

Cortisol Increases During Interracial Encounters Predict (Over-) Correction of Bias

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Purpose

Background:

There is a disjunction between many Whites reported liking of stigmatized or minority group members and their more subtle reactions.

Most White Americans desire to be – or at least appear – unbiased towards African-Americans (Plant & Devine, 1998). People report greater self-liking of partners who are stigmatized (Mendes *et al.*, 2002). Yet in intergroup interactions, White subjects display more malignant cardiovascular reactivity with Black or stigmatized confederates.

Current Research:

In three studies, we investigated the relationship between subjects' overt positivity towards outgroup members and their physiological responses during stressful intergroup interactions. We hypothesized that those who are threatened by outgroup members will attempt to appear unbiased – when they are able to do so. We predicted that this deliberate positivity is fragile, and will only occur when people have the resources to correct their behavior.

Method

Study 1:

31 White participants interacted with either Black or White partners for five minutes of light conversation. We videotaped the interaction and coded for overt positive behavior: smiling, nodding, and laughing.



Study 2:

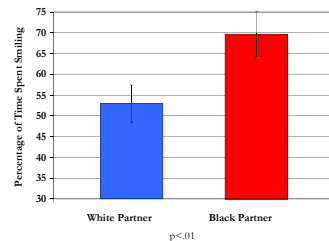


No Stigma Stigma

39 participants interacted with a stigmatized or nonstigmatized partner, first for light conversation and then during a stressful cooperative task.

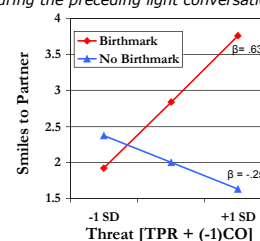
Study 1: Smiles in Interracial Situations

Results showed that White participants spent more time smiling and laughing if they had a Black partner.



Study 2: Smiles to Stigmatized Partners

Participants who were more threatened (higher TPR, lower CO) by their stigmatized partner during the stressful task had smiled more at them during the preceding light conversation.

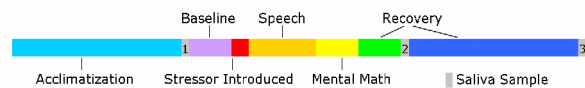


Study 3: A Two Part Design

54 White participants completed a Celebrity Choice Task (29 with no cognitive load and 25 under cognitive load, limiting their ability to correct their choices).

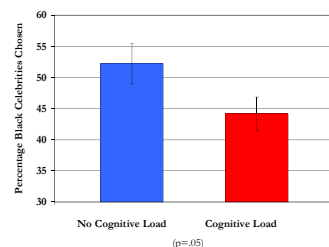


Then all participants completed a stressful speech task with Black evaluators.



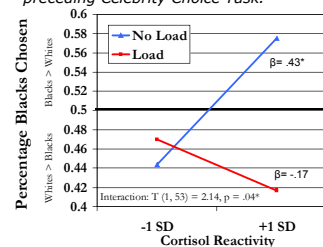
Celebrity Choice and Cognitive Load

Participants who were under cognitive load chose significantly fewer Black celebrities than those who were not under cognitive load.



Cortisol Predicting Celebrity Choice

Participants who showed greater cortisol reactivity to interaction with the Black evaluators had chosen more Black celebrities during the preceding Celebrity Choice Task.



Conclusions

White participants smile and laugh more with Black partners than White partners, in a casual interaction.

In an interaction with stigmatized partners, physiological "threat" during a stressful cooperative task was correlated with the amount of smiling in a less stressful conversation.

Participants who were under cognitive load displayed more anti-Black bias in their preferences for Black or White celebrities.

Participants who had the greatest cortisol reactivity to a stressful interaction with Black evaluators were also those who expressed the most preference for Black celebrities – when not under cognitive load.

Future Directions

Explore whether majority group members only act in this deliberately positive and corrective manner with some groups – and not others. Are there groups with whom majority group members are physiologically threatened but with whom they do not behave overtly positive? We will be looking at Arab-American interactions to test this question.

Investigate the extent to which these corrective processes are guilt-based or compensatory and if they occur more often when participants feel as though they are in a position of dominance over a stigmatized person than if they are in a subordinate position relative to the stigmatized person.

References:

- Mendes, W.B., Blascovich, J., Lickel, B., & Hunter, S. (2002). Cardiovascular reactivity during social interactions with White and Black men. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 939-952.
- Plant, E. A., & Devine, P. G. (1998). Internal and external motivation to respond without prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 811-832.