The Effect of Group Empathy on U.S. Intergroup Attitudes and Behavior in the Context of Immigration Threats

Cigdem V. Sirin, University of Texas at El Paso
Nicholas A. Valentino, University of Michigan - Ann Arbor
José D. Villalobos, University of Texas at El Paso

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/cigdemvssirin/20/
Group Empathy Theory posits empathy felt by members of one group can boost support for another even when the groups are in direct competition for rights, security, and resources. We employ our theory to explain divergent reactions of majority versus minority groups to immigration threats. We conduct a two-wave national survey experiment with 1,799 participants consisting of a randomized sample of Anglos and randomized, stratified oversamples of African Americans and Latinos. The experiment manipulates racial/ethnic cues in a vignette depicting an ambiguous yet potentially threatening incident at an immigrant detention center. African Americans and Latinos are significantly more likely to side with minority detainees and support pro–civil rights policies and actions. The theory’s presumed causal mechanism—group empathy—is substantially stronger among African Americans and Latinos and has a significant mediating effect on such distinct reactions.

Immigrants in the United States constitute a key stigmatized group often perceived as an external threat to the homeland’s economy, security, and culture (Alvarez and Butterfield 2000; Branton et al. 2011; Chavez 2008; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Lahav and Courtemanche 2012). Public hostility toward immigrants as a group may have profound policy and political implications: opposition to the Dream Act and other pro-immigrant legislation, harsh treatment of immigrant children, and even troubling instances of human rights violations in immigrant detention centers (Schriro 2009; Villalobos 2011). However, opinions over such issues are not necessarily uniform across different segments of society. To date, most research has focused on majority Anglo and overall national-level opinions on immigration, while much less is known about how minority groups view immigrants and immigration policy.

So how might perceptions of immigrants vary across racial/ethnic lines? If public opposition to immigration is driven mostly by concerns about economic or existential threats, we would expect the most vulnerable domestic groups to be the most opposed. Compared to Anglos, African Americans experience greater downward wage pressure and employment competition from working-class immigrants (Borjas 2001; Gay 2006). On these grounds, one might expect African Americans to react more negatively to immigrants. Evidence for such differences, however, is mixed. On the one hand, several studies point to interminority conflict between African Americans and immigrants (Cummings and Lambert 1997; Gimpel and Edwards 1999; but see Morris 2000). Other studies find African Americans are significantly more supportive than Anglos of policies favorable to immigrants (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Schuman et al. 1997). Unlike Anglos, African Americans tend to reject news that stigmatizes Latino immigrants (Brader et al. 2010), and their attitudes tend to be unmoved by threatening political appeals (Albertson and Gadarian 2013). Further, Masuoka and Junn (2013) find that
when primed to think about Latino or Asian immigrants, African Americans display more inclusive attitudes on immigration in contrast to Anglos whose immigration attitudes become even more restrictive with racial primes. This presents an intriguing puzzle: Why might African Americans be more supportive of immigrants than Anglos even when they face larger direct material threats and competition from the out-group?

The puzzle may also extend to the Latino community, though in a different manner. Scholars find Latinos are more supportive than Anglos of policies that help undocumented immigrants and their families (Binder et al. 1997). At first blush, a straightforward explanation would point to in-group affinity and ethnic ties with immigrants from Latin America (de la Garza et al. 1993, 15). Media depictions of US immigration as a predominantly Latino phenomenon (despite the actual diversity of newcomers) may mean most citizens, including Latinos, view immigration through this particular ethnic lens (Valentino et al. 2013). However, little is known about how Latinos view other non-Latino immigrants. Other immigrant groups might represent direct competition for rights and resources, which would presumably drive down Latino support for such groups. Otherwise, in-group attachment would be a less convincing explanation if Latinos displayed more favorable attitudes even for undocumented immigrants of non-Latino origin. If so, what would explain such views?

To explain group heterogeneity in reactions to political threats, we develop and test Group Empathy Theory. The theory posits empathy felt by members of one group toward another alters reactions to threats and improves intergroup attitudes and behavior, boosting opposition to punitive policies and elevating support for civil rights protections that could translate into political action. We expect empathy develops particularly when an out-group’s experiences map onto historical patterns of unfair treatment experienced by the in-group. Therefore, we expect empathy for immigrants will be stronger among minority groups in the United States who have experienced discrimination directly, and thus whose cultural histories resonate with the burden of living as an “other.” Accordingly, we predict African Americans and Latinos are more likely than Anglos to exhibit empathy for immigrants, even those from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. If our theory is correct, this empathic process could powerfully counteract negative reactions to existential and material threats and help account for significant racial/ethnic gaps in support for immigration that have been heretofore largely unexplained.

We test our theory via a two-wave national survey experiment with a total of 1,799 participants by employing a randomized sample of Anglos and randomized, stratified oversamples of African Americans and Latinos. The first-wave survey taps the theory’s central concept with our “group empathy index” (a 14-item battery measuring general group empathy across cognitive and affective dimensions), as well as empathy toward specific groups. The second-wave experiment compares Anglo versus African American and Latino reactions to a vignette depicting an ambiguous yet potentially threatening incident at an immigrant detention center. In the experiment, only the racial/ethnic origin of the detainee featured in the vignette is manipulated to examine reactions to immigrants of white, Arab, black, and Latino descent.

By placing the contextual focus of our experiment on undocumented immigrants (rather than immigrants more broadly construed), we conduct highly conservative tests of our hypotheses about group empathy. Since undocumented immigrants lie at the core of concern about economic, security-based, and cultural threats from immigration (Branton et al. 2011; Citrin et al. 1997; Lahav and Courtemanche 2012), one might expect perceptions of threat to dominate policy opinions and political behavior in this context. If, instead, empathy explains group differences in reactions to the treatment of undocumented immigrants, this would constitute strong support for our theory.

GROUP EMPATHY THEORY

Empathy has both cognitive and affective components (Davis 1980, 1983; Duan and Hill 1996). The cognitive dimension captures an individual’s ability to take someone else’s perspective in a variety of circumstances. The affective dimension involves emotional responses (such as sympathy and compassion) to the observed experiences of another. Prior research establishes a strong link between empathy and pro-social attitudes and behavior. People high in empathy are more likely to help others by volunteering (Unger and Thumuluri 1997), donating to charity (Cialdini et al. 1997), and cooperating to reach shared goals (Rumble et al. 2010).

Work in evolutionary psychology suggests that empathy is most adaptive in small social groups, such as family units, where individuals can better guarantee each other’s survival by being carefully attuned to emotional states that sense threats and opportunities in the immediate environment (see Preston and De Waal 2002). Self-categorization theory makes a similar argument about the favorable conditions for empathy: Shared group membership strongly facilitates perspective taking and concern (e.g., Turner et al. 1987). In fact, empathy toward one’s in-group could be negatively associated with empathy for out-groups. Our study departs from these assumptions in that we suspect empathy may be
triggered even for threatening out-groups under certain circumstances. This can happen, we think, when an out-group is being subjected to treatment the observer believes not only to be unfair but also to resonate with the historical treatment of one’s own group. Suggestive evidence comes from studies that find empathy is positively correlated with attitudes toward individuals from stigmatized groups (e.g., Batson et al. 1997). Empathy also seems to diminish in-group–out-group bias, prejudice, and stereotyping (Finlay and Stephan 2000; Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000).

We attempt to pivot the concept of empathy from a strictly small-group, interpersonal phenomenon to one that can operate at the intergroup level, independent of group identification or affinity. We envision “group empathy” as a process where members of one group begin to internalize and vicariously experience the perspectives and emotions of members of another group even when they do not share intimate family or friendship bonds. This group-level empathy, in other words, matters when one’s social group becomes an important lens through which the circumstances of others, even strangers, are evaluated. While exploring the conceptual and operational distinctions between individual- and group-level empathy is not the primary focus of this study, we speculate that the latter is likely to be more politically potent because it can influence policy opinions and behaviors that affect entire social groups. In social psychological research on empathy, little attention has been paid to whether common social experiences between different groups trigger empathic processes and, if so, with what political consequences (Johnson et al. 2009). By situating our experiment in the context of immigration, we explore the consequences of group empathy with powerful policy and political implications.

**Empathy across racial/ethnic groups**

To date, studies in social and political psychology have almost exclusively examined empathy exhibited by Anglos for nonracial/ethnic stigmatized groups (e.g., the homeless, criminals, etc.). Work that does examine ethnocultural empathy also tends to focus on the conditions under which majority group members empathize with minorities (e.g., Finlay and Stephan 2000; Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000; Wang et al. 2003). Our theory, however, focuses on empathy exhibited not only by the majority but also by minority groups for out-groups, and we expect cross-group variation in empathy to explain distinct reactions to very similar political threats.

While empathy for victimized groups can develop among members of the majority, we expect that historically disadvantaged minorities are particularly likely to be empathetic toward members of other groups. As Masuoka and Junn (2013, 5) put it, “race is not simply a demographic characteristic or a product of personal preference but a structural attribute imposed on an individual with important consequences for individual life chances and political experiences.” These experiences affect the social lens through which a person sees the world as one grows from a young child into adulthood. Children of minority groups, for example, might develop empathy for others largely as a result of their own experiences with discrimination or via the stories they hear about the struggles of their family and friends. These internalized cultural narratives should trigger empathy toward other groups with similar experiences.

As mentioned above, empathy comprises both cognitive and affective dimensions, and we expect minorities to display more of both compared to the dominant group. With regard to cognitive empathy, Group Empathy Theory posits that minority group members find it easier to cognitively imagine themselves in the position of a person being unfairly treated due solely to their race/ethnicity, even when that person is from a different racial/ethnic group. According to Segal et al. (2011, 439), minorities have “the dual task of understanding and negotiating their own culture and the culture of the dominant class.” Similarly, Swigonski (1994, 390) argues that in order to thrive, less powerful groups “have the potential for ‘double vision’ or double consciousness—a knowledge of, awareness of, and sensitivity to both the dominant worldview of society and their own perspective.” Accordingly, we expect members of historically oppressed groups to be better able to “put themselves in the shoes” of other minorities experiencing discrimination, especially when it mirrors their own histories. An individual’s direct experience with discrimination should thus serve as a primary causal antecedent of empathy toward others (Eklund et al. 2009; Hoffman 2000). After all, to take the perspective of another person, it helps to hold a repertoire of similar experiences (Cao 2010).

In addition to cognitive empathy, we also expect stigmatized minorities to develop a keener sense of affective empathy. Previous work suggests that affective empathy can be reactive (i.e., responding to the emotional experiences of another) and/or parallel (i.e., experiencing emotions similar to those of another; see Davis 1994; Stephan and Finlay 1999). For instance, witnessing racial profiling may trigger empathetic concern and compassion for the targeted person’s well-being—a form of reactive empathy. But if the observer also experiences anger and disgust in response to such unfair treatment, s/he is paralleling the emotions of the other. Parallel empathy requires a very fine-tuned emotional system that develops over time from personal experience. Since
minorities are more likely to have had such personal experiences or to have been exposed to the cultural narratives of their group, affective empathic processes likely occur more often among minority group members than the majority.

African Americans and Latinos have historically struggled with discrimination, lower income, and higher unemployment (McClain and Stewart 2002). Such shared experiences of exclusion and constraint can increase perceptions of commonality (e.g., Craig and Richeson 2012; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Sanchez 2008), and coalition building can occur between these groups (Barreto et al. 2013; Tedin and Murray 1994; but see Kaufmann 2003). Having superordinate goals may facilitate intergroup cooperation and diminish group boundaries (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000), which in turn helps foster outreach between groups (Stürmer et al. 2006). On the other hand, perhaps due to resource scarcity, African Americans and Latinos can perceive one another as economic competitors (Bobo and Hutchings 1996), and some research suggests such intergroup competition could strongly countervail the development of empathy for outgroups (Cikara et al. 2011). This latter line of research implies minority groups are unlikely to view each other as members of a larger collective.

Despite intergroup competition, which could undermine any sense of co-identification or linked fate between oppressed groups, we think empathy may still powerfully condition reactions to external threats. The reason is that empathy for out-groups may be triggered quite automatically by instances of racial/ethnic-based discrimination and can therefore be impactful even when groups are in competition with each other and do not strongly co-identify. In short, our theory predicts group-based empathy can override one’s existential and economic concerns about an out-group.

**HYPOTHESES**

If Group Empathy Theory is correct, we should find that compared to Anglos, African Americans and Latinos will possess higher baseline levels of general group empathy (hypothesis 1a). These differences should also exist for group-specific measures tapping empathy toward stigmatized racial/ethnic out-groups as well as toward undocumented immigrants as a stigmatized group as a whole (hypothesis 1b).

In an experiment where we manipulate the race/ethnicity of an undocumented immigrant in an ambiguous incident at a detention center, we expect African Americans and Latinos will more likely side with nonwhite detainees (vs detention center officials) and perceive unreasonable cause for law enforcement decisions targeting such immigrants, even when the detainees are from a different racial/ethnic group than their own (hypothesis 2). The theory also predicts African Americans and Latinos exposed to nonwhite detainee vignettes will exhibit higher support for civil rights protections and stronger commitments to political action for addressing the plight of undocumented immigrants in general (hypothesis 3). Last, we expect that empathy toward undocumented immigrants significantly and uniquely mediates these intergroup differences between Anglo-African American and Anglo-Latino respondents regarding their immigration policy opinions and behavioral intentions (hypothesis 4).

**RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA**

We test these hypotheses by conducting a national survey experiment fielded online by Knowledge Networks in two waves with 7–10 day lags between each wave from December 2013 to January 2014. The first wave includes measures of group empathy along with other key sociopolitical measures, including perceived immigration threat, political trust, and economic competition. We administered the experiment and post-test questions in the second wave (see the appendix, available online for a full description of these measures). A total of 1,799 respondents participated in the first wave, which consisted of a randomized sample of 633 Anglos and randomized, stratified oversamples of 614 African Americans and 552 Latinos. Out of the 1,799 first-wave respondents, a total of 671 (244 Anglos, 217 African Americans, and 210 Latinos) took part in the second-wave immigrant detention experiment.1

The median respondent was 48 years old with some college experience and earning around $35,000–$40,000 in household income. Approximately 49% of the respondents were women, 31% identified as liberal, and 31% identified as conservative. The completion rate for the first wave was 67% for Anglos, 51% for African Americans, and 46% for Latinos. For the second wave, the completion rate was 77% for Anglos, 71% for African Americans, and 77% for Latinos.

**First-wave survey**

To measure general group empathy, we created a 14-item “group empathy index” (GEI). To do so, we adapted Davis’s (1980, 1983) “interpersonal reactivity index” (IRI), which is the most widely used measure of individual-level empathy in social psychology with substantial test-retest reliability (see Pulos and Lennon 2004). The IRI consists of a seven-item “perspective taking” subscale and seven-item “empathic

---

1. The remaining 673 respondents in the second wave took part in a different experiment for a separate study that tests Group Empathy Theory in the context of Arab racial profiling in airport security (Sirin et al. 2014).
We adapted this to a group context in the following way: “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.”

The response options ranged from “describes me extremely well” to “does not describe me well at all” on a 5-point scale. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient is 0.84, indicating high internal consistency between our 14 items. The results of a confirmatory factor analysis further justify the formation of a single-dimensional group empathy scale (eigenvalue = 3.11).

To verify that the GEI taps the underlying construct and is distinct from individual trait empathy as captured by the IRI, we conducted online interviews with 300 participants recruited from the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) interface. Half of these participants were randomly assigned to the GEI and the other half to the IRI. All participants then answered questions about policies aimed at capturing and deporting undocumented immigrants. Our goal was to compare the effects of the GEI versus the classic IRI on such policy opinions. If we are correct that the GEI taps a distinct, group-level construct, then it should more powerfully predict opinions about these policies than will individual trait empathy. Our results demonstrate that only the GEI is a significant predictor of attitudes about undocumented immigrants, even after controlling for partisanship, ideology, and key sociodemographic factors. This effect is substantively significant as well; moving from the minimum to maximum level of group empathy leads to a 52% decrease in the likelihood of “very strongly” supporting punitive immigration policies. In contrast, the effect of the IRI on immigration attitudes is statistically insignificant. The GEI is also a stronger predictor of one’s likelihood to engage in political action to help out-groups. We asked our participants: “Imagine you knew a rally to protest discrimination against a racial or ethnic group different than yours was taking place in your town. How likely would you be to attend?” While both the GEI and IRI have a statistically significant effect on one’s intentions to attend such a rally, the effect size is far greater for the GEI. Those with the highest level of group empathy in our sample were nearly 80% less likely to express a lack of interest in attending such a rally, whereas those with the highest IRI were 40% less likely to do so. These findings confirm that the GEI is not simply tapping individual trait empathy and that it actually performs better than the IRI in predicting political attitudes and behavior.

To further test the validity of our GEI, we conducted additional analyses comparing its impact to other political predispositions, including social dominance orientation (SDO), authoritarianism, and ethnocentrism. Specifically, our survey with Knowledge Networks included a question tapping the respondent’s motivation to intervene in a socially awkward situation where someone from a different group might feel insulted by a third party’s jokes. We asked respondents how likely they were to tell a person making racist jokes to stop, even if the jokes were not about their own racial/ethnic group. The response options ranged, on a 5-point scale, from “not at all likely” to “very likely.” We expected a strong correlation between group empathy and responses to this item. By contrast, we did not expect this item to correlate highly with other group-relevant dimensions such as SDO, authoritarianism, and ethnocentrism, because those predispositions do not specifically tap one’s ability to experience another group’s emotions and motivation to help relieve their suffering. Intervening to discourage a “racist joke” correlates strongly with the GEI (r = .38).

By comparison, zero-order correlations between SDO, authoritarianism, and ethnocentrism and responses to the “racist joke” question are very low (r = .12, r = .01, and r = .07, respectively). Ordinal logistic regression analysis with group empathy, SDO, authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, and a host of other controls—including ideology, party identification, and key sociodemographic factors—returns the same result: Empathy has a strong and statistically significant, positive effect on one’s likelihood to discourage racist jokes targeting out-groups, whereas other group-relevant predispositions have no significant effect. Going from the minimum to maximum level of group empathy leads to a 64% decrease in one’s likelihood to do nothing. Thus, our group empathy measure taps an empirically distinct construct and exhibits strong predictive validity.

---

2. Some of the items in the affective dimension of the GEI are designed to measure respondents’ empathic concern about racial/ethnic out-groups who are less fortunate than their own group. However, we do not conceptualize group empathy solely as empathy toward out-groups that are less fortunate than one’s in-group. In a sensitivity analysis, we confirm that group empathy works just as well in predicting pro-civil rights policy attitudes and behavior when these particular items are removed from the index (see table 1A in the appendix).

3. For ease of interpretation and comparison, we rescaled all measures to run from 0 to 1.

4. Table 2A in the appendix provides the full results of our factor analysis.

5. These results are presented in table 3A in the appendix.

6. See table 4A in the appendix.
In addition to our general group empathy measure, we designed a group-specific measure of empathy for undocumented immigrants, consisting of both the empathic concern (i.e., affective) and perspective-taking (i.e., cognitive) dimensions. To measure the group-specific empathic concern dimension, we asked respondents how concerned they felt about the challenges undocumented immigrants face these days. The response options ranged from “very concerned” to “not at all concerned” on a 5-point scale. To measure group-specific perspective-taking abilities, the survey noted: “Regardless of the challenges another group faces, sometimes it is easier and other times more difficult to understand what members of a given group are going through.” We next asked respondents how easy it is for them to put themselves in the shoes of undocumented immigrants. The response options ranged from “very easy” to “not easy at all” on a 5-point scale. We then generated our “group empathy for undocumented immigrants” measure by combining the empathic concern and perspective-taking measures. The respondents also indicated their group-specific empathy for each of the main racial/ethnic groups in our study (i.e., Anglos, Arabs, African Americans, and Latinos).

Second-wave experiment

For this experiment, we produced an ambiguously threatening news vignette that manipulated racial/ethnic cues concerning undocumented immigrants in US detention centers. We employed a 3 × 4 between-groups experimental design (race/ethnicity of the respondent × race/ethnicity of the immigrant detainee). Specifically, we examined whether compared to Anglo respondents, African Americans and Latinos exhibit higher group empathy and less support for punitive measures targeting nonwhite (compared to white) immigrant detainees. The experiment included four conditions with vignettes featuring white, Arab, black, and Latino immigrants. The news vignette depicted an ambiguous incident in which a detainee claimed he was suffering from a serious health condition that required transportation to a hospital outside the detention facility for medical treatment, but detention center officials denied him such medical service because they considered him a flight risk. It was up to the participants to decide how to interpret the incident. For some, the denial of medical attention would seem reasonable considering the potential threat posed, while for others it would be unreasonable and amount to inhumane treatment.7 A caption under the picture read “Detainee denied medical attention due to alleged flight risk.” The news report read as follows:8

Controversy at the Detention Center:
Medical Negligence or Flight Risk?

Recently, there have been several investigative reports regarding the condition of undocumented immigrants being held in detention centers around the United States. The reports indicate that some detainees are held for long periods of time under inhumane conditions, lacking sufficient nutrition, proper sanitary facilities, access to legal counseling, or even contact with family members. The reports also discuss cases of medical negligence concerning the treatment of detainees with serious health problems. In one case, a detainee told authorities he was suffering from severe chest pain, profound shortness of breath, and dizziness, and asked for immediate medical attention. However, these situations require supervised transportation to a hospital several miles away from the detention center. In response, detention center officials denied the detainee this medical service because they considered him to be a flight risk. The officials said they had a reasonable cause to deny medical attention outside the facility. The detainee, on the other hand, said that the denial of medical attention was unwarranted and that his health was continuing to deteriorate.

To manipulate racial/ethnic cues in a subtle way that does not sensitize participants to the intent of the study, we altered only the photos accompanying the news report without openly referring to the targeted person’s name, race/ethnicity, or national origin. We chose photos that reflected the intended race/ethnicity while holding other traits as constant as possible. We accomplished this by selecting pictures from a pool of 40 photos based on ratings provided by an independent panel of eight judges naïve to our hypotheses. Judges rated how much each person appeared white, Arab, black, and Latino, as well as friendly, attractive, wealthy, law-abiding, educated, and trustworthy. We used pictures judged to be significantly different from one another on the race/ethnicity dimension—with perceptions of the race/ethnicity of the person in the picture matching the intended racial/ethnic cue for each experimental condition—but sub-

---

7. In designing this scenario, we followed Peffley and Hurwitz’s (2010) strategy of depicting a controversial incident in an ambiguous manner that allows for open interpretation by the respondents.

8. This experimental scenario was inspired by an actual incident (see Bernstein 2009) as well as official reports on the conditions of immigrants held in detention centers (e.g., Schriro 2009).
stantively similar and statistically indistinct across all other traits, to ensure the internal validity of our experiment.9 The result is a very conservative test of our hypotheses, narrowly manipulating visual racial/ethnic cues without introducing potential confounds.

As an additional manipulation check, we conducted yet another MTurk survey with 125 participants naive to the objectives of our experiment to further ensure that the selected pictures were representative of the intended racial/ethnic cues. For each of the four pictures, we asked our participants: “If you had to guess, which racial/ethnic group do you think this person belongs to?” All participants identified the white-cue photo accurately as white, 85% of the participants identified the person in the Arab-cue photo as Arab, over 99% of the participants accurately identified the person featured in the black-cue photo as black, and 82% of the participants accurately identified the person in the Latino-cue photo as Latino. These results further confirm the validity of our experimental manipulation of racial/ethnic cues.

Upon exposure to the experimental vignette, participants first indicated whether they would side with the detainee versus the detention center officials and whether they thought the conduct of the officials was reasonable. The post-test questionnaire also included questions about participants’ civil rights policy preferences pertaining to undocumented immigrants (“support for civil rights policies”). We asked participants how strongly they supported or opposed (1) more intensive immigration policies aimed at capturing and deporting undocumented immigrants, (2) policies to protect immigrant detention center officials from being sued by detainees claiming mistreatment, (3) law enforcement officials detaining anyone who cannot verify their legal status even if not charged with a specific crime, and (4) giving undocumented immigrants a chance to keep their jobs and apply for legal status. These items represent a strong single dimension (α = .75), allowing us to generate an additive scale.

We also measured participants’ commitment to political action in defense of the rights of undocumented immigrants (“pro-civil rights behavior”) by asking how likely they were to (1) request more information about how to protect the rights of detainees, (2) sign an electronic petition to improve the conditions in immigrant detention centers, and (3) attend a public meeting to defend the rights of detainees. We then generated a single index measure (α = .73).

RESULTS

We first examine preexisting racial/ethnic differences in group empathy. Employing our first-wave survey data, we conducted an ANCOVA with ideology and key sociodemographic controls (age, education, gender, income, metropolitan residence, and religion).10 For post hoc comparisons, we utilize the Bonferroni adjustment to conservatively estimate the significance of differences in multiple group means. The results in table 1 support our expectations for hypotheses 1a and 1b.11 African Americans and Latinos have significantly higher levels of general group empathy compared to Anglos and also maintain significantly greater group-specific empathy for undocumented immigrants in particular. African Americans and Latinos also display significantly higher empathy for other minority racial/ethnic groups than Anglos do, while they are as empathic toward Anglos as Anglos are for themselves.

We next examine our second-wave experimental data.12 Figure 1 illustrates the predicted probabilities for siding with the immigrant detainee calculated using the observed-value approach after fitting probit models. Of the three respondent groups, African Americans displayed the most support for nonwhite detainees, particularly blacks and Latinos—the latter of which provides the strongest evidence in line with Group Empathy Theory. When the immigrant detainee was black, African Americans were much more likely to take his side (75%), while Anglo respondents were less so (37%), demonstrating a significant difference within the black detainee condition. When comparing the results between the white detainee and black detainee conditions, one sees that African American support rose by 28%, while Anglo support declined by 11%, producing a significant interaction between respondent and detainee race/ethnicity. This pattern is consistent with in-group affinity, not neces-

9. For instance, the photo selected for the Anglo passenger condition received a mean rating of 4.87 (on a 5-point scale where 5 means the individual was very typical of the group). The African American photo was rated 1.1 on the same “Anglo appearance” scale. Across the six other trait dimensions, mean differences between any two pictures did not exceed 4 points nor approach statistical significance. Table 5A in the appendix provides the full results of these analyses.

10. We conducted sensitivity analyses with additional controls including employment status, authoritarian personality, social dominance orientation, experience with discrimination, and party identification. The results are consistent with those of the parsimonious model pertaining to the racial/ethnic variations in levels of group empathy (see table 6A in the appendix).

11. Given our unidirectional hypotheses, we employ one-tailed tests.

12. We observe statistical balance in ideological orientation and all major sociodemographic factors across experimental conditions, indicating effective random assignment (see table 7A in the appendix).
Table 1. Racial/Ethnic Differences in Group Empathy, Perceived Threat, Political Trust, and Economic Competition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Anglos</th>
<th>African Americans</th>
<th>Latinos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General group empathy</td>
<td>.553</td>
<td>.603*</td>
<td>.588*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.008)</td>
<td>(.009)</td>
<td>(.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group empathy for undocumented immigrants</td>
<td>.353</td>
<td>.496*</td>
<td>.500*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.012)</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
<td>(.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group empathy for Anglos</td>
<td>.430</td>
<td>.428</td>
<td>.421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.011)</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group empathy for Arabs</td>
<td>.348</td>
<td>.496*</td>
<td>.401*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.011)</td>
<td>(.011)</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group empathy for African Americans</td>
<td>.432</td>
<td>.795*</td>
<td>.508*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.010)</td>
<td>(.011)</td>
<td>(.011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group empathy for Latinos</td>
<td>.419</td>
<td>.616*</td>
<td>.663*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.011)</td>
<td>(.011)</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived national threat of immigration</td>
<td>.488</td>
<td>.425*</td>
<td>.396*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.013)</td>
<td>(.013)</td>
<td>(.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived personal threat of immigration</td>
<td>.342</td>
<td>.319</td>
<td>.305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.012)</td>
<td>(.013)</td>
<td>(.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political trust</td>
<td>.282</td>
<td>.381*</td>
<td>.316*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.010)</td>
<td>(.010)</td>
<td>(.011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived economic competition</td>
<td>.434</td>
<td>.484*</td>
<td>.382*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.013)</td>
<td>(.013)</td>
<td>(.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N per racial/ethnic group</td>
<td>633</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>1,799</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

do not find a significant interaction effect for Latino versus Anglo respondent reactions across white versus nonwhite detainee conditions. We thus find mixed support for hypothesis 2 as it pertains to Latinos.

Next, in examining the impact of racial/ethnic cues in these vignettes on opinion about whether the immigration officials had reasonable cause to deny the detainee’s request for medical treatment, a similar pattern emerges. Figure 2 illustrates that in the white detainee condition, there were no statistically significant differences between the reactions of our three racial/ethnic groups. In the Arab condition, perceiving the officials’ decision unreasonable somewhat increased among African Americans and declined among Anglos in line with our expectations. This pattern is enhanced when the detainee was depicted as black: support rose for African American respondents to 69% and declined among Anglo respondents to 49%, producing a significant difference within the black detainee condition. More impressively, when the detainee was Latino, support among African Americans was maximized (79%) while remaining substantially lower among Anglo respondents (50%), again producing a significant difference within the Latino detainee condition as well as a significant interaction effect across white versus Latino detainee conditions. We think that this latter result provides particularly strong evidence corroborating our theory, because African American respondents displayed even more support for Latino detainees (their primary economic competitor) than they showed for a member of their own racial group.

Latino respondents in the nonwhite detainee conditions were not more likely to perceive the decision to deny the detainee medical attention to be unreasonable than those in the white detainee condition. Nevertheless, Latinos still displayed significantly higher perceptions of unreasonable cause in reaction to the black and Latino detainee vignettes than Anglo respondents. Most notably, Latino perceptions of unreasonable cause for the black detainee (67%) were significantly higher than Anglos (49%), once again demonstrating Latino out-group empathy for black detainees. At the same time, we find no interaction effect for Latino versus Anglo reactions across white versus nonwhite detainee conditions.

Figure 3 shows another similar pattern when we examine the “support for civil rights policies” index, which includes opposition to restrictive immigration policies, more protection for detention center officials, greater leeway for detaining anyone who cannot verify their legal status, and support for giving undocumented immigrants a chance to keep their jobs and apply for legal status. Across all four
Figure 1. Siding with the immigrant detainee. Predicted probabilities calculated using the observed-value approach after fitting probit models with robust standard errors. The asterisk denotes which coefficients for African Americans and Latinos are statistically distinct from the ones for Anglos within each experimental condition ($p < .05$). The symbol Δ denotes whether there is a significant interaction between the race/ethnicity of the respondent and race/ethnicity of the detainee ($p < .05$).

Figure 2. Perceiving denial of medical attention unreasonable. Predicted probabilities calculated using the observed-value approach after fitting probit models with robust standard errors. The asterisk denotes which coefficients for African Americans and Latinos are statistically distinct from the ones for Anglos within each experimental condition ($p < .05$). The symbol Δ denotes whether there is a significant interaction between the race/ethnicity of the respondent and race/ethnicity of the detainee ($p < .05$).
In experimental conditions, African Americans and Latinos were significantly more likely than Anglos to support the civil rights of immigrants, regardless of the race/ethnicity of the detainee portrayed in the vignette. Once again we see that African Americans consistently display higher support for civil rights policies when the undocumented immigrant is nonwhite. African Americans expressed more pro-civil rights views when the detainee was Arab (67%), black (63%), or Latino (60%) compared to their reactions to the white detainee vignette (56%), while Anglo respondents displayed much lower levels of support for nonwhite detainees. The result is a significant difference between African American versus Anglo respondent reactions within each nonwhite detainee condition as well as a moderately significant interaction across the white versus Arab detainee conditions. By comparison, the level of support Latinos displayed for pro-civil rights policies in the nonwhite detainee conditions was not statistically distinct from that in the white detainee condition (which was actually the highest of all conditions among Latinos, at 67%). Nevertheless, Latino support for civil rights policies was once again significantly higher than Anglo respondents in the black (61% vs. 32%) and Latino (49% vs. 33%) detainee conditions. Latino respondents demonstrated notable out-group empathy for minorities by displaying 12% more support for the black detainee (their primary economic competitor) than they showed for a Latino detainee.

Last, figure 4 displays the results for pro-civil rights behavior (i.e., requesting more information, signing a petition, and attending a public meeting—all to protect undocumented immigrants). Anglos were less likely to commit to these actions across the board but especially when the detainee was black or Latino. African Americans also reacted consistently with our theoretical expectations across all conditions. When the detainee was white, African Americans were about as motivated as Anglos (33% vs. 31%) to engage in these pro-civil rights acts. However, African Americans’ commitment to act was substantially higher than Anglos when the detainee was Arab (45% vs. 30%), black

---

**Figure 3. Support for civil rights policies.** Predicted probabilities calculated using the observed-value approach after fitting probit models with robust standard errors. The asterisk denotes which coefficients for African Americans and Latinos are statistically distinct from the ones for Anglos within each experimental condition ($p < .05$). The symbol Δ denotes whether there is a significant interaction between the race/ethnicity of the respondent and race/ethnicity of the detainee ($p < .1$).
(52% vs. 14%), or Latino (54% vs. 25%). These differences between African Americans and Anglos also produced significant interaction effects across both the white versus black and white versus Latino conditions.

The commitment to defend the civil rights of undocumented immigrants was high among Latinos across all experimental conditions. As a result, the pattern for Latinos was distinct from African Americans, perhaps because the issue is so powerfully linked to Latino collective experiences that empathy was extended to all immigrant detainees in our vignettes regardless of their race/ethnicity. Overall, the experimental results corroborate our expectations for our third hypothesis for both minority respondent groups but particularly so for African Americans.

Robustness check: Linked fate versus group empathy?

An alternative causal mechanism for these results is linked fate (Dawson 1995). Perhaps African Americans and Latinos identify with other minority groups, suspecting their fates are linked so that whatever happens to any other non-white group is also likely to affect them. If that were the case, out-group empathy would not be required because the result would be triggered by a simple form of group interest, albeit indirect. To address this possibility, we conducted another survey study via Knowledge Networks with a separate pool of 621 randomly selected participants that included a measure of linked fate toward various groups.14 We find African Americans and Latinos feel no more linked fate toward other minority groups than they do toward Anglos.15 Therefore, neither linked fate nor simple identification with minority groups over Anglos (nor antipathy toward Anglos) explains the experimental results.

MEDIATION ANALYSES: GROUP EMPATHY VERSUS PERCEIVED THREAT

While the results thus far seem quite consistent with our theoretical expectations, we must still demonstrate that it is empathy and not some other factor such as perceived threat, that explains these racial/ethnic group differences. To explore the presumed causal mechanism behind such variation, we conduct path analyses using generalized structural equation models with probit (Baron and Kenny 1986; Hayes and Preacher 2010).16 In these models, we employ group empathy as the mediating factor while controlling for perceived threat and political trust.

14. To measure linked fate, we asked: “When you hear that something good or bad happens to each of the following groups, to what extent do you feel that your life is similarly affected by the fate of each group?”

15. See figure 3A in the appendix.

16. We first estimate the effect of minority race/ethnicity on group empathy as our mediator (path a) and then estimate the effect of group empathy on the outcome variable while controlling for minority race/ethnicity (path b). Finally, we estimate the direct effect of minority race/ethnicity on the outcome variable while controlling for group empathy.
The results presented in figure 5 indicate group empathy explains a significant portion of the difference between African Americans and Latinos on the one hand and Anglos on the other, for each of the dependent variables we have explored above. African Americans and Latinos score significantly higher than Anglos on group empathy for undocumented immigrants. Group empathy in turn significantly boosts the likelihood of taking the immigrant detainee’s side, perceiving the denial of medical attention unreasonable, embracing civil rights policies, and committing to pro-civil rights actions. These patterns are consistent with the presumed causal role of group empathy in producing heterogeneity in intergroup attitudes and behavior toward stigmatized groups, thus corroborating our fourth hypothesis.17

A leading alternative explanation for the distinct intergroup reactions to immigration threats is simply that Anglos perceive such threats to be more severe than do African American and Latino respondents. On its face, this alternative seems improbable because minorities are more likely than Anglos to experience direct downward wage pressure due to competition with undocumented immigrants (Borjas 2001; Gay 2006). Still, to examine this alternative mechanism, we ran mediation analyses using perceived threat of immigration as a possible explanation for intergroup differences across all of our outcome domains.18

Under the basic threat hypothesis, those who perceive higher immigration threat should be least likely to side with an immigrant detainee. We conducted ANCOVA with Bonferroni correction to compare differences in group means vis-à-vis preexisting levels of perceived immigration threat as measured in our first-wave survey (see table 1). Perceptions of personal immigration threat are statistically indistinguishable between African Americans and Anglos while Latino perceptions are somewhat lower, so this cannot explain intergroup differences in the outcomes we examine. However, Anglos perceive significantly higher levels of national immigration threat, which could potentially mediate the differences we find. That said, the results in table 1 also indicate African Americans display significantly higher concerns about economic competition with other groups (including immigrants) than do Anglos, relating to the notion that immigrant influxes pose an actual threat to African American jobs. Nonetheless, in line with our theory and contrary to the basic threat hypothesis, African Americans not only show greater support than Anglos for all undocumented immigrant groups but also demonstrate particularly high support for Latino immigrants—their primary economic competitor.

To systematically explore whether threat perceptions explain the group differences we find in reactions to our experiment, we once again estimate generalized structural equation models followed by bootstrap tests. Our results show that while perceived immigration threat has a significant direct effect, it does not exert a significant mediating effect for any of our dependent variables.19 This is in stark contrast to group empathy’s strong direct and mediating effects discussed above.20

**Group empathy versus perceived threat in other policy domains**

Some may argue that while undocumented immigration poses an economic threat to many Americans, it does not generally pose an existential threat that would signal an imminent danger to personal safety or national security, which in turn might seriously exacerbate out-group animus. The issue of terrorism is one such setting wherein perceived threat is highly salient and diffuse. To begin exploring our theory’s applicability in other policy domains, we analyzed the effects of group empathy on attitudes toward Arab racial profiling and civil rights in the context of terrorism threat using data from the first-wave survey.21 As the theory predicts, group empathy is significantly associated with op-

---

17. We also conducted path analyses for group empathy with additional controls for employment status, authoritarian personality, ethnocentrism, social dominance orientation, experience with discrimination, and party identification. The results are consistent with those of the parsimonious models and demonstrate that group empathy still significantly mediates intergroup variation in responses to the experimental vignettes (see fig. 4A in the appendix). In fact, the size of the total effects mediated by group empathy is higher for all of the outcome variables in these extended models. Concerning the size of the direct effects, group empathy is among the top three explanatory factors (along with perceived immigration threat and SDO) for all of the outcome variables (see table 8A in the appendix). The results thus indicate that group empathy uniquely and powerfully predicts such attitudes and behavior, independent of other key sociopolitical predispositions.

18. Our operationalization of immigration threat comprises economic and cultural elements (adopted from Brader et al. 2008; see the appendix for the full details of this measure).

19. See figure 5A in the appendix.

20. We also ran mediation analyses for political trust as yet another alternative causal mechanism. It is plausible that those who do not trust the government to do what is right might be less likely to side with law enforcement officials or concede civil rights amid political threats (Davis 2006; Peffley and Hurwitz 2010). However, the mediation results demonstrate that the indirect effects of trust are insignificant (see fig. 6A in the appendix).

21. See table 9A in the appendix. Apart from these first-wave survey results, we elsewhere conducted experiments that corroborate Group Empathy Theory in the context of terrorism threat (Sirin et al. 2014).
position to the profiling of Arabs and concern for civil rights violations for the sake of national security, even after controlling for terrorism threat. This effect is stronger among African Americans and Latinos despite their heightened perceptions of terrorism threat compared to Anglos. These findings attest to the robustness of Group Empathy Theory’s premises across different policy domains and forms of threat.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

To date, few empirical studies have offered systematic explanations for variations across racial/ethnic groups in response to political threats. Most investigations on reactions to political threats either make no group distinctions or focus solely on Anglos, partly due to the relative paucity of minority respondents in national opinion surveys. Testing Group Empathy Theory in the context of immigration threats, we find that compared to Anglos, African Americans and Latinos exhibit higher general group empathy as well as higher empathy toward undocumented immigrants and are more supportive of pro-civil rights policies and actions.

Interestingly, Latino respondents’ reactions to minority detainees were not different than their reactions to the white detainee featured in the experimental vignettes. Given their own experiences of stigmatization as immigrants, Latinos are highly sensitive to inhumane treatment in the immigrant detention context regardless of the detainees’ racial/ethnic origin. This is consistent with Masuoka and Junn’s (2013) experimental findings that racial primes do not have an additive effect on Latino attitudes given their generally positive views on immigration.

Our survey results also suggest that Latinos fall between Anglos and African Americans on measures of group empathy. As de la Garza et al. (1996) point out, a large number of Latinos have experienced an acculturation process that in some cases may set their political views and values in closer concert to Anglos. Nevertheless, because of their ethnic consciousness as a minority group, Latinos may still reflect a peripheral and critical view of the political system (Davis 2006). Further, the Latino community is substantially more heterogeneous in terms of its politics, culture, and history than the African American community. As descendants of immigrants hailing from many nations and backgrounds, Latinos may not uniformly experience empathy for other oppressed groups. Indeed, analyzing the first-wave

---

Figure 5. Mediation analyses. Path coefficients estimated via generalized structural equation modeling (probit with robust standard errors). The models include controls for perceived immigration threat and political trust. The significance of indirect effects tested via bootstrapping with bias-corrected confidence intervals ($p < .05$). “AA” denotes African Americans and “L” denotes Latinos. Anglo respondents constitute the baseline category.
survey data for Latino subgroups indicates differences in group empathy between Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and other Latino respondents. Future research might conduct experiments with randomized oversamples of Latino subgroups and vignettes that include more nuanced differentiations of the Latino cue at the subgroup level. Considering the generational status of respondents and offering the option to participate in the experiment in Spanish could also further help unveil empathy-driven attitudes of Latinos at different levels of acculturation and in-group affinity.

Future studies may also examine these processes among other key communities, particularly Asian Americans. Asian Americans are, on average, economically better off than African Americans and Latinos (Lai and Arguelles 2003), which may set their socioeconomic experiences closer to Anglos. At the same time, their immigration experiences are closer to Latinos, since both groups together constitute the majority of current immigration flow to the United States, and both are perceived as non-English speaking newcomers even when they are native-born, English speaking Americans (Masuoka and Junn 2013). Asian Americans have thus been branded as “perpetual foreigners,” suffering from racial stereotypes and discrimination generation after generation (Masuoka and Junn 2013, 61; Uhlman 1991). Accordingly, as with African Americans and Latinos, we expect Asian Americans to react with heightened empathy toward immigrants from other groups (see Lopez and Pantoja 2004; Ramakrishnan 2014).

Another potential avenue of research is to replicate our experiment in different cultural and national settings. One could investigate whether minority immigrant groups in Europe also feel more empathic toward one another and can build intergroup coalitions around common policy concerns amid the animosity and discrimination they collectively face as “the perpetual other” in many European nations (Dancygier 2010). The current political climate concerning Arab and Muslim immigrants in Europe provides fertile ground for such a test.

Just because African Americans and Latinos might express empathy toward undocumented immigrants, this does not mean these groups think of themselves as sharing common values or political goals. For instance, Latinos have a long-standing connection to the issue of bilingual education that African Americans do not share (Falcon 1988). Despite such policy issues and goals a specific to certain groups, and the more general differences in socioeconomic and political interests that may instigate intergroup (or even intra-group) conflict and competition (Jones-Correa 2005; Mc-Clain and Karnig 1990), empathy triggered by observing the mistreatment of out-groups can still serve as a powerful, positive mediator of group conflict. It is quite noteworthy that African Americans displayed such high levels of support for undocumented immigrants, particularly for Latino detainees (even more than black detainees). This lies in contrast to the long-standing presumption of African American aversion to immigrants postulated by the interminority conflict perspective. Instead, it seems there are some common contemporary political contexts where African Americans and Latinos both strongly side with other minorities experiencing discrimination even when they perceive such out-groups to be a significant threat to their in-group economic and political interests. This leaves the door open for more potential coalition building between African Americans and Latinos on immigration and other policy issues affecting disadvantaged groups.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to give special thanks to Charles Boehmer, Amber Boydstun, Lawrence Cohn, George Edwards, Ryan Enos, Emily Falk, Stanley Feldman, Nehemia Geva, Daniel Gillion, Ben Highton, Leonie Huddy, Kosuik Ema, David Jones, Kerem Ozan Kalkan, Don Kinder, Rick Lau, Lily Mason, Monika McDermott, Tali Mendelberg, Marc Meredith, Markus Prior, Gary Segura, David Sears, Jim Sidanius, Stefan Subias, Kathleen Staudt, Lynn Vavreck, and Claes de Vrees. We also thank our anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback.

REFERENCES


