


# The Pitfalls and Promise of Increasing Racial Diversity: Threat, Contact, and Race Relations in the 21st Century

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## Abstract

A decades-long trend toward greater racial and ethnic diversity in the United States is expected to continue, with White Americans projected to constitute less than 50% of the national population by mid century. The present review integrates recent empirical research on the effects of making this population change salient with research on how actual diversity affects Whites Americans' intergroup attitudes and behavior. Specifically, we offer a framework for understanding and predicting the effects of anticipated increases in racial diversity that highlights the competing influences of intergroup concerns, such as relative group status and power, and more interpersonal experiences, such as positive contact, on intergroup relations. We close with a discussion of the likely moderators of the effects of the increasing national racial diversity and consider implications of this societal change for racial equity in the 21st century.

## Keywords

diversity, intergroup relations, group size, perceived threat, neighborhood context

Over the past several decades, the prevalence and salience of increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the United States has been documented across many different communities (e.g., cities, suburbs; Lee, Iceland, & Sharp, 2012). Indeed, by 2044, White Americans are projected to compose less than 50% of the national population (Colby & Ortman, 2015)—a trend receiving widespread media attention (e.g., Horowitz, 2016). Given the magnitude of these demographic changes, it is vital to seek insight from the social scientific literature on the potential consequences of these trends for race relations and progress toward racial equality.

## The Diversity Paradox: Threat and Positive Contact

The societal implications of demographic diversity have long been a prominent area of inquiry, with research often focusing on relationships between racial diversity or minority population size and Whites' intergroup attitudes. Here, we review research on the effects of actual racial and ethnic diversity on intergroup outcomes, followed by the emerging research examining the broad

effects of anticipated increases in the racial diversity of the nation; we focus primarily on the implications for White Americans—currently the dominant majority group.

## Actual diversity and intergroup outcomes

**Minority population size and threat.** Longstanding theoretical work posits that minority group size is commonly used as a proxy for estimating that group's political and economic power and, further, that larger or growing minority groups elicit feelings of threat in the dominant majority that often engender prejudice (Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958; for recent reviews of theories relevant to how increasing diversity may relate to threat, see Hogg, 2016; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). Because increasing racial diversity in majority White neighborhoods,

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states, and nations implies a smaller White population share, Whites may perceive these demographic changes as threatening to their status (i.e., relative group position in society; Blumer, 1958), and these changes may lead to negative racial attitudes and behavior. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that Whites' proximity to larger minority populations is associated with threat and antiminority bias (e.g., Fossett & Kiecolt, 1989). For example, Whites who reside in areas with larger racial minority populations tend to express greater perceived threat, more racial bias, and less support for racial integration than Whites living in areas with smaller minority populations (Fossett & Kiecolt, 1989; Giles & Evans, 1986; Pettigrew, 1959; Taylor, 1998; see also Enos, 2016).

**Minority population size and contact.** Despite the robust literature suggesting that minority group size predicts intergroup bias, there is also an established body of research suggesting that proximity with minority out-group members can have positive implications for majority group members' intergroup attitudes. Insofar as increased diversity also increases the frequency of positive contact between members of majority and minority groups, it can also facilitate positive intergroup attitudes (Barlow, Hornsey, Thai, Sengupta, & Sibley, 2013; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). For instance, the percentage of ethnic minorities in Germans' home districts is negatively related to the expression of antiminority bias, a relationship attributable to increased intergroup contact (Wagner, Christ, Pettigrew, Stellmacher, & Wolf, 2006; see also Schmid, Hewstone, & Al Ramiah, 2012). Intergroup contact theory (e.g., Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) presents the ideal circumstances for contact (i.e., equal status, common goals, cooperation, and support of authorities) that can reduce intergroup anxiety, feelings of threat, and hostility toward racial out-groups (Richeson & Shelton, 2007).

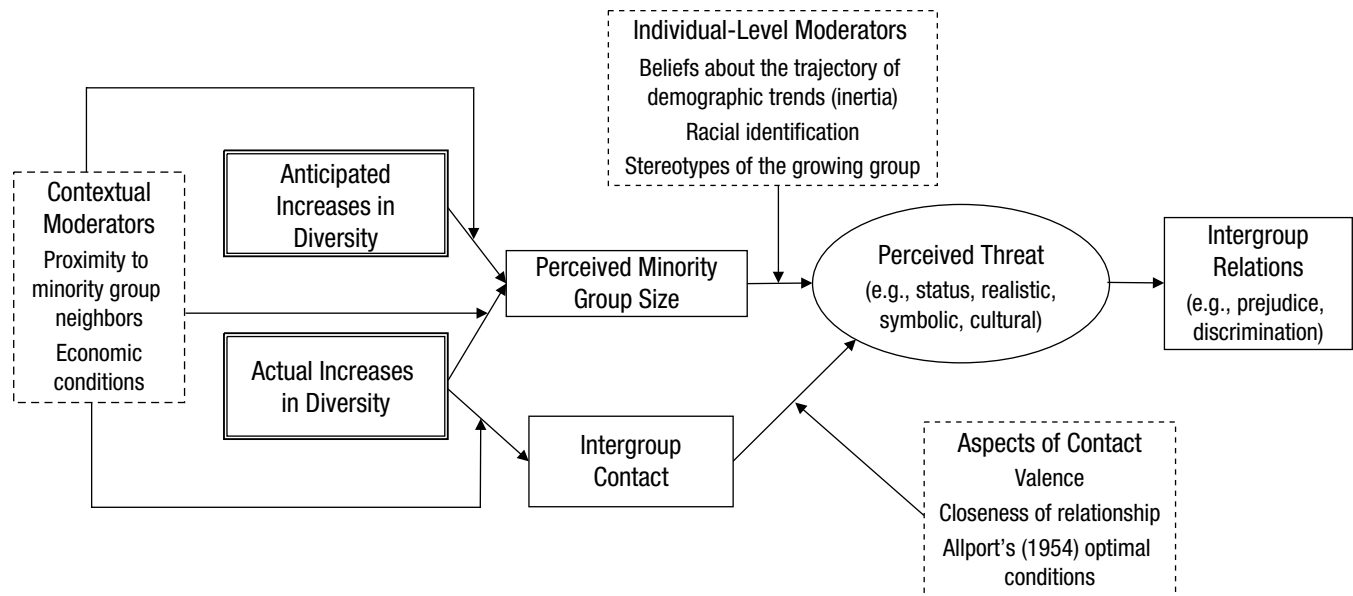
Recent work highlights the importance of accounting for positive contact when predicting the consequences of increasing diversity (see Paolini, Harwood, & Rubin, 2010). Oliver and Wong (2003) revealed, for instance, that ethnic diversity at the metropolitan level was related to greater prejudice, but if examined at the neighborhood level (a level more likely to facilitate positive contact, such as intergroup friendships; see Pettigrew, 1998), ethnic diversity predicted lower prejudice levels. Similarly, after controlling for Latino population size, Hall and Krysan (2016) found that the percentage of Latinos in White residents' surrounding census blocks, but not in their immediate block, predicted perceptions of threat. Sustained contact that yields intergroup friendships, then, may be particularly potent for inoculating against feelings of threat and anxiety, and ultimately, promoting positive attitudes

(see MacInnis & Page-Gould, 2015; Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008).

### ***Anticipated diversity and intergroup outcomes***

Consistent with evidence suggesting that the mere perception that minority groups are larger is associated with Whites' feelings of threat (Alba, Rumbaut, & Marotz, 2005; see also Semyonov, Raijman, Yom Tov, & Schmidt, 2004), a growing body of experimental work suggests that anticipated increases in racial diversity also elicit threat responses. For example, White Americans (and Canadians) who read an article portraying a future in which their racial group will compose less than 50% of the national population (vs. various control conditions) were more likely to perceive that Whites' societal status is under threat, leading to stronger racial identification and more negative intergroup emotions (Outten, Schmitt, Miller, & Garcia, 2012). Moreover, compared with control participants, White Americans for whom the changing national racial demographics were salient expressed more exclusionary attitudes—for example, greater preferences for racial homophily in their social lives, and more pro-White, antiminority bias on both self-report and more automatic assessments of racial attitudes (Craig & Richeson, 2014a; Skinner & Cheadle, 2016).

Beyond their impact on intergroup attitudes and emotions, salient anticipated increases in national diversity can influence Whites' political ideology and preferences regarding race-related political issues: Whites for whom the changing national diversity is salient express (a) more support for conservative policies, including those relevant to race (Craig & Richeson, 2014b); (b) less support for diversity (Danbold & Huo, 2015); (c) more racial resentment and support for the Tea Party (Willer, Feinberg, & Wetts, 2016); and (d) more support for Donald Trump and anti-immigrant policies (if those individuals are highly racially identified; Major, Blodorn, & Blascovich, 2016). Studies have confirmed the mediating role of concerns regarding Whites' status in society (in terms of resources as well as their status as "prototypical" Americans) in engendering these outcomes (e.g., Craig & Richeson 2014b; Danbold & Huo, 2015). Even changing national racial demographics that are presented as the growth of one out-group (e.g., Hispanics) can lead to pro-White discrimination in a dictator game (Abascal, 2015). Taken together, this emerging work suggests that anticipated growth in minority groups is perceived as threatening to Whites' current status as the dominant racial group in the United States, which, in turn, triggers in-group-protective and, often, out-group-antagonistic attitudes, policy support, and behavior.



**Fig. 1.** A framework of how increases in racial diversity—anticipated and actual—influence intergroup relations through perceived threat. Anticipated increases in diversity, such as the shifting demographics of the nation, evoke increased perceptions of minority group size, group threat, and often negative intergroup attitudes and behaviors. This pathway can, however, be buffered if actual increases in diversity yield positive, close contact experiences. The effects of both anticipated and actual increases in racial diversity will be moderated by salient contextual factors (e.g., economic conditions) and individual-level factors (e.g., racial identification; dotted boxes indicate moderating variables).

## Predicting Race Relations in an Increasingly Diverse Nation

In Figure 1, we offer a framework for understanding how anticipated increases in diversity may shape subsequent intergroup relations. Specifically, anticipated diversity may initially elicit greater threat among dominant-group members and, thus, promote negative attitudes and intergroup outcomes. However, as actual diversity in meaningful local environments increases, so too should positive contact experiences that, in turn, should buffer against, if not counteract, perceived threat and yield more positive intergroup relations over time.

Consistent with this account, while the actual presence of immigrants in one's neighborhood can predict perceptions that immigrants are threatening and engender anti-immigrant attitudes, having immigrant neighbors can also predict positive intergroup contact, thereby reducing anti-immigrant attitudes (Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010). Similarly, whereas actual and perceived diversity of Whites' neighborhoods have been shown to be directly associated with lower trust of ethnic minorities (Schmid, Al Ramiah, & Hewstone, 2014), actual neighborhood diversity has also been shown to be indirectly associated with greater intergroup trust due to more positive intergroup contact and lower levels of perceived threat. Hence, whereas anticipated and actual increases in racial and ethnic diversity often elicit a host of negative intergroup outcomes,

positive encounters with members of racial out-groups within increasingly diverse neighborhoods can buffer, and potentially completely reverse, these more racially exclusionary impulses and orientations.

## Moderators

Contextual and individual-level factors may exacerbate or attenuate the effects of growing racial diversity on intergroup outcomes. Poorer economic conditions (Quillian, 1995) and the level of social identification among the majority group (Major et al., 2016) should each increase threat reactions to increasing diversity. Further, the specific threat that is activated by increasing diversity (e.g., cultural or status threats) will likely be shaped by the relative positions of the growing minority groups and, of course, the prevailing cultural stereotypes associated with them (see Zou & Cheryan, 2017). Beliefs about the perceived rate of minority group growth and its implications of actual national population demographics (e.g., concern about becoming "the minority") are likely important predictors of responses to demographic change and may underlie some of the discrepancies between the effects of experienced, compared with anticipated, diversity. For example, some types of anticipated demographic diversity—such as a majority-minority shift—may fairly consistently elicit negative intergroup outcomes among members of the current majority, whereas more modest

increases in racial diversity may have more benign effects. It is also likely that the current level of diversity in the community, state, or nation will contribute to reactions to anticipated increases in said diversity. Research on cultural inertia, or people's desire to maintain the currently perceived rate of cultural change (see Zárte & Shaw, 2010), intriguingly suggests that a consistent increase in diversity may not elicit poor intergroup outcomes, even if the information implies larger minority populations.

### ***Increasing diversity and minority group members' race relations***

Although there is a robust literature linking minority group size to majority group members' perceived threat and intergroup attitudes, the processes implicated in many of the observed outcomes should not be limited to majority groups, but rather should include any group that perceives growing diversity as a potential threat to its status, be it nationally or locally. For example, correlational studies exploring how members of racial minority groups respond to the size of minority out-group populations reveal a link between minority group members' neighborhood racial demographics and perceived competition or threat (e.g., Barreto & Sanchez, 2014; Bobo & Hutchings, 1996). The size of the Latino population in one's neighborhood predicts Blacks' stereotyping of and negative attitudes toward Latinos (Gay, 2006; cf. Oliver & Wong, 2003), but only if Blacks perceive Latinos to have an economic advantage.

Recent experimental work has also found that making the growth in the national Hispanic population in the United States salient leads members of other racial minority groups (e.g., Black Americans, Asian Americans) to express greater support for conservative social policies, including those relevant to the threat (e.g., immigration; Craig & Richeson, 2017), as has been found for White Americans (Craig & Richeson, 2014b). Although the specific mechanism underlying these findings is not yet known, this work points to the likelihood that members of racial minority groups may at times also respond to racial out-group growth with feelings of threat.

While some of the intergroup processes outlined in the present review are certainly applicable to racial minority groups, it is important not to assume that all or even most of the intergroup attitudes and outcomes of increasing national racial diversity found among dominant majority group members (i.e., Whites) will be mirrored among members of racial minority groups. With growing diversity, the common experiences of stigmatized groups and systems of oppression may become increasingly salient in the mainstream discourse, perhaps activating a sense of commonality among stigmatized groups and attenuating perceptions

that minority out-group growth portends poor outcomes for one's own group. Generally, work that focuses on intergroup dynamics among different minority groups is vital for developing more comprehensive models of future intergroup relations (see Craig & Richeson, 2016; Richeson & Craig, 2011).

### **Areas in Which Further Research Is Needed**

While there is compelling evidence regarding how the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the United States and other majority White countries influences intergroup attitudes and related political preferences, almost no work has examined how more basic social cognitive processes are affected by changing racial and ethnic national demographics (but see Wilson & Hugenberg, 2010). Research should consider, for example, how shifting racial demographics may affect the processes associated with deliberate or automatic racial categorization (Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008), as well as processes related to in-group inclusion versus exclusion (Leyens & Yzerbyt, 1992). Additionally, while extant research has found clear evidence that White Americans perceive anticipated demographic change as a threat to their dominant status, the conditions under which different threats (e.g., status, realistic, symbolic, cultural) may be activated by different demographic changes and the subsequent consequences of these different types of threats have been largely unexplored (however, see Danbold & Huo, 2015; Zou & Cheryan, 2017). Exploring these questions will not only elucidate the mechanism (or mechanisms) underlying important downstream consequences of these threats for intergroup relations, but also may unearth ways to affirm the social identity of dominant-group members and, perhaps, promote a more inclusive national identity.

### **Conclusions**

Overall, examinations of Whites' responses to anticipated racial demographic change have produced pessimistic results for the promise of societal racial equity and positive interracial relations. Collectively, this work suggests that Whites are threatened by these anticipated changes, which is likely to reduce support for racial and ethnic integration and race-conscious efforts to redress racial inequality. Despite consistent threat and hostility produced by fear of a changing populace, however, the promise of diversity remains. The presence of racial and ethnic minority neighbors and the positive contact that such presence can produce may temper at least some of the negative intergroup outcomes associated with anticipated diversity. Future longitudinal examinations of how threat from anticipated demographic change

may be buffered by actual contact in neighborhood and local communities undergoing demographic changes are sorely needed (see Laurence & Bentley, 2016). That said, it is possible that the inverse may also hold true; anticipated increases in racial and ethnic diversity, especially at the neighborhood level, may trigger “White flight”—that is, the decision among many White individuals to exit the neighborhood (Zou & Cheryan, 2017), thereby precluding the opportunity for the very types of contact that promote more positive intergroup outcomes. It is also essential to examine all of these processes more dynamically and relationally (Richeson & Shelton, 2007; Shelton & Richeson, 2006), considering, for instance, how members of different racial minority groups respond directly to increasing national racial diversity, as well as how they respond to the effects of these anticipated demographic shifts on White Americans. Understanding the psychological factors that shape responses to changing demographics over time, by both Whites and members of racial minority groups, is vital for understanding racial dynamics in the 21st century.

### Recommended Reading

- Allport, G. W. (1954). (See References). A classic work that examines how intergroup contact may influence racial bias, outlining the ideal conditions for reduced prejudice via intergroup contact (see Chapter 16).
- Blalock (1967). (See References). A classic text on group threat theory that extends the predictions of Blumer (1958), suggesting that larger minority populations may heighten majority group members' perceptions of group threat and expressed bias.
- Blumer, H. (1958). (See References). Another classic text that presents the basis for group threat theory and predicts that majority group members' concerns about group position drive intergroup bias.
- Craig, M. A., & Richeson, J. A. (2014a). (See References). A representative study that illustrates original empirical research exploring the effect of making changing national racial demographics salient for Whites' racial attitudes.
- Richeson, J. A., & Sommers, S. R. (2016). Toward a social psychology of race and race relations for the twenty-first century. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *67*, 439–463. A comprehensive, accessible overview of race and race relations in light of changing racial demographics.
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