

# The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology

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Volume 11

Issue 1 *Ripped from the Headlines: Analyzing  
the Social Implications of the News*

Article 2

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January 2019

## Stimulating a Response: Does Exposure to the Confederate Flag Impact People's Attitudes Regarding Social Dominance Orientation, Ethnocultural Empathy, and their Political Beliefs?

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### Recommended Citation

Goldman, Brian M.; Chang, Pearl S.; Meddaugh, Joshua R.; and Daddona, Mark F. (2019) "Stimulating a Response: Does Exposure to the Confederate Flag Impact People's Attitudes Regarding Social Dominance Orientation, Ethnocultural Empathy, and their Political Beliefs?," *The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

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## Introduction

It is our human nature to form groups and consequentially label these groups as a means of establishing our social identities. The inherent quality of creating groups leads to the “us” versus “them” mindset, which emphasizes dimensions of in-group versus out-group mentality. Such groups become more tangible when symbols are adopted to represent the in-group versus out-group mindset (Katz & Haas, 1988). For instance, group symbols such as flags, are a form of expression that evoke a sense of realness and tangibility (Callahan & Ledgewood, 2016), thus creating stronger group mentality (Katz & Haas, 1988). Sometimes flags lead to an in-group mentality reflecting unification and patriotism (Katz & Haas, 1988), but other times, flags lead to an out-group mentality endorsing one’s superiority over other groups.

An example of such dichotomous sentiments is the Confederate flag. Some Southerners view the Confederate flag as a proud reminder of southern heritage (Cooper & Knotts, 2006; Newman, 2007), whereas others interpret the Confederate flag as oppressive and threatening. For instance, the Confederate flag has been used as a form of political justification for committing both ideological and racially loaded crimes (Ehrlinger et al., 2011; Hutchings, Walton, & Benjamin, 2010; Trenticosta & Collins, 2011) which has been well-documented in many current events.

The controversial divisiveness of in-group and out-group mentalities stem from the flag’s historical inception during the American Civil War and continues into the contemporary era. Some recent examples include the events during the summer of 2017, where the removal of Confederate flags and monuments sparked dissension, due to their historical implications. The Confederate flags were removed from Alabama and South Carolina’s state capitol grounds in 2015, while the Confederate symbol was removed from the Georgia state flag in 2001. The United States House of Representatives also attempted to ban the display of Confederate flags in Veterans Administration cemeteries in 2016. Due to this dissension and national attention, the researchers in this study are seeking to investigate the effect, if any, the Confederate flag has on an individual’s social dominance orientation, ethnocultural empathy, and/or their political beliefs to further understand the divisiveness of this symbol.

## Social Dominance Orientation

Contemporary research has discovered that it has become increasingly commonplace to utilize flags as a means to intimidate and convey superiority to those who are not within the group itself (Becker, Enders-Comberg, Wagner, Christ, & Butz, 2012; Callahan & Ledgewood, 2016; Kimmelmeier & Winter,

2008). Similarly, *social dominance orientation* (SDO) a concept, derived from the field of social psychology, explains the endorsement and maintenance of discriminative and prejudicial practices regarding superiority of one's own group membership towards non-members (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) and espouses the belief that Americans should dominate others (Kimmelmeier & Winter, 2008). Social dominance theory explains preservation of in-group membership and the ideology of people to maintain the status quo of in-group status while illuminating those found in the out-group.

The concept of social dominance has been conceptualized as possessing two different purposes (Jost & Thompson, 2000). The first function consists of beliefs that one's group has superior qualities to out-group members. The second notion is continual permitting and/or perpetuation of prejudiced and discriminatory actions towards out-group members. Both Ehrlinger et al. (2011) and Hutchings et al.'s (2010) studies of the Confederate stimulus significantly link this symbol with aspects of racial endorsement, which further delineates how Confederate flag priming may distinguish in-group/out-group preferences.

Little work has been completed on exposing people to the Confederate flag to activate schemas which may result in racially biased judgments of an out-group member. Recent research by Ehrlinger et al.'s Study 2 (2011) found that predominately white participants rated a hypothetical African-American job applicant more negatively when they were in a Confederate flag priming condition. Furthermore, Pratto et al. (1994) noted that higher endorsement of SDO correlated with expressed racism towards Black and Arab races. Support for social policies including advocating for women's rights, minority's rights, gay rights as well as environmental policies was found to be negatively correlated with SDO. These results further illustrate the differentiation between in-group/out-group status as marked by SDO.

## Ethnocultural Empathy

The notion of SDO is seemingly counter to *ethnocultural empathy* (EE). Rasoaal, Eklund, and Hansen (2011) define EE as "feeling, understanding, and caring about what someone from another culture feels, understands, and cares about" (p. 8). EE also includes a universal appeal where members of different groups possess similar experiences, thus making it easier for out-groups to relate to one another.

Other than belonging to a different group, Rasoaal et al. (2011) list several factors that decreases an individual's level of EE. These factors include inability to understand different cultures, "lack of practical experience of being in cultures other than one's own and lack of ability to perceive similarities and differences between the other's" (p. 9). These factors further the divide between the "us" verses "them" mentality. While higher SDO reflects an orientation concerned with

preserving in-group favoritism and derogating out-groups, EE generally emphasizes tendencies that serve to decrease or minimize in-group/out-group preferences. In short, the researchers propose that attitudes towards other groups, or out-groups, will be measured by SDO and EE.

## Political Ideology

Ehrlinger et al.'s Study 1 (2011) reported that priming people with the Confederate flag can be powerful enough to impact voting behavior and the voting intentions of individuals. This particular study reported that White participants were less likely to vote for Barack Obama when primed with the Confederate flag. Likewise, Ehrlinger et al.'s Study 2 (2011) demonstrated that exposure to the Confederate flag led participants to evaluate a fictional Black character as more negative than participants in the neutral condition. Ehrlinger et al.'s study concluded that exposure to the Confederate flag led White participants to engage in more negatively racially charged beliefs and behaviors.

Research also suggests that voting behavior was impacted in Ehrlinger et al.'s (2011) study due to the notion of voters utilizing information shortcuts. One theory argues that voters search out a speaker and/or symbol who has interests in common with the voter (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Lupia, 1994). These speakers/symbols then allow voters to connect candidates with their own stances on issues (Popkin, 1994). Based on this interpretation, voters create narratives about the candidates/symbols in addition to using them as a rationale to justify and extend their political beliefs.

The researchers in this study posit that the Confederate flag acts as an information shortcut that will determine whether exposure to the stimulus has a differential impact inducing conservatives and liberals toward adopting comparatively more polarizing attitudes on in-group/out-group mentality. Napier and Jost (2008) have proposed that a hallmark of conservatism compared to liberal ideology is a heightened tendency to accept and justify the existence of unequal outcomes under the guise that such inequities are fair and legitimate. In the current study, the researchers propose that priming conservatives with the Confederate flag may activate schemas pertaining to the perceived fairness and legitimacy of the Confederate heritage notion, a social order in which concepts such as SDO are perceived as natural and just (ie. "This country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are"). Additionally, multiple studies indicate that political orientation (i.e. more conservatism) positively correlates with greater SDO (Kteily, Ho, Sidanius, 2012; Kugler, Jost & Noorbaloochi, 2014; Pratto et al., 1994). Therefore, the researchers posit that more conservative political affiliations will be related to more SDO but less EE when exposed to the Confederate flag. Conversely, priming liberals with the Confederate flag is

proposed to activate schemas and feelings associated with the notion that the past social system was unjust and unfair, thus decreasing SDO but increasing EE.

## Study Rationale and Hypotheses

Given the particular features and influences of the Confederate flag, the researchers believe it is worth examining whether exposure to this stimulus would induce participants to adopt particular beliefs regarding social dominance orientation (SDO), ethnocultural empathy (EE), and political ideology. The current study sought to build from Ehrlinger et. al's (2011) work by examining whether the Confederate flag impacted participants' levels of SDO and EE relative to a control group condition (i.e., an Olympic flag exposure). The researchers selected the Olympic flag as the spirit of the Olympic Games often represents positive thoughts in individuals and symbolizes world unity. Furthermore, this study is necessary as little work has been done that determines whether political ideology has the potential to moderate stimulus exposure on an individual's psychological functioning.

The three hypotheses for this study are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: In general, participants exposed to the Confederate flag would report higher levels of SDO and lower levels of EE than participants exposed to the Olympic flag (i.e., a main effect of priming condition).

Hypothesis 2: Political orientation (i.e., higher conservatism scores) would generally be associated with higher levels of SDO and lower levels of EE (i.e., a main effect of political orientation).

Hypothesis 3: Exposure to the Confederate rather than the Olympic flag will magnify the relationships between participants' political orientation and their SDO and EE scores (i.e., political orientation would moderate the relationship between priming condition and the outcome variables).

## Method

### Participants

The sample was comprised of 194 participants from a diverse public university in the metropolitan area of Atlanta, Georgia. Participants were predominantly Black (N = 139, 72%), female (N = 150, 77%), and relatively non-traditional in age ( $\bar{x}$  = 25.55, Mdn = 22.00, SD = 8.94) ranging from 18 to 70 years old. The participants self-identified as being southern (N = 177, 91%). Participants were also asked to report their political orientation on a 7-point scale (1 = Very Conservative, 4 = Moderate, 7 = Very Liberal) as well as to report their political party affiliation (Democrat: 75%, Republican: 11%, Libertarian: 9%, Green: 1%, Tea: 1%, Other: 4%).

## Measures

**Social Dominance Orientation Scale (SDOS).** The SDOS (Pratto et al., 1994) is a 16-item scale designed to measure individual differences in preferences for group inequality and maintaining a social hierarchy between groups. Ratings were made on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree). For the purpose of this study, instructions were modified which directed participants to complete the scale based on their beliefs “at this moment” rather than their beliefs “in general”.

While the SDOS historically has been utilized to generate a unidimensional summary score, recent advances support that two distinct subdimensions of social dominance orientation (SDO) exists (Ho et al., 2012). One subdimension, or subscale, reflects support for group-based *dominance* hierarchies (e.g., “Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups”, “It’s probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom”), the other reflecting opposition to group-based *equality* (e.g., “We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups”, “Increased social equality is beneficial to society”).

The SDOS has a high internal reliability, Cronbach’s  $\alpha^1$  (alpha), = .83 (Pratto et al, 1994). Research regarding the SDOS noted a moderate correlation ( $r = .38$ ) between conservatives and social dominance orientation (SDO). Higher scores on the SDOS also correlated with variables such as nationalism, patriotism and cultural elitism.

**Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (SEE).** The SEE is a 31-item self-report instrument built on definitions and discussions supporting the notion of empathy pertaining to various ethnic and racial backgrounds other than one’s own (Wang et al, 2003). Ratings were made on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 6 = Strongly Agree). Again, this measure was adapted to direct participants to complete the scale based on their beliefs “at this moment” rather than their beliefs “in general”.

The SEE is comprised of four subscales; a 4-item *Empathic Awareness* subscale, measures participants’ knowledge regarding racial and ethnic group’s unique experiences for people different from oneself (e.g., “I am aware of how society differentially treats racial and ethnic groups other than my own”, “I recognize that the media often portrays people based on racial or ethnic stereotypes”), a 15-item *Empathic Feeling and Expression* subscale measures participant’s recognition of discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes in addition to unique emotional and affective responses for people different from oneself (e.g., “When other people struggle with racial or ethnic oppression, I share their frustration”, “I express my concern about discrimination to people from other racial

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<sup>1</sup> Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  (alpha) is an estimate of reliability (consistency of measure) of a psychometric test (Cho, 2016).

or ethnic groups”), a 7-item *Empathic Perspective Taking* subscale measures participants’ ability to understand other groups unique experiences and emotions different from one’s own (e.g., “It is easy for me to understand what it would feel like to be a person of another racial or ethnic background other than my own”, “It is difficult for me to relate to stories in which people talk about racial or ethnic discrimination they experience in their day-to-day lives”-reverse scored), and a 5-item *Acceptance of Cultural Differences* subscale measures participants’ ability to embrace traditions celebrated by groups different from one’s own (e.g., “I feel annoyed when people do not speak standard English” -reverse scored, “I do not understand why people want to keep their indigenous racial or ethnic cultural traditions instead of trying to fit into the mainstream”-reverse scored).

Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  in two studies indicated internal consistency for the SEE ( $\alpha = .91$  in both studies) as well as each of the four subscales: Empathic Feelings & Expression ( $\alpha = .90$ ;  $\alpha = .89$ ), Empathic Perspective Taking ( $\alpha = .79$ ;  $\alpha = .75$ ), Acceptance of Cultural Differences ( $\alpha = .71$ ;  $\alpha = .73$ ), and Empathic Awareness ( $\alpha = .74$ ;  $\alpha = .76$ ). A test-retest reliability analysis indicated the total scale and four subscales are stable over time with overall reliability of ( $r = .76$ ), Empathic Feelings & Expression ( $r = .76$ ), Empathic Perspective Taking ( $r = .75$ ), Acceptance of Cultural Differences ( $r = .86$ ), and Empathic Awareness ( $r = .64$ ) (Wang et al., 2003).

## Procedure

A research team comprising of faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students recruited students from predominately undergraduate psychology courses. Researchers read from a script explaining to participants that the nature of the study was a “memory recall task”. The participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, which included either the neutral/control stimulus exposure (i.e. Olympic flag) or the experimental stimulus exposure (i.e. Confederate flag).

Participants were asked to carefully observe the picture for 30 seconds and then immediately asked to recall as many items as possible from the picture. A standardized photograph of a break room was projected in the classroom. In an effort to maximize its ecological validity, the investigators sought to portray a naturalistic setting upon which an individual may encounter in their day-to-day experience. The picture reflected a longshot of the room without any persons present so as to not contaminate the exposure to the flag stimulus by any associations with particular individuals. A diverse set of stimuli were depicted in the field of vision, including a wall mounted television and a fire extinguisher, plants, and a round table with chairs that clearly was being utilized, having many books, drinks, pens, and two laptop computers openly displayed upon the table. The screen on one of the laptops was set to the google search homepage while the content on the other laptop served as the experimental manipulation, with the full

screen depicting either a Confederate flag (N = 93) or the Olympic flag (N = 101) depending upon which experimental condition participants were assigned. All other stimuli in the photos for both the experimental and control situations were identical except for the flag. Efforts were made to strike a balance between assuring that the flag image was salient to participants (i.e., would likely be observed) and not being blatant in placing it in a location that might arouse suspicion that the flag stimulus was the content of interest to the investigators. Following the memory recall task, participants completed the remainder of their packet which included the SDOS and the SEE.

## Results

As indicated in Table 1, summary scores, standard deviations, and Cronbach's  $\alpha^2$  were computed for each of the dependent variable subscale scores (i.e., SDO and EE) and for the political beliefs variables (i.e., 1 = very conservative; 7 = very liberal). Political beliefs scores indicated that the sample scored close to the "moderate" response option of 4 on the 7-point scale ( $\bar{x} = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ). Likewise, both the median and mode for the sample was a 4.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability<sup>3</sup> of Study Variables

Variable	# Items	Scale	Sum	SD	$\alpha$
Political Beliefs	1	1-7	4.36	1.29	
Social Dominance Orientation					
Equality	8	1-7	49.15	7.37	.88
Dominance	8	1-7	20.24	9.70	.83
Ethnocultural Empathy					
Awareness	4	1-6	19.92	3.48	.79
Feeling and Expression	15	1-6	68.81	11.15	.88
Perspective Taking	7	1-6	30.23	5.19	.60
Acceptance of Cultural Differences	5	1-6	24.61	4.16	.72

*Note.* Political Orientation (1 = Very Conservative; 7 = Very Liberal)

<sup>2</sup> Cronbach's  $\alpha$  is reported to demonstrate reliability of the measure of the dependent variables subscales.



A series of hierarchical regression models were conducted to test the main effects of hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 that political beliefs would moderate the relationship between flag condition exposure (Confederate or Olympic flag) and the dependent variables of SDO and EE subscale scores. For each respective analysis, step 1 of the model examined the flag condition as a dummy coded variable (Confederate = 0, Olympic = 1), political beliefs (standardized z-score), as well as a set of control variables that included age (standardized z-score), gender (dummy coded as Male = 0, Female = 1), race (dummy coded as Not Black = 0, Black = 1), and region. Step 2 of the model also included the interaction term between the previously described flag condition and political beliefs scores. Whenever a significant or marginally significant interaction emerged, figures were presented to depict the interaction at high or low politically liberal beliefs based on predicted values computed as being  $\pm 1$  standard deviation value from the mean.

### Social Dominance Orientation Results

The SDO subscales scores of dominance and equality were examined separately. The corresponding standardized regression coefficients along with the explained variance for the respective models are displayed in Table 2.

Equality subscale scores. The step 1 model predicting equality subscale scores indicated that the overall model was significant  $F(6,187) = 4.00, p < .01, R^2 = .11$ . Politically liberal beliefs ( $\beta = .17$ ) and being Black ( $\beta = .18$ ) emerged as significant predictors ( $p < .05$ ), and gender-being female emerged as a marginally significant predictor ( $\beta = .12, p < .10$ ). The step 2 overall model was also significant  $F(7,186) = 4.04, p < .01, R^2 = .13$ , and indicated that politically liberal beliefs ( $\beta = .30$ ), being Black ( $\beta = .17$ ), as well as gender-being female ( $\beta = .15$ ) emerged as significant predictors ( $p < .05$ ), in addition to region emerging as a marginally significant predictor ( $\beta = .12, p < .10$ ).

Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Social Dominance Orientation Subscale Variables

Model	Equality		Dominance	
	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\beta$	$R^2$
Step 1		.114		.062
Condition	.08		.03	
Political Beliefs (PB)	.17*		-.08	
Age	.07		-.23**	
Gender	.12†		-.04	
Race	.18*		.03	
Region	.09		.01	
Step 2		.132		.063
Condition	.08		.03	
Political Beliefs	.30**		-.10	
Age	.09		-.23**	
Gender	.15*		-.05	
Race	.17*		.03	
Region	.12†		.00	
Condition X PB	-.20*		.03	

Notes: \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ , † $p < .10$

Political Beliefs: Higher scores reflect more liberal political orientations

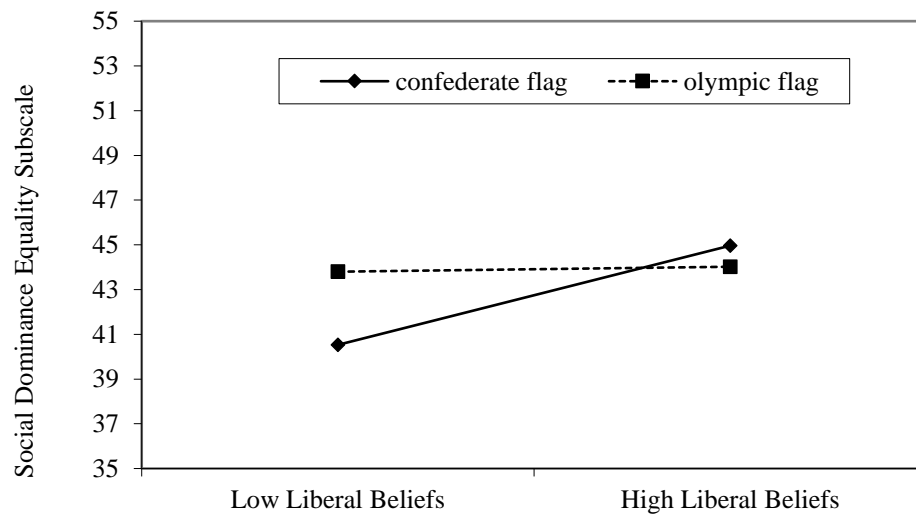
Gender (Male = 0, Female = 1)

Race (Not Black = 0, Black = 1)

The interaction term between flag condition and political beliefs also emerged as a significant predictor ( $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Figure 1 depicts the interaction, revealing that the differences primarily resided among those more conservative (low liberal belief) having reported relatively more opposition to group equality when they were exposed to the Confederate rather than Olympic flag.

Dominance subscale scores. Neither the step 1 overall model  $F(6, 187) = 2.07$ ,  $p = .06$ , nor the step 2 overall model  $F(7, 186) = 1.78$ ,  $p = .09$  predicted differences in SDO dominance subscale scores were statistically significant. Consequently, they are not further reported on.

Figure 1. Interaction between Flag Condition and Political Beliefs Predicting Social Dominance Equality Subscale Scores



### Ethnocultural Empathy Results

Empathic awareness subscale scores. A comparable set of hierarchical regression models were conducted on each of the EE subscale scores. The corresponding standardized regression coefficients and explained variance for the respective models are reported in Table 3. The step 1 model predicting empathic awareness *equality* subscale scores indicated that the overall model was marginally significant  $F(6,187) = 1.89, p < .09, R^2 = .057$ . Politically liberal beliefs ( $\beta = .14$ ),  $p < .07$ , emerged as marginally significant predictors whereas being Black ( $\beta = .16$ ) emerged as significant predictors ( $p < .05$ ). Politically liberal beliefs ( $\beta = .29$ ) and being Black ( $\beta = .15$ ), emerged as significant predictors ( $p < .05$ ) in the step 2 overall model  $F(7,186) = 2.332, p < .05, R^2 = .081$ .

Table 3: Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Ethnocultural Empathy Variables

Model	Empathic Awareness		Empathic Feeling Expression		Perspective Taking		Accepting Cultural Differences	
	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\beta$	$R^2$
Step 1		.057		.074		.101		.011
Condition	-.08		.07		.01		.05	
Political Beliefs	.14†		.17*		.19*		.05	
Age	.03		.10		.20*		-.05	
Gender	.01		.11		-.05		.01	
Race	.16*		.01		-.01		.01	
Region	.05		.11		.11		.05	
Step 2		.081		.099		.115		.011
Condition	-.08		.07		.01		.05	
Political Beliefs	.29**		.33**		.31**		.06	
Age	.05		.12		.21**		-.05	
Gender	.05		.15*		-.02		.01	
Race	.15*		-.00		-.02		.01	
Region	.08		.14*		.14†		.05	
Condition X PB	-.22*		-.23*		-.17†		-.01	

Notes: \*\* $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ , †  $p < .10$

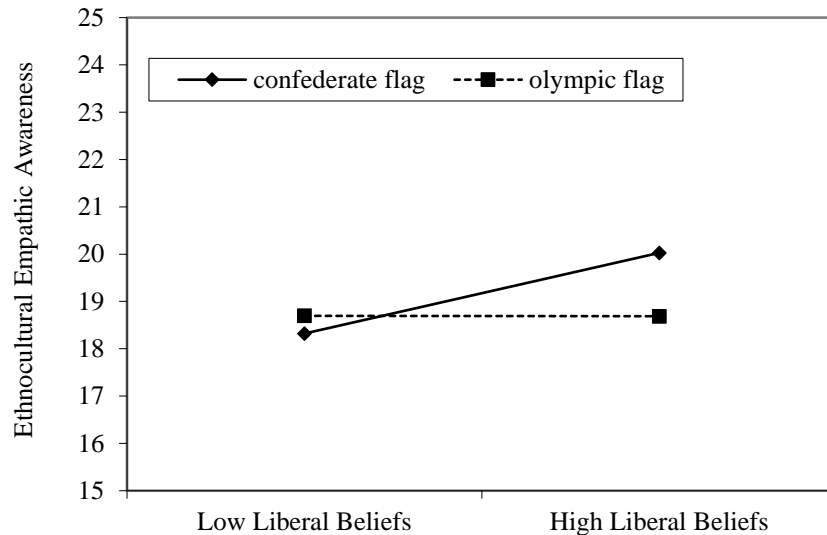
Political Beliefs: Higher scores reflect more liberal political orientations

Gender (Male = 0, Female = 1)

Race (Not Black = 0, Black = 1)

The interaction term between flag condition and political beliefs also emerged as a significant predictor ( $\beta = -.22, p < .05$ ). Figure 2 depicts the interaction, revealing that the differences primarily resided among those with more liberally inclined political beliefs (high liberal belief), having reported relatively more empathic awareness when they were exposed to the Confederate rather than Olympic flag.

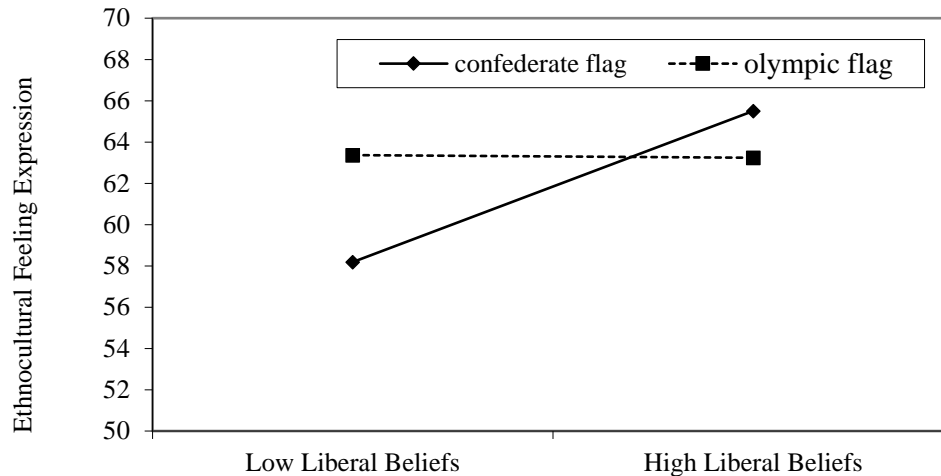
Figure 2. Interaction between Flag Condition and Political Beliefs Predicting Empathic Awareness Subscale Scores



Empathic feeling and expression subscale scores. When examining empathic feeling expression subscale scores, the step 1 model indicated that the overall model was statistically significant  $F(6,187) = 2.50, p < .05, R^2 = .074$ , and only politically liberal beliefs ( $\beta = .17$ ) emerged as a significant predictor ( $p < .05$ ). The step 2 overall model was statistically significant  $F(7,186) = 2.927, p < .05, R^2 = .099$ . Political beliefs ( $\beta = .33$ ), and gender ( $\beta = .15$ ) emerged as significant predictors ( $p < .05$ ), indicating that women and identifying with more liberal political ideology were associated with more empathic feeling expression.

The interaction term between flag condition and political beliefs also emerged as a significant predictor ( $\beta = -.23, p < .05$ ). Figure 3 depicts the interaction, revealing that the differences were more pronounced among conservatively (low liberal belief) minded individuals who reported lower feeling expression when they were exposed to the Confederate rather than Olympic flag. Despite the slopes among liberals being less pronounced, empathic feeling expression was higher when those with high liberal beliefs were exposed to the Confederate rather than the Olympic flag.

Figure 3. Interaction between Flag Condition and Political Beliefs Predicting Empathic Feeling Expression Subscale Scores

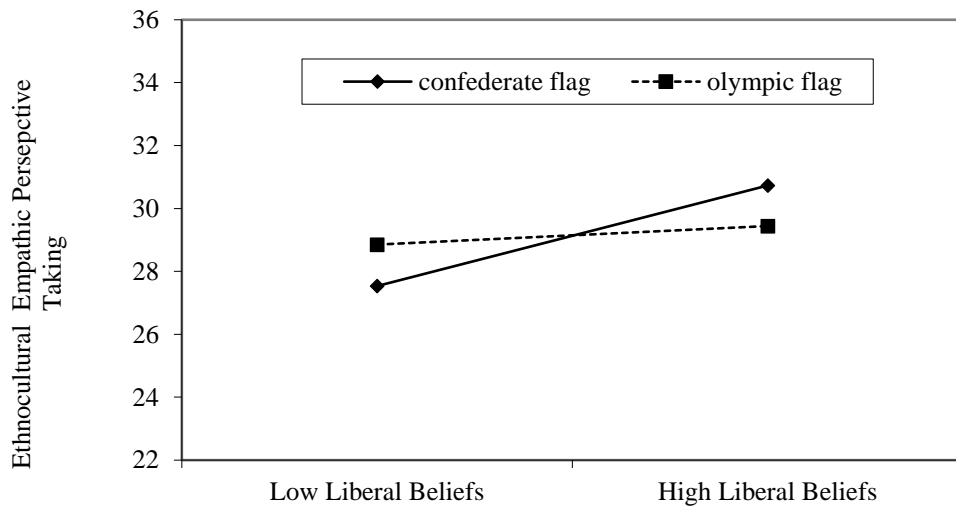


Empathic perspective taking subscale scores. When examining empathic perspective taking subscale scores, the step 1 model indicated that the overall model was statistically significant  $F(6,187) = 3.48, p < .01, R^2 = .101$ , and only politically liberal beliefs ( $\beta = .19$ ) and age ( $\beta = .20$ ) emerged as significant predictors ( $p < .01$ ). The step 2 overall model was also statistically significant  $F(7,186) = 3.44, p < .01, R^2 = .115$ . Political beliefs ( $\beta = .31$ ), and age ( $\beta = .21$ ) again emerged as the only statistically significant predictors ( $p < .01$ ), indicating that older participants and those having more politically liberal beliefs were associated with more empathic perspective taking. The interaction term between the flag condition and political beliefs emerged as a marginally significant predictor ( $\beta = -.17, p < .09$ ).

Figure 4 depicts the crossover styled interaction. The pattern indicates that when exposed to the Olympic flag, conservatives (low liberal belief) or liberals (high liberal belief) were not particularly distinguishable in their empathic perspective taking scores. However, when participants were exposed to the Confederate flag those with conservative oriented beliefs reported less empathic perspective taking while those with liberal beliefs reported more empathic perspective taking tendencies.

Cultural differences subscale scores. Neither the step 1 overall model  $F(6, 185) = 0.34, p > .05, R^2 = .011$ , nor the step 2 overall model  $F(7, 184) = 0.29, p > .05, R^2 = .011$  predicting differences in the acceptance of cultural differences subscale scores were statistically significant.

Figure 4. Interaction between Flag Condition and Political Beliefs Predicting Empathic Perspective Taking Subscale Scores



## Discussion

The hypotheses under investigation in this study included two main effects hypotheses, Hypothesis 1 for differences based on the flag exposure condition (Confederate vs. Olympic Flag), and Hypothesis 2 for differences based on political orientation. The interaction effect hypothesis, Hypothesis 3, investigated whether the experimental (i.e., Confederate stimulus) or control group (i.e., Olympic stimulus) accounted for changes in SDO and EE scores based on the participants' political beliefs.

### Main Effects Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 was not supported. There were no significant main effects for the flag priming condition for any of the outcomes. This suggests that the flag priming by itself did not alter participants' endorsed levels of SDO and EE.

In respect to Hypothesis 2, a variety of main effects for political orientation emerged that significantly predicted state-based SDO and EE scores. As depicted in Table 2, participants with more liberal oriented political orientations endorsed greater *group equality* SDO subscale scores and EE scores on three out of the four EE subscales- *empathic feeling expression*, *empathic perspective taking* and *empathic awareness* subscale scores (Table 3). Notably, political beliefs emerged as the most robust individual predictor variable examined and such findings

occurred even when statistically controlling for the flag priming conditions, the interaction between experimental condition and political beliefs, as well as multiple characteristics of the participants themselves, such as their age, gender, race, and region affiliation. Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that unlike the flag priming conditions, variability in political beliefs meaningfully distinguished various feelings regarding in-group/out-group differences.

Hence, political ideology appears to reflect a pervasive state of mind in people that has implications for their immediate feelings of empathy and equitable treatment for out-group members. This may explain how in the 2016 Republican Presidential Primary and Presidential Election, then candidate/nominee Trump, while espousing conservative ideology, refused to denounce known Klansman, and Confederate flag enthusiast, David Duke. Likewise, the link in the current study's findings between more conservatively held political beliefs with less endorsement of group equality (i.e., SDO subscale) and ethnocultural empathy may help to explain the lack of support for policies that perceived out-group members may directly benefit from, such as restricting immigration opportunities to non-U.S. citizens.

### Interaction Hypothesis

These findings also largely support the interaction hypothesis put forth, which highlight the combined effect of peoples' political beliefs and their particular flag priming condition. Specifically, significant interaction effects emerged for SDO *equality* subscale scores and the EE subscale scores of *empathic awareness* and *empathic feeling and expression* (with a marginally significant effect for the *empathic perspective taking* subscale scores). The graphical depictions of these significant interaction effects reveal some important trends.

The largest polarization (i.e., most extreme responses) between SDO and EE scores always occurred between participants who had been exposed to the Confederate flag as opposed to the Olympic flag. More specifically when exposed to the Confederate flag, the greatest endorsement of SDO *equality* subscale scores (Figure 1), *empathic awareness* (Figure 2), *empathic feeling expression* (Figure 3), and *empathic perspective taking* (Figure 4) (marginally significant) subscale scores occurred among liberals versus the least endorsement of these respective scores occurred among conservatives. Comparatively such disparities were less pronounced when participants were exposed to the Olympic flag. Hence, the Olympic flag condition appears to serve as a meaningful comparison group (i.e., "control group") to better understand the relative polarizing responses reported by participants in the Confederate flag condition. More specifically, relative to their respective "baseline" responses (i.e. Olympic flag) when exposed to the Confederate flag, conservatives were more apt to disavow SDO equality and EE whereas liberals were more apt to endorse SDO equality and EE.



These interaction effects suggest that conservatives and liberals respond differentially when they are exposed to the Confederate flag. However, being that the main effect for political orientation also emerged whenever significant interaction effects had, it further suggests that relative to liberals, conservatives generally have less acceptance of group equality (SDO) and less empathy for out-groups (at least regarding being aware of instances of discrimination and expressing empathy for others who are discriminated against), and such tendencies are even stronger when they are exposed to the Confederate flag. The implications of such findings may have important political implications especially when considering out-groups who are minority groups. For example, while conservatives may generally be less inclined to express empathy for disparate treatment faced by minority out-groups (i.e., empathic feeling expression) than liberals are, when a symbol like the Confederate flag is activated conservatives seem to shift further away from expressing empathy while liberals shift more towards empathy. Likely, liberals' perceptions of the Confederate flag as being a racist symbol engenders deeper feelings of empathic expression. Notably, conservatives typically profess that the Confederate flag is more about the preservation of heritage than racism (often even challenging the assertion that the racism symbolism is warranted), yet the pattern that emerged on the outcome of SDO equality scores demonstrates that when exposed to the Confederate flag conservatives were quite simply less oriented toward identifying with the value of group equality being achieved. Whether such shifts are consciously experienced is beyond the scope of the current investigation, however the findings nonetheless reveal that political mindsets matter in and of themselves and that such mindsets also may have important implications for the meaning ascribed to a symbol like the Confederate flag. Moreover, while common sense might suggest that different meaning ascribed to the Confederate flag may be primarily about people's race and the perspectives that different experiences and socialization may confer upon peoples' worldviews, it is noteworthy that in the current study political beliefs was by far the most robust individual predictor variable.

## Implications

In support of such conclusions, consider the findings from two recent public opinion polls that indicate that feelings regarding Confederate symbols differ more substantially along the lines of political orientation than on racial categorizations. Specifically, an NPR/PBS News Hour/Marist Poll (Montanaro, 2017) found that when asked about statues honoring leaders of the Confederacy, 31% of self-identified liberal or very-liberal individuals vs. 81% of conservative or very conservative individuals endorsed that the statues should “remain as a historical symbol.”

However, relatively less disparities existed along racial categorizations (44% of African Americans vs. 65% of Latino, vs. 67% of White individuals). Likewise, a complementary pattern was found in a Quinnipiac University Poll (August 2017) where the number of persons who expressed their support for “removing Confederate statues from public spaces around the country” were more split along political party lines (65% of Democrats vs. 9% of Republicans) than along racial group categorizations (67% of Black vs. 47% of Hispanic vs. 33% of White individuals).

The current study seems particularly timely with respect to resurging social issues pertaining to symbols of the Confederacy (i.e., Confederate flags and monuments), which have often elicited polarizing debate as to whether such symbols are inherently markers of “heritage” or of “hate”. Such viewpoints are generally divided along the lines of people’s political orientation and public policy decisions regarding Confederate symbols are likely to continue as recent estimates indicate that there are still over 700 monuments in existence throughout the United States (Casteel & Barry-Jester, 2017). The potency of such symbols is evident in recent events like that of Charlottesville, Virginia, when an alt-right rally organized over protesting the intended removal of a Robert E. Lee Confederate monument saw brutal clashes between the protestors and counter-protestors that included a White Supremacist ramming his car through counter-protestors and killing a civil rights activist named Heather Heyer. Confederate flags were waved by protestors whose chants included, “You will not replace us!” and “Jews will not replace us!” Whether such sentiments reflect recent trends about historically majority “in-groups” (e.g., White, Christian individuals) feeling being replaced by “out-groups” (e.g., historically marginalized racial or religious minority groups), or if they reflect enduring nativist sensibilities that have persisted since the first immigrant populations arrived in The United States, the sentiments nonetheless underscore the notion that people’s political orientation has important implications for people’s perceptions and motivations regarding group differences, their understanding of who qualifies for in-group and out-group membership, and for the meaning ascribed to symbols of the Confederacy.

The current study suggests that polarization over public policy for Confederate symbols will likely continue because people’s political ideology in and of itself involves differing perceptions and feelings about reconciling group differences with others (e.g., whether group divisions are perceived as being natural and acceptable, or whether one should empathize with others). Differences along political ideology lines involve general inclinations towards constructs like SDO and EE and such inclinations may be magnified by exposure to a symbol such as the Confederate flag, thereby compelling individuals toward particular stances on pressing contemporary social issues such as favoring group equality or retaining existing inequities (i.e., in-group versus out-group mentality), acceptance or

rejection of a pluralistic/multicultural society, and whether historically vulnerable and marginalized demographic groups have legitimate or illegitimate concerns over addressing past injustices. Presumably such magnification occurs because the implicit meaning of the Confederate flag appears to be in accordance with key differences in people's political orientation. Napier and Jost (2008) have proposed that a hallmark of conservative compared to liberal ideology is a heightened tendency toward system justifying beliefs that involve accepting and justifying/rationalizing the existence of unequal outcomes across groups amid the perception that such inequities are fair and legitimate. As would appear to be the case in the current study, priming conservatives with the Confederate flag may spontaneously activate convictions pertaining to the perceived fairness and legitimacy of "the heritage notion", of a social order in which systemic group advantages and disadvantages are perhaps deemed to be relatively natural and just, and consequently this schema may serve to reaffirm sentiments like those expressed in the social dominance orientation construct ("This country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are"). By contrast, perhaps priming liberals with the Confederate flag activates schematic perspectives and feelings associated with the notion that the past social system was unjust and unfair, and the enduring persistence of the flag serves as a reminder that the present system is still fraught with the scourge of hate and racism- thereby magnifying concerns over group inequities and empathy towards out-groups.

## Conclusion

Overall, this study sought to uncover the link between the image of the Confederate and Olympic flag, social dominance orientation (SDO), ethnocultural empathy (EE) and political ideological. It also brought to light the potential ill effects that information shortcuts have on individual's ideology as well as quite possibly their vote choice.

Three hypotheses were tested in this study. The first hypothesis found there was not a significant main effect difference between exposure to the confederate flag and participant levels of SDO or EE. The second hypothesis indicated a significant main effect between political orientation and SDO, with liberals expressing higher endorsement of group equality than conservatives (low liberal beliefs). Liberals also expressed higher levels of EE on the empathic feeling expression, empathic perspective taking, and empathic awareness subscales. Finally, the third hypothesis found multiple significant effects. More specifically, conservatives (low liberal beliefs) exposed to the Confederate flag reported significantly lower levels of SDO equity subscale scores than liberals exposed to the Olympic flag. In addition, liberals exposed to the Confederate flag reported higher EE empathic awareness subscale scores than liberals exposed to the Olympic

flag. Conservatives exposed to the Olympic flag reported higher EE empathic feeling expression subscale scores than conservatives exposed to the Confederate flag, while liberals exposed to the Confederate flag reported higher scores on the same scale than liberals exposed to the Olympic flag. Finally, although marginal differences were found between EE empathic perspective taking subscale scores and flag exposure for conservatives and liberals, conservatives exposed to the Olympic flag reported slightly higher subscale scores than liberals exposed to the Confederate flag. Thus, the current study lends support for the contention that exposure to the Confederate flag induces conservatives and liberals toward adopting comparatively more polarizing attitudes and inclinations that reify their extant worldviews.

Although this study resulted in some significant and valuable findings, there were also some limitations. The demographic background of participants reflected the overall student population at the institution where the research was conducted. Further studies would benefit from a larger and more diverse sample size to include additional males and representation of individuals from other racial and ethnic groups. However, it is interesting to note that the present pattern of findings emerged despite the sample being predominantly comprised of Black participants and emerged even when race and other variables were controlled. As such, it may help to disentangle potential confounds between race and political ideology that may arise in more traditionally predominantly White samples.

Future research would likely benefit from examining people's political orientation in addition to their race. The sample composition in the current study further supports the contention that the differences found between people of varying political orientations are likely to exist on ideological grounds that are not reducible to just participants' race and Confederate flag exposure. Thus, while prior studies have largely chronicled the effects of Confederate flag exposure on mostly White participants (e.g., Ehrlinger et al. 2011), or have even focused exclusively on White samples in predicting what factors (e.g., racial prejudice) underscore support for the Confederate flag (e.g., Strother, Piston, & Ogorzalek, 2017), the current work demonstrates that even among a predominantly Black sample, exposure to the Confederate flag has differential effects on people's beliefs and feelings concerning in-groups/out-groups depending upon their political orientations.

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