Testing the "Black Code": Does Having White Close Friends Elicit Identity Denial and Decreased Empathy from Black Ingroup Members?

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Word count: 4388

Social Psychological and Personality Science (2014)

Abstract

The present experiment examined identity denial and reduced empathy for ingroup (vs. outgroup) targets as a function of the racial composition of their social networks. Black participants rated ingroup (Black) targets as more weakly racially identified and expressed less empathy for ingroup targets with cross-race close friends vs. same-race close friends or no friends. Furthermore, the effect of social network composition on empathy was mediated by perceived racial identity. These findings were limited to the ingroup target. Although the outgroup (White) target was rated as more weakly identified when shown with cross-race close friends vs. same-race close friends or no friends, neither social network composition nor perceived racial identity predicted empathy for the outgroup target. These findings extend previous research on identity denial and suggest that, for Blacks, closely associating with Whites undermines the usually robust pattern of ingroup empathy.

Keywords: Blacks; cross-race friendships; empathy; identity denial; social networks

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Some scholars suggest that there is an unspoken "Black Code" that governs Black Americans' interactions with White Americans: "Relationships with whites *must* be kept at arm's length maintaining a silent us against them mindset. Blacks who appear too friendly and comfortable around whites are viewed with suspicion; their blackness in question. " (Marcus, 2011). Indeed, research suggests that minorities, perhaps even more than majority group members, benefit psychologically from having a clearly defined and positive social identity (Tajfel, 1978) and that one means by which they might achieve an optimally distinct ingroup identity is by distancing themselves from the advantaged outgroup (Brewer, 1993). Would failing to maintain this distance call into question their ingroup identity? In the present research we examine Blacks' perceptions of Blacks' and Whites' racial identity as a function of the racial composition of their social networks. We additionally investigate the intragroup consequences of being perceived as weakly identified, namely decreased empathy for ingroup members in need.

Identity Denial: When Others Decide Who You Are or Are Not

The benefits of having a positive social identity are well documented, perhaps especially for stigmatized minorities. For example, among Blacks, developing racial identity is thought to be an important part of one's personal growth with implications for psychological well-being (e.g., Cross, 1978; Phinney, 1989), and it may also serve as a protective buffer from perceived discrimination (e.g., Ashburn-Nardo, Monteith, Arthur, & Bain, 2007). Indeed, stigmatized minorities often respond to marginalization by majority group members with increased essentialist beliefs that there is some special essence that unites members of their ingroup (Morton & Postmes, 2009).

The same self-categorization processes that give rise to ingroup identity also lead to depersonalized social attraction in which individuals like ingroup members who embody prototypical group characteristics and behaviors (Hogg & Hains, 1996). However, when group members exhibit atypical behaviors and/or traits, they are seen as "black sheep" and are often disliked and even ostracized by fellow ingroup members (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988).

Besides disliking group members who do not embody the group prototype, ingroup members might also question their degree of ingroup identification, a phenomenon called *identity denial* (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). Identity denial occurs when ingroup perceivers deny non-prototypical ingroup targets their status as legitimate ingroup members. That is, they perceive that ingroup targets who do not exemplify the ingroup's characteristics, values, or behaviors are weakly identified with the ingroup, if they identify with it at all.

It is important to note that identity denial can occur regardless of the degree to which the non-prototypical ingroup target actually does identify with the group. For example, American citizens of Asian descent – irrespective of how much they see themselves as American – report being asked offensive questions like, "where are you really from?" by more prototypic (i.e., White) Americans (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). By posing such questions, White Americans are denying Asian Americans their American identity. To date, the experience of identity denial has been documented among Asian Americans (Cheryan & Monin, 2005) and bi- or multi-racial individuals (Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker, 2009), with the research primarily focusing on the consequences of experiencing identity denial, such as feeling angry and offended and disliking the source of the identity denial.

Several lines of research suggest that Black Americans may also be targets of identity denial from ingroup members and with similarly negative consequences. For example, Black

adolescents who were accused by their peers of "acting White" reported increased anxiety (Murray, Neal-Barnett, Demmings, & Stadulis, 2012), and even the fear of such accusations has been linked with academic underachievement among Black students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Identity denial clearly has deleterious consequences, yet little is known about the specific factors that elicit it, particularly for Blacks. The sparse extant literature on identity denial has instead focused on multiracial or multinational individuals, raising the possibility that the experience of identity denial is limited to targets who perhaps are perceived as having to spread their ingroup identity among a number of ingroups. However, in research most germane to the present study, Johnson and Kaiser (2013) found that, for Black perceivers, one signal of ingroup targets' weakened perceived racial identity is wealth. Specifically, Blacks who were portrayed as wealthy were perceived by other Blacks as more weakly racially identified than those who were portrayed as less affluent, suggesting that violating an ingroup stereotype (i.e., poor Blacks) or demographic base rate is one factor that provokes identity denial from ingroup members.

One goal of the present study was to determine whether other contextual factors, namely the race of ingroup targets' close friends, would similarly lead Black perceivers to confer or deny targets racial identity. Previous research suggests that Blacks do attend to and are influenced by information about the racial makeup of others' social networks, but, to date, these "others" have been White outgroup members. Specifically, Wout, Murphy, and Steele (2011) exposed Black and White participants to a White target with a diverse versus an exclusively White social network and led participants to expect a subsequent interaction with the White target. Social network diversity had no bearing on White participants' expectations; they anticipated smooth interactions regardless of the target's friends. However, having same-race versus cross-race friendships did affect Black participants' expectations of the subsequent interaction with the

White target; they expected the White target with cross-race friends to be more inclined to see them positively, which, in turn, reduced their anxiety about the interaction. Self-categorization research would predict that, as stigmatized minorities, Blacks would not react as favorably to ingroup targets with cross-race friends. Instead, they should see Black targets' having a White social network as a failure to maintain optimal group distinctiveness (see Brewer, 1993) and to uphold the valued ingroup identity. They should therefore deny these ingroup members their racial identity and, consistent with research on the black sheep effect (Marques et al., 1988), reject them in some way. Toward that end, a second goal of the present research was to examine a particular way that Blacks might reject ingroup targets for whom they have denied ingroup identity. More specifically, we examined whether identity denial has consequences for perceivers' empathy for the target.

Consequences of Identity Denial for Intragroup Empathy

There is extensive evidence that individuals show high degrees of empathy for ingroup members across a variety of situations (Batson & Ahmad, 2009; Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011; Mathur, Harada, Lipke, & Chiao, 2010; Xu, Zuo, Wang, & Han, 2009). This is perhaps because the feelings of oneness that are so critical to evoking empathic concern for others (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Maner et al., 2002) are experienced for ingroup members (Smith & Henry, 1996; Tropp & Wright, 2001). In contrast, people often have little empathy for racial outgroup members who are in need (see Avenanti, Sirigu, & Aglioti, 2010; Gutsell and Inzlicht, 2010).

Interestingly, Blacks, more than any other racial group, show empathy toward members of their ingroup (Brown, Bradley, & Lang, 2005; Roberts & Levenson, 2006). This typical pattern of empathy towards one's ingroup is based upon the notion that the ingroup is unified and

cohesive and that ingroup members are interchangeable group exemplars (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). However, as we have discussed, people may not necessarily psychologically include all other individuals who belong to their group as bona fide ingroup members. Blacks may see some ingroup members as "less Black" when they have a White social network, and they may in turn be disinclined to feel empathy for them (Johnson & Kaiser, 2013).

Putting it All Together: Overview and Predictions

In the present research, we examined whether Black participants' perception of a Black (vs. White) target's racial identity might be influenced by the racial composition of his social network and whether such perceptions in turn have implications for empathy for the target. Although our primary interest was in *intra*-group perceptions, we included a White target condition for comparison purposes, suspecting that there may be differential reactions to cross-race friendships for ingroup versus outgroup members. To investigate this potential asymmetry, participants viewed the Facebook page of a *Black* or *White* target pictured *alone* (i.e., control condition), with two *Black friends*, or with two *White friends*. Thus, the design was a 2 (race of target: Black vs. White) × 3 (social network composition: Black friends vs. White friends vs. alone). Participants reported their impressions of the target, including perceived racial identity. Then they read details regarding the target's experience of a family tragedy involving the death of his parents and reported the degree to which they felt empathy for the target.

Because it violates the "Black Code" (Marcus, 2011) and threatens the ingroup's optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1993), we predict that having cross-race friends will qualify the typical pattern of ingroup empathy among Blacks. Moreover, we propose that perceived racial identity is the mechanism behind this relationship. That is, Blacks with White close friends will elicit

identity denial (Cheryan & Monin, 2005) and, in turn, less empathy from ingroup members than those who have same-race friends or for whom no social network information is provided.

We would not expect this process to occur similarly for White targets, however. Even if they are seen as weakly racially identified (i.e., "less White") for having Black friends, they may not be viewed as similar enough to the perceiver's ingroup to elicit substantial levels of empathy. Furthermore, because White targets do not share group membership with participants, having cross-race friends is not a social identity threat or violation of a special ingroup "code." In short, the implications of having cross-race friends and therefore being perceived as low in racial identity by Black perceivers should be more damning for Black targets, who have undermined the ingroup's distinct identity.

Method

Participants

Two hundred twelve Black students (63% female) from a historically Black university in the southeast participated for course credit. They were junior and senior psychology majors who ranged from 19-28 years of age.

Procedure

Participants were given an experimental booklet that stated that the researchers were interested in processes associated with impression formation. They were told that they would read three passages and form impressions of individuals discussed in those passages. To reduce demand, the first two passages were irrelevant and focused on a manager's affair with a subordinate and a nurse using drugs.

For the experimental passage, participants were shown the Facebook page of a *Black* male or *White* male named John Harrison. The page were included a profile picture of the target

smiling, his favorite beer, favorite pet, and favorite quote. The last section of the page was titled "Top Friends." Participants saw two W*hite* or two *Black* friends in the pictures. The top friend section was excluded in the *control* (i.e., alone) condition.

Participants responded to four items ($\alpha = .68$) that assessed *perceived racial identity* of John. These items, completed on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1-strongly disagree, 7-strongly agree), were adapted from the importance to identity subscale of Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992) Collective Self-Esteem Scale (e.g., "Being a Black [White] person is an important reflection of who John is").

After all participants completed the experimental booklet, they were told the experimenters were also interested in general responses to "others in need" (adopted from Johnson, Ashburn-Nardo, Spicer, & Dovidio, 2008, Experiment 2). They were given a sheet that stated that the person from the Facebook page had recently experienced a "run of bad luck." The sheet also included a picture of John. Information from the sheet revealed that John was a college student and his parents were recently killed in a car accident, thus leaving him to raise his little brother and little sister. Next, participants reported their feelings of empathy (see Batson 1991; Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002) for John with the following five items ($\alpha = .84$): sympathy, compassion, warmth, soft heartedness, and being moved (on 1-7 Likert-type scales with higher scores indicating stronger agreement). Participants were then debriefed.

Results

After averaging relevant items to create scales of perceived racial identity and empathy, we first wished to determine whether there were main effects or interactions involving target race and race of social network, thereby establishing any direct effects of these variables on our outcomes of interest. Thus, we submitted scores on both perceived racial identity and empathy to

a 2 (race of target: Black, White) × 3 (social network composition: Black friends, White friends, alone) analysis of variance (ANOVA). We also included participant gender as a predictor in our initial analyses. However, the results indicated that there were no main effects or interactions involving participant gender; thus, this variable was not included in any discussion of the results.

Perceived Racial Identity

An ANOVA indicated that there were significant main effects of both target race, $F(1, 206) = 63.02$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .18$, and social network composition, $F(2, 206) = 11.71$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .06$, such that participants perceived White targets ($M = 4.44$) to have stronger racial identity than Black targets ($M = 3.56$), and perceived targets pictured with White social networks ($M = 3.54$) to have weaker racial identity than those pictured alone ($M = 4.24$, $p < .001$) or with a Black social network ($M = 4.06$, $p < .01$). There was also a significant interaction between social network composition and target race, $F(2, 206) = 20.11$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .11$. For White targets, social network influenced perceived racial identity, albeit weakly, $F(2, 90) = 4.64$, $p < .02$, $\omega^2 = .03$. As shown in Figure 1, having a Black social network decreased participants' perceptions of the White target's racial identity relative to the control condition (i.e., pictured alone) only ($p < .02$); there were no differences among the other conditions (ps > .11). Social network had a more dramatic effect on perceived racial identity for Black targets, $F(2, 116) = 34.99$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .18$. As Figure 1 illustrates, participants rated Black targets with a White social network significantly lower in perceived racial identity than those pictured alone ($p < .001$) or with a Black social network ($p < .001$). Being pictured alone did not differ from being pictured with Black friends ($p > .44$). Thus, having cross-race friends decreased perceived racial identity for both White and Black targets, but the effect was much stronger for Black than for White targets.

Empathy

ANOVA also revealed significant main effects of social network composition $F(2, 206) = 9.17$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .05$, and target race, $F(1, 206) = 41.47$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .13$, on empathy. More specifically, post hoc tests indicated that participants reported significantly less empathy when the target was shown with a White social network ($M = 3.97$) versus with either a Black social network ($M = 4.51$, $p < .001$) or when pictured alone ($M = 4.35$, $p < .01$). In addition, participants reported significantly greater empathy for the Black ($M = 4.54$) versus White target ($M = 3.95$). These effects were qualified by a significant interaction between target race and social network, $F(2, 206) = 14.56$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .09$. As shown in Figure 2, when the target was White, social network composition did not have a significant effect on empathy, $F(2, 90) = 1.35$, $p > .26$, $\omega^2 = .01$. Social network composition was important, however, in participants' feelings of empathy for the Black target, $F(2, 116) = 18.93$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .11$. In particular, participants reported significantly less empathy when the Black target had a White social network than when the target was pictured either alone ($p < .001$) or with Black friends ($p < .001$). There was no significant difference in empathy for Black targets who were pictured with Black friends versus alone ($p > .56$). In summary, violating the "Black Code" (Marcus, 2011) undermined the often-observed robust effect of shared group membership on empathy.

Mediational Influence of Perceived Racial Identity

Recall that we expected identity denial (i.e., weakened perceived racial identity) to serve as the mechanism through which social network composition influences empathy. In other words, perceived racial identity should mediate the relationship between social network composition and empathy. However, we expected this to occur only for Black targets, who, as members of participants' ingroup, failed to maintain the group's optimal distinctiveness by

associating too closely with Whites. We therefore employed a multiple group comparison (see, for example, Kline, 1998) to determine whether any observed indirect effect of social network composition on empathy differed for Black versus White targets.

We utilized a bootstrapping procedure developed by Hayes and Preacher (2010) specifically designed to assess indirect effects for multi-categorical predictors (i.e., with more than 2 levels) such as our social network composition variable. Their ordinary-least squares regression-based procedure created two dummy-coded vectors to represent the three conditions of the social network variable; the first represented the effect of having a White social network relative to the control (i.e., alone) condition and the second represented the effect of having a Black social network relative to the control condition. Using this procedure, we estimated the relative (to the control condition) direct and indirect effects of social network composition. Moreover, we estimated 95% confidence intervals based on a bootstrap of 5000 samples to determine whether the indirect effect likely differs from zero in the overall population. Confidence intervals that contain 0 indicate that the indirect effect does not significantly differ from 0; thus, no evidence of mediation.

Black target. We first conducted the bootstrapping analysis in the Black target condition, where we expected social network composition to have a significant indirect effect on empathy through perceived racial identity. The model is shown in the upper panel of Figure 3. The omnibus test of the indirect effect of social network composition on empathy through perceived racial identity indeed suggested that the indirect effect was significantly different from 0, $b = .21$ ($SE_{boot} = .05$), 95% CI [.13, .32]. More specifically, as shown in the upper panel of Figure 3, the omnibus effect was driven by the statistically significant relative indirect effect of having a White social network. The previously significant direct effect of social network composition on

empathy was no longer significant. Collectively, these variables accounted for 47.41% of the variance in empathy for the Black target.

White target. The bootstrapping analysis in the White target condition revealed no significant indirect effect of social network composition. As shown in the lower panel of Figure 3, neither relative indirect effect was statistically significant. This was also reflected in the omnibus test, b = -.01 (SE_{boot} = .01), 95% CI [-.03, .00]. Furthermore, social network composition and perceived racial identity collectively accounted for a mere 6.95% of the variance in empathy for the White target. Together, these results provide evidence that perceived racial identity mediates the relationship between social network composition and empathy when the target is Black but not White.

Discussion

In the present research, we found that Blacks perceived both Black and White targets with cross-race close friends as more weakly racially identified than targets depicted either alone or with a same-race social network. Thus, having cross-race friends elicited identity denial. In turn, identity denial predicted perceivers' feelings of empathy for the ingroup (Black) target. Empathy for the outgroup (White) target was unaffected by their perceived racial identity.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

These findings enhance our understanding of identity denial, both in terms of factors that elicit it and in terms of its consequences. Whereas previous research largely focused on identity denial for multiracial (Townsend et al., 2009) or multinational (Cheryan & Monin, 2005) targets, this research suggests that it can occur more broadly, among Black Americans who are seen by ingroup members to have aligned themselves too closely with the advantaged White outgroup. Thus, even one's close associates can elicit identity denial. We similarly observed decreased

perceived racial identity for Whites who closely affiliated with Blacks, suggesting that one can deny others' identity regardless of shared group membership. This is something previous research on identity denial has not examined. Furthermore, whereas previous research has focused on the psychological consequences of identity denial for those who experience it, we demonstrated a perceiver consequence: decreased feelings of empathy for the ingroup target.

The present research is an especially powerful demonstration of the negative consequences of identity denial because empathy is something that is typically almost blindly conferred to ingroup members (Batson & Ahmad, 2009; Cikara et al., 2011; Mathur et al., 2010; Xu et al., 2009), especially among Blacks (Brown et al., 2005; Roberts & Levenson, 1996). Here, feelings of empathy Blacks had toward an ingroup member were qualified by the racial composition of his friendship network. Seeing Whites, however, as less strongly identified with their race did not yield increases in empathy. Although perhaps surprising, given that Whites with diverse social networks evoke less anxiety for Blacks in intergroup interactions (Wout et al., 2011), we see this asymmetry in empathic responding as an extension of previous research on oneness and empathy. Having cross-race friends made Black targets seem "less Black" and thus less like the self for our Black participants, thereby decreasing empathy (see Cialdini et al., 1997; Maner et al., 2002). However, having cross-race friends did not necessarily make White targets seem "more Black" or more like the self; thus, there were no implications for empathy.

The present research may also have practical implications for Blacks' success. As Blacks begin to overcome barriers of institutional racism and make strides in domains once exclusively controlled by Whites, their success will inevitably involve close associations with Whites (Thy Blackman.com, 2012). Indeed, Blacks sometimes strategically imply that they have connections to Whites in an effort to increase their probability of success in the corporate world (see Luo,

2009; Yoshino, 2002). Doing so may be a means of distancing themselves from negative group stereotypes (Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986) or perhaps a "disarming mechanism" to enhance their acceptability in the eyes of White employers or colleagues (Livingston & Pearce, 2009). Regardless of motive, such strategic outgroup alignment may put Blacks at risk for identity denial from fellow ingroup members, as demonstrated here.

Limitations and Future Directions

No study is without limitations, and, arguably, one limitation of the present research is the population from which we drew our sample – a historically Black university. Indeed, one might expect these effects to be larger among perceivers who, themselves, are highly identified with their race (see black sheep effect, Marques et al., 1988) or perhaps have a more essentialist view of race that results from perceived discrimination (Morton & Postmes, 2009). Interestingly, Blacks at historically Black colleges and universities do more strongly endorse nationalist ideologies than those enrolled at predominantly White institutions, but they are not more highly identified with their race (Cokley, 1999). In hindsight, we would ideally have included a measure such as the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997) to assess participants' own identity and racial ideologies. However, it is noteworthy that other forms of intragroup penalization have been observed in samples of Black college students from predominantly White colleges (e.g., Ashburn-Nardo & Johnson, 2008; Ashburn-Nardo, Knowles, & Monteith, 2003). Thus it is quite likely that our results would generalize and that these population-based factors would magnify but not qualify these patterns.

Future research is needed to elucidate the process of identity denial. At present, it seems that this research is in an early stage, identifying various triggers of identity denial and psychological outcomes for those who experience it. Self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg,

Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) – particularly the Hogg and Hains (1996) depersonalized social attraction framework – would appear to be a viable candidate for increasing our understanding of the processes through which identity denial occurs.

Conclusions

While there is extensive documentation of the positive impact of having cross-race friendships for majority group members (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), stigmatized minority group members, anecdotally, have faced significant negative intragroup "pushback" for having such relationships (see Austen-Smith & Fryer, 2005). As we seek to develop more inclusive communities across our nation as well as more globally, research that illuminates factors that undermine intergroup relations certainly is warranted, but we should not neglect research on *intra*group relations. The present study demonstrates that greater attention should be given to factors, such as the "Black Code," (Marcus, 2011) that might make disadvantaged group members reluctant to embrace members of their own group.

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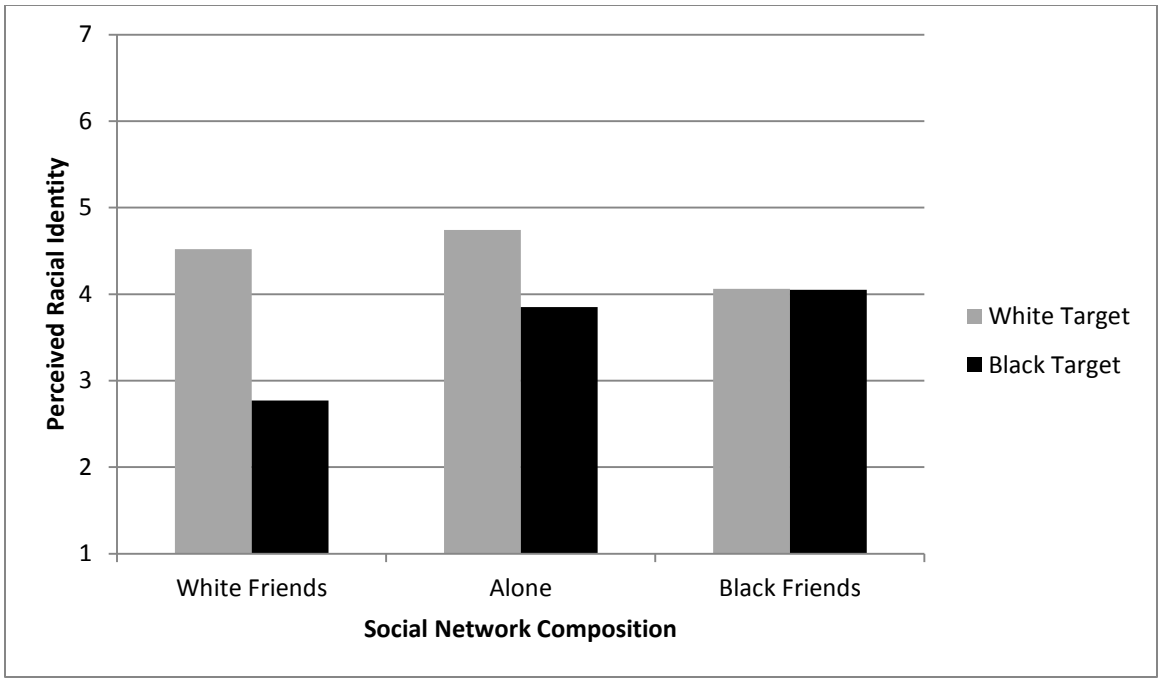

Figure 1. Perceived racial identity as a function of target race and social network composition.

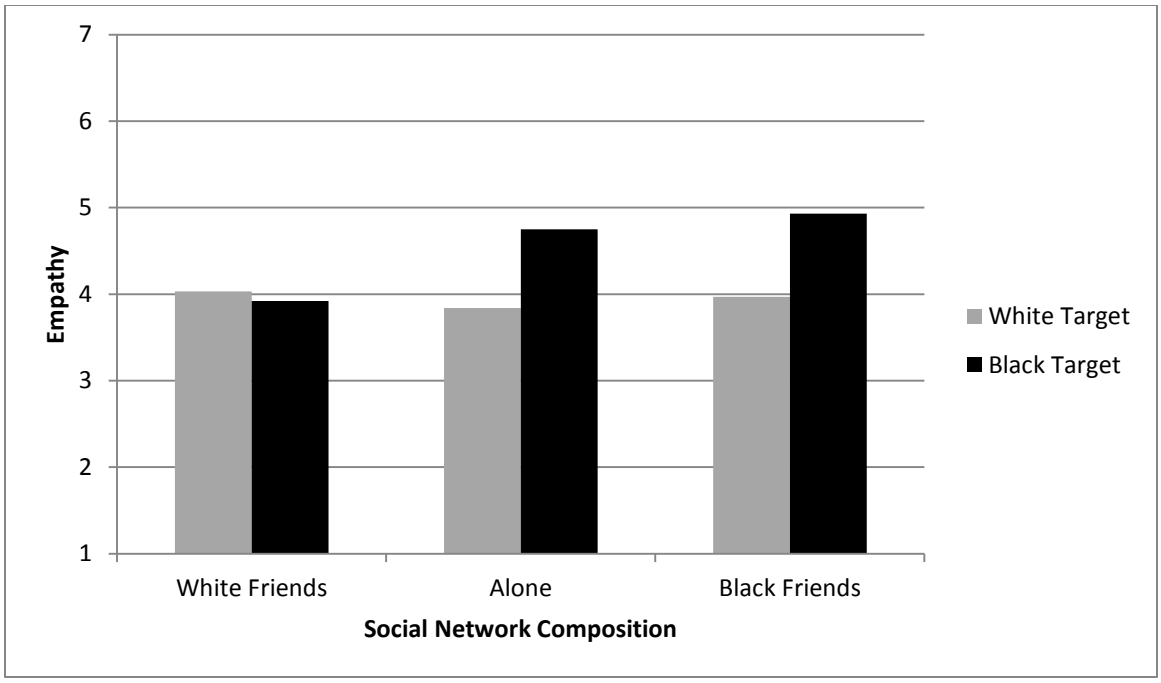

Figure 2. Empathy as a function of target race and social network composition.

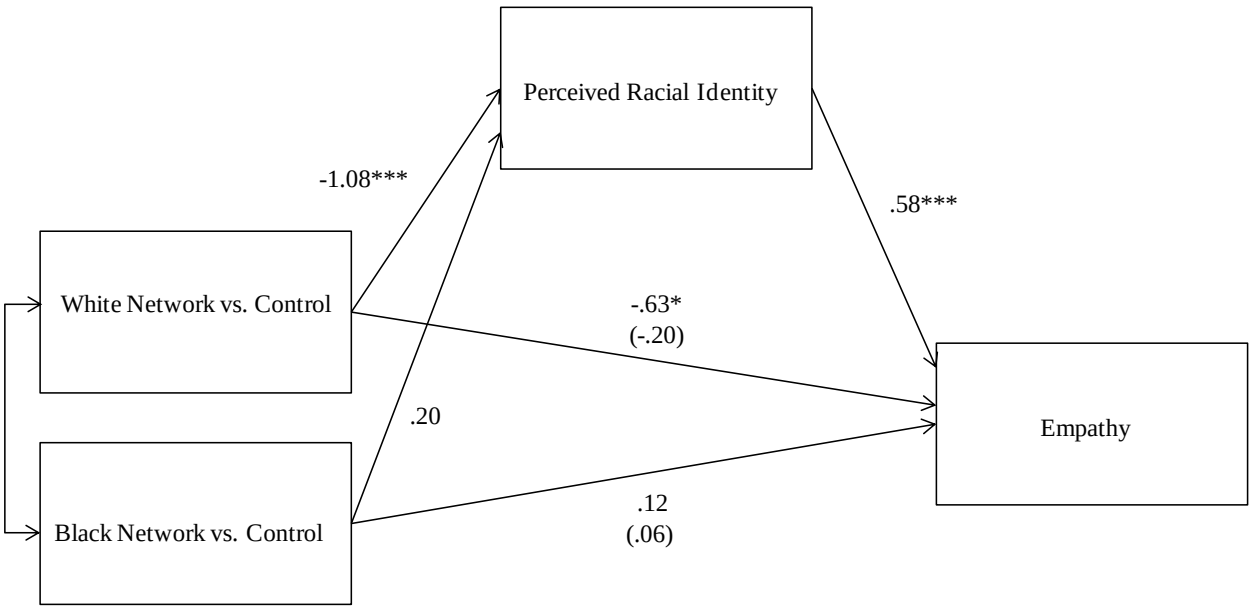

Figure 3a. Indirect effect of social network composition on empathy through perceived racial identity in the Black target condition. Direct effect of social network on empathy is shown in parenthesis. *$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$

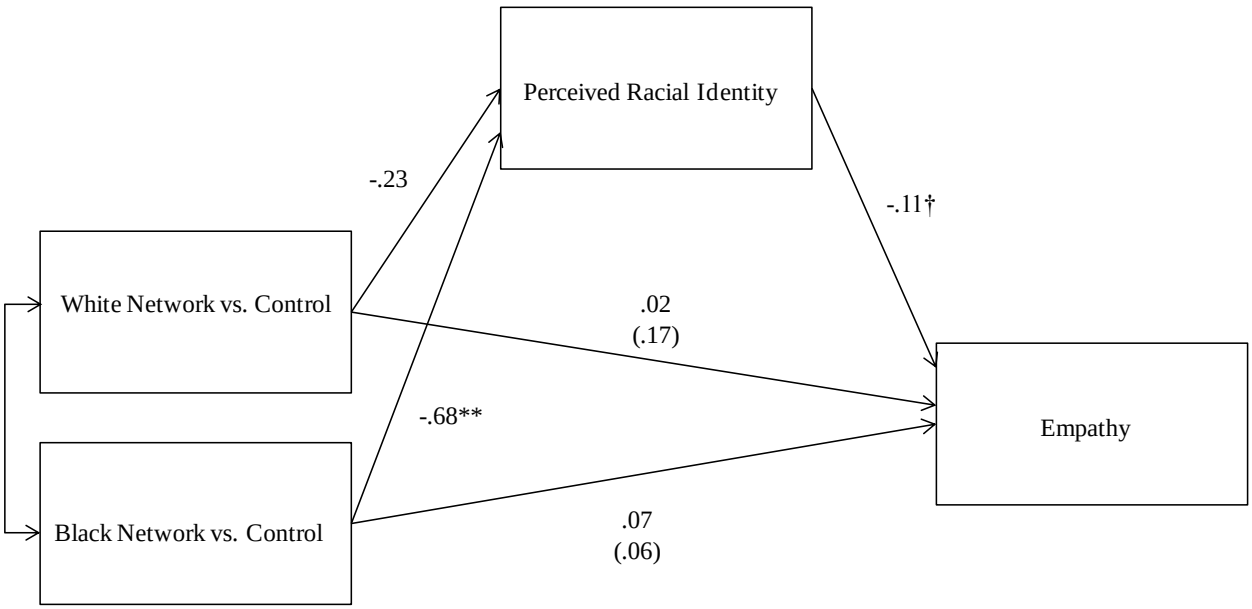

Figure 3b. No indirect effect of social network composition on empathy through perceived racial identity in the White target condition. Direct effect of social network on empathy is shown in parenthesis. $^{**}p < .01$, $\dagger p < .06$