



Reports

Interracial roommate relationships: A mechanism for promoting sense of belonging at university and academic performance

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated whether intergroup contact through roommate assignment in college dormitories affects the academic well-being of minority and majority students at a predominantly White university. Participants were first-year students randomly assigned to either a majority or minority group roommate. During the beginning and end of their first semester at college, participants completed a questionnaire packet which included ratings of their sense of belonging and identification with their university. At the end of the school year, participants' official grade point averages (GPA) were also recorded. In general, students randomly assigned to an interracial roommate relationship reported an increased sense of belonging at university at the end of the first semester at college. Specifically for minority students, those randomly assigned to a majority group roommate reported a stronger sense of belonging at university and received a higher GPA than minority students randomly assigned to a minority roommate. Analyses suggested that sense of belonging partially mediated the effect of room type on minority students' GPA. Room type did not affect majority students' GPA. These findings have implications for improving academic satisfaction, performance, and retention.

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Introduction

A substantial body of literature has demonstrated the benefits of intergroup contact for prejudice reduction and intergroup relations (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, for a review). The underlying assumption is that the more contact between groups, the more the group members can learn about their similarities, rather than their differences, and thereby disconfirm negative beliefs and feelings. More recently, this literature has been extended into the domain of academics to determine whether intergroup factors affect students' adjustment to and success at college (see Levin, Van Laar, & Foote, 2006, for a review).

In general, most of this work has focused on minority students. Indeed, research has indicated that minority students have a more difficult time adjusting to college life both socially and academically compared to majority students, particularly at predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Allen, 1985; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Davis, 1994; Massey & Fischer, 2006). Historically, socioeconomic differences have been cited as the primary factor contributing to these differences (Chavous, Rivas, Green, & Helaire, 2002). However, another key factor associated with the probability of minority students making a successful adjustment to college at PWIs is prior interracial experience (Adan & Felner, 1995; Chavous et al., 2002; Graham, Baker, & Wapner, 1995; Massey & Fischer,

2006). Students from more ethnically diverse neighborhoods, high schools, and social networks typically display better adjustment to college life than students from less ethnically diverse environments. Specifically, minority students who report greater pre-college exposure to their majority peers report more social satisfaction and comfort, greater attachment to the institution, and greater confidence in their academic abilities (Chavous et al., 2002; Graham et al., 1995). These students also tended to earn higher GPAs (Chavous et al., 2002; Davis, 1994; Massey & Fischer, 2006). Presumably, their earlier intergroup contact prepared them for the PWI environment and experiences, allowing for a less stressful transition with a higher probability of academic success.

In addition to pre-college experiences, diversity of friendships at college has also been noted as beneficial to minority students. In general, minority students who report higher expectations of rejection based on their racial identity have a reduced sense of belonging at their academic institution and adjust less easily to college life (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002). However, minority students who have more friendships with majority group members tend to be buffered against these negative effects (Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008). That is, minority students with higher levels of race-based rejection concerns do not exhibit lowered university satisfaction and identification if they have more cross-group friendships. Levin et al. (2006) also found that Latino students with more ingroup friends at the beginning of their academic careers felt a reduced sense of belonging at their academic institution and attained lower GPAs later in college. For majority group students, diversity of friendships did not affect university satisfaction

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(Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008), sense of belonging, or GPA (Levin et al., 2006).

Sense of belonging has been highlighted as particularly important for minority students' academic satisfaction and success at PWIs. In two studies, Walton and Cohen (2007) found that African American students who experienced more belonging uncertainty, or less social connectedness in their academic setting, reported less academic fit, believed that they had less potential to succeed, and received lower GPAs. However, after exposure to an intervention in which doubts about belonging were attributed to being a first-year student regardless of race, African American students exhibited improvement on all previous academic assessments. Specifically, during the intervention, students received feedback from upperclassmen of varying ethnic/racial backgrounds all endorsing the difficulty of the first year at college. The intervention did not affect White students' beliefs about their potential to succeed or their GPAs as compared to White students in a control group. However, White students who experienced the intervention reported less academic fit than those in the control group. Thus, knowledge of outgroup members' experiences at college benefited first-year minority students. Taken together, these findings suggest positive academic consequences of intergroup contact for minority students at PWIs.

Beyond pre-college exposure and college friendship networks that are generally self-selected, another means of gaining intergroup contact in a university setting is through roommate assignment in college dormitories. Most first year students are randomly assigned to their roommates. As such, many students are assigned to an outgroup roommate. This situation provides a very intimate setting in which students share experiences with their roommates at all times of day and generally for extended periods of time (i.e., most live together for one academic year). An additional advantage of dormitory housing is that it meets many of the optimal conditions for intergroup contact (Allport, 1954). Students sharing a room are generally considered to have equal status, and the dormitory room is ideally a cooperative environment with a common goal of working together to achieve a suitable living situation. Moreover, the university administration may be seen as an authority that supports the intergroup contact, because representatives of the institution assigned students to their rooms and oversee the housing system. Finally, the dormitory situation involves a very intimate setting in which frequent and personal interactions may occur.

For minority students at PWIs, having a majority group roommate may serve a similar function as a diverse friendship network or the intervention conducted by Walton and Cohen (2007). Although interracial roommates do not spend as much time together as same-race roommates and students tend to report greater dissatisfaction in interracial rooms (e.g., Shook & Fazio, 2008a), they do have extended, intimate contact and time shared together in the room, which may result in some of the previously noted benefits. Indeed, the effectiveness of Walton and Cohen's (2007) intervention was not contingent on friendship formation. Furthermore, analyses of archival data found that African American students attained higher fall GPAs when randomly assigned to a White roommate rather than an African American roommate, whereas roommate race did not affect White students' academic performance (Shook & Fazio, 2008b). Thus, interracial roommate relationships may benefit minority group members.

With regard to majority (i.e., White) students, intergroup contact does not seem to be as influential for academic well-being. Friendship diversity was not associated with sense of belonging, satisfaction at university, or GPA for White students (Levin et al., 2006; Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008). Also, roommate race did not affect White students' academic performance (Shook & Fazio, 2008b). Presumably, as part of the majority group at a PWI, intergroup contact is less impactful on White students' adjustment and performance at university. This, however, is not to say that interracial roommate relationships do not have positive effects on majority group students. Previous research has demonstrated that White students in interracial roommate relationships exhibited a reduction in negative attitudes toward African

Americans and decreased intergroup anxiety as compared to White students in same-race roommate relationships (Shook & Fazio, 2008a; Van Laar, Levin, Sinclair, & Sidanius, 2005). Thus, interracial roommate relationships benefit majority students' racial attitudes and intergroup relationships, but these benefits may not extend to academic factors.

The purpose of the present research was to examine the effect of interracial roommate relationships on sense of belonging at university and academic success, as assessed by GPA. Previous research has demonstrated that intergroup contact through friendship networks prior to entering college and during college increase minority, but not majority, students' sense of belonging at their university and influence academic success and performance. However, in both cases, there are issues of self-selection. Only students willing to develop diverse friendship networks will benefit from the intergroup contact. A potential alternative means of achieving the benefits of intergroup contact may be through dormitory roommate assignment. As most students are randomly assigned to their roommates, the dormitory setting provides a natural field experiment in which self-selection concerns are eliminated. Through their living situations, students in interracial rooms receive intergroup contact for an extended period of time and the opportunity to observe an outgroup member's experience of the first year at college, which may provide benefits similar to those observed as a result of diverse friendship networks and belonging interventions. It was expected that minority students randomly assigned to a majority group roommate would report a greater sense of belonging at their university than minority students randomly assigned to a minority group roommate. Furthermore, it was expected that minority students with a majority group roommate would earn higher grades than minority students with a minority group roommate, and this effect would be, at least, partially mediated by sense of belonging. For majority students, roommate race was not expected to influence sense of belonging or GPA.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited via email solicitations sent through the university residential housing office to all students living in university dormitory housing at a predominantly White, urban university on the South Atlantic coast of the United States. The study was advertised as a two-session study of factors that contribute to freshman students' adjustment and success in their first year of college. To be eligible, participants had to be starting their first semester of college and living in a dormitory room with exactly one roommate to whom they were randomly assigned by the university housing office (i.e., students had not requested their roommate, had not known their roommate prior to their arrival at school, and were not assigned based on personal interests or preferences). University policy regarding random assignment of roommates was very strict. The only information used to assign roommates was students' willingness to live with a smoker. Demographic information, personality factors, and lifestyle attributes were not considered in the assignment of roommates, so roommate assignment was relatively unbiased. Also, students were recruited individually, not in roommate pairs (i.e., dyadic data was not collected).

Two hundred seventeen eligible students completed the first session during the first 4 weeks of the fall semester. One-hundred seventy participants (78%) returned for the second session during the last 3 weeks of the semester.¹ Participants were given the option of receiving course credit or \$10 cash for their participation in each session. In order to accurately test the effects of prolonged intergroup

¹ Attrition did not differ between most of the four participant race/room type categories, $ps > .13$. However, attrition was lower for minority participants in interracial rooms (11%) as compared to minority participants in same-race rooms (17%) and majority participants in same-race rooms (29%; $ps < .05$).

contact, we restricted our analyses to participants who maintained a consistent roommate throughout their first semester at school ($N = 159$; 52% White, 22% African American, 11% Asian, 3% Latino, and 12% "Other"). Thus, analyses were conducted on White students who had a majority ($n = 47$) or a minority roommate ($n = 37$)² and minority students who had a White ($n = 37$) or a minority roommate ($n = 38$).³ For ease of presentation and discussion, majority/minority student room assignments will be referred to as interracial rooms, whereas majority/majority and minority/minority student room assignments will be referred to as same-race rooms. The proportion of participants who changed roommates during their first semester did not differ between any of the room type by participant race categories, $ps > .43$. The mean age at the beginning of the study was 18.14 years ($SD = .38$), and 81% of the sample were female.⁴

Measures

Sense of belonging

Two items were used to assess how connected participants felt to the university. First, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with the statement "I feel a sense of belonging to [the university]" on a scale from 0 (Strongly Disagree) to 10 (Strongly Agree). Participants were also asked to report how much they identified with their university on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 9 (Very Much). These items were highly correlated at both Session 1 ($r = .57$, $p < .001$) and Session 2 ($r = .70$, $p < .001$), so composite scores were created by averaging the standardized scores of each item.

Grade-point average (GPA)

GPA was provided by the university's registrar with the student's permission after the completion of the spring semester and is reported on a 4.0 scale.

Scholastic aptitude test (SAT) score

A composite of participants' math and verbal SAT scores were also provided by the university registrar, with a maximum combined score of 1600 (800 points per section). These scores were used as a control variable in analyses of academic performance.

Procedure

Upon arriving for their first research session, participants were given an overview of the study and provided written consent for their participation. Additionally, participants were asked to sign a release form to allow the university to provide their SAT scores and grade point average after the spring semester to the experimenters. One-hundred forty-five participants agreed to the release of their academic information for the study.

Following the study briefing, participants completed all questionnaires, as well as several other surveys and computer tasks unrelated to this specific study, at individual workstations. When all materials were completed, participants were told that they would be contacted at a later date to schedule their participation in the second research session. They were then paid (or provided with research credit) for their participation and dismissed. Participants completed identical measures

² The racial/ethnic breakdown of White participants' minority roommates was 52% African American, 24% Asian, 16% Latino, 3% Native American, and 5% "Other."

³ The racial/ethnic breakdown of minority participants' minority roommates was 54% African American, 24% Asian, 2% Latino, 2% Native American, and 17% "Other." Minority participants were not necessarily assigned to a roommate of the same race/ethnicity.

⁴ Analyses were conducted to determine whether there were any sex differences in the proportion of room changes. Participant sex was also initially included in the primary analyses. However, there were no significant main effects or interactions, $ps > .10$, so analyses are reported collapsed across participant sex.

in the second research session during the last 3 weeks of the fall semester.

Results

Sense of belonging

To determine whether room type affected participants' reported sense of belonging at college, we analyzed the data using a 2 (participant race) \times 2 (room type) repeated measures ANOVA with session (beginning of the fall semester vs. end of the fall semester) as a within-subjects variable. There were no main effects; however, there were two significant interactions. First, there was a significant Session \times Room Type interaction, $F(1, 155) = 5.97$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. For participants in interracial rooms, there was a marginal simple effect of session, $F(155) = 3.50$, $p < .07$. That is, participants in interracial rooms reported a greater sense of belonging at the end of the semester ($M = .13$, $SD = .91$) than at the beginning of the semester ($M = -.02$, $SD = .96$). For participants in same-race rooms, sense of belonging appeared to decline from the beginning of the semester ($M = .00$, $SD = .85$) to the end of the semester ($M = -.11$, $SD = .94$), but this difference did not reach statistical significance, $F(155) = 2.49$, $p = .12$. Furthermore, at the beginning of the semester, there was no difference between room types in reported sense of belonging at the university, $p > .85$. At the end of the semester, participants in interracial rooms reported slightly higher levels of sense of belonging at the university ($M = .13$, $SD = .91$) compared to participants in same-race rooms ($M = -.11$, $SD = .94$). However, this difference did not reach a conventional level of significance, $F(155) = 2.27$, $p = .10$.

Finally, there was a significant Room Type \times Participant Race interaction, $F(1, 155) = 4.04$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$ (see Fig. 1). Minority participants in interracial rooms reported significantly higher levels of sense of belonging than minority participants in same race rooms, $F(155) = 3.83$, $p = .05$. Majority participants' sense of belonging did not differ by room type, $p > .39$. Additionally, minority participants in interracial rooms reported significantly higher levels of sense of belonging than majority participants in interracial rooms, $F(155) = 4.59$, $p < .05$. However, minority and majority participants in same-race rooms did not differ in their reported sense of belonging, $p > .51$.

Academic performance

Next, we sought to investigate the effect of room type on academic performance as assessed by grade point average (GPA) at the end of

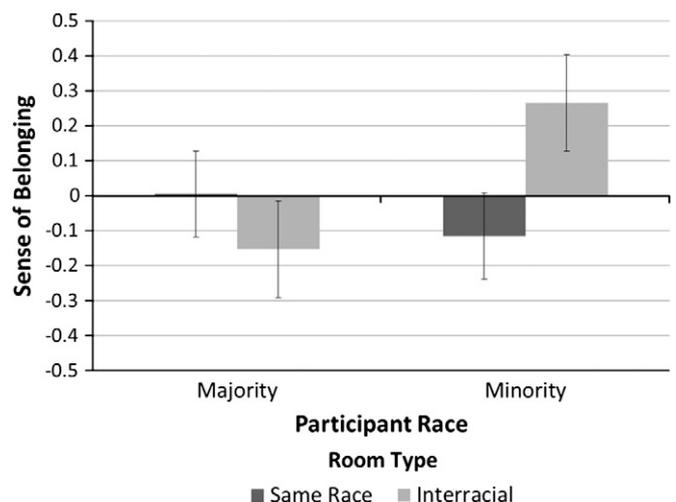


Fig. 1. Sense of belonging as a function of participant race and room type. Error bars represent ± 1 SE.

the spring semester. A 2 (participant race) \times 2 (room type) ANCOVA with SAT scores as a covariate was conducted. SAT scores were included as a covariate to control for students' general academic abilities. There was a Participant Race \times Room Type interaction, $F(1, 140) = 7.21, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$ (see Fig. 2). Minority students received higher GPAs in interracial rooms ($M = 3.13, SD = .60$) than in same-race rooms ($M = 2.54, SD = .99$), $F(1, 140) = 11.51, p < .01$. Room Type did not affect majority participants' GPAs, $p > .70$. There was also no difference between minority ($M = 3.13, SD = .60$) and majority ($M = 3.10, SD = .67$) participants' GPAs in interracial rooms, $p > .50$. However, minority students in same-race rooms ($M = 2.54, SD = .99$) received lower GPAs than majority students in same-race rooms ($M = 3.14, SD = .71$), $F(1, 140) = 10.11, p < .01$.

Correlational analyses

To examine the effect of sense of belonging on academic performance, we first correlated sense of belonging at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester with GPA, while controlling for SAT scores, for the entire sample. Including all of the participants, neither sense of belonging at the beginning of the semester ($r = .01, p > .85$) nor at the end of the semester ($r = .05, p > .50$) correlated with GPA. However, for minority participants, sense of belonging at the end of the fall semester significantly predicted GPA at the end of the spring semester ($r = .29, p < .05$). For majority participants, sense of belonging at the end of the fall semester was inversely related to GPA at the end of the spring semester ($r = -.22, p = .07$).

To determine whether the difference in academic performance for minority participants in same-race versus interracial rooms was due to differential sense of belonging, mediational analyses were conducted. For minority participants, room type significantly predicted both sense of belonging at the end of the fall semester ($B = .49, p < .05$) and GPA while controlling for SAT scores ($B = .62, p < .01$). As previously noted, sense of belonging at the end of the fall semester significantly predicted GPA while controlling for SAT scores ($B = .28, p < .05$). Controlling for sense of belonging, the relation between room type and GPA reduced in size ($B = .47, p < .05$). A Sobel test (MacKinnon & Dwyer, 1993) revealed that the reduction in the association was marginally significant, $z = 1.73, p < .09$. Similar results were found utilizing the bootstrapping procedure recommended by Lockwood and MacKinnon (1998). The 90% confidence interval of the indirect effect of room type on academic success through sense of belonging ($M = .10, SE = .08$) held a lower bound at zero (90%

$CI = .00-.24$), indicating a marginally significant partial mediation effect.

Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to test the effect of intergroup contact, specifically random assignment to an interracial dormitory roommate relationship, on sense of belonging at university and academic success, as assessed by grade point average. Previous research has indicated that intergroup contact may be particularly beneficial for minority group members in a predominantly White institution (e.g., Levin et al., 2006; Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008). We found that participants in interracial rooms generally reported a stronger sense of belonging at their university at the end of the fall semester as compared to the beginning of the semester and a slightly stronger sense of belonging compared to participants in same-race rooms. Regardless of participant race, assignment to an interracial room appeared to benefit students, resulting in greater self-reported belongingness and identification with the university.

Specifically for minority participants, students in interracial rooms reported a stronger sense of belonging at their university across both sessions than minority students in same-race rooms. Room type did not affect majority participants' sense of belonging, although majority participants in interracial rooms reported a lower sense of belonging than their minority participant counterparts. Room type also positively affected minority students' academic performance during their first year at university. That is, minority students in interracial rooms received higher GPAs at the end of the spring semester than minority students in same-race rooms. Room type did not affect majority students' GPAs, but majority students in same-race rooms earned higher GPAs than minority students in same-race rooms. Furthermore, mediational analyses suggested that sense of belonging partially mediated the effect of room type on academic performance for minority group members. The stronger sense of belonging at university for minority students in interracial rooms led to higher academic performance. Of course, the mediational evidence was marginal, so these conclusions are tentative. Further research and replication are necessary to support this finding. However, the mediational pattern is consistent with the theoretical framework of this research and suggestive of the benefits of intergroup contact on academic success. Together, these findings indicate that interracial roommate relationships have beneficial effects on the sense of belonging at university and academic success of minority group students at a PWI.

For majority participants, assignment to a minority or majority roommate did not affect sense of belonging or GPA. These findings are consistent with previous research that also found White students' adjustment to university and academic success unaffected by intergroup contact (e.g., Levin et al., 2006; Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008; Shook & Fazio, 2008b). As part of the majority group at a PWI, White students are less sensitive to race-based rejection and are less likely to make race-based attributions (e.g., Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Walton & Cohen, 2007). That is, their fit or place at a PWI is less uncertain. Thus, having a minority group roommate may have been less influential on majority participants' sense of belonging and performance at college.

These findings are particularly noteworthy, because the dormitory housing situation provides a true field experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to their roommates, thereby eliminating confounds such as self-selection and students' prior knowledge or experience with their roommate. Thus, causal inferences can be made, and the effects can be attributed to the room type. These findings are also noteworthy given the difficulties that tend to characterize interracial roommate relationships (e.g., Phelps et al., 1998; Shook & Fazio, 2008a). That is, although interracial roommate relationships tend to be less satisfying and less involved, the present data indicate that there are benefits to the living situation as compared to same-race roommate relationships.

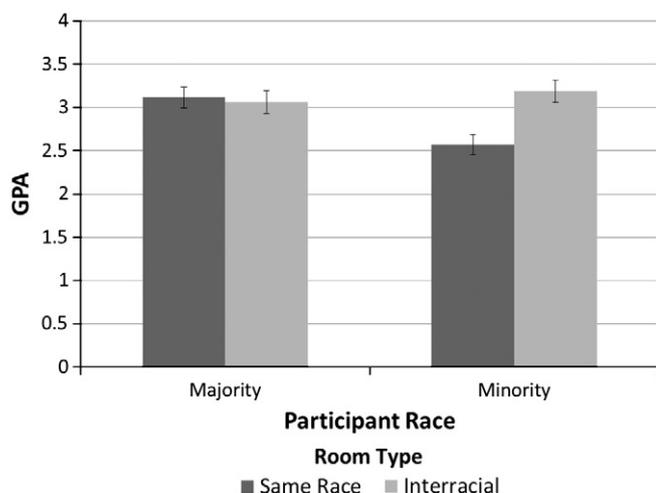


Fig. 2. Spring GPA as a function of participant race and room type, controlling for SAT scores. Error bars represent ± 1 SE.

The exact mechanism by which these benefits were conferred was not tested in the current research. Potentially, the interracial roommate relationships provided a buffer similar to what [Mendoza-Denton and Page-Gould \(2008\)](#) found with minority students who had more majority friends in their social networks, which resulted in more academic satisfaction and belonging. The interracial roommate relationship may have also affected minority students' perceptions of the extent to which their first semester difficulties generalized beyond their racial group ([Walton & Cohen, 2007](#)). In this personal setting, first-year minority students may find that they share common experiences of hardship and stress with their majority roommates, and vice versa. Such experiences may lead minority students to the perspective (similar to what was conveyed in the Walton and Cohen intervention) that doubting one's place at a university is normal for first-year students, and perhaps more importantly, these doubts and stressors are not specific to their racial group (i.e., stereotype threat). However, for minority students with minority group roommates, there is likely to be a reduced opportunity to disconfirm beliefs that common hardships are attributable to minority group status. That is, minority roommate relationships may provide less opportunity to discourage race-based attributions and expectations of discrimination. Indeed, [Levin et al. \(2006\)](#) found that minority students with more ingroup friends were more inclined to perceive discrimination toward their ethnic group. Same-race roommate relationships may also increase the likelihood of minority students experiencing collective threat, an extension of stereotype threat in which individuals are concerned that fellow ingroup members' behaviors may reinforce a negative group stereotype ([Cohen & Garcia, 2005](#)). In fact, collective threat can have negative consequences for minority group members' academic performance ([Cohen & Garcia, 2005](#)). Future work should test these potential mechanisms.

The present work highlights some important benefits of intergroup contact for both minority and majority group students. However, these benefits may be particularly significant for minority students at predominantly White academic institutions. Utilizing existing university residential housing practices, we found that random assignment to an interracial roommate relationship versus a same-race roommate relationship resulted in a stronger sense of belonging at university and a higher GPA for minority students. These findings have implications for improving academic satisfaction, performance, and retention.

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