

The Effects of Minority Group Labeling on Feelings of Empathy and Psychological Closeness

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Introduction

As human beings we are naturally inclined to use labels to categorize people into different social groups. The use of these labels has serious implications for the ways we view, feel, and behave towards members of the labeled groups. For example, one effect of these labels is to set intergroup boundaries that define who is included in one's own group (the ingroup or "we") and who is excluded (the outgroup or "they") (Dovidio et al., 2004). As a result of this categorization, we have the natural tendency to favor the ingroup and to derogate the outgroup while maintaining distinctions between the groups. These are tendencies that have important implications for interpersonal and intergroup relations. This study examines the effects of describing a victim of discrimination as either "Black" or "African American" on the level of empathy and psychological closeness that a person feels towards this victim. Both empathy and psychological closeness have cognitive and emotional elements.

Main Hypothesis:

When a victim of discrimination is described as African-American (which includes a shared identity as "American" with White participants), as opposed to Black (an outgroup label suggesting no common identity with White participants), then participants will be more likely to feel closeness and empathy towards the victim of discrimination.

Method

Participants:

- 71 undergraduate Kenyon College students (N=71)
- Age ranged from 17 to 22, 50 females and 21 males

Study Design:

- Results were analyzed using independent samples t-tests
- The independent variable in the study was the label used to describe the victim of discrimination (either Black or African-American)
- The dependent variables in the study were empathy and psychological closeness (both subdivided into emotional and cognitive subsections), and identification for White participants (choice between White, White American, and American identification).

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Procedure

Participants completed the study in the form of an online questionnaire after having signed an informed consent form. Participants were instructed to read a scenario involving an incidence of discrimination. There were two versions of the scenario. One condition described the victim as "Black," and the other condition described the victim as "African American". Participants were instructed to read the scenario while imagining that they were observing the situation as a bystander. After reading the scenario, participants were asked to complete measures concerning their empathy and psychological closeness felt towards the victim of discrimination. Both empathy and psychological closeness were measured on seven point Likert-scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Participants were finally directed to a measure of participant identification, adapted from Stone and Crisp (2007). This measure was only administered to White participants, who were asked to complete a statement with the label most fitting to their identity. Only White participants were included in the analyses because the focus of the current study is the way in which majority group members (White Americans) view minority group members as a result of the way minority group individuals are labeled.

Results

Figure 1

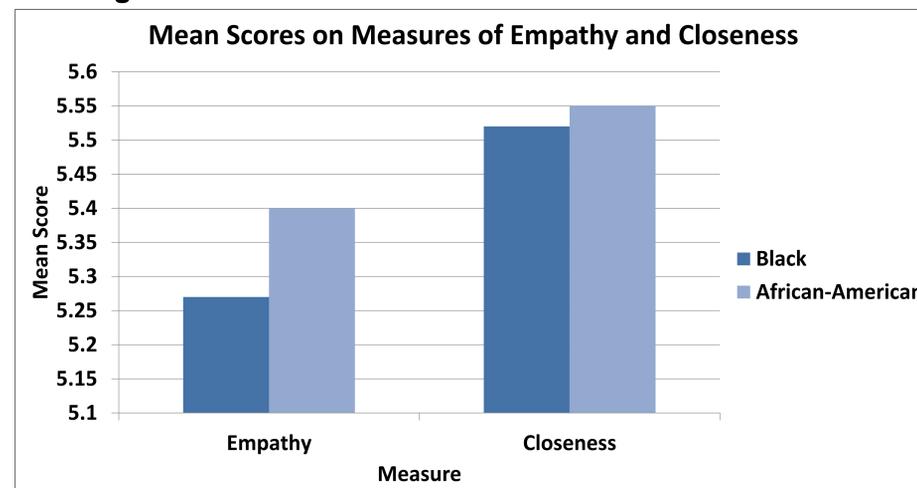


Figure 2

Measure	Label	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Empathy	Black	5.27	0.875	0.146
	African-American	5.40	0.787	0.133
Closeness	Black	5.52	0.751	0.125
	African-American	5.55	0.683	0.115

Discussion

Independent samples t-tests failed to show statistically significant relationships between the independent variable (label of the victim of discrimination as either Black or African-American) and feelings of empathy and psychological closeness felt towards the victim of discrimination. However, the mean values suggest that the data is trending in the hypothesized direction (greater empathy and psychological closeness felt towards a victim described as African-American, as opposed to Black; see Figure 2). Another independent samples t-test demonstrated that there was a statistically significant relationship between the label of the victim and White participant identification ($t(68) = -.999; p < .05$). This means that White participants were more likely to identify themselves as White (as opposed to American) when the victim of discrimination was described as Black (as opposed to African-American), and that White participants were more likely to identify themselves as American (as opposed to White) when the victim of discrimination was described as African-American (as opposed to Black).

Implications and Future Directions

Given that the results failed to demonstrate a statistically significant difference between the labels used and empathy and psychological closeness felt towards a victim, can we assume that there is no difference in the implications of these labels? While this study only examined empathy and psychological closeness felt towards a victim of discrimination, future studies should examine other factors that may promote helping behaviors and other indicators of positive intergroup-behavior. Given that the results demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between the label used to describe a victim of discrimination and the way in which White participants identified themselves, can we assume a causal relationship between the two variables? Future studies should use baseline measures of national and subgroup identification to examine this relationship more thoroughly.

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