Cultural Mistrust and Social Media Relationships

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Abstract
This study sought to examine the suitability of the Cultural Mistrust Inventory (CMI) items for contemporary interracial social relationships on social media. The study employed qualitative cognitive interviews with 28 persons of color in the U.S. Findings suggest that the CMI may not be a suitable measure for accurately assessing relational trust across different racial groups on social media due to generational change in consciousness about race relations, and the perceived ambiguity of the CMI items. Findings also reveal that the CMI is limited in its ability to assess racial trust on social media and may not account for how trust manifests across different social media platforms. These findings suggest that the continued use of the CMI to assess contemporary interracial relationships is not recommended.

Keywords
intercultural social relationships, social media, cultural mistrust

Cultural Mistrust and Social Media Relations
Four decades after its conception, researchers have not fully interrogated the suitability of Terrell and Terrell’s (1981) conceptualization of “cultural mistrust” for today’s interracial social relationships. Because “race” is a socio-historical concept (Omi & Winant, 2014), it stands to reason that current conceptions of race, interracial trust, and interracial social relationships are likely to reflect changes in social, cultural, and political life since 1981. All such scales have limitations based on changing social contexts. Consequently, contemporary conceptualizations of race and interracial trust on social media may be different from Terrell and Terrell’s (1981) conceptualizations.

How persons of color trust Whites may have changed since 1981 when Terrell and Terrell devised the now classic Cultural Mistrust Inventory (CMI). Conceptualized to examine the extent to which African Americans distrusted Whites in their everyday face-to-face social relationships, the CMI reflected its historical moment. Yet, contemporary researchers continue to use the CMI to ascertain the effects of racial mistrust without a consideration of its suitability for present-day interracial relationships on social media.

Though it can be argued that the historic effects of racism that inspired the CMI are still in effect today, social science research has not considered the impact of social and cultural changes that could impact the suitability of the CMI in 21st century interracial relationships. As an example, the findings using the Racialized Aggressions on Social Media’s (RASM) (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2021) indicate that social media communication may affect the utilization of the CMI, suggesting that the construct of “cultural mistrust” may be outdated and may now be incompatible with online social relationships unimagined in 1981.

Consequently, an examination of the CMI is needed to improve the validity of social science inquiries that seek to better understand how interracial social relationships are carried out by new generations in the 21st century’s trademark relational space, social media.

Literature Review
Cultural mistrust. As Omi and Winant (2014) assert, scholars’ and researchers’ conceptualization of “race” in American society has differed across time, but it is still historically salient. Modern Western societies have faced the difficulty of defining race and its significance for political organization, the courts, and social systems. The conceptualization of “race” has always been mutable; its groupings and divisions have been “transformed, destroyed and reformed” (Omi &

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Winant, 2014, p. 12) by scientific, religious, and political forces. Consequently, as a concept and construct, “race” has proven conceptually variable and deficient, a problem for psychological theorizing and research measurement (Helms et al., 2005).

Ignoring this conceptual difficulty, in 1981 Terrell and Terrell developed the Cultural Mistrust Inventory (CMI) to measure African-Americans’ distrust of “Whites,” a binary conceptualization of race defined by “Blackness” and “Whiteness” as paradoxical and absolute racial identities. Though “race” was never simply a Black-White experience, the Black-White racial binary has been prevalent and inescapable (Gonzalez-Sobrino & Goss, 2019). As the conceptual basis of the CMI, the Black-White binary paradigm prevalent in U.S. history and culture now seems even more problematic (Bonilla-Silva, 2004). Since 1981, demographic forces such as the increase in mixed-race individuals, and the immigration and migration of people of color may have changed our understanding of race. Taking these forces into consideration, conceptualizations of “race” may not fit the binary framing of race in the CMI.

However, the CMI has been used to measure mistrust between racial and ethnic groups across several disciplines. In mental health and counseling, the CMI has been used to measure African Americans’ attitudes toward mental health and counseling services (Duncan, 2003; Whaley, 2001). For example, Whaley’s (2001) meta-analysis of correlation studies on cultural mistrust in African Americans and their mental health attitudes postulated evidence of cultural mistrust’s significant effect on African Americans’ psychosocial attitudes and behaviors. The CMI has also been used to examine perceptions of racial discrimination (Ball, 2016; Brooks & Hopkins, 2017; David, 2010; Stepanikova & Oates, 2016), psychosocial dimensions such as self-efficacy (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2011), educational achievement and motivation (Caldwell & Obasi, 2010), and adolescents’ perceptions of the racial climate in their school and neighborhood relationships (Benner & Graham, 2013).

“Cultural mistrust” has also proven to mediate the relationship between racial discrimination and attitudes among racially and ethnically diverse groups. For example, Benner and Graham (2013) positively correlated experiences of discrimination with cultural mistrust among ethnically and racially diverse high school students. Cooper and Sánchez (2016) determined that cultural mistrust played a role in Latino and Latina adolescents’ attitudes toward the value of education. In one study of Asian American university students, an increase in racial microaggressions was related to an increase in cultural mistrust and subsequently, student well-being (Kim et al., 2017).

Other studies have examined variations in the level of cultural mistrust among ethnically diverse Black students. For example, Phelps et al. (2001) found that African American students reported higher mistrust compared to their African, West Indian, and Caribbean peers. Though Kim et al. (2017) apply Terrell and Terrell’s (1981) cultural mistrust inventory to Asian American college students on the basis that “it stands to reason that mistrust as an outcome of racial oppression can be generalized to the Asian American context” (p. 664), they suggest that future researchers should develop a cultural mistrust measure that is specific to Asian Americans. Ogunyemi et al. (2020) do not directly cite Terrell and Terrell (1981) in their systematic review of microaggressions in the learning environment, but rather, they cite Kim et al. (2017) when referring to cultural mistrust. Overall, prior research has not rigorously interrogate the CMI items’ suitability for current racial and ethnic populations, especially beyond in-person interactions.

Within postsecondary education, researchers who are interested in the attitudes of university students of color about Whites and the role that perceptions of interracial trust play in their lives also still employ the CMI. Studies of cultural mistrust among college students have largely focused on the same psychosocial attitudes and behaviors in the mental health and counseling research literature. Nickerson et al. (1994) provide evidence of a negative relationship between cultural mistrust and attitudes about mental health services among African American university students. They found that greater mistrust of Whites was associated with negative feelings about seeking therapy from White staff, and beliefs that therapeutic services from White staff would be inadequate to meet their needs. Townes et al. (2009) endorse the assertion that African American students with high levels of cultural mistrust prefer to enlist African American mental health professionals. Researchers have also used the CMI to examine the relationship between cultural mistrust and college student outcomes measures including GPA (Caldwell & Obasi, 2010; Irving & Hudley, 2005), academic self-concept (Cody, 2017), self-esteem (Phelps et al., 2001), and career development (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2011). Further, the CMI has been used to examine indicators of campus climate including the perception of faculty mentor credibility, effectiveness, and cultural competence (Grant-Thompson & Atkinson, 1997), students’ of color relationships with White faculty (Cody, 2017), and perceived mistrust and differential treatment between African American and White students (Thompson et al., 1990).

Currently, researchers still employ the CMI with little regard for the relevance of the conceptualization and items for new generations of people of color. The majority of studies on cultural mistrust among university students were conducted at U.S. universities almost 20 years ago (Whaley, 2001), and with the exception of the few studies mentioned, were limited in scope. Further, recent studies employing the CMI have not substantively modified the scale’s items to reflect the social and cultural change in interracial social relations but not substantively. For example, in David (2010), CMI items were edited to refer to “Filipinos” instead of “Blacks” (p. 60). More recently, researchers seeking to examine the impact of online racial harassment on the
emotional well-being and sense of belonging of university students of color developed the Racialized Aggressions on Social Media survey (RASM) (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2021) and included items from the CMI without significant modification. The RASM used the original CMI language and constructs but modified each item by adding the phrase “on social media.” In their findings, the researchers reported that students of color were puzzled by the CMI items in the RASM, bringing into question the CMI items’ suitability for examining 21st century online interracial social relationships. In other words, how students today conceptualize race and interracial trust could suggest that the CMI items designed to measure “cultural trust” are outdated and obsolete. However, Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2021) did not pursue this line of inquiry, leaving it for other researchers to pursue.

In sum, the empirical research literature employing the CMI lacks an updated, contemporary conceptualization and interpretation of students’ of color cultural mistrust of Whites across all racial and ethnic identifications, and as well as a conceptualization of interracial trust on social media. The absence of a conceptual update of the CMI items is a gap in the research literature.

Social media and race. The effect of race in the establishment of online social networks has been examined in a variety of ways and grounded in the sociology of relational ties and social capital (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000), and friendship networks and choice (Blau, 1977; McPherson et al., 2001). Researchers have directed their attention to racial homophily on Facebook (Lewis et al., 2012; Wimmer & Lewis, 2010), finding that shared racial background and pre-existing homophilous friendship ties amplified racial homophily online. In contrast, Gonzales (2017) suggests that among racially marginalized populations, homophily widens their online social networks online with weak tie exchanges, that is, individuals most unlike them. For racially marginalized populations, homophily does not restrict their online social connections.

How and with whom online social relationships are established beyond racial homophily could be explained by the effects of the presence of racism on social media. In the U.S., the Pew Research Center’s 2017 survey of online racism details various forms of online racial harassment (e.g., embarrassment, being called offensive names), and witnessing the online harassment of others (e.g., stalking, long-term sexual harassment) (Duggan, 2017), all behaviors that affect interracial social relational trust online. In the Pew survey, a majority of African American survey respondents (68%) reported that it is more important to feel secure and comfortable online than to speak freely in public (Duggan, 2017). Researchers have identified social media as reflections of larger cultural and social norms and values, finding that social media are a means for disseminating discriminatory beliefs (e.g., racism and sexism) (Bliuc et al., 2018; Fox et al., 2015), and are exploited for threatening and bullying communication (Anderson, 2017; Giumetti & Kowalski, 2016). Tynes and Markoe (2010) detail the growth of racism on social media by scrutinizing images and text of racially themed parties circulated on university students’ online networks, while Gin et al. (2017) report that racial aggressions are common on social media. These studies suggest that online racism has a distinctive power and could have an effect on interracial trust online.

Conceptual Framework
This study is conceptually grounded in the propositions that (a) “race” is a historical and changeable construct that is socially and culturally significant (Omi & Winant, 2014), and that (b) the “mediatization of culture and society” is now fundamental to cultural and social change (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 105). Taken together, it is reasonable to assert that conceptualizations of race can reflect cultural and social changes circulated on social media through modes of communication on these media, and the varying levels of relationships across these media. Much like social media has affected consumer perceptions, social media have provided access to images and information that has broadened exposure to racial and ethnic diversity, conceivably impacting the conceptualization of race and “cultural mistrust.” Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how college students of color today conceptualize “cultural mistrust” on social media in order to determine if the CMI items are suitable for use today, or if they require updating and how.

Methods
To examine how students of color today conceptualize cultural mistrust on social media in order to determine if the CMI items are suitable for use today, and if they require updating, qualitative methods were deemed appropriate for this inquiry. In contrast to quantitative methods, qualitative methods enable researchers to understand participants’ perceptions of concepts and experiences that guide their reasoning, attitudes, and behaviors. Through qualitative methods, researchers can gather rich descriptions of complex experiences and nuanced understanding of complicated concepts such as “interracial trust” that change across generations and social locations. Through qualitative methods, researchers can derive “meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant” that constitute data typically “not amenable to counting or measuring” (Hammarberg et al., 2016, p. 499). Unlike quantitative research questions, qualitative research questions are not meant to determine why a phenomenon occurs (cause and effect), but rather how the phenomenon is understood and what meaning is made of the phenomenon by study participants (Silverman, 2015).
The research question guiding this inquiry is:

(1) Are the CMI items (Terrell & Terrell, 1981) suitable for determining “cultural mistrust” of Whites on social media by college students of color today?

(a) If found unsuitable, how are they perceived incongruous with current conceptualizations of “cultural mistrust”?

Cognitive interviewing was selected as the data-gathering method in order to examine how participants conceptually process and react to survey items. Cognitive interviews enable researchers to assess comprehension, judgment, and responses to survey items (Tourangeau et al., 2000). The combined use of cognitive interviews and focus groups has been shown to improve the design of surveys of university students (Ouimet et al., 2004). Because researchers have identified that race/ethnicity and power mediate the participant-researcher relationship (Archer, 2002; Vakil et al., 2016) and should be critically considered in the design and execution of social science research (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008), and given the focus of this study, cognitive interviews were facilitated by a Latina member of the research team and two trained doctoral students of color.

Prior to the interviews, the research team developed “pro-active probes” (Tourangeau et al., 2000, p. 352) based on RASM’s implications for research (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2021). Systematically constructed before the cognitive interview, these pro-active probes were verbal inquiries designed to surface potential confusion about CMI items. Moreover, the research team agreed that particularized “reactive probes” (Tourangeau et al., 2000, p. 352) should also be used throughout the cognitive interviews and focus groups to flesh out participants’ responses and reactions to each CMI item. Cognitive interview and focus group notes and recordings were transcribed by an independent transcription service.

The qualitative study using cognitive interviews was conducted at a medium-sized private, predominantly White university in the Northeast region of the United States. Consistent with Terrell and Terrell’s (1981) sampling but expanding sampling beyond the inclusion of African American men, a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling was used to recruit university students of color who were 18 years of age or older. A recruitment email was sent through several university channels including courses, programs and offices that support students of color, and student cultural organizations and groups. Students who identified as White were excluded from the study. A total of 28 students participated in this study and are given pseudonyms here. Participants in the study included 4 Doctoral students, 3 Masters students, and 21 undergraduates across multiple disciplines. Data saturation was reached when the information collected from these 28 participants yielded no new themes (Guest et al., 2006). The research team agreed that the data were robust and that saturation had been reached after the 19th interview. But because “race” and “interracial trust” are nuanced and complicated experiences and their conceptualization integral to the study, we continued to operationalize saturation by conducting additional interviews (Saunders et al., 2017).

Participants were all members of generational cohorts born after 1982 who have grown up in an environment in which they are constantly exposed to online communication, and who produce communication and form social relationships online (Jones, 2011; Palfrey & Gasser, 2011; Tapscott, 2008). All participants stated that they were active on social media such as Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, though their preference for platforms varied. The sample was primarily comprised of self-identified African American/Black students with one participant who identified as Asian, and one as Indian. Data were collected through hour-long recorded cognitive interviews designed to test and refine survey items (Desimone & Le Floch, 2004; Peterson et al., 2017), and through 60-minute focus groups of participants of various racial and ethnic identities from the original participant pool.

A semi-structured protocol composed of the CMI items (Terrell & Terrell, 1981) and grounded in prior research that explored the CMI (e.g., Benner & Graham, 2013; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2021) was used in this study. Participants in both the cognitive interviews and focus groups were asked to (a) explain how they understood and conceptualized “cultural mistrust,” and (b) to decode and give reasons for their interpretation of the 13 items of the CMI scale used in the RASM (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2021) (Appendix A). The 13 CMI items presented to participants were the original CMI language and constructs modified by “on social media,” effectively mapping the original relational assumption—face to face interactions—onto social relationships on social media (Table 1). The participants were given a paper copy of the items, and read each item along with the researcher, often re-reading and pausing to contemplate each item. Data collection occurred throughout spring, summer, and early fall 2019.

The systematic coding of the interview and focus group transcripts and researchers’ field notes served as the primary method of data analysis. After the interviews and focus groups were transcribed, each transcript was independently analyzed by members of the research team using a constant comparative method to create emerging codes and categories that enabled the researchers to “describe, dissect and distill the data while preserving their essential properties” (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012, p. 356). After coding was completed using HyperRESEARCH software, a list of inductive codes was developed by the researchers based on emerging themes identified in the transcripts. This initial list of inductive codes formed the codebook and were discussed between the research team members. A total of 272 codes emerged from preliminary open coding of the transcripts.
These codes were then analyzed and reviewed by the researchers for frequency and significance, correspondence and disparity, and then reconciled. For example, while some participants judged Item #12 (Whites “keeping their word”) as “confusing” given the communication context, that is, that “keeping one’s word” is not typical in online communication, other participants were just “unclear” because they were unfamiliar with the expression as it applies to social media communication. The researchers reconciled these two codes (“confusion” and “unclear”), and settled on “confusion” as the best classification. Both perceptions could be seen as “confusing” to the participants albeit for distinctive reasons. Once reconciled, all codes were grouped together or collapsed in order to more clearly ascertain patterns and themes that addressed the research questions.

Transferability was established by offering information about the data and the research site so that readers can draw comparisons to other contexts (Guba, 1981). At the completion of the analytical coding process, two principal themes emerged, and relationships between the themes and subthemes were identified.

Findings
Cognitive interviews largely exposed a generational mismatch between the participants and the constructs in the 13 CMI items drafted in 1981. In general, participants were often unsure about constructs and lexicon used throughout the 13 CMI items, often asking for explanation and clarification. Here, we first synthesize participants’ perceptions of “cultural mistrust” as a concept, and then present the two principal themes that emerged from the analysis of their impressions of the 13 CMI items elicited by the cognitive interviews.

Conceptualization of “cultural mistrust”. Overall, participants interpreted “cultural mistrust” as a dated term that is ambiguous and unspecific. Participants judged the term as antiquated and anachronous, likely owing in part to knowledge that the construct was developed in 1981 (per the initial proactive prompt below).

In 1981, “Cultural Mistrust” was conceptualized by researchers as Black peoples’ mistrust and suspicion of White people in politics, law, interpersonal relations, education, and work. What do you think about “cultural mistrust” today? How would you define it in 2019? How is it different or the same as was conceptualized in 1981?

Much like the term “racial minorities” in many of the CMI items was read as dated (U.S.-centric) language, “cultural mistrust” was conceptualized by researchers as Black peoples’ mistrust and suspicion of White people in politics, law, interpersonal relations, education, and work. What do you think about “cultural mistrust” today? How would you define it in 2019? How is it different or the same as was conceptualized in 1981?

| CMI item # | CMI item                                                                 |
|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1          | White individuals on social media are usually fair to all people regardless of their race. |
| 2          | Racial minorities should be suspicious of a White person who tries to be friendly on social media |
| 3          | Whether you should trust a person on social media or not is not based on his/her race |
| 4          | Racial minorities can usually trust White peers in their user networks on social media |
| 5          | I have trustworthy White friends on social media |
| 6          | Racial minorities should not associate with White individuals on social media because White users cannot be trusted |
| 7          | Racial minorities should be on guard when interacting with White individuals on social media |
| 8          | Racial minorities must be cautious about what they say on social media in the presence of White individuals since White individuals will try to use it against them |
| 9          | White individuals are usually honest with racial minorities on social media |
| 10         | White individuals are as trustworthy as members of any other ethnic group on social media |
| 11         | White individuals will say one thing on social media and act in other ways in real life |
| 12         | White individuals on social media will usually keep their word |
| 13         | Racial minorities should not confide in White individuals on social media because they will use your statements against you |

Trustworthiness. Guided by Guba (1981) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), the researchers took several actions to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings by monitoring the credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the data. First, after creating a codebook, researchers engaged in peer debriefings where they refined and created new codes as needed. Convergence and descriptive validity of the codes and themes was achieved through continuous multiple peer debriefings with the research team members. To ensure confirmability, analytic memos about the data that were composed during each interview to capture patterns and interviewers’ observations (Corbin et al., 2015; Saldana, 2015) were examined in peer debriefing sessions with the research team. In the peer debriefings, research team members challenged assumptions and interpretations made by the team members’ coding of the transcripts. Subsequent peer debriefings confirmed the coding decisions (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Consequently, the accuracy and credibility of the data reflect what participants expressed (Maxwell, 1992).
mistrust” also seemed conceptually limited. As Marta (African American) said,

I think “cultural mistrust” now spans beyond race and it goes into ethnicity, family background and even class structures what you can talk about culturally.

Kiara (African American) had a similar response:

I think it would be very difficult to pinpoint. Yes, there are so many things that have changed, but I think the biggest thing would be the student profile would have probably changed the most because there’s really no one kind of student. Perhaps in the past we could say most university students sort of fit this profile, but I don’t think you can say that anymore at all.

Participants acknowledged the historical context in the conceptualization of “cultural mistrust,” and some, like Nia (African American) deepened and extended interpretation to include systemic racism as inherent to the concept:

I feel like today’s just a lot of that happening nowadays as well. personally to me, I just feel like it’s all systemic. It’s built into our government and built into the way we live just because I have experienced through my family and just where we live and conditions how we can’t get out of our own city. So, I feel like that is ‘cultural mistrust.’ I just can’t trust the system that has been set in place because it has affected not just me but also my friends, my family and also those before me and after probably.

Participants referenced racist microaggressions that they experience now as a component of “cultural mistrust,” also adding that racial mistrust “was probably more macro” in 1981. Participants could not necessarily equate “cultural" with “racial," for example. When asked to think about “racial mistrust” one participant said, “I think using the word cultural is what at least threw me off at first.” Others noted that “using the word race makes it more obvious,” and that culture includes not just race but “racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, gender, culture that is different from my own.” In sum, most participants insisted that the “cultural mistrust” needed conceptual updating, and at minimum, re-wording.

Principal themes elicited by CMI items. The two principal codes that characterized participants’ cognition of the 13 CMI items used in the RASM, “confusion” and “clarity,” were antipodal in nature, revealing either a general conceptual bewilderment or comprehensibility of the items. Codes that indicated participants’ confusion reflected concerns about concepts that undergird the item, as well as the lexicon (language or terms) used, sweeping assertions or generalizations, and the ways in which participants curated their social media accounts. Confusion was far more common among respondents than clarity.

As a principal theme, “cognitive confusion” was the compilation of codes that reflected participants’ concerns with (a) dated lexicon (language and terms) used; (b) concepts that were ambiguous; and (c) generalization and sweeping statements in the CMI items.

The lexicon used in the CMI items was often confusing to participants. For example, participants were puzzled about the use of the word “friendly” (CMI item 2), and were unsure how to interpret “be on guard” (CMI item 7) and “keeping their word” (CMI item 12). Jada’s (African American) confusion about “keeping their word” is representative of the responses to this CMI item:

...it kind of implicitly applies that they’ll keep their word. ... What promises are people making to me on social media or what promises do people that I follow, what promises in general are they making? So, I don’t think I necessarily know what “keep their word” means. ... I had a clear understanding of the question before, which kind of goes hand in hand. Because the question before is White individuals will say one thing on social media and act in other ways in real life. That is clear to me. But “keep their word.” I don’t know if that’s a similar concept.

Many students cited that the items lacked clarity. For example, when asked about the first CMI item, several students struggled to articulate what it means to be “fair” within social media contexts. Additionally, for CMI item 12, many students struggled to understand what it meant for someone to “keep their word” on social media, and whether keeping one’s word could be verified in online spaces.

Participants found the generalizations about Whites pervasive in the CMI items to be flawed universals. For example, CMI items 9, 10, 11, and 12 asked participants to group together all “White individuals” and determine whether all Whites are “honest with racial minorities,” whether all Whites are “trustworthy,” and whether all Whites can “keep their word.” Participants resisted universally attributing a specific behavior or a quality to Whites, arguing that there are distinctions and nuances that should be considered (e.g., which White peers and in what context), and context-specific conditions (e.g., which social media platform) to confidently respond to the item. Vanessa (African American) remarked,

I don’t know because for me it’s like very, it’s hard for me to generalize one group but it’s like, sometimes like some White individuals or like I have or there have been instances where White individuals have ... part of this for me, part of this question seems like it speaks to the generalizing all White individuals.

For example, Tiana (African American) offered that the inventory should reflect the decisions users make:

Can I suggest that this gets kind of teased out into some people have public social media pages and interact with people publicly. Other people have very private pages. So, I think that the
responses will be different in how people engage on social media based on those settings.

In general, participants desired more nuanced items that were conceptually clear, contemporary, and context-specific, not oversimplifications. Throughout the cognitive interviews, student responses reflected a desire for the items to capture the nuances of social media use and user presence. Cleo (African American) offered the following observation:

“I think I’m just thinking about what platforms university students use because I did some analysis of platforms university students use, and it was not the ones I use, and I was like wow, you get old really fast and you don’t notice, and I don’t even fully understand all of the social media that they use, all of the apps or what the purpose of them are. So, I’d say for maybe the graduate students, I guess something to the effect of how much they choose to engage with White folks or racial stimuli on the internet in general.

Though resistance to generalizing statements about Whites was often a function of participants’ principled discomfort, much of their resistance to generalize about Whites stemmed from the fact that participants curated their social media, making the generalization incongruent on social media.

Participants intentionally vet and select other users with whom to connect, and utilize the distinctive functionality of different social networking media to select and present information or items such as pictures, video, music, etc. with relational ties to specific people and groups. For example, the conceptual centerpiece of the CMI items, “trust” of Whites was pointless and meaningless to participants because the item does not specify to which social media platform the statement applies. More importantly, the items do not factor in participants’ propensity to predetermine their trust in Whites before selecting and organizing their online social relationships on particular platforms. Participants explained that they produced different kinds of online social networks in which their social relationships were curated as a function of their face-to-face social relationships with certain Whites. In effect, participants curated White relationships through their prior face-to-face relational experiences in which trust was assessed, and by social media platform. For example, participants choose whom to follow on Twitter or Instagram based on both face-to-face relationships and their online comportment. Participants can also block Whites they deem racist on various social media applications, effectively curating trust online.

Though participants did want the CMI item to specify the online platform under consideration, they did not make too many distinctions between platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) and the contextual nuances that informed their decisions regarding interracial trust on those platforms. Participants’ utilization of each platform’s security and privacy settings ostensibly made them managers or custodians of their accounts. However, the varying functionalities and audience/user membership of each platform did register as a consideration for some of these participants. For example, the more “public” Twitter required more serious consideration of the identity of White users than the highly curated, peer-based Snapchat.

Cognitive clarity. Though confusion with the CMI items used in the RASM was pronounced and well-defined among the majority of participants, a few participants experienced the items as clear-cut and unambiguous. These participants often remarked that, “Yes, I can answer that” without much consideration and seemingly little concern. Researchers coded these responses as “clarity,” indicating that participants were confident that they could respond to the item believing that they understood what was being asked.

Nonetheless, those participants who responded that they were not confused by the CMI items very often made certain to note that their responses were conditional, that is, based on social media platform. In these cases, participants gave examples of how their responses were informed by which social media platform they had in mind, or the online context in which they placed the item, and the nuances of those media. Several of these participants explained that on GroupMe (a mobile group messaging app), they drew distinctions between online messaging groups (established social relationships) in order to respond to the CMI item. The GroupMe app allows users to create a “group” by adding members who can see all messages to the group (including images, videos, documents, etc.). By creating a “group,” participants consciously selected trusted relationships to a “group,” where each member can see all messages to the group (including images, videos, documents, etc.) or private messages from user to user.

It should be noted that the data did reveal some cognitive differences in participants whose developmental and intellectual consciousness about race seemed more advanced. Participants who explained that university coursework on race and racial history informed their interpretations resisted the term “minority” and questioned the “White-centric” narrative implicit in the items. Genesis, a Master’s student in Social Work commented that though she agreed with the CMI’s desire to capture Black-White trust, she wondered if the instrument itself did not center whiteness as normative:

The focus of this when it is Black and White, which I understand and I think it’s important, but what it does is it still centers the White individuals.

In sum, the cognitive interviews revealed concerns about the dated nature of the concepts and the lexicon used in the CMI, which made responding to the items somewhat confusing to participants. Additionally, participants’ confusion was a function of their need for clarification regarding the social media applications. Because participants curate their social media often based on face-to-face social relationships,
responses to many CMI items were conditional, or dependent on the level and kind of curating done. This made these items even more confusing to participants.

**Discussion**

The responses of the study’s participants asked to assess the relevance of the Cultural Mistrust Inventory (Terrell & Terrell, 1981) items suggest that CMI items are problematic when used to ascertain a measure of “trust” across interracial social connections on social media. This study’s cognitive interviews revealed confusion about the nature of the CMI items, in particular the terms used and the lack of nuance with regard to interracial relational trust given user autonomy on social media and the media’s capabilities. The two motivating and central constructs, “cultural” and “mistrust” proved largely incongruent with Generation Z and Millennial participants’ cognition. Participants’ bewilderment with the CMI’s foundational construct, “cultural mistrust,” is an indication that current generations of persons of color understand “culture” and “mistrust” in decidedly 21st century ways, and that the construct may well be both a misnomer and a relic.

“Culture” is understood by participants as more complex and multifaceted than the CMI items imply, and certainly not a direct conceptual equivalent with “race.” “Black” and “White” as a racial binary was challenged by these recent generations of persons of color, a reflection of the historicity of “race” (Omi & Winant, 2014), and the contemporary disruption of race as a “Black-White” binary paradigm. Though the dynamics of the “Black-White” binary race relations still exist for these participants in face-to-face and online social relations, “race” is conceived by them as a continuum mediated by a plethora of social, cultural, and intellectual forces, as well as their own cognitive development. As a result, the CMI items appeared inconsistent with their cognitive mapping of race that is non-binary, and certainly not a direct conceptual equivalent with “race.”

As researchers have identified, among university student populations social media relational networks are based on their previous face-to-face relationships (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2018). Consistent with the origins, development and evolution of social media and its uses on university campuses (Martínez Alemán & Wartman, 2009), online social relationships are mostly based on and prompted by face-to-face social relationships. Consequently, the CMI items in the RASM may not adequately reflect how interracial trust impacts the formation of online interracial social relationships.

As a measure of the extent to which persons of color “trust” White/European American students in their online networks, the CMI may lack conceptual strength. This corresponds to participants’ consternation with those CMI items used in the RASM that did not make distinctions between social media platforms, or which Whites they trust, and in which particular online context trust is enacted. Because Whites had been vetted through face-to-face social relationships, and were calculatedly placed on the sociogram, interracial social relational choice online may in fact reflect established relational face-to-face social homophily rather than heterophily.

Using Terrell and Terrell’s (1981) Cultural Mistrust Inventory items to gauge interracial relational trust on social media requires an update of the conceptualization of race, interracial relational trust, and a calibration of the items to capture the nuances of social media functionality and their related uses. The original CMI items are perceived to be historically dated, and consequently inappropriate for assessing interracial relational trust in online social relationships. Simply altering each item by adding “on social media” to each item was insufficient.

**Significance and Implications for Research**

The study’s principal significance points to the need to revise the CMI (Terrell & Terrell, 1981) to more accurately reflect perceptions of interracial trust. For social science researchers interested in assessing interracial social trust on social media, and by extension in face-to-face social relationships, the validity of findings from this study warns against the use of the CMI (Terrell & Terrell, 1981) as is. The study confirmed that confusion and uncertainty about the meaning of the concepts and words used in the original CMI characterize participants’ ability to respond to the survey. This suggests that in designing future surveys, researchers will be well-served to reconsider using 1981 CMI items.
Race and interracial relations are not static, and as such, must be accounted for as relationships embedded in and influenced by social structures and cultural change. The study’s findings reflect this, and indicate that frequent revision of the CMI and other such inventories are necessary given that context and history impact the nature of interracial trust and relationships. In 1981, Terrell and Terrell asserted that “cultural trust” between Blacks and Whites could be measured using an inventory. Since that early conceptualization of interracial relational trust, the conceptualization of race has evolved and social media have extended interracial social relationships beyond face-to-face exchanges. The findings from this study suggest that for the Cultural Mistrust Inventory (Terrell & Terrell, 1981) to serve as a guide for the design of surveys that aim to gather data on students’ of color conceptualizations of interracial trust on social media, a conceptual and lexical updating is warranted.

Secondly, our results exhort educational and psychological researchers to consider the use of cognitive interviews to test extant scales and psychometric surveys, and to use these (and other) qualitative measures to improve reliability measures. As was the case in this study, through the use of cognitive interviews we were able to ascertain that changed perceptions of concepts challenged the reliability of an established scale’s items. Cognitive interviews allow researchers to obtain participants’ thought processes when engaging with psychometric scale items to improve those scales (Willis, 2005; Wolcott & Lobczowski, 2021), and that was certainly the case in this study. The use of a qualitative method such as cognitive interviewing helps researchers identify “problems in the underlying cognitive processes through which respondents generate their answers to survey questions” (Tourangeau, 2003, p. 5), strengthening the validity of the items.

The context and history of race and consequently interracial trust brought to light by the cognitive interviews in this study were culturally specific to the U.S. and U.S.-based populations. As a social construction, “race” has been a variable and multidimensional reality that has proven highly methodologically troublesome in many national contexts (Roth, 2017). That said, researchers should take note of the findings from this study to examine the relevance of survey items used in contexts and populations outside the U.S. Certainly, aspects of the study’s findings regarding the conceptions of interracial trust can be similar in other cultural and national contexts, but researchers should employ cognitive interviews to gather participants’ thought processes to check the validity of their instruments’ items in those national contexts.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study, as well as implications for the revision of extant and newly developed psychometric scales. First, because this examination of the CMI was not designed to ascertain the levels, depths, or intensity of interracial cultural trust or mistrust on social media, additional research is needed to better gauge the power of a revised CMI today. Second, prior research has demonstrated that students of color experience predominantly White institutions more negatively than their White peers (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1999). Since these data were collected at one predominantly White institution, it is unclear whether a similar study at a more racially and ethnically diverse institution or at a Historically Black College or University would generate different findings. Thus, though these triangulated and audited qualitative data provide us with dependable findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1982), we cannot confirm that similar findings would surface in other than predominantly White institutional contexts. Lastly, researchers interested in more rationalistic research frameworks may choose to design larger quantitative assessments to posit claims of reliability.

Appendix A

Cultural Mistrust

Protocol. Today, we want to expand upon a study that we conducted last academic year. In that study, we wanted to examine whether racial assaults/attacks/offenses on social media impact the emotional well-being and sense of belonging of students of color on predominantly White university campuses.

During the research, the researchers found that the responses of students of color to the portion of the survey that originated in the “Cultural Mistrust Inventory” suggested that these items were dated, that how the CMI conceptualized cultural mistrust in 1981 may not resonate with university students of color today.

Today, we’d like to ask you about the ways in which students of color at a PWI conceptualize/think about “cultural mistrust.”

1. In 1981, “Cultural Mistrust” was conceptualized by researchers as black peoples’ mistrust and suspiciousness of White people in politics, law, interpersonal relations, education, and work.
   • How do you think about “cultural mistrust” today? How would you define it in 2019?
   • How is it different or the same as was conceptualized in 1981?

2. Let’s talk a little about the aspects of the CMI. The inventory items are listed the handout. We’ll just focus on cultural mistrust on social media, but feel free to expand beyond that.

Please read each item, and think about the following:
   • Can you tell me what you think about each of these items on the CMI?
   • Do you think that the item is still relevant?
• What about the item still makes sense to you? Doesn’t make sense to you?
• Cultural Mistrust Inventory Items (also on the handout):
  • White individuals on social media are usually fair to all people regardless of their race
  • Racial minorities should be suspicious of a White person who tries to be friendly on social media
  • Whether you should trust a person on social media or not is based on his/her race
  • Racial minorities can usually trust White peers in their user networks on social media
  • I have trustworthy White friends on social media
  • Racial minorities should not associate with White individuals on social media because White users cannot be trusted
  • Racial minorities should be on guard when interacting with White individuals on social media
  • Racial minorities must be cautious about what they say on social media in the presence of White individuals since White individuals will try to use it against them
  • White individuals are usually honest with racial minorities on social media
  • White individuals are as trustworthy as members of any other ethnic group on social media
  • White individuals will say one thing on social media and act in other ways in real life
  • White individuals on social media will usually keep their word
  • Racial minorities should not confide in White individuals on social media because they will use your statements against you

(3) What would you like our research team to know about racial attacks on social media?

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