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Do Racial Perceptions Affect Communication in Conflict?

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Abstract

This study was designed to examine the effect that people's perceptions of race had on their communication in a conflict. Surveys were sent out, and 35 people participated in the study. Responses were analyzed for verbal and nonverbal communication behavior that provides negative or positive attitudes of the participant. Negative and positive attitudes in responses were determined using 11 characteristics that were taken from a list of characteristics used in a similar study analyzing the positive and negative communication character of police-civilian interactions (Dixon, Schell, Giles & Drogos, 2008). There were no significant differences found in the study. However, the study inspires that this phenomenon needs to be explored more.

Do Racial Perceptions Affect Communication in Conflict?

Going into any conversation, most people will have already developed an expectation of how that interaction will go before it starts (Kim, 2014). Research has found that "expectations can change based on the race of the person" (Ramasubramanian, 2010). Before even choosing to communicate interracially, one already has a perception of a person based on his or her race. How individuals perceive the people and objects around them affects their communication. People respond differently to a person that they have perceived favorably than they do to someone they find unfavorable (Ramasubramanian, 2010). The level of influence that the difference in race played on communication was found to be a major component in a study done on police traffic stops (Dixon, Schell, Giles& Drogos, 2008). This study looks to branch off what was found in the interactions in police-civilian communication between races.

The goal of the current study was to investigate the extent to which the race of interactants might influence the communication in a simple conflict where no authority differential was present. Communication differences could include saying less or more, changing one's tone or volume, or making racist remarks, for example. Whether a person is personally prejudiced or not, this study sought whether a person's racial perceptions created distinct patterns of responses in a common conflict communication situation.

Literature Review

It is important to first make sense of interracial interactions and what goes into the perceptions and expectations people have for them. Also, because the current study is a conflict situation, it is important to understand cultural and other influences on attitudes toward disagreement and conflict.

Perception

Before looking into what role racial perceptions play in interracial interactions, it is important to look how people form their perceptions. Numerous studies have examined the effect that previous cross-racial interactions have on an individual's perceptions about interracial communication. How an individual thinks about race is informed partly by interactions with friends, acquaintances, and others they encounter in our everyday life, and, most relevant to this study, the interactions with others who are different from us in race and ethnicity (Martin, Trego & Nakayama, 2010; Deetz & Simpson, 2004). Whether people's perceptions of race are negative or positive then depends on the feelings they take away from their interactions.

Studies are looking at trying to understand racial attitudes through the contact hypothesis, which predicts that certain types of intergroup interaction can result in changing negative racial attitudes (Martin, Trego & Nakayama, 2010; Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Rabinowitz, Wiggit, von Braun, Franke, & Zander-Music, 2005; Stephan, 1987; Tredoux & Finchilescu, 2007; Yancey, 2003).Although, simply having more contact with individuals of an out-group can have an effect on one's perceptions, there are many situational factors that affect whether it has a positive of negative effect.

In order for one's prejudice to be reduced with contact, the contact situation has to embody four conditions. There must be equal status between groups in the situation, they must share common goals, there must be no competition between the individuals, and lastly, there must be no authority sanction for the contact (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000).Shook and Fazio, (2008) had a perfect situation to examine the effects of contact on racial perceptions in which the four conditions were demonstrated. The students had equal status and had similar

goals with no completion or authority. The study found that white students' cohabitating with interracial roommates reported greater positive attitudes toward African Americans and less intergroup anxiety, whereas White students' attitudes in same-race rooms showed no change. However, the attitudes individuals will create depend on whether they have a positive or negative experiences while interacting interracially. Because those in the study had a positive experience with the person of that race, positive perceptions of the race of their roommate were shaped.

This also means that having a negative experience can result in shaping a negative attitude toward people different in race. In a 2010 study done by Halualani on University students' experience with interactions with students of different races, numerous students narrated their interactions with their African American peers as extremely ""negative," "difficult," and "hostile." The study found that the previous negative interactions they had with African American students caused them to create the perception that future exchanges will also be "negative," "difficult," and "hostile" (Halualani, 2010). These difficult interactions made the students less likely to interact with African American students in the future.

These studies that look into the contact hypothesis and the effect it has on the perceptions an individual creates about race are key to understanding the routes one will take when approaching an interaction with a differently raced person. As research shows, previous contact can cause someone to avoid interactions with people from a certain race or cause them to be more comfortable in interacting with people of a different race than them.

Numerous studies have looked at the role stereotypes play in expectations going into an interracial interaction. While many people may challenge the existence of racial and ethnic stereotyping, it continues to be prevalent in the United States and most everywhere else. These

stereotypes play a big role in affecting individuals' perceptions about other races before interacting with them. Stereotypes may lead others to have prejudicial attitudes toward groups, make unfair attributions, and act toward groups in particular ways (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002; Devine, 1989; Devine & Elliot, 1995; Hepburn & Locksley, 1983). The fact is that many people do not have relationships, friendships, or even interactions with people of different ethnicities. They are left to create their perceptions based on stereotypes they hear and see either from the people they interact with and, from media.

People tend to use existing stereotypical knowledge rather than individuating information, while communicating with a member of another cultural group (Ramasubramanian, 2010; Chaiken & Trope, 1999). If someone has stereotypical knowledge about a race that is negative, it has the possibility to affect his or her judgment in deciding to interact and how to interact with that race.

Many of these stereotypes are portrayed and normalized for people though media. The literature provides considerable evidence that mass media can affect people's images of others as well as themselves (Jeffres & Atkins, 2011). Exposure to constant media images eventually develops into stereotypes. Mass media frequently portray African-Americans as criminal, thuggish, deviant, aggressive, and lazy human beings. This can lead people to believe that these things must be somewhat true and if they do not believe it, it is still a "normal" thing internalized before even interacting with an African American. Even if individuals have contact with people of different races, stereotypes still cross their minds when uncertain of someone.

Stereotypes lead to expectations, which subsequently affect both the encoding and interpretation of messages with the stereotyped groups (Ramasubramanian, 2010). Specifically, in the present study, which will be looking at communication interracially in a conflict situation, stereotypes can have an impact on the responses.The communication theory that is raised most often to account for media images effects on perception is the cultivation theory, which states that the more time people spend in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality on certain topics (Jeffres & Atkin, 2011). When the media portray African Americans as a race not to mess with in a conflict on the streets, cultivation theory says based on how much time is spent seeing this portrayal, the stereotype could affect a person's image of African Americans, impacting their actions in conflict and other situations. The current study's goal is to show if these images can affect communicative decisions during an interaction with a person of a different race when there is conflict.

Though a person's perceptions of a race can be created by his or her previous contact with that race or be affected by stereotypes of that race, that perception alone is not the only factor to the chosen behaviors in a conflict. Kim's (2005) contextual theory of interethnic communication focuses on interethnic behavior of a single communicator, explaining communicative behaviors of individuals when they encounter others who are ethnically dissimilar. She built the theory on the recognition that specific interethnic communication events cannot be meaningfully understood without taking into account a set of societal, situational, and psychological forces that make up the context for interethnic behaviors. Kim's theory places the behavior in an interaction at the center of three contextual layers, the communicator, the situation, and the environment (Kim, 2005). If any of the three layers of the context change, then

behavior or interaction or meanings will change. What the conflict is about, the circumstance, what the surrounding environment is, or the race or identity of the communicator all play a huge role in what the communicative behaviors will be. A conflict in an area full of people will play a role in how much the race of the person one is in conflict matters.

Conflict and Culture

Much of what causes problems in the resolution of conflict is a cultural orientation towards conflict and conflict negotiation itself (Stadler, 2013). Cultures, as a collective of individuals, do show certain tendencies, trends and preferences that can be useful in understanding an individual's action. Aside from perceptions and stereotypes people may have, certain tendencies developed in their culture has a role in the communicative behaviors they display in a conflict. In German culture, for example, where disagreement is welcomed in many social situations, people tend to voice disagreement quite freely and openly. In cultures such as Anglo-Saxon and many Asian cultures, people are more likely to resort to conflict avoidance (Stadler, 2013). People's attitudes towards conflict and their approaches to resolving it are to a substantial degree influenced by the preferences structures and orientations of their cultural backgrounds (Stadler, 2013).

This research shows that not only are people's racial perceptions of the other important in their approach, their own culturally developed attitudes towards conflict in general also influence their communicative behavior in a conflict. Of course, the conflict's degree of seriousness also affects the means people will use to resolve conflict (Stadler, 2013). While some cultures are accepting of disagreement and even may embrace an atmosphere where things get a little heated, other cultures tend to shy away from disagreement and conflict. These preferences influence how

likely someone is to see a need for conflict to be addressed or how to approach resolving conflict

that has already risen.

Rationale

This study was designed to examine the effect that people's perceptions of race had on

their communication in a conflict. Although research shows that cultural attitudes and other

forces will affect communicative behaviors, the current study is designed to look only at

tendencies in communication based just on the race of the individual the person is in conflict

with, rather than seeking differences due to culture or conflict style or the role The environment

or situation play in shaping the communicative behaviors in the conflict. These perceptions can

be developed by both previous interracial interactions and the constant presence of stereotypes.

With the presence of different perceptions, the current study's research question was this:

RQ1: What differences in communication tactics will participants report in same vs.

opposite race conflict scenarios?

Method

Participants

Participants were obtained using convenience sampling; participants were recruited via

an invitation sent to networked people in the author's Facebook circle, who also were invited to

share the enclosed study link with their college friends for consideration. No incentive was

offered to complete the survey. Participants were provided with a consent language form

attached to the survey.

In all, 35 respondents participated, each in one of two conditions, 19 participants responded

to survey one and 16 to survey two. Of the 19 participants, 9 were male, and 9 were female. The

average age of respondents was 20.7 years of age. Ethnicities of these participants were 12

(63%) Caucasian, 4 (21%) African, 1 (5%) Asian, and 2 (11%) identified themselves as mixed.

For college type Eight (42%) attended Public University, ten (53%) attended a Private

University, and 1 (5%) was not currently enrolled in a college. Of the 16 participants in survey

version two, 10 were male and 6 female; average age was 21.2, and reported ethnicities were 11

(69%) Caucasian, 3 (19%) African, 1 (6%) Asian, and 1 (6%) Hispanic. For college type, 4

(25%) of the participants attended a Public University, 10 (63%) attended a Private University, 1

(6%) attended a Community/Junior College, and 1 (6%) was not currently enrolled in college.

Procedure

The current study was approved by the University of Portland's Institutional Review Board.

Each participant clicked the survey link and was given only one of the two possible scenarios to

read and respond to, along with the remainder of the survey, which was identical across the two

survey conditions (see Appendix 1). One version included a scenario where the participant was

described to be in conflict with a person similar in race; the other scenario was identical except

that the conflict was described as being with a similar-raced person. In both conditions, the

participant was asked at two different points what s/he thought s/he would say and do in that

situation. Those responses constitute the primary data for this study.

Coding and Data Analysis

Both surveys' responses were combined into one data set and coded without the coder

knowing which survey version the respondent had seen, in order reduce the chance of

investigator bias in coding. Responses were analyzed for verbal and nonverbal communication

behavior that provides negative or positive attitudes of the participant. Responses were coded

according to 11 characteristics measuring a participant's message negative and positive

communication characteristics (see Appendix 2). Those 11 characteristics were taken from a list

of characteristics used in a similar study analyzing the positive and negative communication

character of police-civilian interactions (Dixon, Schell, Giles & Drogos, 2008). Each scenario

was scored on all 11 dimensions of positivity-negativity, producing one overall "negativity"

score for each respondent.

Results

After coding, the responses again were sorted into same vs. different race scenarios and

their negativity ratings. Negativity scores were examined across the two conditions using a t-test

to seek the significance of any difference in negativity ratings. Negativity scores of responses

received in survey one (difference in race) compared to the responses received in survey two

(similar in race) showed that the individuals in conflict with someone similar in race to them

3.72 (SD=1.802) were more negative than those who were in conflict with someone different in

race than them 2.94 (SD=2.62). Analysis revealed no significant difference between the two

conditions, however, $t = -1.01$, $p = .32$. As the results show, most individuals were on the lower

side for showing negativity in their responses for both scenarios. Though the difference across

the two conditions reflects what the literature review suggested might occur, that difference was

not statistically significant enough to confirm as actually present in this study.

Discussion

This study was designed to investigate whether there would be differences in reported

conflict communication tactics depending on whether those in conflict were of different or

similar races. The results from hypothetical scenarios showed that individuals in conflict with

someone similar in race were more negative than those who were in conflict with someone

different in race than them, but not to a degree great enough to rule out the influence of chance.

Although these results showed a difference as expected, results did not indicate a significant

difference attributable to the race of the conflict partner.

This was based on previous research showing that people do create perceptions and make

communication decisions based in part on racial perceptions. Essentially, it was believed that

people's responses would show that race was a significant reason for responses to differ. The

scenario chosen was developed using knowledge of Kim's research on interethnic

communication. The scenario was meant to be in an ordinary environment where there were no

obvious authority or status differences between participants.

One finding that was not reported was the fact that 7 participants chose to say nothing in

the conflict with a person different in race to them, compared to only 3 participants in a conflict

with a person similar to race in them doing the same. This could be due to attitudes about dealing

with racial difference, but that is not possible to know with the data at hand. Also, out of 35

responses, only one racist remark was reported as part of a communication response. Either not

many people in this pool were personally prejudiced or there is perhaps some other social

desirability reason people refrain from using (or reporting they would use) racist remarks. Both

questions raised merit further study.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. One limitation was the study's use of convenience

sampling. Because the survey was sent online on Facebook, the only individuals who could

participate are those who use the social network. And the low number of overall participants was

another limitation, as was the primarily Caucasian ethnicity of the respondent (65%), which

limits the generalizability of these findings. There was also the potential for coder bias given

only one coder analyzed the data.

These limitations should offer up recommendations for prior research on this question.

Researchers should create a study where the same individual can be analyzed in a conflict with a

person similar in race, and separately in a conflict with a person different in race than them, in

real rather than hypothetical situations. Such a study would give the researcher a window onto

how race changed the response of particular individuals.

Conclusion

This study did not find significant differences in communication plans between the

similar and different race conflict scenarios, but it still functions as starting ground for a question

that needs more research. Do racial perceptions cause people to create different interactions with

each other in a conflict? Although the mean difference found in this study could have happened

by chance, results indicate that the study may be on to something. Much research has found that

things like previous interracial interactions and stereotypes have an effect on the perceptions

people create about a race, and that perceptions strongly shape people's communication.

However, findings lead to the unanswered question that merits addressing: in what ways is

communication altered because of one's racial perceptions? This study tried to find a difference

in the negativity of conflict communication and the results were intriguing. The results

encourage researchers to further study the relationship of racial perceptions and interracial

Interactions.

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Appendix One: Survey

Please read this scenario then answer the following two questions based on how you think you would act.

You are standing in an unorganized line at the counter inside a gas station when a man comes into the store and cuts in front of you somewhere in the line. The man looks to be about your age and not too exotic or showy: average stature, a buzzed head, different than you [or similar to you, in version #2] in race, wearing simple jeans and a grey T-shirt.

No one else is saying anything. You choose to say something to the man: what do you say?

The man then insists that "there was no line" and doesn't move, what do you say next?

What is your gender?
- Male
- Female

What is your age?

Ethnic group (how do you identify)
- Caucasian
- Asian/ Pacific Islander
- African
- Hispanic
- Other

What type of college do you attend?
- Public University
- Private/ Religiously affiliated University
- Community or Junior College
- Single-sex college
- Liberal Arts College
- Not attending college
- Other

Appendix Two: Content Analysis Codebook

(source: Dixon, Schell, Giles & Drogos, 2008)

Verbal aggression:

An Individual was verbally aggressive towards the cutting man. These are noxious symbolic

messages containing criticism, insults (including racial epithets), cursing, or objects the person

relates to. These do NOT constitute direct threats to harm, but they do typically include words

that are designed to emotionally harm the hearer. For example "Stop lying to me, either you're

stupid, or you must think I'm stupid!"

No verbal aggression 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 verbal aggression

Threat of physical aggression:

Did the individual threaten physical aggression against the cutting man? This is deliberately

endangering the physical well-being of another person, or warnings of intentions to cause

physical harm to a person. Instances include physically menacing a person, issuing verbal threats

such as "If you don't comply with my requests/commands, I will have to hurt you".

No threat of physical aggression 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 physical aggression threatened

Respect and politeness:

In general how respectful and polite was the individual toward the cutting man? Does the

individual show regard for the Man through speech, manners and behavior. An exceptionally

polite individual will attempt to make sure that the cutting man feels comfortable during the

interaction by using both verbal and non-verbal messages. For example, a man could say

"please" and "thank you" rather than just instructing the man what he or she needs. The

individual could also be seen as polite by using differential language to refer to the man who has

cut (e.g., "sir," "madam," "first name"). Impolite and disrespectful individuals will tend to be

rude and curt. They will treat the man simply as a threat or an "offender".

<p align="center">Respectful /polite 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 disrespectful</p>

Indifference:

To what extent was the individual indifferent to the cutting man? An individual who is

indifferent will say that he or she does not care regardless of the circumstances. The individual

will bring up to the driver that they are in the wrong, and no matter the circumstances they won't

let them get away with it. An individual who is NOT indifferent will listen to the concerns of the

man and will behave as if they actually care.

<p align="center">No indifference 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 indifferent</p>

Impatience:

To what extent was the individual impatient with the cutting man? An individual who is

impatient will rush through the interaction with the man. An impatient individual may be less

thorough in his/her explanations and may not listen well to the needs and questions of the man.

Individuals who are highly impatient may be so with their hands to hurry the man, or just cut in

front of the man. An individual who is NOT impatient will be quite relaxed and NOT frustrated

with the man regardless of how long the interaction takes.

No impatience 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 extremely impatient

Rigidity:

An individual who is rigid will most likely not take any excuse that Cutting man has to offer.

Rigid officers are inflexible. Rigid individuals will remain very text book and rely on the "script"

to mandate the outcome of the interaction (e.g. "that's not how it works, you're supposed to go

to the back of the line"). An individual who is NOT rigid will remain more relaxed and receptive

to the man. Their overall tone tends to be warm and receptive. They are also more likely to offer

the man more options instead of simply the most punitive outcome.

Rigidity not present 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Rigidity

Patronizing:

 The individual spoke to the cutting man in a patronizing manner. An individual who is

patronizing will use his or her identity or status to belittle and degrade the less authoritative

position of the person. This may entail referring to a clearly older male as "boy," A patronizing

individual may "dumb down" his or her speech and/or purposely offer an overly simple

explanation, perhaps in a tone as if speaking to a child. An individual who is NOT patronizing

will NOT use his or her status to remind the man that they lack power during the interaction. A

non-patronizing individual will speak to the man as an adult who is fully capable of

understanding the situation.

No patronizing 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 extremely patronized

Insulting:

The individual insulted the cutting man. An individual who insults the man may insult many

different things about him. The individual may make a derogatory comment regarding race, age

or sex. Insulting remarks will always be very personal. An individual who is insulting may also

resort to name calling like, "idiot" or "moron." An individual who is NOT insulting will refrain

from any derogatory remarks regarding the man.

Insult not used 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 insult used

Sarcasm:

The individual expressed sarcasm during the interaction. An individual who is sarcastic will use

ironic comments in combination with tone to purposefully rebut the cutting man's position. For

example, "So, where's the line?" Or the individual may offer an excuse for the man cutting with

something like "It's alright guys, he didn't see everyone standing here waiting."

An individual who is NOT sarcastic will remain straightforward within his or her language and

paralanguage.

No sarcasm 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 extremely sarcastic

Apologetic:

The individual seemed genuinely apologetic or remorseful during the interaction. This could be

expressed by saying something like "I am sorry, but we were in line". Communication that is

apologetic sounds like the individual really is sincere that they have to approach the man. An

individual who is NOT apologetic will in no way admit fault for anything at any point during the

interaction.

Apologetic 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 not apologetic

Submissiveness:

The individual was submissive to the man. Individuals who are submissive will tend to be fully

compliant with all of the

Man requests and arguments. Submissive individuals are completely accepting of the man's

authority. They will not argue back during the interaction, silence. Individuals who are NOT

submissive will tend to challenge the man's judgment. In addition, they will consistently

reiterate their point of view during the interaction.

Submissive 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 submissiveness was absent