4-29-2022

Hometown Diversity and Race Essentialism: The Role of Interracial Friendship Quality

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By

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Honors Thesis

Submitted to:

Psychology Department

University of Richmond

Richmond, VA

April 29, 2022

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate associations between high-quality interracial friendships and race essentialism among college students who perceived differing levels of racial diversity in their hometowns. Participants, who were recruited from a small, private university in the southeastern United States, included 84 juniors and seniors who reported having at least one other-race close friend. Participants completed a web-based survey about their hometown diversity, friendship quality, and race essentialism. Results from multiple regression analyses revealed two significant interaction effects between hometown diversity and two measures of interracial friendship quality: intimate disclosure and affection. Findings indicated that higher intimate disclosure and affection within interracial friendships were associated with lower race essentialism but only for individuals from less diverse hometowns. This study extends previous research on intergroup relationships and race essentialism and underscores the importance of high-quality interracial friendships for individuals from less racially diverse backgrounds.

Keywords: intergroup contact, intergroup friendship, race essentialism

Hometown Diversity and Race Essentialism: The Role of Interracial Friendship Quality

American college campuses are placing increasingly greater emphasis on diversity, inclusion, and intergroup contact. Intergroup contact has long been theorized to have the potential to reduce prejudice toward outgroup members and thus improve interracial relations (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). One crucial goal of promoting interracial relations is to reduce race essentialism, which refers to the lay theory that social categories, such as race, have underlying essences that cannot be observed directly (Gelman, 2004). For example, individuals who endorse race essentialist beliefs might think that people of a given race have different behavioral tendencies that they do not share with people of other races. Race essentialist thinking has been linked to stereotyping, prejudice, and beliefs in social hierarchies (e.g., Mandalaywala et al., 2018). Past literature has demonstrated that diversity exposure and interracial contact are associated with reduced race essentialism for college students (e.g., Pauker et al., 2018). However, the benefits of high-quality interracial friendship as a particular type of intergroup contact in reducing race essentialism have yet to be thoroughly investigated. This is of practical importance, as understanding what aspects of interracial contact contribute to the reduction of race essentialism would help inform colleges' practices in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate whether lower hometown diversity predicts higher race essentialism and what specific aspects of interracial friendship quality, if any, moderate this association.

Benefits of Intergroup Contact and Interracial Friendship

Previous research has demonstrated numerous cognitive and social benefits of diversity exposure and especially interracial contact. Racial diversity supports cognitive benefits,

including more creative thinking (Antonio et al., 2004) and more careful information processing (Sommers, 2006). For example, when White individuals were asked to discuss race-relevant topics and merely anticipated membership in a racially diverse group, they engaged in more thorough information processing (Sommers et al., 2008). Moreover, positive racial intergroup contact leads to reduced prejudice by reducing anxiety about intergroup contact and increasing empathy toward outgroup members (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). For example, White college students living with an other-race roommate for six months exhibited less anxious and more pleasant behaviors during a novel interracial interaction (Gaither & Sommers, 2013).

One important type of interpersonal relationship that involves substantial cross-racial interaction is interracial friendship. Research on interracial friendships among college students demonstrates that having racial diversity in college students' friendship groups increases students' commitment to understanding race and is associated with potential interracial interaction outside of the friendship group (Antonio, 2001). Research also shows that interracial friendship has a positive effect on college students' development of self-concept, ethnic attitudes, and intellectual self-confidence (e.g., Antonio, 2004; Levin et al., 2003). Evidence suggests that intergroup friendships confer positive effects on racial attitudes and cognitive outcomes. It is also possible that having an intergroup friend might challenge individuals' ideas about racial categories, such as race essentialist beliefs.

The Effects of Interracial Contact on Race Essentialism

Essentialist thinking has been shown to contribute to stereotyping, prejudice, and beliefs in social hierarchies. For example, individuals exhibiting more essentialist thoughts are more likely to endorse stereotypes across different social categories and believe in innate explanations

of stereotypes (Bestian & Haslam, 2006), have increased prejudice toward individuals from

stigmatized groups (Prentice & Miller, 2007), and regard existing social hierarchies and

inequalities as natural (Mandalaywala et al., 2018).

Previous research has demonstrated the malleable nature of essentialism and identified

several possible antecedents of decreased essentialist thinking, one of which is interracial

contact. Deeb et al. (2011) demonstrated that Jewish and Arab children attending integrated

schools are less essentialist in their thinking than children in mono-cultural schools, and

interethnic exposure contributes to decreases in essentialist mindsets. Moreover, children from

more racially diverse environments show less age-related increases in outgroup stereotyping and

essentialist thinking compared to children from predominantly White environments (e.g., Pauker

et al., 2016). These trends also exist in studies investigating adolescents, especially college

students. In a longitudinal study conducted at a large, multi-ethnic university over a period of

five years, Levin et al. (2003) found that students who had more outgroup friends in college were

more likely to exhibit positive ethnic attitudes at the end of college, controlling for other factors.

In line with this finding, a more recent longitudinal study from Pauker et al. (2018) showed that

White college students who moved from the continental United States to Hawai'i showed a

significant reduction in their essentialist beliefs about race over their first year of college, which

was related to increases in the racial diversity of their acquaintances. Moreover, research

demonstrates that mere contact or exposure to diversity is not sufficient; positive contact and

social interaction within a diverse context are critical to the way in which individuals react to

diverse surroundings (Stolle et al., 2008). High-quality interracial friendships represent one

important kind of positive intergroup contact and are especially crucial in forming beliefs among

emerging adults such as college students. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate how

three aspects of high-quality interracial friendships, rather than simply the presence of interracial friendships, are associated with lower race essentialism. Given that previous studies provide support for the link between racial diversity and reduced essentialism, it is reasonable to expect a similar pattern of associations for individuals from racially homogeneous backgrounds who have high-quality friendships with cross-racial individuals for several years.

The Present Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate hometown diversity, interracial friendship quality, and race essentialism among college students. Due to previous research demonstrating a strong correlation between interracial contact and lower race essentialism (e.g., Deeb et al., 2011; Pauker et al., 2018), I hypothesized that high-quality interracial friendships would be closely associated with the reduction of race essentialist thoughts. I further hypothesized that individuals with lower hometown diversity would score higher on race essentialism, and that high interracial friendship quality (including intimate disclosure, affection, and conflict) would diminish that association. This study focused on the interracial friendships of college juniors and seniors who are more likely than first- and second-year students to have established high-quality, lasting friendships with other-race peers. Investigating the specific qualities within interracial friendships that diminish race essentialism extends the existing literature on intergroup contact and would be the first step in identifying targeted intervention strategies to create more valuable intergroup contact to further reduce race essentialism thinking in college students.

Method

Participants

Initially, 181 juniors and seniors from a small, private university in the southeastern United States consented to participate. This study included a subsample ($n = 84$) of students who reported that they had at least one, other-race close friend. Participants were 65.5% female, 29.8% male, 2.4% gender fluid, and 2.4% non-binary. In addition, 96.4 % of the sample identified as cis-gendered, and 2.4% identified as transgendered and 1.2% preferred not to answer. The sample consisted of 63.1% juniors and 36.9% seniors, $M_{age} = 20.83$ years ($SD = 0.88$), and was made up of 38.1% White students, 16.7% East Asian students, 9.5% Hispanic or Latin American students, 8.3% South Asian students, 6% African American or Black students, 2.4% Middle Eastern students, and 16.7% who identified as Multiracial or other racial.

Procedure

Participants, who were recruited via an introductory psychology course participant pool and campus-wide advertisements and emails, received either course credit or a $5 Amazon gift code as compensation for their time, respectively. Data were collected using a self-administered Qualtrics survey. After verifying their junior or senior student status, participants provided informed consent, which acknowledged their options to skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering and to withdraw from the study at any time.

Participants were first asked to report their demographics and provide initials for three closest friends. Participants then completed friendship quality measures for each of their friends. Next, participants completed measures on hometown diversity and additional covariate measures[1]. After completing the survey, participants were debriefed regarding the study's

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[1] Covariate measures that have not been analyzed and will not be discussed further include Openness (John & Srivastava, 1999), Intergroup Contact Attitude (Phinney, 1992), and parental ethnic-racial socialization (Hughes and Johnson, 2001; Tran & Lee's, 2010).

purpose and instructed to refrain from talking to prospective participants about the study. This study was approved by the University of Richmond Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data Analysis Plan

Given the aim to examine interracial friendships, participants were included in the analyses only if they identified an other-race peer as their first friend and/or they indicated a relatively lower racial-ethnic-cultural connection with their first friend. It is also assumed that since participants were asked to identify three friends in hierarchical orders, the first friend each participant identified is their best friend. To evaluate the study hypotheses, I performed multiple linear regression analyses.

Measures

Hometown Diversity

To assess hometown diversity, participants responded to three items that asked "How racially diverse was your neighborhood (high school, city)? In other words, how many different racial-ethnic-cultural groups were there?" Response options ranged from 1 (*a little racially diverse*) to 6 (*extremely racially diverse*). These items were developed for this study, but informed by similar measures used in past research (Stevenson et al., 2005; Kearns & Whitley, 2018). A mean score of hometown diversity was computed for each participant, such that higher scores indicate higher hometown diversity. Reliability was acceptable for this measure with Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$.

Friendship Measures

For each of the three friends identified, participants were asked to indicate their friend's race and the number of months they have been friends, and to rate the racial-ethnic-cultural connection they feel with the friend and their friendship quality.

Racial-ethnic-cultural connection. The participant's perceived racial-ethnic-cultural connection with their friend was measured with the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron et al., 1992). Participants were asked to choose a pair of circles from seven with different degrees of overlap that best represents their racial-ethnic-cultural connection with their friend (1 = *no overlap* and 7 = *most overlap*).

Friendship quality. Friendship quality was measured with the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). For each friend they listed, they answered 9 questions assessing intimate disclosure, affection, and conflict. Intimate disclosure was measured with 3 items (e.g., "How often do you tell this person everything you're going through?"), with a Cronbach's α = .92[2]. Affection was measured by 3 items (e.g., "How much does this person like or love you?"), with a Cronbach's α = .87. Lastly, conflict was measured by 3 items (e.g., "How often do you and this person argue with each other?"), with a Cronbach's α = .87. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with each item on a 5-point scale (1 = *little or not at all* and 5 = *the most*). A mean score for intimate disclosure, affection, and conflict was computed for each participant's friend indicated, higher scores indicate better friendship quality.

Race Essentialism

Participants' race essentialism was measured by the phenotypic and behavioral subscales of the Beliefs About Race Scale (BARS; Tawa, 2017). These subscales consist of nine items, e.g., "Race groups are formed based on similar physical traits such as skin color or hair texture" and "People of the same race share similar behavioral characteristics (e.g., the tendency to speak loudly or quietly) that they do not share with people of different races" (1 = *strongly disagree,* 5 = *strongly agree*). A mean score of race essentialism was computed for each participant, such

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[2] Reliability coefficients for friendship quality are for responses to the first friend listed.

that higher scores indicate higher race essentialism. Reliability was acceptable for this measure with Cronbach's α = .78.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

I conducted preliminary analyses to obtain means, standard deviations for all study variables and bivariate correlations for some study variables. See Table 1. There was not a significant correlation between hometown diversity and race essentialism (r = -.01, p = .90), indicating that hometown diversity and race essentialism are not correlated within this sample. There were significant positive correlations between intimate disclosure and affection and intimate disclosure and conflict, which show the consistencies between the friendship measures.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics Table with All Continuous Variables

	Hometown Diversity	Race Essentialism	Intimate Disclosure	Affection	Conflict
Hometown Diversity	**2.94 (1.23)**				
Race Essentialism	-.01	**2.62 (0.65)**			
Intimate Disclosure	-.23*	-.19	**3.33 (1.02)**		
Affection	-.18	-.19	.64**	**3.56 (0.93)**	
Conflict	.02	.09	.23*	.14	**1.41 (0.73)**

Note. Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) appear in bold along the diagonal.

Correlations between variables appear below the diagonal. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Differences in Essentialism Among Those with Versus Without an Interracial Best Friend

 I examined differences in race essentialism between participants with an interracial best

friend and participants with a same-race best friend using an independent samples t test. I found

no evidence to suggest that individuals with an interracial best friend ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 0.76$)

differed from individuals with a same-race best friend ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.65$) in race

essentialism, 95% CI [-0.15, 0.30], $t(181) = 0.66$, $p = .15$.

Associations Between High-Quality Interracial Friendship, Hometown Diversity, and Race

Essentialism

 I conducted a multiple linear regression analysis to examine whether hometown diversity,

intimate disclosure with an other-race close friend, and the interaction of these two variables

predicted race essentialism. Hometown diversity and intimate disclosure were mean-centered

prior to the analysis such that a score of zero represented the sample mean. Both the main effect

of hometown diversity ($B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .91$) and the main effect of intimate disclosure

($B = -0.09$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .23$) on race essentialism failed to reach significance. However, these

main effects were qualified by a statistically significant interaction term ($B = 0.20$, $SE = 0.08$, p

$= .01$). To probe this interaction, I followed procedures as outlined by Aiken and West (1991).

When using intimate disclosure as the focal predictor and hometown diversity as the moderator,

at low levels of hometown diversity (-1 SD), intimate disclosure was negatively and significantly

associated with race essentialism ($b = -0.28$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .01$); while at moderate (M) and high

levels of hometown diversity (-1 *SD*), intimate disclosure was not significantly associated with race essentialism (for moderate *b*, see the main effect; for high levels, *b* = 0.11, *SE* = 0.11, *p* = .33). (See Figure 1.) Alternatively, when using hometown diversity as the focal predictor and intimate disclosure as a moderator, at low levels of disclosure (-1 *SD*), hometown diversity was significantly and negatively associated with race essentialism (*b* = -0.16, *SE* = 0.07, *p* = .04); while at moderate (*M*) and high levels of intimate disclosure (+1 *SD*), hometown diversity was not significantly associated with race essentialism (for moderate *b*, see the main effect; for high levels, *b* = 0.19, *SE* = 0.10, *p* = .08).

I also examined whether hometown diversity and affection for those with an other-race best friend interacted to predict race essentialism by running a multiple linear regression analysis. Hometown diversity and affection were mean centered prior to the analysis such that a score of zero represented the sample mean. Both the main effect of hometown diversity (*B* = -0.03, *SE* = 0.06, *p* =.60) and the main effect of affection (*B* = -0.12, *SE* = 0.08, *p* = .12) on race essentialism failed to reach significance. The interaction term was marginally significant (*B* = 0.14, *SE* = 0.07, *p* = .06). To probe this interaction, I again followed procedures as outlined by Aiken and West (1991). When using affection as the focal predictor and hometown diversity as the moderator, at low levels of hometown diversity (-1 *SD*), affection was significantly and negatively associated with race essentialism (*b* = -0.30, *SE* = 0.12, *p* = .01); while at moderate (*M*) and high levels of hometown diversity (-1 *SD*), affection was not significantly associated with race essentialism (for moderate *b*, see the main effect; for high levels, *b* = 0.05, *SE* = 0.13, *p* = .67). (See Figure 2.) Alternatively, when using hometown diversity as the focal predictor and affection as the moderator, at low levels of affection (-1 *SD*), hometown diversity was marginally and negatively associated with race essentialism (*b* = -0.17, *SE* = 0.10, *p* = .08); while at

moderate (*M*) and high levels of affection (+1 *SD*), hometown diversity was not significantly associated with race essentialism (for moderate *b*, see main effect; *b* = 0.10, *SE* = 0.01, *p* = .26).
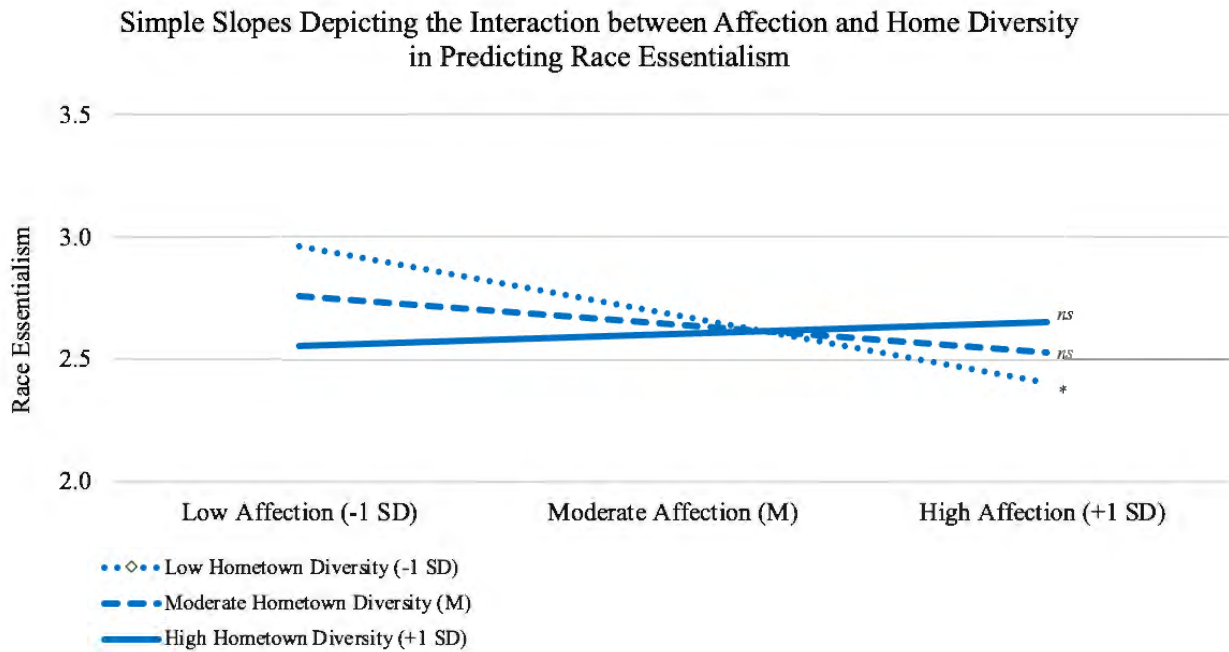
I then examined whether hometown diversity and conflict for those with an other-race best friend interacted to predict race essentialism by running a multiple linear regression analysis. Hometown diversity and conflict were mean centered prior to the analysis such that a score of zero represented the sample mean. Both the main effect of hometown diversity (*B* = - 0.01, *SE* = 0.06, *p* =.85) and the main effect of affection (*B* = -0.08, *SE* = 0.10, *p* = .46) on race essentialism failed to reach significance. The interaction term was not significant (*B* = -0.05, *SE* = 0.08, *p* = .50).

Figure 1
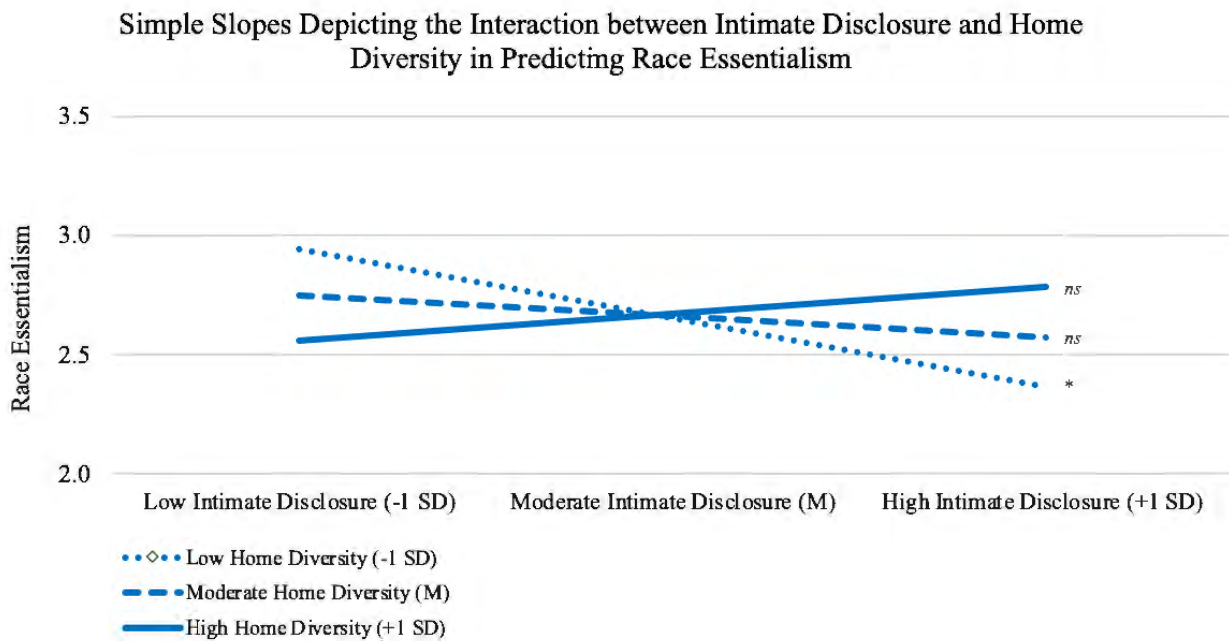
Note: Race essentialism is measured on a scale of 1-5. *ns* = not significant, * *p* < .05.

Figure 2

Simple Slopes Depicting the Interaction between Affection and Home Diversity
in Predicting Race Essentialism

Note: Race essentialism is measured on a scale of 1-5. *ns* = not significant, * *p* < .05.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the role of interracial friendship quality in moderating the association between hometown diversity and race essentialism in University of Richmond students. I hypothesized that individuals with lower home diversity would have higher race essentialism, and that high interracial friendship quality (including intimate disclosure, affection, and conflict) would diminish that association. Results showed that, although lower home diversity was not associated with higher race essentialism for individuals with an interracial best friend, high levels of intimate disclosure and affection within interracial friendships were associated with lowered race essentialism for individuals coming from more racially homogeneous places. No such relationship was observed for the friendship quality measure

conflict. These findings did not support the first hypothesis but partially supported the second hypothesis.

These findings both support and extend previous research on intergroup contact and race essentialism. Previous research demonstrated that cross-racial friendship, as one particular type of cross-racial contact, confers more cognitive and social benefits than mere intergroup contact due to its involvement of repeated good intergroup contact, intergroup cooperation and mutual understanding (Page-Gould et al., 2022). Consistent with these findings, results from my study provide correlational evidence indicating that having high intimate disclosure and affection with one's interracial best friend is associated with lower race essentialism when that individual comes from a less racially diverse environment. These findings point to the necessity of promoting high-quality interracial friendships in addition to striving for better diversity within universities or colleges.

Another finding of the study was that merely having a cross-race best friend was not associated with reduced race essentialism. This is consistent with previous studies that demonstrate that diversity exposure is not sufficient in reducing prejudice since positive contact and social interaction within the diverse context are critical to the way in which individuals react to and construe diverse surroundings (Stolle et al., 2008). Taken together, the findings of the current study highlight that interracial friendship alone is not sufficient and that these interracial friendships might provide more benefits for participants coming from more racially homogeneous backgrounds.

Though previous studies suggest that interracial contact reduces race essentialism (e.g., Pauker et al., 2018), this study extends such findings by examining associations between a specific form of interracial contact, interracial friendships, and race essentialism. It was found

that intimate disclosure and affection within interracial friendship were significantly associated with lower race essentialism for individuals coming from less diverse hometowns, while conflict within interracial friendship did not. This might be due to the nature of each measure of friendship quality. While intimate disclosure and affection are strong indicators of the closeness within friendships, conflict can signal both closeness in the case of good conflict resolution and disagreeableness (Laursen, 1993). Future research could disentangle the effects of conflict and conflict resolution and uncover whether the degree to which individuals agree or disagree with their interracial friends' values on various subjects is associated with lower race essentialism.

Limitations

One limitation of the study was that participants are susceptible to self-report bias and social desirability in this study given that the study relied on self-reports. As a result, participants might not be able to objectively evaluate their feelings, behaviors, and thoughts, and may answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others. Specifically, as a result of self-report bias and social desirability bias, participants might provide higher hometown diversity scores and lower race essentialism scores, and identify cross-race friends that they were actually not close to, making it less likely to observe the desired effects. However, given the significant associations observed, the elimination of such limitations would likely yield stronger effects. Another limitation is that participants might not be completely blind to the study hypothesis after answering several questions and therefore are more likely to identify outgroup friends or to score higher on their friendship qualities with outgroup friends. One more limitation is that the generalizability is somewhat reduced given our data being collected at a small, private university in the southeastern United States and the current context of intergroup dynamics on the campus where the data were collected.

Future Directions

Future research should examine whether the effects of high-quality interracial friendships for those coming from more racially homogeneous backgrounds might also extend to other consequential measures of prejudice, biases, and stereotyping. For example, high-quality interracial friendships might also contribute to the lowering of social dominance orientation and explicit prejudice toward racial minority groups. Future research should also go beyond college campuses to investigate whether the findings in this study apply to other institutions, other specific populations, or society as a whole. Moreover, future research should move beyond correlational, cross-sectional studies to investigate interracial friendships through longitudinal studes or even experimental designs in providing stronger and causal evidence on the benefits of sustained high-quality interracial friendships. Such studies would be important in identifying the factors within intergroup friendships that contribute to less intergroup prejudice and stereotyping and could be crucial in identifying relevant interventions and strategies in making college campuses more inclusive and equitable.

<div align="center">Conclusions</div>

My study extends previous research on intergroup relationships and race essentialism by showing how different aspects of interracial friendship quality moderate the association between hometown diversity and race essentialism among college students at the University of Richmond. The findings suggest that, for students from more racially homogenous backgrounds, high-quality interracial friendships are crucial in shaping their beliefs about race, specifically lowering their beliefs about racial essentialism. Though these results are correlational, they offer one mechanism by which racial essentialism might be reduced: the cultivation of high-quality interracial friendships.

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