Intergroup helping during the coronavirus crisis:

effects of group identification, ingroup blame and 3rd party outgroup blame

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the link to data/materials is provided in the manuscript.

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Abstract

Two studies tested predictors of helping across national boundaries. British participants reported blame attributions for the coronavirus crisis, either to the British government (ingroup blame), or to the Chinese government (3rd party outgroup blame), and it was tested whether this was associated with intentions to donate money to help outgroup members suffering from effects of the coronavirus crisis in the world's poorer countries. It was hypothesized that strength of identification with the national ingroup would be negatively associated with blame attributions to the ingroup, and that it would be positively associated with blame attributions to a third party outgroup. Blame attributions were predicted in turn to be related to outgroup helping, with ingroup blame being positively associated with helping intentions, and 3rd party outgroup blame being negatively associated with helping intentions. Support for these predictions were found in one exploratory (N = 100) and one confirmatory (N = 250) study.

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The fallout from the COVID-19 crisis will be immense, both in terms of human suffering and economic losses. Governments, companies, and citizens are under enormous financial pressure. But, so are many development aid and disaster relief charities. Many of these have launched urgent appeals for donations to fund the COVID-19 response, for example the Red Cross, Oxfam, and Save the Children. This contribution will harness insights from the social psychology on intergroup helping to test predictions about when help, in the form of donations to those suffering from the impacts of the coronavirus crisis in the world's poorer regions, will be forthcoming. Who is likely to feel motivated to help others in far-away places, and how do group memberships and attributions of blame affect helping decisions? Predictors of British nationals' donation intentions to outgroup victims in badly impacted poor regions will be assessed. It is hypothesized that identification with the national ingroup will be negatively associated with desire to blame the ingroup for existing problems, and that it will be positively associated with desire to blame 3rd party outgroups. Ingroup blame in turn is predicted to be positively associated with willingness to help outgroup members, and 3rd party outgroup blame is predicted to be negatively associated with willingness to help outgroup members (see Figure 1). In this investigation, the participants' psychologically relevant ingroup were British nationals, the outgroup members participants reported to want to help (or not) were those suffering from the coronavirus in globally resource poor areas such as Syria and sub-saharan Africa, and the 3rd party outgroup potentially blamed for the problem were the Chinese.

Ingroup identification and ingroup and outgroup helping. Times of crisis often inspire selfless acts (Solnit, 2010). However, decisions to help others (or not) are affected by social

and group identities (Stuermer & Snyder, 2010; van Leeuwen & Zagefka, 2017). Assistance is more readily offered to those who are perceive to be fellow ingroup members than to those on the outside (Dovidio, Gaertner, Shnabel, Saguy, & Johnson, 2010; Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005; Levine & Manning, 2013). For example, in a study predicting help for outgroup victims of an earthquake in Italy, Vezzali, Cadamuro, Versari, Giovannini and Trifiletti (2015) found that when outgroup members are included in a common ingroup, this increases prosociality towards them. One reason for the preference to help ingroup over outgroup members is that empathy, a main emotional driver of helping responses, is more easily triggered when the person in need is an ingroup member (Bloom, 2017; Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011; Maner & Gailliot, 2007).

Nonetheless, people do sometimes help members of social outgroups (Sierksma, Thijs, & Verkuyten, 2015; Stürmer, Snyder, Kropp, & Siem, 2006). Those prosocial acts towards outgroup members are typically driven somewhat less by empathy and more by other factors, such as a desire to improve the ingroup's image (Hopkins et al., 2007; Kardos, Leidner, Castano & Lickel, 2019), a desire to assert the ingroup's superiority (Nadler, Harpaz-Gorodeisky, & Ben-David, 2009; van Leeuwen, 2007), or the perceived attractiveness of the help seeker (Stürmer, Snyder, & Omoto, 2005).

An important question is what psychological processes might drive intergroup helping offered to national outgroup members and residents of the world's poorer regions, in the context of the coronavirus crisis. While it is well documented that strong ingroup identification increases willingness to help ingroup members (e.g., van Leeuwen & Zagefka, 2017), the effects of ingroup identification on willingness to help *outgroup* members is less well understood. This research will test whether ingroup identification might have an indirect negative effect on willingness to help outgroup members, mediated by blame attributions to the ingroup and 3rd party outgroups.

Ingroup identification and ingroup and 3ʳᵈ party outgroup blame. Blame attributions can be expected to be impacted by strength of group identification. People draw a sense of positive self-esteem from their group membership, and they are motivated to see their group in a positive light (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This is particularly true for strong identifiers, and relatedly collective narcissists, who are particularly interested in defending their ingroup's image (Marchlewska et al., 2020). Hence, it can be expected that strength of identification will be negatively related to willingness to acknowledge that the ingroup is to blame for any problems, and that it will be positively related to blaming outgroups. In the present context, strong identification is therefore hypothesized to be negatively associated with ingroup blame for the coronavirus crisis, and to be positively associated with outgroup blame for the coronavirus crisis.

Blame attributions to the ingroup. When reacting to victims of unfortunate events, attributions and beliefs about who caused the problem in the first place strongly impact on behavioural reactions (Weiner, 1980; 1993). People are often psychologically motivated to blame victims for their plight, because this allows for a continued belief that the world is just (Lerner & Miller, 1978). And, victims who are blamed are less likely to be helped (Schmidt & Weiner, 1988; Zagefka, Noor, Brown, Randsley de Moura, & Hopthrow, 2011). Studies have not only investigated the effects of victim blame, however, but also the effects of believing that one's ingroup is to blame for a certain problem. People can feel guilty on behalf of their group if they believe the group is to blame for a wrongdoing (Kardos et al., 2019; Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006), and those emotions too have important behavioural consequences. For example, attributing the cause of a certain problem to the ingroup increases the perceived responsibility of a potential donor to intervene and fix the problem by contributing a monetary donation (James & Zagefka, 2017; see also Warner, Wohl, & Branscombe, 2014). Ingroup culpability implies feelings of guilt, and support for reparative

actions to make good any damages (Kardos et al., 2019; Rothschild, Landau, Molina, Branscombe & Sullivan, 2013). Those previous studies suggest that the more a problem is attributed to the ingroup, the higher the perceived responsibility and moral obligation to rectify the problem will be. In line with this, one might expect in the context of the coronavirus crisis that ingroup blame is positively associated with perceived responsibility for fixing the problem and helping those negatively impacted, even if those in need are outgroup members. This is why in the present context it was hypothesized that blame attributions to the ingroup would be positively associated with desire to help outgroup members suffering from the problem that is perceived to be caused by to the ingroup. In short, the more one (or one's group) is perceived to have caused a problem, the more one will feel obliged to fix it by offering help to those negatively impacted.

Blame attributions to 3rd party outgroups. Interestingly, while much research has investigated the effects of victim blame, and a reasonable amount of research has investigated the effects of blaming the ingroup for a problem, there is barely any reseach investigating the effects of blaming a problem on a third person or group. This is surprising, because after all in many situations there is a third, very plausible explanation for suboptimal states of affairs: it might not be that the victims caused their problem, and it might not be that I or my group caused the problem, but it could be that the issue was caused by a third person, or a third outgroup that neither I nor the victims belong to.

In the case of naïve explanations for the cause of the coronavirus crisis, such third-party attributions might not only be feasible but even likely: a substantial number of people seem to be inclined to blame the pandemic primarily on actions by the Chinese government (https://uk.news.yahoo.com/majority-britons-blame-chinese-coronavirus-160309489.html). At the same time, media reports have made the case that the British government is to blame for failing to manage the crisis effectively, for example as suggested by the Sunday Times on

19 April 2020 (https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/coronavirus-38-days-when-britain-sleepwalked-into-disaster-hq3b9tlgh). The crisis might therefore be blamed, amongst other factors and to varying degrees depending on one's political leaning, on the British government and failings of the ingroup, or on the Chinese government and failings of a 3rd party outgroup. As seen above, it is hypothesized that blaming the ingroup for a problem would have a positive impact on willingness to help outgroup members suffering from the problem. In contrast, willingness to help outgroup members might decrease when a third party, in this case the Chinese government, is blamed for the crisis, because respondends will feel that problems that affect an outgroup and that are caused by yet another outgroup have little to do with them: perceived responsibility to address the problem will be lowered in this case. In some ways, being able to 'point the finger' at others might imply that the ingroup is 'off the hook', and absolved of responsibility for fixing the problem (Rothschild et al., 2013).

Overview of the research. Taken together, then, it is hypothesized that identification will indirectly affect outgroup helping intentions. Identification is expected to be negatively associated with ingroup blame attributions for the coronavirus crisis, and to be positively associated with 3rd party outgroup blame attributions for the crisis. Ingroup blame is then expected to be positively associated with helping intentions towards residents of the world's poorer regions suffering due to the pandemic, and 3rd party outgroup blame is expected to be negatively associated with helping intentions towards outgroup members.

The hypothesized processes are summarised in Figure 1. These processes were tested in the context of effects of identification with the British national ingroup, blame attributions for the COVID-19 crisis to the national ingroup (the British government) and a 3rd party outgroup (the Chinese government), and willingness to help coronavirus sufferers in the world's poorer regions.

Two correlational studies were conducted online in April and May 2020 with participants who self-identified as British nationals. Participants were asked about their degree of national identification, perceptions of blame regarding the coronavirus crisis, and willingness to help members of national outgroups who are negatively impacted by the coronavirus crisis. The coronavirus crisis presents an interesting context for testing widener psychological processes involving the effects of group identity and blame attributions on intergroup helping. Study 1 was exploratory in nature, and Study 2 was confirmatory.

Study 1

Method

Participants

One hundred participants completed the study on the Prolific oneline platform in April 2020 (mean age = 32.43 years; 64 females, 35 males, 1 differently identified). Only participants who had identified themselves as having British nationality participated.

Measures

All measures were assessed with Likert scales (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"). British *ingroup identification* was measured with three items based on Brown et al. (1986): 'It is important to me to be British'; 'I see myself as British'; and 'I am glad to be British', α = .86.

Ingroup blame was measured with six items, preceeded by the question 'In your view, how much is the British government to blame for the coronavirus crisis?' Items were: 'The British government has mishandled the situation'; 'It is the fault of the British government that we are in this mess'; 'The British government is to blame for the current crisis'; 'The British government did not act fast enough', 'The British government is underfunding the NHS'; and 'The British government is not supplying enough protective gear to the NHS', α = .89.

3rd *party outgroup blame* was measured with two items, following the question 'In your view, how much are the Chinese to blame for the coronavirus crisis?': 'It is the fault of the Chinese government that we are in this mess'; and 'The Chinese government is to blame for the current crisis', $\alpha = .88$.

To measure *outgroup helping*, participants were told that 'Coronavirus will be especially hard in poor areas, and for refugees', and they were asked to respond to two items: 'I would be willing to donate money to help Syrian refugees cope with the coronavirus threat', and 'I would be willing to donate money to help poor Africans cope with the coronavirus threat', $\alpha = .94$. Materials and data are available for review on the OSF website: https://osf.io/2epkd/?view_only=1d41569cbfdd4144a6f6e7bc4dd5f39d.

Results and Discussion

Descriptives and bivariate correlations are displayed in Table 1. To test whether ingroup identification would affect outgroup helping indirectly, via ingroup and outgroup blame, a structural equation model was built using AMOS and using observed variables in the model. Standardised path values are displayed in Figure 2.

The model fitted the data well, $\chi^2(2) = 3.90$, *ns*; *CFI* = .95; *RMSEA* = .09; SRMR = .06. Together, identification and the two blame variables explained about 20% of the variance in outgroup helping ($R^2 = .21$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect of identification on helping via the two paths was significant, -.19, $p < .01$, $CI_{lower} = -.11$, $CI_{higher} = -.33$, $p < .01$. Hence, results were in line with the prediction that ingroup identification would indirectly affect outgroup helping, via blame attributions to both the ingroup and outgroup.[1]

Given the relatively low sample size, a post hoc power analysis was conducted, using Preacher's tool on quantpsy.org, for the RMSEA with a given sample size and df, and an alpha level of .05. This indicated that the power of study 1 was 0.72, which falls just short, but not by much, of the conventional ideal of .80.

Next, it seemed prudent to replicate the pattern but with a bigger sample and with preregistering the results (https://osf.io/2epkd/?view_only=1d41569cbfdd4144a6f6e7bc4dd5f39d). Study 2 diverges from the preregistration in one aspect: Due to an oversight, the pre-reg mentions an N of 100 (which is on the small side for SEM with this number of parameters to be estimated). Because correlations have been found to stabilise around $N = 250$ (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013), this was the sample size we aimed for in the replication study. No iterative sampling took place; data was only analysed once the whole sample had been collected.

Study 2

Method

Participants

Two hundred fifty five participants completed the study on the Prolific oneline platform in May 2020 (mean age = 32.72 years; 175 females, 76 males, 4 differently identified or missing responses to this question). Only participants who had identified themselves as having British nationality participated in the study.

Measures

All measures were assessed with the same scales as in study 1 (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"); British *ingroup identification* α = .88; *ingroup blame* α = .87; *3rd party outgroup blame* α = .91; and *outgroup helping* α = .81.

Results and Discussion

Descriptives and bivariate correlations are displayed in Table 1. To test whether ingroup identification would affect outgroup helping indirectly, via ingroup and 3rd party outgroup blame, a structural equation model was built using AMOS, again using observed variables. In addition to the indirect effects, a direct path from identification to outgroup

helping was also included. Standardised path values are displayed in Figure 2 (values not in parentheses).

The model fitted the data well, $\chi^2(1) = 3.35$, ns; $CFI = .98$; $RMSEA = .09$; SRMR = .03. Together, identification and ingroup and outgroup blame explained 14% of the variance in outgroup helping ($R^2 = .14$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect of identification on helping was significant, $= -.09$, $p < .02$, $CI_{lower} = -.04$, $CI_{higher} = -.18$, $p < .02$. Hence, results were in line with the prediction that ingroup identification would indirectly affect outgroup helping, via blame attributions to both the ingroup and a 3rd party outgroup. Note, however, that in contrast to study 1 this time only the path from 3rd party outgroup blame to outgroup helping reached (again) significance, while the path from ingroup blame to outgroup helping was not significant.

Again, a post hoc power analysis was conducted, using Preacher's tool on quantpsy.org, for the RMSEA with a given sample size and df, and an alpha level of .05. This indicated that the power of study 2 was 0.79, i.e. very close to the ideal of 0.80.

General discussion

Overall, results from both studies supported the predictions. Those who were strongly identified with the British national ingroup were less likely to donate to coronavirus sufferers in the world's poor regions, an effect that was mediated by blame attributions to the national ingroup and, importantly, the Chinese government as a 3rd party outgroup.

The present work extends previous theorising in some important ways, and four are particularly worth highlighting. First, it highlights the potential effects of a hitherto neglected type of blame attribution: that to 3rd party outgroups. Previous work has extensively studied the effects of victims being blamed for their own plight (e.g., Lerner & Miller, 1978), and of blaming one's ingroup for a problem (e.g., James & Zagefka, 2017). Hardly any work has considered the effects of blaming a 3rd party outgroup – i.e. a group that is neither the

ingroup, nor the outgroup one might (or not) wish to help. It is hoped that this paper can make a contribution by flagging 3rd party blame as an important avenue for future research. It seems that the availability of a 3rd party scapegoat significantly interferes with willingness to extend help across group boundaries. 3rd party blame attributions have not received a lot of research attention previously (for an exception, see Rothschild et al., 2013), but they clearly have important consequences for helping intentions, as demonstrated by the present results.

Second, by focussing on 3rd party outgroups, this paper follows recent suggestions to move away from simple ingroup-outgroup dichotomies, and to consider the greater complexities of social reality in which often three or more groups, rather than just two, are psychologically relevant (Dixon et al., 2020; Zagefka, 2019). Theoretically, it seems important to move away from the dichotomous question of blaming either the victim or the self/ingroup. Clearly, blame attributions to third parties are also possible, and they appear to have important consequences. The present paper therefore not only contributes by highlighting the importance of 3rd party blame attributions, but more broadly by moving away from binary conceptualizations of intergroup relations and considering more complex triadic constellations.

Third, this paper explores blame attributions through the lens of identity management strategies by exploring their relationship with ingroup identification. Previous research has mainly focussed on the effects of blaming one entity or the other, without paying much attention to where those blame attributions themselves come from. The present findings clearly show blame attributions as a product of identity management processes. In this, they highlight the importance of identity for informating reactions to adversity, and helping decisions in particular.

Fourth, this paper charts the important consequences of blame attributions in a novel naturalistic setting, i.e. that of the coronavirus crisis in 2020. This global pandemic poses

enormous problems not only for individual nations, but for the international community. This manuscript offers some first insights into the psychology of intergroup helping and solidarity, and therefore speak to an important topical issue.

The findings have clear policy relevance. Health professionals have warned about the dangers of 'vaccine nationalism', whereby rich states might monopolise resources more urgently needed in poorer regisions of the world (e.g., https://pharmaboardroom.com/articles/the-wellcome-trusts-jeremy-farrar-speaks-out-against-vaccine-nationalism/#:~:text=The%20Wellcome%20Trust%E2%80%99s%20Jeremy%20Farrar%20Speaks%20Out%20Against,the%20global%20race%20to%20develop%20a%20COVID-19%20vaccine). Insights into how willingness to mitigate the impacts of the coronavirus crisis in other nations can be encouraged are therefore of great practical importance: how can we persuade people to help others across national boundaries overcome this global emergency? The present findings suggest that a perception that other countries are to blame for the crisis have an adverse effect on willingness to help national outgroup members. Politicians blaming the Chinese for the crisis (e.g., https://nypost.com/2020/05/20/trump-blames-chinas-incompetence-for-coronavirus-death-toll/) will therefore not only have inflammatory effects on political relations, but also directly negatively impact on the population's willingness to extend aid towards the world's poorest suffering from the crisis.

Limitations of the research. The present research is not without its limitations. Crucially, the present work did not assess actual donations, but only self-reported willingness to donate, i.e. donation intentions. Although self-reports typically correlate highly with actual donations (e.g., Zagefka et al., 2011), more work would be needed looking at actual behavior before firm conclusions can be drawn. Moreover, both studies are correlational, which means that no inferences about causality are valid. Although the associations that were observed are

compatible with the directional hypotheses that were proposed, they cannot be understood as conclusive evidence.

Avenues for future research. Several issues can be highlighted as important avenues for future research. First, is is maybe surprising that ingroup and outgroup blame were not correlated, because one might expect that both a driven by a desire to seek accountability in others. Future research could test the boundary conditions of when ingroup and outgroup blame are unrelated or not.

Second, many other variables have of course been shown to affect outgroup helping decisions, for example dehumanisation of outgroup members (Andrighetto, Baldissarri, Lattanzio, Loughnan, & Volpato, 2014; Cuddy, Rock, & Norton, 2007) and social norms (Lay, Zagefka, González, Álvarez, & Valdenegro, 2019; McKeown & Taylor, 2018). The current findings offer a significant addition, in demonstrating the importance of 3rd party blame attributions in informing helping intentions. There is clear scope to study 3rd party blame and several other important predictors in conjunction in the future.

Third, with regards to people in other nations, which were conceptualized as 'outgroup members' in this study in which national identity was salient to participants, it is relevant that shared adversity can lead to a sense of identification with others suffering from the same problems (Drury, Cocking, & Reicher, 2009). Given that coronavirus is a global problem, this could be an opportunity to study new shared group memberships with others who traditionally have always been clear psychological outgroups.

The fourth avenue for future research is to do with an inconsistency in the results of studies 1 and 2. Although the indirect mechanism via 3rd party outgroup blame was highly consistent across both studies, there was variability regarding the effect of ingroup blame on outgroup helping intentions. Although the bivariate correlations between ingroup blame and outgroup helping were positive and significant in both studies, the path coefficient in the

SEM in study 2 did not reach significance. Future research could untangle when a positive effect of ingroup blame on outgroup helping might emerge or not.

One possibility is that there might be some additional, unmeasured variables that moderate the relationship. Given how rapidly evolving and changing the coronavirus crisis is, it is conceivable that public perceptions and ideas about the culpability of the British government and its meaning might have changed significantly between April and May 2020. Study 1 was conducted in April 2020 at the absolute peak of the British epidemic, whereas infection rates had comparatively eased off in May 2020. It is possible that differences in perceived urgency of the problem might have affected the link between ingroup blame and outgroup help. Future research could test this.

Another possibility is that the variation is due to the complexities of identification and disidentification with the British government. In this study, ingroup blame was measured by asking British participants about perceived blame of the British government. We would expect that most people feel a degree of ownership of and investment in the government of their country – British nationals are likely to be more proud of, or ashamed of, actions of their government than the actions of other countries' governments, precisely because it is the government of, for, and by the ingroup. Having said this, it is also undoubtedly true that identification with any government will vary significantly according to political leanings, and that in some contexts some British nationals might consider the British government as an outgroup not an ingroup. We acknowledge this complication as an important issue that could be considered in future research which also considers political leanings and degree of perceived self-other overlap with the British government.

Nonewithstanding these issues, the present take-away messages can be highlighted as follows: In terms of theory advancement, it was shown that blaming 3rd party outgroups has important consequences for intergroup helping decisions. Research should move away from

considering just ingroup blame and victim blame to consider more complex constellations. In terms of practical implications, those looking to boost donations to coronavirus victims in other countries and especially poor regions would be well advised to deemphasize blame attributions to the Chinese and other third parties, as those provide potential donors with a psychological 'get-out clause' that means that they are less likely to assist outgroup victims in desperate need of help.

Footnotes

1. Study 1 had included a failed manipulation. It had originally been attempted to test the effect of media coverage, by exposing participants (or not) to a real article headline criticising the British coronavirus response. The manipulation check was not significant, and the manipulation did not significantly affect any of the variables measured in the study, which is why the data were subsequently analysed in correlational terms in connection with the present hypothesis.

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Table 1

Bivariate correlations and means for Study 1 (N = 100) and Study 2 (N = 250).

	1. British Identifica-tion	2. Ingroup Blame	3. Outgroup Blame	4. Outgroup Helping
1. British Identifica-tion		-.38 ***	.29 ***	-.31 ***
2. Ingroup Blame	-.37 ***		-.009	.15 *
3. Outgroup Blame	.26 **	.04		-.28 ***
4. Outgroup Helping	-.10	.26 **	-.34 ***	
Study 1				
Means	3.81	3.52	3.54	3.09
SD	1.00	1.03	1.09	1.21
Study 2				
Means	3.84	3.68	3.54	3.09
SD	0.98	0.87	1.11	1.16

Note. $* p < .05$, $** p < .01$, $*** p < .001$. SD = Standard deviation. Correlations for study 1 below the diagonal, correlations for study 2 above the diagonal.

Figure 1. Hypothesized model of blame mediating the effect of ingroup identification on willingness to help outgroup members
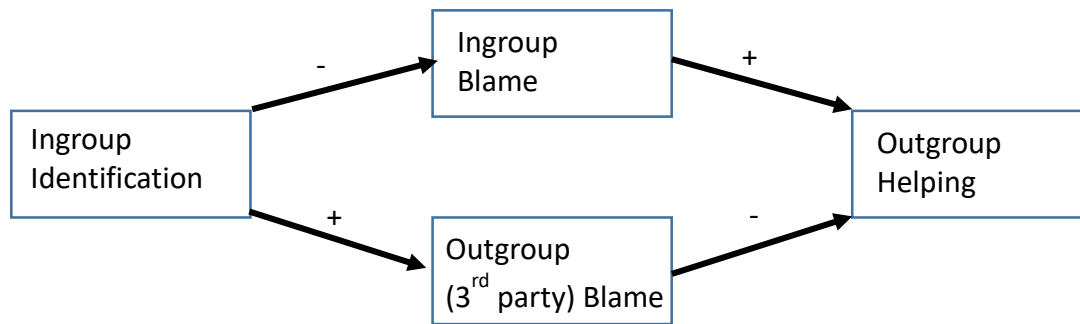
Figure 2. Indirect effect of identification on outgroup helping mediated by blame, standardised path coefficients. Results for Study 1 in parentheses, results for Study 2 outside parentheses. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Study 1 $N = 100$; Study 2 $N = 250$.