

Examination of Racial Categorization within Group Dialogue

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The present research hypothesized that participants in race dialogue avoid racial categorization in an attempt not to be seen as racist. Using video taped conversations of undergraduate students at Penn State, the present research identified examples of avoidance of racial categorization. It was hypothesized that, in mixed-race group dialogues, where the possibility of being seen as racist was elevated, White participants would avoid racial categorization more often than in all-White group dialogues.

Key Words: racial dialogue, categorization, color-blindness

It was hypothesized that, if White participants participating in racial dialogue are uncomfortable with issues of history and power, the avoidance of racial categorization will occur in an attempt not to be seen as racist. There has been much research done examining how interpersonal concerns affect individuals within interracial encounters. These issues of concern may focus around issues of prejudice, which, like other interpersonal concerns can effect individual's perceptions and behaviors, (Devine, Evett, & Vasquez Suson 1996). The approach to reducing interracial tension, *color-blindness*, proposes that racial categories should not be considered when making decisions such as hiring and school admission. The primary argument of this approach is that social categories should be dismantled and disregarded, and everyone should be treated as an individual (Firebaugh & Davis, 1998). This approach directly applies to this research, in that we are observing how this "disregarding" of racial categories affects racial dialogue. The purpose of this research was to examine whether or not the avoidance of racial categorization stems from this concern with being seen as racist. And, if so, what might this suggest about the causes of so-called "color-blind" approaches to racial difficulties?

Within group dialogue it was observed that participants placed more emphasis alternate descriptors such as way of dress, personality, non-verbal cues, and social interactions than on racial identity. We have found examples of participants placing more emphasis on these within video taped sessions. Participants have been quoted saying: "It is more personality than race," "I think it is more of the situation that you meet someone in [what you think of them], than what race they are," "I can tell more about someone based on what they have on, more than what race they are". White participants made

these statements. By doing so, race was devalued and no longer seen as an important aspect of the conversation.

It stands to reason that, if no one has a race, then no one can be racist. This then may be the tacit reasoning behind Whites' avoidance of racial categorization. This pattern of avoidance would have been developed by participants to lessen the concern of being labeled racist. To test this proposed relationship, the observation of video recorded race dialogues was conducted. The use and avoidance of racial categorization was coded and noted for examples. Gender and race were coded to determine the correlation.

Methods

For this research we obtained data from group conversations focusing on race and race relations. The Race Relations Project at The Pennsylvania State University conducted these conversations. The Race Relations Project is a group that facilitates conversations with undergraduate students and various organizations on the Penn State campus. Undergraduate students who have been trained through course work and supervised conversations direct the discussion. The facilitators use a Socratic style of questioning when conducting the groups. The groups lasted ninety-minutes. Each group was video and audio recorded. The participants were undergraduate students all above the age of eighteen who signed and agreed to a waiver releasing videotapes for research. The sessions included groups of six to ten members including two trained facilitators who were also undergraduate students at The Pennsylvania State University. Students participated in each session to fulfill a course requirement.

Two research assistants observed each RRP session to improve inter-rator reliability and decrease observer bias. The observers noted comments related to racial categorization and coded for: race of the person making the comment (White, Black, or Other), gender of the person (Male, Female), role of the person (Participant, Facilitator), and time (time quote was made in seconds), and for actual quote made related to racial categorization. These codes included: Was there hesitation when asked "What are you or what do you classify yourself as," Any Explicit Denial?, Do the use Symbolic Ethnicity?, Do they use Alternative Social Classification?, Superordinate (Everyone is the same), Do they state that talking about the issue makes it worse?, Do they state that they are uncomfortable categorizing people?, Do they say something negative about categorizing people?, Yes or No, Do they State: Because I am [RACE] I am stereotyped, How many times does this person say something related to categorizing?, Is this person overall shy or outspoken (Scale from 1-3, 1 being shy and 3 being outspoken). The data collected was entered into an excel spreadsheet. The excel spreadsheet was converted into SPSS format for data analysis.

The proposed relationship for this research was that mainly White participants in the group dialogues would avoid racial categorization the most in an effort not to be seen as racist. The hypotheses of the present research were that Whites would avoid racial categorization more than other groups, avoidance of racial categorization would lead to the devaluation of race in racial dialogue, rather than race used as a way of categorization there would be more emphasis placed on way of dress, personality, social interaction, and

other non-verbal cues, and avoidance of racial categorization will have been developed as a method to avoid being labeled a racist.

Results

It was hypothesized that White participants would make more categorization comments in groups where the concern of being labeled racist was greater. It was hypothesized that White participants would do so in an attempt to avoid being seen as racist. Data was analyzed using a statistical analysis of comments coded in all 28 sessions observed. The average comment made for each category coded was found. There was a statistically significant difference in the amount a comment was made when Blacks were not present in a group, and when Blacks were present in a group. The categories that had a significant difference were explicit denial comment, symbolic ethnicity, alternative social classification, stating discomfort with categorization, and mentions of categorization. The “explicit denial” comments were comments made by participants that explicitly denied being racist. The “symbolic ethnicity” comments were comments made by participants that affiliated them with their culture in an attempt to avoid their affiliation with their race. The “alternative social classification” comment made affiliated participants with a group such as “jock”, or “nerd” in an attempt to avoid affiliation with their race. The comments made by participants “stating discomfort with categorization”, were noted as having discomfort with the act of categorization. The “mentions of categorizations” comments made by participants were noted when a participant mentioned the act of categorization. The category explicit denial of racism had the results: with no Blacks present there was an average of 0 comments made per session, with Blacks present in the group there was an average of 1.05 comments made per session, $t(26) = 2.27, p < .05$. The category symbolic ethnicity had the results: with no Blacks present there were 0.75 comments made per session, with Blacks present there were 2.2 comments made per session, $t(26) = 2.17, p < .05$. The category alternative social classification had the results: with no Blacks present in there were 0.25 comments made per session, with Blacks present there were 1.3 comments made per session, $t(26) = 2.21, p < .05$. The category “stating discomfort with categorization” had the results: with no Blacks present there were 0 comments made per session, with Blacks present there were 1.15 comments made per session, $t(26) = 2.39, p < .05$. The category “mentions of categorization” had the results: with no Blacks present there were 5.38 comments made per session, with Blacks present there were 9.4 comments made per session, $t(26) = 2.39, p < .05$.

Limitations

The limitations of this research can be seen as the non-proportional sample of participants used. There were a disproportional number of White participants compared to Black participants. A sample that was more proportionally even throughout races may have produced different results. It was only hypothesized that participants avoided racial categorization in an attempt not to be seen as racist. It was not examined or supported that this avoidance actually does reduce the concern of being labeled racist. Also, the understanding of how this avoidance allows for the concern of being labeled racist was

not examined. All of these limitations are future areas of interest that should be researched.

Conclusion

Issues of history and power such as the historical enslavements of Blacks, historical racism, and continued prejudiced towards out-groups are all issues that weigh on White participants within racial dialogues. In an effort to avoid the negative stigma that has been placed on Whites because of these things, White participants often attempt to avoid them. This avoidance occurs in the devaluation of race. Through the avoidance of racial categorization, White participants erase important issues of history and power from the dialogue and remove the threat of racism. White participants do this through an individualization of others in the group. Participants are separated from their social group such as race by placing a greater emphasis on descriptors such as gender, culture, and personality. Doing so, the race of an individual is erased from the conversation. If all participants are seen as “race-less” or equal, there is no responsibility that can be placed on any participant for issues of history and power on the lives of social groups. The threat of racism is also erased, because all participants are equal, and any statement or opinion cannot be seen as a racist. A major implication found from this research is that what may make White participants comfortable in racial dialogue, may not be what makes everyone comfortable.

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