The Effects of Common In-Group Identity and Race of the Narrator on Perceived Credibility of Stories of Racial Discrimination

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Abstract

The present study examined the effects of 1) a common in-group identity manipulation and 2) the race of a person describing an instance of discrimination against a black person on perceived credibility of the description of discrimination and levels of support for policies that promote equity for minorities in America. We predicted that a common in-group identity (either induced by a common in-group identity manipulation, or naturally occurring when a person of the participant's race was relaying the experience of discrimination) would elevate the credibility of the experience and increase support for policies with racial implications. The experiment did not reveal a significant effect of either factor on the credibility of the experience or support for policies. However, the results did conform to a pattern of consistent difference between how Whites perceive situations of slightly subtle discrimination compared to non-Whites, where Whites perceive less discrimination than non-Whites.

Keywords: Social Categorization, Dual Identity, Common Identity, Discrimination, Race

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In contemporary America, despite widespread endorsement of egalitarian principles, majority-group members continue to discriminate against Blacks, albeit in more subtle ways than in the past (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). Racial discrimination has become less blatant because societal norms and policies generally encourage equal treatment of all Americans. Therefore, many majority-group members in America believe that racism is a thing of the past, while Blacks and other minority groups continue to perceive frequent discrimination.

While a vast majority of Whites (67%) reported that they were satisfied with the way Blacks are treated in the United States, the majority of Blacks (47%) reported that they were *dis*satisfied with the way Blacks are treated in the United States (Gallup Attitudes about US Black-White Relations Survey, 2013). Over one-third (37%) of Blacks (while only 15% of Whites) reported that racial discrimination is a "mostly to blame" for Blacks' "inferior jobs, income, and housing situation" (Gallup Attitudes about US Black-White Relations Survey, 2013). This disconnect between the perceptions of experience by minority group-members and majority group-members creates tensions in modern society, often stemming from majority group-members being skeptical of situations in which minority group-members claim to have experienced discrimination based on their race.

The current study investigated how to bridge this gap of understanding between experiences of racial discrimination by utilizing the concepts of social categorization, intergroup relations, and common in-group identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2009; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). By manipulating how participants conceive of their own group identity, and varying the group identity of the person experiencing discrimination, this experiment seeks to find a way to communicate incidents of racial discrimination to majority group-members that is credible and encourages support of policies that would increase equality between minority and majority groups.

Social Categorization: In-group vs. Out-group

What we observe in this mismatch of subjective perception may be at least in part explained by social categorization theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). To make sense of the complex world, humans employ cognitive processes to simplify the massive amount of information they regularly confront (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2010). This process applies to nearly all aspects of the human experience, including social information. Humans are very social creatures, and the world is full of many individuals with unique traits and personalities – far too many for one person to comprehend individually. To make meaning of this massive amount of information, humans spontaneously categorize other people often based on attributes they perceive others to have in common. People also orient themselves within social categories, giving them a way to self-define based on the qualities associated with their own group (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2010; Tajfel and Turner 1979).

Social categories at their most basic level divide into in-group versus out-group: us versus them. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory has reliably shown that individuals use group identification as a way to achieve more positive self-concept, often by associating positive attributes with their group, and comparing their group favorably to other groups. The consequence of this in-group favoritism is that out-groups are often assessed more negatively, even when the divisions between the groups are arbitrary and temporary (Billig and Tajfel, 1973). This kind of categorization makes cooperation, a key to peaceful human existence, easier and less risky for in-group members, because members of a relevant in-group get the benefit of the doubt. Again, the consequence of this is that the out-group is avoided and trusted less in cooperative situations (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2010).

There are several cognitive effects associated with defining people as members of one's in-group vs. out-group. One such effect is that information that comes from each group is processed differently. People tend to process information more deeply from in-group members than from out-group members and remember it better (Mackie et al., 1990). People are also biased to trust in-group members and distrust out-group members. Foddy, Platow, and Yamagishi (2009) found that people are much more likely to trust a stranger who is a part of their in-group to allocate monetary resources fairly than a stranger who is a member of an out-group. Voci (2006) found that feelings of trust toward in-group members increased along with distrust of out-group members when the value and distinctiveness of the in-group was under external threat. The threat in the study consisted of having participants read a list of exclusively negative attributes of their in-group

supposedly endorsed by out-group members as "typical of the in-group." One consequence of the finding that people question the credibility of out-group members and are less persuaded by them is that Whites may be relatively unresponsive to Blacks' claims of experiencing discrimination.

This heuristic division of individuals into groups also helps give rise to several phenomena that often negatively affect societies, including stereotyping and bias. Introduced first by Lippman (1922), stereotypes are traits or qualities that have come to be associated with a certain group, whether or not they are true of all individual members of that group. Activating stereotypes leads to easier assumptions about an individual simply based on their group membership, and stereotypes often perpetuate because people are more ready to see expected traits or behaviors that are related to a stereotype they already hold (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2010). Based on such stereotypes, people can develop biases toward different groups, which can be either implicit or explicit. In the United States, whites have been shown to have both an implicit preference for whites and an implicit negative bias against blacks (Nosek et al., 2002).

Although many white Americans outwardly endorse ideals of equality and may actively work toward these ideals, their implicit negative biases against black Americans still work in very real ways. The limited responsiveness of Whites to Blacks' descriptions of experiencing bias may represent a form of subtle discrimination. Aversive racism is a form of contemporary racial bias in which non-explicitly biased whites may still avoid contact with blacks out of discomfort, and only act in ways that are discriminatory when they are rationalizable or indirect

(Dovidio et al., 2002; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). The situations in which aversive racism is most likely occur are ambiguous, and allow the person acting in a discriminatory manner to justify their actions based on elements of the situation other than race (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). In fact, many people who practice aversive racism incur a cognitive cost because they are constantly trying to act in nonbiased ways and think nonbiased thoughts during interracial interactions (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005).

Despite these efforts, people who participate in aversive racism do show discriminatory behavior across a wide range of scenarios, especially when their behavior can be explained by reasoning other than racial bias. Such instances include helping a Black and White victim of a violent crime equally when the individual is the only witness, but helping the black victim only half as much as the white one when they believe the individual believes there were other witnesses, thus giving an explanation for their lack of action (Gaertner and Dovidio, 1977). A less dramatic but perhaps more insidious example is a job applicant selection study in which white participants read applications from both white and black applicants that were either weak, moderate, or strong. In the moderate condition, where the qualifications of the applicant were ambiguous, did whites discriminate against black applicants, choosing fewer of them compared to white applicants who were at the same level of qualification. In this case, the participants could point specifically to the negative aspects of the mixed qualifications of the black applicants as the reason they were not selected, even though white applicants had equally varied qualifications. The level of discrimination against black applicants found in this

study did not change over a ten-year period, despite a steady drop in explicit prejudice over the same period (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2000).

When we consider group categorization, every individual is a member of many groups and subgroups. For example, one can be an activist, a student, and an American. Research has found that it is possible to change what group is most salient in order to induce people to think of more people as members of their in-group (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2009). By creating this superordinate common in-group, many biases and prejudices between subgroups are broken down as all the positive things associated with in-group members are extended to those who were formerly out-group members (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). Thinking positively of subgroup membership within a superordinate group, or maintaining a dual identity, is also helpful to intergroup relations (Gaertner et al., 2000).

For example, Banfield and Dovidio (2013) showed that, somewhat counter-intuitively, inducing a common identity among white and black participants with the superordinate identity of Americans made Whites less perceptive of instances of subtle discrimination against Blacks, because racial differences were not salient, and they were less likely to be thinking of the distinctive experience of being a *black* American. Only when the common identity was under threat did white participants see discrimination in the subtle scenario. In the threat condition, participants read that the United States ranks very poorly compared to other countries in education. White participants in the common in-group condition were more likely to recognize acts of blatant discrimination. Inducing a dual identity as both a member of an ethnic group and an American caused Whites to be more responsive to such

instances of subtle discrimination, and to be more willing to act on behalf of Blacks (Banfield & Dovidio, 2013). One implication of these findings is that when Whites perceive Blacks primarily as members of a common national group, Americans, they may perceive them as more credible and trustworthy, and thus accept and respond to claims of unfair treatment.

The goal of the research is to understand which way of presenting a scenario of racial discrimination is most believable and most likely to increase willingness to support policies that explicitly support minorities in America. The current research investigated perceptions of veracity when presented with an incident of racial discrimination. We used a similar framework to Banfield and Dovidio (2013) by inducing a common in-group identity or dual identity framework, by reminding participants that they were Americans or racially distinct Americans. We also varied the group identity of the person presenting the incident of racial discrimination, by manipulating if the person was relayed the experience was an in-group member (a White person) or an out-group member (the person who purportedly experienced the discrimination or a different Black person). We tested if this manipulation changed how believable participants found the Black person's claim of discrimination, and consequently how much they endorsed anti-discrimination policies.

We hypothesized that when racial differences between Black and White Americans are first made salient, white participants would not be inclined to believe a black person describing his or her own experience of slightly ambiguous discrimination, or that of a black person describing another black person's

experience. We further predicted that white participants would be more likely to believe another white person, a member of their preferred in-group, talking about an instance of discrimination against a black person. In contrast, we expected that emphasizing only common identity as Americans would increase the credibility of the descriptions of bias conveyed by a black person (both the person who experienced the bias and another Black person) and thus promote greater support for anti-discrimination policies.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk (*N* = 402; 202 female, 200 male; mean age = 36.61 years, range = 18-75, *SD* = 11.73; self-reported as 79.4% White, 7.7% Black, 8.7% Hispanic/Latino, 5.9% Asian, and 2% other). One hundred thirty-six participants were excluded from the analysis because they indicated that the race of either the target in the scenario described or the narrator of the scenario a race other than the intended race for the manipulation in their condition.. The remaining participants (N = 266; 120 female, 120 men; mean age = 36.25 years, range = 18-74, *SD* = 11.80) self-reported as 80.5% White, 7.5% Black, 7.9% Hispanic/Latino, 6.8% Asian, and 3.8% Other. Participants completed the survey for fifty cents. Participants were all United States citizens over eighteen years old.

Materials and Procedure

Materials were presented in the order as described here unless otherwise noted. Participants were told that they would be doing a psychology experiment

about how people react to information presented in different ways. Participants were assigned randomly to the group identity manipulation, in which participants were asked to think of citizens of all ethnic and racial backgrounds as Americans just like them (common group identity), or to think of race as a useful distinction between Americans (dual identity), or were in a control condition without any racial cues. In the "Common Identity" condition, participants read an article from Banfield and Dovidio (2013), called "Celebrating our American Identity," which emphasized the common values shared among all people in America, regardless of racial or ethnic identity (e.g. "Instead of focusing on our particular race/ethnicity, we should celebrate that we all belong to the same big whole."). In the "Dual Identity" condition, participants read a different article from Banfield and Dovidio (2013), titled "Celebrating our Dual Identities," which urged readers to think of both ethnic and racial identity as well as American identity as important to self-definition (e.g. "We are all members of specific racial/ethnic group *and* a common group – Americans."). In the Control condition, participants read an article about the beauty and variety of the American landscape, which did not contain any cues about race or group identity (e.g. "No matter where you find yourself in America, you are likely to be surrounded by incredible landscapes.").

As a check of the manipulation and attention, participants responded to statements like "Despite having different racial identities, we are all Americans," "I am proud to be an American," and "It is useful to differentiate people based on race," on a seven-point scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree).

Participants were then assigned randomly to read an account of racial discrimination against a Black person relayed by either (a) a White person describing an experience of discrimination against a Black person (White Describe Black), (b) a Black person describing their own experience (Black Describe Own), or (c) a Black person describing the experience of another Black person (Black Describe Black). These were the three actor conditions.

To indicate the race of the presenter or speaker, an image of a face appeared next to the text, which was in quotation marks (images from Righi et al., 2012). To indicate the race of the person who is experiencing the discrimination, names that have reliably cued racial identity were used (Stefan Uddenberg, Ariel Mosley, Kathleen Oltman, and John Dovidio). (See Fig. 1.)

Outcome variables*. Narrator Credibility.* Participants in all three actor conditions responded to statements about the narrator (including the person telling the story about himself): "This person's portrayal of Terrell's experience is credible", "This person's portrayal of Terrell's experience is trustworthy," "This person's portrayal of Terrell's experience is accurate "on a seven-point scale (1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree). These three items were combined into a narrator credibility variable (α = .88).

Target Credibility. Participants in both secondhand actor conditions (White Describe Black and Black Describe Black) responded to statements about the target character in the story (Terrell): "Terrell's portrayal of his own experience is credible", "Terrell's portrayal of his own experience is trustworthy", "Terrell's portrayal of his own experience is accurate" on a seven-point scale (scale (1=

strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree). These three items were combined into a target credibility variable (α = .86).

Policy Questions. Participants also responded to statements about American policies that have racial implications on a seven-point scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree). These items were "Minorities in America deserve special consideration when applying for jobs or to schools," "There should be laws prohibiting discrimination against minorities in the workplace," and "The American government should act to ensure equal opportunity for people of all races in America." These were combined into a policy variable for analysis (α = .65, 3 items).

Discrimination. Participants were also asked how upset they were by what they had read, whether they thought it constitutes discrimination, and whether they would act to change the outcome. These items were also rated on a seven-degree scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree), and were combined into a discrimination variable (α = .91, 5 items).

Results

Narrator Credibility

Univariate analyses tested the effects of identity condition and actor condition on the credibility of the narrator (including the Black person describing their own experience), with fixed factors of group identity, race of actor, and race of participant and their interactions. There were no significant main effects of either condition on credibility of the narrator or interaction between identity and actor conditions, all *p*'s > ,05. There was a main effect of race on perception of credibility

of the narrator, $F(1, 248) = 4.306$, $p = .039$, partial eta squared = .017, observed power = .543. Overall, white participants ($M = 5.025$, $se = .071$) found the narrator regardless of the narrators' race, less credible than non-White participants ($M = 5.366$, $se = .148$) when accounting an incident of racial discrimination against a black individual. Particularly important to this investigation, there was a significant interaction between group identity and race of actor conditions, $F(4, 248) = 2.458$, $p = .046$, partial eta squared = .038, observed power = .698. Participants in the White Describe Black actor condition showed the greatest effect of the identity manipulation. Those in the Common Identity condition ($M = 5.798$, $se = .300$) found the narrator most credible, followed by those in the Dual Identity Condition ($M = 4.944$, $se = .263$), and those in the Control condition ($M = 4.561$, $se = .200$) (see Fig. 2).

Target Credibility

In a similar univariate model the effects of identity condition and actor condition on the credibility of the target (the person described in the story, who was always Black) were tested with fixed factors of identity and actor conditions and the race of participants, and the interactions between these three conditions. There was no significant effect of group identity condition or race of actor condition on target credibility, and no significant interaction between any of the factors, all p's > .05. There was an effect of participants' race on credibility of the target $F(1, 143) = 6.418$, $p = .012$, partial eta squared = .043, observed power = .711. White participants ($M = 5.065$, $se = .086$) found the target less credible than non-White participants ($M = 5.561$, $se = .086$).

Policy

A univariate analysis of variance was used to test the effects of common identity and the race of the actor on policies regarding race. The fixed factors were identity condition, actor condition, looking at all the interactions therein. There were no significant effects of either identity condition or actor condition, and no significant interaction, all *p*'s > .05. There was a marginal trend showing that actor condition had an effect: support for policies was highest in the White Describe Black condition (*M* = 5.225, *se* = .162) compared to the Black Describe Black condition (*M* = 4.927, *se* = .109) and the Black Describe Own condition (M = 4.918, *se* = .107), F(2, 248) = 2.012, *p* = .136, partial eta squared = .016, observed power = .413 (See Figure 3). There was again a main effect of participants' race on policy preferences, *F*(1, 248) = 6.570, *p* = .011, partial eta squared = .026, observed power = .724. Non-White participants (*M* = 5.421, *se* = .176) endorsed these policies more strongly than did White participants (*M* = 4.921, *se* = .084).

Discussion

There was one interaction that supported the hypothesis that a common group identity would increase endorsement of policies that ensure equitable treatment of minorities in job or educational settings. For participants in the actor condition where a White person described an experience that happened to their Black friend, the interaction between actor condition and identity condition indicated that inducing a common identity with all Americans increased the credibility of the narrator the most, and the dual identity condition also increased the credibility of the narrator compared to the control condition. The actor

condition had a slight effect on participants' support for the policies, trending in the direction predicted, with participants in the condition with the White narrator supporting the policies more than those in the condition with the firsthand Black narrator's account, and those in the condition with the secondhand Black narrator's account showing the least support for the policies.

Other than this interaction, there were no significant results indicating that either the common identity manipulation or actor manipulation had an effect on the outcome variables, although there was a marginal trend showing that the actor manipulation might increase support for the policies.

The significant findings of the current study centered on the difference between White and non-White participants, regardless of what identity or actor condition they were in. The pattern of results reflects the status quo: White people in the US are less likely than Black people to see discrimination as a main cause for Black Americans' inferior jobs (Gallup Attitudes about US Black-White Relations Survey, 2013); in this study, White participants were less likely than non-White participants to perceive discrimination, be upset by it, or intervene to change the outcome. White participants were also less likely to endorse policies that would act to equalize opportunities for minorities in America, consistent with Gallup Attitudes about US Black-White Relations Survey (2013), which reported that most Whites (81%) do not believe that new civil rights laws are needed to reduce discrimination against Blacks, while 53% of Blacks believed that such laws were necessary. Also in this poll 54% of Blacks reported that they preferred that the government play a major role (vs. minor role) in trying to improve the social and economic positions of

blacks and other minority groups, compared with 22% of Whites. White participants also found both the narrator and target (who was always Black) of the story less credible overall than non-White participants.

Overall, these findings move toward confirming the general disconnect between Whites' and non-Whites' perceptions of situations of subtle discrimination against Black people. These results also show potential effects of common group identity manipulations when engaging with scenarios of discrimination and that having a White person, or member of the privileged group identity, talk about discrimination against minority group-members could be effective in increasing endorsement of policies that support minority group-members.

There were several limitations to this study, the greatest one being the study design for the actor conditions. Because many participants could not correctly identify the race of the person pictured or the person in the scenario, the total number of participants and thus power of the study was greatly diminished. Participants had trouble identifying the White man's race, thinking he was Middle Eastern in several cases, and also in some cases participants appeared to mix up the race of the target in the story with the narrator's race. Significant effects of the actor condition were found with the complete data set in the direction predicted, but once the misidentifying participants were removed, the effects were gone. This may have been because the participants in the White Describe Black actor condition were disproportionately removed, leaving the final breakdown between actor conditions to be 48 (18%) White Describe Black, 107 (40.2%) Black Describe Black, and 111

(41.7%) Black Describe Own. With so few participants in this condition, it was difficult to achieve significance.

A future study would include more clear indications of the races of both narrators and targets. Although the goal was to somewhat subtly imply their races and thus not make the participant aware of the manipulation, it is evident that being explicit about each person's race would allow for results that more accurately reflect the desired manipulation.

Another limitation was not being able to test the identity manipulation effectively. Since there was no effect of identity on any of the dependent variables, other than the one interaction, it may be that the manipulation did not have an effect. The responses to the questions asked after participants read the initial article did not show significant differences depending on identity condition. In future investigations, a better measure of the manipulation should be used to see whether it had an effect.

A final limitation was the demographic makeup of the participants. Ideally, the study should be conducted with an equal number of Black and White participants to identify the way in which each group engages with members of their in-group compared to the out-group. In addition to establishing more clearly the effects of the identity and actor manipulations on each group, this could illuminate how future interventions could be tailored based on the group they are targeting. If the goal is for people to find stories of racial discrimination more credible, it may be that the person talking about the experience who is most credible depends on the race of the listener.

Because of these significant limitations, this question is worth pursuing further, as it has important implications for American society.

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Figures

Figure 1. White Describe Black actor condition.

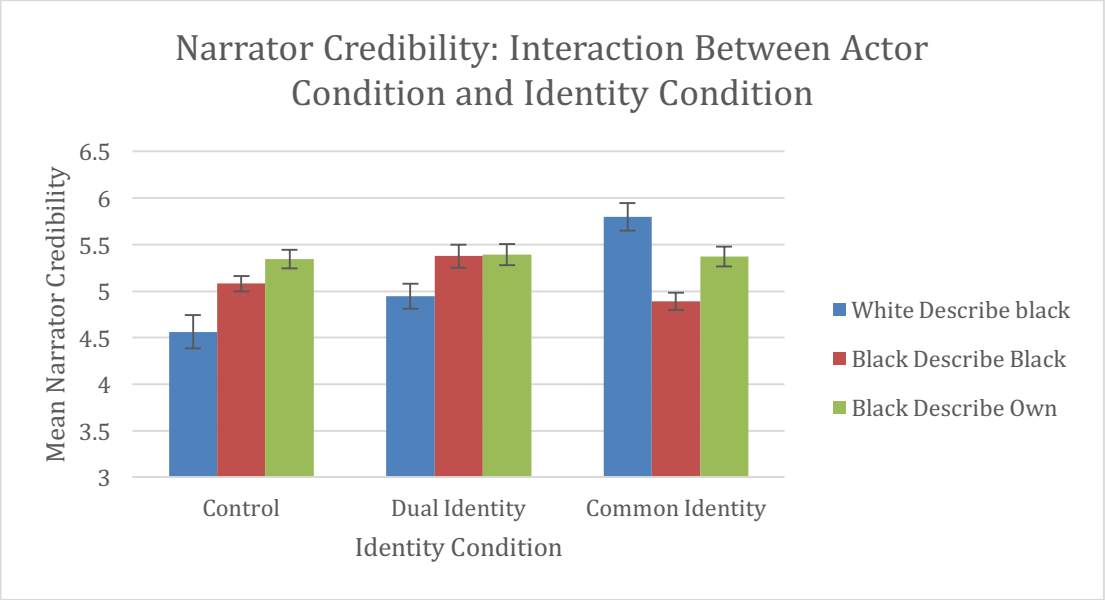

Figure 2. Interaction between actor condition and identity condition in analysis of narrator credibility.

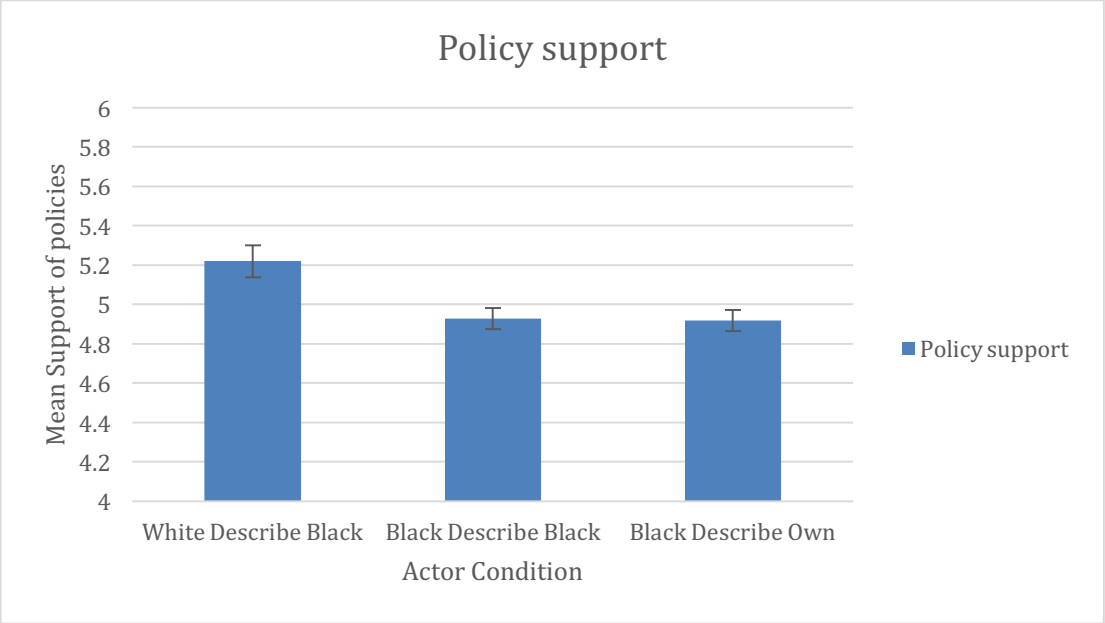

Figure 3. Marginal trend of effect of actor condition on policy support.