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"Do my opinions even matter?" Variation in White Students' Participation in Class Discussions on Race

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Abstract

Class discussions on sensitive topics such as race have potential to foster meaningful interaction but can also encounter barriers toward inclusive participation. Learning from students' mindsets and motivations when faced with such opportunities can inform how instructors prepare for and facilitate such discussion. The current study focused on how White students reportedly changed the way they participated in class discussions when race-related topics were discussed, and the various student characteristics and motives that corresponded to such changes. A survey of 478 White students included quantitative and qualitative data describing students' mindsets and experiences regarding race-related discussions. Students were compared across a series of items focused on their feelings, concerns, and desires related to such discussions, which also formed the basis for a cluster analysis to capture a parsimonious set of distinct perspectives. That analysis yielded three groups of students labeled as Enthusiasts, Worriers, and Detached. These groups varied in how they adjusted their discussion participation and in some of their background characteristics (i.e., gender, voting pattern, number of courses taken with race as a topic). The coding of open-ended responses and subsequent quantitative comparisons suggested that the groups varied in their motivations for willingly backing off, begrudgingly backing off, increasing participation, and their participation being contingent on class circumstances. A total of 14 major codes emerged that deepened our understanding of the three groups and contributed to suggested considerations for instructors.

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Introduction

College students across the Unites States report considerable reluctance to discuss controversial topics, often fearing criticism from fellow students who disagree (Schmidt, 2022; Zhou & Barbaro, 2023). Self-censoring appears to be common practice both inside and outside the classroom due to perceived high levels of sensitivity to certain topics or opinions (Camp, 2022; Gibson, 2020; Zhou & Barbaro, 2023). In our observation, race-related topics have the potential to impact the nature of class discussion, often resulting in hesitancy among students, especially when classes are made up of students from more than one racial group. Indeed, race was identified as the second most uncomfortable topic to discuss in class (after politics), according to a national sample of undergraduate students (Schmidt, 2022). For a variety of reasons, students might struggle deciding how best to engage in such discussions, particularly in predominately White institutions (PWI) where classes often include just one or a few students of color (Littleford et al., 2005; Spanierman et al., 2008).

Class discussions about race-related topics are hampered if groups of students withhold their participation. For example, if White students decide to stay quiet, students of color carry the brunt of responsibility for speaking up and educating White students (Castagno, 2008), a process that can become burdensome and resented by students of color (Richeson & Shelton, 2007). Conversely, some White students have been known to speak up in such conversations as a way to demonstrate a sense of allyship toward minoritized students (Case, 2012). The current study aims to expand understanding of the various motivations and perceptions that drive the level of White students' participation in race-related class discussions and ultimately impact classroom discussion. Through detailed quantitative and qualitative analyses, substantive variation across students' perspectives were apparent, and can shine light on considerations for instructors wishing to facilitate fruitful discussions about race.

Our motivation for this research is to better understand aspects of the learning environment that contribute to positive learning outcomes for all students. We are sensitive to the specific racial dynamic of a classroom in which students of color are greatly outnumbered by White students and believe that such a dynamic provides opportunities and pitfalls for education. We hoped to gain nuanced insight from students' perspectives, understanding that within-group diversity exists regarding motivations and interpretations of potentially sensitive topics. In the first stage of this line of research (Anonymous) we focused on the perspectives of African American students, the most typical racial minoritized group in our courses at a PWI. Through focus groups we inquired about their thoughts and feelings when race-related topics were discussed in their classes. A major emphasis emerged regarding how students decided to participate in such discussions, sparking further interest in understanding more fully what various students take into consideration when these discussions arise.

The current study focuses on the perspectives of White students attending a PWI (the same one from the first phase) in the context of their participation in class discussions about race. These perspectives can attune instructors, student advisors, and perhaps parents to concerns that some students share that fuel barriers toward meaningful discourse around sensitive topics. Ultimately our findings could have implications for understanding and influencing overall pedagogy, student-

teacher interactions, learning outcomes including student retention and graduation rates (particularly for ethnic minority students), and professional development curriculum for instructors.

Literature Review

Research related to race and higher education often focuses on the experiences of students from racially marginalized groups attending PWIs, emphasizing how experiences of racism and racial tension negatively impact their comfort on campus, psychological well-being, and academic success (McCabe et al., 2009; Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2009). Studies have generally indicated that such students can experience frustrations and threats that could understandably impede their willingness to risk discussing race-related topics in class (Anonymous; Lo et al., 2017; McCabe et al., 2009; Morrison, 2010). Some minoritized students postpone participation until they discover whether racist attitudes are present (Anonymous; Sue et al., 2009).

One would expect that students in the majority to feel more at home in a PWI and to more easily navigate their educational experience while being relatively oblivious to race-related issues (Rabow et al., 2014). Yet, race-related discussions might also trigger concerns that dissuade White students from full participation. Indeed, a national survey of college students indicated that White students felt more reluctant than other students to discuss race-related topics (Zhou & Barbaro, 2023). Some research has also focused on the perspectives of White students in similar settings, adding to a growing, more wholistic picture of classroom dynamics in classes populated with minimal racial diversity.

Reluctance to Participate

Some White students have strong emotional reactions to racial content that result in them shutting down, including defensiveness (McCabe, 2009), shame or guilt (Case, 2007), shock (Spanierman et al., 2008), and helplessness toward fostering social change (Spanierman et al., 2008). Sue (2013) argued that many White students are unaware of what it means to be White, especially through the eyes of people of color, and thus struggle having meaningful cross-racial conversations. White students from places with limited racial diversity (e.g., Midwestern United States) might lack experience with cross-racial interaction (Spanierman et al., 2008), lessening their confidence in discussing race. Research shows that White students from less racially diverse neighborhoods and who have less racially diverse peer groups particularly seem to be less at ease and skilled at talking about race (Pascarella et al., 2019; Saenz et al., 2007). Furthermore, some schoolteachers seem to avoid discussing race to reduce potential discomfort in class, adding to a sense of “colormuteness” (Castagno, 2008). Such a practice, whether intentional or otherwise, arguably serves the status quo of Whiteness and privilege and models a taboo toward race-related discourse.

Classes that include a body of racially diverse students can be a particularly intimidating environment for race-related discussion. Steele (2011) applied the concept of “stereotype threat”—a fear of acting in a way that confirms stereotypes of a group to which one belongs—to explain some self-censorship among White students. Saying something wrong could verify a suspicion that White people are racist, a label that can result in significant backlash. Some White

students believe that students of color are overly sensitive to racial offense and hasty in making accusations of racism (Geoff, 2008)—a stereotype that also contributes to participation reluctance by students of color (Anonymous). Of course, a lack of participation from any student can be driven more by shyness and more passive approaches to learning, regardless of topic (Brunsma et al., 2013; Saenz et al., 2007).

Eagerness to Participate

Do some White students participate more than usual in discussions that focus on race? Less appears in the literature on this possibility, but some motivations seem conductive toward it happening. Under the same stereotype threat mentioned above, some students might feel pressure to prove their innocence of racism by engaging in the discussion with "virtue signaling" (Wallace et al., 2020). Indeed, some White students have reported feeling anxious about being too passive when discussing race and speak up to show they care about the topic (Boysen, 2012; Tatum, 1992). Virtue signaling might also result from the desire to improve social status among peers and instructors who strongly value certain perspectives regarding race (Wallace et al., 2020). Some White students might speak up out of the desire to express their allyship with students of color and to denounce the attitudes of fellow White students perceived as racist or ignorant (Case, 2012; Spanierman et al., 2008).

Despite the potential for discomfort and conflict, studies suggest that discussing race-related topics has benefits. White students have expressed that class conversations on diversity led to a more respectful campus atmosphere (Hikido & Murray, 2016) and hearing emotional stories about racism in class helped students better appreciate racial inequalities (Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018). Overall, such interaction can foster empathy for each other's circumstances and openness to divergent perspectives (Thakral et al., 2016). Conversely, some studies have identified adverse effects of race related courses, such as reports of higher levels of fear of other races, loss of cross-race friendships, and less empathy toward racial minority struggles, with little evidence of change in prejudice levels (Case, 2007; Spanierman et al., 2009). Perhaps differing motivations among the various students played a role in such outcomes and taking motivations into account when engaging race-related content could promote the more positive outcomes.

Contextual Considerations

Some research has identified factors that can contribute to participation levels in discussions of sensitive topics. As noted, greater racial diversity in composition of one's neighborhood and peer groups, which can also be a reflection of social class, can relate to comfort levels with race-related discussions (Pascarella et al., 2019; Saenz et al., 2007). Furthermore, young women and people who vote for the Democratic party in the U.S. are more inclined than young men and people who vote for the Republican party to perceive the existence of racial discrimination (Horowitz, 2019). Thus, characteristics related to gender, political ideology, family economic status, and diversity of one's childhood settings are relevant to understanding motivations behind discussion participation. Additionally, research has shown that White students who took a course on racial inequality demonstrated more acquired knowledge about power, privilege, and oppression and expressed more empathy for the experiences of students (Maxwell & Chesler, 2022). Thus,

previous exposure to discussions of race might also be a factor in feeling more comfortable or confident in speaking up during a discussion about race, though prior negative experiences doing so might also sour one's enthusiasm.

The Current Study

Our overall aim was to investigate the motivations of White students who reportedly choose to participate differently (less or more) in class discussions about race compared to discussions of other topics. We relied on self-reports of perceived differences between the two circumstances. We used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in our investigation. We include an in-depth investigation of various perspectives or approaches toward participating in race-related discussions, aided by both quantitative and qualitative analyses and integrating the findings of each. We also investigate contextual considerations regarding students' background with exposure to racial diversity, their political leanings, and social class. This research could reveal enlightening information about the minds and hearts of students weighing the perceived consequences of engaging more or less with such a sensitive topic. It could help identify a variety of diverse mindsets within a single class that contribute to the nature of certain class discussions, and perhaps attune educators to such mindsets in ways that help them determine how to effectively prepare students for and moderate such discussion.

The current study is shaped by assumptions that 1) “colormuteness” in classes is conducive to negative outcomes (this pertains to the impetus for the research), 2) students’ concerns informed by “stereotype threat” can affect motivations to participate differently in race-related discussions, and 3) pressures or desires to "virtue signal" could also impact motivations to participate differently in race-relate discussions. The core constructs in these assumptions form a conceptual basis for our inquiry and provide some general archetype motivations to investigate from which additional nuance could arise. We use a broad array of quantitative measures to capture diverse motives and perspectives toward race-related discussions in class, and a qualitative analysis to tap into the richness of students' thought processes and experiences regarding such discussions. Professionals that influence higher education learning can draw conclusions that apply to their own circumstances and expertise, though we will offer some implications based on our best thinking and exposure to this topic.

Method

After approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Ball State University (protocol # 1494982), undergraduate students across all units at a public Midwestern university (U.S.) were sent an email invitation to participate in an anonymous survey about “undergraduate students’ interpretations of and reactions to classroom lectures and discussions around race, ethnicity, and race-relations.” Anonymity was particularly important given the sensitive nature of the topic. All email recipients were welcome to complete the survey, but for the purposes of the current study we would select White students over the age of 17 for our analyses. A total of 478 White students completed at least half of the survey, though 364 had complete data for all the background variables and the variables that captured student experiences and feelings in class regarding topics of race. Nearly all (n = 98) of those removed were systematically missing data regarding

the racial makeup of their neighborhoods, schools, and friends; parental education and income; and their voting record. After replacing missing scores (with sample means) for three individuals on their age, and one on parents' education and income, the final sample was 370. This group was 67.8% female and had an average age of 21.12 (*SD* = 3.24). About 67% of the sample came from households with the most educated parent reportedly having at least a 4-year college degree, and about 57% reported a combined parental income up to $100,000 a year. The final sample was compared with the 98 students who had been removed, revealing no differences between the samples in sex, age, number of courses taken related to race, and the tendency to alter one's participation level for race-related discussion.

Measures

Demographic/background

Data was gathered for age (in years), sex assigned at birth (*male, female, other*), racial identity (*White/Caucasian, Black/African American, Latinx, Asian, Other*), education level of the most educated parent they grew up with *(*1=*<high school, 2=high school/GED, some college,* 3=*2-year or Associate's degree,* 4=*4-year degree, 5=advanced degree*), and parents' approximate combined (if applicable) yearly income *(*1=*<$25,000*, 2=*$25,000-$50,000,* 3=*$50,000-$75,000,… 7=>$150,000*). Participants reported the racial compositions of their neighborhood while growing up and their high school (*mostly White*, *mostly Black*, *mostly another race (that didn't match my own race)*, *racially mixed*, *diverse*). Students also reported the racial composition of their current group of close friends (*pretty much all of my same race*, *mostly of my same race*, *about half are not of my race*, *mostly of other races than my own*). Higher scores on these racial composition variables indicate more exposure to people of diverse races.

Students also estimated the number of college/university courses they had taken that have "covered information pertaining to race, ethnicity, or race-relations" (*1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 or more*). To get a sense of their political ideology, students responded to the following item: "which political party did most of the candidates represent that you voted for (or would have voted for)" (*Democrat, Republican, About an equal mix of Democrat and Republican, Independent, Other*). All responses were less than 10% except for "Democrat" (55.9%) and "Republican" (24.9%). The variable was coded dichotomously as 1= Republican, 0 = Other.

Participation in Class

While various measures of race-related attitudes and feelings exist for general contexts, we created measures to precisely target the perceptions of students in certain scenarios. Items were informed by data gathered in our prior research with students who identified as Black or African American and their experiences in classes at a PWI (Anonymous). Several questions were posed regarding students' participation in race-related class discussions. The first focused on changes in participation: "When class discussions around issues of race come up, how different is your level of participation compared to other times? (*less than do for other topics*, *about the same as I do for other topics*, *more than I do for other topics*). An open-ended question then immediately followed: "Please explain your answer to the question just above (e.g., explain what it is about the

classroom, teacher, other students, or anything else that might contribute to why you might participate differently).” To minimize the priming of certain responses, these two questions were purposely placed in the survey prior to any other questions about their discomfort level or concerns or desires regarding topics of race being discussed in class. Similarly, a pair of questions followed that were more precise about the makeup of the classroom: “How does having at least one student of color in the classroom affect your participation in class discussions related to race? (*I participate less-if at all*, *It doesn’t affect my level of participation*, *I participate more*),” and “Please explain your answer to the question just above (e.g., explain why you might participate differently).” Finally, after responding to the statements noted above (emotional experience in the classroom), students were asked to “share any other thoughts or feelings [they] have when discussions of race occur when at least one student of color is in the classroom.” The three open-ended questions became the basis for a qualitative content analysis.

Another set of questions were created by the authors to capture a variety of feelings, concerns, and desires students might have regarding class discussions of race. These questions were inspired by the concepts in the literature review (i.e., colormuteness, stereotype threat, seeking legitimacy) and from insights gained from the prior phase of our research that involved focus groups of African American students (Anonymous). Students reported their level of “discomfort [they] feel when discussions of race occur in the classroom when there is more than one racial group present” (1-5 scale; *none*, *a tiny bit*, *some*, *quite a bit*, *a huge amount*). They then reported the extent to which they “feel any of the following during discussions of race when a student of color is in the classroom” (1= *not at all*, 2=*a little*, 3=*somewhat*, 4=*quite a bit*, 5=*very much*) by responding to 13 statements that addresses feelings or desires that emerge during race-related discussions such worry about being accused of saying something that is perceived as racist, worry about having students get angry at them, being excited to share, and hoping student of color would speak up (see Table 2 for complete list of items). These 14 items, when viewed within the context of their participation level in discussions or race, might speak to some motives behind any changes in their level of participation.

Analysis

Quantitative methods were used to test for demographic and background variables that might help explain differences across White students' perspectives in the class setting during race-related discussions. Given the exploratory nature of the investigation, we used 14 different items to try to capture a variety of motivations behind class discussion. Analyzing these items separately in conjunction with demographic and background factors can highlight nuance regarding narrow motivations. Another way to gain insight about the motives, and to make interpretations of a list of items more manageable, is to analyze how students group together based on shared types of motivations. Thus, cluster analysis procedures were also used to identify whether a parsimonious number of categories of students (or of broad perspectives held among the students) emerged as their collections of motives were analyzed simultaneously. Once identified, these categories—"clusters"—would be compared along the various background characteristics and open-ended responses explaining their mindset when faced with the opportunity to participate in a race-related class discussion.

We then paused the quantitative analysis and met to discuss the initial quantitative findings to focus our thinking about what we hoped to learn from the open-ended responses through qualitative analysis, particularly to generate deeper insight about students' motivations and mindsets than could be ascertained through the quantitative questions. The open-ended responses might clarify how students make sense of the class context, their own identity, and the nature of the topic when considering if and how they decide to participate in the class discussion. Most students (93.1%) responded to at least one of the first two open-ended questions and were retained for the qualitative analysis. The other 33 students were similar to those who responded to the open-ended questions except the non-responders were more likely to have attended a racially diverse high school (69.7% vs 41.8%) and to have racially diverse friends (90.9 vs 74.6) compared to those retained for qualitative analysis.

We (all three authors) independently read through the open-ended responses to familiarize ourselves with the data and then convened to discuss our first impressions. We micro-coded several responses together based on how each pertained to the overarching question of why students participated differently (if applicable) in discussions of race. Each response could receive multiple codes if it appeared that more than one idea was communicated. The responses to the three open-ended questions for each student were used together to try to best capture the perspectives of each student. We paid most attention to the response to the first open-ended question, which focused on explaining change in participation “When class discussions around issues of race come up.” We also referred to the explanation offered for how “having at least one student of color in the classroom [affected their] participation in class discussions related to race.” This second explanation sometimes helped clarify the first, in which case no new codes were added. Any new, pertinent information would result in additional codes. Responses to the third open-ended question—to “share any other thoughts or feelings [they] have when discussions of race occur when at least one student of color is in the classroom”—were only considered when one of the first two open-ended questions had responses to minimize the likelihood that the responses were overly primed by the rest of the survey items. Only four responses were consequently ignored.

After coding together the responses of several students, we began to independently code each response, reconvening on several occasions to discuss our coding of each student up to approximately 75% of the students, formulating and refining a consistent set of codes through our discussions. Discrepancies among coders were discussed and resolved as we reflected on how we had applied such codes in other cases and as we reminded ourselves to focus on explanations for why participation changed. The remaining responses were coded by the first author accordingly. Together we then discussed the complete group of codes and organized and combined codes thematically until we reached consensus on a set of major codes to represent the various sentiments expressed by the students. These codes were grouped into four categories of ways that students approached the opportunity to participate in race-related discussion.

The qualitative codes could help deepen understanding of the differences among the identified student cluster groups. A final quantitative analysis was conducted to help integrate the findings between the quantitative and qualitative analyses. Specifically, each of the major qualitative codes were dummy-coded so that students could be compared quantitatively regarding whether they

mentioned any given qualitative codes. Frequencies of the codes were compared across the three clusters to provide insight on fundamental differences among the three groups. We considered the quantitative and qualitative findings as a basis for overarching conclusions and implications.

Results

Did Students Change Their Participation, And What Set Those Apart Who Did?

Sizable proportions of students decreased their level of participation when race-related topics were discussed in class, especially those with certain background characteristics. First, regarding reported changes in participation levels when topics of race were discussed in class (compared to other topics), descriptive statistics indicated that 53% of the sample participated less, 34.9% did not change their participation level, and 12.2% participated more). Students prone to have participated less in such discussions (Table 1) tended to have more highly educated parents, less racially diverse friendships, and voted Republican. When asked more specifically about participating in class in discussion about race when at least one student of color was present, the reported proportions were as follows: 33% decreased 64.6% did not change, and 2.4% increased. Those prone to have participated less tended to have less diverse friendships and to have voted other than Republican. Sex, age, parental income, childhood neighborhood racial composition, high school racial composition, and number of courses that discuss race were not associated with changes in participation in either situation.

The average extent of emotional experiences in class around discussions of race depended on the particular item students responded to (Table 2). Average overall discomfort regarding racial discussions was relatively low (2.00). The highest mean scores were for hoping students of color "share their unique perspectives" (4.25) and "correct any misconceptions or stereotypes" (4.03). Next was excitement about saying "something positive about another race" (3.39). The lowest score was regarding worry about "hurtful things that students of color might say about White people" (1.59) followed by worry about "other White students feeling upset or uncomfortable" (1.97). The other means were midrange (between 2 and 3).

The feelings, concerns, and desires around discussions of race differed for students based on several background characteristics. Bivariate correlations and independent-samples *t*-Tests revealed that participant sex, political party, and having a racially diverse group of friends were particularly relevant to students' emotions (Table 2). Looking at the first nine items, which focus on discomfort and worry, male students appear to be the most uneasy, specifically related to potentially negative reactions from White students and the instructor. Female students were more worried than males about hurting the feelings of students of color. Students from more diverse neighborhoods were somewhat more concerned about the negative reactions of White students. Students with more racially diverse friends were less uncomfortable around racial discussion in class and were less concerned than other students about negative reactions from, and hurting the feelings of, students of color. Students prone to vote Republican were consistently more worried and uncomfortable than other students, especially regarding negative reactions of all students and of the instructor.

Table 1

*Chi-square and ANOVA results for comparing changes in class participation regarding race-related topics and minority students present (*n=*370)*

	Participate with Racial Topic				…when Student(s) of Color Present			
	Decrease	Same	Increase	χ^2/F	Decrease	Same	Increase	χ^2/F
Sex								
Male	59.7%	29.4%	10.9%		26.1%	71.4%	2.5%	
Female	49.8%	37.5%	12.7%	3.20	36.3%	61.4%	2.4%	3.82
Age	21.07	21.34	20.67	.76	20.83	21.29	20.56	.93
Parent Education	4.74	4.37[a]	4.13[a]	5.99**	4.75	4.45	4.22	2.43
Parent Income	4.36	4.14	3.76	2.30	4.32	4.20	3.11	1.99
Diverse Neighborhood	1.95	1.71	2.16	1.55	1.92	1.86	2.33	.40
Diverse High School	2.10	1.98	2.18	.31	2.10	2.00	3.33	2.63
Diverse Friends	1.78	2.19[a]	2.04[a]	11.32***	1.74	2.06 [a]	2.22 [a]	7.27***
Political Voting								
Republican	72.8%	25.0%	2.2%		25.0%	75.0%	0%	
Other	46.4%	38.1%	15.5%	22.57***	35.6%	61.2%	3.2%	7.25*
# Courses discuss race	2.96	3.02	2.84	.20	3.03	2.93	3.1	.18

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001; [a]Means in the same row are statistically the same.

Table 2

*Mean differences (*t*-tests) and bivariate correlations (*r*) for demographic/background variables and students' feelings in class (*n=370)*

	Sample Mean (SD)	Gender (Male) *t*	Parent Ed *r*	Parent Income *r*	Diverse Neighbrhd *r*	Diverse School *r*	Diverse Friends *r*	Vote Repub. *r*	# Courses *r*
1. Discomfort when discussions of race occur in class with more than one racial group	2.00 (1.06)	.58	.08	.06	-.02	.02	-.12*	5.91***	-.08
2. I worry about hurtful things that students of color might say about White people	1.59 (1.05)	2.36*	.00	.03	.06	.04	.01	7.38***	-.03
3. I worry about being accused of saying something that is perceived as racist	2.55 (1.43)	.86	.05	.05	.08	.04	-.12*	8.16***	-.09
4. I worry about hurting the feelings of students of color if I say something	2.49 (1.33)	-3.79**	.04	-.01	.07	-.07	-.14**	.81	.01
5. I worry about students of color getting angry at me if I say something	2.39 (1.41)	.24	.01	.07	.08	.03	-.13*	7.07***	-.10
6. I worry about other White students getting angry at me if I say something	1.97 (1.34)	3.35***	.05	.05	.14**	.08	-.01	5.41***	-.07
7. I worry about other White students feeling upset or uncomfortable if I say something	1.78 (1.18)	3.36***	.07	.02	.13*	.04	.00	3.48***	-.06
8. I worry about the reaction of the instructor if I say something	2.04 (1.28)	1.79	.06	.01	.09	.11*	-.04	5.84***	-.11*

9. I am uneasy about the discussion because I don't like the potential for conflict	2.49 (1.40)	-1.33	.02	-.08	-.03	-.08	-.14**	3.89***	-.08
10. I am excited to show that I am informed about racial issues	2.73 (1.33)	-1.95	-.11*	-.08	.05	-.01	.10	-3.73***	.19***
11. I am excited to say something positive about another race	3.39 (1.39)	-2.37**	-.14**	-.11*	.09	.01	.10*	-2.15*	.14**
12. I am excited about the potential for a spirited debate on racial issues	2.49 (1.41)	.87	-.15**	-.06	.07	.01	.12*	-2.82**	.19***
13. I am hoping that the students of color will share their unique perspectives	4.25 (1.08)	-4.48***	-.12*	-.13*	.07	-.06	.07	-4.86***	.17**
14. I am hoping that the students of color will correct any misconceptions or stereotypes	4.03 (1.25)	-5.21***	-.12*	-.09	-.02	-.11*	.03	-5.25***	.17**

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Note: Age and high school racial composition were not significantly related to any of the variables.

When looking at the remaining five items, which reflect a more positive or hopeful emotional experience, female students and students from an apparent higher socio-economic background (higher parental education and income) were more excited about the opportunity for engaging conversation, including hearing specifically from students of color. Students who had taken more courses that included topics of race were generally more enthused about race-oriented class discussion and excited to display their knowledge. Conversely, students prone to vote Republican were relatively and consistently less eager for such conversations.

What broader perspectives were represented across the students?

Cluster analysis was used to see if certain patterns of feelings, concerns, and desires existed within the sample to represent a parsimonious set of distinct perspectives toward participating in discussions on race. We used a two-step process recommended by Hair and colleagues (2010). The first step uses a hierarchical cluster analysis with Ward's linkage method and a scree diagram to determine the number of clusters. The agglomeration schedule and diagram were indicative of three clusters. K means clustering then identified the specifics for each of the three clusters. The mean points of each cluster are included in Figure 1.

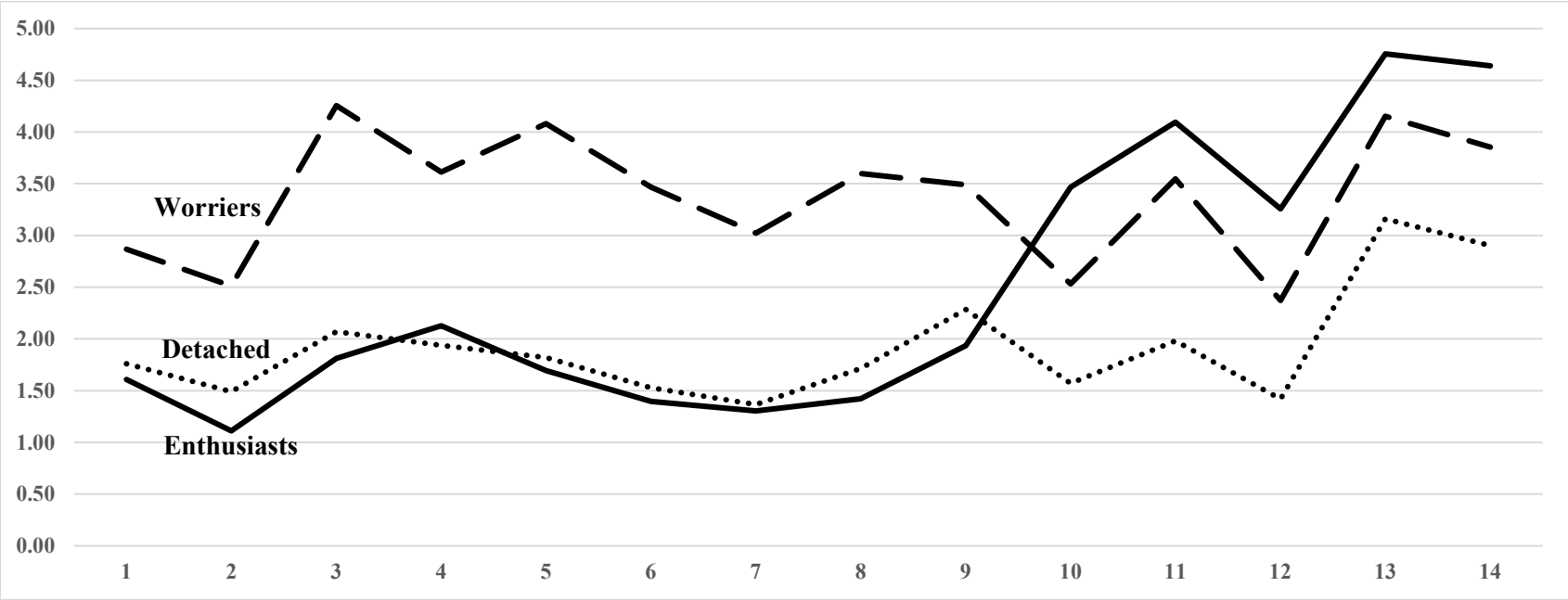
The largest cluster (48.1% of the sample) scored relatively low across the discomfort and worry items and highest on the enthusiastic and hopeful items. This cluster could be described as being comfortable and excited to engage ("Enthusiasts"). The second largest cluster (28.5% of the sample) was the most worried and concerned in class and were also moderately excited and could be described as being worried but interested ("Worriers"). The final cluster (23.4% of the sample) was low on discomfort and worry and also the lowest on enthusiasm for discussion and could be described as comfortable but relatively unexcited ("Detached").

Investigation of clusters (i.e., types of students) revealed several differences in students' background characteristics. Chi-square and ANOVA analyses (Table 3) indicated that Enthusiasts were disproportionately female (77.4%). The Worriers had the highest proportion of students who voted Republican (39%) and Enthusiasts had mostly voted otherwise (92.6%). Compared to the other groups, on average, Enthusiasts were more prone to have taken the highest number of courses in which racial issues had been discussed (3.44). Enthusiasts had the highest proportion who said they increased participation when race-related topics were discussed (19.1%), Worriers included the most students who decreased participation (68.4%), and Detached had proportions that fell between those of Enthusiasts and Worriers. No statistical differences were detected in participation change when students of color were in the class.

Because of the large number of students eliminated from the sample due to systemically missing data on their background variables (n = 98, see Method section), an alternative analysis with the full sample (n = 478) was conducted for all quantitative analyses except for the background variables. All findings were the same, except that the Chi Square score for sex differences in changing participation when a minority student is present (right side of Table 1) was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 8.59$, $p = .01$). Hence, the original analyses continue to be reported here.

Figure 1

Three Cluster Groups Plotted Along the 14 Feeling Questions Regarding Race Being Discussed in The Class



Note. The numbers on the horizontal axis correspond with the items as they appear in Table 1.

Table 3

*Chi-square and ANOVA results for comparisons of background characteristics and changes in participation among the student groups (*n=*370)*

	Enthusiasts (48.1%)	Worriers (28.5%)	Detached (23.4%)	χ^2/F
Sex				
Male	22.6%	40.4%	41.1%	
Female	77.4%	59.6%	58.9%	18.01***
Age	21.01	20.85	21.42	1.21
Parent Education	4.45	4.56	4.72	1.28
Parent Income	4.02	4.34	4.53	2.71
Diverse Neighborhood	1.85	2.10	1.73	1.32
Diverse High School	1.99	2.15	2.11	.32
Diverse Friends	2.03	1.92	1.96	1.56
Voting				
Republican Only	7.4%	39%	23.2%	
Other	92.6%	61%	76.8%	53.99***
# Courses discuss race	3.44	2.83[a]	2.40[a]	16.93***
Participation Change				38.46***
Decrease	39.1%	68.4%	57.1%	
Same	41.7%	26.5%	36.6%	
Increase	19.1%	5.1%	6.3%	
Participation Change w/ SoC~				8.17
Decrease	30%	39%	25%	
Same	66.1%	59.6%	73.2%	
Increase	3.9%	1.5%	1.8%	

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001; ~when at least one student of color (SoC) in is the class

[a]Means in the same row are statistically the same.

What do qualitative codes of open-ended responses reveal about motivations?

Qualitative content analysis of the students' explanations regarding their change in participation for race-related discussions resulted in 14 major codes. As noted, statements could receive multiple codes if they contained more than one sentiment, some of which could be closely related ideas. Those who said that their participation did not change in such circumstances offered little insight for the purposes of our investigation, typically either mentioning that the student either enjoys participating or tends to be quiet (often due to shyness) regardless of topic. Furthermore, we decided to generate one set of codes that would apply to all the responses regardless of which of the three open-ended questions each response belonged (i.e., without distinguishing whether the question mentioned students of color being in the class). The main reason for this decision

was that the first question did not specify whether a student of color was in the class and responses to that question often reflected the assumption that students of color were present (e.g., “I feel as a white female I want to open the floor to others and their experience over my own”). Furthermore, students would often reiterate their first response in a later response (e.g., “Again, I don’t want to speak inappropriately about topics that pertain to race. I’d rather listen than talk”).

The 14 codes can be organized within four types of approaches toward class participation regarding topics of race (see Table 4 for model quotes of all codes). The first two changes incorporate two general circumstances that contributed to participating less than usual: “willingly backing off” and “begrudgingly backing off.” Willingly backing off on participation included the following six interrelated codes.

> Make space: allowing time for students of color to share their thoughts and experiences.
> Can’t relate: lacking the knowledge and experience of race-related issues to be able to contribute meaningfully to discussion.
> Not my place: it is not the place of a White student to opine on the experiences of students of color.
> Listen to learn: intentional about taking the opportunity to be silent and learn from others who are more informed about the topic.
> Avoid conflict: hoping to minimize the possibility of contributing to general conflict in class.
> Not offend: not wanting to say something that could offend someone or otherwise make them feel bad—concerned about others’ feelings.

Begrudgingly backing off on participation included the following four interrelated codes.

> Protecting myself: might be interested in participating but worries too much about saying something the wrong way and being attacked (as opposed to the primary worry being about hurting someone else’s feelings—see “not offend”—or about general tension in the classroom—see “avoid conflict”).
> Unpopular opinions: believing that one’s opinions differ from the majority and sharing them will likely provoke accusations of being ignorant or a racist. This is often closely tied to self-protection but with specific mention of opinions being unpopular.

Table 4

Sample Quotes Corresponding to the Four Types of Changes and 14 Themes.

Themes	Sample Quotes
	Willingly Back Off
Make space	Sometimes, I'll get just a tad quieter because I feel like I can't and shouldn't dominate those conversations, being white. I recognize my

	voice is not the most important one in the room during those moments so I may participate a little less.
	I am white and very privileged. I don't feel comfortable taking up that space and time from people who deserve it.
	Because I am white, I prefer to speak less and let other students of color have space to speak. Especially if we are covering sensitive issues, such as police brutality or immigration. I do not want to dominate a conversation about race as a white person.
Can’t relate	I feel that I haven't been subject to a lot of racial discrimination so am willing to hear out those who have more to say on the subject.
	I don't feel that I have appropriate knowledge of what to say concerning race.
	Whenever I speak up in class, I make sure to have at least some knowledge or experience with whatever the topic is. The last thing I feel comfortable doing as a cis-gendered white male is speaking about race.
Not my place	I simply don't want to get in the way of what POC voices have to say about race because it's not my place as a white person to do so.
	I sometimes feel it is not my place to speak on the experience of others and I do not want to offend those in my class who feel as if I'm speaking for them.
	I am white and do not feel in the right place to talk about race and the troubles/concerns/hardships other races have to endure.
Listen to learn	Since I am white, I enjoy listening to others to learn more and be educated by their experiences.
	I honestly just feel like I am still learning a lot. I don't want to say the wrong thing and I know that in race-based issues, I have a lot to learn.
	A student of color would have more to say than I would during a discussion of race. I would love to hear their views and opinions because they may have more experience than I would have.
Avoid conflict	I don’t participate differently unless I see that a topic causes conflict.

	As far as I am concerned, the less that is said about the topic, the less likely that people get riled up.
	We're all the same regardless of the color of our skin. My participation deals with not wanting to fight everyone (mostly the white people) not the people of color for having an opposing viewpoint.
Not offend	I want to be respectful to other students and their experiences. I never want to say something the wrong way and offend someone.
	It is a more sensitive topic and I don't want to say something that might be interpreted wrong or make anyone feel bad.
	Race is a hard topic to talk about in a classroom. You don't want to hurt anyone's feeling or say something wrong. I participate less because I don't want to say something that might potentially hurt another student.
	Begrudgingly Back Off
Protect myself	It's mostly when the classroom gets political. I have been centered out in class for being a republican. Sometimes the class will openly start saying "all republicans are racist" or something like that. So when it comes time for me to share I know they no longer will value me as a person.
	I don't participate much in discussion anyway, but when a white person speaks about race it will almost always be racist to someone in the room. It's just better not to talk.
	… I'm tired of "changing" my views in order to be respected as a student. I also feel that this impacts grades.
	I do not want to be attacked for my opinions.
	As a Caucasian female, I feel awkward talking about race. I am afraid someone is going to shout "white ignorance" towards me. I wish I knew how to relate to other races better.
Unpopular opinions	It is stressful enough to voice the "unpopular" opinions with white people, but especially when there are other minorities in the classroom it is harder because I feel like people take things the wrong way or twist what you are saying to make you seem like a bad person.

	I tend to participate less because my opinions (which are unpopular on campus because they're conservative leaning) are usually shot down by others or the professor and because I don't want the discussion to turn into an argument.
	I don't participate in discussions about race, because my views greatly differ those of other students, I am not some hive minded weakling who virtues signals about everything and calls racism to everything without first looking at facts, if I were to speak in class I would automatically be ousted as a racist, without first having my point of view fully heard and represented with facts.
Voice is dismissed	Since I am white I have been told my opinion doesn't matter.
	Being a straight, white male in our current political environment, my opinions are usually discounted or unwanted. With this in mind, I usually keep quiet.
	I just feel like I don't have a say because I'm not a POC so in the eyes of others my opinion is irrelevant.
	I've been told I cannot have an opinion.
Too much focus on race	Generally, I am outgoing and open about my beliefs, because I feel strongly that the discussion of opposing views is the cornerstone of higher education. However, when the topic of race is brought into the discussion, I almost always remove myself from the conversation. It seems as though my peers feel it to be necessary to loudly and, with great vigor, express to the room that any person with white skin is personally responsible for the crimes against other races in previous generations. These forced discussions of race are the greatest factor, I feel, that has stripped away much of the value of discussion-based classes.
	I have the general belief that race does not really matter and focusing on it only really makes things worse. I think this belief is fairly popular and grounded in common sense.
	…I believe the topic of race divides more people than it unites, and politicians and institutions with political or ideological motives continue to fan the flames of hatred and racism, but in reality, its all smoke and mirrors.

Increasing Participation

Have passion	I am more passionate about the topic of race, giving me more confidence to participate. I might participate more than I do for other topics that are less important. Racism is a serious issue not only in this country but around the world and I feel that it is more important to voice my opinion as well as participate in discussions about it to help educate others and myself on how to fix it or help find the roots of the issue. I feel strongly about the topic and want to share my ideas. I feel very strongly about topics such as inclusivity, especially when it comes to discrimination of people of other races.
Knowledgeable	I am well educated on the matter due to the classes I have taken and take it very seriously considering a big part of the problem is people are not educated in this area of history as well as current events. I feel I have a strong understanding on the topic. I feel like I've done enough research on the topic to be able to contribute to conversations to engage in healthy discourse with classmates.
Be an ally	I usually participate more when the discussion pertains to race because I consider myself an ally and advocate for those who have not been blessed with the privilege I have as a White person. I want to validate their experience and let them know they're being heard. I try to build off of what they share to help me become more educated in regards to race and racial issues. At this point, issues of race are not to be disputed, there is no room for debate; equity is necessary and anyone claiming otherwise should be told how and why they are wrong. I am passionate about learning and being an ally to these topics.
	Contingent
It depends	I participate differently depending on the overall attitude of the class. If the class has been good about having kind and open conversations, then I am more willing to participate.

> It depends on the dynamic of the class honestly. Some environments are more welcoming than others and oftentimes, I do not participate as much because the professor is not as comfortable with the subject.
>
> Most of the time I try to get the vibe of the classroom before I speak on topics such as race. In most cases people will get outwardly offended by things others say so I choose to not speak if I see that people are getting easily offended.
>
> I have had many professors that shut down students that have a differing viewpoint than their own. Professors often make you seem like a bad guy in class if you have a differing viewpoint.
>
> I feel I will be targeted for my opinion and receive a bad grade.

> Voice is dismissed: knowing that one's perspective will be downplayed, unwelcomed, or unallowed because of being White.
> Too much focus on race: viewing discussions on race as irrelevant, overstated, or inherently divisive, also reducing opportunities to focus on other topics (more of a resentful sentiment than "avoid conflict" which is more about discomfort).

The third type of change was "increasing participation" because of the topic. Three interrelated codes were included.

> Have passion: having strong feelings about the importance of the topic and thus making extra effort to participate.
> Knowledgeable: knowing more about this topic and thus feeling more able to participate in class discussion.
> Be an ally: wanting to show support for students of color and to signal allyship.

Finally, the fourth type of change (and 14th code) was not in a particular direction or done with a consistent motive. Namely, participating was "contingent" upon specific circumstances.

> It depends: participation could increase or decrease depending on the overall class atmosphere (e.g., students' attitudes and sensitivities) or on the instructor's perceived openness to varying viewpoints and competence in facilitating sensitive discussions.

What do qualitative codes reveal about the three student groups (perspectives)?

The three types of student clusters also tended to differ in their proportions of code mentions. Chi-square analyses revealed (Table 5) that Enthusiasts were mostly likely to willingly back off to "make space" whereas worriers were most likely to back off to "avoid conflict" and "not offend."

Detached had proportions toward the midpoints between Enthusiasts and Worriers on “make space” and “avoid conflict.” For begrudgingly backing off, Worriers were especially prone to mention “protect myself,” “unpopular opinions,” and “voice is dismissed,” and Detached were most prone to mention “too much focus on race.” Enthusiasts were particularly low on these codes (though a moderate level on “voice is dismissed”). For increased participation, Enthusiasts had nearly all the mentions of “have passion” and “knowledgeable” for reasons to participate while the other two groups were similarly silent in this regard. Finally, Worriers were much more prone than the others to mention that their participation was contingent (“it depends”) on the class environment and instructor’s approach to the topic. Of note, Enthusiasts had much higher proportions of “not my place,” “listen to learn,” and “be an ally” than the other groups, but these differences were not deemed statistically significant. Given the magnitude of the different proportions, if the proportions were to remain the same but with a larger sample of mentions, it seems likely that statistical significance would have been reached. The results of the alternative analyses (with the larger sample) did not differ from this original analysis.

Table 5

Proportions of qualitative codes mentions compared across Student Type

	# of Mentions	Enthusiasts	Worriers	Detached	Chi-Square
Willingly back off					
Make space	96	68.8%	10.4%	20.8%	24.30***
Can’t relate	72	50%	19.4%	30.6%	4.40
Not my place	46	65.2%	19.6%	15.2%	5.81
Listen to learn	29	62.1%	10.3%	27.6%	5.0
Avoid conflict	41	14.6%	58.5%	26.8%	25.08***
Not offend	59	27.1%	49.2%	23.7%	16.43***
Begrudgingly back off					
Protect myself	99	4%	69.7%	23.2%	125.74***
Unpopular opinions	39	5.1%	64.1%	30.8%	36.43***
Voice is dismissed	31	22.6%	61.3%	16.1%	17.86***
Too much focus on race	21	14.3%	38.1%	47.6%	11.61**
Increase participation					
Have passion	31	93.5%	6.5%	0.0%	27.33***
Knowledgeable	14	85.7%	7.1%	7.1%	8.07*
Be an ally	19	68.4%	15.8%	15.8%	0.20
Contingent					
It depends	35	34.3%	54.3%	11.4%	12.69**

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001; ˜when at least one student of color (SoC) is in the class

Discussion

We investigated variation in how White students adjusted their participation in class discussion when race-related topics were the focal point of such discussion. The emphasis was on students' mindsets and their decision-making considerations rather than on specific course content, pedagogical approaches, or testing a particular theoretical framework, though our findings likely have implications for such. We have no objective knowledge of, nor can we verify, the content that the students responded to or the student or instructor's behavior in any given class. Regardless, students' perceptions of their experiences are valuable in that they likely inform their attitudes toward subsequent opportunities to participate in class discussion. Below we integrate the findings across the various quantitative and qualitative analyses to discuss the numerous potential motivations White students have for choosing to participate differently in class discussions when race and race-related topics were part of the conversation.

In light of a tendency for students to self-censor around sensitive topics (Schmidt, 2022; Zhou & Barbaro, 2023) and the literature reviewed on White students' approaches toward addressing race-related issues, we were not surprised to see that more than half (53%) of the students in our sample reported decreased participation and that only about 12% reported increased participation in race-related class discussions. The numbers were somewhat different when it was made explicit that at least one student of color was present: about 33% said they decreased participation and 2.5% said they participated more. These two patterns might seem inconsistent—one might expect a greater proportion of White students to speak less when at least one student of color is in the class, compared to when that isn't necessarily the case (the generic scenario). Several open-ended responses related to changes in participation shed some light on possible reasons for the differences in frequencies between these two items. For example: "Why would it change anything?", "Race doesn't matter to me and it doesn't make me uncomfortable.", and "Why would anyone participate any differently based on the racial status of their classmates?". Such sentiments could speak to assumptions about respect—equal treatment—or about a race-evasive mindset that lacks appreciation for race-based power dynamics in the classroom (Spanierman et al., 2008). Social desirability could also play a role to the extent that the students perceived acting differently around students of color is looked down upon. Also, some White students might have worried that not participating could be interested as a lack of interest in issues such as racial equality (Boysen, 2012; Tatum, 1992). However, fewer White students spoke up more when a student of color was in the class than said they would do so in the generic scenario, suggesting some reticence.

Comparisons of the three student groups—or three types of perspectives—also helped investigate different motivations behind certain approaches to participation. The Enthusiasts especially hoped that students of color would "share their unique perspectives" and "correct any misconceptions or stereotypes," though the Worriers were close behind. Enthusiasts also had a propensity to willingly back off to "make space" for students of color to speak. The "can't relate," "not my place," and especially "listen to learn" codes also might dovetail with a strong desire to hear the voices of students of color. However, this creates a dilemma. Students of color might resent the implied or direct pressure to represent their ethnic group (Anonymous; Maxwell &

Chesler, 2022) and experience anxiety about the expectation to speak up when they might prefer to avoid that burden (Srivastava & Francis, 2006). Given that the Enthusiasts tended to have more liberal politics, had taken more classes in which race was discussed, and were the ones who nearly exclusively mentioned being knowledgeable about race-related topics, one might expect this group to be more attentive to this dilemma. Perhaps they were aware but were also primarily hoping that others would hear the accounts of students of color and become more convinced about the plight of racism, which has shown to be an effective strategy to produce such an outcome (Weinzimmer & Bergdahl, 2018).

Some Enthusiasts (far more than in any other group) seemed to embrace race-related discussions as a chance to shine—to display their knowledge and, for some, to engage with a topic they care deeply about. Some might have had more selfless motives in doing so, while others may have seen an opportunity to virtue signal to gain status among peers and evaluators (Steele, 2007; Wallace et al., 2020). Yet, most still held back a bit. Between 30% to 39% of Enthusiasts (depending on the question) said they decreased participation, seemingly motivated in some cases by the desire for making space for students of color to talk and a sense that it wasn't the place of White students to comment. Enthusiasts might feel torn between these two mindsets, though most, regardless of their excitement to engage and listen, reported not increasing their participation. The groups were formed based on their concerns and hopes and not their actual participation level, so being enthusiastic does not necessarily mean speaking up.

Worriers also disproportionately backed off, sometimes willingly motivated by concerns about general conflict and causing offense. They were also the most concerned group regarding hostile reactions of students (White and students of color) and of the instructor. They were especially prone to begrudgingly backing off, commonly motivated by self-protection, sometimes because of their unpopular opinions and having experienced (or witnessed) negative reactions to the expression of such opinions. They had especially high scores on worrying about "being accused of saying something that is perceived as racist" and "students of color getting angry at [them]," and also had the highest proportion of the "it depends" code. They appear to have been cognizant of their surroundings and implications of class participation, which would be consistent with experiencing stereotype threat (Steele, 2011). They also scored relatively high on worrying about White students' reactions, not just those of students of color. Given the nature of the qualitative comments, at least some Worriers begrudgingly held back with a sense of hurt or resentment about such stereotyping, believing that the stereotypes were misguided in their cases.

Worriers were particularly conflict-avoidant and concerned about self-protection. Knowing they tended to have less popular opinions, it seemed safer to say little. As seen in the open-ended responses, some worried about having their words twisted or being "shot down," and at the least not being respected and at worse being labeled a racist. The "voice is dismissed" code also appeared to include a resentful tone and was sometimes based on reportedly being told that they were unallowed to have an opinion. Many instructors and students believe that racial insensitivity should be addressed immediately (Boysen, 2012), which could result in what feels like public rebukes. These apparent reprimands might be interpreted as disallowing someone to express one's perspective, though a "there is no room for debate" type sentiment, as declared by an Enthusiast, might be expressed more directly in class. Furthermore, for some, joining the

discussion helps indicate interest and support, demonstrating that they care about the plight of marginalized populations (Boysen, 2012), yet they feel disallowed from doing so.

In truth, some opinions (or voices) will be immediately challenged, which can be understandable and arguably appropriate, but can also feel stifling. From the perspective of those begrudgingly holding back, it seemed that their views were often perceived as being discounted just because of being White or their opinions did not match with what they perceived to be the orthodoxy of the student body. From the perspective of challengers (including in this sample), students of color need support and validation from privileged allies (Case, 2012). Challengers often interpret disagreement as a defensive, emotional response to fragility or a means to retain the status quo of racial power dynamics and White entitlement (Brunsma et al., 2013; DiAngelo, 2011). Together these perspectives seem to create a tension regarding how closely—and in what manner—to regulate language and ideas in the classroom. Self-censorship, even if motivated by avoiding potential offense, risks the minimization of opportunities for genuine dialog and the exploration of differences and resulting in students expressing only surface-level “happy talk”—such as proclaiming the benefits of diversity (Bell & Hartmann, 2007, p. 895). It can also place more burden on students of color to participate more than they desire.

The third group, Detached, were the lowest on the excitement-oriented items and were similar to Worriers on the percentage of those who increased their participation and on the qualitative codes associated with increasing participation (and none of them mentioned “have passion”). This reticence appears to be a balanced mixture of willingly and begrudgingly backing off with relatively little interest in participating in race-related discussions, though moderate interest (but lowest among the groups) in hearing from students of color. Perhaps their collective attitude was one of “better safe than sorry”—they did not mind backing off on a topic they couldn’t relate much to and were not especially concerned about how others might react to their comments, though believed there was some risk in offering their thoughts.

Additionally, nearly half (and a plurality) of mentions for the code “too much focus on race” were from the Detached group. This code might share some commonality with “avoid conflict” (and thus perhaps lacking enthusiasm about a sensitive topic) and “unpopular opinions” codes. As seen in the model quotes, “too much focus on race” can reflect a variety of sentiments—being put off by the zeal or accusatory nature of some students, believing that race is unimportant—a race-evasive mindset (Brunsma et al., 2013), and that focusing on race creates division. Such perspectives tend to be associated with students being less open to talking about race (Harbin et al., 2019). Overall, it is curious that this group was nearly identical to Enthusiasts in their lack of worry but differed in so many ways that generally corresponded with having worries: more Republican voters, fewer courses that discussed race, a greater tendency to decrease participation, and fewer mentions of most of the begrudgingly backing off codes. We named them *Detached* in part with some speculation that these students might worry less because they are somewhat “checked out” or otherwise oblivious to the implications of discussing race, but in-depth interviews might help in understanding this interesting pattern.

Just a note on the "contingent" approach to participation. Some students explicitly mentioned that in some cases they might speak up more and in some less depending on various elements of the

circumstance (e.g., attitudes, comfort levels, student sensitivity). Students' decision-making around participating in class discussions about race might be more contingent than was captured in the present study. For example, some White students might feel more motivated to speak up *only* if another White student makes a perceived racist comment, hoping to ease tension in the atmosphere or to distance themselves from the offender (Taylor et al., 2024). In situations where conversations stay superficial and non-controversial, the same White students might feel content being just a listener.

Limitations and implications

As with similar studies, the convenience, cross-sectional nature of the sampling should be considered when interpreting the findings. National research in the United States has indicated that university students from the Midwest were more reluctant than students from other regions in the country to discuss their views on race (Stiksma, 2020), which could shape the results of the study. We do not have objective data regarding actual changes in discussion participation based on the topic, but trusted students to have a reliable perception regarding their general approach toward engaging in race-related discussions, be it less, more, or the same as other topics in general. Though we were able to glean additional insight by incorporating responses to open-ended questions, most responses were brief, and students had no opportunity for elaboration and clarification (as they would have in a face-to-face interview). The tone of comments was often ambiguous, so we intended to avoid overinterpretation and focus on the choice of words. Thus, some of the final codes appear similar and might tap into the same core sentiment (e.g., "make space" and "not my place") but we erred on the side of a longer list of codes that might reveal greater nuance and was truer to the words used by the students. Being able to ask for clarification would have helped us further refine our codes and perhaps result in some different conclusions.

An advantage to our methodology, however, is that we likely received more frank and honest information because of the anonymous nature of the survey. Finding ways to gather in-depth, nuanced information from students about race-related issues likely requires assured anonymity in a private environment. This would be particularly applicable when researchers hope students are genuine and feel able to express views that are easily misunderstood or misconstrued or could put them at risk of censure (or praise) from people within and outside their racial group.

Our study findings further attest to how challenging race-related discussions can be for instructors to facilitate. They also reinforce and add to important considerations for instructors, particularly when teaching in contexts that include sensitivity over topics related to race (e.g., regions with a history of racism or tensions between racial groups) and some polarization among political ideologies that are somehow connected to perspectives on race and race relations. Hence, we offer the following considerations to prepare for fostering inclusive and meaningful discussion, each of which could fuel additional discussions with students about discussing sensitive topics:

- What exactly does it mean to participate in a discussion? What might it mean when some students just listen? Note that silence can mean giving space, not feeling qualified to speak, not feeling allowed to speak, not feeling safe to speak, or not believing the topic

is relevant or ultimately productive to address. We advise caution when making assumptions about anyone's level of participation.

- What do students of color (or who otherwise might stand out in class, being heavily outnumbered in some way) want to be treated in such discussions? Do they want space? Do they want to get personal or address misconceptions? What stereotypes might they feel threatened by? What do you do when some students prefer to have less attention brought to them while others prefer taking advantage of being given more space (Richeson & Shelton, 2007)? How might White students (or the majority) also experience stereotype threat? From our research on this topic, we advise caution when making assumptions about students having the same preferences even if they share the same ethnicity or social status.

- Do students feel pressure to virtue signal? Are some more motivated by pressure to conform, a genuine desire to show support for a marginalized group, or a way to prove their innocence of racist ideas? What really is the purpose of the discussion, and is that purpose conducive to certain motivations for speaking up? We advise caution in making assumptions about the motivations of students who make affirming or popular statements in discussions of sensitive topics, and to help students reflect on their motivations for doing so.

- Are unpopular opinions desirable in such discussions? How do you distinguish an opinion that is unpopular because of political or cultural leanings of the majority of students (and perhaps the instructor) from ones that are unpopular because they are hostile, uncivil, or bigoted? How should instructors intervene when discomfort or offense occurs from an unpopular (or poorly-worded) comment? For example, in our data, students prone to vote Republican more consistently reported discomfort, worry, and lessening participation. Republicans tend to see barriers based on race to be less prevalent than do Democrats (Horowitz, 2019), and are more likely to believe that focusing on the history of slavery and racism in the United States does more harm than good to society (Pew, 2021). Such viewpoints could be interpreted in various ways by instructors and students—as racist, racially insensitive, ignorant, innocent misunderstandings, understandable beliefs based on certain life circumstances, a different way of looking at things, a desire for more racial unity. We advise instructors to be intentional about where to draw lines between being inclusive and inviting of diverse voices and advocating for the feelings of marginalized students in the class. Trying to do both at the same time with the same commitment levels can be especially challenging; explaining to students how and where the instructor draws this line might help in that regard.

- Should instructors or students set up the guidelines for discussions of sensitive topics? We advise serious consideration of giving students some or perhaps most of responsibility for creating such guidelines. The considerations mentioned above could be addressed while doing so. The process could cause meaningful reflection about many of the issues noted by the students in our study. However, if students are involved with expressing their ideas for discussion guidelines, obtaining anonymous input from

> students might help in facilitating classroom guidelines and discussion. Otherwise, the barriers that prevent open discussion about race or other sensitive topics might become barriers toward having a through discussion (and analysis) of all the issues at stake.

Such considerations can be very time-consuming, and making time and space for such an investment could be challenging for courses in which race-related topics are tangential. Adding time and materials aimed at helping students buy into the investment could place further strain on ensuring sufficient focus on all the necessary course content and all the course objectives. It thus might be tempting for instructors to skip bringing up race-related topics at all, which comes with its own set of costs. We are left to wonder whether tangential and sporadic discussions of race-related topics would likely result in meaningful exchanges among students with diverse perspectives without having first built a foundation conducive to minimizing the barriers noted in our study. Instructors would be well served to take time during the development of a course to consider the tradeoffs of the level of investment they intend to make in addressing sensitive subject matter.

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