The Role of Frienship Networks and Motivational Goals in Interracial Interactions

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Increased globalization has led to more diversity in the United States, yet, people are often reluctant to initiate interracial interactions. These interactions may engender identity threatening situations. Research suggests that interactants likely possess one of two goals—performance or learning goals. This study examines how the diversity of one ’s friendship network and the interaction goals of individuals may signal identity threat or safety. It is hypothesized that a White participant adopting a performance goal and anticipating an interaction with a Black partner who has all Black friends, will experience the most identity threat. To investigate this hypotheses, a 2 by 2 between-subjects factorial design is employed: (High diversity: 3 Black friends and 2 White friends vs. low diversity: 5 Black friends) x (interaction goal: performance vs. learning). Results reveal that participants who adopt a performance goal experience significantly more identity threat when their partner has a low diversity friendship network: they have more negative emotion, feel less capable of meeting the demands of the interaction, and feel less certain of their interaction partner’s desire to be friends. Diverse friendship networks signal to participants that their partners will be more accepting of them. Further research is exploring whether diverse friendship networks signal identity safety, even when they do not include members of one’s racial in-group. In a follow-up study, the “Black and Asian” friendship network is added to the diversity condition.

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