White out of mind: Identity suppression as a coping strategy among Whites anticipating racially charged interactions

Christopher K. Marshburn[1] and Eric D. Knowles[2]

Abstract

Discussing racial issues often makes Whites anxious, particularly when their conversation partners are Black. We theorized that Whites seek to avoid anxiety by suppressing thoughts of White identity prior to such interactions. In Study 1, White participants expected to discuss a race-related or nonracial topic with a Black or White partner. An Implicit Association Test (IAT) measured subsequent changes in the activation of participants' White identities (i.e., *self–White* associations). The prospect of discussing race-related (vs. nonracial) topics with a Black partner reduced participants' *self–White* associations, implying identity suppression. Moreover, participants' nonverbal responses suggest that identity suppression functioned to mute participants' anxiety. In Study 2, participants completed the identity activation measure only after learning that they would not interact with a partner. Consistent with "rebound" effects known to follow suppression, participants who previously expected to discuss a race-related topic with a Black partner showed heightened *self–White* associations.

In 2009, the country's first Black Attorney General, Eric Holder, remarked that the United States "is a nation of cowards" when it comes to talking about race (Hornick, 2009). Though controversial, Holder's assertion is supported by psychological research: Many White Americans are reluctant to discuss racial topics (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008), and often experience anxiety when they must (Trawalter & Richeson, 2008). Although Whites may feel uncomfortable discussing nonracial topics with minorities (e.g.,

Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002), or race-related topics with fellow Whites (Trawalter & Richeson, 2008), racial discourse tends to cause

[1]University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA
[2]New York University, USA

Corresponding author:
Christopher K. Marshburn, Department of Psychology, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223, USA.
Email: cmarshb1@uncc.edu

Whites the most anxiety when their conversation partners belong to the racial outgroup (Goff, Steele, & Davies, 2008; Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006). The present work examines a novel strategy through which Whites cope with cross-race conversations about racial subject matter. We propose that, when such "racially charged" interactions loom, Whites soothe themselves by banishing thoughts of their whiteness from consciousness—a process we refer to as *identity suppression*.

Whiteness as a Liability

Because whiteness is a concept inextricably linked to societal dominance (Helms, 1990), White identification can represent a psychological liability (Knowles, Lowery, Chow, & Unzueta, 2014). Identification with powerful groups, which typically benefit from unearned advantages established and maintained through transgressions against outgroups, can induce feelings of collective guilt (e.g., Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998). Consistent with this finding, White identification has been shown to produce negative ingroup- and self-evaluative emotions (Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003; Knowles & Peng, 2005; Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005; Swim & Miller, 1999).

Given the negative connotations of whiteness and its associated privileges, Whites may fear that their race will lead non-White interaction partners to judge them negatively. Indeed, cross-racial interactions can trigger a form of stereotype threat in Whites (cf. Steele, 1997), who may worry that their behavior during an interaction will reinforce a stereotype of "Whites as prejudiced" (Shelton, Richeson, & Vorauer, 2006). Although racial subject matter is not necessary for the experience of threat (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2002), such discourse renders interracial interactions all the more anxiety-provoking for Whites (Goff et al., 2008; Saguy & Kteily, 2014). For instance, Goff et al. (2008) found that White participants who expected to discuss race with a Black partner worried that they would be perceived as racist, which in turn led them to increase physical

distance between themselves and the partner. In sum, White identity frequently represents a subjectively experienced liability with which Whites must cope in racially charged situations.

Coping in Racially Charged Interactions

Whites draw on multiple strategies to cope with the threat posed by racially charged interactions. Whites may attempt to avoid interracial interactions altogether (Plant & Devine, 2003) or increase the physical distance between themselves and their non-White partners (Goff et al., 2008; Stern & West, 2014). In Goff et al. (2008) study, they conducted a series of experiments that examined how expecting to discuss racial profiling with a Black partner influenced the amount of physical distance White participants' put between themselves and the partner. White participants who worried that they would be perceived as racist demonstrated the greatest physical distance from their partner. However, it was participants' stereotype activation of "Whites as racist" and not White identity activation per se that led to increased physical distance. This finding may be a consequence of White identity being measured via a word-stem completion task, which gauged activation of Whiteness in general (e.g., Europe and privilege). However, the measure did not necessarily capture how closely whiteness, especially its negative aspects, was associated with White participants' own self-concepts (Goff et al., 2008, p. 107). Nevertheless, these findings demonstrate that threatened Whites prefer to avoid interracial interactions.

When interracial interactions are inescapable, Whites may attempt to dispel identity threat by denying the existence of societal discrimination (Shelton et al., 2006) or blaming their non-White partners for a failure to establish rapport (Vorauer & Sakamoto, 2006). Whites facing racially charged interactions might also try to manage their behavior in ways that (they believe) will lead to positive interpersonal outcomes. For instance, dominant-group (e.g., Whites) members may attempt to selectively confirm the positive aspects of the

ingroup metastereotype (i.e., the stereotype that Whites believe the outgroup has of them; Klein & Azzi, 2001) or control their own behavior to minimize cues that might suggest prejudice (Richeson & Shelton, 2007).

Identity Suppression

We propose an additional strategy through which Whites cope with racially charged interactions. If identification as a White person is a source of threat in such situations because it triggers fears of being perceived as racist (Goff et al., 2008), then Whites might shield themselves against anxiety by putting White identity out of their minds. This strategy can be conceptualized as an act of suppression (Monteith, Sherman, & Devine, 1998) in which activation of whiteness is inhibited through self-regulatory effort. Just as members of minority groups can relieve threat by suppressing specific negative stereotypes of the ingroup (Logel, Iserman, Davies, Quinn, & Spencer, 2009; Steele & Aronson, 1995), Whites may dispel anxiety in racially charged situations by effortfully suppressing activation of their identity as White. Through an exercise of mental control (Wegner, 1994), then, Whites may endeavor not to "experience" their whiteness before and during racial conversations with an outgroup partner. Identity suppression exemplifies what Knowles et al. (2014) term *identity distancing*, or efforts by Whites to escape the negative intrapsychic consequences of membership in the dominant racial group. Importantly, conscious efforts to control or replace unwanted thoughts can, despite their explicit nature, regulate the automatic activation of those thoughts—suggesting that Whites' thought suppression efforts may be detectable at the implicit level (Blair & Banaji, 1996; Gollwitzer & Schaal, 1998).

It is important to note that previous research has demonstrated forms of identity distancing. For instance, Steele and Aronson (1995) showed that Black participants who experienced stereotype threat during an intelligence test were less likely to report enjoying stereotypically Black interests and activities (e.g., basketball and jazz) compared to Blacks in the nonthreatening condition. Moreover, Black participants experiencing threat were also less likely to disclose their race on a questionnaire relative to nonthreatened Blacks, which suggests that identity threat led to identity distancing. The current research sought to extend these previous findings by examining, at an implicit level, a specific type of identity distancing strategy—identity suppression. Furthermore, given that identity suppression should occur at the implicit level, we investigated if the strategy could dampen experiences and behaviors outside of voluntary control, such as anxiety and its associated nonverbal symptoms (Dovidio et al., 2002).

The Present Research

We explore the idea that Whites suppress their racial identity as a means of avoiding anxiety in anticipation of racially charged interactions. In Study 1, White participants were administered a measure of racial identity activation (Knowles & Peng, 2005) after being led to believe they would discuss a race-related (vs. nonracial) topic with a Black (vs. White) partner.[1] Participants were surreptitiously filmed during the experimental procedure, allowing us to code their nonverbal behaviors for signs of anxiety. We hypothesized that the prospect of conversing with a Black partner about race would lead Whites to suppress White identity, as indicated by relatively low identity activation scores. Further, we predicted that identity suppression would be functional—protecting White participants against the anxiety induced by a looming racially charged interaction. If identity suppression guards against anxiety, then suppression (i.e., low identity activation scores) should be associated with reduced nonverbal symptoms of anxiety.

In Study 1, we sought to rule out two potential alternative explanations for any apparent identity-suppression effects. First, racially charged situations might spur Whites to downplay the importance of race in their lives (Chow, Lowery, & Knowles, 2008), which in turn could drive changes in self–White associations. Although a form of identity distancing (Knowles et al., 2014),

this process entails altering one's explicit beliefs about ingroup identity and is distinct from thought suppression. Because identity suppression entails attempts to avoid thinking about whiteness—not efforts to *revise one's beliefs* about race or identity—we sought to show that racially charged situations trigger identity suppression independent of changes in participants' explicit identity beliefs. Thus, we expected to observe changes in participants' implicit White identity, but not their reports of explicit White identity. Second, we hypothesized that identity suppression would result directly from anticipation of racially charged situations (i.e., cross-race interactions involving racial discourse). Suppression effects could, however, emerge as by-products of "social tuning" processes (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009). That is, people strive to create social bonds when the situation requires getting along with another person. For instance, Whites sometimes lower their levels of prejudice toward Blacks in order to emulate a Black partner's presumed racial attitudes (e.g., Sinclair, Lowery, Hardin, & Colangelo, 2005). By reducing the relative positivity of the ingroup, such tuning effects could result in diminished self–White associations (Greenwald et al., 2002). We therefore sought to show that identity suppression is not mediated by changes in explicit or implicit anti-Black prejudice.

A second study further tested the notion that identity suppression reflects an attempt by Whites to suppress thoughts of their racial identity. Acts of thought suppression can have "ironic" effects, whereby unwanted thoughts become *hyperaccessible* after efforts to suppress them are discontinued (Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987). In particular, efforts to regulate unwanted thoughts can cause a subsequent "rebound" in their activation and application (Macrae, Bodenhausen, Milne, & Jetten, 1994; Monteith et al., 1998). If, as theorized, Whites suppress thoughts of whiteness in anticipation of racially charged interactions, then White identity should become especially accessible after suppression efforts are stopped. In Study 2, White identification was measured after participants learned that they

would not actually interact with a partner, and thus are likely to have discontinued thought suppression. In a reversal of the effect hypothesized in Study 1, we predicted *heightened self–White* activation among participants who had previously expected to discuss a race-related topic with a Black partner.

Study 1

Participants

One hundred and seventeen White students from a public university in California were offered course credit in return for study participation. The initial sample size reflected the number of participants that could be run before the end of the academic term. Data from 23 participants who failed either of two attention checks (described in what follows) were excluded from analysis. Also excluded were 14 additional participants who stated in debriefing that they did not believe the study's cover story (i.e., that they would interact with a partner). Finally, one additional participant's data was missing due to computer malfunction. Thus, the final sample consisted of 79 participants: 21 men and 58 women ranging in age from 18 to 44 years old ($M = 20.73$, $SD = 3.93$). We saw no evidence that the data exclusions disproportionately affected particular experimental conditions, $\chi^2(2) = 2.05$, $p = .36$.

Procedure

Participants were run one at a time, and came to the laboratory expecting to converse with another student about a randomly selected topic. The experimenter informed participants that, prior to the interaction, they and their partners would be assigned a conversation topic and view short personal profiles of one another. Participants were then told that their partner had arrived at the lab, was waiting in another room, and that information about him or her had already been collected and uploaded to a computer. This information included a digital photograph of the putative partner, as well as his or

her name, hometown, and college major. Next, the experimenter photographed and collected the same information from participants. Participants were then seated at a computer in a small testing room and instructed to review the assigned conversation topic and partner profile while their own profile information was uploaded and shown to the partner. Unbeknownst to participants, their computer's built-in webcam and microphone were recording during the experimental session; an opaque sticker was used to obscure the webcam's "on" light.

Inquisit 2.0 was used to randomly select and display a conversation topic and partner photograph to participants. The order of presentation of the topic and partner manipulations was counterbalanced between participants. Inquisit was programmed to produce an audible beeping sound when the topic and partner race information appeared on the screen, making it possible to cross-reference these events when coding participants' nonverbal behaviors.

Conversation topic manipulation. Participants were told that they would "have a 10-minute conversation with your partner about the following topic" and to "take a moment to think about what you might say." In the *race-unimportant* condition, the prompt read as follows: "Social problems in America would be reduced if we stopped paying attention to people's race." In the *race-important* condition, the prompt was: "Social problems in America would be reduced if we paid more attention to how race affects people's lives." In the *nonracial* condition, participants were told that they would discuss "guidelines for what to do in the event of a major earthquake." Note that the race-unimportant and race-important topics would both require participants to engage in racial discourse; only the nonracial topic would lack racial content.

Partner race manipulation. Participants viewed profile information that included a photograph of their putative partner (Figure 1). In the *White partner* and *Black partner* conditions, the computer displayed a photograph of a college-age White or Black person (respectively). A photo,

gender-matched to participants, was randomly selected from a set of eight pictures (two Black women, two Black men, two White women, and two White men) taken from a face database (Phillips, Moon, Rizvi, & Rauss, 2000). The people depicted displayed neutral facial expressions. To increase believability that the photographs had just been taken, their backgrounds were altered to match the walls in our laboratory.

After exposure to the topic and partner race manipulations, participants completed, in random order, measures of identity activation, explicit White identity, and explicit and implicit anti-Black prejudice. Participants then completed measures of their attentiveness to task directions. At this point, participants were instructed to summon the experimenter, who probed them for suspicion (i.e., doubt that they would meet another student). Participants learned that they would not actually interact with a partner, and were debriefed and dismissed.

Measures

White identity activation. Activation of participants' racial identity—our primary dependent variable—was measured using the White Identity Centrality Implicit Association Test (WICIAT; Knowles & Peng, 2005). The WICIAT is a computer-based measure that gauges the strength or activation of automatic mental associations between the concepts of *self* and *White*. The task requires participants to rapidly sort words into the category *me* (I, me, mine, my, myself) or *not me* (they, them, their, other, themselves) and faces into the categories *White* or *non-White*. By assigning the same computer keys to identity-consistent (e.g., White faces and "me") and identity-inconsistent (e.g., non-White faces and "me") stimulus combinations, a score can be computed that reflects the relative ease with which participants complete the identity-consistent (vs. inconsistent) trials—thus gauging activation of participants' *self–White* associations. WICIAT scores were computed using Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji's (2003) algorithm. Identity suppression is indexed by low scores on the WICIAT.

Figure 1. Gender-matched partners with whom participants expected to interact.

Nonverbal anxiety. Ten independent raters, all of whom were blind to experimental condition, coded participants' video recordings for nonverbal signs of anxiety. Each video was coded by a minimum of three raters. Coders were instructed to identify the following anxiety-related cues: widening the eyes or raising the eyebrows; frowning or pursing the lips; shaking, shifting, or swaying; playing with objects (e.g., hair or piercings); heavy breathing or sighing; handwringing; nail biting; touching the self; excessive blinking; averting the eyes; and nervous smiling (Bosson, Haymovitz, & Pinel, 2004). Based on the frequency and intensity of these behaviors, coders used a 4-point scale to rate participants' overall anxiety (1 = *no anxiety*, 4 = *a lot of anxiety*). Coders rendered anxiety ratings at two separate time-points in each video. A prestimulus baseline rating was made approximately 20 seconds before participants were exposed to any stimulus. A poststimulus rating was made immediately after onset of the conversation topic or partner race stimuli (whichever appeared last).

Prestimulus and poststimulus anxiety ratings displayed acceptable reliability (ICC = .63 and .78, respectively; Cicchetti, 1994).

Explicit White identity. Participants were administered two explicit measures of White identification—namely, modified versions of Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, and Smith's (1997) eight-item Identity Centrality Scale (sample item: "In general, being a member of my racial group is an important part of my self-image"; α = .87) and Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992) 16-item Collective Self-Esteem Scale (sample item: "In general, I'm glad to be a member of my racial group"; α = .84). Participants made their responses to both questionnaires on a 7-point Likert scale anchored on the left by "*strongly disagree*" and on the right by "*strongly agree*."

Anti-Black prejudice. Participants were administered explicit and implicit measures of anti-Black prejudice—specifically, McConahay, Hardee, and Batts's (1981) seven-item Modern Racism Scale

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of variables assessed in Study 1.

	White partner			Black partner		
	Control	Race-relevant	Race-irrelevant	Control	Race-relevant	Race-irrelevant
WICIAT	0.16	0.25	0.39	0.47	−0.08	0.09
	(0.38)	(0.47)	(0.40)	(0.43)	(0.41)	(0.61)
Explicit ID	3.47	3.26	3.75	3.48	3.61	3.21
	(1.57)	(1.15)	(1.16)	(1.07)	(0.74)	(1.33)
CSE	4.80	4.86	5.06	4.90	4.66	4.85
	(0.91)	(0.72)	(0.73)	(0.47)	(0.67)	(0.93)
MRS	1.75	1.68	1.64	1.72	1.76	1.63
	(0.49)	(0.51)	(0.61)	(0.46)	(0.43)	(0.45)
Race IAT	0.40	0.14	0.30	0.20	0.13	0.06
	(0.63)	(0.68)	(0.73)	(0.77)	(0.87)	(0.81)
Anxiety	0.05	0.46	0.50	0.27	0.56	0.64
	(0.83)	(0.91)	(1.07)	(0.69)	(0.94)	(0.72)

Note. WICIAT = White Identity Centrality Implicit Association Test. Explicit ID = modified Identity Centrality Scale. CSE = Collective Self-Esteem Scale. MRS = Modern Racism Scale. Race IAT = Racial Prejudice Implicit Association Test. Anxiety = anxiety change score.

(sample item: "Blacks are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights"; $\alpha = .69$) and Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz's (1998) Race IAT. Participants made their scale responses on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) and Race IAT scores were computed using Greenwald et al.'s (2003) algorithm.

Attention checks. At the end of the study, participants were administered two multiple-choice questions gauging their attentiveness to the stimulus materials and instructions (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009): "What was the gist of your discussion topic?" (choices: "What to do in the event of an earthquake," "Problems would be reduced if people ignored race," or "Problems would be reduced if people paid attention to how race affects people's lives") and "What was your partner's race/ethnicity?" (choices: "White/Caucasian" or "Black/African American"). Only participants who correctly answered these probes were retained in the final sample.

Results

Activation of White identity. We hypothesized that Whites expecting to talk to a Black partner about race would suppress activation of their White identity. Thus, participants in the Black partner condition were expected to display weaker *self–White* associations when assigned a race-related conversation topic than when assigned a nonracial topic. The topic manipulation was not expected to affect participants' *self–White* associations in the White partner condition (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics by condition).

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to test the effects of partner race, conversation topic, and their interaction, on WICIAT scores (our index of *self–White* associations). We observed no significant main effect of partner race, $F(1, 73) = 0.70$, $p > .250$, $\eta^2 = .01$, or conversation topic $F(2, 73) = 1.24$, $p > .250$, $\eta^2 = .03$. However, the Partner Race × Conversation Topic interaction was significant, $F(2, 73) = 5.10$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .12$, indicating that the topic manipulation had a different effect on WICIAT scores in the Black and White partner conditions (see Figure 2). Post hoc power analysis revealed an observed power of 76% for this interaction. When added to the model, the order of presentation of partner race and conversation topic did affect identity activation either alone or interactively with other factors, $Fs \leqslant 1.00$, $ps > .370$, $\eta^2 s < .03$.
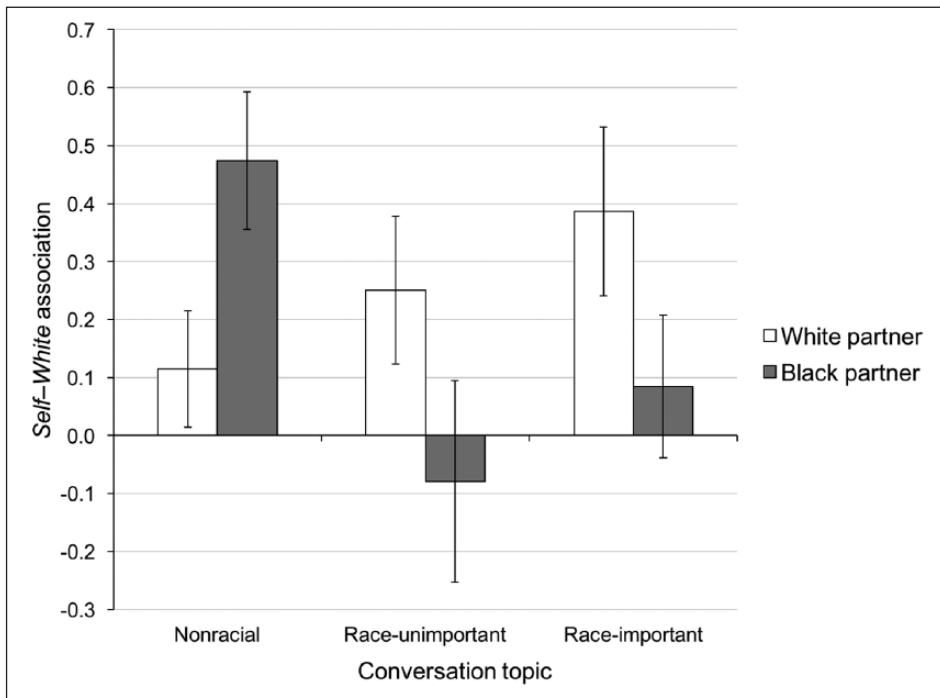
Figure 2. Identity activation as a function of conversation topic and partner race (Experiment 1).

We conducted planned contrasts to test our specific hypotheses. As expected, participants expecting a Black (i.e., outgroup) partner WICIAT scores were significantly lower in each of the race-related topic conditions compared to the nonracial topic condition: race-unimportant versus nonracial, $F(1, 74) = 6.92$, $p = .010$, $\eta^2 = .30$, and race-important versus nonracial, $F(1, 74) = 5.20$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .11$. WICIAT scores did not differ between the two race-related topic conditions: race-unimportant versus race-important, $F(1, 74) = 0.59$, $p > .250$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Moreover, a contrast comparing the pooled race-related topic conditions (race-unimportant and race-important) to the nonracial topic condition was significant, $F(1, 74) = 8.75$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .16$.

For participants expecting a White (i.e., ingroup) partner, contrast analyses revealed no differences in identity activation between any pair of conversation topics: race-unimportant versus nonracial, $F(1, 74) = 0.70$, $p > .250$, $\eta^2 = .02$; race-important versus nonracial, $F(1, 74) = 2.37$,

$p = .128$, $\eta^2 = .11$; and race-unimportant versus race-important, $F(1, 74) = 0.49$, $p > .250$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Also nonsignificant was the contrast comparing the pooled race-related topic conditions (race-unimportant and race-important) to the nonracial topic condition, $F(1, 74) = 2.14$, $p = .148$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Thus, we observed no sign of identity suppression in the White partner condition.

The results can also be examined by comparing the effects of partner race within conversation topic conditions. Participants who expected to discuss the nonracial topic with a Black (i.e., outgroup) partner displayed stronger *self–White* associations than those who expected to discuss the same topic with a White (i.e., ingroup) partner, $F(1, 74) = 5.35$, $p = .024$, $\eta^2 = .16$. This is consistent with an identity priming effect, wherein exposure to an outgroup member makes one's ingroup membership salient (Knowles & Peng, 2005). Although not significant, the reverse pattern was observed in each of the two race-related topic conditions: Participants expecting a Black

(vs. White) partner displayed weaker *self–White* associations in the race-unimportant condition, $F(1, 74) = 2.35$, $p = .130$, $\eta^2 = .12$ and race-important condition, $F(1, 74) = 2.52$, $p = .117$, $\eta^2 = .06$. A contrast testing the effect of partner race in the pooled race-related topic conditions was significant, $F(1, 74) = 4.83$, $p = .031$, $\eta^2 = .07$.

Nonverbal anxiety. We hypothesized that identity suppression would be functional, protecting Whites against the anxiety caused by looming racially charged interactions. Hence, we tested whether identity activation mediated an indirect effect of conversation topic on nonverbal anxiety in the Black partner condition—such that race-related topics reduced identity activation and this reduction, in turn, muted displays of anxiety.

To test the predicted indirect effect, we first subtracted each participant's poststimulus anxiety score from his or her prestimulus baseline; the resulting difference score represents the change in participants' nonverbal anxiety after they were assigned to a conversation topic and partner race condition. Then, for each partner race condition (White and Black), we tested the indirect effect, through identity activation, of conversation topic on participants' nonverbal anxiety. In these analyses, the two race-related topic conditions (race-unimportant and race-important) were pooled and compared to the nonracial topic condition. Model coefficients were estimated using the *sgmediation* command in Stata 13, and bias-corrected bootstrapping (with 10,000 resamples) was used to calculate confidence intervals of the indirect effects. Results are shown in Figure 3.

In the Black partner condition, we observed a significant negative effect of the race-related topics on identity activation, B = −0.44, 95% CI [−0.81, −0.08], $\eta^2 = .16$, reflecting Whites' tendency (noted in previous lines) to suppress activation of their identity in anticipation of racially charged situations. Identity activation, in turn, was positively associated with nonverbal anxiety, B = 0.42, 95% CI [−0.08, −0.92], $\eta^2 = .09$. Together, these paths comprised a significant negative indirect effect of topic condition on
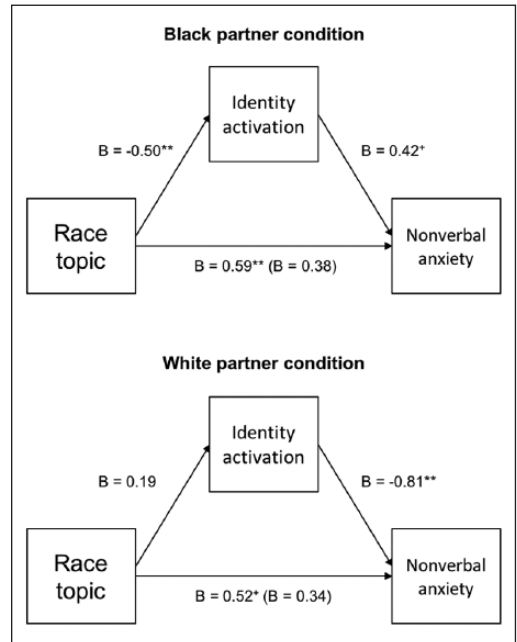

Figure 3. Indirect effects of race topic (−1 = nonracial, 1 = racial) on nonverbal anxiety in the Black partner condition (top panel) and White partner condition (bottom panel; Experiment 1).

nonverbal anxiety, B = −0.21, 95% CI [−0.56, −0.01]. Controlling for this indirect effect revealed a positive and significant direct effect of topic condition on nonverbal anxiety, B = 0.59, 95% CI [0.28, 1.16], $\eta^2 = .14$, such that participants displayed more anxiety in the racial (vs. nonracial) topic condition. (The sign difference between the direct and indirect effects of topic condition on nonverbal anxiety accounts for the absence of a significant total effect of topic on anxiety, B = 0.38, 95% CI [−0.07, 0.83], $\eta^2 = .07$.) Thus, it appears that Whites faced with racially charged interactions can, in fact, protect themselves from anxiety by suppressing activation of White identity (i.e., their ingroup self-stereotypes).

In the White partner condition, no indirect effect from conversation topic to nonverbal anxiety was predicted or found, B = −0.15, 95% CI [−0.51, 0.04]. We also observed no significant direct effect, B = 0.52, 95% CI [−0.04, 1.07],

$\eta^2 = .09$, or total effect of topic on anxiety, B = 0.36, 95% CI [−0.21, 0.94], $\eta^2 = .04$.

Explicit White identity. We next examined the effects of our manipulations on participants' levels of explicit White identity. An ANOVA testing the effects of partner race, conversation topic, and their interaction on Identity Centrality Scale scores revealed no significant effects, $Fs < 0.67$, $ps > .250$, $\eta^2s < .10$. Similarly, no significant effects emerged when scores on the Collective Self-Esteem Scale, or any of its four subscales (private regard, public regard, membership, and identity; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), were used as the dependent variable, $Fs < 1.82$, $ps > .171$, $\eta^2s < .16$. The failure of our manipulations to change participants' explicit levels of racial identification is consistent with an identity suppression account, but inconsistent with the notion that Whites respond to threat by altering their substantive beliefs about ingroup identity. Thus, we found support for our prediction that identity suppression functions independently from people's explicit beliefs about identity.

Anti-Black prejudice. Our next step was to assess our manipulations' effects on explicit and implicit racial attitudes. First, we used a two-way ANOVA to test the effects of partner race, conversation topic, and their interaction on participants' Modern Racism Scale scores (our index of explicit prejudice). As expected, this analysis revealed no significant effects, $Fs < 0.30$, $ps > .250$, $\eta^2s < .07$. The same model, this time predicting Race IAT scores (our measure of implicit prejudice), also yielded no significant effects, $Fs < 0.73$, $ps > .250$, $\eta^2s < .10$. The failure of our manipulations to change participants' explicit or implicit racial attitudes suggests that social tuning, wherein Whites attempt to emulate the attitudes of an interaction partner, cannot account for our identity activation findings.

Discussion

Study 1 suggests that Whites anticipating racially charged interactions cope with anxiety by suppressing thoughts of their racial identity. Participants who expected to converse with a Black partner about race-related topics displayed significantly weaker *self–White* associations than Whites expecting to discuss earthquake safety with a Black person. Analysis of participants' nonverbal behavior suggests that participants who suppressed their White identity accrued a benefit in terms of reduced anxiety. The failure of our experimental procedure to shift racial attitudes suggests that identity suppression is unrelated to social tuning mechanisms, and the lack of effects on explicit White identity imply that suppression does not require changes in individuals' beliefs about whiteness.

Study 2

"Ironic" effects are the hallmarks of motivated thought suppression (Wegner, 1994). When people discontinue conscious effort at avoiding unwanted thoughts or stereotypes these mental representations do not merely return to presuppression levels of accessibility—they often become *hyperaccessible* (Monteith et al., 1998; Wegner et al., 1987). If, as theorized, the prospect of racially charged interactions leads Whites to suppress thoughts of ingroup identity, then these individuals should discontinue suppression efforts when they discover that no interaction will take place. The discontinuation of motivated suppression, in turn, should produce a "rebound" effect—with activation of *self–White* associations reaching higher levels of activation than if no suppression had been attempted. To test this prediction, Study 2 differed from Study 1 in one crucial respect—namely, we measured White participants' *self–White* associations only *after* informing them that they would not interact with a partner, and therefore were likely to have discontinued efforts to suppress their identities. We predicted that, in the Black partner condition, White participants who previously expected to talk about a race-related topic (i.e., and thus suppressed identity activation) would show stronger *self–White* associations than participants who expected to talk about a nonracial topic (i.e., and

thus had not previously suppressed identity activation).

Participants

Eighty-one White students from a public university in California were offered course credit in return for study participation. The initial sample size reflected the number of participants that could be run before the end of the academic term. Data from 16 participants who failed either of two attention checks (described in what follows) were excluded from analysis. Also excluded were seven participants who stated in debriefing that they did not believe the study's cover story (i.e., that they would interact with a partner). The final sample consisted of 58 participants: 15 men and 43 women ranging in age from 18 to 51 years old ($M = 21.15$, $SD = 4.86$). We saw no evidence that the data exclusions disproportionately affected particular experimental conditions, $\chi^2(1) = .40$, $p = .53$.

Procedure

The procedure was identical to that of Study 1, with two exceptions. First, because our analyses failed to identity any differences between the two race-related conditions, Study 2 omitted the *race-important* condition, hence retaining *race-unimportant* as the only race-related topic.[2] Second, after participants were assigned to conversation and partner race conditions, but before they completed the dependent measures, the computer displayed the following message:

> It is now necessary to inform you that you will NOT be having an interaction. It was important for the study that you believed you would be meeting a partner. Now that you are aware that you will NOT be having an interaction, please complete some questionnaires and measures for the remainder of the time.

We reasoned that this message would prompt participants to discontinue any efforts at identity suppression.

After learning that they would not interact with a partner, participants completed, in random order, the same set of measures used in Study 1: identity (i.e., self–White) activation (Knowles & Peng, 2005), explicit White identity (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Sellers et al., 1997), explicit anti-Black prejudice (McConahay et al., 1981), and implicit anti-Black prejudice (Greenwald et al., 1998). Participants then completed measures of task attentiveness (Oppenheimer et al., 2009). At this point, participants were then instructed to summon the experimenter, who debriefed them.[3]

Results

Activation of White identity. If the prospect of racially charged encounters spurs Whites to effortfully suppress their racial identity, then those associations should "rebound" once suppression efforts are stopped. Thus, we predicted that White participants who previously expected to talk about a race-related topic with a Black partner would show stronger *self–White* associations than participants who expected to talk about a nonracial topic with a Black partner (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics by condition).

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to test the effects of partner race, conversation topic, and their interaction, on WICIAT scores (our index of *self–White* associations). We observed no significant main effect of partner race, $F(1, 55) = 0.60$, $p > .250$, $\eta^2 = .01$, or conversation topic $F(1, 55) = 0.65$, $p > .250$, $\eta^2 = .01$. However, the Partner Race × Conversation Topic interaction was significant, $F(1, 55) = 5.13$, $p = .028$, $\eta^2 = .08$, indicating that the topic manipulation had a different effect on WICIAT scores in the Black and White partner conditions (see Figure 4). Post hoc power analysis revealed an observed power of 66% for this interaction. When added to the model, the order of presentation of partner race and conversation topic did affect identity activation either alone or interactively with other factors, $Fs \leqslant 1.05$, $ps > .300$, $\eta^2s < .03$.

Examining simple effects of topic by partner race, we found that for participants expecting a Black (i.e., outgroup) partner, WICIAT scores

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of variables assessed in Study 2.

	White partner		Black partner	
	Control	Race-irrelevant	Control	Race-irrelevant
WICIAT	0.32	0.15	0.14	0.52
	(0.47)	(0.41)	(0.28)	(0.51)
Explicit ID	2.93	3.01	3.18	3.33
	(1.05)	(1.27)	(0.78)	(1.47)
CSE	4.31	4.55	4.48	4.57
	(0.68)	(0.91)	(0.51)	(1.04)
MRS	1.82	1.83	1.79	1.66
	(0.57)	(0.79)	(0.51)	(0.44)
Race IAT	0.13	0.23	0.37	0.44
	(0.77)	(0.59)	(0.57)	(0.65)
Anxiety	−0.08	0.55	0.40	0.34
	(0.68)	(0.76)	(0.53)	(0.80)

Note. WICIAT = White Identity Centrality Implicit Association Test. Explicit ID = modified Identity Centrality Scale. CSE = Collective Self-Esteem Scale. MRS = Modern Racism Scale. Race IAT = Racial Prejudice Implicit Association Test. Anxiety = anxiety change score.
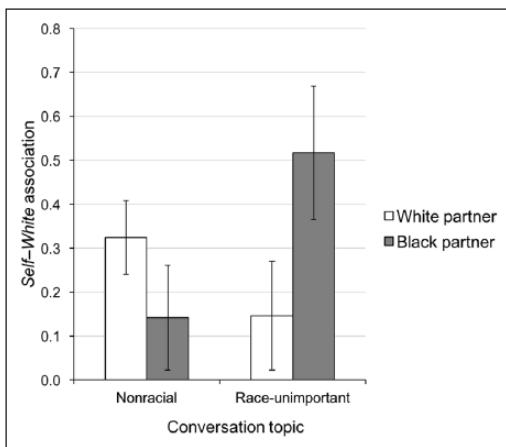

Figure 4. Identity activation as a function of conversation topic and partner race (Experiment 2).

were marginally higher in the race-related topic condition compared to the nonracial topic condition, $F(1, 55) = 3.78$, $p = .057$, $\eta^2 = .14$, whereas topic had no significant effect on the WICIAT scores of participants who expected a White (i.e., ingroup) partner, $F(1, 55) = 1.41$, $p = .240$, $\eta^2 = .06$.

The results can also be examined by comparing the effects of partner race within conversation topic conditions. Partner race had no significant effect on the *self–White* associations of participants expecting to converse about a nonracial topic, $F(1, 55) = 1.56$, $p = .217$, $\eta^2 = .05$. In the race-related topic condition, however, participants exhibited marginally stronger *self–White* associations if they expected to interact with a Black (vs. White) partner, $F(1, 55) = 3.58$, $p = .064$, $\eta^2 = .12$.

Explicit White identity. We next examined the effects of our manipulations on participants' levels of explicit White identity. An ANOVA testing the effects of partner race, conversation topic, and their interaction on Identity Centrality Scale scores revealed no significant effects, $Fs < 0.79$, $ps > .250$, $\eta^2 s < .02$. Similarly, no significant effects emerged when scores on the Collective Self-Esteem Scale, or any of its four subscales (private regard, public regard, membership, and identity) were used as the dependent variable, $Fs < 1.31$, $ps > .250$, $\eta^2 s < .03$.

Anti-Black prejudice. Our next step was to assess our manipulations' effects on explicit and implicit racial attitudes. First, we used a two-way ANOVA to test the effects of partner race, conversation

topic, and their interaction, on participants' Modern Racism Scale scores. This analysis revealed no significant effects, $Fs < 0.37$, $ps > .250$, $\eta^2s < .01$. The same model, this time predicting Race IAT scores, also yielded no significant effects, $Fs < 1.34$, $ps > .250$, $\eta^2s < .03$.

Discussion

Study 2 provides evidence for an "identity rebound" effect and, by extension, supports the idea that Whites attempt to suppress activation of their White identities in anticipation of racially charged situations. Before their *self–White* associations were assessed, participants in this study learned that they would not actually meet with a partner—and are therefore likely to have discontinued thought suppression. Consistent with a rebound effect, participants who had previously expected to discuss a race-related topic with Black partner (and thus had suppressed identity activation) showed stronger *self–White* associations than participants who expected to talk about a nonracial topic (and thus had not previously suppressed identity activation).

General Discussion

White people often experience anxiety at the prospect of discussing race with Black people (Goff et al., 2008; Trawalter & Richeson, 2008). The present research explores a novel strategy through which Whites stave off anxiety when such "racially charged" interactions loom: identity suppression. We theorized that Whites attempt to avoid thoughts related to whiteness and, in so doing, suppress activation of their White identity. In support of this account, White participants in Study 1 exhibited weaker *self–White* associations when they expected to discuss race-related (vs. nonracial) topics with a Black partner, whereas no such effect of topic emerged among participants expecting to interact with another White person. Evidence for the functionality of identity suppression comes from our analysis of participants' nonverbal behavior, which indicates that suppression shielded Whites against

displaying anxiety generated by imminent racially charged interactions. Study 2 revealed a rebound effect (Macrae et al., 1994; Monteith et al., 1998) vis-à-vis participants' *self–White* associations, strengthening our case for the motivated suppression of identity. When White participants were informed that they would not, in fact, interact with another student—thus freeing them to discontinue identity suppression—those who had expected to discuss race with a Black partner displayed *greater self–White* associations than did participants who had expected to talk with a Black partner about a nonracial topic. The present work is some of the first to examine implicit strategies that Whites enact in the moments leading up to racially charged interactions. Our data suggest that Whites set the stage for such interactions by suppressing thoughts of White identity.

Distancing "Bad" Identities

Although the current study is the first to demonstrate implicit identity suppression in response to a race-specific identity threat, previous research has explored other forms of identity distancing as a coping strategy. Pronin, Steele, and Ross (2004) found that women who had taken a large number of math courses engaged in what the authors called "identity bifurcation." That is, these women identified less with feminine characteristics associated with negative stereotypes concerning women's math abilities (e.g., emotional, wearing makeup) but not with feminine characteristics unrelated to women's math abilities (e.g., sensitive, empathic). Furthermore, these women did not identify more with masculine traits (e.g., competitive, analytical), which suggests that the coping strategy was not to embody masculine traits but to escape the parts of their feminine identities that were negatively stereotyped. In Pronin et al.'s (2004) study, identity bifurcation was possible because the women in the study were able to distance themselves from the "bad" parts of femininity while maintaining the "good" parts. With whiteness, as it pertains to racial inequality, perhaps Whites feel that there are no "good"

parts (or at least no "good" parts that a non-White partner would find compelling). If this is the case, then in order to appear nonracist and cope with a racial threat, Whites may feel that they can temporarily jettison their psychological whiteness by suppressing their White identity.

Psychological Preparation and Implications for Interracial Interactions

Fear of being perceived as prejudiced, in part, is what drives Whites' threat appraisals during interracial interactions (Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009). These threat appraisals can be directed at oneself or at an other (Shapiro & Neuberg, 2007). That is, threats to a person's self-concept (i.e., "What if this stereotype is true of me?") or reputation (i.e., "What if outgroup others see me as stereotypic?") conjure concerns about performance during interracial interactions (Shapiro & Neuberg, 2007; Trawalter et al., 2009). For self-focused Whites performing well during a racially charged interaction would mean not being perceived as prejudiced by a Black partner.

Additionally, people's approach to a interracial interaction is related to their goals (Trawalter et al., 2009); learning goals tend to make people partner-focused, which attenuates identity threat (Goff et al., 2008) and corresponds to increased positive other directed actions (Vorauer, Gagnon, & Sasaki, 2009), whereas performance goals tend to produce self-focus, which exacerbates identity threat and leads to more negative exchanges (Goff et al., 2008; Plant & Devine, 1998; Vorauer et al., 2009). When Whites are self-focused during racially charged interactions, they worry that they will be judged negatively because of their whiteness. When this is the case, distancing themselves from the stereotype of the prejudiced White person (e.g., identity suppression) might minimize their identity threat and prepare them to engage in interracial contact (Shelton et al., 2006).

One way that Whites strive to appear unprejudiced during interracial interactions is by controlling their nonverbal behavior. For example, Shelton (2003) found that Whites who were instructed to be unprejudiced during interracial interactions displayed less nonverbal discomfort than those not given such instructions. Furthermore, these White participants were liked by their Black partners more than Whites who did not control their nonverbal behavior. Other research found that racially charged situations led Whites who were high (rather than low) in negative implicit bias against Blacks to control their nonverbal anxiety during interracial interactions. This led high bias Whites to be liked more by Black partners as they were perceived as being more engaged during the interaction (Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005).

In the current study, identity suppression led White participants to limit their expression of nonverbal anxiety. It is important to acknowledge, however, that our findings are limited to Whites who anticipated racially charged interracial interactions. Thus, we can only speculate about what implications identity suppression might have for actual interracial interactions. Nevertheless, we think that identity suppression might allow Whites to protect their self-esteem by creating psychological distance from a threatened identity (e.g., whiteness). This, in turn, limits their expressions of nonverbal anxiety before, and potentially during, interracial interactions, which may reduce their likelihood of being perceived as prejudiced.

It may also be that Whites use identity suppression as a prepatory act for racially charged interactions. According to Cesario, Plaks, and Higgins (2006) people perform automatic social behaviors as prepatory acts when primed with social outgroup members. Furthermore, this behavior is guided by implicit motivations. That is, when primed with an outgroup, people who have an implicit preference for a group will mimic trait stereotypes associated with that group. Specifically, participants who held positive implicit feelings toward elderly people walked down a hallway more slowly when primed with pictures of elderly people (Cesario et al., 2006). Although we found no evidence that implicit bias toward Blacks influenced participants' White identity or expression of nonverbal anxiety, it is still possible that identity suppression may be a

prepatory act that is motivated by Whites desire for a successful interaction. In other words, it could be that Whites' motivation to have a successful interaction (e.g., not be perceived as prejudiced) with a Black partner might lead them to suppress their identity. Given that our data cannot directly speak to White participants' motivations per se, future research should explictly examine whether or not concerns about being perceived as prejudiced influence the relationship between identity suppression and expression of nonverbal anxiety in White participants. Furthermore, future research should examine how identity suppression impacts Whites' nonverbal anxiety during interracial interactions and if there are any benefits to either partner.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the present research suggests that identity suppression is a useful, self-protective coping strategy for Whites as they prepare for racially charged interactions, our understanding of its utility as it relates to nonverbal discomfort is constrained because our design did not include actual interactions. Certainly, our data demonstrate that identity suppression led Whites to display less nonverbal discomfort, which usually benefits interracial interactions (Shelton, 2003). However, not expressing nonverbal discomfort may also indicate freezing, or motor inactivity in response to fear, which would likely impact interracial interactions negatively (Trawalter et al., 2009).

Although the current research cannot completely rule out freezing as a consequence of identity suppression, research examining Whites' motivations to control prejudice during interracial interactions may indicate that the current findings are likely not demonstrative of freezing. For instance, Plant (2004) found that although some Whites with high internal motivation to control prejudice also experience high levels of anxiety during interracial interactions, they do not typically avoid them; they welcome them. Moreover, Whites with high internal motivations to control prejudice are more concerned with eliminating prejudice rather than making it

undetectable (Plant & Devine, 2009). That is, Whites who are highly internally motivated to control their prejudice were more willing to engage in interracial interactions even at the prospect of unintentionally expressing nonverbal behavior that may be detected and interpreted as prejudicial by a Black partner. Thus, Whites who are motivated to control their prejudice would likely not freeze in preparation for an interracial interaction because their motivation is to control prejudice during the interaction, not escape it. Although the current study did not measure motivation to control prejudice during the interaction, we did measure participants' negative bias toward Blacks, which has been shown to negatively correlate with motivation to control prejudice (Plant & Devine, 2009). Given that the current sample demonstrated relatively low negative bias toward Blacks (see Tables 1 and 2), it is likely that they were also internally motivated to control their prejudice. Of course, future research should directly test how motivation to control prejudice impacts identity suppression and expression of nonverbal discomfort, especially during actual interracial interactions. Furthermore, future research should test whether identity suppression negatively or positively impacts interracial interactions.

Additionally, future research should aim to replicate the findings of the current studies. Our studies examined identity suppression and identity rebound separately. In the future, research could combine the manipulations from Study 1 (i.e., partner race and conversation topic) and Study 2. That is, researchers could extend the manipulation from Study 2 by varying when participants completed the White identity measure (i.e., before or after learning they would not meet their partner) to more directly compare identity suppression and rebound. Furthermore, it is important to note that the sample sizes in the current studies were relatively small. Our analyses, however, still demonstrated reasonable power to detect the predicted effects for our statistical tests.[4] Despite having adequate statistical power, it is still important for future research to replicate our findings with a larger sample.

Conclusion

Overall, the present research suggests that Whites deploy identity suppression as a coping response to racial threat. Furthermore, identity suppression leads to decreased expressions of nonverbal discomfort in anticipation of racially charged interactions. Whether Whites engage in identity suppression only to protect their self-concepts from looming racially charged interactions, or because of their aspirations to have a smooth interaction is a question for future research. The current studies, however, have given clear evidence that Whites do cope with (racial) identity threat by minimizing ties to their own racial identity. Although the present work has identified identity suppression as a novel coping strategy employed by Whites to prepare for interracial interactions, it is important to note that our predictions about what identity suppression means for interracial contact is only speculative. It is important for future research to further examine identity suppression during interracial interactions to determine whether or not it is a functional strategy for Whites to use in intergroup contexts.

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Notes

1. For exploratory purposes, we included two variants of the race-related topic (i.e., race-unimportant and race-important). We made no formal predictions distinguishing the effects of these conditions, although we expected both to impact White identity more strongly than the nonracial topic among participants in the Black partner condition.
2. Study 1 demonstrated that both the race-important and race-unimportant conditions were both viewed as threatening for White participants relative to the nonracial topic. Although we found no significant differences between the two race-related conversation topics in Study 1, we kept the race-unimportant (vs. race-important) topic in Study 2 in light of research suggesting that avoiding race during interracial interactions is particularly taxing for Whites when race is relevant to the conversation (Apfelbaum et al., 2008).
3. As in Study 1, participants in Study 2 were video-recorded. However, because identity activation scores gauged identity *rebound* rather than identity suppression, Study 2 was ill-equipped to assess the role of suppression in muting participants' symptoms of nonverbal anxiety. Thus, we omit detailed discussion of participants' nonverbal behaviors in Study 2. We note, however, that the lack of a significant direct effect of conversation topic on nonverbal anxiety in the Black partner condition, B = -0.01, 95% CI [-0.59, -0.57] is unsurprising given the fact that, in order to observe this effect it Study 1, it was first necessary to partial out the indirect effect of topic on nonverbal anxiety through identity suppression scores.

    Despite the lesser utility of nonverbal anxiety scores in Study 2, we probed the data for evidence that participants felt relief upon learning that no interaction would take place. Participants' poststimulus anxiety scores were higher than their "postreveal" anxiety scores, $t(55) = 2.87$, $p = .006$, suggesting that participants experienced a reduction in anxiety in the absence of an impending racially charged interaction. We also compared participants' nonverbal anxiety scores across studies. We found no significant differences in participants' prestimulus, $t(133) = 0.89$, $p = .375$, or poststimulus, $t(133) = -1.21$, $p = .229$ anxiety scores, further suggesting that removal of a looming racial threat in Study 2 decreased participants' discomfort.
4. Power analyses suggest that the cell sizes in both studies were adequate in the present context. Based on the observed cell means, Study 1 displayed a power of 76% to detect the crucial Partner Race x Conversation Topic interaction at an alpha of .05. Study 2 was powered at a respectable 66%.

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