Comfort versus Discomfort in Interracial/Interethnic Interactions: Group Practices on Campus

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Achieving the potential organizational benefits of diversity has long been inconsistent (William and O'Reilly, 1998; Webber and Donahue, 2001; Horwitz and Horwitz, 2007; van Knippen and Schippers, 2007; Joshi and Roh, 2009). The reasons are still not well understood (Shore et al., 2009; Joshi et al., 2011; Guillaume et al., 2013). Greater knowledge of perceptions and interpersonal interactions is needed (Kossek and Zonia, 1994; Mor Barak et al., 1998; Brown, 2004; Ely et al., 2006), since achieving diversity's benefits requires that diverse individuals actually interact competently and meaningfully with each other, rather than interacting only superficially or avoiding each other entirely. A key factor associated with this individual competence and choice is the comfort or discomfort that an individual experiences when interacting with diverse others, according to social psychological literature and an earlier qualitative phase of the research presented here. In this study we investigate several group practices that are posited to foster such comfort. The literature germane to comfort uses three terms: intercultural (e.g. Crisp and Turner, 2011; Halualani, 2007), interracial (e.g. Plant and Devine, 2003) and interethnic (e.g. Gaertner and Dovidio, 2005). In the discussions below, we use *interracial/interethnic* as the broad term that brings together these literatures. We use the term *interracial/interethnic comfort* to connote the more specific construct operationalized in this study, where subjects were asked about their "interracial/interethnic" interactions. The subjects were college students, individuals at a key life stage in which they can develop, or not, interracial/interethnic competencies.

College students' intercultural developmental rests on meaningful intercultural interactions that they experience as positive (Brown, 2004; Hutchinson and Hyer, 2000; Hu and Kuh, 2003; Hurtado, 2005). However, many college students have not had such

interactions. Rather, findings indicate that they mistake superficial intercultural interactions for meaningful ones (Halualani, 2007). Extending this finding, student interviewees in our qualitative research (Bernstein and Salipante, 2010) contrasted their experiences across various group settings on campus, repeatedly using terms that we had not anticipated – "comfort" and "discomfort" – to differentiate interracial/interethnic interactions that were positive and meaningful from those that were not. The importance of this finding is not only that comfort was a differentiating factor for the individual but moreover, that it operated at the group level and was fostered, or not, by a group's practices.

Concepts such as interracial/interethnic comfort are needed to explain and address a contemporary reality in many group settings: numerical diversity has been achieved but meaningful inclusion has not. To date, the main concept used to explain avoidance of interracial/interethnic interactions in the presence of diversity has been the sociological concept that "birds of a feather flock together" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, 2001). However, that concept fails to provide insight into how individuals experience their interracial/interethnic interactions and why positive interracial/interethnic interactions are common in some groups and not in others.

If perceived interracial/interethnic comfort differentiates group settings of more and less positive interracial/interethnic interactions, then what is it about some group settings that favor the development of comfort rather than discomfort? For the concept of interracial/interethnic comfort to be of practical value, researchers should provide groups and organizations with conceptual knowledge of its nature and its group-level antecedents, antecedents that can be fostered by the actions of leaders. Here, we use

quantitative methods to test several group factors identified in our research's qualitative research phase as associated with interracial/interethnic comfort's development in some campus groups: Strong, shared group purpose; a climate that welcomes all individuals; and a structuring of interactions such that all group members, regardless of race/ethnicity, have meaningful contact with each other (Bernstein and Salipante, 2010).

THEORY DEVELOPMENT AND HYPOTHESES

Interracial discomfort, in various forms, has been identified in laboratory studies (Plant and Devine, 2003; Crisp and Turner, 2011). It seems to have been little investigated in field research, despite indications in a few studies of its serious negative impacts for both minority and majority individuals. Those impacts include the following:

Impeding positive relationships. In intergroup contact at the community level Noble (2005) finds that discomfort in the form of stereotype threat – feeling that one is being treated by others according to a negative stereotype – was experienced by immigrants, putting distance in their relationships with the community's dominant group members.

Creating negative interactions. Proceeding from social psychological literature on group functioning, Plant and Devine (2003) identify the effects of interracial anxiety, summarizing their findings in several lab group studies in terms of a vicious cycle for majority (White) group members: majority members who experience anxiety about interacting with minority (Black) members have higher expectancies than other majority members of negative interactions; those expectancies lead them to greater avoidance of such interactions; when they do interact with minority group members, they use less

skillful interaction behaviors, leading to interaction outcomes that are more negative; in turn, those negative outcomes lead to further anxiety and interaction avoidance.

Strengthening negative attitudes. Crisp and Turner's (2011) extensive review of several bodies of research on cross-cultural interaction points to the effects of stereotype inconsistency – one individual perceiving the behavior of an individual from a different culture as inconsistent with the first individual's cultural stereotype. Rather than producing positive attitude change, this inconsistency results in discomfort, avoidance, and the strengthening of the negative stereotype unless, they posit, the individual has the ability, the motivation, and repeated opportunities to interact with members of the other culture.

These three elements of ability, motivation, and repetition suggest group level antecedents of comfort vs. discomfort. For example, drawing on Allport's (1954) concepts of favorable cross-cultural contact, the motives of individuals in a group may be to achieve a shared purpose through repeated, purpose-driven, collaborative interactions. Hence, we can expect the everyday purposes and interaction practices of a particular group to have a substantial effect on reducing individuals' discomfort. Settings that provide these conditions for developing interracial/interethnic comfort might break the vicious cycle of anxiety identified by Plant and Devine, gradually producing positive outcomes from interracial/interethnic interactions and positive expectancies of future interactions.

What else can we expect about group situations that can produce comfort? From Noble (2005) we understand comfort as reflecting an individual's "fit" and ontological security (Giddens, 1990) in a group. Interracial/interethnic comfort, then, reflects a sense

of belonging and a competence in using appropriate behaviors when engaging with culturally dissimilar others in a particular social context. Competence, and the self-efficacy that accompanies it (Jones, 1995), can develop over time through repeated task-related experiences and as new information and experiences are acquired (Gist and Mitchell, 1992).

Drawing on these concepts, we define interracial/interethnic comfort as the felt ease, safety, and self-efficacy of interacting appropriately with diverse others. We present below a number of inter-related, group-level factors hypothesized to be antecedents of comfort, as depicted in the paths of Figure 1. We base these paths on analyses of students' descriptions of their interracial/interethnic experiences collected in our qualitative research phase of grounded theory development (Bernstein and Salipante, 2010). That phase involved intensive, semi-structured interviews with twenty-seven individual members (current students and alumni) of a racially/ethnically-diverse voluntary service organization. Interviewees on two selected campuses (one private and one public university) were asked to describe experiences of meaningful interracial/interethnic interactions in that organization. Open and closed coding produced emergent findings that are consistent with the theory above and the more specific concepts below.

Figure 1 about here

Interaction Structuring. *Interaction structuring* (Weisinger and Salipante, 2005) refers to deliberate relational actions that groups adopt to promote member interaction. During their interviews, students spoke of the significance of activities such as icebreakers, new

members interviewing existing members, fellowship-building social events, specific new member projects, and clique reduction as pushing them to interact with all members of their service organization (Bernstein and Salipante, 2010). An associated concept is *recategorization.* According to Gaertner and Dovidio's (2000) common in-group identity model*,* recategorization suggests that out-group bias may be ameliorated when both in-group and out-group members realign themselves as belonging to a common group. This change enables diverse individuals to maintain their differing ethnic group identities while facilitating the "generalization of the positive effects of [ethnic] intergroup contact to the other [ethnic] group as a whole" (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2005: 630). Encouraging recategorization in particular groups is important since students, free to choose with whom they associate on campus, may otherwise fail to associate with dissimilar others. As cautioned by Ellison and Powers (1994), "it is possible to have extremely limited interpersonal contact with members of different racial and ethnic groups even in . . . desegregated (schools)" (1994: 396). Relational practices of interaction structuring can overcome this problem by promoting quality interactions that facilitate the exchange of individuating information (Rothbard et al., 2005).

> *Hypothesis 1. Interaction structuring has a positive effect on interracial/interethnic comfort.*

Welcoming Climate. A group that fails to welcome individuals from particular cultural backgrounds can produce a serious form of psychological discomfort in those individuals (Noble, 2005), leading to their exit. The ability of a group to engender a sense of welcome for diverse members is important in countering such exit and providing the repeated opportunities for comfortable interracial/interethnic interpersonal interactions to develop over time. In the qualitative phase students described the

importance of their service organization's welcoming practices in promoting positive, comfortable interactions among all members (Bernstein and Salipante, 2010).

Hypothesis 2. A welcoming climate has a positive effect on interracial/interethnic comfort.

Shared Superordinate Purpose. Superordinate purpose refers to a group's shared goal–-one that is felt strongly enough by members to supersede their cultural or ethnic differences (Sherif, 1958). Consistent with Allport's (1954) concepts of purposeful contact, engaging in the pursuit of a common purpose allows group members to share attitudes, personal beliefs, and values associated with deep-level diversity (Stangor et al., 1992). As opposed to surface-level diversity – involving observable differences such as gender, age, race/ethnicity and physical attributes – deep-level diversity requires meaningful engagement. It develops over extended interactions with diverse others and is characterized by individuals engaging together based on a group's values and principles. When individuals are motivated to join by the purpose of a group, they develop strong group social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), are less focused on individualistic or personal benefits (Lembke and Wilson, 1998), and are more willing to change personal perspectives (Tajfel, 1982). Purposeful interactions foster informational and social influence processes that encourage solidarity rather than divisiveness (Williams and O'Reilly, 1998). Organizational purpose expands the students' identity beyond the self to the group (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000). In our qualitative phase twenty-one of the twenty-seven interviewees described the importance of their common goal of volunteering, resulting in meaningful interracial/interethnic experiences that increased behavioral comfort (Bernstein and Salipante, 2010).

Hypothesis 3. Shared superordinate purpose has a positive effect on

interracial/interethnic comfort.

Belonging. In the qualitative phase, all twenty-seven interviewees described fellowship – solidarity and acceptance – as central to their experiences in their service organization (Bernstein and Salipante, 2010). The need to belong is a basic human motivation (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). A sense of belonging reflects a particularly strong feeling of inclusion, of being close to others in the group and accepted by them. It indicates that an individual has, per Giddens (1986; 1990), a sense of security and a practical consciousness about how to interact with others in the group. Personal security and interpersonal competence are conducive to developing comfort in interacting repeatedly with racially/ethnically-different others in the group. Belonging, then, captures at the group level Crisp and Turner's (2011) three conditions – motivation, ability, and repeated interaction – for cross-cultural acceptance and learning. As such, we posit that a sense of belonging in a group is a direct precursor to experiencing interracial/interethnic comfort in that group.

Hypothesis 4. A sense of belonging has a positive effect on interracial/interethnic comfort.

Interviewees in the qualitative phase described joining their service organization for its mission of service but ultimately continuing in it for the fellowship (Bernstein and Salipante, 2010). Hence, a sense of belonging, of real inclusion in the group, developed over a period of time. As noted by Brown (2004: 29), inclusion requires "the systematic putting in place of structures" that give individuals a sense of belonging. Accordingly, we posit that the antecedents outlined above are such elements, with shared purpose, welcoming practices, and interaction structuring contributing to the development over time of a sense of belonging to the group.

Hypothesis 5. A sense of belonging partially mediates the effect of interaction structuring on interracial/interethnic comfort.

Hypothesis 6. A sense of belonging partially mediates the effect of a welcoming climate on interracial/interethnic comfort.

Hypothesis 7. A sense of belonging partially mediates the effect of shared superordinate purpose on interracial/interethnic comfort.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Given Halualani's (2007) finding that students commonly misperceive superficial intercultural interactions for more meaningful ones, as well as the qualitative phase indicating that few of their interracial/interethnic interactions on campus were comfortable, the study faced a challenge – how could its survey methodology produce adequate variance on comfort and its other constructs to enable proper analysis? Consequently, as suggested to us by the qualitative phase (Bernstein and Salipante, 2010), we directed survey participants to identify and respond in terms of the particular campus setting where they experienced their most meaningful interactions with differing others. To specify the dimension of diversity we were seeking, the survey used the terms *racial/ethnic, ethnic/cultural, racial/cultural,* and *people from different racial/ethnic groups.* Accordingly, the survey asked: "In the following situations at college, please indicate the frequency of positive meaningful interaction with individuals from different ethnic/cultural groups." Eight particular group settings were listed: dorm/residential life, classroom (e.g. team projects), sports teams, music or theater groups, departmental or pre-professional groups, student government, co-curricular groups or organizations, the national voluntary group (of which all respondents were members), other voluntary/community-focused groups, and "other". All remaining questions focused a respondent on interracial/interethnic experiences within the particular group setting to

which they assigned the highest frequency. For example, if the student identified the music or theater group, then the online survey inserted the words 'music or theater group' in each question. In the discussions below the term 'group' refers to that setting—that is, where the respondent had experienced the most meaningful interracial/interethnic interactions. The groups are *organizational groups* based on function, as opposed to *identity groups* based on gender, ethnicity, and similar factors (Alderfer, 1986).

Sample and Data Collection

The sample consisted of 360 student members of a voluntary service organization with over 17,000 members on more than 366 college and university campuses, the same national organization with which we conducted the qualitative phase of the study at two of its chapters. Its chapters are known for being numerically diverse and, therefore, its members have likely experienced intercultural interactions on campus. The formally stated purpose of this organization is to develop leadership, to promote friendship and to provide service to humanity. The survey was emailed by the service organization in September, 2010, to 3,490 members at 50 geographically distributed schools: eight faith-based institutions, 18 public universities, and 24 private liberal arts schools, a sample selected to mimic the percentage of these types of institutions nation-wide. Also, chapter advisors were requested to forward the survey to their members. Not surprisingly, since the sample came from members of the service organization, more respondents specified the volunteering organization setting than any other.

Respondents were primarily (91%) undergraduates and most (81%) were female. The ethnicities, races, and settings selected by the students (Table 1) indicate a sample

that is dominantly Caucasian (74%) and female (81%). Analyses discussed below address the sample composition.

Table 1 about here

Measures

Table 2 summarizes the constructs and items used in the analyses to operationalize the concepts consistent with their discussions above. For each of the constructs, responses were recorded using a five-item Likert-scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). We used construct items from existing scales where possible, developing new items where there was a lack of prior quantitative research. We conducted extensive pre-testing and pilot testing of the entire survey to ensure content validity, clarity, and reliability of the measures, whose statistics are reported below.

The interracial/interethnic comfort construct was operationalized by four items describing the level of comfort the student felt while interacting with students from different races/ethnicities in the particular group setting the respondent had selected. The items addressed the comfort of interactions with differing others within the group, their confidence when facing those interactions, the importance of feeling comfortable in the group, and whether during times of need they could turn to individuals of another ethnic and racial background in the group. The Cronbach's alpha for interracial/interethnic comfort was 0.729. The Interaction Structuring construct included three items focused on ways in which the selected group enables all members to interact with one another: Reshuffling of members; discouraging the formation of cliques; and providing opportunity for social interactions with diverse others. The Cronbach's alpha for

interaction structuring was 0.641.

The welcoming climate construct faced a potential problem of social desirability bias due to its sensitive nature. Individuals would desire to say that they, and a group that they were part of, would welcome diverse individuals. The phrasing of items for the construct served to attenuate this problem by being reverse-stated, referring to being unwelcome – e.g., "People who belong to different ethnic/racial backgrounds perceive my group as unwelcoming." Such phrasing takes advantage of agreement bias, the tendency of survey respondents to agree with a statement. Further, the items are phrased as reporting on others' views, a phrasing used in survey research to measure sensitive issues (Sudman and Bradburn, 1974; Tourangeau and Yan, 2007). In addition to the item quoted above, the construct used two items: whether people from different backgrounds perceive the group as somewhat tense or hostile to them, and whether it is difficult to get diverse individuals to join the group. All three items were reverse-coded to produce the welcoming climate construct. Its Cronbach's alpha was 0.881.

Shared superordinate purpose consisted of three items asking respondents to indicate the importance of the group's purpose to them in terms of its values, achieving its goals, and their reasons for joining it. The Cronbach's alpha for shared superordinate purpose was 0.758. The belonging construct consisted of 7 items describing the level of attachment the respondent felt in the particular group: their comfort in the group as a whole; feeling of fellowship; commitment; being part of the group; feeling close to others; involvement in the group; and feeling like "I really belong". The Cronbach's alpha for belonging was 0.931. The alphas for all the constructs indicate their viability for the analyses below.

Table 2 about here

Data Analysis

The research model was tested through structural equation modeling using Partial Least Squares (PLS) (Chin and Frye, 1998), as appropriate for constructs that did not meet normality assumptions (Chin, 1998). Of 366 survey responses, six were unusable due to missing data. The remaining responses had <1% missing data points. Using the "mean substitution" method (Hair et al., 2010), a usable sample size of 360 resulted. This assured the minimum threshold would be met based on an alpha level of 0.05, 20 predictors, an anticipated effect size of 0.15, and a desired statistical power of 0.8. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) revealed a final trimmed model with 20 items yielding a 5-factor solution with items loading *a piori*.

Table 3 provides the descriptive statistics, correlations, factor loadings, composite reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity for all model constructs. For all items in each construct, factor loadings were equal to or exceeded .60, composite reliability was above .70, and average variance extracted exceeded .50 (Chin, 1998). Convergent validity (CR) was established by composite reliability < 0.7, composite reliability greater than average variance explained (AVE), and AVE greater than 0.5. Discriminant validity was established by maximum shared variance (MSV) being less than AVE and by the correlation between any two constructs being less than the square root of AVE (Gefen et al., 2000), as shown along the diagonal in Table 3.

Table 3 about here

The measurement model obtained using AMOS resulted in excellent fit statistics (Chi-squared = 774.466, df = 152, CMIN/df = 2.464, Probability Level = .000, CFI = 0.944, PCFI = .755, RMSEA = 0.064 (Lo = 0.056-Hi = 0.072), and PCLOSE = 0.003). The reliance on a single instrument for data collection necessitated examination for common method bias. We used four methods: (1) Harman single factor test (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986), (2) examination of the correlation matrix (Table 3) of the latent constructs for correlations above 0.90 (Pavlou et al., 2007), (3) addition of a common factor (adapted from Podsakoff et al., 2003), and (4) addition of a marker variable (Liang et al., 2007). The results suggested that the common method variance present is insufficient to produce significant bias.

RESULTS

Tests of Hypotheses

Figure 2, Table 3, and Table 4 present the complete model's detailed results for the full sample of 360 respondents. They indicate strong support for the hypothesized relationships. As depicted in Figure 2, the hypothesized direct paths to interracial/interethnic comfort were supported by the statistical equation modeling analysis for three of the four antecedents, with effect sizes, as measured by path coefficients, statistically significant and reasonably important in magnitude, as follows (Table 4): H2, welcoming climate, .218, $p<.01$; H3, shared superordinate purpose, .159, $p<.01$; H4, belonging, .378, $p<.001$, interaction structuring's relationship to interracial/interethnic comfort was totally rather than only partially mediated by belonging, therefore, Hypothesis 1 was not directly supported. The effect of interaction

structuring on interracial/interethnic comfort was indirect and fully mediated by belonging. The specified path coefficients were tested by examination of the t-values generated through bootstrapping in PLS and by the Pseudo F test (Chin, 1998). The correlations among the constructs, presented in Table 2, similarly indicate strong support for the hypothesized relationships. The total variance explained in the structural equation model was substantial, at 59.8%, and the posited antecedents were ones that, in combination, explain much of the variance in belonging (R-squared = .441) and interracial/interethnic comfort (R-squared=.340). These R-squared values were statistically significant and sufficient to meet the acceptable threshold (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 4 about here

Figure 2 about here

Mediation

The hypothesized mediation effects of belonging were tested following Mathieu and Taylor's (2006) and Baron and Kenny's (1986) guidelines. In addition to fully mediating the effects of interaction structuring on interracial/interethnic comfort (Hypothesis 5), belonging partially mediated the effects of superordinate purpose (Hypothesis 6) and welcoming climate (Hypothesis 7), as hypothesized.

Multi-group Subsample Moderation

Since the sample was skewed toward female and majority-background students, we tested whether the hypothesized relationships varied by these individual characteristics. Regarding race and ethnicity, McPherson et al. (2001) suggested that Caucasians are often poorly adjusted in multi-cultural environments since they have the

most ethnically-homogeneous networks and, consequently, are less experienced in interracial/interethnic interactions than those from diverse groups. Yet, Caucasian students, according to Gavino et al., (2010) felt that their university was less exclusionary and more multicultural than the students of color. Therefore, we used multi-group analysis to investigate the impact of being Caucasian or non-Caucasian on feeling a sense of belonging to the group and achieving interracial/interethnic comfort. Similarly, since the study's sample was 81% female, we analyzed the impact of gender.

Multi-group results are summarized in Table 5. Variance explained for interracial/interethnic comfort increased 9% for Caucasians and decreased 10% for non-Caucasians. Similar differences on race and ethnicity were found for the variance explained in belonging (Caucasians increased 15%; non-Caucasians decreased 27%). These results indicate that the particular antecedents in the model explained belonging and interracial/interethnic comfort somewhat better for Caucasians than for non-Caucasians. These findings imply that Caucasian students are more impacted by the structuring of interactions with diverse group members, the group's welcoming climate, and its shared superordinate mission. A possible explanation for the Caucasian students' higher sensitivity to these group practices may be their lack of prior exposure to heterogeneous groups, as suggested above by McPherson et al. (2001). However, note that the model still provides statistically-significant paths and variance explanation for each race and ethnicity grouping, indicating that the model is relevant for both minority and majority individuals. Females exhibited only a slight positive change (2%) in variance explained for interracial/interethnic comfort and belonging, indicating that the high percentage of females in the sample was unlikely to have affected the model's

results.

Table 5 about here

DISCUSSION

This study seeks to shed new light on the nature and group-level antecedents of an individual's interracial/interethnic comfort – the felt ease, safety and self-efficacy of interacting appropriately with diverse others. Examining such comfort among college students, the study's results support the view that a group's practices for interpersonal interactions around its purposes can have important impacts on members' experiences with diversity and inclusion. The results support the model of Figure 1, which represents a simple theory of group influence on one component of cultural development – interracial/interethnic comfort, including achieving a modicum of confidence as measured by the comfort construct. To further explore this theory in light of the study's results, we consider possible conceptualizations for the effects observed in the model.

As measured here, interracial/interethnic comfort refers to individuals' perceptions that proceed from differences in racial/ethnic identities. However, rather than measuring an individual's attitudes toward differing others, interracial/interethnic comfort captures a person's perceptions about themselves – specifically, about their emotional and cognitive state when in interracial/interethnic interactions. Being centered on these interactions, self-perceptions of comfort have a distinctive behavioral basis. High levels of comfort reflect close, perhaps sometimes intimate, behavior in relationships, as indicated by the construct's item (Table 2) asking whether the individual can turn to people of "other ethnicities/races in my group … in time of need."

interracial/interethnic comfort also reflects whether the individual faces the prospect of cross-ethnic interactions "with confidence". This confidence with interracial/interethnic behavior can be seen as the *practical consciousness* of how to act competently in a particular context that Giddens (1986) identifies as the key to producing *reciprocating action* – continued purposeful interaction wherein an individual understands the other's behavior sufficiently to take a next, reasonable action in response. Such competent knowing is more tacit than explicit and is learned over time in particular contexts. Hence, we should expect an individual's interracial/interethnic comfort to develop gradually and be specific to particular group contexts.

Not surprisingly, then, the study finds that particular elements of group context bear on college students' self-assessments of interracial/interethnic comfort. Perhaps most important is the indication that comfort is dependent, to an important degree, on the group context being such that the individual feels a sense of belonging in the group – an attachment to and identity with the group. Belonging, as measured here, signals a particularly strong form of inclusion, one resting on interpersonal relationships and involvement – "brotherhood/sisterhood", "close to the people", "involved", "committed to my group" (Table 2). Taken together, high levels of belonging and comfort may be seen as sustaining in some groups a diversity culture of the type called for in prior research, wherein all members achieve insider status (Chavez and Weisinger, 2008), experience psychological safety (Singh et al., 2013), communicate readily (Janssens and Aanoni, 2007), enjoy freedom from stereotyping (Bilimoria, Joy, and Liang, 2008), and are given voice (Shore et al., 2011).

For an individual, we speculate that a sense of belonging in a diverse group and comfort in that group likely develop in tandem over time. The descriptions of the student interviewees in our research's qualitative phase indicated that the development of relationships and of comfort was recursive: students conversed with diverse others whom they did not previously know while interacting around the group's purpose of community service, forming interpersonal relationships that led to learning about each other's backgrounds; the conversations and learning led to interpersonal comfort that facilitated more serious conversations about personal backgrounds and life experiences (Bernstein and Salipante, 2010). Item #4 in the comfort construct (Table 2), which asks whether "there are people of other ethnicities/races that I met in my [selected group] whom I can turn to in times of need", suggests the ability to engage in serious conversations with diverse members of their group. Such serious cross-cultural conversations contrast with ones elsewhere on campus that the students in the qualitative research phase described as more guarded – more superficial, as Halualani (2007) found. Consistent with belonging encompassing Crisp and Turner's (2011) three conditions for cultural acceptance and learning, as argued earlier, a sense of solidarity with members of a diverse group enables the serious interracial/interethnic conversations and learning that are one route to students' building comfort and confidence.

The important role that belonging appears to have in the development of interracial/interethnic comfort is consistent with the group-level concepts investigated here being relational in nature – that is, they bear on the nature of relationships among group members. Taken together, the relational concepts of interaction structuring, welcoming climate, and shared superordinate purpose are seen in the model's results as

explaining much of the development of belonging. But, more specifically, what is it about these particular factors that explains solidarity and comfort?

Figure 2 indicates that the main impacts of interaction structuring and shared superordinate purpose on interracial/interethnic comfort are through belonging. Their strong relationships with belonging resonate with several of Allport's (1954) conditions for effective cross-ethnic contact: equal status, shared superordinate goals, and cooperation to reach those goals. If achieving a group's goals is important to an individual, as captured by the superordinate purpose construct, the individual has an incentive to join with others in the group around its purpose-oriented tasks. If, in addition, the group's interaction structuring practices discourage cliques and encourage interactions among all members (per the items in Table 2), then the individual will be pushed to interact with a variety of group members, including those of different race and ethnicity, in pursuit of the group's purpose. The result of this combination of factors is that the individual is likely to experience solidarity with others of similar purpose, irrespective of other differences. Put another way, these two elements create a strong enough convergence of individual interests and group purpose for that purpose to become superordinate, enabling recategorization (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000) of members around the group's purpose rather than around their racial/ethnic backgrounds. The associated sense of belonging with other members, including those of different racial/ethnic background, then contributes to the development of comfort.

Compared to shared purpose and interaction structuring, the effect of welcoming climate on interracial/interethnic comfort appears to be more direct and somewhat less through belonging (Figure 2). An explanation may lie in the wording of the items used

to measure these three concepts. The items for the former two concepts do not explicitly mention ethnic/racial backgrounds. Rather, they refer to everyday group-level practices that apply to the group as a whole – its purpose and its relational practices for creating interactions among group members. Welcoming climate, as well as interracial/interethnic comfort, is measured with items that ask about "different ethnic/racial backgrounds" (Table 2). Welcoming climate may thereby be capturing more powerfully the group element of cross-racial/ethnic inclusion, bearing on whether diverse individuals actually interact positively and frequently. For instance, as was revealed to us during the qualitative phase of research, the service organization required all new members to meet individually with each existing chapter member for a lengthy conversation, an interaction structuring practice that led to serious cross-ethnic interactions during the welcoming phase of membership (Bernstein and Salipante, 2010).

In sum, the three group-level antecedents investigated here provide a relational context in which diverse individuals have a greater or lesser likelihood of experiencing numerous cross-racial/ethnic interactions (interaction structuring) that are friendly (welcoming climate) and oriented around a strong, common goal (shared superordinate purpose). Together, they appear to contribute to whether or not individuals develop a sense of belonging to the group as a whole and a comfort in interacting with members from a different racial/ethnic background.

LIMITATIONS

The survey's 10% response rate is a potential limitation. The survey was distributed in September when many schools are just getting started and students are

often inundated by multiple emails and surveys. The interaction structuring construct exhibited a low reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.64). While this is below the recommended 0.7, it is within the lower levels of acceptability and sufficient in exploratory research (Hair et al., 2010). In addition, in this study the structural equation modeling was conducted using PLS (Chin and Frye, 1998) where the composite reliability for interaction structuring was .794, exceeding the minimum of 0.7. However, we suggest further development of the interaction structuring construct to learn more about the dynamics of the interactions. Despite these limitations, the study provides a useful exploration of group-level practices that promote interracial/interethnic comfort.

IMPLICATIONS

This study's model of group-level antecedents to interracial/interethnic comfort, as conceptualized above, constitutes a theory of personal cultural acceptance and development by college students that is consistent both with long-standing concepts of purposeful contact (Sherif, 1958; Allport, 1954) and with recent theoretical syntheses of social psychological research (Crisp and Turner, 2011). The study extends the latter by identifying a set of group practices in field settings that operationalize the factors theorized to underlie an individual's cross-racial/ethnic engagement and learning: motivation, ability, and repetition. The study's results suggest that the concepts in Figure 1 are worthy of further field investigation in university and other institutional contexts, and of attention by leaders interested in heightening the benefits of diversity in their institutions.

Implications for Research

Based on this study and the limited prior research on interracial/interethnic and intercultural discomfort and anxiety, theories of cultural learning and competence development that incorporate concepts of interracial/interethnic comfort and group-level relationship-development practices are needed to understand individuals' choices to interact meaningfully, superficially, or not at all with diverse others. To further the development of such theory, and to identify additional group factors that foster cultural development, it would be useful for future studies to explore and expand this study's interracial/interethnic comfort construct. The concept captures several important aspects of an individual's willingness, ability and confidence to interact positively with racially/ethnically-different others. Bringing these several aspects together as *comfort* makes the construct coherent, in the sense of according with the terminology and self-descriptions of individuals about their cross-racial/ethnic interactions. Interracial/interethnic comfort, as conceived and measured in this study, should be more fully explored by empirical comparison with other measures of positive and negative interactions, such as Plant and Devine's (2003) concept of interracial anxiety. Further research can deepen the comfort construct's current elements, such as the closeness of interracial/interethnic relationships and the level of interracial/interethnic self-efficacy, and explore its extension to potential additional elements, such as the persistence of cross-cultural relationships and the willingness to explore cultural differences.

By contrasting group practices in a variety of field settings where interracial/interethnic comfort is and is not found, research can increase our understandings of the social psychological dynamics of diversity. Such research is likely to identify group practices beyond those studied here that support the development of

interracial/interethnic comfort and competence. Particular group practices may be found to differ in their efficacy, depending on institutional environment and individual difference. For instance, the students in this study's sample – due to membership in their voluntary service organization, or to their selective response to the request to participate in a survey on campus interactions –may have been more open to cross-racial/ethnic learning than other students, making them more sensitive to the particular group practices studied here. It would be valuable to explore whether, for students in other purposeful groups, different practices – e.g., formal team-building activities – are more effective. Like team-building, we expect, that many effective practices will be conceptually similar to those studied here, being relational practices that recategorize individuals around a superordinate group identity. Follow-up studies that examine these more subtle nuances would be beneficial.

Implications for Practice

The study's results indicate that, among both majority and minority-background individuals at a key developmental stage in life, psychological discomfort in interracial/interethnic interactions can be overcome in particular group settings by specific practices that produce a sense of belonging and a motivation to interact repeatedly with diverse others. This finding suggests new avenues for promoting diversity, ones that some universities are already pursuing partially. To enhance student life, they are expanding student activity centers where individuals voluntarily form and join groups that meet their interests. University leaders might take further advantage of these efforts and enhance students' interracial/interethnic skill development by promoting groups that attract diverse members and fostering appropriate interaction

practices in those groups. Formal training for student leaders could emphasize fellowship practices such as welcoming and interaction structuring that develop solidarity and comfort among diverse members. These practices could be promoted as providing the joint benefits of group accomplishment and personal interracial/interethnic development.

Other institutions concerned with achieving benefits from diversity, institutions such as health care that have professionals from a variety of cultural backgrounds, might attempt a similar approach. The relational group practices suggested here are actionable, ones that group and organizational leaders can foster in order to promote meaningful inclusion at the group level. We anticipate that future research in a variety of settings will produce knowledge of group-level practices that can guide leaders in their efforts to promote interracial/interethnic comfort and competence.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Demographics

Race/Ethnicity	74% Caucasian; 16% Asian; 6% African American/Black; 15% Other
Settings students selected in which they had positive and meaningful interracial/interethnic interactions	41% Voluntary Service Organization or other volunteering organization 25% Residential Life 16% Classes 13% Other co-curricular organizations (including sports and departmental groups)

Table 2: Constructs and Items*

Construct	Items	Source	Cronbach's Alpha
Interracial/Interethnic comfort	1. I am comfortable interacting with a group of people of different ethnicities/races within my [selected group]. 2. When I am with members of my [selected group] I face the prospect of interacting with people from different ethnicities/races with confidence. 3. Feeling comfortable within the [selected group] is important to me. 4. There are people of other ethnicities/races that I met in my [selected group] whom I can turn to in times of need.	Neuliep & McCroskey (1997) Neuliep & McCroskey (1997) New Item Anderman (2002)	0.729
Welcoming Climate	1. People who belong to different ethnic/racial backgrounds perceive my [selected group] as unwelcoming.** 2. People who belong to different ethnic/racial backgrounds perceive my [selected group] as somewhat tense or hostile to those who are different from the rest of us.** 3. It is difficult to get people of different ethnic/racial backgrounds to join the [selected group].**	New item New Item New Item	0.881
Shared Superordinate Purpose	1. I understand the values that are important to my [selected group]. 2. It is very important to me for my [selected group] to achieve its goals/purposes. 3. I joined my [selected group] because of its stated purpose or goal.	Kelley (1992) New Item New Item	0.758
Interaction Structuring	1. My [selected group] actively reshuffles the members in such a way that it is easy to get to know everyone. 2. The [selected group] discourages the formation of cliques. 3. The [selected group] provides opportunity for social interaction with many different group members.	New Item New Item New Item	0.641
Belonging	1. I feel comfortable in my [selected group]. 2. My [selected group] has a very strong feeling of brotherhood/sisterhood. 3. I feel committed to my [selected group]. 4. I feel like I am part of my [selected group]. 5. I feel close to the people in my [selected group]. 6. I feel involved in what is happening in my [selected group]. 7. I feel like I really belong in my [selected group].	Kelley (1992) New Item New Item Anderman (2002) Anderman (2002) Evans & Jarvis (1986) Evans & Jarvis (1986)	0.931

* When the term "selected group" appears in these items, it was substituted with the particular location on campus the student identified as having experienced the most meaningful interracial/interethnic interactions. In other words, if a student identified the music or theater group as the location they experienced the most meaningful interracial/interethnic interactions then in all of the subsequent survey items the words "music or theater group" would appear in place of the word "selected group." For example, interracial/interethnic comfort item #1 would now read, "I am comfortable interacting with a group of people of different ethnicities/races within my music or theater group."
** Reverse coded items.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Correlations	Mean	SD	CR	AVE	WC	SSP	IS	B	IC
WC***	3.2843	.71919	.929	.812	**.901**				
SSP***	4.0593	.70384	.873	.698	.203	**.835**			
IS***	1.9861	.88111	.794	.566	.177	.430	**.752**		
B***	4.0619	.74884	.946	.717	.258	.573	.531	**.847**	
IC***	4.2778	.53654	.821	.537	.346	.420	.308	.525	**.733**

The square root of AVE is higher than the correlations indicating high correlations in the model. WC=Welcoming Climate, SSP=Shared Superordinate Purpose, B=Belonging, IS=Interaction Structuring, IC= Interracial/Interethnic Comfort. ***Significant at < .001 level**.** N=360

Table 4: Summary of Hypotheses Results

#	Description	Outcome
H1	Interaction structuring has a positive effect on interracial/interethnic comfort.	Not directly supported--the effect was indirect and fully mediated by belonging
H2	A welcoming climate has a positive effect on interracial/interethnic comfort.	Supported
H3	Shared superordinate purpose has a positive effect on interracial/interethnic comfort.	Supported
H4	A sense of belonging has a positive effect on interracial/interethnic comfort.	Supported
H5	A sense of belonging partially mediates the effect of interaction structuring on interracial/interethnic comfort.	Not supported--the effect was indirect and fully mediated by belonging
H6	A sense of belonging partially mediates the effect of a welcoming climate on interracial/interethnic comfort.	Supported
H7	A sense of belonging partially mediates the effect of shared superordinate purpose on interracial/interethnic comfort.	Supported

Table 5: Multi-Group Moderation

Multi-Group	**Belonging R-Sq.**	**Change in R-Sq.**	**Interracial/Interethnic Comfort R-Sq.**	**Change in R-Sq.**
Caucasians Only	0.509***	0.068*** (15%)	0.371***	0.031** (9%)
Non-Caucasian Students	0.322***	-0.119*** (-27%)	0.305***	-0.035* (-10%)
Females	0.463***	0.022* (5%)	0.359***	0.019* (5%)

Prior to moderation: Belonging R-Sq. = 0.441*** and Interracial/Interethnic Comfort R-Sq. = 0.340***. Three paths lead to the Belonging and Interracial/Interethnic Comfort constructs.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

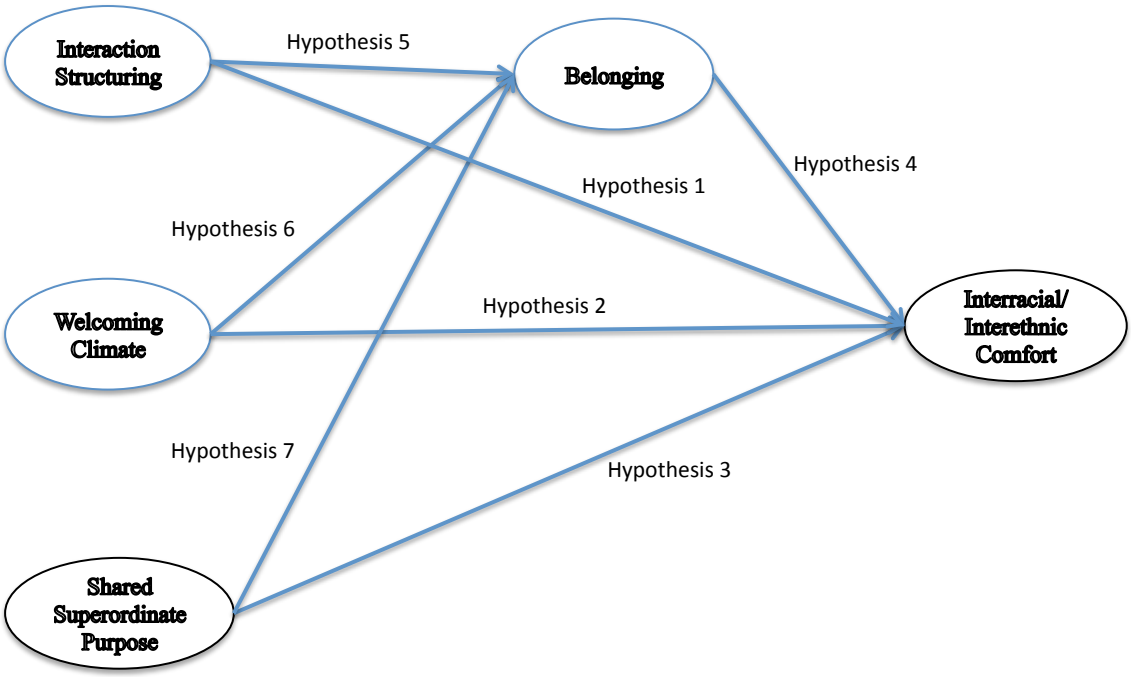
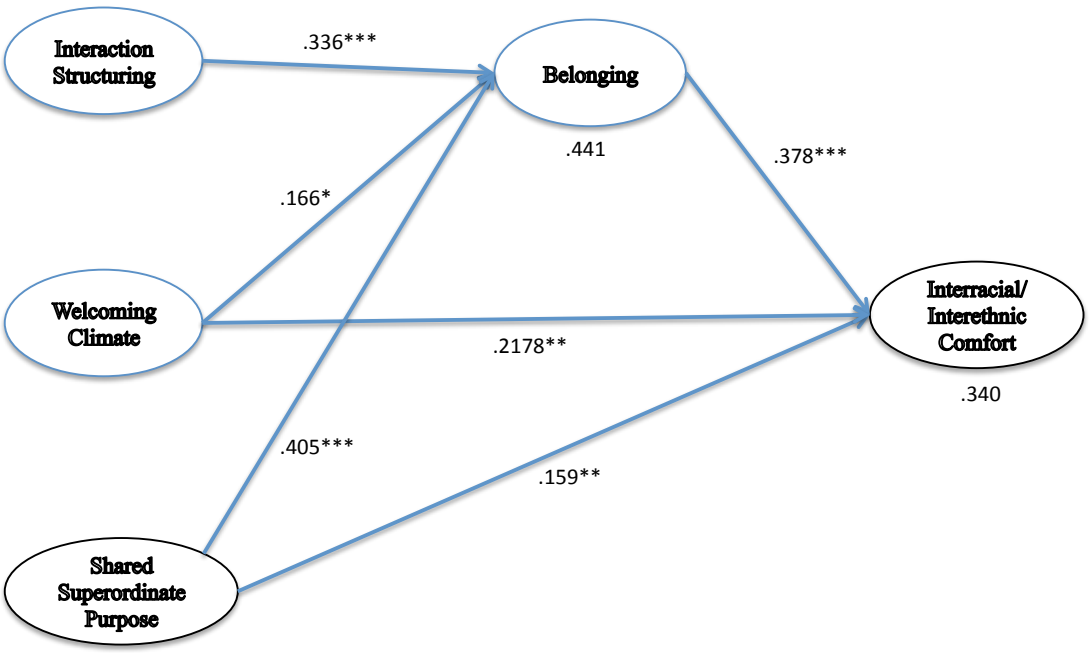


Figure 2: Tests of Hypotheses



* p < 0.05
** p < 0.01
*** p < 0.001

Chi-squared = 774.466, df = 152, CMIN/df = 2.464, Probability Level = .000, CFI = 0.944, PCFI = .755, RMSEA = 0.064 (Lo = 0.056-Hi = 0.072), and PCLOSE = 0.003