Two undergraduate student facilitators run Socratic-style discussions designed to promote open dialogue between all participants. They are each trained through exercises involving active listening skills, being opened to the opinions and experiences of others, asking non-leading or loaded questions, reading body language, and educated to critically focus on participants' comments and the possible thoughts behind them.

RRP sessions are run throughout the academic year and consist of 5 and 12 undergraduate participants per session. Students can volunteer to participate or may receive partial course credit for their participation. Each student signs a consent form before any dialogue or observation begins.

Twenty-Three 90-minute video-taped sessions of the RRP were watched and coded for content by a trained researcher. In total, two hundred and seventy-three undergraduate participants were observed.

Parity of Claim comments were operationalized as any statement that equated two different racial or social groups to each other. The social categories consisted of such non-racial groups as social clubs, religious affiliations, or sexual orientations. Each time a Parity of Claim comment was made, it was transcribed. Additionally, the race, gender, and time at which the comment was made were noted. Whether the individual making the comment was a student facilitator or a student participant was also noted. Lastly, the comment immediately before and immediately after the Parity of Claim comment was transcribed and coded in the same manner.

Whenever a comment was made that explicitly mentioned history or a historical event was made it was transcribed and coded in a manner identical to that of Parity of Claim comments. Similarly, the gender and race of each speaker were noted as well as whether they were a facilitator or participant.

A second trained research assistant independently viewed 14 of the sessions to establish inter-rater. One hundred percent inter-rater reliability was established.

Results

Recall that it was predicted that Whites would represent a disproportionate number of Parity of Claim comments. Whites represented 75 percent of the total number of participants, yet accounted for 87 percent of the total Parity of Claim comments made. It was also hypothesized that Whites would use more Parity of Claim comments that erased history or power.

Recall it was hypothesized that these Parity of Claim comments would occur more often in groups where Blacks were present than in groups without Blacks present. A significant difference in the number of Parity of Claim comments made by Whites was found between groups with no Black participants ($M = .60$) and groups with Black participants ($M = 4.89$), $t(21) = 2.43$, $p < .05$. And, again, it was hypothesized that there would be more mentions of history in groups without Black participants than in groups with Black participants. A significant difference was also observed here, such that when Blacks were present, there were fewer mentions of history made per session ($M = .56$) than when Blacks were not present ($M = 2$), $t(21) = 2.23$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

While in racial dialogues, Whites are sharing a different experience than other races such that they are responding to a concern with appearing racist more than any other racial group. The support found for our first hypothesis demonstrates that Whites are using more Parity of Claim comments than other races. Although a person may not hold racist views the threat of appearing racist is still very present for them and affects the choices that they make while engaging in racial dialogues.

When Blacks are present in the group, the number of Parity of Claim comments increases fourfold, whereas the mentions of history decrease. This is consistent with our second and third hypothesis and shows that participants want to focus on perceived commonalities while eschewing the racist past that divides us.

Limitations

This study looked solely at undergraduate students engaging in dialogues for course credit. The setting effected the conversation and the results may not be generalizable to the greater population because of the specific age group and context for the conversations. Although the presence of a single Black person was enough to affect the rates at which Parity of Claim comments were made, Blacks represented a very small (10 percent) portion of participants in The Race Relations Project sessions. This under representation may not adequately reflect the comments that Blacks could use during these racial dialogues and may also not be generalizable. Also, having higher rates of Blacks present in these dialogues may also strengthen the current findings or create additional trends not found studying the present data.

The study was conducted using video taped sessions of racial dialogue; therefore there was no opportunity to question participants as to what they were feeling in the sessions.

The intent behind comments not questioned during the dialogues, such as many of the Parity of Claim arguments, could not be ascertained nor could the reactions of the other participants.

Conclusions

The present research demonstrated Whites in racial dialogues exhibiting conversation techniques different from those of other races. Whites were more often equating the experiences of different races or social groups through Parity of Claim comments as well as making more such comments that erase history and power. These commonalities were emphasized more when Blacks were present than when they were not, but the references to history were reduced, suggesting that Whites did not want to focus on issues that make racism salient.

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