

Review

Responsiveness in interracial interactions

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Perceived responsiveness—feeling understood, validated, and cared for—is critical for wellbeing and successful relationships, yet these feelings are experienced less frequently in interracial interactions than in same-race interactions. In this article, we synthesize recent research on responsiveness in interracial interactions and relationships. We first highlight how responsiveness differs in interracial versus same-race contexts. We next discuss the role of cross-race partners' goals and motivations in responsiveness, with particular attention to the ways in which self-presentation goals undermine responsiveness as well as emerging research on goals and motivations that may facilitate responsiveness in interracial interactions. Finally, we discuss how a contextual factor, the salience of race, influences responsiveness in interracial interactions.

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Interracial interactions are often fraught with misunderstanding. People experience less mutual understanding, empathy, and perspective-taking in interactions with racial outgroup members than in interactions with ingroup members [1]. Even among friends, cross-race (vs. same-race) friends may feel more uncomfortable with personal disclosure, especially about racial issues, and may not know how to respond when their outgroup partner confides in them [2]. Moreover, because of differing needs, goals, and motivations in interracial interactions, people often believe they have been attentive to and supportive of their outgroup

interaction partner, only to learn that their partner does not feel the same way [3]. A common factor across these situations is responsiveness—the extent to which a person shows understanding, validation, and care for their partner [4]. Perceiving that one's relationship partner is responsive is associated with greater relationship well-being in general [5] and in interracial friendships specifically [6].

In this article, using Reis and colleagues' model of responsiveness as a framework [4], we synthesize recent research on responsiveness in interracial interactions and friendships. We begin with a brief overview of the responsiveness model, focusing on how responsiveness unfolds in interracial interactions. We then address: 1) How responsiveness differs in interracial vs. same-race interactions; 2) How individuals' goals and motivations impact responsiveness in interracial interactions; and 3) How contextual factors—in particular, the salience of race—influence responsiveness in interracial interactions. Our goal is not to provide an exhaustive review of studies, but rather to provide illustrative examples of key psychological processes.

Responsiveness model in an interracial context

According to the responsiveness model [4], feeling understood, validated, and cared for is an interpersonal dyadic process beginning with an interaction or event between two people. In an interracial context, an example event could be a Black person disclosing personal information or expressing emotions to a White person. The White person then responds in a way that suggests that they do or do not understand (comprehend the partner's core self), validate (appreciate and value the partner), and care for (feel affection and concern about the partner's well-being) the Black person. A key aspect of this response is the extent to which the White person engages in high-quality listening behaviors that convey attentiveness (e.g., eye contact and nodding) and comprehension (e.g., paraphrasing, offering verbal validation, and asking follow-up questions) [7]. The Black person subsequently interprets the responsiveness of the White person's response, shaping the extent to which they feel understood, validated, and cared for by the White person. This process thus involves three components: the White person's *intended responsiveness* (the understanding, validation, and care they aim to convey), the White person's

enacted responsiveness (the extent to which their actual verbal and nonverbal behavior, including their listening behavior, conveys understanding, validation, and care), and the Black person's *perceived responsiveness* (their perception of how much the White person understands, validates, and cares for them). All three components are influenced by each partner's needs, goals, and motivations. Successful responsive interactions occur when, in this case, the White person's intended and enacted responsiveness is indeed perceived as responsive by the Black person—and vice versa, when the Black person responds to the White person. These successful responsive interactions have positive implications for interaction outcomes (e.g., enjoyment, trust) and personal well-being (e.g., happiness).

Responsiveness in interracial interactions

Research suggests that people believe that outgroup members understand and value their perspectives less than ingroup members [8], suggesting lower perceived responsiveness in interracial compared to same-race interactions on average. Even in close relationships such as friendships, people feel less supported and accepted by cross-race (vs. same-race) partners [9–11]. In daily interactions with strangers and friends, people report feeling less understood in interracial (vs. same-race) interactions [1,12,13]. Enacted responsiveness may also be lower in interracial interactions: A meta-analysis of 37 studies that included measures of nonverbal or observer-rated behavior revealed that people behaved less warmly toward racial outgroup (vs. ingroup) members [14], perhaps conveying lower levels of validation and care.

Feeling misunderstood in interracial interactions can occur for various reasons. One explanation is that people have difficulty accurately decoding the social and emotional signals of outgroup members, whether because they are less familiar with outgroup faces or because they attend less to outgroup members' expressions [15]. In some cases, this reduced sensitivity to outgroup members' signals can affect anyone; for example, one study found that both Black and White participants less accurately recognized when outgroup (vs. ingroup) members were feeling anxious [16]. However, recent research suggests that this reduced sensitivity to outgroup members' signals is more likely to affect majority group members than minority group members [15]. For example, Whites are worse at differentiating between Duchenne (genuine) and non-Duchenne (fake) smiles on Black faces than White faces, whereas Blacks were equally able to distinguish between smile types on both Black and White faces [17]. These perceptual gaps could prevent people—especially majority group members—from accurately recognizing how their cross-race partner is feeling and offering the support their partner needs, leading to lower responsiveness.

A second explanation for reduced responsiveness in interracial interactions is that people rely on racial stereotypes and biases when interpreting outgroup members' expressions and behavior. For example, Whites tend to perceive Blacks' neutral facial expression as hostile and threatening [18]. Blacks, on the other hand, may hold stereotypes about Whites as prejudiced and subsequently perceive Whites' smiles as more threatening, particularly when they suspect that Whites are behaving positively only to hide their prejudice [19]. These patterns are exacerbated by the fact that people feel less similar to outgroup members [20], and subsequently rely more on stereotypes about the outgroup's intentions, emotions, and behaviors, making it difficult to empathize with their partner's actual experience and perspective [21]. Reliance on group stereotypes and biases may affect both perceived responsiveness (even if a cross-race partner has responded responsively, people may not interpret their behavior as responsive or may even falsely believe that their partner has responded negatively), as well as intended and enacted responsiveness (people may be less likely to try to behave responsively if they perceive their cross-race partner to be hostile or prejudiced).

One unique consideration for responsiveness in interracial interactions is that people may not only perceive responsiveness of their interaction partner on an individual level, but also at a group level. Recent research suggests that people's beliefs about the degree to which members of an outgroup generally understand and value the perspectives of ingroup members have important implications for intergroup relational outcomes such as trust [8]. Perceived group-level responsiveness (how much *they* understand *us*) and perceived individual-level responsiveness (how much *you* understand *me*) may thus both shape relational outcomes in an intergroup context.

The role of goals and motivations in responsiveness

The goals and motivations people bring to interactions shape their ability to both enact and perceive responsiveness. In an interracial context, self-presentation goals are particularly influential. For example, in interactions between Blacks and Whites, Whites, who are concerned about being viewed by their outgroup partner as prejudiced, seek to be liked and perceived as unbiased by their partner [22]. Blacks, who are concerned about being devalued and viewed through the lens of negative stereotypes, seek to be respected by their partner [22]. We highlight three ways these goals can affect responsiveness.

First, people's self-presentation goals can cause them to present themselves to an outgroup partner in a way that is inconsistent with their true self [23]. When the outgroup partner notices this inconsistency, both

partners may feel misunderstood. For example, Whites' goals to appear egalitarian and unbiased may cause them to display more positive behaviors in interracial (vs. same-race) interactions, such as smiling more and making more positive comments to their partner [24,25]. However, this display of positive behaviors is not always genuine. For example, although Whites may smile more overall, these smiles may not be authentic. Indeed, White women (but not men) display Duchenne (genuine) smiles in particular less frequently and for shorter durations in interracial (vs. same-race) interactions [26]. Such disingenuity does not go unnoticed. Whereas Whites tend to focus on the overall content of their verbal behavior and believe that they have successfully communicated egalitarianism, Blacks tend to focus more specific nonverbal and linguistic cues (e.g., eyes, (de)humanizing language) that signal Whites' true racial attitudes [27,28]. As such, Blacks—in particular, those who are highly suspicious of Whites' motives [19,29,30]—are good at differentiating between Duchenne and non-Duchenne smiles on both White and Black faces [17] and at detecting Whites' true racial attitudes [28]. In a cross-race interaction, Blacks may thus (accurately) interpret Whites' positive behaviors as disingenuous and disrespectful, consequently feeling that their White partner does not truly understand and care for them. In turn, their response may not validate Whites' aims to appear egalitarian, leaving Whites feeling misunderstood because they thought their overly positive behavior demonstrated that they were not prejudiced.

Second, self-presentation goals can lead people to place more focus on themselves and how they are being perceived than on their partner, impeding their ability to truly listen and respond to their partner's needs [31]. This may lead to overestimates of responsiveness, such as believing that one understands their partner more than their partner actually feels understood. For example, White' affiliation goals motivate Whites to claim (and perhaps believe) that they understand a Black interaction partner when discussing racial topics [32]. In reality, however, Whites' affiliation goals interfere with their ability to engage in high-quality listening and to accurately understand their partners' experience, resulting in them overestimating how much they understand their Black partners' thoughts and feelings compared to how much their partner felt understood—reducing Black partners' relationships satisfaction [3].

Finally, this self-focus can also lead people to misperceive their own behavior, particularly how much they have actually signaled responsiveness in interracial interactions. When people are self-focused in interactions, they fall prey to an egocentric illusion of transparency, assuming that their partner can accurately detect their inner feelings and friendship interests [33]. Consistent

with this idea, self-focused Whites believe that they signal friendship intent more strongly than is perceived from their behavior by their minority partner and objective observers witnessing the interaction [34,35]. Ironically, Whites' attempts to view the interaction from their partner's perspective can backfire by further increasing focus on how their partner is evaluating them [36] and egocentric assumptions that their feelings are obvious to their partner [37]. These misperceptions set the stage for cascading misunderstandings, as individuals expect their partner to reciprocate an overture, even when this signal is actually too weak for their partner to detect.

Certain goals and motivations may also facilitate responsiveness in interracial interactions. For example, focusing on a common ingroup identity [38,39] promotes positive orientations and supportive behaviors during interracial interactions. Specifically, recategorizing oneself and an interracial partner as members of the same group leads one to perceive greater similarity with their partner, which in turn increases their likelihood of caring for their partner's needs and thinking that this care is reciprocated by their partner [38]. Approaching interracial interactions with learning goals is also associated with positive interaction outcomes, perhaps in part by reorienting people from self-focused evaluative concerns about how they are being perceived to a focus on better understanding their partner [40,41]. Consistent with this idea, Whites who are internally motivated to respond without prejudice are less focused on their own experience in interracial interactions and more focused on supporting and learning about their partners, increasing attention to their Black partner's need to be respected in interracial interactions [31]. Consequently, they are more likely to engage in behaviors that center their Black partner, rather than themselves, perhaps increasing enacted responsiveness. Taken together, these findings suggest that certain goals and motivations can counter disruptive behaviors that contribute to misunderstandings.

Contextual factors and responsiveness: the salience of race

Interracial interactions where race is salient, such as conversations about race, are particularly ripe for misunderstandings and discomfort, even between friends. Both Whites and Blacks anticipate low responsiveness in interracial conversations about race, such as feeling misunderstood, not being listened to, and not being able to find common ground [42]. In particular, Blacks may feel uncomfortable disclosing their experiences of prejudice to a White partner [2]. This discomfort is not unfounded. For one, Whites have less accurate knowledge about the extent of past and present racial inequality than Blacks [43,44], which can lead to misunderstandings at best, and invalidation of Blacks' experiences at worst [45]. Additionally, Blacks who

disclose prejudicial experiences often bear the social cost of being perceived as hypersensitive and a “complainer” by Whites [46], rather than Whites listening and reacting responsively to their support needs. Indeed, Blacks prefer to discuss race with Black (vs. non-Black) friends, anticipating that Black friends will be more understanding and provide more responsive support [47]. Finally, conversations where race is salient may heighten Whites’ concerns with appearing unbiased and increase attempts to engage in colorblind behavior, interfering with enacted responsiveness by increasing negative nonverbal behavior [48].

In addition to direct conversations about race, another race-salient context in which responsiveness may be gleaned is witnessing how outgroup members respond to a racist incident. For example, although non-Blacks predict they will experience emotional distress after witnessing a racist anti-Black comment, the actual experience of witnessing such a comment does not elicit such a response [49]. Blacks who observe this lack of response from outgroup members may feel unvalued, compared to if the outgroup member had confronted the comment [50]. Together, these findings suggest that the salience of race in interactions can significantly impact both enacted and perceived responsiveness.

Future directions and conclusion

Responsiveness is critical to interracial interactions and relationships. When people feel understood, valued, and cared for by their outgroup interaction partner [6] and outgroup members in general [8], they experience greater intimacy, satisfaction, trust, forgiveness, and interest in developing further cross-group friendships. Emerging research has suggested some promising approaches to improving responsiveness in interracial interactions, such as creating a common ingroup identity [38], approaching interracial interactions with learning goals [40], and centering outgroup partners’ needs [31], although more research is needed to determine whether and how interventions built around these strategies might reliably improve responsiveness at scale. Future research could also examine whether training individuals to engage in high quality listening [51] can improve responsiveness in interracial interactions. Fostering high quality listening may be particularly helpful when talking about sensitive topics such as racial prejudice, given that speaking with a listener who is nonjudgmental and expresses empathy can reduce anxiety [52] and facilitate self-reflection and openness to change, potentially leading to more favorable outgroup attitudes [53]. Future work may also examine whether individuals have different standards for interpreting the responsiveness of their cross-race (vs. same-race) partner’s behavioral cues—for example, whether the same behavior may be perceived as responsive in same-race but not in cross-race interactions. Finally, more research is also needed

to determine whether responsive behaviors are equally beneficial for Whites and ethnic minorities in interracial interactions. Some research suggests that lower-status group members’ intergroup attitudes improve when others have listened to and understood their perspective, whereas higher-status group members’ intergroup attitudes improve when they have listened and taken the perspective of others [54,55], perhaps suggesting that interventions focusing on improving the responsiveness and listening of Whites may be most beneficial for both Whites and ethnic minorities.

The implications of responsiveness in interracial interactions go beyond any one relationship. Fostering understanding and care across the racial divide is especially important in contexts such as medicine [56], policing [57,58], and education [59], where racial inequality is high and the consequences of misunderstandings can be dire. Given these high-stakes contexts where mutual understanding matters most, further investigating the factors that shape and improve responsiveness may shed light on ways to reduce racial inequality.

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Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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- * of special interest
- ** of outstanding interest

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