I

The Puzzle

Empathy for Outgroups amid Existential Threats and Ingroup Interests

No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.


Sugar, ketchup, and mustard – common condiments became tools of racial harassment during the “sit-in movement” that started in 1960, as four black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, protested segregation in public spaces by sitting at a whites-only lunch counter of a local store. Denied service, they quietly remained in their seats until the store closed that day. Soon the movement spread across the South, with thousands of students and activists joining this nonviolent act of defiance. The rules of the sit-in movement were simple: no matter what they do, no matter what they say, remain calm and peaceful. Whenever protestors were hauled away by police, or injured so badly they could not continue, others would take their place. An iconic photo from a sit-in on May 28, 1963, in Jackson, Mississippi, shows three demonstrators – two women and one man – stone-faced and determined at a lunch counter. Their hair and clothes were covered in sugar, ketchup, and mustard (and blood, seeping from the man’s head), surrounded by a sneering white mob. The photo is a powerful image of civil rights activism in the face of racism and hatred. But there is more to the story. Two of the three demonstrators were not African American.


During the civil rights movement, racial animus had a substantial impact on the policy attitudes and political behavior of many white Americans, both Southerners and non-Southerners, who strongly resisted efforts to integrate schools and public spaces. Many of them saw the struggle for equality as a threat to their culture and values, as well as to their political and economic interests. And, of course, some of that was surely true: the prevailing racial hierarchy benefited them, their families, and their co-ethnics. So the behavior of the angry mob surrounding the demonstrators in the picture – as appalling and disgusting as it was – is not surprising or unusual within the broader history of race relations in the United States. One might be puzzled, however, about what motivated the two nonblack demonstrators to support their African American compatriot – and the entire movement? What would compel members of one group to stand (and, in this case, sit) in solidarity with an outgroup in their fight for justice and equality, even when that act carries great personal risk and material sacrifice?

In this book, we will explore the roots of political solidarity with marginalized outgroups. We suspect that political support for outgroups who are suffering cannot be reduced to the absence of racial animus, disregard for existential threat, a naive willingness to sacrifice ingroup interests, or an overriding moral, liberal, or egalitarian worldview. Many “nonracists” are passive bystanders to racism. Many progressives are not motivated even to vote, let alone to protest discriminatory policies that target marginalized outgroups. On the other side, many who care deeply about their own safety and security are nonetheless compelled to defend the political interests of vulnerable outgroups. A central piece of the puzzle is what we call group empathy: the ability and motivation to take another group’s perspective, feel emotionally connected to their struggles, and care about their welfare even when doing so puts the individual’s interests, or those of their group, at risk.

Many scholars have puzzled over similar questions for decades (Monroe 1996; Scuzzarello et al. 2009), focusing on individual acts of altruism, benevolence, and compassion toward others under extraordinary circumstances. Why did some non-Jewish Germans – and other Europeans – routinely risk their lives to save strangers of Jewish descent during the Holocaust? We hope to add our own perspective to that discussion by documenting, carefully and empirically, how empathy for outgroups shapes public opinion and political behavior not just under extreme circumstances but also in more mundane times.

We have collected a great deal of evidence demonstrating that outgroup empathy is a major force in shaping political attitudes and behavior across groups and national boundaries and in a wide variety of policy domains. In the next section, we continue our discussion of the puzzle in two key policy domains – terrorism and immigration. Considering reactions to outgroups affected by policies and actions taken in these contexts, we highlight some surprising differences across social divisions and within groups that commonly invoked explanations based on existential threats, ingroup material interests, and symbolic identities cannot explain. That is where Group Empathy Theory comes in.
Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Americans of Arab and Middle Eastern descent became the subject of scrutiny and suspicion in their own country (Cainkar 2002; Panagopoulos 2006). The public’s anti-Arab reaction after 9/11 may seem simple at first blush: existential threats posed by terrorist groups from the Middle East led many Americans to fear and then stigmatize fellow citizens who had nothing to do with the perpetrators and who were themselves just as likely to be victims. Indeed, persistently negative and threatening portrayals of Arabs as terrorists (Merskin 2004) might well have made national identity more salient for many (Transue 2007), prompting non-Arab Americans to support punitive anti-terrorism policies even at the expense of civil liberties. This “existential threat” hypothesis would further predict that those facing the greatest risk from terrorism would be the most antagonistic toward anyone ethnically similar to the group that brought death and destruction to their homeland on that terrible day. Surprisingly, perceptions about the risk of future terrorist threats turned out to have only limited power to predict public reactions to security policies and the treatment of Arab Americans.

One puzzle emerged in the form of large differences in opinion across racial/ethnic groups in the United States concerning the appropriate policy response to 9/11. African Americans generally perceived greater risk from terrorism than did whites after the attacks (e.g., Eisenman et al. 2009; Huddy et al. 2005). In a national study on behavioral and life changes in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Torabi and Seo (2004) found that African Americans were more likely than whites to improve home security, limit outside activities, and change their mode of transportation in fear of terrorism. Given the logic of the existential threat hypothesis, one would then expect blacks to express more support for strict homeland security policies in order to prevent another attack. However, in national survey data collected in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, African Americans were much less willing to trade civil liberties for security than whites and Latinos even when they were quite concerned about another terrorist attack (Davis & Silver 2004; Davis 2006).

These large racial gaps in opinion about national security policies after 9/11 were not fleeting. A CBS News/New York Times survey conducted in 2011 with New York City residents for the tenth anniversary of the attacks found that 44 percent of African Americans thought it was “extremely likely” that Arab Americans were being singled out unfairly in the post-9/11 era, compared with just 34 percent of whites who felt that way.³ More surprising, perhaps, was that this gap existed above and beyond racial group differences in party preferences.

identification and other socio-demographic factors like education and income. In other words, these differences in opinion did not spring from partisan politics or personal material stakes.

Blacks’ resistance to draconian security policies and higher sensitivity to Arab racial profiling did not spring from feelings of relative security either. Among the same 2011 CBS News/New York Times survey participants, African American and white residents of New York did not differ significantly in their perceived risk of another terrorist attack targeting their city, with about one-third of each group saying an attack in the near future was “somewhat likely.” Meanwhile, more than twice as many African Americans (25 percent) compared to whites (12 percent) felt that New Yorkers had “not at all recovered” emotionally from the attacks. Therefore, even ten years after the attacks, African Americans were significantly more cognizant of the unfair treatment of Arab Americans, despite perceiving the same risk and experiencing more emotional distress about terrorist attacks compared with whites.

Of course, this circumstantial evidence cannot disprove the existential threat hypothesis. Indeed, people who lived in Manhattan during the attacks were more likely to move from the Democratic Party toward the Republican Party (Hersch 2013) and became somewhat more supportive of anti-terrorism spending (Hopkins 2014). It is not surprising that such a powerful event would impact those who witnessed such immense political violence first-hand. As other studies have shown, personal and group interest play a role in policy opinions when the stakes are high and salient (Chong et al. 2001). So why didn’t African Americans, who were more likely on average to live in urban areas that might become targets of terrorist groups, move toward policies and candidates promising greater security?

Another survey conducted in 2011 for the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks inquired whether respondents thought there were more violent extremists among Arabs than among other ethnic groups. In that study, 54 percent of African Americans and 47 percent of Latinos thought there were fewer or about the same number of violent extremists among Arabs compared to other groups. Only 32 percent of whites felt this way. A follow-up survey conducted in 2012 revealed other notable racial/ethnic differences: 66 percent of African Americans and 54 percent of Latinos said they felt “mostly” or “very” favorable toward Arabs, compared to 47 percent of whites. Going back to the surveys conducted shortly after 9/11, feeling

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4 The analytical results of the survey data discussed in this chapter are provided in the online appendix.


thermometers had indicated that African Americans and whites displayed similar levels of negative affect for Arabs while Latino ratings of Arabs were somewhat lower than the other two respondent groups (Davis 2006, 206). However, ten years later, African Americans and Latinos expressed much more favorable sentiments about Arabs than whites did. What was the driving force behind this opinion shift over the decade that moved African Americans and Latinos away from whites and toward more positive evaluations of Arabs as an outgroup?

Fast-forward to 2017, when Donald Trump issued his so-called Muslim ban. This policy barred immigrants, refugees, and visitors from several Muslim-majority nations that Trump’s administration branded as “terror-prone.” Consequently, Arabs and other predominantly Muslim Middle Eastern communities were once again stigmatized as threats to homeland security. Perhaps not coincidentally, hate crimes against these communities rose, but so did positive affect toward these groups. A 2017 Arab American Institute (AAI) poll shows that 52 percent of those surveyed expressed a favorable opinion of Arab Americans compared to 40 percent in 2015. In the same poll, 51 percent rated American Muslims favorably compared to 33 percent two years prior. This was the first time in AAI polling that a majority of Americans favorably rated both groups. A majority of respondents displayed strong opposition to the profiling of Arab and Muslim Americans and expressed awareness of a rise in hate crimes. In addition to these overall public opinion trends, a 2019 study by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) revealed large intergroup differences concerning opinions of Muslims. African Americans were seven times more likely to hold positive than negative opinions of Muslims while Latinos were five times as likely to do so. In comparison, whites were almost as likely to hold favorable as unfavorable opinions. What explains these positive shifts in US public attitudes toward Arab and Muslim Americans, and large racial/ethnic group differences in opinion, in the face of Trump’s policies and rhetoric criminalizing these communities?

Again, we think it is unlikely that these public opinion dynamics in reaction to terrorism and groups negatively affected by harsh security policies are fully explained by threats or material interests. Another common explanation for these puzzles is symbolic politics (Sears 1993), which denotes the psychological attachments to party and race that structure the way people think about politics above and beyond their personal economic circumstances. Nonwhites are indeed more likely to be Democrats and to hold more liberal views on civil rights, immigration, and a host of other issues related to race/ethnicity and redistribution. But we also think the most-often-cited alternative explanations,

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7 See www.aaiusa.org/aai_american_attitudes_poll_in_the_press.
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including partisanship and “symbolic” predispositions related to group identification (Sears 1993), are not sufficient. While we will discuss our reasons for this skepticism more in the chapters to come, for now we would simply point out that large and statistically significant differences in policy opinions remain even after controlling for these alternative political dimensions. Furthermore, racial/ethnic differences in opinion are largest and most consistent concerning domestic, redistributive policies (Kinder & Winter 2001). Why, then, are these patterns emerging on policy issues like national security, so removed from standard racial political debates?

Immigration constitutes another central issue of our time. Immigrants have become a highly stigmatized group, characterized by some politicians and natives as a threat to the homeland’s economy, culture, and security (Branton et al. 2011; Chavez 2008; Hainmueller & Hiscox 2010; Lahav & Courtemanche 2012). Amid these negative perceptions, public animosity toward immigrants can run high (Alvarez & Butterfield 2000; Branton et al. 2011; Chavez 2008; Perea 1997), though the causes of this often substantial variation in support for more or less immigration is still debated (e.g., Valentino et al. 2019). Hostile public attitudes may have profound policy implications: harsh treatment of immigrant children, opposition to the Dream Act, and even troubling instances of human rights violations documented in immigrant detention centers across the country (Villalobos 2011). However, similar to the case of terror threats, opinions over such issues are not necessarily uniform across different segments of society. To date, most research has focused on whites’ opinions on immigration, while much less is known about the dynamics of opinion among minority groups.

If public opposition to immigration is driven mostly by concerns about economic or existential security threats, we would expect the most vulnerable domestic groups to register the greatest opposition. African Americans experience greater downward wage pressure and employment competition compared to whites due to the influx of working-class immigrants (Borjas 2001; Borjas et al. 2010; Gay 2006). On these grounds alone, one might expect African Americans to react more negatively than whites to immigration.

So how do perceptions of immigrants vary across racial/ethnic lines? The evidence is mixed at best. On the one hand, several studies point to interminority conflict between African Americans and other nonwhite groups over political rights and resources (Cummings & Lambert 1997; Gimpel & Edwards 1999; but see Morris 2000). Still, African Americans are also found to be significantly more supportive than whites of policies favorable to immigrants in general (Kinder & Sanders 1996; Schuman et al. 1997). Further, unlike whites, blacks tend to reject news that stigmatizes Latinx immigrants (Brader et al. 2010), and their immigration attitudes tend to be unmoved by threatening political appeals (Albertson & Gadarian 2013). For instance, polls consistently show that African Americans’ opposition to Trump’s border wall surpasses that
of all other groups in the United States, even Latinos. This presents an intriguing puzzle: Why might African Americans be more supportive of immigrants than whites are, even when they face larger and more direct material threats and no obvious short-term benefits from immigration?

The puzzle may also extend to the Latinx community, though in a different way. Scholars find Latinos are more supportive than whites of policies—such as amnesty—that assist undocumented immigrants and their families (Binder et al. 1997). At first blush, ethnic ties with immigrants from Latin America might seem a plausible explanation for this (de la Garza et al. 1993). The US news media have depicted immigration as an almost exclusively Latinx phenomenon (despite the actual diversity of newcomers) for some time, leading many citizens to view the issue through a narrow ethnic lens (Valentino et al. 2013). However, little is known about how Latinos view non-Latino immigrants. Ingroup attachment is a less convincing explanation if Latinos are more favorable toward undocumented immigrants of non-Latino origin. We find they are. What explains such views?

Beyond such large racial/ethnic gaps in opinions in these policy domains, there is significant within-group variation as well. For instance, college-educated whites compared to whites without college degrees, and white women compared to white men, are much more likely to oppose Trump’s family separation policy. Even partisan groups are sometimes heterogeneous, as in the case of substantial support for the Dreamers (undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children) among Republican identifiers. So there is a great deal of heterogeneity in opinion dynamics surrounding certain policy issues that cannot be explained simply in terms of symbolic politics, threat perceptions, ingroup interest, or even personal stakes. The fact is many people—within both white and minority communities—live in areas targeted by terrorists but nevertheless oppose lopsided trade-offs of civil liberties for security. Among these, substantial fractions refuse to trade humanitarian principles for border security, as seemed clear when polls overwhelmingly revealed opposition to the family separation policy of the Trump administration.

To explain heterogeneity in reactions to a broad range of threats to the nation, we develop Group Empathy Theory (Sirin et al. 2016a, 2016b, 2017). The theory posits empathy felt by members of one group toward another can alter reactions to existential threats and even counteract ingroup interest, thereby reducing intergroup conflict, boosting opposition to punitive policies, and elevating
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support for civil rights protections. Of course, we expect empathy for potentially threatening outgroups to be less common than empathy for close intimates and for members of one’s ingroup. We further expect outgroup empathy to develop under a variety of circumstances, particularly when one group’s experiences map onto historical patterns of unfair treatment experienced by another. The theory explains why African Americans and Latinos are more likely than whites to support policies that protect stigmatized groups other than their own. However, group empathy is politically consequential among all groups: whites who demonstrate high levels of group empathy (albeit via different socialization processes and experiences) are also more supportive of policies that reduce inequality and protect disadvantaged groups.

In study after study, we find that the ability to put oneself in the shoes of a member of an outgroup experiencing distress fundamentally structures political opinion and action across all racial/ethnic groups, above and beyond the forces that have been known for some time to influence these decisions. We find that group empathy is as strong as or stronger than alternative explanations such as party identification, ideology, racial resentment (Sears 1988), authoritarianism (Altemeyer 1981, 1996; Feldman & Stenner 1997), and social dominance orientation (SDO; Sidanius & Pratto 2001) for opinions about terrorism, immigration, foreign aid, humanitarian crises, military interventions, contemporary social movements (such as Black Lives Matter), and a variety of other policies and issues affecting group rights and resources. Group empathy is not simply a substitute for ingroup identity or outgroup animus, and it powerfully influences mass policy opinions in the United States and Britain.

What we offer in the end is a broad and original theory about how whites and nonwhites think not just about their own groups but about others, as well as how variation within and across these groups helps explain broader public opinion dynamics regarding threats to the nation from without and within. The theory and empirics transcend the typical focus on the black–white dynamic in the United States, which remains an essential area of research but must also be broadened as societies around the world become more diverse and multicultural. The book ends with contemplation about how individuals and ultimately entire nations might foster group empathy in order to improve comity in their increasingly multicultural societies amid the revival of far-right, populist, and exclusionary politics.

**Empirical Tests of Group Empathy Theory**

The tests we bring to bear come from seven nationally representative studies, plus several smaller studies on convenience samples, conducted between 2012 and 2020.\(^\text{12}\) Six of the nationally representative studies are based on the US

\(^{12}\) The Appendix at the end of the book provides information on sampling methodology, descriptive statistics, response rates, and the full items for several measures not detailed within the text.
public and one on respondents from Great Britain. The US samples in these studies contain large representative subsamples of black and Latinx citizens, so we can learn about the dynamics of opinion within at least two prominent minority groups, not just among the majority. The data were collected across the two markedly different presidential eras of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, giving us confidence that the influence of outgroup empathy is not fleeting. The number of independent tests using a variety of measurement approaches and issue domains suggests the impact of group empathy is robust.

We measure empathy for outgroups alongside other group-related and political predispositions, such as SDO, ethnocentrism, partisanship, ideology, and the like. When we run experiments, it is to vary racial/ethnic cues in vignettes within key threat contexts, including terrorism, immigration, and humanitarian crises abroad, in order to see if different racial and ethnic groups indeed respond differently to the same threatening events. They very often do. We then explore whether this variation is explained by differences in outgroup empathy. It very often is. The general measure of group empathy we created—the Group Empathy Index (GEI)—is more abstract than many of the other standard measures of group-oriented predispositions and evaluations such as racial resentment or feeling thermometers. The GEI, as we will discuss further in Chapter 3, does not ask about how strongly each respondent empathizes with particular groups in society. This makes for a more conservative test of the theory while minimizing endogeneity concerns, since outgroup empathy as a general predisposition should be less specifically linked to political conflicts between particular groups in a given country.

Our two major tests come from a two-wave national survey with two embedded experiments fielded by GfK (formerly known as Knowledge Networks) in December 2013–January 2014. We refer to this as the “2013/14 US Group Empathy Two-Wave Study.” GfK provides a probability-based platform known as “KnowledgePanel.” A total of 1,799 respondents participated in the survey, with a randomized sample of 633 whites and randomly selected stratified oversamples of 614 African Americans and 552 Latinos. Of 1,799 first-wave respondents, a second wave reinterviewed 1,344 respondents. Roughly half of these (244 whites, 217 African Americans, and 212 Latinos) took part in an airport security (“Flying While Arab”) experiment while the other half (244 whites, 217 African Americans, and 210 Latinos) participated in an immigrant detention experiment.

We also provide an online appendix with additional information for all the data used in this book (including the survey and experimental materials) along with various manipulation checks and sensitivity analyses.

When we use the label “whites” in this book, we are referring to self-identified non-Latino whites. This is to distinguish the group from Latinos, who also may identify as white. Many of our studies are performed on samples comprised solely of respondents who identify as (1) non-Latino white, (2) African American, or (3) nonwhite Latino because our hypotheses specifically concern intergroup attitudes and behavior involving these groups.
Measures of group empathy (the fourteen-item version of the GEI) appeared in the first wave of this study. The first wave also contained measures of SDO, ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, threat perceptions about terrorism and immigration, trust in government, and a spate of additional items tapping policy opinions and behavioral tendencies. We administered experimental treatments and policy questions in the second wave. The experiments compare white versus African American and Latino reactions to vignettes (in the form of news stories) depicting ambiguous but potentially threatening incidents (either in the context of airport security or immigrant detention) in which racial/ethnic cues were nonverbally manipulated. The news story was accompanied by a photo of the targeted passenger or immigrant detainee. We randomly assigned a photo of a white, Arab, black, or Latino male without any explicit racial/ethnic identifiers.

We conducted a pilot of the “Flying While Arab” experiment (also fielded online by GfK in August/September 2012 with a separate pool of 621 participants (a randomized sample of 221 whites and randomly selected stratified oversamples of 193 African Americans and 207 Latinos). We refer to this as the “2012 US Group Empathy Pilot Study.” This first experiment helped us improve our instrumentation and serves as a robustness check of the airport security experiment fielded in December 2013–January 2014. It also included measures of linked fate, which allowed us to rule out the possibility that empathy for outgroups is simply standing in for linked fate with those groups. We also performed a couple of surveys with smaller, nonrepresentative samples using Mechanical Turk (MTurk) – an online crowdsourcing platform – in order to improve our measurement and provide additional robustness and manipulation checks in various chapters. We refer to this set of MTurk surveys as the “2015 US Group Empathy Study.”

We tested Group Empathy Theory with another national survey experiment, this time in the context of foreign policy, fielded online by GfK in late September and early October 2016. This study was supported by Time-sharing Experiments in the Social Sciences (TESS), so we refer to this as the “2016 US Group Empathy TESS Study.” A total of 508 respondents participated in the study, which consisted of a random sample of 173 whites and randomly selected stratified oversamples of 172 African Americans and 163 Latinos. The pretest questionnaire included a range of items designed to measure preexisting foreign policy attitudes, including foreign aid and humanitarian interventions, along with the fourteen-item GEI. Participants were then exposed to the experimental treatment in the form of a hypothetical news report about the violent actions of an oppressive government in an island nation – either in the Balkans or in the Arabian Peninsula – accompanied by a photograph of a young victim. The individual appeared to be either European or Arab. We measured respondents’ reactions to these vignettes in terms of both their support for a variety of policy actions that the United States may take in response to the