Expect the Unexpected: Failure to Anticipate Similarities Leads to an Intergroup Forecasting Error

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People often expect interactions with outgroup members to go poorly, but little research examines the accuracy of these expectations, reasons why expectations might be negatively biased, and ways to bring expectations in line with experiences. The authors found that intergroup interactions were more positive than people expected them to be (Pilot Study, Study 1). One reason for this *intergroup forecasting error* is that people focus on their dissimilarities with outgroup members (Study 1). When the authors focused White participants' attention on the ways they were similar to a Black participant, their intergroup expectations changed to match their positive experiences (Studies 2 & 3). Regardless of focus, Whites expected to have pleasant intragroup interactions, and they were accurate (Study 4).

Keywords: affective forecasting, intergroup relations, similarity, race, intergroup contact

One of the best ways to reduce prejudice, according to decades of social psychological research, is to increase contact between outgroup members (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). If the right conditions are met—for example, if people have the opportunity for informal interactions and enjoy equal status—then social interaction is a tried and true way of reducing hostility and prejudice. There has been a good deal of attention to removing societal and structural barriers to intergroup contact by, for example, increasing integration in education and housing (e.g., Deutsch & Collins, 1951; Gerard, 1988). There has been less attention to psychological barriers to intergroup contact. Even if schools were fully integrated, individuals would need to make the effort to interact with and to get to know members of other groups. Researchers have found that people are reluctant to take this step because they underestimate outgroups members' interest and willingness to interact with them (Shelton & Richeson, 2005). In the present studies, we investigated another psychological barrier to intergroup contact that we call the intergroup forecasting error: People overestimate the negativity of interactions with outgroup members, in part because people focus on their differences from outgroup members and underestimate their similarities.

When people have negative expectations about social interactions, they are likely to avoid rather than approach members of other groups (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, & Purdie, 2002; Pinel, 1999; Plant & Devine, 2003; Shelton & Richeson, 2005). Because people who avoid an interaction do not have the opportunity to encounter disconfirming evidence, their existing attitudes and expectations might, therefore, be reinforced. Further, overly negative expectations can be costly in terms of lost opportunities or resources wasted in an attempt to prepare for a negative encounter that would not occur (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). And, as noted, correcting people's negative expectations might increase their willingness to interact with outgroup members, thereby reducing prejudice.

Why Intergroup Expectations Are Often Negative

Negative expectations of intergroup interactions appear to be the norm for members of both minority and majority groups. Heterosexual, lesbian, and gay individuals predicted that they would feel and behave less friendly and more nervously when interacting with members of the other sexual orientation than when interacting with members of their own group (Devine, Evett, & Vasquez-Suson, 1996). Similarly, Americans anticipated feeling more anxiety during interactions with non-Americans than during interactions with fellow Americans (Gudykunst & Shapiro, 1996).

People tend to form negative expectations of intergroup interactions for a number of reasons, especially when the interaction partner is a stranger (Gudykunst, 1989; G. R. Miller & Steinberg, 1975). When thinking about what an interaction partner is like, people often have little information to go on other than their stereotypes, which are often negative (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Gudykunst, 1989; Hamilton, Sherman, & Ruvolo, 1990; Hebl, Tickle, & Heatherton, 2000; G. R. Miller & Steinberg, 1975; Park, 1928). People may also focus too

much on perceived differences in both existing social groups (Holtz & Miller, 1985) and minimal groups (Allen & Wilder, 1979), given that people tend to perceive more similarity in opinions and beliefs between themselves and fellow ingroup members than they perceive between themselves and outgroup members (Allen & Wilder, 1979; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Further, people tend to assume that all outgroup members share similar dispositions and that these dispositions differ from those of the ingroup (Fiske & Ruscher, 1993; Jones, 1990; Simon, 1993). Yet in most cases, two people interact for a reason: They work together, they have mutual friends, or they belong to the same club. Reliance on stereotypes might lead people to overlook these binding ties and to expect to share fewer similarities with a person from a different social group than with a person from the same social group. In the same vein, Frey and Tropp (2006) suggested that metaperceptions generated across group boundaries also tend to rest heavily on assumed dissimilarities.

There is very little research on the extent to which negative expectations about interactions with outgroup members match experiences. Undoubtedly, negative expectations are sometimes correct. People who hold negative stereotypes about each other may act in unfriendly ways, even when trying their best to control their prejudice (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002). There is reason to believe, however, that interactions with outgroup members often go better than people expect. If so, people might exhibit an intergroup forecasting error, the tendency for expectations of intergroup interactions to be more negative than actual experiences.

Research on affective forecasting has shown that, in general, people are not very good at accurately predicting their emotional reactions to future events (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). Several sources of affective forecasting errors have been identified, including the tendency to misconstrue the nature of future events, to apply inaccurate theories, to overproject from one's current feelings, and to fail to anticipate the extent to which one has the psychological resources to cope with negative events (e.g., Gilbert, Driver-Linn, & Wilson, 2002; Gilbert & Wilson, 2000; Griffin & Ross, 1991; Hsee & Zhang, 2004; Loewenstein, O'Donoghue, & Rabin, 2003; Mellers & McGraw, 2001; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003, 2005; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). Drawing on these findings, we believe that one reason that intergroup expectations tend to be negative is that people misconstrue what their partner will be like. For example, when expecting to interact with a Black person that they do not know, Whites might focus on stereotypes, thereby overestimating the extent to which this particular Black person is different from Whites.

In reality, similarities may exist and may arise to smooth the social interaction. Indeed, in early research, Byrne and McGraw (1964) found that both high-prejudiced and low-prejudiced Whites responded positively to a Black stranger when they believed that they shared similar attitudes with the person. Failing to anticipate shared similarities could partially explain the intergroup forecasting error. Encouraging people to consider the similarities that they share with an outgroup stranger, rather than focus on the differences, might bring expectations more in line with experiences.

In the present research, we evaluated the nature and accuracy of intergroup and intragroup expectations, examined why intergroup expectations might not match experiences, and tested one way to bring intergroup expectations in line with actual experiences. In a pilot study, we tested the idea that people have more negative expectations for interactions with outgroup members than for interactions with ingroup members. In Study 1, we used a daily diary method to look at the extent to which intergroup expectations matched experiences in a variety of real world settings. In Study 2, we randomly assigned people to be forecasters or experiencers and examined the role that perceived similarity plays in explaining the intergroup forecasting error. In Study 3, we manipulated perceived similarity to test whether changing people's default focus on differences to a focus on similarities would reduce the intergroup forecasting error. In Study 4, we tested the hypothesis that the intergroup forecasting error is specific to interactions with outgroup members and does not apply to interactions with ingroup members.

Pilot Study

Imagine that as you take your seat on an airplane, you find that the stranger sitting next to you is a member of a different racial group. How would you feel if you struck up a conversation with that person? Would your expectation be correct? Past research indicates that forecasts about intergroup interactions will likely be negative. For example, nonheterosexuals (Devine, et. al., 1996) and Americans (Gudykunst & Shapiro, 1996) expected to have less pleasant interactions with heterosexuals and non-Americans than with members of their own group. We build on this research by comparing affective and experiential expectations about interactions with a variety of outgroups (i.e., race, sexual orientation, size) and expectations about interactions with the ingroup.

Method

Participants

We recruited 59 students (43 women, 16 men) to participate in the study in exchange for course credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 years to 22 years ($M = 18.5$, $SD = 0.88$). All participants reported that they were White.

Procedure

Participants read five scenarios describing hypothetical interactions. Each scenario began with the following:

> Please imagine you are traveling alone and you end up sitting next to the following individual on an airplane. Before the plane takes off, you spend a few minutes talking to this person. During the course of your conversation, you learn this about your neighbor:

Participants then read about the following people, in one of two random orders.

> Jason is a 28-year-old White male from Columbus, Ohio. He is a teacher.

> Sarah is a 29-year-old White female. She is from Reading, Pennsylvania and is a chef.

> Melissa is a 28-year-old White female who is 50 pounds overweight. She is from Roanoke, Virginia and processes workers compensation claims for a retail store.

J. P. is a 30-year-old African American male from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He works in advertising.

Brian is a 27-year-old gay White male. He is from Richmond, Virginia and manages a temporary employment agency.

Because all participants were White, the White male and White female characters constitute ingroup members. One feature indicates the outgroup status of three characters: size, race, and sexual orientation. According to research on categorization (e.g., Tajfel & Forgas, 1981) and stigma (Allport, 1954; Campbell, 1956), simply highlighting this unique feature will result in the perception of those three characters as outgroup members.

After reading each scenario, participants were asked to indicate how likely it was that they would feel annoyed, resentful, nervous, angry, afraid, enthusiastic, relaxed, happy, excited, and cheerful when interacting with the person, all on 7-point scales labeled 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very much* at the endpoints. Participants also indicated, on scales that ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much,* "How awkward would your interaction be?" "How much do you think you would like [person X]?" and, "How well do you think you would get along with [person X]?" We computed an anticipated negativity index by reverse scoring the ratings of positive emotion, the ratings of how well participants said they would get along with the person, and the ratings of liking for the person, and we averaged these scores with the negative emotions and the rating of anticipated negativity in the interaction (α = .94).

Results and Discussion

We conducted hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) using HLM 6.02a because, unlike analysis of variance (ANOVA), HLM accounts for the shared variance due to multiple observations within the same participant. Therefore, the parameter estimates generated from HLM (particularly the standard errors) are less biased than are those generated from ANOVA when the data are nested within participants. Coefficients produced by HLM can be interpreted in a manner similar to unstandardized beta weights. Group membership of the person rated was coded as follows: 0 = ingroup: White, and 1 = outgroup: gay, Black, and heavy. We entered group membership as a Level 1 predictor of anticipated negativity. We also entered the order of scenario presentation and the participant's gender as Level 2 predictors of anticipated negativity.

As predicted, participants expected to experience significantly more negativity with outgroup members (M = 3.04, SD = 0.89) than with ingroup members (M = 2.29, SD = 0.76; G_{00} = 2.09, SE = 0.49, p < .0001). There was no effect of participant gender (G_{10} = 0.09, SE = 0.24, *ns*). There was also an effect of order of presentation (G_{20} = −0.68, SE = 0.21, p = .002), but the effect of group membership was significant within each order (G_{00} = −0.71, SE = 0.30, p = .02, and G_{00} = −0.65, SE = 0.27, p = .02). Additionally, the intergroup and intragroup difference remained when we tested each type of outgroup (gay, Black, heavy) against the ingroup.

The pilot study data set the stage for our subsequent studies by showing that people have more negative affective and experiential expectations about interactions with outgroup than ingroup members. It also suggests that people are willing to express such negative expectations, despite possible social desirability concerns

about appearing prejudiced. The next step was to examine the accuracy of people's expectations about interactions with outgroup members, to test the hypothesis that these expectations are often more negative than actual experiences. Study 1 was a diary study in which people reported their expectations about or actual reactions to interactions with outgroup members. This study had the advantage of examining real-life interactions with a variety of outgroup members. As in most diary studies, however, we could not control the kinds of interactions people thought about or actually had. To address this issue, Studies 2, 3, and 4 were lab studies in which participants interacted with other participants who were outgroup members (Study 2) or with an experimental accomplice who was an outgroup member (Studies 3 & 4).

Study 1

We conducted a diary study to examine three aspects of the intergroup forecasting error. First, we tested the extent to which expectations about future intergroup interactions differed from reports of actual intergroup experiences. Second, we tested whether the negativity of forecasts or experiences differed depending on the type of outgroup under consideration (e.g., people of another race versus another gender). Third, we tested whether participants' group memberships affected the discrepancy between expectations and experiences. It may be the case that because, compared with majority group members, minority group members have more experience with intergroup interactions, minority group members' intergroup forecasts and experiences do not differ.

Method

Participants

We recruited 38 students (29 women, 9 men) from a psychology class to participate in the study in exchange for course credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 years to 48 years (M = 22.3, SD = 4.57). Participants provided demographic information during a study orientation session. Of the participants, 2 indicated that they were Asian, 3 said that they were Hispanic, 4 said that they were African American, 25 said that they were White, and 4 indicated that they were multiracial. Of the female participants, 3 provided only a single diary entry, and they were therefore excluded from the analyses. The results are very similar when the data from these 3 participants are included.

Procedure

Participants were asked to keep a daily diary of one intergroup interaction per day for a period of 5 days. Participants were told that intergroup interactions were encounters "with anyone who is from a different social group (e.g., gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, social class)." Half the participants, randomly assigned to be forecasters, were asked to write about how they thought they would feel and behave during an intergroup interaction that they expected to have during the day. For example, forecasters might know that they are going to a friend's apartment that night and that their friend's roommate is gay. The heterosexual forecaster would then complete the diary entry about the anticipated exchange with the friend's roommate. The other half of the participants, randomly assigned to be experiencers, were asked to

write about how they actually felt and behaved during an intergroup interaction. Forecasters were instructed to complete their report before engaging in the upcoming intergroup interaction, and experiencers were instructed to complete their report after finishing the intergroup interaction.

For each entry, all participants first were asked to recount the circumstances surrounding the intergroup interaction, following the prompt, "Please briefly describe the intergroup interaction." Participants then described the group membership of their interaction partner, following the prompt, "Explain how the other person differed from you in terms of social group membership." All participants reported only one category for the interaction partner. Then, forecasters indicated the extent to which they would feel four negative emotions (afraid, anxious, intimidated, depressed) during the interaction, whereas experiencers reported the extent to which they actually felt each emotion during the interaction, both on 7-point scales, on which $1 = $ *not at all* and $7 = $ *very much*. Emotion items were averaged to create a score representing anticipated or actual negative affect ($\alpha = .78$).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Participants reported a total of 172 interactions (84 forecasts, 88 experiences, $M = 4.80$ interactions per individual), the majority of which involved someone of a different race ($n = 66$), followed by interactions involving a different age group (e.g., the elderly, children; $n = 23$), gender ($n = 21$), mental or physical disability ($n = 21$), social status (e.g., professor vs. student, supervisor vs. employee; $n = 11$), sexual orientation ($n = 10$), weight ($n = 6$), and socioeconomic status ($n = 6$), and interactions involving nine events that fell into the category of other (e.g., sorority member, Republican). The majority of intergroup interactions were with strangers ($n = 120$), followed by interactions with peers ($n = 27$), friends ($n = 14$), and coworkers ($n = 11$). We were interested in forecasts and experiences with individuals who were relatively unknown to the participants, thus we excluded interactions with friends and coworkers and retained 147 interactions (70 forecasts, 77 experiences) for the remaining analyses.

We created a dummy-coded variable of level of outgroup threat in order to test whether (a) forecasters opted to report different kinds of interactions than experiencers, and (b) the type of outgroup affected the reports of negative emotions. We conceptualized level of outgroup threat as the level of danger that people typically associate with a given social group (Stangor & Crandall, 2000). Groups that are typically associated with high physical (e.g., violence, disease) or moral (e.g., values) threat include race, sexual orientation, and disability. In comparison, gender, age, social status, and size are groups that tend to be associated with less physical threat or less moral threat. We assigned high threat groups a value of 1 and low threat groups a value of 0. To test the first question related to level of outgroup threat, we conducted a chi-square analysis, which basically counts the number of observations per category. We found that level of outgroup threat, $\chi^2(1, N = 172) = 0.04$, *ns,* and target group membership more generally, $\chi^2(8, N = 172) = 5.61$, *ns,* did not differ between participants who were randomly assigned to predict experiences and those who were randomly assigned to report experiences.

Predicted Versus Experienced Negative Emotions

We used HLM to correct for multiple observations within participant. We entered type of report (forecast $= 1$, experience $= 0$) and level of outgroup threat (low threat $= 0$, high threat $= 1$) as Level 1 predictors of negative emotions, and we entered participant gender (female $= 0$, male $= 1$) and participant race (White $= 0$, not White $= 1$) as Level 2 predictors of intercept, of type of report, and of level of outgroup threat.

As predicted, forecasters anticipated more intense negative emotions during intergroup interactions ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.13$) than experiencers reported feeling ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 0.69$; $G_{00} = 1.95$, $SE = 0.99$, $p < .05$). The level of outgroup threat was not a significant Level 1 predictor of negative emotions ($G_{20} = -0.52$, $SE = 0.63$, *ns*), suggesting that the type of outgroup under consideration did not affect the intergroup forecasting error.

Participant race was not a significant Level 2 predictor of the intercept ($G_{02} = -0.59$, $SE = 0.47$, *ns*), of type of report ($G_{12} = -0.38$, $SE = 0.69$, *ns*), or of outgroup threat ($G_{22} = -0.56$, $SE = 0.557$, *ns*), suggesting that the intergroup forecasting error operated similarly for White and non-White participants. Similarly, participant gender was not a significant Level 2 predictor of intercept ($G_{01} = -0.01$, $SE = 0.57$, *ns*), of the type of report ($G_{11} = -0.79$, $SE = 0.76$, *ns*), or of level of outgroup threat ($G_{21} = 0.06$, $SE = 0.48$, *ns*), suggesting that intergroup forecasting error operated similarly for female and male participants.

Discussion

As predicted, forecasters anticipated that they would feel more negative emotions during intergroup interactions than experiencers reported feeling. An advantage of the diary methodology is that people described real social interactions of many types, increasing the external validity of our results. It is interesting that neither participant race nor participant gender moderated forecasts or experiences of negative affect. Both male and female forecasters from a variety of racial backgrounds showed the intergroup forecasting error.

A disadvantage of the diary methodology is that we could not control the kinds of interactions that people chose to report. It is possible that forecasters selectively reported one kind of interaction, whereas experiencers selectively reported another (e.g., only those that went especially well). There are, however, reasons to doubt this alternative explanation. First, there were no significant differences between the types of interactions that forecasters reported and the types of interactions that experiencers reported; that is, it was not the case that forecasters reported about upcoming interactions with one kind of outgroup whereas experiencers reported about interactions with a different kind of outgroup. Second, we found that level of outgroup threat was not associated with type of report; that is, forecasters were not more likely to report interactions with highly threatening outgroups and experiencers were not more likely to report interactions with mildly threatening outgroups.

Nonetheless, it is important to rule out the alternative hypothesis more directly, by controlling the kinds of intergroup interactions people have, which we did in Studies 2, 3, and 4. Study 2 had two main purposes. First, we attempted to replicate Study 1 in a laboratory experiment in which we held constant the kind of

interaction and assigned people to be forecasters or experiencers. Second, we examined a specific way in which forecasters might misconstrue an upcoming interaction with an outgroup member—namely, they might underestimate how similar they are to their interaction partner.

Study 2

Given that people form intergroup expectations based at least in part on stereotypes (Frey & Tropp, 2006; Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998), they should expect to share relatively few similarities with a partner who is from a different social group (Byrne & Wong, 1962). In reality, similarities may exist, regardless of social group membership, and may act to smooth the social interaction. For example, students who attend the same university likely live in the same dorms, take the same classes, and perhaps attend the same sporting events, thereby creating the possibility for shared similarities. Because those similarities are likely overshadowed by the partner's group membership, we thus predicted that forecasters would anticipate having little in common with an outgroup member and would anticipate having a relatively negative exchange with an outgroup member.

Another aim in this study was to compare the quality of intergroup and intragroup experiences. Perhaps it is the case that intergroup expectations are worse than intergroup experiences but that, overall, intergroup interactions are more negative than intragroup interactions. If so, then negative intergroup expectations might be based on an accurate comparison of intragroup and intergroup experiences. Alternatively, if people discover shared similarities during the course of an interaction, it could be that intergroup experiences are just as positive as intragroup experiences. If so, then negative intergroup expectations would be inaccurate in comparison with intergroup experiences and with intragroup experiences.

The participants in Study 3 were White undergraduates and Black undergraduates. Although it would have been ideal to use a complete Type of Report (forecaster or experiencer) $\times$ Race of Partner (same or different) $\times$ Race of Participant (White or Black) design, the main purpose in the study was to provide an initial test of the hypothesis that people make overly negative forecasts about interactions with an outgroup member because people underestimate how similar to themselves the outgroup member is. Therefore, we included three conditions: White participants who forecasted how they would feel when interacting with a Black participant, White and Black participants who rated their feelings after interacting with each other, and White participants who rated their feelings after interacting with a White partner.

Method

Participants

The participants, 109 students (54 women, 55 men), were recruited from psychology classes to participate in the study in exchange for course credit. We only recruited White ($n = 78$) and Black ($n = 31$) participants for this study.

Procedure

We recruited 1 Black participant and 2 White participants for each session, ostensibly to complete a concept-mapping task. After

signing the consent form, the experimenter asked all 3 participants to introduce themselves to each other and explained that they needed to complete a preliminary activity before they began concept mapping. The experimenter said,

> For this activity, two of you will remain in this room, and one will follow me to a separate room. To see who will go into the other room, I'm going to have you each draw a number from this cup.

The numbers in the cup ranged from 1 to 3, and all 3 participants believed that they had an equal chance of going to the separate room. The White participant who drew the highest number became the forecaster and went to another room. The other White participant and the Black participant became experiencers. If only 2 participants were scheduled or showed up for the session, then both participants were assigned to be experiencers. This procedure effectively yoked the White forecaster and the White experiencer to the same Black partner, allowing us to compare expectations and experiences in the same situation and with the same partner.

Experiencers. In the experiencer condition, the experimenter said,

> In order to get the most out of the concept-mapping technique, it is best if the people using the technique get to know each other a bit first. So for the next 7 minutes, we'd like for the two of you to talk. You can discuss any topics that come to mind.

All conversations were videotaped with the participants' permission and were later analyzed for content. After the conversation, the participants were taken to separate tables on different sides of the room to complete questionnaires about their experience.

All items were answered on scales ranging from $1 = $ *not at all* to $11 = $ *very much*. Participants answered six questions about their feelings during the interaction (anxious, intimidated, uneasy, comfortable, secure, relaxed). We reverse scored the positive emotions and averaged all items to form an index of negative emotions ($\alpha = .89$). Participants answered five questions about their evaluation of the interaction ("I felt comfortable interacting with my partner," "I liked my partner," "I would like to get to know more about my partner," "If given the opportunity, I think that my partner and I could be friends," and "If given the opportunity, I would like to participate in an additional experiment with my partner."). We reverse coded these items and averaged them to form an index of negativity of partner evaluations ($\alpha = .89$).[1] Participants also responded to two statements about how similar they were to their partner ("My partner is quite similar to myself," and "My partner and I have a lot in common."), which we averaged to form a measure of perceived similarity ($\alpha = .82$).

An exploratory principle components analysis of the emotion, partner evaluation, and similarity items revealed three distinct factors with all items loading cleanly on the appropriate factor. Emotions were moderately correlated with partner evaluation ($r = -.38$) and similarity ($r = -.22$). Partner evaluation was moderately correlated with similarity ($r = -.49$). Because items belonging to each scale loaded onto a unique factor and the factors were not strongly correlated with each other, we retained three distinct scales.

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[1] Participants answered several other items that are not related to the current article.

Forecasters. Forecasters were asked to imagine what it would be like sitting in the next room, talking to one of the two experiencers. The experimenter asked the forecaster to draw a letter from a cup to determine which experiencer she or he would imagine talking to. Regardless of the letter drawn, the forecaster was asked to imagine talking with the Black participant. Forecasters answered the same questions as experiencers.

Coding of Videotaped Interactions

Four trained research assistants (two White, two Black) independently coded the videotaped interactions for positivity of behavior. The assistants separately rated the following items for Black and White participants: "The participant was comfortable interacting with the interaction partner," "The participant seemed to like the interaction partner," and "These two could be friends." All ratings were made on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*. Coder reliability was acceptable for each item (α = .92, α = .80, and α = .79, for comfortable, liked, and friends, respectively). We averaged ratings on these items to create a positivity scale. Reliability for the scale was acceptable (α = .86 for the Black coders; α = .89 for the White coders).

Results

Forecasted Versus Experienced Negativity of the Interactions

We hypothesized that White forecasters would predict that interaction with the Black participant would be more negative than White experiencers reported it to be. To test this hypothesis, we compared forecasters and experiencers who were randomly assigned to their roles. Because the intergroup forecasters and experiencers were yoked to the same Black experiencer, we used a paired *t* test to compare the forecasts with the experiences. As hypothesized, forecasters expected the interaction to be more negative than White intergroup experiencers reported it to be (M = 4.51 vs. M = 3.35; SDs = 1.95 and 1.99, respectively), $t(47)$ = −2.73, p = .009, for negative emotions and (M = 5.20 vs. M = 4.01; SDs = 1.58 and 1.90, respectively), $t(47)$ = −3.96, p < .001, for partner evaluation. Not only did the intergroup interactions go better than Whites predicted, they went as well as the intragroup interactions did. Whites interacting with Blacks reported as positive an experience as did Whites interacting with other Whites (M = 3.42 vs. M = 3.53; SDs = 1.94 and 2.15, respectively), $t(51)$ < 1, *ns*, for negative emotions and (M = 4.12 vs. M = 4.00; SDs = 1.51 and 1.80, respectively), $t(51)$ < 1, *ns*, for partner evaluation. (These analyses included all people assigned to the role of experiencer, not just those sessions in which there were also forecasters.) Moreover, Blacks viewed the interaction as positively as did their White partners (M = 3.04 vs. M = 3.41; SDs = 1.79 and 1.93, respectively), $t(59)$ < 1, *ns*, and for partner evaluations (M = 4.15 vs. M = 4.00; SDs = 1.90 and 1.80, respectively), $t(59)$ < 1, *ns*.

To test the overall pattern of results, we conducted a planned comparison with the following contrast weights: Whites' forecasts of interacting with Blacks = −2, Whites' experiences with Blacks = 1, and Whites' experiences with Whites = 1. The contrasts were significant for negative emotions, $t(103)$ = −2.41, p = .02, and for partner evaluation, $t(103)$ = −2.36, p = .02.

Actual Quality of the Interaction

White participants may have reported that the interaction with the Black participant was more positive than it actually was, for social desirability reasons. One argument against this possibility is that forecasters were willing to predict that the interaction with the Black partner would be negative, and it is unclear why they would be less susceptible to social desirability concerns than experiencers. The coder ratings of the actual interactions were also inconsistent with a social desirability interpretation. First, coders perceived that Whites expressed about the same amount of positivity when interacting with other Whites as they did when interacting with Blacks (M = 4.64 vs. M =4.83; SDs = 0.98 and 0.65, respectively), $t(53)$ < 1, *ns*. Second, we examined whether outside observers perceived that Black experiencers exhibited less positivity than White experiencers, which might have occurred if White experiencers were less comfortable interacting with Blacks than with Whites. The outside observers did not perceive a difference; coders rated the Black and White interaction partners very similarly in terms of how much positivity they expressed during the conversation (M = 4.65 vs. M = 4.75; SDs = 0.78 and 0.81, respectively), $t(83)$ < 1, *ns*. Coder ratings, therefore, matched Black and White experiencers' reports of the interaction. There were no significant differences between the ratings of the Black coders and the ratings of the White coders. To be sure, these are all null findings, but the fact that Black and White outside observers believed that Whites expressed the same positivity with White and Black partners and that Blacks and Whites enjoyed the intergroup interaction equally adds weight to the conclusion that forecasters were incorrect in their predictions of a negative interaction with a Black partner.

Forecasted Similarities Versus Experienced Similarities With the Interaction Partner

As hypothesized, White forecasters viewed themselves as less similar to the Black partner than White experiencers did (M = 4.65 vs. M = 5.27; SDs = 1.48 and 1.64, respectively), $t(47)$ = 2.64, p = .01. Moreover, White experiencers reported about the same level of similarity to the Black partners and the White partners (M = 5.27 vs. M = 5.64; SDs = 1.79 and 1.36, respectively), $t(72)$ < 1, *ns*. Finally, Black and White partners reported about the same level of similarity (M = 5.19 vs. M =5.29; SDs = 1.72 and 1.39, respectively), $t(72)$ < 1, *ns*. A planned comparison (Whites' forecasts of interacting with Blacks = −2, Whites' experiences with Blacks = 1, and Whites' experiences with Whites = 1) was significant, $t(105)$ = 2.08, p = .04.

Furthermore, regression analyses revealed that perceived similarity mediated the relation between type of report (forecast vs. experience) and partner evaluation (Sobel z = 1.93, p = .05). Whites failed to anticipate how similar they would find their Black partner to be (B = −0.23, p = .04), and the more similarity they perceived, the less negatively they evaluated their partner, after controlling for condition (forecaster vs. experience; B = −0.45, p = .001). Finally, the direct link between type of report and

partner evaluation was reduced from $B = 0.29$, $p = .01$ to $B = 0.18$, *ns,* when perceived similarity was included in the equation.[2]

Discussion

As predicted, Whites did not expect to share similarities with a Black partner or to have a positive intergroup interaction. These expectations were wrong; White intergroup experiencers reported significantly higher levels of similarity than did forecasters, significantly lower negative emotions, and significantly higher partner evaluations. Further, we found no evidence that White experiencers had less positive interactions with Blacks than Whites or that White experiencers perceived that they were less similar to Blacks than Whites. It appears that, during the interactions, White participants discovered similarities shared with Black partners, which contributed to the positivity of these interactions. Therefore, in this study, intergroup expectations were inaccurate in two ways: (a) Intergroup expectations were more negative than intergroup experiences, and (b) intergroup experiences were just as positive as intragroup experiences.

The overall positivity of the interaction appeared to be genuine, as it was confirmed by self-report, by third party ratings of the videotaped conversations, and by ratings by the Black partner. Our argument, we should note, does not depend on there being no differences between intergroup experiences and intragroup experiences. Rather, we argue that intergroup experiences are often more positive than people anticipate, and the results of Studies 1 and 2 support this prediction.

People who have negative expectations about interactions with outgroup members are likely to avoid intergroup interactions (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Pinel, 1999). Because willingness to engage in intergroup contact is key in reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000), it is thus important to find ways to make expectations more closely match experiences. The results of Study 2 suggest a possible way to do this. Forecasters erred in believing that they would not be similar to Blacks, which may have led to the belief that the interaction would not be positive. Focusing Whites on their similarities with an outgroup member, in advance of an interaction, may thus change their expectations about how the interaction will go. We tested this hypothesis in Study 3.

Study 3

One way to improve intergroup expectations would be to point out to Whites that they share important attitudes with an outgroup interaction partner, which numerous studies have shown increases liking in interpersonal exchanges (e.g., Clore & Byrne, 1974; Rokeach, 1960). Instead, we hypothesized that it might be enough to focus people's attention on the fact that they share mundane similarities with the outgroup member, such as preferring apples to oranges. In fact, we held constant the degree of actual similarity and simply asked some participants to focus on their similarities with their partner and other participants to focus on their differences from their partner. We predicted that focusing even on trivial similarities would be enough to change the default focus on differences when making intergroup forecasts and that this would be enough to reduce the intergroup forecasting error.

We did not expect that the actual quality of experiences would necessarily differ, depending on whether participants focused on similarities or differences. Regardless of focus, during the course of the conversation the participants might seek out or discover shared similarities with the partner, and those similarities could smooth the interaction (as appears to have happened in Study 2).

Method

Participants

In exchange for credit toward fulfilling a requirement in a psychology class, 41 White female students participated in the study. There were no significant effects of gender in the previous studies.

Procedures

When participants reported to the lab, they met a Black female confederate. To minimize the likelihood that results were due to the individual characteristics of any one confederate, one of two female research assistants played the role of the Black confederate. Confederates were unaware of the condition to which their partner was assigned, and confederates were trained to act in a similar manner with all participants, regardless of the friendliness of the participant (e.g., confederates were instructed to mainly respond to questions rather than generate them).

After exchanging names with the confederate and signing the consent form, the participant was taken to a separate room and asked to indicate her preference for 27 pairs of mundane items, such as apples versus oranges and carpets versus hardwood floors. Once participants completed the questionnaire, they were told that we would show their answers to their partner and that we would let them see their partner's responses. The experimenter took the participant's answers to the other room where the confederate always matched exactly 70% of the participant's choices.

Similarity focus versus difference focus. Before the participant read the confederate's answers, the experimenter said, "When reading her answers, I'd like for you to focus on the [similarities/ differences] between your answers and those of your partner. Think about how [similar/different] your answers are when you first read them." Participants were then randomly assigned to write a couple of paragraphs describing the similarities ($n = 20$) or differences ($n = 21$).

Forecasts and experiences. Participants then made forecasts about their upcoming conversation with the confederate while they were by themselves in the separate room. Participants were assured that their responses would be anonymous and would never be seen by the experimenter or the confederate. To reinforce this statement, participants inserted their completed questionnaire into an envelope. Thus, it is unlikely that participants felt compelled to respond as they thought they should or according to how they thought the experimenter wanted them to. They then moved back

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[2] We found the same mediation pattern for emotion as for partner evaluation, though the pattern was somewhat weaker.

to the other room and had a 5 min conversation with the confederate.[3]

Debriefing.   To rule out the possibility that demand characteristics explain our results (i.e., that participants are guessing the hypothesis and answering in line with their guess), the experimenter conducted an extensive funnel debriefing with all participants to assess their level of suspicion and their best guess about the research hypothesis. Most participants did not come close to guessing the hypothesis, and no participant guessed the full hypothesis.

Dependent measures.   Participants answered the same set of questions two times. The first time, the questions were phrased in the future tense (forecasts) and were answered before the actual interaction. The second time, the questions were phrased in the past tense (experience) and were answered after the actual interaction. All items were answered on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 11 = *very much*. Participants predicted and reported six emotions (anxious, intimidated, uneasy, secure, relaxed, happy), as well as three evaluations of the quality of the interaction: "I [will be/was] able to make the interaction go smoothly," "My partner [will feel/felt] comfortable interacting with me," and "I [will like/liked] my partner." The emotion and evaluation scales were highly correlated ($r = .77$, $p < .001$, and $r = .73$, $p < .001$, for forecasts and experiences, respectively), so we combined the average of negative emotions and (reverse scored) evaluations for an overall indicator of the negativity of the interaction ($\alpha = .92$, and $\alpha = .93$, for forecasts and experiences, respectively). Results are identical when the scales are analyzed separately.

Results

Our first prediction was that focusing on similarities shared with the Black partner would reduce the intergroup forecasting error. This prediction was confirmed with a between–within ANOVA, with focus (similarities, differences) as the between-subjects factor and type of report (forecast, experience) as the within-subjects factor. There was a significant main effect of type of report, $F(1, 39) = 49.12$, $p < .001$, reflecting the fact that forecasted affective reactions ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.26$) were more negative than experienced affective reactions ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.20$). As hypothesized, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between focus (similarities, differences) and type of report (forecast, experience), $F(1, 39) = 5.38$, $p = .03$ (see means in Figure 1). Simple effects tests showed that, as predicted, participants' forecasts were more positive when participants focused on similarities than when participants focused on differences, $t(39) = 3.36$, $p = .002$. As we anticipated, there was no significant difference between people's experienced affect when they focused on differences and their experienced affect when they focused on similarities, $t(39) < 1$, *ns*. This finding is consistent with Study 2, in which it was found that even when Whites had negative expectations about an intergroup interaction, the interaction went more positively than expected. Finally, simple effects tests showed that when people focused on differences, their forecasts were significantly more negative than were their experiences, $t(39) = 6.68$, $p < .001$. When people focused on similarities, their forecasts were also significantly more negative than were their experiences, $t(39) = 3.28$, $p = .002$, but to a lesser degree (as indicated by the significant Similarity and Difference × Forecast and Experience
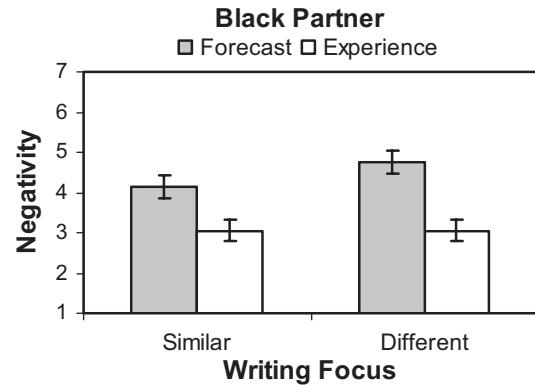

Figure 1.   White participants' forecasted negativity versus experienced negativity of interacting with a Black partner, by whether people focused on similarities with or differences from their partner (Study 3). The error bars represent the standard error.

interaction reported previously). To summarize, people in the Black partner condition who focused on differences showed the same intergroup forecasting error as people in Study 2 who were not asked to focus on similarities or differences, suggesting that focusing on differences is the default in intergroup interactions. As predicted, asking people to focus on similarities reduced the intergroup forecasting error, though it did not completely eliminate it.

Discussion

Study 3 found a way to reduce the intergroup forecasting error, namely by having people focus on their similarities with a member of a different race. People who focused on trivial similarities made more positive affective and experiential forecasts, and made more accurate forecasts, than people who focused on differences. It is interesting that focusing on similarities or differences had no significant effect on the actual quality of the interaction, possibly because people in both differences and similarities conditions discovered, once they began the interaction, that they had things in common with their partner. Further, most participants were probably motivated to make the interaction go as smoothly as possible and found ways to ensure that it did. Past research on compensation found that if one or both partners attempt to compensate for potential awkwardness in an interaction, the quality of the conversation is likely to improve (C. T. Miller & Major, 2000).

Study 4

Studies 1–3 demonstrated that people make overly negative forecasts about interactions with outgroup members. It is possible, however, that this error is not limited to predictions about outgroups; perhaps people underestimate how positive an interaction

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[3] To see whether making forecasts about the interaction influenced people's actual interactions, we also ran conditions in which participants interacted with the confederate without making forecasts. Because the ratings of the interactions in these conditions did not differ significantly from the ratings of participants who made forecasts, we report the results of the within-participant (forecasts vs. experiences) analysis only. A between-subjects analysis produced similar results.

will be with any stranger, including members of their ingroup. In contrast, we predicted that people are especially likely to underestimate their similarity with outgroup members and therefore people will be more likely to underestimate the positivity of interactions with outgroup members, compared with ingroup members. To test this prediction, we replicated Study 3, with the addition of conditions in which White students interacted with White partners. The study thus was a Type of Report (forecast vs. experience) × Focus (similarity vs. difference) × Race of Partner (White vs. Black) between-participants design. We expected to replicate Study 3 results when people interacted with a Black partner, in that they would make overly negative forecasts when asked to focus on differences. In contrast, we expected people to make relatively positive forecasts about their interactions with a White partner, regardless of whether they focused on differences or similarities.

Method

Participants

In exchange for credit toward fulfilling a requirement in a psychology class, 81 White women participated in the study.

Procedure

The procedure was identical to Study 3, with three exceptions. First, participants interacted with either a Black or a White confederate. Second, participants reported either forecasts or experiences and not both. Third, we videotaped the interactions between the participant and the confederate, so that we could code the quality of the interactions.

Materials

Forecasters read items that were phrased in the future tense and completed items before the interaction, whereas experiencers read items that were phrased in the past tense and completed items after the interaction. All items were answered on a scale from $1 = not$ at all to $11 = very$ $much$. Participants predicted and reported eight emotions (anxious, intimidated, uneasy, comfortable, secure, relaxed, confident, happy). We reverse scored positive items so that higher numbers indicate more negative emotions ($\alpha = .89$). Participants also predicted or reported six evaluations of the quality of the interaction. Three items were also used in Study 3: "I [will be/was] able to make the interaction go smoothly," "My partner [will feel/felt] comfortable interacting with me," and "I [will like/liked] my partner." We added three items for this study: "I felt comfortable interacting with the other participant," "The other participant liked me," and "The two of us ended up having a lot in common." We reverse scored the items so that higher numbers indicate more negative experiences and averaged the six items ($\alpha = .88$). The emotion and experience scales were highly correlated ($r = .69$, $p < .001$), so we combined them to form an index of interaction negativity ($\alpha = .92$). Results are the same when the scales are analyzed separately.

Coding of Videotaped Interactions

Four trained research assistants (two White, two Black) independently coded the videotaped interactions. They rated the same items that we used in Study 2 to assess positivity, "The participant was comfortable interacting with the interaction partner," "The participant seemed to like the interaction partner," and "These two could be friends," all on scales from $1 = not$ at all to $7 = very$ $much$. Coder reliability was acceptable for each item ($\alpha = .74$, $\alpha = .67$, and $\alpha = .72$, for comfortable, liked, and friends, respectively). We averaged ratings on these items to create a positivity scale. Coder reliability for the scale was also acceptable ($\alpha = .91$ for the Black coders; $\alpha = .90$ for the White coders).

The coders also assessed three aspects of confederate behavior during the conversations: how much the confederate smiled, how much the confederate nodded (both on scales ranging from $-3 =$ $none$ to $3 = a$ lot), and how much the confederate talked ($-3 =$ $much$ $less$ $than$ the $participant$ to $3 = much$ $more$ $than$ the $participant$). We found acceptable reliability for smiling ($\alpha = .75$), nodding ($\alpha = .79$), and talking ($\alpha = .68$). Reliabilities did not differ by coder race.

Debriefing

The experimenter conducted an extensive funnel debriefing with all participants to assess their level of suspicion and their best guess about the research hypothesis. Most participants did not come close to guessing the hypothesis, and no participant guessed the full hypothesis.

Results

As in Study 3, we predicted that focusing on the similarities shared with the Black partner would reduce the intergroup forecasting error. We did not expect to find evidence of the forecasting error for White partners. This prediction was confirmed with a 2 (type of report: forecast vs. experience) × 2 (focus: similarities vs. differences) × 2 (race of partner: Black vs. White) between-subjects ANOVA. There was a significant main effect of type of report, $F(1, 73) = 7.86$, $p = .006$, reflecting the fact that forecasted negativity ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 0.22$) was greater than the experienced negativity ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.22$). As hypothesized, this main effect was qualified by a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 73) = 7.13$, $p = .009$.

As seen in Figure 2A, we replicated Study 3. When Whites interacted with Blacks, those participants who focused on differences forecasted that the interaction would be more negative than it was, $t(73) = 4.74$, $p > .001$. Those who focused on similarities forecasted that the interaction would be positive, and these forecasts did not differ significantly from experiences, $t(73) = 0.33$, ns. Replicating Study 3, a planned contrast showed a significant interaction between focus (similarities, differences) and type of report (forecast, experience) in the Black partner condition, $t(73) = 3.38$, $p = .001$. The effect was not significant in the White partner condition, $t(73) = -0.74$, ns.

As seen in Figure 2B, there was no evidence of forecasting errors in the White partner condition. People forecasted that the interaction would go relatively well, and it did go relatively well. There were no significant main effects of focus or type of report nor a significant interaction, $Fs(1, 31) < 0.50$. As in Study 2, there were no significant differences in people's ratings of the actual interactions with a Black partner versus a White partner, $Fs(1, 73) < 0.50$.
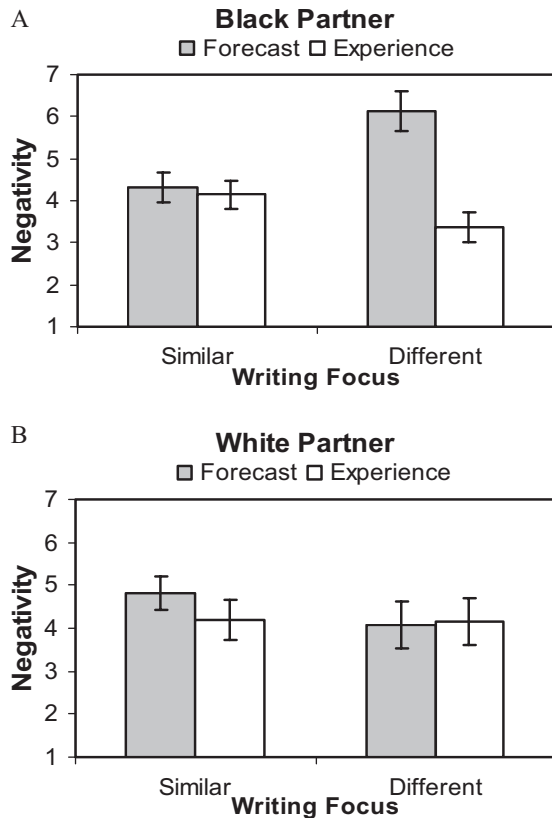
A

Black Partner
☐ Forecast ☐ Experience

B

White Partner
☐ Forecast ☐ Experience

Figure 2. A: White participants' forecasted negativity versus experienced negativity of interacting with a Black partner, by whether people focused on similarities with or differences from their partner (Study 4). B: White participants' forecasted negativity versus experienced negativity of interacting with a White partner, by whether people focused on similarities with or differences from their partner (Study 4). In both panels, the error bars represent the standard error.

Another way of characterizing the results is that when Whites were paired with Blacks and focused on differences, they forecasted that the interaction would be significantly more negative than it was, $t(73) = 3.07$, $p = .003$. In every other condition, forecasts did not differ significantly from experiences, $ts(73) < 1.00$, $ps > .30$. Also, when focused on differences, Whites' forecasts for interacting with a Black partner were more negative than Whites' forecasts for interacting with a White partner, $t(73) = 2.89$, $p = .005$.

As in Study 2, we tested the possibility that participants were exaggerating how well their interactions with Black partners went. Contrary to this social desirability interpretation, coders perceived that Whites expressed the same amount of positivity when interacting with other Whites as they did when interacting with Blacks ($M = 5.26$ vs. $M = 5.48$; $SDs = 0.95$ and 1.12, respectively), $t(79) < 1.50$, ns. There were no significant differences between the ratings of Black coders and the ratings of White coders. We also tested the possibility that White confederates responded differently from Black confederates in the interactions. Contrary to this possibility, confederate behavior did not differ significantly across conditions for smiling, $F(1, 72) = 0.42$, ns, nodding, $F(1, 72) = 0.35$, ns, or talking, $F(1, 72) = 1.53$, ns. To be sure, these are all

null findings, but the fact that Black and White outside observers believed that Whites expressed the same positivity toward White partners and Black partners adds weight to the conclusion that forecasters were incorrect in their predictions of a negative interaction with a Black partner.

Discussion

As in our first three studies, we found that although people expected intergroup interactions to go poorly, they tended to go quite well—as well as intragroup interactions. Study 4 adds an important piece to the puzzle by showing that intergroup forecasts were more negative (and less accurate) than intragroup forecasts in the same situation. We also replicated the finding that asking Whites to focus on similarities with a Black partner produced forecasts that more closely matched experiences. In fact, in Study 4, forecasts did not differ from experiences when Whites focused on similarities.

General Discussion

In many cases, people who find themselves on an airplane, seated next to a stranger who is from a different social group, will anticipate a long and uncomfortable journey. Our data suggest that if they strike up a conversation with the stranger, the interaction would be more pleasant than they anticipated. In Studies 1–4, we found that people's affective forecasts about interactions with outgroup members were more negative than were people's reports about actual interactions with outgroup members. Study 1 was a diary study in which people made forecasts about or reported experiences with outgroup members in everyday life. A disadvantage of this study is that we could not be certain that people were forecasting and reporting about identical interactions. In Study 2, we avoided this problem by randomly assigning people to forecast or to experience an interaction with a participant of a different race. Study 3 went one step further with a within-participant design, in which White participants forecasted how they would feel in an interaction with a Black participant and then reported how they actually felt after interacting with her. In Study 4, we compared intergroup forecasts with intragroup forecasts and showed that focusing on similarities versus differences uniquely reduced the forecasting error in an intergroup context. The fact that similar findings were obtained in studies in which different methodologies were used adds to our confidence about the generalizability of the results.

Study 2 revealed one possible reason for the intergroup forecasting error: People assumed that they would not be very similar to their partner, failing to anticipate that they would discover similarities when they actually interacted with him or her. In Studies 3 and 4, we discovered a way to reduce the intergroup forecasting error: focusing people's attention on similarities with their partner, even trivial ones such as the fact that they both prefer apples to oranges. In our example of the plane trip, then, simply reminding people that they undoubtedly share things in common with their seatmate (after all, the other person is taking the same flight, possibly to the same final destination) might be enough to correct people's forecasts and increase the likelihood that they will start a conversation with the person.

In Study 2, in which we did not ask participants to focus on similarities or differences, participants made the intergroup forecasting error and underestimated their similarities with their Black partner. It thus appears that focusing on differences is the default in intergroup interactions and that asking people to focus on similarities—even the trivial ones manipulated in Studies 3 and 4—can reduce the forecasting error. Of course, other factors likely contribute to the intergroup forecasting error, such as the failure to anticipate that the interaction partner will attempt to present a positive image (Dunn, Biesanz, Human, & Finn, 2007) and will attempt to make the interaction go smoothly. Recent research on coping with discrimination established that targets of prejudice compensate in a wide variety of ways for the possibility of experiencing prejudice (Mallett & Swim, 2005; C. T. Miller & Major, 2000). Further, according to the norm-setting hypothesis (Baumeister, Hutton, & Tice, 1989), if the target is able to engage in compensation, the interaction is likely to go well and the majority group member is likely to respond to the target favorably. In this way, targets of prejudice might be able to interrupt the possibility of a self-fulfilling prophecy during intergroup interactions.

Another question of interest is whether targets of prejudice also make overly negative forecasts about interactions with outgroup members. We provided preliminary evidence in Study 2 that they do; like White participants, minority participants (Asians, Hispanics, and Blacks) showed a similar pattern of forecasts that were more negative than experiences. The number of minority participants in this study was small, thus we hesitate to make too much of this finding. It is possible, though, that minority group members also underestimate their degree of similarity with outgroup members and fail to anticipate how much outgroup members will engage in compensation, trying to make the interaction go smoothly (Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005). Neglecting the mutual drive toward a pleasant experience might also explain part of the intergroup forecasting error and should be considered in future research.

Expectations might also be influenced by individual differences, including majority group members' level of prejudice and minority group members' sensitivity to the possibility of being stereotyped. For example, high-prejudice majority group members probably have more negative expectations for intergroup contact than do low-prejudice majority group members (Conley, Devine, & Rabow, 2002). Minority group members who are high in stigma consciousness (Pinel, 1999) or race-based sensitivity to rejection (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002), and who therefore expect that others will think about and treat them according to their group membership, probably have more negative intergroup expectations than those who are less sensitive.

The present findings also extend existing knowledge about affective forecasting. A number of affective forecasting errors have been found, most commonly the impact bias, whereby people overestimate the intensity and duration of emotional reactions to future events (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003; 2005). Consistent with this finding, we found, in the present studies, that people overestimated the negativity of interactions with outgroup members. In the studies, we identified a new mechanism for the impact bias, namely, the tendency to underestimate how similar one is to an outgroup member. Further, the studies extend research on forecasting to a new domain (few previous studies in this literature have examined social interactions) and identify conditions under which people do not make forecasting errors (when interacting with ingroup members or when asked to focus on similarities with an outgroup members).

One limitation of our studies is that we used college students as participants. The interactions between White students and Black students in Studies 3 and 4 might have gone well because the students did in fact have a number of things in common. They lived in the same town, went to the same school, and were participating in the same experiment. In some ways, this reflects reality—people typically find themselves in intergroup interactions for a reason (e.g., at work, at a party), and the factors that brought these people together have the power to make their experience go well. But if people do not have anything in common and are not motivated to get along with each other, then negative expectations might very well match experiences.

Another question is why people do not seem to learn from past experiences that interactions with outgroup members will go well. Most, if not all, of the White participants in Studies 3 and 4 probably had previous interactions with Black peers. Assuming (as our hypotheses suggest) that these interactions went better than expected, why did people continue to exhibit the intergroup forecasting error in our experiments? Research has shown that there are a number of barriers to learning from experience and correcting one's affective forecasts (Wilson, Meyers, & Gilbert, 2001, 2003). People must code an upcoming experience as similar to a past one, make the effort to recall the past experience, and recall accurately how they felt during the past experience—conditions that are often not met. Further, there might even be some advantage to expecting the worst from intergroup interactions because, in doing so, people might try to thwart a negative outcome by using compensation (Dunn et al., 2007). Of course, if people's expectations are wildly different from their experiences, then such preparation and effort devoted to compensation might be considered wasted resources (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997), and people might simply decide not to initiate interactions with members of other social groups, thereby potentially robbing themselves of the opportunity to learn that their expectations were wrong.

The present research fills an important gap in the literature on intergroup contact. Intergroup contact (under the right conditions) is one of the best ways of reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). The present studies suggest that people might avoid intergroup contact because of the often unfounded belief that they will have a bad experience. It follows that correcting such beliefs might lead to more intergroup contact. For example, informing people that they will likely have more in common with an outgroup member than they think, or that they and their partner will likely have the motivation and resources to make the interaction go well, might increase the likelihood of positive contact, thereby reducing prejudice and improving intergroup relations.

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