

THE INTERSECTION OF EMPATHY, SOCIAL IDENTITY, AND THREAT

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Abstract

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Empathy is a tool we can use to feel and understand other's emotions and circumstances. The social identity perspective posits that we are motivated to protect and promote the groups we belong to, and that we feel emotions on behalf of the group. Further, intergroup threat theory (found within the social identity framework) postulates that perceived threat to one's group leads to intergroup tension, breeding prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory behavior. To investigate the relationship that identity and threat have on participant's empathy for outgroups, I measured: how much participants identified with the White American identity; their White privilege awareness; their perceived anti-Black discrimination; their racial colorblindness; and their overall empathy levels. Next, participants ($n = 52$) were exposed to either a neutral stimulus or a threatening stimulus targeting the White American identity. Threat perception and empathy towards Black people was measured post manipulation. Findings indicate a significant negative correlation between racial colorblindness and empathy ($p = .018$, $r = -0.32$, $t = -2.42$, $CI = [-0.548, -0.056]$).

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The Intersection of Empathy, Social Identity, and Threat

In 2013, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin that took place the year prior, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, founded by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, was born (Bell et al., 2020; Black Lives Matter, 2020). The movement was created to bring attention to the disproportionate rate that Black people experience police brutality, and to spur collective action to improve the American social institution. By publicizing the murders of: Tamir Rice; Tanisha Anderson; Mya Hall; Walter Scott; Sandra Bland; and Mike Brown committed by police officers (Black Lives Matter, 2020), the BLM movement has garnered a mass amount of attention, both positive and negative, and more so following the murder of George Floyd (Moghaddam, 2020).

Identification with this movement can be polarizing, with opposition claiming that “all lives matter,” or just outright hate towards the Black community. Even though there is a clear disparity among racial groups in the United States (e.g., job opportunities, housing opportunities, incarceration rates, education funding; Saini & Vance, 2020), there are still those who claim that racism has been eliminated, using the election of our 44th President, Barack Obama as evidence (Neville et al., 2013), or claiming that racism still exists, just at an individual level and not at an institutional one (Unzuta et al., 2008). The denial of systemic racism usually encompasses the denial of racial privileges, most typically, White privilege (Knowles & Lowery, 2012). The question arises, why can some individuals recognize their own racial privileges and recognize when discrimination against the Black community is occurring, while others cannot?

Empathy gives people the unique ability to understand one another and the trials we endure. The ability to empathize with one another provides contexts to situations in which people might otherwise be misinformed of the plight of others (Davis, 1994). I posit that empathy plays a key role in people's ability to recognize racial privileges and discrimination against racial minority groups. Further, I hypothesized that empathetic allotment to outgroup members (i.e., how much empathy is granted to members of different groups) can be influenced by how strongly people identify with their race, and whether or not threat to one's racial group affects

Empathy

Pedwell (2014) defines empathy as the "affective act of seeing from another's perspective and imaginatively experiencing her or his thoughts, emotions and predicaments" (p. 6). Within the broad definition of empathy there are three different types of empathy: cognitive, affective, and compassionate (Ekman, 2004; Powell & Roberts, 2017). Cognitive empathy is imagining oneself in another's situation or circumstance (i.e., walking a mile in another's shoes; Davis, 1994); affective empathy is feeling, or "catching" the emotions of others (Powell & Roberts, 2017; Jones et al., 2010); and compassionate empathy is empathy that spurs action to aid or relieve others (Jones et al., 2010).

Using a cultural-psychological framework, I will be examining and defining racism as a societal system that preserves White supremacy and disadvantages those with non-White racial identities (Salter et al, 2017). Additionally, while examining racism, I will be keeping in mind Salter et al.'s (2017) three key points of the psychology of

racism: (1) how racism is ingrained in our day-to-day life, (2) how racism is sustained and enforced in our society through our selections and/or preferences, (3) and how our cultural world promotes our racialized perspectives and actions.

When addressing systemic racism, the subject of White privilege and the role it plays in perpetuating racism in America is unavoidable. White privilege is the unspoken social advantages White people are granted at the expense and disadvantage of non-White individuals (Schumacer-Martinez & Proctor, 2020). Phillips and Lowery (2018) argue that White privilege is not inherently invisible, but it is actively concealed by those who possess it through enforced societal norms. They go as far to suggest that this “herd invisibility” serves to protect the innocence and the social advantages of those who are benefitting from their own racial privileges. The question is raised, how do the groups that we belong to affect who we empathize with?

Establishing Frameworks

Social identity theory

Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is a social psychological examination of the influence that group membership has on self-conception (i.e., who we think we are) and self-evaluation (how we perceive ourselves to be), and how group membership informs our attitudes, beliefs, and actions (Hogg, 2018), while also serving to explain group processes (i.e., how group members interact with one another) and intergroup relations (i.e., how groups interact with each other; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

According to SIT, a group is defined as three or more people that distinguish themselves from others based on sharing a particular set of characteristics, qualities, and

evaluations (i.e., they make evaluations of self and others on behalf of and relative to the group they belong to rather than the individual; Hogg, 2018). Social identity is who the individual thinks of themselves to be through the lens of their membership within a group. People can belong to several different groups, and shift in and out of social identities depending on the context (Grant & Hogg, 2012; Hogg, 2018; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). That being, certain identities (and thus, certain attitudes and behaviors) are activated given the current social context.

Social and self-categorization (Abrams et al., 1990) is at the core of the social identity perspective and posits that we categorize ourselves and others based on the groups that we identify with. We group ourselves and others through the process of *depersonalization* (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Depersonalization is the cognitive process of reducing the individuality of others to the groups that they belong to, seeing them as representations of their group's prototype rather than an individual, and interchangeable with their fellow group members. Put simply, depersonalization strips individuals of their unique personal characteristics while applying the characteristics of the group to them, regardless of whether or not they actually embody those traits (Hogg, 2018).

Membership to important groups drives us to promote and protect the groups we identify with (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, this motivation to promote and protect can lead to ethnocentric group attitudes (belief that one's group is superior to others), known as *positive distinctiveness* (Hogg, 2018). Self-esteem plays a major role in our motivation to join groups, specifically, groups that boost or enhance our perception of ourselves (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Since we view groups as an extension or representation

of the self, we are motivated to perceive and evaluate the groups that we belong to in the most positive light possible (i.e., self enhancement; Sedikides & Strube, 1997); helping us to maintain a positive evaluation of ourselves. More so, we are motivated to make sense of the world and our place in it. Within the SIT framework there is intergroup emotions theory (IET; Smith, 1993), a sub theory within SIT that posits that there are emotions felt by the individual on behalf of the group they identify with. Within intergroup emotions, there is the *intergroup empathy bias*—the tendency to only empathize with ingroup members, and the inability to empathize with outgroup members (Cikara et al., 2014).

Intergroup threat theory (ITT; Stephan & Stephan, 2000) explains how perceived threat to one's ingroup, either realistic threat (perception of threat to one's well-being) or symbolic threat (perception of threat to one's way of life; Demirdağ & Hasta, 2019), leads to intergroup tensions, prejudices, negative stereotyping, and intergroup anxiety (Riek et al., 2006).; similar to how we are motivated to perceive the groups that we belong to positively, we are also driven to protect the groups that we belong to.

Review of Relevant Literature

Threatened Whiteness

Crowley (2019) conducted a study in which he interviewed three teachers in an urban education program to determine how White preservice educators use a combination of personal experiences along with White privilege education to gain a better understanding of structural racism. Their findings suggest that even after education of racial privileges, participants will not necessarily gain an understanding of structural

racism. The implications for these findings suggest that education about racial inequities alone is not enough. Similarly, Philips and Lowery (2020) conducted eight studies that confronted participants with evidence of their privilege. Their results showed that even when participants were confronted with evidence of their privilege, they used life hardships or personal merit to explain or justify the ways in which they receive privilege in an attempt to protect the self. Their findings suggest that being presented with evidence of privilege in individuals triggers defensive tendencies and is not enough for participants to acknowledge the ways in which they receive unspoken societal advantages. This begs the question: Does it matter how we present White privilege to White people?

Exploring similar questions, Lowery et al. (2007) conducted three studies investigating the relationship between White people's perceptions of racial inequity when their self-regard was threatened (framed as White privilege) versus when their self-regard was affirmed (framed as anti-Black). They found that White individuals were more likely to acknowledge racial inequities when their self-regard was affirmed (anti-Black framing) than when their self-regard was threatened (framed as White privilege). These findings suggest that telling White people about their White privilege might threaten them and hinder their ability to learn about racial inequity and racial privileges, which is consistent with the social identity framework.

White ignorance

Many White people lack knowledge of racial inequities and awareness of their own racial privileges, but this does not completely explain many White people's vocal

opposition to the BLM movement. Along with a lack of awareness, there is additionally a lack of empathy for Black people from White people (Forgiarini et al., 2011; Mekawi et al., 2016). Forgiarini et al. (2011) conducted a study in which participants' physiological arousal and empathy was measured to determine emotional reaction to pain felt by other people. Participants watched video clips of Black and White who were either brushed on the hand by the researcher or were pricked with a needle. They found that White participants felt significantly less pain (less affective empathy) for Black people than other White people; consistent with intergroup empathy bias, and thus the SIT framework.

Empathy may serve to predict racial colorblindness perspectives. Mekawi et al. (2017) conducted a study to identify the relationship between an individual's Big 5 personality (i.e., conscientiousness, openness, narcissism, extraversion, and agreeableness), empathy, aggression levels, and individual's racial colorblindness (unawareness of privilege, unawareness of systemic racism, unawareness of explicit racist transgressions). They found that participants that measured lower in agreeableness, empathetic concern, and perspective taking, were less able to identify instances of blatant racism and systemic racism. The pattern for people high in empathy is inverse. Neto and Pederson (2013) conducted an experiment to examine if pro-social attitude and behavior variables had the potential to influence participants to engage in bystander anti-racism. They found that participants that were older and had higher levels of empathetic concern were more likely to engage in bystander anti-racism behavior (publicly speaking out against it), suggesting

that empathy can also serve as a predictor for engagement in anti-racist behavior; this has powerful implications for developing anti-racist trainings.

The Power of Empathy and Empathic Practices

Empathy training has shown to be successful in educational settings at reducing acts of discrimination from educators towards students of color. Okonofua et al. (2016) conducted a study in which researchers encouraged educators to practice empathic discipline (focusing on what led to deviant behavior) over punitive discipline (focusing on punishment for deviant behavior) towards students. They found that at risk students' suspension rates were cut in half, and at risk students' respect for educators increased when educators practiced empathetic discipline over punitive discipline.

Going beyond the classroom, empathetic practices are used in a variety of different settings. Gloor and Puhl (2016) conducted a study to investigate strategies to reduce negative stigmas associated with being overweight. Researchers found that participants that reported high levels of fat phobia also reported higher social distancing and stronger affective reactions towards people who are obese. They randomly assigned participants to one of five different conditions, empathy, perspective-taking, causal information, empathy/information blend, or a control condition. They found that participants in the empathy and perspective-taking conditions demonstrated greater warmth and more favorable attitudes toward obese people than those in the other conditions. These findings suggest that strategies and practices that are aimed at lowering prejudice attitudes may be more successful if they incorporate empathetic and perspective-taking exercises.

Todd et al. (2012) conducted four experiments to test the efficacy of perspective taking as means for combating denial of discrimination. The researchers had participants engage in perspective-taking exercises and found that participants that were assigned to take the perspective of Black or Latinx targets were more likely to explicitly state that they recognized persistent discrimination against their target identity. These findings imply that perspective taking can be used to help individuals recognize discrimination.

The Current Study

Given the current social and political climates, the current study investigates empathy in predicting people's ability to recognize racial privileges and discrimination against minority groups, while also investigating the relationship between empathy, identity, and threat. In the presented literature, empathy plays an impactful mediating role in lowering prejudice attitudes and discriminatory behavior. Moreover, people who partake in more perspective-taking than others are more likely to have decreased prejudice attitudes, participate in less discriminatory behavior, are more aware of their own privileges, and are more aware of social injustices (e.g., systemic racism). Additionally, there is a relationship between threat and empathy allotment for outgroups; yet, even with the numerous studies conducted on empathy and perspective-taking for relieving prejudice attitudes and discriminatory behavior, there is limited research on how empathy allotment towards outgroups is impacted by perceptions of threat to an individual's ingroup. There is also limited research on the predictive power of empathy and individual's ability to recognize held racial privileges and discriminatory acts against minority groups. Additionally, the role that group membership serves in influencing an individual's empathy allotment for outgroup members under conditions of threat has yet to be investigated.

The lack of research on these topics and their convergence leads to several research questions. Are people with higher levels of empathy better equipped to recognize their own held privileges? Are they better equipped to recognize discriminatory acts against minority groups? When an individual's ingroup is perceived to be threatened

by an outgroup, is their empathy towards that outgroup lessened? Does the salience of an individual's social identity affect the amount of empathy they have towards threatening outgroup members?

To answer these questions, this study will examine how much people identify with the White American identity, how their identity correlated with: racial colorblindness; perceived racial privilege; perceived anti-Black discrimination; and general empathy levels (cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and compassionate empathy). Participants will then be randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which they will either read a paragraph about Elizabeth Key (a historical Black figure), or read a paragraph about how White Americans have built a system that perpetuates White supremacy, ending with a call to action to dismantle the system of oppression (threat condition). Perception of threat and empathy towards Black people will be measured post-manipulation.

Hypotheses

The current study hypothesizes:

(H₁) A positive relationship between empathy and perceived White privilege;

(H₂) A positive relationship between empathy and perceived anti-Black discrimination;

(H₃) A negative relationship between empathy levels and colorblindness;

(H₄) A negative relationship between threat and empathy for Black people;

(H₅) White American identification will moderate the relationship between threat and empathy; I predict that those in the threat condition who identify strongly with the

White American identity will report less empathy for Black people than those in the control condition.

Method

Sample and Exclusions

Seventy-five participants were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (AMT). Of the 75 respondents, 23 were excluded from the data for either: a) failing manipulation checks, or b) self-identifying as non-White or not American.

Measures

Identity

After providing informed consent, participants reported the degree to which they identify as White and American using a four item ($\alpha = .83$) 7-point Likert scale. Example items included, "Being an American is an important part of my identity" and "I take great pride in being an American." Participants responded to each statement using the provided 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale.

Racial color blindness

Racial color blindness is the belief or perception that race does not play a part in the opportunities one has or is presented with in life. Before being exposed to experimental manipulations, participants reported their levels of color blindness by completing a 20 item ($\alpha = .78$) Unawareness of Racial Privileges subscale taken from the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale-Short Form (CoBRAS-SF; Neville et al., 2007). Example items included: "*Everyone who works hard, no matter what race they are has an equal chance to become rich.*" and "*Social policies, such as affirmative action,*

discriminate unfairly against white people.” Participants responded to each statement on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale.

Perceived White privilege

White privilege (the degree to which one acknowledges the privileges one receives on the basis of being White) was measured pre-treatment by asking participants to respond to the five item ($\alpha = .79$) White Privilege Scale (Swim & Miller, 1999) using a 7-point Likert scale. Example items included: “*Being a White person grants unearned privileges in today’s society*” and “*I do not feel that White people have any benefits or privileges due to their race.*”

Perceived Anti-Black discrimination

Participants reported their perceived anti-Black discrimination (the amount of oppression against Black people that they perceive in our society) by responding to the seven item ($\alpha = .87$) Iyer et al.’s (2003) Other-Focused Belief in Discrimination Scale. Example items included, “*Many Black employees face racial bias when they apply for jobs or are up for a promotion*”, and “*Although there is some racial discrimination in today’s society, most Blacks do **not** face discrimination on a regular basis*”. Participants indicated how much they agreed with the seven statements provided using a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale.

Empathy

Cognitive empathy (perspective-taking), affective empathy (feeling others’ emotions), and compassionate empathy (desire to help others as a response to their situation) was measured using the 13 item ($\alpha = .82$) Empathetic Concern and Perspective

Taking subscales from Davis' (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Inventory. Example items consisted of: "*I try to understand everyone's point of view in a conflict before reaching a decision*" and "*Other people's misfortune doesn't usually affect me*" (reverse coded).

Participants responded to each statement via a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale. Scores for cognitive, affective, and compassionate empathy were combined to calculate general empathy levels.

Threat manipulation

Upon completion of the preliminary survey, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the control condition, participants read an educational paragraph about Elizabeth Key. In the manipulation condition, participants read a paragraph meant to threaten the White American identity. Threat was framed with paragraph about White Americans' role in the oppression of Black people and the perpetuation of White supremacy in our society. The paragraph ended with a call to action to dismantle the system of oppression White people have created and maintained.

Perception of threat

Post manipulation, participants reported on a scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) how much they agree with the following statement: "After reading the previous passage, I feel that my identity as a White American was being threatened."

Empathy towards Black people

Empathy towards Black people (empathy felt towards Black people) was measured directly after the manipulation check using an adjusted version of the Ethnocultural Empathy scale (Wang et al., 2003). The 11 item ($\alpha = .85$) scale consisted of

statements including: “*I seek opportunities to speak with Black people about their experiences*”, and “*I rarely think about the impact a racist or anti-Black joke has on the feelings of a Black person.*” Participants responded via a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale.

Demographics

Lastly, participants provided basic demographic information consisting of: ethnicity; age; socio-economic status; liberal-conservative orientation; political orientation; if they voted in the 2020 election; and who they voted for in the 2020 election if they did indeed vote. Upon completion of the demographics, participants received a code required to collect compensation via AMT.

Procedure

Participants accessed the experiment via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Before starting the survey, participants provided informed consent. Once informed consent was obtained, participants completed a survey measuring their: White American identity; perceived White privilege; perceived anti-Black discrimination; racial color blindness; and their levels of empathy (cognitive, affective, and compassionate). Upon completion of the survey, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the control condition, participants read an educational paragraph about Elizabeth Key. In the other manipulation condition, participants were presented with a paragraph threatening the White-American identity. After being presented with one of the two conditions, participants were prompted to fill out an additional survey measuring their perceived threat from the paragraph and their empathy towards Black people. After completing the

experiment, participants received monetary compensation (75¢) via Amazon's Mechanical Turk.

Results

Recruitment and participants

Participants were 52 self-identified White Americans, ranging from 19-66 in age ($M=34.15$, $SD=10.43$), and predominantly male (65% male, 13% female, 26% declined to answer).

Primary analysis

The data was cleaned, and assumptions were checked prior to data analysis. Assumptions were violated and data was transformed to address the violations. Following data transformation, four Pearson's correlation tests were conducted to test hypotheses one through four, and a significant negative relationship between racial colorblindness and empathy in support of hypothesis three ($p = .018$, $r = -0.32$, $t = -2.42$, $CI = [-0.548, -0.056]$) was found.

There was not a significant relationship found for hypothesis one, that there is a positive relationship between empathy and perceived White privilege ($p = .089$, $r = 0.24$), hypothesis two, that there is a positive relationship between empathy and perceived anti-Black discrimination ($p = .533$, $r = 0.09$), or hypothesis four, that there is a negative relationship between threat and empathy for Black people ($p = .446$, $r = 0.11$). A linear regression was conducted to test hypothesis five, that White American identification would moderate the relationship between threat and empathy; the results were insignificant, $F(3, 48) = 0.64$, $p = .31$, $R^2 = 0.39$.

*Table 1***Table 1**

	ID	WPA	BABD	RCB	BE	EBP	POT
C	<i>M</i> = 24.07, <i>SD</i> = 4.26	<i>M</i> = 24.76, <i>SD</i> = 5.04	<i>M</i> = 25.24, <i>SD</i> = 5.72	<i>M</i> = 78.79, <i>SD</i> = 14.68	<i>M</i> = 59.38, <i>SD</i> = 7.69	<i>M</i> = 47.62, <i>SD</i> = 5.62	<i>M</i> = 3.31, <i>SD</i> = 1.31
T	<i>M</i> = 23.22, <i>SD</i> = 4.79	<i>M</i> = 21.52, <i>SD</i> = 8.48	<i>M</i> = 24.57, <i>SD</i> = 6.11	<i>M</i> = 80.35, <i>SD</i> = 17.66	<i>M</i> = 59.78, <i>SD</i> = 9.89	<i>M</i> = 45.04, <i>SD</i> = 8.99	<i>M</i> = 3.57, <i>SD</i> = 1.24

C = control condition; *T* = treatment condition; *ID* = White American identification; *WPA* = White privilege awareness; *BABD* = belief in anti-Black discrimination; *RCB* = racial colorblindness; *BE* = baseline empathy; *EBP* = empathy for Black people; and *POT* = perception of threat.

Discussion

After having participants complete a pretest measuring their: identity as a White American, racial color blindness levels, belief in anti-Black discrimination, awareness of White privilege, and general empathy level, they were randomly assigned to read either a biographical paragraph or a paragraph mean to elicit threat to their identity as a White American. Post manipulation participants reported how much threat they felt to their identity as a White American (manipulation check) and their empathy levels towards Black people. Results revealed support for the third hypothesis of this study—that there is a negative correlation between empathy and racial colorblindness; that being, participants reporting lower levels of racial colorblindness had higher levels of empathy. However, support for hypotheses one (that there is a positive relationship between empathy and White privilege awareness), two (there is a positive relationship between empathy and perceived anti-Black discrimination), and four (there is a negative relationship between threat and empathy for Black people) was not found.

The lack of significance for hypothesis four could be explained by a general lack of empathy for Black people from White people—consistent with the previous literature cited (Forgiarini et al., 2011; Mekawi et al., 2016); though, the lack of significant findings for hypotheses one and two could be attributed to the fact that people are motivated to see the groups that they belong to in the best light possible because the group serves as an extension of the self (another thing that we are motivated to protect and evaluate positively; Hogg & Reid, 2006), and acknowledgement of both White privilege and anti-Black discrimination serves to tarnish the image and reputation of

White Americans. It may be that empathy can't predict White privilege awareness or anti-Black discrimination, or if it can, identity may serve as a moderator for the relationship.

The similar mean and standard deviation scores examining the amount of threat perceived by the received statement indicates a failure of the threat manipulation.

Participants across conditions reported high levels of threat. I believe that one of the pretests served to activate an identity threat (likely the White privilege awareness scale) given that participants reported a high amount of threat perceived across conditions. It could be also a failure of the manipulation, both paragraphs may have elicited feelings of threat.

It is not surprising that there was only one significant effect found given the small sample size. Other reasons for the lack of effects detected in the findings may be attributed to social desirability effects (the desire to answer in a way that is socially appealing), especially considering that being blatantly racist is becoming increasingly unpopular; but it is likely these insignificant findings could be explained by what we already know from prior research (White people have less empathy for Black people), theory (we positively evaluate the groups that we belong to), and poor methodology.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several glaring limitations, one of which being that a power analysis was not conducted prior to recruitment of participants and the sample size was incredibly small, reducing the overall power of the study. Moreover, the threat reported in each group was not significantly different, revealing an instrumentation error, potentially that one of the scales may have unintentionally had threatening affects to participant's

identity. More so, instrumentation used could be improved upon; specifically, scales used to measure identity and the manipulation used to elicit feelings of threat within participants. Rather than using a validated scale to measure identity, I created my own scale. More so, this scale combined measurements for White and American identity, confounding them and not defining or measuring their distinctive qualities.

Additionally, the manipulation used was ineffective—there were not a different amount of threat reported across groups. This may be due to feelings of threat being felt after completing one of the pretests (e.g., the scale measuring White privilege awareness); or the lack of differences among the groups may be due to the control paragraph unintentionally eliciting threat. The control paragraph used was a biographical paragraph about Elizabeth Key—the first Black person to sue for their freedom and win in the thirteen colonies. While this paragraph was used with the intention of eliciting positive emotions by reading about the freedom of someone from enslavement, it may be that it was counterproductive and worked to make participants feel threatened. The manipulation check used simply asked participants how much threat to their identity as a White American they felt after reading the selected paragraph. In future studies a validated and reliable method of eliciting feelings of threat to one's identity should be used in place of the one used in this experiment paired with a better manipulation check.

Given the limitations of the current study, there is ample opportunity for improvement (larger sample, validated and reliable measures, validated manipulations for threat, and stronger manipulation checks)—perhaps using multiple operationalizations (using multiple and differing measures and manipulations to observe these constructs),

and maybe first piloting the study. Many of the issues found in this study (small sample, poor instrumentation, ineffective manipulation, and weak manipulation check) may have been avoided if it were first piloted.

Concluding remarks and future directions

While this study investigated the affects of threat on empathy, examination of the effects of self-uncertainty on empathy is a potential avenue for research. More so, research into how language elicits feelings of threat and empathy from a social identity perspective would be a beneficial addition to the current literature. Further, investigation into the newer modes of communication via social media platforms (i.e., internet memes) and their potential to create or deplete empathy and foster a collective and unified identity.

Research into the threat is becoming increasingly necessary, especially when one considers the current controversy of critical race theory being taught in public schools. If threat is creating enough intergroup tension to question whether or not the education of systemic racism should be implemented in our schools, then we need to investigate methods to eliminate those feelings of threat being felt.

The proposed directions for future research have the potential to contribute to the literature on the intersections and effects that threat and has on empathy, and how important group membership moderates the relationship. With police brutality and murder against Black Americans gaining more attention on social media, there has been an increase in tension and “othering” across racial and political groups. Further, Black people are and have been experiencing a disproportionate amount of mistreatment from police officers, and we must work to dismantle these systems of oppression as swiftly as possible.

To do this we must not only reform the criminal justice system, but additionally, we must rebuild our public education system to reflect an accurate depiction of the historical injustices committed by Americans against racial minority groups and educate American children about racial privileges.

The findings from this study and future investigations have the opportunity to inform our understanding of how messages that are framed or perceived as threatening to White Americans affect their ability to empathize with Black Americans, and how that informs their perception of racial privileges and disparities. We know that empathy plays a key role in educating others about racism and discrimination, so if people are not able to empathize with one another, it inhibits their ability to learn.

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