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## Different sides of the same conversation: Black and White partners differ in perceptions of interaction content

Michael Olson  
*University of Tennessee*

Camille Johnson  
*San Jose State University, camille.johnson@sjsu.edu*

Kevin Zabel  
*Western New England University*

Joy Phillips  
*University of Tennessee*

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Different Sides of the Same Conversation:

Black and White Partners Differ in Perceptions of Interaction Content

Michael A. Olson

University of Tennessee

Camille S. Johnson

San Jose State University

Kevin L. Zabel

Western New England University

Joy E. Phillips

University of Tennessee

Running head: PERCEPTIONS OF INTERACTION CONTENT

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## Abstract

A positive interracial interaction can create a foundation for friendships, improved intergroup attitudes and reduced prejudice. Recent research has demonstrated that what people talk about is important. Here, two studies expand the interaction content model of interracial interactions to reveal that Black and White Americans perceive interaction content in similar and different ways. As expected, Black and White participants evaluated conversation topics along the same three dimensions, but differed in their perceptions of specific conversation topics. These convergences and differences emerged for pre-generated (Study 1) and self-generated (Study 2) topics. Factor analyses revealed that conversation attributes similarly distilled to the predicted underlying content dimensions of intimacy, valence, and controversy for Black and White Americans. However, Black individuals found interaction content, in general, to be more controversial, race-related, enjoyable, and predictable than White individuals. Although both groups found race-related content more controversial, Black individuals were less bothered by discussing race and found race-related topics to be more predictable and enjoyable to discuss. These findings supported the interaction content model which may provide a framework for future research on interracial interactions. We conclude with the importance of considering differences in perceptions of interaction content, as well as suggestions for how intergroup interaction research could benefit from systematically incorporating such content.

*Key words:* Intergroup interaction, interaction content, prejudice, contact hypothesis, race-related, Black partners, self-disclosure

### **Different Sides of the Same Conversation:**

#### **Black and White Partners Differ in Perceptions of Interaction Content**

Interaction partners sometimes see eye-to-eye and sometimes they do not. There can be synchrony, where interaction partners understand one another and share meanings of conversation content, as well as disconnect, where partners have different interpretations of the interaction and its content. Such disconnect seems especially likely when people come from different backgrounds. The present work examines similarities and differences in perceptions of interaction content among Black and White Americans. Similarities in perceptions of conversation topics are likely to facilitate communication in interracial interactions and create conditions for positive outcomes (e.g., friendship, reductions in prejudice), and differences may lead to communication failures and negative outcomes (e.g., anxiety, depletion, distancing). Thus, understanding race-based similarities and differences in perceptions of conversation content serves the broader goal of understanding the dynamics of interracial interactions, as well as how such interactions can be made more harmonious.

Little is known about the determinants and consequences of interaction content, including selection strategies people employ, how interaction content is determined by various dispositional and contextual factors, differences in perceptions of interaction content, and what sorts of consequences content has on interaction outcomes (Zabel, Olson, Johnson, & Phillips, 2015). To systematically address interaction content and its potential implications for intergroup interaction, we focus on two main goals in the present research. First, drawing from a variety of disciplines we propose an interaction content model in which intimacy, valence, and controversy are central dimensions along which a given conversation topic might be placed. Then, we provide evidence that interaction content variability can be reduced to these dimensions for both

Black and White Americans. However, such similarity in structure does not imply similarity in perceptions of any given topic. Thus, as a second goal, we identify ways in which Black and White Americans systematically differ in their perceptions of interaction content.

### **The Structure of Content in Interactions**

Surprisingly, differential perceptions of conversation topics have not been systematically considered in the social psychology literature. Instead, researchers have tasked participants to talk about a wide range of topics, for example, favorite and worst memories (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997); college courses (McConnell & Leibold, 2001); social issues (Vorauer, Gagnon, & Sasaki, 2009); books (Plant & Butz, 2006), and dating (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002), among many others (including studies where the content of the interaction was to vary freely (e.g., Ickes, 1984; Richeson & Shelton, 2007)). Rarely is any theoretical rationale provided for choosing one topic over another. In the absence of systematic consideration of conversation topics, the potential moderating role of conversation topics (and perceptions of and any preferences for those topics) on interracial interaction phenomena cannot be addressed. Given that the discussion of unexpected or unwelcome topics amplifies the effort required for interracial interactions (Zabel et al., 2015), understanding how members of different racial groups view topics, and if those views differ, is important.

### **Understanding Content in Interactions**

Given the tremendous variability in interaction content, an initial goal in any systematic study of content is to organize it. We focus on different attributes (i.e., specific characteristics of a given conversation topic) that individuals may ascribe to conversation topics. Then, we attempt to uncover the basic dimensions underlying these attributes. We are interested in whether Black and White Americans use the same underlying dimensions to understand and categorize

conversation topics, and if Black and White Americans rate individual topics along those dimensions in similar ways. These attributes but were chosen to represent characteristics of dyadic interaction content thought to have implications for interaction outcomes. The attributes included in the current work emerged from relevant psychology and communications research on interaction in general and interracial interaction in particular, and include predictability, novelty, intimacy, trust, romance-relatedness, positive image potential, enjoyment, race-relatedness, and controversy. Based on previous research (Johnson, Olson, & Fazio, 2009; Zabel et al., 2015) we expected that the attributes would distill to the underlying dimensions of intimacy, valence, and controversy. Simplifying content to core dimensions in this way makes content research more manageable for systematic study. Next, we describe those dimensions and the attributes we believe will comprise them.

**Intimacy: Intimacy, trust, and romance-relatedness.** Intimacy and trust are foundational to relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994; Wheelless & Grotz, 1977). Intimate self-disclosure engenders liking between partners and is associated with relationship satisfaction (Cole & Bradac, 1996; Collins & Miller, 1994). The liking effect occurs for both the individual sharing personal information and the partner receiving that information (Collins & Miller, 1994). Moreover, self-disclosure can build intimacy and trust within interracial interactions (Ensari & Miller, 2002) where it can be lacking (Alesina & Ferrara, 2000; Rich, 1974; Smith, 2010).

The role of intimacy in interactions becomes more apparent in situations where intimacy is not properly calibrated. To create a smooth interaction, individuals gauge their partner's levels of responsiveness to mutual sharing of intimate information and adjust the level of disclosure they seek and offer in their interactions (Reis & Shaver, 1988). When there is a failure to appropriately calibrate intimate self-disclosure to social norms, sanctions can result (e.g.,

conversational awkwardness, social avoidance). Avoiding sanctions and providing an appropriate amount of self-disclosing information *requires* individuals to be cognizant of intimacy levels during their interactions. Because maintaining appropriate levels of intimacy is important in all interactions, intimacy may be particularly important in interracial interactions. For example, Zabel et al. (2015) showed that the cognitive depletion effects often observed in interracial interactions (e.g., Richeson & Shelton, 2003) depended on interaction content intimacy; only when intimate topics were discussed were depletion effects observed. In the present research, we expect romance-relatedness and trust attributes (as well as ratings of intimacy itself) to be subsumed under the broader core dimension of intimacy.

To measure perceptions of intimacy, we asked people to describe the degree to which topics were personally-revealing (intimate) and would require trust to answer (trust). Relatedly, we also asked about perceptions of the degree to which topics were related to romance, dating, or sex.

**Valence: Positive image-potential and enjoyability.** Ample evidence suggests that valence (the pleasantness of a given topic and enjoyment of conversation about it) is an important consideration in conversation (Johnson et al., 2009). Research in interpersonal communication (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957) supports this argument. Indeed, a frequently employed strategy of getting interaction partners to feel positively towards each other is to facilitate “enjoyment in communication” (p. 97; Bell & Daly, 1984), which could be fulfilled through discussions of positively-valenced, enjoyable topics and avoidance of negativity in interactions, such as making unpleasant remarks and discussing negative topics (Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Martin, Hecht, & Larkey, 1994). Similarly, a comprehensive study in which participants reported on the topics and objectives of their recent interactions with casual

acquaintances or good friends found that “Making the conversation enjoyable” was the most endorsed conversation objective (Clark, 1998). Other objectives identified by participants similarly underscored the importance of valence as an underlying content dimension (i.e., “be friendly,” “be humorous,” “talk about topics of interest to other”). Interestingly, in Johnson et al.’s (2009) work, White participants were less willing to discuss relatively positive topics with a Black relative to a White interaction partner, suggesting that people do not simply aim for the most enjoyable content in any given interaction, but may strategically choose more or less positive topics to serve specific ends.

Impression management motives may also favor positively-valenced topics. Individuals actively strive for others to like them (Leary, 2004), and they tend to like others who view them positively (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). Discussing enjoyable topics might serve this goal. Moreover, relative to their non-White partners, there is evidence that White individuals actively seek to be liked in interracial interactions (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010).

In sum, acting to make the conversation—and oneself—appropriately positive are important objectives across ordinary conversations, and likely particularly so in initial and intergroup encounters. Given these objectives, one’s perception of the valence of a particular topic is likely to be a significant determinant of whether a conversation topic is pursued in an interaction. We expect the attributes positive image potential and enjoyment to be subsumed under the valence dimension.

**Controversiality: Controversy and race-relatedness.** Previous research suggests that controversy, or how “safe” or “hot” a topic is (Johnson et al, 2009), is an important dimension to be considered in conversation. Controversy has proven to have a range of impacts in group discussion, both deleterious and constructive (e.g., Tjosvold & Deemer, 1980). In the close



relationships literature there is evidence that couples are attuned to conflict-triggering events (including specific conversation topics), and invoke a variety of strategies to manage discussion of controversial topics (e.g., Gottman, 1993). It is likely that in interracial interactions, people similarly manage controversial topics in the same way. Reflecting this, people are likely to report “avoiding upsetting topics” as an important conversational objective (Clark, 1998) and pursue neutral topics that adhere to norms, promote reciprocity, and stimulate smooth interactions (Clark, 1998; Davis, 1981). Neutral topics are less likely to fall outside a partner’s latitude of acceptance (Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965), or create an obstacle to reciprocity (Grice, 1975).

In the present research, controversy refers to the perceived likelihood that conversation partners are likely to disagree on a topic or consider it a hot-button issue. Race-related, in this context, refers to perceptions that attitudes related to those topics may differ by race (Johnson, et al., 2009). In the context of interracial interactions, the race-relatedness of topics may be a more specific sort of controversy and therefore influential (Goff, Steele, & Davies, 2008; Trawalter & Richeson, 2008). Thus, we also suspect race-relatedness will be subsumed by the controversy dimension.

**Scriptedness: Predictability and novelty.** Finally, when conversations with outgroup members are scripted, or follow a predictable pattern, interaction partners experience reduced anxiety and increased partner liking (Avery, Richeson, Hebl, & Ambady, 2009). Unique or rare topics may have the potential to cause anxiety, and novel topics can be a stressor in social interactions (Jones, Farina, Hastorf, Markus, Miller, & Scott, 1984), particularly in the context of interactions with outgroup members (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001). However, such topics may also be seen as interesting, memorable, and may promote the

perception of partner interest. Thus, we included perceptions of predictability and novelty in the study for exploratory purposes.

### **Race-Based Differences in Ratings of Topics**

The present work also examines whether Black and White Americans differ in their evaluations of particular conversation topics, particularly in their perceptions of topics as race-related and controversial. Examples of where attitudes and opinions may differ between people of different races abound. In discourse on the role of race in the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina, Trump's presidency, the myriad police shootings of Black men, and many other cases, one's construal of the topic is well-predicted by one's race, with Black respondents believing the topics to be "about race" more than their White counterparts (e.g., Tatum, 2003). This may reflect the finding that race is generally more central to the identity of Black (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998) than White Americans, and Black individuals prefer to talk about race more than White Americans (Applebaum, 2006). Similarly, because minority-Americans may experience more threats and are more sensitive to subtle identity threats and microaggressions than White-Americans (Guendelman, Cheryan, & Monin, 2011), they may experience increased accessibility of race-related issues.

Additionally, it is important to note that Black individuals may be more apt to see topics as "about race" as a result of rightfully acknowledging the existence of pervasive societal prejudices. In comparison, White individuals may be less likely to acknowledge these biases and prejudices, either because they are less apt to be the target of prejudices, lack cognitive awareness that they possess such prejudices, and/or are motivated to maintain an egalitarian self-image (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). These factors may lead Black partners to see conversation topics, on average, as being more race-related than White partners.

Black and White Americans are also expected to differ in how controversial they find conversation topics generally. To view a topic as controversial, one must recognize multiple perspectives about that topic. Black individuals must interact with majority group members, whereas majority group members can often avoid interactions with minorities. This suggests Black individuals are likely aware of majority points of view and how those points of view might differ from their own. Black individuals are also more likely to endorse a multicultural ideology that recognizes and appreciates group differences, whereas White individuals tend to subscribe to a color-blind ideology that minimizes perceptions of difference between groups (e.g., Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007; Verkuyten, 2005). Thus, Black individuals may more frequently recognize the diverging points of view on a particular conversation topic and that controversy is a natural byproduct of differing perspectives. White majority individuals, in contrast, may exhibit a false consensus bias (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977) such that they are less likely to consider the possibility that others have diverging perspectives, and in turn are less likely to perceive controversy in conversation topics. Thus, compared to White Americans, Black Americans were expected to see conversation topics as generally more controversial.

### **Overview of Studies**

Two studies examined race-based convergences and divergences in perceptions of interaction content. In Study 1, we solicited ratings of a wide range of interaction topics from Black and White participants to examine whether conversation topic attributes similarly distilled to three dimensions: intimacy, enjoyability, and controversy. We expected that the race-relatedness and controversy attributes would load into the controversy dimension, positive image potential and enjoyment would load into the valence dimension, and trust and romance-relatedness would load into the intimacy dimension similarly for Black and White individuals.

In Study 1, we also explored race-based divergences in perceptions of interaction content. We expected Black participants to rate conversation topics, on average, as more controversial and race-related. For Black but not White participants, we also predicted that greater perceptions of a topic as controversial or race-related would relate to increased perceptions of predictability. We did not predict race-based differences in perceptions of topic intimacy and valence. In Study 2, we extended the investigation of race-based divergences in perceptions of interaction content to topics generated by the participants themselves.

## Study 1

### Method

#### Participants

Thirty-nine Black (13 male and 26 female) and 36 White (15 male and 21 female) undergraduates at a large Southeastern US university completed a within-subjects experiment for psychology course credit. Each participant completed nine ratings of 88 conversation topics, such that the analysis included 792 ratings from each participant and 59,400 ratings overall.

#### Materials

Conversation topics were generated from a review of past research on dyadic interaction (e.g., Ensari & Miller, 2002; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998; Taylor & Altman, 1966). The final 88-item of topics list included content areas related to personal tastes and preferences in music and foods, politics, school and work, sports, relationships, and many others (see Johnson et al., 2009, for additional details on question items).<sup>1</sup>

Participants rated each of the 88 topics on nine attributes using a 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a lot*) response range. The nine attributes were: 1) *Race-relatedness* (How race-related is the question or issue? Race-relatedness refers to whether or not you believe that a person's answer to the

question would depend on their race); 2) *Predictability* (How predictable would a conversation about the topic be?); 3) *Novelty* (How novel or unique would discussing the question be to you?); 4) *Trust* (How much would you need to trust the other person in discussing this topic?); 5) *Positive image potential* (Would addressing this question give you an opportunity to create a positive image for yourself or allow you to “look good” to others?); 6) *Romance-relatedness* (How much would you be discussing romance, dating, or sex?); 7) *Intimacy* (How much of yourself would you be revealing if you answered that question?); 8) *Enjoyment* (How much would you enjoy answering this question?); and 9) *Controversy* (How controversial is the particular topic?).

### **Procedure**

Upon being seated at individual workstations, participants were told the research involved what people tend to discuss when they first meet a new acquaintance. Black and White sessions were conducted separately, and Black participants were told that sessions reserved for Black participants were designed to increase minority representation in the study. Experimenter race was matched to participant race.

All materials were included in a single packet. The packet first introduced participants to the rating instructions, including definitions of each of the scales as described above. The following pages listed the 88 conversation topics with space for recording ratings. Participants provided all nine ratings for a given topic before moving to the next topic. Given the length of the packet, participants were encouraged to proceed at their own pace and take breaks as necessary. After completing the packet, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire, were debriefed, thanked, and dismissed.

## **Results and Discussion**

We expected that the ratings of the 88 conversation topics by both White participants and Black participants would similarly converge around the three fundamental dimensions of intimacy, valence, and controversy.

### **Data Preparation and Strategy**

Data preparation and analyses involved two sets of analyses. First, to examine the hypothesis that content would distill to 3 primary dimensions, data were aggregated across individuals and the rating of the topic was treated as the unit of analysis in principal component analyses (PCA). Second, to examine race-based differences in ratings of topics, data were aggregated across topic and the participant was treated as the unit of analysis.

### **Principal Component Analyses**

We submitted the ratings of each topic to PCA in order to uncover common underlying components. For Black participants, three components with Eigenvalues over 1, accounting for 75% of the total variance, were revealed. Varimax rotation was used to identify the nature of these factors (see Table 1). Consistent with our expectations, the underlying attributes mapped well onto the dimensions of intimacy (factor 1), valence (factor 2), and controversy (factor 3). Specifically, trust, romance-relatedness, and novelty loaded well onto the intimacy dimension, positive image potential and enjoyment loaded well onto the valence dimension, and race-relatedness loaded well onto the controversy dimension.

The same analysis procedure was followed for White participants<sup>2</sup>. The PCA revealed a 3-factor solution accounting for 75% of the variance. Consistent with our expectations and what was found for Black participants, the underlying attributes mapped well onto the dimensions of intimacy (factor 1), valence (factor 2), and controversy (factor 3). There was some deviation

from the Black participants (see Table 2). Predictability loaded onto the intimacy factor more for White participants than Black participants, whereas predictability loaded on both valence and controversy factors for Black participants. Also, romance-relatedness ratings loaded onto the valence factor for White participants, but the intimacy factor for Black participants. These differences were not expected. Overall, however, the results provide initial evidence for our argument that intimacy, valence, and controversy represent fundamental dimensions of content for both Black and White individuals and can be used to systematically study the role of content in intergroup interaction.

### **Race differences in ratings of topics**

As expected, several race-based differences in attribute ratings of the topics, on average, emerged (see Table 3). First, and consistent with predictions, Black participants rated topics as more race-related than did White participants. However, no differences in ratings of controversiality was found. Although no specific pattern was hypothesized, analysis revealed that Black participants found the topics in general to be more predictable and more enjoyable, as well as, as lower in trust, positive image potential (marginal), and novelty (marginal) than White participants.

We next examined how Black and White participants would see the attributes of topics as correlated. Table 4 provides those correlations. As expected, race-relatedness and controversy were positively correlated ( $z = .06, p = .96$ ) for both Black and White participants. Similarly, controversial topics were viewed as predictable by Black but not White participants ( $z = 2.13, p = .03$ ). These patterns are consistent with our reasoning that Black individuals have more experience with race-related topics in interaction, and thus find them more predictable.

Although not predicted, the latter pattern is consistent with the notion that White partners are less willing to discuss race than Black partners (Johnson et al., 2009). Lastly, we found that although Black and White individuals both perceived novel topics to be significantly less predictable, White participants perceived the novel topics to be less predictable than Black participants ( $z = 2.02, p = .04$ ). These relationships reported above were unexpected, and we are unclear as to the mechanisms underlying them.

In summary, the structure of interaction content was similar for both Black and White participants and consisted of the core dimensions of intimacy, valence, and controversy. In addition, predicted race-based differences in perceptions of topics emerged.

## **Study 2**

In Study 1, participants rated topics that were pre-selected by the researchers. Even with our attempt to procure a variety of topics, there is no guarantee that these are what people actually talk about in an initial interaction. Study 2 was designed to address this potential weakness and create a more realistic, externally valid source of conversation topics. Our specific aim in Study 2 was to uncover whether the race-based differences in attribute ratings revealed in Study 1 would replicate when participants were free to select their own conversation topics.

### **Participants**

Sixty-six White (13 male and 52 female, with one participant failing to report gender) and forty-five Black (17 male and 28 female) participants completed the study voluntarily with no compensation. They were approached in well-trafficked areas on a large Southeastern United States university campus by a race-matched researcher and asked to complete the brief survey they were told was about conversation topics one might broach with a person one just met.

### **Materials and Procedure**



To keep the study brief, the materials were simplified and focused only on the dimensions revealed in Study 1. After agreeing to participate, respondents completed a one-page survey. The first side solicited demographic data (age, race, gender, hometown) and provided the following instructions, “Imagine that a mutual friend introduces you to a new acquaintance. Your friend has just introduced you and has now left the two of you alone for a few minutes to get to know one another. Please list the 5 things you are most likely to talk about with your new acquaintance.” After listing the 5 topics, participants were instructed to turn the page over and rate each of their topics on four dimensions (intimacy, race-relatedness, enjoyability, and controversiality). Only four ratings were solicited to make the survey short enough to be completed in a few minutes. As in Study 1, descriptions of these attributes were provided and responses were indicated on 5-point scales. Finally, participants were asked to indicate the race and gender of the person with whom they imagined interacting<sup>3</sup>. They were then thanked and debriefed.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Descriptives**

Participants listed a wide array of topics, but the most frequently mentioned were “where they are from,” “their major,” “the weather,” “work,” and “how they know our mutual friend.” We examined the reliability of participants’ ratings across the 5 topics. Across participant race and topics the attribute ratings were quite similar (all alphas > .70). Therefore, for these analyses, participant’s average ratings of their 5 topics for each attribute were used.

### **Tests of Differences**

Mean ratings and comparisons between Black and White participants are reported in Table 5. Results are consistent with Study 1. Black participants rated the topics they generated as

more race-related, more controversial, more enjoyable and more intimate than did White participants.

### **Correlational Analyses**

We also examined correlations between attributes (see Table 6). As observed in Study 1, Black and White participants saw race-related topics as controversial to a similar degree ( $z_{dif} = -1.08, p = .28$ ) and saw intimate topics more controversial. Whereas Study 1 found no relationship between intimacy and race-relatedness, in this study, Black and White participants found intimate topics to be race-related. Moreover, Black participants enjoyed intimate topics, whereas for White participants, there was no significant correlation,  $z_{dif} = -2.01, p = .04$ .

### **Race differences in frequency of self-generated topics**

Supplementary analyses were conducted to examine whether race differences in perceptions of interaction content were a function of the topics chosen themselves rather than perceptions of content. That is, did Black and White participants choose different topics to discuss or perceive the same topics in different ways? If the former were true, it could serve as an alternative explanation to the current conclusion that Black and White individuals perceive varying amounts of controversy, race-relatedness, intimacy, and enjoyability in interaction topics.

Three trained coders categorized each of participants' self-chosen topics as belonging to one of the following eleven categories: activities, college, friends, future, home, likes, major, personal, sports, work, or miscellaneous (see Table 7 for definitions used by coders for categorization and frequencies of categories as a function of race). These categories were determined based on initial examination of the self-generated topics<sup>4</sup>.

A chi square goodness of fit analysis was conducted to examine whether the frequency with which Black participants self-generated each category differed from that of White

participants, using Black participant observed frequencies as the expected value for White participants (see Table 8 for frequencies). A statistically significant chi square value emerged,  $\chi^2(10) = 31.36, p = .001$  (0 cells with expected frequencies less than 5), indicating difference(s) in the frequency of one or more categories.

Follow-up analyses were conducted to illuminate the racial differences in category frequencies. Consistent with previous research (Agresti, 2007; Delucchi, 1993; Sharpe, 2015), residuals between observed and expected values were used to determine which categories were driving the statistically significant chi square test. Residuals regarding each category were standardized by dividing by the square root of the expected count for each category (see Table 8). These standardized residuals (z-scores) control for the fact that larger expected cell counts tend to correspond with larger residuals and represented the difference between the observed and expected frequency counts for each category in square rooted expected units. Consistent with recommendations (MacDonald & Gardner, 2000; Sharpe, 2015), a Bonferroni adjustment was made by dividing the alpha of .05 by 11 (the total number of cells in the Chi Square test) to minimize the experimenter-wise error rate. This resulted in an alpha of .0045 (two-tailed alpha = .00225) and corresponding critical regions of  $z = \pm 2.84$  for each of the category follow-up tests. Based on these critical regions, two race differences emerged in the frequencies of self-generated categories. Specifically, White participants self-generated friends-related topics more than Black partners,  $z = 3.82, p < .00225$ , whereas Black participants self-generated personal-related topics more than White partners  $z = -2.94, p < .00225$ . For 9 of the 11 topic categories, Black and White participants self-generated the topics to an equal degree. This suggests that race differences in perceptions of conversation topics as controversial, race-related, intimate, and enjoyable, did not result from Black and White participants choosing different topics to discuss.

### General Discussion

We began with the observation that interaction content is likely to have important implications for interactions, but that scarce social psychological research has considered interaction content in a systematic way. Here we presented a theoretically-informed structure for interaction content that might be used in the future to systematically study the role of content in interactions, particularly interracial interactions. We provided evidence that interaction content can be described as three-dimensional space consisting of intimacy, valence, and controversy dimensions, and that this structure is similar for both Black and White respondents.

We also identified how Black and White respondents diverge in their perceptions of interaction content. Across both studies, we found evidence that Black participants perceived conversation topics overall as being more race-related than did White participants in initial interactions (and, in Study 2, more controversial). Furthermore, more content attributes were associated with predictability for Black participants than White participants; Black participants perceived race-related and controversial topics in particular as being more predictable. Topics providing an opportunity to create a positive image were also viewed as more predictable by Black participants. In contrast, for White participants, only intimacy was associated with predictability. While only speculative, these findings are consistent with the notion that Black participants may have greater experience in discussing a variety of topics (Nielsen Wire, 2010) and hence find them generally more predictable.

Study 2 revealed significant differences in perceptions of topics in the predicted directions that did not emerge as statistically significant in Study 1. Although lower powered, Study 2 entailed ratings of self-generated topics rather than topics generated by the researchers in Study 1. Evaluations of conversation content may be stronger for self-generated topics. For

example, in study 2, Black participants rated their self-selected conversation topics to be more controversial than did White participants, but this difference did not emerge in Study 1. One potential reason for this divergence is that Black individuals are more likely to support a multicultural ideology in which differing and opposing views are appreciated and respected (Ryan et al., 2007) and therefore may choose topics that align along self-perceived controversial fault lines. In addition, Black participants found controversial topics to be more predictable, and since predictable interactions with strangers are more comfortable, they may have selected controversial topics because they are more predictable. We lacked statistical power in Study 2 to test this model, and it was beyond the scope of the present research, but future study could examine these relationships.

Similarly, compared to White participants, Black participants also rated their self-selected topics as more intimate in Study 2 (but not Study 1) and associated intimacy of topics with enjoyability. This may reflect a general preference for greater self-disclosure on most types of conversation topics for Black respondents compared to White respondents (Gudykunst, 1986) that leads to the selection of topics that facilitate self-disclosure.

A skeptic might argue that differences in the topics chosen by White and Black participants, rather than differences in perceptions of interaction content per se, might be driving the effects revealed in Study 2. However, analyses indicated that frequencies for most self-generated topic categories did not differ by race. Of the two categories for which racial frequency differences occurred, no racial differences in perceptions of race-relatedness, controversy, intimacy, or enjoyability emerged. Black participants did perceive friends' related topics as more controversial and race-related than White participants. However, friends' related topics comprised a modest percentage (9.33%) of Black participants' self-generated topics. Thus,

we argue race differences in content perceptions seem to be driven by different perceptions of comparable content.

### **Implications for Real World Intergroup Interactions**

The current findings contribute to recent research systematically demonstrating that interracial interaction content can determine the outcomes of that interaction. This research showed that White individuals prefer to avoid intimate topics in interracial interactions (Johnson et al., 2009) and that when those preferences are violated, they become more cognitively fatigued (Zabel et al., 2015). In addition, this work has shown that White individuals' content preferences in interracial interactions appear to be functional, as Black individuals form more positive impressions of White individuals who engage in their preferred strategies of avoiding intimate and race-related topics (Zabel, Olson, & Johnson, 2018).

The present research advances systematic understanding of content in interracial interactions by providing evidence that although Black and White individuals may evaluate or categorize conversational content along three similar dimensions, discrepancies exist in where a particular conversational topic falls on these dimensions. These discrepancies may undermine even well-intentioned interactions. For instance, imagine if a Black individual engages in a dialogue with a White partner that they feel is intimate, but that their White partner does not perceive as intimate. The White partner would then reciprocate with a low level of intimacy, which the Black partner may interpret as disinterest, which could preclude the friendship that can emerge from self-disclosure (Ensari & Miller, 2002). Conversely, if a White individual who discloses information they perceive as low in intimacy during an interracial interaction (i.e., their preferred content strategy; Johnson et al., 2009) receives a response from a Black partner that is more intimate than is expected, this could be perceived by the White individual as being "too

much, too soon.” Again, this perception may hamper additional self-disclosure between the partners vital to fostering positive interracial interaction content experiences (Pettigrew, 1998) that reduce prejudices and produce more harmonious intergroup interactions.

In a similar way, differing perceptions of race-relatedness in interracial interactions could lead to discomfort and conflict and undermine interactions. For example, White individuals may choose topics they perceive as being low in race-relatedness (i.e., their preferred content strategy), but that are nonetheless perceived as high in race-relatedness by their Black partners. White partners are likely to be taken aback by the conversation “suddenly being about race.” Their Black partner, in perceiving that the White individual raised a race-related topic, may form more negative impressions of their White partner (Zabel et al., 2018). On the other hand, if a Black individual broaches a topic that they perceive as race-related in order to start a race-related dialogue with a White individual, the White partner may fail to perceive the topic as race-related, and fail to respond appropriately. Indeed, this disconnect in intentions and responses may contribute to a variety of maladaptive emotional (stigma: Major & O’Brien, 2005; anxiety: Stephan & Stephan, 1985), cognitive (e.g., cognitive depletion; Richeson, 2003), and behavioral (e.g., social distance: Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974) outcomes for both partners (Richeson & Shelton, 2007).

Thus, the present research raises the intriguing possibility that despite the best intentions (Bergsieker et al., 2010), differences in perceptions of conversation topics can lead to dissatisfaction with the conversation and continuation of default avoidance-related interracial interaction strategies (Plant & Butz, 2006). Future research should continue to examine these possibilities.

Even if Black and White partners agree on perceptions of conversation topics, other differences between Black and White partners remain. For instance, members of minority groups are more likely to acknowledge and appreciate differences between groups, whereas majority group members tend to prefer ignoring and minimizing group differences (Verkuyten, 2005). Moreover, minority and majority group members also approach intergroup interactions with different motives (Bergsieker et al., 2010) and expectations (Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005). Black individuals expect to be the target of prejudice in interracial interactions (Shelton et al., 2005), which corresponds to their chief goal in interracial interactions of being respected (Bergsieker et al., 2010). In contrast, White individuals' chief goal is to be liked in interracial interactions (Bergsieker et al., 2010). To this end, White individuals employ an avoidance focus (Plant & Butz, 2006) in interracial interactions with the goal of egalitarianism to minimize the potential of appearing prejudiced (Dunton & Fazio, 1997). Situations that threaten these goals in interracial interactions may prompt a variety of negative affective, cognitive, and behavioral consequences (Shelton & Richeson, 2007), even if perceptions of interaction content are in agreement. Nevertheless, the current work is essential at identifying race-based convergences and divergences of interaction content, which likely serve as important moderator of the goal- and expectation-behavior processes outlined above.

### **Limitations**

The intention of this research was to bring attention and order to interaction content as an influential factor when studying interracial interactions. It is important to note that although this research has implications for interracial interactions, when not prompted, participants tended to envision a same-race rather than different-race interaction partner. Whether perceptions of the degree to which interaction content can be described along various dimensions and how various



attributes are related may vary as a function of interaction partner race are empirical questions that merit future research. Nevertheless, the current research is an important step to shedding light on how the study of interaction content can be organized conceptually that may prove fruitful to future empirical research.

It is possible that the effects demonstrated in the current research would be even more pronounced within real interracial interactions. For instance, Black participants may be more likely to perceive topics as race-related and controversial in interracial interactions. Moreover, in a manner consistent with previous research (Trawalter & Richeson, 2008), Black (relative to White) participants may be more likely to perceive race-related topics as enjoyable in interracial interactions given that Black people are perceived to be “experts” (Tatum, 1992) on topics of race and the motivational concerns of White people regarding avoiding prejudice (Dunton & Fazio, 1997).

## **Conclusions**

Historically, social psychologists have been reluctant to study some racial and ethnic group differences. Asking such questions seems to risk validating the very stereotypes that the field views as destructive and inaccurate (see Lee, McCauley, & Jussim, 2013). Relatedly, it could be argued that the field of psychology has largely taken a “colorblind” approach to the study of social perception (see Plaut, 2002), where research aimed at getting people to ignore group memberships and form more individuated impressions of people was—and still is—a value (e.g., Fiske, 2012). Nevertheless, recent research on interethnic ideology suggests that there are differences between groups, particularly in how they approach functioning in a diverse society (e.g., Shelton & Richeson, 2006). The present research identified both intergroup similarities and differences in perceptions of interaction content. Specifically, we found that

despite similarities in how they structure interaction content, these groups systematically differ in how they perceive it. As we have argued, understanding such convergences and divergences is critical to providing a fuller picture of the dynamics of intergroup contact, and, ultimately, in improving intergroup relations. The current work valuably contributes to a social psychological understanding of the factors important to facilitating positive intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

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Table 1

Black Participant Factor Loadings from Principal Component Analysis of Topic Ratings, Study 1

Attribute	Factor		
	Intimacy	Valence	Controversy
Intimacy	<b>.91</b>	.06	.08
Trust	<b>.89</b>	-.20	.05
Romance-Related	<b>.79</b>	.46	-.18
Enjoyment	-.02	<b>.87</b>	-.23
Pos Image Potential	.07	<b>.51</b>	.22
Novelty	<b>.78</b>	-.05	-.03
Predictability	-.17	.51	.52
Controversy	.28	-.23	<b>.90</b>
Race-Related	-.14	.17	<b>.79</b>

Table 2

White Participant Factor Loadings from Principal Component Analysis of Topic Ratings, Study 1

Attribute	Factor		
	Intimacy	Valence	Controversy
Intimacy	<b>.85</b>	.43	.10
Trust	<b>.91</b>	.28	.10
Romance-Related	.28	<b>.91</b>	.00
Enjoyment	-.49	<b>.60</b>	-.33
Pos Image Potential	.13	<b>.50</b>	-.06
Novelty	<b>.73</b>	.19	-.06
Predictability	<b>-.56</b>	.31	.04
Controversy	.31	-.11	<b>.93</b>
Race-Related	-.19	.04	<b>.72</b>

Table 3

Mean Ratings of Topics by Attribute and Participant Race, Study 1

Attribute	Black Ps ( <i>n</i> = 39) (SD)	White Ps ( <i>n</i> = 36) (SD)	<i>t</i> -statistic ( <i>df</i> = 73) ( <i>p</i> -value)	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Intimacy	2.84 (.58)	2.82 (.66)	.21 (.83)	.05
Trust	2.27 (.57)	2.47 (.71)	-2.02 (.047)	.47
Romance-Related	1.75 (.87)	1.72 (1.00)	.18 (.86)	.042
Enjoyment	3.03 (.56)	2.62 (.67)	4.35 (<.001)	1.01
Pos Image Potential	2.79 (.47)	2.93 (.51)	-1.92 (.06)	.45
Novelty	2.57 (.35)	2.67 (.41)	-1.78 (.08)	.41
Predictability	3.04 (.40)	2.57 (.39)	7.92 (<.001)	1.84
Controversy	2.42 (.98)	2.35 (1.08)	.48 (.63)	.11
Race-Related	2.02 (.68)	1.76 (.59)	2.74 (.008)	.64

Table 4

Correlations Between Ratings by Participant Race (Black participants/White Participants), Study 1

	2. Int.	3. Cont.	4. Enj.	5. Nov.	6. Trust	7. Pos.	8. Race	9. Rom.
1. Predictability	-.07/-.26*	<b>.32*/-.18</b>	.25*/.40*	<b>-.33*/-.68</b>	-.25*/-.31*	.25*/.02	.38*/.05	.04/.08
2. Intimacy		.26*/.31*	.10/-.12	.81*/.66*	.87*/.95*	.23*/.42*	-.01/-.06	.59*/.57*
3. Controversy			-.39*/-.48*	.17/.16	.25*/.33*	.11/-.05	.51*/.50*	-.02/-.03
4. Enjoyment				.11/-.09	-.13/-.25*	.43*/.49*	-.08/-.21*	.32*/.28*
5. Novelty					.77*/.67*	.16/.33*	-.06/-.07	.45*/.34*
6. Trust						.06/.27*	.02/-.05	.46*/.46*
7. Pos. image pot.							.09/-.06	.08/-.06
8. Race-rel.								-.18/-.11
9. Romance-rel.								

Note: \*  $p < .05$ ; bolded correlations indicate that Black and White individual correlations differ significantly from one another with an alpha of  $p < .05$

Table 5

Mean Topic Ratings by Participant Race, Study 2

Dimension	Black Ps (SD)	White Ps (SD)	<i>t</i> -statistic ( <i>df</i> = 109) ( <i>p</i> -value)	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Intimacy	2.88 (1.06)	2.33 (.73)	3.19 (.002)	.60
Controversy	1.89 (.89)	1.47 (.51)	3.16 (.002)	.58
Enjoyment	3.84 (.96)	3.53 (.73)	1.98 (.05)	.37
Race-rel.	2.03 (1.03)	1.57 (.61)	2.92 (.004)	.54

Table 6

Correlations Between Ratings by Participant Race (Black/White participants), Study 2

	2. Cont.	3. Enjoy.	4. Race.
1. Intimacy	.25 <sup>+</sup> /.30*	<b>.47*</b> /.11	.28*/.24*
2. Controversy		-.10/-.17	.31*/.49*
3. Enjoyment			.21/-.05
4. Race-rel.			

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , <sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ ; bolded correlations indicate that Black and White individual correlations differ significantly from one another with an alpha of  $p < .05$ .



Table 7

## Self-Generated Topic Coding Definitions and Frequencies, Study 2

Topic	Definition/Description	Black <i>n</i> (% of total responses given)	White <i>n</i> (% of total responses given)
Recreational Activities	Things the interaction partner might do, including but not limited to hobbies, clubs, and attending church.	21 (9.33)	25 (7.58)
College	Whether the partner was in school, details about their school, and year in school.	26 (11.56)	41 (12.42)
Friends	Questions about the mutual friend that introduced them, how they met, and/or other friends besides the mutual friend.	21 (9.33)	52 (15.76)
Future	Future plans, including spring break plans, vacation plans, and career possibilities.	9 (4.00)	14 (4.24)
Home	Where their interaction partner is from and current residence or living situation.	34 (15.11)	57 (17.27)
Likes	Preferences (not behavioral hobbies), including music, books, movies, food, games, and interests.	30 (13.33)	35 (10.61)
Major	Questions about their college major.	19 (8.44)	31 (9.39)
Personal	A partner's personal life (e.g., age, family, dating), how they are feeling, their name, and objects a person is wearing (e.g., shoes or clothing).	26 (11.56)	20 (6.06)
Sports	Whether a partner plays sports or likes sports.	10 (4.44)	13 (3.94)
Work	Whether a person works, and if so, where they work and what they do.	8 (3.56)	17 (5.15)
Miscellaneous	The weather, the day itself, politics, and current events.	21 (9.33)	25 (7.58)

Table 8

Chi Square Goodness of Fit Follow-Up Test for White Participants (Expected Values Based on Black Participants' Observed Data)

Topic	Observed Value (O)	Expected Value (E)	Raw Residual (O-E)	Standardized Residual (O-E)/ $\sqrt{E}$
Recreational Activities	25	30.80	-5.80	-1.05
College	41	38.16	2.84	.46
Friends	52	30.80	21.20	3.82*
Future	14	13.21	.79	.22
Home	57	49.88	7.12	1.01
Likes	35	44.00	-9.00	-1.36
Major	31	27.86	3.14	.59
Personal	20	38.16	-18.16	-2.94*
Sports	13	14.53	-1.53	-.40
Work	17	11.79	5.21	1.52
Miscellaneous	25	30.80	-5.80	-1.05

Note: \*indicates statistically significant difference in the frequency with which White and Black participants self-generated that particular topic at  $p < .00225$ .

### Endnotes

1. Although our interest was not in content areas, topics were organized into the following categories to ease presentation to participants: School (e.g., “What is your favorite thing about your school?”), Government and Politics (e.g., “What is the most important problem facing American society today?”), Social Issues (e.g., “Should gay and lesbian marriages be legal?”), Friends and Family (e.g., “Where are you from originally? Where are your parents from?”), Love and Romance (e.g., “What is your idea of the perfect romantic vacation?”), Spirituality (e.g., “Could it be argued that one religion is more harmful or beneficial than another?”), and a broad category of items labeled “Personal” (e.g., “What kinds of music do you like to listen to?”).
2. A separate confirmatory factor analysis could not be conducted because the model included two two-item latent variables. To meet identification requirements, three items per factor are required.
3. Participants were not assigned to imagine a particular kind of partner in Study 1, and it was assumed that participants would imagine someone of their own race. It is plausible that they may have imagined otherwise, particularly Black participants, who may be more accustomed to interactions with other-raced individuals. Hence, in Study 2 we collected information about the race of one’s imagined interaction partner to assess whether partner race moderated any of the race-based differences observed in Study 1. 91% of Black and 98% of White participants reported imagining a same-race interaction partner. Including data from participants indicating a different-race partner did not alter the pattern of results, so they were retained for the main analyses.

4. Discrepancies among coders were discussed until such cases were resolved.

Discrepancies in topic categorizations comprised a small amount of categorizations (< 10%).