

Racial tension in a 'split-second'

17 December 2008

Interracial and interethnic interactions can often be awkward and stressful for members of both majority and minority groups. People bring certain expectations to their interactions with members of different groups—they often expect that these interactions will be awkward and less successful in establishing positive, long-lasting relationships than interactions with members of one's own racial or ethnic group. These expectations can cause people to interpret the vague comments and behaviors of others more negatively in intergroup situations, further confirming their negative perceptions of these interactions.

Research has suggested that apprehensive behaviors such as brief hesitations may often be a result of anxiety experienced in intergroup interactions. However, Yale University psychologist Adam R. Pearson along with his colleagues from the University of Connecticut wanted to know if the opposite was true: Can brief hesitations in conversation (often associated with anxiety) actually cause interracial tension?

In this study, subjects engaged in one-on-one conversations via closed-circuit television with someone of the same (intragroup) or different (intergroup) racial background. Unbeknownst to the participants, half of the conversations occurred with a brief delay—equipment was used to delay auditory and visual feedback for one second throughout the conversation. This delay was subtle and was not consciously detected by the participants. The remaining conversations occurred in real time, with no delay. Following the conversation, participants independently completed questionnaires about their experience, rating their feelings and those of their partners.

The results, reported in the December issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, revealed that a mere one second delay in conversation was sufficient to raise anxiety in intergroup but not intragroup interactions. Both whites and minorities in the delayed intergroup conversation felt more anxious

and viewed their partners as being more anxious compared to participants who engaged in conversations in real time.

In addition, participants in the delayed intergroup conversation indicated less interest in getting to know their partners. Surprisingly, participants in intragroup conversations reported feeling even less anxious in the delayed conversation than they did when interacting in real time and were unaffected by the delay when it came to wanting to get to know their partner.

These findings suggest that ingroup members are given a "benefit of the doubt" following a brief delay in conversation. However, this courtesy is not extended to members of other racial or ethnic groups. In addition, these results offer direct experimental evidence of just how fragile intergroup relations are when people are first getting acquainted. This study also provides some insight into why it is that attempting to regulate our behavior to ease tension in interracial interactions can sometimes backfire. The authors suggest that this can introduce delays in the natural flow of conversation which can further contribute to anxiety of all members involved in the interaction. The authors conclude that "the findings may also have direct practical implications for understanding the persistence of racial and ethnic disparities across a wide variety of contexts, including law enforcement, employment and legal settings, where appearing apprehensive may place members of racial and ethnic outgroups at a distinct disadvantage."

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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