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The Effect of the Black Lives Matter Movement On American Attitudes

by

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Honors Thesis

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Psychology Department

University of Richmond

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## Abstract

The present research focuses on changing attitudes towards Black Lives Matter (BLM) and racism. Black Lives Matter was founded in 2013, but came to a political and social forefront following the death of George Floyd in the summer of 2020. Based on research that large-scale movements have the capability of creating long term attitudinal changes, this research seeks to address the significance of BLM on attitudes in undergraduate students. Participants were recruited from University of Richmond Introduction to Psychology courses over the Fall 2020, Spring 2021, Fall 2021, and Spring 2022 semesters. They completed a survey assessing their attitudes towards BLM, race, and racism, and results found that participants tended to support Black Lives Matter. Many participants rated high support as well as significant changes in their attitudes towards the movement, with many participants providing further reasoning and evidence throughout qualitative data.

*Keywords:* Black Lives Matter, politics, racism, attitudes, movements

### **American Attitudes Towards the Black Lives Matter Movement**

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old black male, was killed at the hands of police in Minneapolis. Police were called because George Floyd had purchased cigarettes with a \$20 counterfeit bill (Hill, 2020). As he was pinned to the ground, calling for help, officer Derek Chauvin kept his knee on Floyd's neck for at least eight minutes and forty-six seconds, even after Floyd lost consciousness and died. A few weeks prior, on March 13, 2020, 26-year-old Breonna Taylor was killed in her home during a "no-knock" entry raid that had been changed to a "knock and announce" procedure (Oppel, 2021). Breonna was shot five times and killed within minutes, though she did not receive medical attention for at least a twenty-minute period following her being shot. The raid was targeted at her home because police thought that her ex-boyfriend was using her house to receive packages in a drug-deal trade. No drugs were found in the house. Another well-known case of racially-motivated police violence is that of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, who was killed by police in February of 2012 walking home from a convenience store in his own neighborhood. George Zimmerman saw him, called police and described the boy as suspicious, and after being told not to follow him, killed him ("Florida teen Trayvon Martin is shot and killed", February 2012).

The names do not stop here. About 1 in 1,000 Black men can expect to be killed by police (Edwards et al., 2018), and Black men are about 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than white men (Peeples et al., 2020). Research shows that New York Police Department (NYPD) officers with multiple negative marks in their files were 3.1 times more likely to fire their guns than other officers (Ridgeway, 2015). Many officers who resign or are fired following racially-motivated incidents end up serving in various positions of power at other, smaller agencies in lower-scale neighborhoods, which research shows often have higher proportions of

black residents (Peeples et al., 2020). This allows for officers with disciplinary histories to continue working despite warnings about further racially-motivated actions, and in especially vulnerable areas.

The present study wanted to assess whether the increased attention towards the Black Lives Matter movement following these instances of police violence changed people's attitudes. Large-scale movements and protests have the capability of creating long-term attitudinal changes (Mazumder, 2018), perhaps even more so than the first African-American President (Music, 2020). Massive social movements can create an environment prepared for institutional, lasting changes in society. Mazumder argued two points: 1) Collective action through protests can create attitude shifts in public spaces, and 2) Intergenerational transmission of beliefs allows historical ideational change to persist. Mazumder finds evidence that these movements have the power to shape public opinion in the long-term. He focused on the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in particular, finding that Whites residing in counties where protests occurred were more likely to be liberal today, especially in their attitudes towards racial injustice. Specifically, these residents indicated higher support for affirmative action, less racial resentment, and more often identified as Democrats compared to Whites from counties that did not experience protests (Mazumder, 2018). It seems likely that major movements such as the Civil Rights Movement have the power to leave lasting legacies on institutions, politics, and societal attitudes and support.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a major social justice movement that was founded in 2013 following the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer ("About- Black Lives Matter", 2022). In the summer of 2020, BLM came to the political and social forefront following the death of George Floyd. With increased media attention, including actual footage of Floyd's death, came immense protesting. The New York Times estimated that on June 6 alone, 500,000 people

showed up to protest in 550 different places (“Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History”, 2020). The Kaiser Family Foundation’s polls estimated that 26 million people protested between Floyd’s death and the end of their polling period, June 14th (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020).

The importance of Black Lives Matter is that it focuses attention on racism and its negative effects on health and well-being in African Americans, aiming to reduce these issues by way of a large-scale movement and widespread education. Research on PTSD and racial trauma shows that African-Americans generally experience a higher prevalence rate of PTSD than white counterparts, which can be tied to race. The National Survey of American Life found that African Americans experience PTSD at a rate of 9.1%, whereas non-Hispanic Whites experience PTSD at 6.8% (Williams et al., 2018). This signals a major disparity, and PTSD is just one of the disorders where we see this trend. These patterns can be attributed to networks of associated factors that interlace to create compounded trauma for any individual or their community. For example, individuals may fear the social cost that could come with discussing their traumas, their experiences with racism, their feelings and stories. They may be perceived as less likable, a complainer, or accused of not taking responsibility. The stress sensitization hypothesis shows how increased trauma throughout any given time period can increase the chances of experiencing a pathological response to a future trauma (Williams et al., 2018). Epigenetics has shown that these traumatic experiences and how individuals cope with them, with positive or negative mechanisms, can be passed down to future generations. Future research might consider how increased support from diverse communities following major social movements can impact the ways in which Black people are comfortable discussing their experiences without fear of the

social costs that might accompany it, and how increased comfort in discussion can have positive impacts on mental health and well-being.

Additionally, the accumulation of microaggressions and seemingly subtle events overtime can produce severe effects on mental and physical health (Nadal et al., 2014). Microaggressions have become a consistent theme in addressing how society has normalized racism and how it impacts individuals in ways that are not always obvious (Nadal et al., 2014). These effects can be especially pronounced in college education settings (Minikel-Lacocque et al., 2013). Increased awareness of microaggressions through major movements such as BLM (i.e. what they are, *why* they are hurtful, and how they are most often associated with offensive stereotypes) may suggest ways to reduce or eliminate microaggressions in the long-term. Awareness of microaggressions also has the power to bring to the surface various instances of racism, particularly at an institutional level. With awareness and understanding of how microaggressions can affect individuals and how systemic racism is embedded in our society, it is possible that instances of racism may be decreased.

Though the Black Lives Matter movement was founded in 2013 and was well-known prior to 2020, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others brought the movement to the social and political forefront. Patnaude et. al. (2021) state: “BLM has undoubtedly changed the dynamic of modern society in terms of systemic racism...the true value of the movement lies in the newfound conversations on an issue that has been ingrained in society’s fabric.”

The present study analyzed survey responses. Questions assessed attitudes and opinions towards BLM, race, and racism. In particular, I was interested in attitudes since April 2020 and how past experiences related to racism may have changed attitudes prior to and following the

increase in unrest. We hypothesized that participants will have experienced a change in attitudes towards BLM, indicating higher support following the onset of racial, political, and social unrest circa May 2020.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

We recruited participants from the University of Richmond's Introduction to Psychology class using the SONA system over the course of four semesters: Fall 2020, Spring 2021, Fall 2021, and Spring 2022 ( $N= 260$ ). The student's ages ranged from 18 to 22. There were 187 female participants and 69 male participants, and four reported a gender not listed. There were 146 white participants, 42 Asian or Asian American participants, 26 Black participants, 22 Latinx or Hispanic participants, 16 multiracial participants, 1 Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander participant, 1 Alaskan Native participant, and 6 participants did not self-report their race. There were 57 participants from an urban area, 110 from a suburban area, and 93 from a rural area. Participants received class credit for their participation in our study. Participants were asked to complete an anonymous survey on their attitudes regarding Black Lives Matter.

### **Design**

This study set out to determine the influence of early racial socialization on young adults' views on Black Lives Matter using a self-report survey. Specifically, this study asked questions gauging participants' views towards Black Lives Matter and how they have shifted in light of different events occurring alongside the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers wanted to understand how increased awareness of and media exposure to racial unrest in the United States influenced the views of participants.

### **Materials**



Dr. Jane Berry's lab students worked together to create a survey assessing attitudes toward and experiences with the Black Lives Matter movement. The survey was developed and edited over an 8-week period, and designed to take about one hour for each participant. Researchers received IRB approval from the University of Richmond, and the survey was launched in October 2020. Each student developed a set of questions that were related to different hypotheses and concepts related to their own interests. For example, one question asked: *The COVID pandemic and the death of George Floyd heightened attention by the news and social media on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Think about your support or resistance towards BLM prior to these events and your support or resistance for BLM now. Between then and now, would you say your support towards the movement has increased, decreased or stayed the same? Participants responded with My Support has... "Decreased significantly", "Decreased moderately", "Decreased a little bit", "Stayed about the same", "Increased a little bit", "Increased moderately", or "Increased significantly".* Throughout the survey, participants were also given room to explain their answers to many of the questions in their own words.

### **Procedure**

Introduction to Psychology students were asked to complete the survey for class credit. They signed up for one-hour time slots and arrived at the Berry lab. Research assistants set up computers with the surveys, greeted participants, and prompted them to leave their belongings and phones outside of the testing room. They were then asked to complete the consent form on the front page of the survey, told it would take approximately one hour, and told that they could stop at any time or ask the research assistants questions if they had them. After completing the survey, research assistants thanked and debriefed participants, explaining the procedure for

making sure their responses remained anonymous, explaining what the survey was designed to measure and what would be done with responses, and asking if they had any questions or concerns. Responses were then analyzed using SPSS 27.0.

## Results

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Frequency analyses were conducted on demographic data. The distribution from the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 semesters' data consisted of 136 participants ( $N=136$ ). 71 participants reported being White (52.2%), 14 reported as Black or African American (10.3%), 11 as Latinx or Hispanic (8.1%), 25 as Asian or Asian American (18.4%), 1 as Alaskan Native (.7%), 1 as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (.7%), 10 as Multiracial (7.4%), and 3 as a race that is not listed (2.2%). Participants' ages ranged between 18 and 22, with a mean age of 19 ( $M=19.01$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ). 98 participants identified as female (72.1%), 36 identified as male (26.5%), and 2 identified as a gender that was not listed below (1.5%). Due to the small sample size of participants identifying as a gender not listed, analyses were not run on differences between those who did not identify as male or female. 21.3% of participants reported their home as urban, 73.5% reported suburban homes, and 5.1% reported as rural. 2 participants reported their political affiliation as strongly conservative (1.5%), 5 as moderately conservative (3.7%), 17 as mildly conservative (12.5%), 34 as neither conservative nor liberal (25%), 18 as mildly liberal (13.2%), 44 as moderately liberal (32.4%), and 16 as strongly liberal (11.8%).

As for support concerning Black Lives Matter, participants from these most recent two semesters were asked to rate their support or non-support for BLM on a scale of 1 (low-support) to 10 (high-support). Results showed that none of the participants rated their support below a 3. Only 6.6% of participants rated their support as a 5 or below. 5.9% of participants rated support

as a 6, 11.8% reported a 7, 9.6% an 8, 14% reported a 9, and a majority of 52.2% participants reported their support for BLM as a 10. One of our participant's defined BLM as "a movement aimed to as well as enlighten people about the hardships and racism faced by Black people everywhere but especially in America. It's to show that the live[s] of Black people do matter as historically our lives are disregarded or seen as unimportant" (Participant).

Initial analyses were conducted to assess whether there were any differences in support for BLM from the Fall 2021 semester to Spring 2022 semester. An independent samples t-test was conducted on the question "On the following scale, please rate your support or non-support for BLM by selecting a number where 1='I do not support BLM' to 10= 'I do support BLM'" and was grouped by semester. No significant differences were found,  $t(122) = 0.28, p = .389$ . Research from the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 datasets were then combined with the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 data to assess differences between all four semesters, which is the data reported in the above participants section. Upon combining data, we had 260 participants total ( $N=260$ ).

A correlational analysis was run between all four semesters to examine support for BLM and political affiliation. Results were significant ( $r = .65, p < .001$ ), suggesting that higher ratings of liberalism were positively correlated with higher support for BLM.

After combining the data, we specifically looked at our questions concerning race relations, where participants rated, on a scale of 1-10, how much they agreed or disagreed with each item. These items included: "There are very few problems with race relations in the United States", "Race relations have improved in my lifetime", "Every individual has the responsibility to help the country achieve better race relations", and "I believe I have more to learn about race and race relations in the United States". Reliability analyses using Cronbach's alpha were performed ( $\alpha = .46$ ) using all four variables. Removing the item "Race relations have improved in

my lifetime” yielded a Cronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha=.62$ ). This result indicated that the other three measures could be combined into one new measure with greater reliability. We labeled this new measure negative attitudes towards race relations. Items 3 and 4 were reverse-coded such that higher scores on the new race relations variable indicated more negative beliefs about race relations.

We then analyzed the relationship between negative beliefs about race relations, support for Black Lives Matter, and gender. We ran independent samples t-tests, first testing our hypothesis that females would rate their support for Black Lives Matter higher than males. Statistically significant results were found, providing support that females do support BLM at higher rates ( $M = 8.88, SD = 2.01$ ) than males ( $M = 7.61, SD = 2.40$ ),  $t(254) = 4.26, p = .001$  (See **Figure 1**). Another independent samples t-test showed that males ( $M = 3.1, SD = 1.73$ ) had higher scores on the negative race relations variable, showing more negative attitudes towards race relations compared to females ( $M = 2.23, SD = 1.39$ ),  $t(251) = -4.25, p = .001$  (See **Figure 2**). Finally, path analyses revealed that the effect of gender on BLM support was mediated by participant’s scores on the negative race relations variable (See **Figure 3**). This suggests that gender differences in support of Black Lives Matter is partially mediated by negative race relations. Together, gender and negative race relations account for 42% of the variance in Black Lives Matter support,  $R^2 = .42, p = .001$ .

### ***Qualitative Data***

Though the data did not show significant changes over time concerning support for BLM through our four semesters, looking at qualitative data allows us to look deeper into these results. When examining participants’ explanations for their change in support, a number of potential confounding variables showed up. For example, some participants reported lower changes in

support because they had supported the movement prior to the death of George Floyd, and only supported it more following these events. One participant reported “I already supported the movement immensely, but seeing such a publicized murder reignited my feelings towards the situation. Seeing how people still defended the murderer also helped reignite feelings of anger and disbelief.”, and another stated “it has always been constant because I have always had to deal with race in this society”. We did see themes of increasing support for BLM; one participant saying, “I think after this incident I became more aware of the differential treatment that existed and the consequences of it and that made me support the movement more as I [learned] how desperately change is needed”. Looking at male and female responses in terms of their change of support proved interesting and further showed male and female differences in their levels of support. One male participant reported, “They really lost me with all of the looting back in June. BLM also became a trend to support. so no, they lost a lot of the support i had for them originally”. Another male reported, “BLM movements got more violent and impacted my hometown in negative ways”. One female reported “These events brought to light the true inequalities between the black community and the rest of the country and opened my eyes to the urgency of stopping this injustice. I didn’t know how terrible police brutality truly was, as before all of the media coverage I only knew the story of Trayvon Martin and didn’t know that senseless killings of black individuals by white police officers was so common”. Another female participant reported, “Although I knew of Black Lives Matter before 2020, I think I gained a better understanding of what exactly it meant during COVID and surrounding the death of George Floyd. I also believe that an increase in its popularity drew me to do my own research because I wanted to understand this issue on a deeper level, as I was seeing it more and more everyday.”. One final report from a female participant stated, “My support has increased

significantly in the period of heightened awareness of BLM. I learned so much about the movement through my own research, marches, and protests and became much more passionate about the topic. I was never in resistance I was just indifferent because of my white privilege.”.

### **Discussion**

Our analyses showed a number of intriguing results that partially supported our hypotheses. We ran analyses to assess the relationship between support for BLM and political affiliation, and found significant results providing evidence that higher support for BLM was associated with higher ratings of liberalism, as was expected (“Support for Black Lives Matter remains stable”, 2022). We also wanted to look at how gender might play a role in predicting attitudes towards Black Lives Matter, based off of the statements: “There are very few problems with race relations in the United States,” “Race relations have improved in my lifetime,” “Every individual has the responsibility to help the country achieve better race relations,” and “I believe I have more to learn about race and race relations in the United States.” We found that male participants were more likely to have less positive attitudes towards race relations, whereas females had more positive attitudes towards race relations. Additionally, females tended to report higher support for BLM compared to males.

Another interesting finding to examine was participant’s ratings of support for Black Lives Matter. As reported, more than half of our participants rated their support for BLM as a 10, with less than 10% of participants rating support below a five, and no participants rating support as less than a three. These numbers do not align with national polls of more generalizable populations (“Support for Black Lives Matter remains stable”, 2022), and thus begs questions concerning our participant pool and asks us to consider how undergraduate students at a liberal arts university compare to more diverse samples. It would be interesting to run further tests to

analyze differences in White participants' support compared to Black participants' support and whether we might find differences, as well as to publish this survey to participants beyond just the University of Richmond population.

Through data analysis, we discovered that our question assessing how participants' attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement changed over time did not entirely capture the question we sought to answer. We wanted to determine whether the movement caused people's attitudes to change, but many of our participants did not have a "change" in attitude, but rather a confirmation of their beliefs. Many participants reported more moderate changes in their attitudes, but when given the opportunity to explain their answers, provided significant information for our analyses. Despite reporting moderate or little change in attitudes, participants explained further that they had supported the movement both prior to and following the death of George Floyd, and thus did not select an option such as "increased significantly". We did find extensive initial evidence that the movement had the power to change some people's attitudes: leading them to protest, sign petitions, donate money, or simply feel greater senses of anger towards racial injustice in America. We also found evidence that for those already doing this prior to the death of George Floyd, the movement had the power to make them more passionate and influence their desire to educate themselves through new means. Though we did not find significant values for change throughout the four semesters, we did find initial evidence partially supporting what Mazumder found: large-scale movements have the potential to create long-term attitudinal changes.

### **Limitations**

Though our results show interesting preliminary results, there are limitations to our research. Our participants consisted solely of undergraduate students enrolled in a Psychology

100 course. Future research should address similar questions and hypotheses in a broader, more representative and generalizable population. Additionally, the participants may not fully capture both a racially and gender diverse group, thus future research should aim to capture attitudes from a broader and more diverse sample of participants, better able to represent American attitudes towards BLM. It would be interesting to also assess regions and the homes of our participants to look for patterns.

Results found in this study emphasize the need for future research. Questions may consider a more longitudinal design—our research captured attitudes over time, from October 2020 to March of 2022, but attitudes may continue evolving as this movement changes. Future research should also ask more questions to compare attitudes before April 2020 and after 2020, as well as to assess how attitudes may change two years later, five years later, and so on. It will be interesting to see if and how the movement picks up momentum again, and how attitudes develop.

Our question assessing whether participants' attitudes towards Black Lives Matter changed before and after the death of George Floyd found some intriguing results as many cited attitude changes in a positive direction. However, some of our most intriguing results actually came from the qualitative data, the explanations for their ratings. Looking at the quantitative data, it was clear that some participants had significant attitude changes while others had more moderate changes, but there was much more significance placed on this when examining the qualitative data. Participants frequently reported that they ranked their change in attitude as a moderate increase, for example, or stayed the same, because they already greatly supported the movement beforehand. Many participants added that while their attitudes may not have changed as they had always supported the movement, they were left feeling far angrier and more



passionate about the cause. Future questions should look more into the specific ways in which attitudes changed, and aim to find a more general consensus of whether the movement led to major attitude changes.

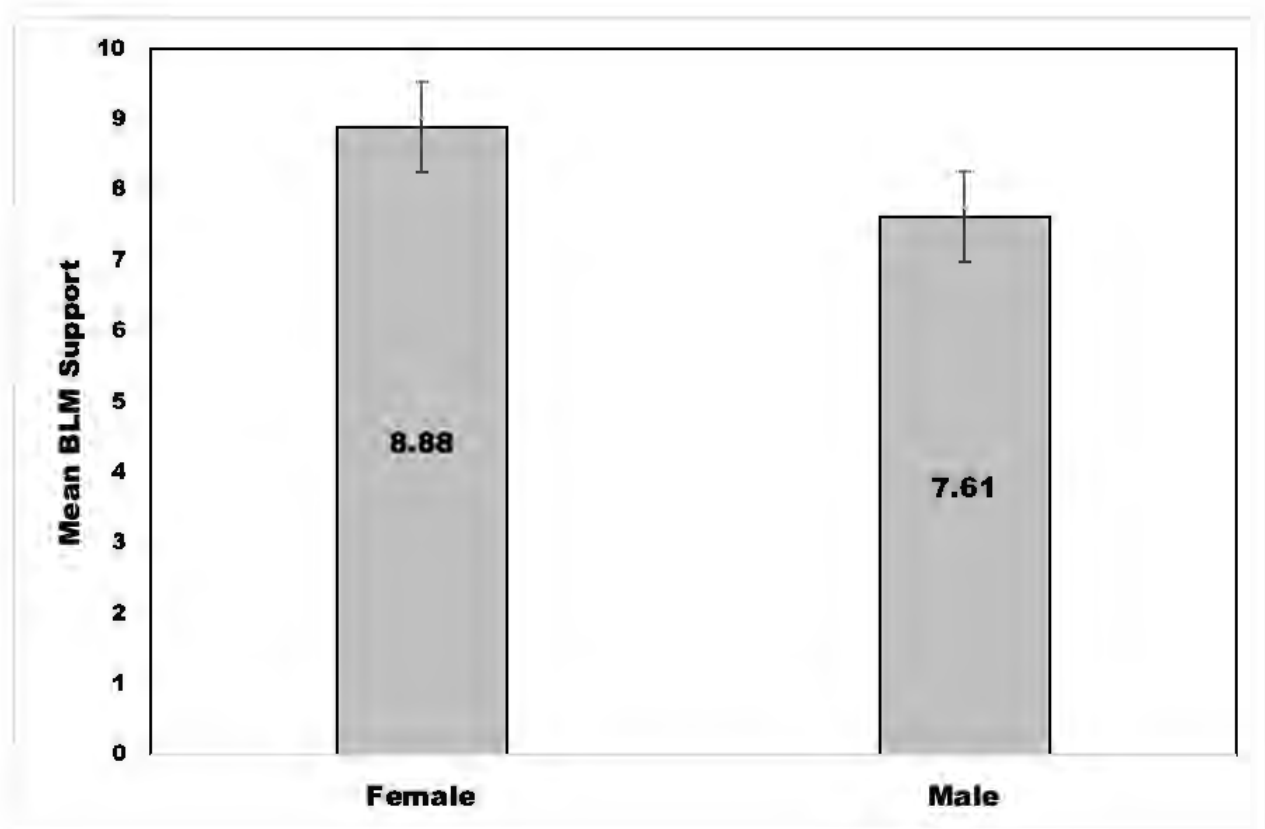
Qualitative data provided promising evidence that the movement may have caused significant change— some participants had only briefly heard of the movement prior to Floyd’s death, but were eager to do their own research and were exposed to far more content through social media and news outlets. Many participants did not cite change, but instead reported paying more attention and feeling more anger towards the movement in the wake of its prominence. In these participants, we may speculate that the Black Lives Matter movement led to significant change. Though more quantitative data is needed, these results support similar findings from Mazumder (2018) on large-scale movements that lead to long term attitudinal changes.

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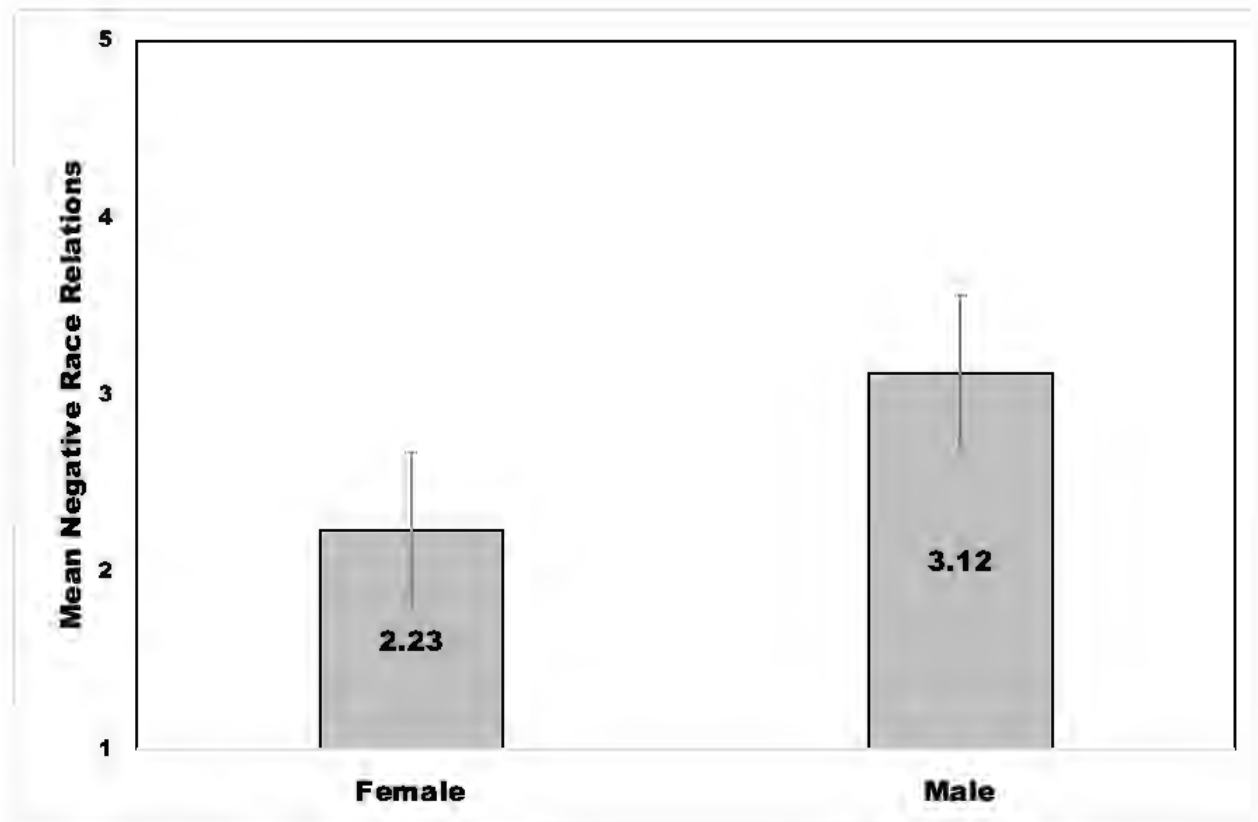
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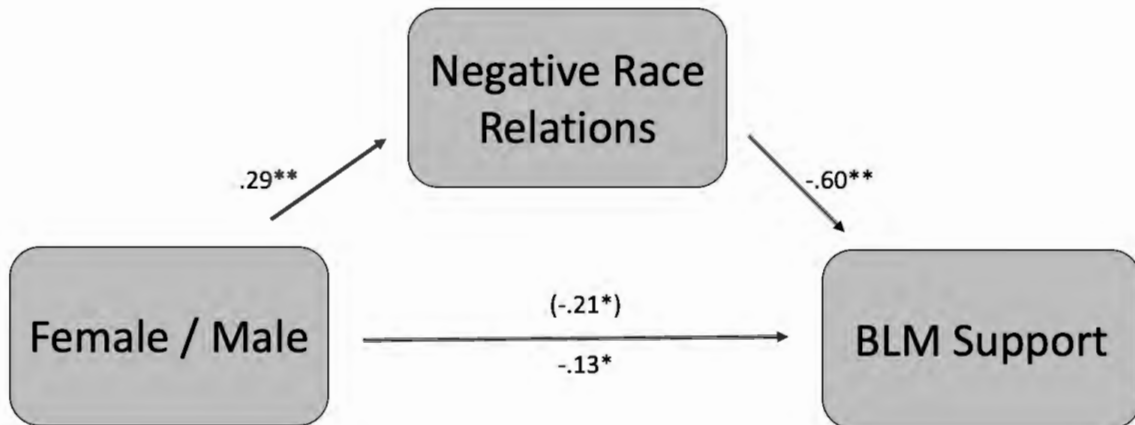
Appendix A



**Figure 1.** *Gender and Support for Black Lives Matter.* Female ( $M = 8.88$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ) versus male ( $M = 7.61$ ,  $SD = 2.40$ ) ratings of support for Black Lives Matter.



**Figure 2.** *Gender and Negative Race Relations.* Males ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) had higher scores on the negative race relations variable, showing more negative attitudes towards race relations compared to females ( $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ).



**Figure 3.**

*The mediating role of negative race relations on gender and Black Lives Matter support. As seen in Figure 1, our hypothesis exploring the relationship between gender and BLM support found significant results, i.e. females supported BLM at higher rates than males. Regression analyses suggest that the gender difference in rating of support for BLM are partially mediated by the negative race relations factor.*