

Leadership in a Diverse World: Stress and Coping in Response to Interracial Contact

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The United States is becoming increasingly racially diverse, making interracial interactions virtually inevitable. This diversity has the potential to be tremendously rewarding. Exposure to racial diversity can lead to many positive outcomes, including more positive racial attitudes, better leadership development and more complex thinking about the social world.¹ In the words of former President Bill Clinton, diversity can be a “Godsend” for those who can “live together, learn together, work together.”² Indeed, organizations that have promoted and leveraged diversity have gained a huge competitive advantage. Organizations like IBM have not only succeeded in achieving diversity in their workforce, they have used it to reach out to new markets, develop more creative solutions, and redefine the work they do so that employees—all employees—feel invested in the company.³ IBM’s success story is not the norm, however. Many organizations struggle to achieve diversity, especially at the top of the organizational hierarchy, and they fail to leverage differences.⁴

For decades, researchers have argued that the reason efforts to increase diversity fail is that people are secretly (or not-so-secretly) prejudiced. Research has shown that most people favor members of their own social groups.⁵ They trust and like ingroup members more than outgroup members, and prefer to give rewards to those in the ingroup.⁶ In the context of race relations,

¹ Alexander W. Astin, *What Matters In College?: Four Critical Years Revisited* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993); Natalie J. Shook, Russell H. Fazio, and J. Richard Eiser, “Attitude Generalization: Similarity, Valence, And Extremity,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43, no. 4 (2007): 641-647; Anthony Lising Antonio, Mitchell J. Chang, Kenji Hakuta, David A. Kenny, Shana Levin, and Jeffrey F. Milem. “Effects of Racial Diversity on Complex Thinking in College Students.” *Psychological Science* 15, no. 8 (2004): 507-510; Anthony Lising Antonio, “The Role Of Interracial Interaction In The Development Of Leadership Skills And Cultural Knowledge And Understanding,” *Research in Higher Education* 42, no. 5 (2001): 593-617; Samuel R. Sommers, “On Racial Diversity and Group Decision Making: Identifying Multiple Effects Of Racial Composition On Jury Deliberations,” *Journal Of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 4 (2006): 597; Samuel R. Sommers, Lindsey S. Warp, and Corrine C. Mahoney, “Cognitive Effects Of Racial Diversity: White Individuals’ Information Processing In Heterogeneous Groups,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44, no. 4 (2008): 1129-1136.

² William Clinton, “Second Inaugural Address of the President of the United States,” *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States*, accessed September 3, 2014, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres65.html>.

³ David A. Thomas, “Diversity as a Strategy,” *Harvard Business Review*, last modified September 2004, <http://hbr.org/2004/09/diversity-as-strategy/ar/1>.

⁴ Fay Hansen, “Diversity’s Business Case Doesn’t Add Up,” *Workforce* 82, no. 4 (2003): 28-32.

⁵ Marilynn B. Brewer, “The Psychology Of Prejudice: Ingroup Love and Outgroup Hate?” *Journal Of Social Issues* 55, no. 3 (1999): 429-444.

⁶ Chester A. Insko, John Schopler, and Constantine Sedikides, “Personal Control, Entitativity, and Evolution,” in *Intergroup Cognition And Intergroup Behavior*, ed. Chester A. Insko, John Schopler, and C. Sedikides (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1998), 75-108; Henri Tajfel, Michael G. Billig, Robert P. Bundy, and

research has shown that white Americans prefer white people. They prefer to live in predominantly white neighborhoods.⁷ They have an easier time associating good things with white people and bad things with black people.⁸ They are also more willing to help and share resources with white people than with people of minority groups.⁹ Clearly, prejudice can undermine diversity efforts.

This explanation is incomplete, however. A main reason diversity efforts today fail is that diversity is challenging. Interracial interactions are stressful. Research has shown that many individuals exhibit physiological and behavioral signs of distress during interracial interactions. They exhibit increases in cortisol, a “stress hormone.”¹⁰ They also exhibit nonverbal behaviors associated with social anxiety (e.g., fidgeting, blinking excessively, averting eye gaze) that undermine the quality of social interactions.¹¹ To improve interracial interactions and leverage diversity, leaders will need to learn how to cope with interracial contact in positive and productive ways.

Stress and coping in response to interracial interactions

To understand why interracial interactions are stressful and how people might cope with that stress, it is useful to understand stress and coping more generally. Figure 1 provides a schematic of the stress and coping process applied to the interracial context. When faced with a potential stressor, individuals make primary and secondary appraisals.¹² During primary appraisal,

Claude Flament, "Social Categorization And Intergroup Behavior," *European Journal Of Social Psychology* 1, no. 2 (1971): 149-178.

⁷ Robert D. Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century: The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30, no. 2 (2007): 137-174.

⁸ Brian A. Nosek, Frederick L. Smyth, Jeffrey J. Hansen, Thierry Devos, Nicole M. Lindner, Kate A. Ranganath, Colin Tucker Smith et al., "Pervasiveness and Correlates Of Implicit Attitudes and Stereotypes," *European Review of Social Psychology* 18, no. 1 (2007): 36-88.

⁹ Samuel L. Gaertner and John F. Dovidio, "The Subtlety of White Racism, Arousal, and Helping Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 35, no. 10 (1977): 691; Richard H. McAdams, "Cooperation and Conflict: The Economics of Group Status Production and Race Discrimination," *Harvard Law Review* (1995): 1003-1084.

¹⁰ Wendy Berry Mendes, Heather M. Gray, Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton, Brenda Major, and Elissa S. Epel, "Why Egalitarianism Might Be Good for Your Health: Physiological Thriving During Stressful Intergroup Encounters," *Psychological Science* 18, no. 11 (2007): 991-998; Trawalter, Sophie, Emma K. Adam, P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, and Jennifer A. Richeson, "Concerns About Appearing Prejudiced Get Under The Skin: Stress Responses to Interracial Contact in the Moment and Across Time," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48, no. 3 (2012): 682-693.

¹¹ John F. Dovidio, Kerry Kawakami, Craig Johnson, Brenda Johnson, and Adaiah Howard. "On the Nature of Prejudice: Automatic and Controlled Processes." *Journal Of Experimental Social Psychology* 33, No. 5 (1997): 510-540; John F. Dovidio, Kerry Kawakami, and Samuel L. Gaertner, "Implicit and Explicit Prejudice and Interracial Interaction," *Journal Of Personality and Social Psychology* 82, no. 1 (2002): 62; Fazio, Russell H., Joni R. Jackson, Bridget C. Dunton, and Carol J. Williams, "Variability in Automatic Activation as an Unobtrusive Measure of Racial Attitudes: A Bona Fide Pipeline?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, no. 6 (1995): 1013; Sophie Trawalter and Jennifer A. Richeson, "Let's Talk About Race, Baby! When Whites' and Blacks' Interracial Contact Experiences Diverge," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44, no. 4 (2008): 1214-1217; Trawalter, "Under the Skin."

¹² Richard S. Lazarus, *Psychological Stress and the Coping Process*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1966.

individuals appraise the demands of a potential stressor. In the context of interracial interactions, they appraise how much effort the interaction is likely to require. Research has shown that most people appraise interracial interactions as being quite demanding.¹³ Whites are often concerned about appearing prejudiced and ethnic minorities are often concerned about being the target of prejudice — managing these sets of concerns requires effort.¹⁴ Individuals often self-regulate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in an effort to manage their concerns.

STRESS AND COPING FRAMEWORK FOR INTERRACIAL CONTACT

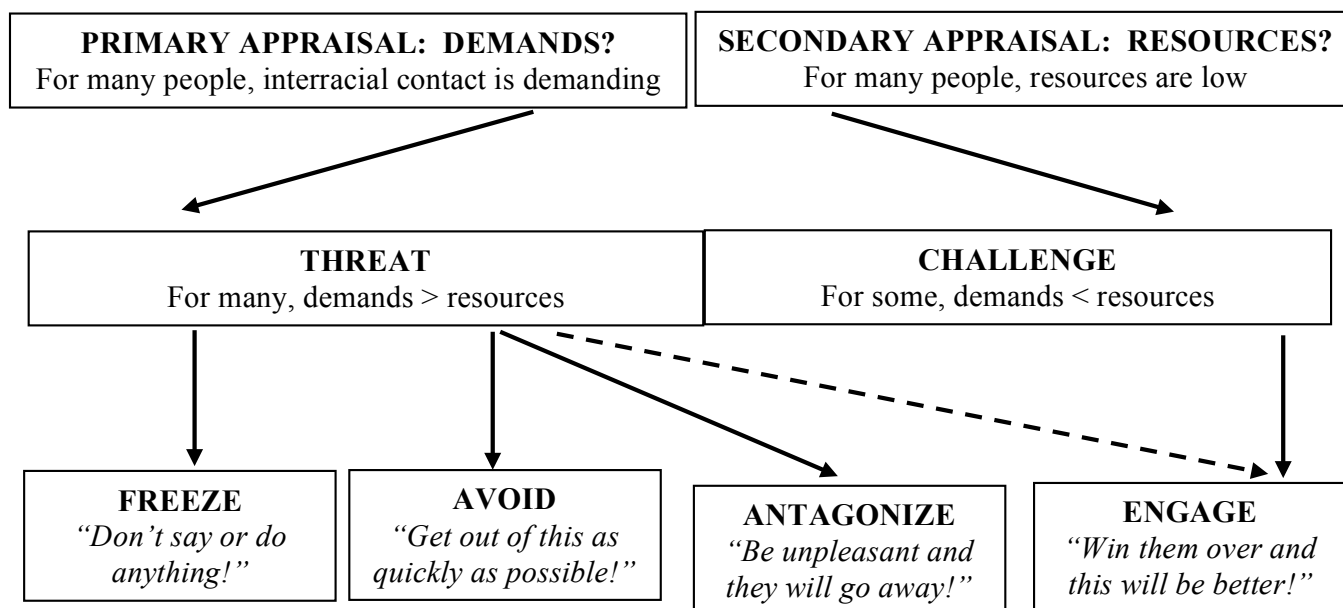


Figure 1. A stress and coping framework for understanding behavior during interracial interactions.

Once people have assessed the demands of a potential stressor, they go on to secondary appraisal. During this phase, individuals appraise resources available to cope with the stressor. Resources can be material, physical, or psychosocial, and facilitate one's ability to change the situation, mitigate negative outcomes, and/or generate positive outcomes. In the context of interracial contact, one of the most useful resources is a social script. Social scripts are guidelines for what to say and do during a social situation. People have social scripts for any number of situations, such as attending class (e.g., sit down, take notes, ask thoughtful questions), eating at restaurants (e.g., wait to be seated, look at the menu, order from the waiter), and even interacting with those of one's own racial group (e.g., say hello, ask where s/he is from, talk about favorite restaurants in Charlottesville). Because many people have little interracial contact experience, they lack

¹³ Jim Blascovich, Wendy Berry Mendes, Sarah B. Hunter, Brian Lickel, and Neneh Kowai-Bell, "Perceiver Threat in Social Interactions with Stigmatized Others," *Journal Of Personality and Social Psychology* 80, no. 2 (2001): 253.

¹⁴ J. Nicole Shelton, Jennifer A. Richeson, and Jacquie D. Vorauer. "Threatened Identities and Interethnic Interactions." *European Review of Social Psychology* 17, no. 1 (2006): 321-358; Jennifer A. Richeson and J. Nicole Shelton, "When Prejudice Does Not Pay Effects of Interracial Contact on Executive Function," *Psychological Science* 14, no. 3 (2003): 287-290; Jennifer A. Richeson, Sophie Trawalter, and J. Nicole Shelton, "African Americans' Implicit Racial Attitudes and the Depletion Of Executive Function After Interracial Interactions," *Social Cognition* 23, no. 4 (2005): 336-352.

social scripts for interracial interactions. This lack of experience is especially true of white Americans.¹⁵ Consider how stressful it is for many white Americans to use racial labels (“*should I say black or African American?*”).¹⁶ This lack of knowhow can make interracial contact stressful for both whites and minorities.

Interracial interactions are stressful then because the demands of interracial interactions often exceed individuals’ resources to meet those demands. As a result, individuals often feel threatened or distressed and must deploy coping strategies to reduce their stress. These strategies can take countless forms, but broadly speaking, there are four basic coping behaviors: attacking the source of threat (to remove the threat), avoiding/escaping the threat, freezing until the threat disappears, or creating and maintaining social bonds to manage the threat. Attacking and avoiding/escaping the threat is often referred to as “fight or flight,” while creating social bonds to cope with a threat has also been referred to as “tend and befriend.”¹⁷ In the context of interactions, we label these responses antagonizing, avoiding, freezing, and positively engaging, respectively.¹⁸

Antagonizing

One response to threat is attacking the source of the threat, moving it from one’s immediate environment. In the context of interracial interactions, individuals who attack antagonize their interaction partner. They might sneer and make snide remarks (e.g., offensive jokes) or behave in aggressive and dominant ways. The goal of antagonizing is to invalidate the threat, making the interaction and one’s interaction partner insignificant. Although this coping response can reduce the threat people feel during interracial interactions, it fails to promote positive outcomes.

Avoiding

Another common response to threat is avoiding it. In the context of interracial contact, individuals who avoid will avert their eye gaze, lean back and away from their interaction partner, and try to end the interaction as quickly as possible. Because avoiding requires disengagement, it too fails to promote positive outcomes. Moreover, when whites are avoidant, they run the risk of appearing prejudiced, and when minorities are avoidant, they run the risk of appearing incompetent.

¹⁵ Sophie Trawalter and Jennifer A. Richeson, “Regulatory Focus and Executive Function After Interracial Interactions,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 42, no. 3 (2006): 406-412.

¹⁶ Michael I. Norton, Samuel R. Sommers, Evan P. Apfelbaum, Natassia Pura, and Dan Ariely, “Color Blindness and Interracial Interaction: Playing the Political Correctness Game,” *Psychological Science*, 17, 949-953.

¹⁷ Walter Bradford Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body* (New York: Norton, 1932).

Shelley E. Taylor, Laura Cousino Klein, Brian P. Lewis, Tara L. Gruenewald, Regan AR Gurung, and John A. Updegraff. “Biobehavioral Responses to Stress in Females: Tend-And-Befriend, Not Fight-Or-Flight.” *Psychological Review* 107, no. 3 (2000): 411-429.

¹⁸ Sophie Trawalter, Jennifer A. Richeson, and J. Nicole Shelton, “Predicting Behavior During Interracial Interactions: A Stress and Coping Approach,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, no. 13 (2009), 243-268.

Freezing

A third common response to threat is freezing. In the context of interracial contact, individuals who freeze will close their body posture and brace themselves for what is to come. They will say or do as little as possible. After all, if they say or do nothing, they cannot say or do something wrong. As with the avoiding response, freezing requires disengagement from the interaction and fails to promote positive outcomes. At best, it prevents negative outcomes.

Positively Engaging

A final coping response is positively engaging. In the context of interracial contact, people who positively engage make eye contact, lean forward, nod and smile, and affirm their interaction partners' comments. As the interaction unfolds, they are able to reduce stress by making the interaction more comfortable and easier to navigate.

Positively engaging in the face of threat can be difficult. Indeed, the easiest way to positively engage is to reappraise the interaction as a challenge instead of a threat. Leaders can accomplish this shift from threat to challenge by reducing the demands of the interaction and/or increasing resources to meet the demands. Once resources exceed the demands of the interaction, individuals will feel positively challenged and they will positively engage. (See Figure 1.)

How to Positively Engage in Interracial Interactions

The first way to promote positive engagement is to reduce the demands of interracial interactions. One way to achieve this goal is to improve racial attitudes. Indeed, research has shown that people who have more interracial contact and more positive racial attitudes find interracial interactions less demanding.¹⁹ Changing racial attitudes is notoriously difficult, however. It likely requires positive interracial contact among equal-status peers who share a common goal and must work together to achieve that goal.²⁰ It may also require specific strategies to counter stereotypes (e.g., exposure to counter-stereotypical media and role models) and strategies to promote a pro-diversity mindset (e.g., acknowledging/celebrating rather than ignoring differences).²¹

Luckily, there are other ways to reduce the demands of interracial contact. The surest way is to get people to focus on their interaction partner, the interaction, or the task at hand, rather than themselves. For example, people can think of the interaction as an opportunity to learn about a topic or another person as opposed to an opportunity to perform well or not.²² They can also adopt a promotion focus ("*do the right thing*") rather than a prevention focus ("*don't do the wrong thing*") to reduce the demands of interracial contact.²³ Agreeing on a group goal and/or

¹⁹ Blascovich et al., "Perceiver Threat."
Mendes et al., "Egalitarianism."

²⁰ Gordon Willard Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954).

²¹ Nilanjana Dasgupta and Anthony G. Greenwald, "On the Malleability of Automatic Attitudes: Combating Automatic Prejudice with Images of Admired and Disliked Individuals," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, no. 5 (2001): 800-814; Jennifer A. Richeson and Richard J. Nussbaum, "The Impact of Multiculturalism Versus Color-Blindness on Racial Bias," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 40, no. 3 (2004): 417-423.

²² Phillip Atiba Goff, Claude M. Steele, and Paul G. Davies, "The Space Between Us: Stereotype Threat and Distance in Interracial Contexts," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 94, no. 1 (2008): 91-107.

²³ Trawalter and Richeson, "Regulatory Focus and Executive Function."

forging a common group identity can help people perceive racial outgroup members as ingroup members, thereby reducing the demands of the interaction.²⁴

These strategies are likely to be even more effective if paired with increased resources. As noted, the most useful resource for meeting the demands of interracial contact is to have a social script. A script is simply a template for how some event should go (in this case an interaction). It provides structure to the meeting or interaction. It lets people anticipate what is coming up next so that they can be ready. And it provides a shared “language” people can use (during this time, it is “safe” to talk about race, gender, or other typically taboo topic). With a social script, it would not be out of place to bring up the topic because the participants expect it. Research has shown that providing white individuals with a script—what to say and when to say it—can greatly improve interracial contact.²⁵ Consider these two real-world examples. IBM recognized that discussing race-related issues was stressful and that these discussions were therefore avoided. They implemented “5-min drills,” a structured time during meetings when executives had to identify and discuss minority employees deserving of promotions. This structured time provided a predictable, promotion-focused, and safe environment to talk about a diversity-related issue. Other companies have used icebreakers. Even though icebreakers may seem silly, the activity gives employees a loose script to help them initiate and navigate interracial contact.

These social scripts are helpful only insofar as companies can implement them. Thus, resources necessary to implement these scripts are important too. These resources can include physical resources such as glucose (energy) levels and psychosocial resources such as social status. Social status is an important resource in any social interaction. It confers respect. In the context of interracial contact, it has long been recognized that equal status promotes positive interactions (Allport, 1954).²⁶ This may be especially important for minorities who are often concerned about being disrespected (i.e., discriminated against). In short, interracial interactions must be set up in a way to support the effective use of social scripts *and* the individuals must have enough personal resources to implement those scripts.

²⁴ Elliot Aronson and Shelley Patnoe, *The Jigsaw Classroom: Building Cooperation in the Classroom* (New York: Longman, 1997); Samuel L. Gaertner, John F. Dovidio, Phyllis A. Anastasio, Betty A. Bachman, and Mary C. Rust, “The Common Ingroup Identity Model: Recategorization and the Reduction of Intergroup Bias,” *European Review of Social Psychology* 4, no. 1 (1993): 1-26.

²⁵ Derek R. Avery, Jennifer A. Richeson, Michelle R. Hebl, and Nalini Ambady, “It Does Not Have To Be Uncomfortable: The Role of Behavioral Scripts In Black–White Interracial Interactions,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 94, no. 6 (2009): 1382-1393; Jennifer A. Richeson and Sophie Trawalter, “Why Do Interracial Interactions Impair Executive Function? A Resource Depletion Account,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 88, no. 6 (2005): 934-947.

²⁶ Allport, “Nature of Prejudice.”

Conclusion

The United States' population is increasingly diverse and interracial interactions are stressful. One solution to resolve this stress is to avoid interracial interactions. The problem with this solution, of course, is that diversity is not a choice but a fact of U.S. society. As a nation, we are committed to the ideals of equal opportunity and we know from experience that separate is not equal. The solution is to cope with the stress of interracial contact. Unfortunately, most of our coping responses are not conducive to positive interactions. Often, people antagonize, avoid, or freeze. People can cope in a more positive and constructive way, however, by positively engaging. Leaders can learn and teach others to positively engage if they are able to reduce the demands of interracial contact and increase the resources people have for meeting those demands. Only then will leveraging diversity be possible. ■

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