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Black and Blue All Over: Whose Lives Matter?

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Honors Thesis

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Abstract:

This study investigated the influence of beliefs about race on support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Blue Lives Matter (BluLM) movements, mediated by attitudes towards police and beliefs about white privilege. Utilizing a sample of undergraduate university students, data were obtained through a survey measuring beliefs in the biological and social constructs of race, support for police, belief in white privilege, and attitudes toward BLM and BluLM. Results indicated that individuals who perceive race as a biological construct are less likely to support BLM and more likely to support BluLM, while beliefs in white privilege and attitudes towards police mediated these relationships. Findings suggest complex relationships between beliefs about race, support for law enforcement, and attitudes toward racial justice movements. The implications for understanding the dynamics in support of both BLM and BluLM will be analyzed to provide avenues for future research.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, white privilege, police support, biological essentialism, Blue Lives Matter

What is Black Lives Matter?

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement began as a social justice movement concerned with protecting and upholding the rights of Black people in America. Most scholars agree that it was “founded as a social movement in the United States, by Alicia Garza, Patrisse McCullors, and Opal Tometi, [and] emerged as a result of the shooting death of teenager Trayvon Martin on February 20, 2012,” (Jackson, 2019, p. 1). While the message of BLM was gaining traction societally, the movement truly gained its traction largely due to the use of #BLM as a hashtag on social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter (now X). The most prominent observance of the rapidly growing BLM movement came with the trial of George Zimmerman, the white civilian who shot and killed unarmed 17-year old Trayvon Martin. Outrage erupted on social media when the jury declared Zimmerman “Not Guilty.” Thus the #BlackLivesMatter movement gained its footing, quickly gaining popularity as it drew attention to the sense of urgency in addressing injustices demonstrating disregard for Black lives.

In 2014, when a black teen named Michael Brown was killed by a police officer, the jury chose not to indict the officer. Racial protests and riots exploded across the US as the #BlackLivesMatter movement spilled into the streets (Chase, 2017). These deaths, along with many others including but not limited to Breonna Taylor, Terrence Crutcher, and Walter Scott, triggered social justice movements all over the United States, as they were representative of a bigger and consistent issue of unjust police violence against Black people. Some other recognizable names that amplified the momentum for BLM are Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor... (*Black History Month*, 2022). Although some of these stories may not be as well recognized or popularized by mainstream media outlets, these are black people who were all tragically murdered. Then their killers were not properly sentenced to the justice that the public felt was deserved. Since then, the focus on racial injustice has grown and the frustration and fury at the slow pace of change has festered.

The BLM movement became international news in May 2020, when a video went viral of police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on the neck of and ultimately killing George Floyd as he screamed for mercy and help. The horrifying video of Floyd gasping for breath – “I can’t breathe...” provided stark evidence to the world of violence against members of the Black community in the United States. The death of Floyd ignited even more support for the BLM movement and gained traction among new supporters regarding the issues that BLM stands for. Statistics regarding the demographics of protestors during the height of BLM in 2020 found that the vast majority of protests were made up of mainly white people with a range of 76-85% of protestors being white depending on the city. (Mobilewalla, 2020). One study even found that pro-white attitudes decreased for both white and black participants during the peak of the BLM movement, showing increased support and acknowledgment of racial justice issues like Black Lives Matter (Sawyer & Gampa, 2018). Support among Americans for BLM increased from 43% in 2016 to 67% in June 2020, following the murder of Floyd (Boudreau et al., 2022). The tragic and violent death of George Floyd became a clear symbol for the racial justice issues that Black Lives Matter draws attention to and demands change for. In the aftermath of Floyd’s death, media attention and public awareness of biased and violent policing increased substantially.

Black Lives Matter has become the official rallying cry against racist police violence (Petersen-Smith, n.d.). The main goal of BLM is to establish the same level of accountability in murder cases, regardless of racial group and law enforcement status. That is, whether it’s a Black person or a non-Black person, a police officer or a civilian, people should be held accountable for taking the lives of others (Chaney & Robertson, 2015). Although the movement is mainly Black-led, people of all races have taken part in protests nationwide, showing this movement is not only supported by Black Lives (Sawyer & Gampa, 2018). The current study aims to determine what factors mediate support for the Black Lives Matter movement, as this can look different across age groups and other demographics.

Blue Lives Matter as a Countermovement

Against the backdrop of the increased momentum of BLM, the Blue Lives Matter (BluLM) movement came to light. As the BLM movement gained traction and supporters, it also gained many enemies, eventually forming opposing movements such as BluLM. BluLM is a countermovement to BLM, that is, a “reaction, countering and even imitating some of their tactics” (Solomon & Martin, 2019, p. 23). Solomon and Martin’s study on competitive victimhood found that “Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter together illustrate the “movement-countermovement” dyad. While BluLM was reflective of the blue-line flags seen on bumper stickers and sweatshirts before the death of George Floyd, it was not until the trial of Derek Chauvin, who was found guilty of all charges, that BluLM was used as a reaction to the police reform demanded by BLM supporters. Moreover, the true Blue Lives Matter movement emerged *after* Black Lives Matter.

The original website for Blue Lives Matter claimed to be a “nonprofit organization created to help Law Enforcement Officers and their families during their time of need. The organization's members are police officers and members from other state and federal agencies dedicated to making a difference and demonstrating that "BLUE LIVES MATTER" (*Our Mission*, n.d.). Although it does not claim to be a countermovement to BLM, it does partially blame BLM for its founding, claiming the deaths of two NYPD officers were due to the lies spread by the Black Lives Matter movement in the media, claiming these lies are what caused a “fanatic” to murder both officers (Smith, 2019). The leaders of the BluLM movement claim it to be apolitical and race-neutral, prioritizing the needs of police officers without concern for race. However, a study showed strong empirical evidence that BluLM is a direct racial justice countermovement to BLM, even if their racial motives are more implicit (Newman et al., 2023).

So the question arises: do the same factors that predict support for BLM also predict support for BluLM? The variable of focus for this study is belief in the construct of race, specifically believing that biologically, humans possess 99% of the same traits across the genome (I def have the source for this).

The purpose of this study is to examine predictors of support for BLM and BlueLM in the context of race, as mediated by demographics of Richmond students and their attitudes towards police and the belief in white privilege.

Predictors of Support for Black Lives Matter versus Blue Lives Matter

Race as a Social or Biological Construct. With the rise of movements like BLM and BlueLM, there was an increase in interest and discourse regarding race and racial beliefs among the general public (Dunivin et al., 2022). With an increase and shift in public discourse, there's also been a rise in conflicting opinions related to racial issues. There are two main and contradictory views on the nature of race. One view is that race is inherently biological and that those DNA and biological differences yield inherited value. Although the US Census bureau asks people to answer racial identification questions, they state that "the data on race are based on self-identification and the categories on the form generally reflect a social definition of race. The categories are not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically. Respondents can mark more than one race on the form to indicate their racial mixture" (*Race | American Community Survey | U.S. Census Bureau*, n.d.). Although they claim this, many share the popular belief that race is defined by skin tone, hair texture, eye shape, and other traits essential to one's identity. These traits are markers of difference amongst groups of human beings and are seen as natural and objective parts of humanity. These physical attributes come with behavioral and cultural differences as well, which are also objective and unchangeable. This concept is also known in the scholarly literature as biological essentialism. These differences are an integral part of human nature and human history (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). As a highly racialized society, this view is a popular one. The view of race as biological is the foundation and justification for a history of racism under the law as well as implicit and explicit racist beliefs. It allows people to segregate because by "nature" different races are genetically different affecting behavior and intellect, therefore giving reason for separation.

Those who believe that race is a biological construct are less likely to view racial issues as social justice issues, and in turn, may be less likely to support the BLM movement.

In contrast, some view race as a social construct, one that society created and has given meaning to. Race as described by many scholars “is not some unchanging, biological essence, but rather a malleable social category created through the state, law, science, and/or social interaction in particular historical times and places” (Pierce, 2014, p. 259). It is something that humans throughout history have given meaning to through the hierarchy of law. A history of slavery, segregation, inequality, discrimination, and racism has stemmed from our exposure to race as a biological construct, the exposure that society imposes on us. Therefore, many believe that race is not inherently biological, but that society has grown inherently used to being socialized into believing that it is biologically based. This view of race accepts that race should not be hierarchical, and may be more willing to accept things like that white privilege is real, and may be less likely to support the police, than those who see race as a biological certainty. Those who believe in race as a social construct will likely show more support for social justice movements that involve race such as BLM and less likely to support non-racial justice movements like BluLM. Logically, it makes sense that biological essentialist views are foundational to non-support for racial justice movements. Overall this study predicts that those who see race as a social construct will be more likely to support BLM and less likely to support BluLM than those who see race as inherently biological.

Existence of White Privilege. It is reasonable to predict that the contradictory views on race as essential versus race as socially constructed would be related to other race-based constructs, such as white privilege. McIntosh (1988) introduced white privilege as summarized by CARED (Calgary Anti-Racism Education) as “the unquestioned and unearned set of advantages, entitlements, benefits and choices bestowed upon people solely because they are white. Generally, white people who experience such privilege do so without being conscious of it” (McIntosh, 2019). She describes many

aspects with examples of her own lived white privilege in her essay, which was a pivotal moment in social justice literature as it introduced a new concept that has raised many defensive responses from white people (Collins, 2018). Recently the DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) chair of John Hopkins University, Dr. Sherita Golden, stepped down after defining privilege “in part, as a “set of unearned benefits,” giving a broad list of examples of privileged groups including: white people; able-bodied; heterosexuals; cisgendered; men; Christians; middle or owning class; middle-aged; and English speakers” (Gessler, 2024). This definition is seemingly identical to that of McIntosh as described earlier, yet it upset and caused so many white people to respond defensively that Golden was forced to step down from her well-established career and position in education. Just like the defensive white people at John’s Hopkins, for years since the idea of white privilege was introduced to our society many have responded along the lines of, “just because I am white doesn’t mean that my life is easy”. The idea is not that white people do not have problems or challenges in their lives, it is the idea that they are given an unfair advantage due to the color of their skin based on racist systems of power and access that lead to privileges that are denied to others who are not white. White privilege has been studied extensively by scholars in political science, women’s studies, sociology, and psychology.

In psychology, one of the most widely-used measures of white privilege measures is the White Privilege Attitudes Scale (WPAS), a 24-item scale that holds high validity and has been used in other studies and will be used in the current study to investigate white privilege. (Pinterits et al., 2009). This scale has high internal validity and reliability and has been cited more than 259 times in other published studies across disciplines ranging from psychology to ethics. Its widespread use in research and its strong psychometric properties led us to adopt it for use in the present study.

Seeing race as a social construct will likely lead to less defensiveness against accepting white privilege because those who believe in the social construction of race will understand the disproportionate treatment and opportunities of differing races. Believing race is a social construct

allows for a clearer view of how such a construct made way for the creation of white privilege, by acknowledging a long history of different white privileges. One of the many white privileges that exists today, that is being investigated in the present study is the treatment of white people from law enforcement, particularly the police. *Attitudes Towards Police Reform*.

This study also investigated attitudes toward police reform/relations. The Black Lives Matter movement has brought an increase in media attention to police officers and their conduct. Past research has demonstrated through in-depth social media analyses that the killing of George Floyd triggered an unprecedented amount of attention toward instances of police violence in the US. When the video of George Floyd went viral, it triggered a resurgence and resurfacing of other videos depicting police violence, thus fueling conversations about race, policing, and the need for reform, with some even calling for the complete abolishment of the police system in the US (ref). This study will investigate the relationship between attitudes towards police reform and support for Black Lives Matter. As established above, the Black Lives Matter movement is fighting for police officers to be held accountable for the unjust murders and overall mistreatment of black individuals, so it makes sense that supporters of BLM, will most likely also support police reform efforts (Wu et al., 2023).

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Those who believe race is a social construct will be more likely to support BLM as mediated by white privilege and police support.

Hypothesis 2: Those who believe race is a biological construct will be more likely to support BluLM as mediated by police support and the belief that white privilege exists.

Method

This study investigated the influence of biological essentialism on support for Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Blue Lives Matter (BluLM) as mediated by belief in white privilege and support for the police. Specifically, this study focused on opinions and experiences with and about police, as well as their

understanding of and belief in white privilege. Items for measuring police support were developed by the author and the white privilege items were selected from the White Privilege Attitudes Scale (WPAS) (Pinterits et al., 2009). All police support items can be found in Table 3 and all white privilege items can be found in Table 4.

Participants

Participants were recruited from an introductory psychology class at The University of Richmond for class credit and from all other departments for cash remuneration (\$20.00).

Ethics Approval

The research procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Richmond, following the ethical treatment of human subjects.

Procedure

In fall 2023, current students in the research lab worked together with their mentor to develop new questions for the Attitudes Toward BLM survey. Upon receipt of IRB approval, data collection began. Students signed up to participate using a Google form and received a confirmation email with a QR code that researchers scanned to upload participant's information and availability.

Upon entering the lab for their appointment, participants were seated at a computer which displayed the consent form. Participants read the consent form to begin the survey as researchers informed them that the survey would last approximately an hour and that they could ask whatever questions they may have throughout the survey. Upon completion of the survey, researchers debriefed participants and informed them they could email any further questions or concerns directly to Dr. Berry.

Results

Two conceptual models were created to depict the predicted relationships between biological essentialism, white privilege, police support, and support for Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter. Statistical analyses of the two models were conducted using Hayes PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2018) for

path analyses with two mediators. We tested our hypotheses by examining the direct and indirect effects of belief in race as a social or biological construct on support for Blue Lives Matter (BluLM) and Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements, with white privilege (WP) and police support (PS) as mediators.

The internal consistency of our measures was assessed by calculating Cronbach's alpha for items, using SPSS version 27. The alpha coefficients were high for both police support items ($\alpha = .87$) and white privilege items ($\alpha = .84$), meeting the criterion for acceptable internal reliability for scales.

Biological essentialism had an indirect effect on support for BLM through belief in WP and support for police. The results revealed support for a significant indirect effect through WP on BLM, $\beta = -.18$, $SE = .05$, 95% CIs (-.2869, -.0769). The indirect effect of PS on BLM was nonsignificant, $\beta = -.02$, $SE = .03$, 95% CIs (-.0771, .0264). The initial direct effect of biological essentialism on BLM was significant, $\beta = -.17$, $t = -2.17$, $p = .03$, but was reduced to nonsignificant, $\beta = .03$, when the mediators were included in the analysis. Overall, the model accounted for 44% of the variance in BLM.

We also examined whether biological essentialism had an indirect effect on support for BluLM through belief in WP and support for police. The results revealed support for a significant indirect effect through WP on BluLM, $\beta = .08$, $SE = .03$, 95% CIs (.0243, .1510). The indirect effect of PS on BluLM was significant, $\beta = .14$, $SE = .04$, 95% CIs (.0662, .2240). The initial direct effect of biological essentialism on BLM was significant, $\beta = .31$, $t = 4.13$, $p = .0001$. The final direct effect was nonsignificant, $\beta = .09$ when the mediators were included in the analysis. Overall, the model accounted for 44% of the variance in BluLM.

Discussion

Both hypotheses were confirmed. Seeing race as biologically constructed was related to less support for the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), as mediated by belief in white privilege and police support. In contrast, seeing race as biologically constructed was related to greater support for the Blue

Lives Matter movement (BluLM), as mediated by the same variables. The models accounted for almost half of the explained variance in Black Lives Matter (44%) and Blue Lives Matter (44%) support.

Interestingly, the indirect effect of white privilege was significant for both BLM and BluLM but the indirect effect of police items was only significant for BluLM. This finding suggests that the relationship between police support and support for the Black Lives Matter movement is complicated, and that support for one does not preclude support for the other. It is clear from our data that some participants support police *and* support BLM, and some support the police but *not* BLM, with still others not supporting either -- thus the non significant regression coefficient. This finding may seem to challenge claims that BluLM and BLM are counter-movements (Newman et al., 2023), but in fact, the finding reveals that different variables are related to support for each movement. Although the relationship between BLM and BluLM is negative ($r = -.47$), if the Blue Lives Matter movement is truly about upholding and protecting the rights of police, without any negative tones towards BLM as they claim to be, then someone can score high on police support items and in turn support the Blue Lives Matter movement's overall goal, without being directly opposed to Black Lives Matter. This finding is rather promising for continuing to improve racial justice and race relations in the United States.

Finally, it is worth noting that the items developed for this study by the author for examining support for the police demonstrated remarkably high internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$), and higher than that for the published White Privilege Scale (Pinterits et al., 2009) items ($\alpha = .840$). We conducted an exploratory factor analysis to assess whether the police items were measuring one or more components of police support. Results revealed that the police support items (see Table 2) comprise two distinct factors that appear to measure two different aspects of police support. We believe the first factor measures personal/lived experiences or interactions with police officers and the police system in the United States. Items in this category included police as friends, personal experiences, community safety, and threats to personal well-being. The second factor seems to measure opinions, beliefs, and attitudes

toward police officers and the police system in the United States. Items in this category included police reform, support for the current police system, and police getting too much negative media attention. One of the most interesting findings from the factor analysis was that the item that measures empathy for the police loaded on both factors (lived experiences with the police, and opinions/beliefs/attitudes towards the police). While our items revealed two factors of police support, it is possible that our items do not fully capture the many different types and aspects of support for the police in the United States. Future research should explore the components of police support more fully, perhaps including police and their families in focus groups to ascertain a broader understanding of the experience and nature of police work and their lives in the U.S.

Our study was not without limitations. One of the biggest limitations was the sample demographics. The majority of the participants were white (70%), well-educated University students, and mostly psychology majors, who likely have a better understanding than the average American about complex social issues like Black Lives Matter, biological essentialism, white privilege, and current policing policies. Thus, the generalizability of our results is restricted to other populations of students at primarily white institutions (PWIs).

Another limiting aspect of the lack of diversity of the participant population is that many of them are psychology majors completing the survey for a class credit. Even though in the procedure we explicitly tell participants that their responses will remain anonymous and confidential, many students may be afraid to share their true opinions if they are not the generally agreed upon views enforced by the department or their peers. Fear of judgment as well as social desirability bias are factors that may limit the validity of responses to a survey like this one. Particularly with regards to racial issues, there is often pressure in higher-education institutions to assert educated responses to complex questions, and therefore these may not be authentic responses.

It is also important to note this younger demographic when it comes to cell phone use, as echo chambers can be created using social media platforms and other online forms of communication. Older age groups, specifically those who grew up before the first-generation iPhone hit the US market in 2008, will likely have different and deeper-rooted opinions of race and the criminal justice system. It would be interesting to survey citizens across all age groups in the US, to assess generational and age differences on social justice issues such as BLM and BluLM.

One of the most interesting findings was that police support and support for Black Lives Matter were not mutually exclusive, which contradicts previous work stating that Blue Lives Matter (a movement that claims to support the police) is a countermovement to Black Lives Matter. Future research should investigate specific motivations for support for Blue Lives Matter, including which issues are prioritized by supporters. Are supporters of Blue Lives Matter “out to get” supporters of Black Lives Matter? Are they just trying to uphold police rights? Are there different kinds of supporters for Blue Lives Matter with different motivations? These questions deserve further investigation.

Conclusion

Investigating the specific factors for support for both movements may shed light on the diverse range of possible perspectives within each of these movements and their supporters. This in turn, can inform strategies for fostering dialogue and understanding between opposing viewpoints. Further, investigating the effects of social media, a highly involved factor in both these movements, has on support and supporters. This study contributes to our understanding of the complex interplay and overlap between racial beliefs, attitudes about law enforcement, and support for social justice movements. By understanding the motivating factors underlying support for BLM and BluLM, this research adds to the literature aimed at addressing racial disparities and promoting equity and justice in society.

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Table 1*Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges for Predictor, Outcome, and Mediating Variables*

Variable	M	SD	Range
1. Essentialism	-0.88	3.32	-7.0 - +7.0
2. White privilege	45.40	17.78	0 - 100
3. Policing	58.95	17.82	0 - 100
4. BLM	81.64	23.37	0 - 100
5. BluLM	26.75	28.87	0 - 100

Table 2*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Police Support Items*

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Police support	4.98	2.50	1									
2. Police reform	1.58	0.57	-.46**	1								
3. Experiences with police	4.45	1.36	.42*	-.20**	1							
4. Keep community safe	5.17	1.45	.58**	-.29**	.50**	1						
5. Threat to well-being.	2.32	1.21	-.47**	.22**	-.46**	-.59**	1					
6. Safe where police are present	4.83	1.57	.50**	-.18*	.50**	.61**	-.60**	1				
7. Police as my friends	4.54	1.73	.34**	.12	.34**	.37**	-.43**	.43**	1			
8. Empathize with police	4.55	1.54	.53**	-.32**	.36**	.52**	-.44**	.44**	.41**	1		
9. Negative media attention	3.74	1.60	.61**	-.45**	.23**	.42**	-.30**	.35**	.23**	.55**	1	
10. Treat differently based on the color of their skin.	5.45	1.32	-.55**	.31**	-.22**	-.36**	.38**	-.34**	-.30**	-.48**	-.50**	1

N range over items = 161 - 164; $\alpha = .87$

Table 3*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for White Privilege Items*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. White privilege exists	8.07	2.10	1			
2. White privilege is systemic	5.37	1.35	.75**	1		
3. White privilege = white bashing	2.34	1.50	-.71**	-.70**	1	
4. People of color have privilege	3.45	1.74	-.49**	-.45**	.44**	1

N= 164, $\alpha = .84$

Table 4*Police Support Items*

On the following scale, please rate your support or non-support for the current police system in the United States where 1 = "I do not support" to 10 = "I fully support"

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below, where 1 = 'I strongly disagree' and 7 = 'I strongly agree.'

1. "The police keep me and my community safe."
2. "The police are a threat to my personal well-being."
3. "I feel safe in environments where police are present."
4. "I was raised to view police as my friends."
5. "I empathize with the challenges faced by police officers."
6. "Police officers get too much negative attention from the media."
7. "Police treat people differently based on the color of their skin."

Please rate your personal experiences with the police in the United States where 1 = "very negative" and 7 = "very positive"

In the United States, should the police be reformed?

Yes, Maybe, No

Figure 1: Path Analysis of support for Black Lives Matter (BLM)

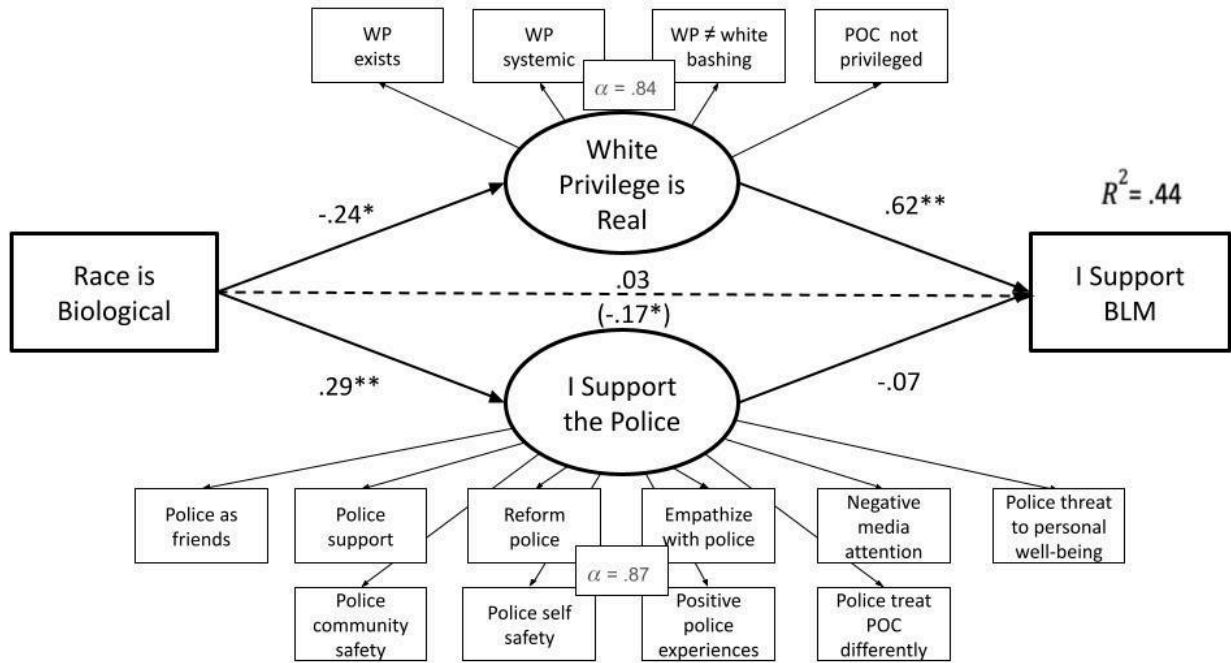


Figure 2: Path Analysis of support for Blue Lives Matter (BLuLM)

