

# Study Finds We Are Better Able to Detect Racial Tension in Members of Our Racial Group

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In March of 2008, in a speech addressing contemporary racial tensions in America, then-Senator Barack Obama suggested that there is a “chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.” Could this be true? Is it more difficult for members of different races to understand each others’ emotions and intentions? Psychologist Heather M. Gray from Boston University, along with Wendy Berry Mendes and Carrigan Denny-Brown of Harvard University, investigated whether the ability to detect a person’s anxiety declines when perceptions are made across the racial divide.

Although interactions with members of other racial groups are becoming increasingly more common, they are still a source of anxiety for many people. This interracial anxiety can “leak out” in the form of uncontrollable, stressful behaviors such as fidgeting and vocal tension. But how sensitive are we to signs of interracial anxiety, and does race influence the ability to detect interracial anxiety in other people? To answer these questions, the researchers videotaped White and Black participants as they performed a difficult task in front of a panel of either same-race evaluators (i.e. White participants with White evaluators) or different-race evaluators (i.e. White participants with Black evaluators). In addition, the researchers measured the participants’ cortisol (a hormone that increases when we are stressed) levels to gauge how stressed participants were. Then, a separate group of White and Black observers watched the videotapes of the participants (without seeing the evaluators) and were asked to rate the participants’ anxiety.

The results of the study, reported in the December issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reveal that we are better able to detect anxiety in members of our own racial group than in people of different racial backgrounds. Only the same-race observers detected an increase in anxiety when participants were engaged in an interracial encounter; different-race observers failed to detect this change. And even more interesting, only the same-race observers noticed changes in anxiety that matched up with the participants’ actual stress levels (as determined by measuring cortisol).

The authors suggest that “race-matched observers appeared to draw upon subtle nonverbal indicators of intergroup anxiety that were undetectable to race-mismatched observers.” They note that being out of tune to the emotional states of people from different backgrounds “may make it difficult to develop a sense of shared emotional experience.”