



A Phenomenological Divide: Reference Group Consequences for Existential Isolation

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Abstract

An apparent phenomenological divide between majority and minoritized groups exists in contemporary America in terms of feelings of social connection. Drawing on recent findings relating to existential isolation (i.e., the sense that one is alone in one's subjective experience) three studies compare these feelings towards one's in-group and out-group. Study 1 assesses whether Black and White participants vary in their self-reported existential isolation when referencing their own or another racial group. Results reveal Black Americans feel as though other Black Americans share their perceptions more than do White Americans. In contrast, White Americans report similarly shared perceptions by both racial groups. Study 2 (preregistered) assessed these effects with a concealable identity: sexual orientation. Study 3 further replicates these effects and finds effects among Black Americans to significantly differ from a neutral control condition. Implications and future directions for epistemic (in)validation are discussed.

Keywords: existential isolation, intergroup relations, race, sexual orientation

A phenomenological divide: Reference group consequences for existential isolation

“As a Black person, you’ve always seen all the racism, the microaggressions. But as White people, they don’t understand this is how things are going for me...They don’t live those experiences. They don’t live in those neighborhoods. They moved out. It’s so easy to be White and oblivious in this country.”

- Courtney Tate, elementary school teacher, 2020

“...until you are Black in America, you won’t truly understand what it is to be Black in America.”

– Alvin Kamara, National Football League player, 2020

“I have to decide whether to come out or hide again and again—at the doctor’s office, at my child’s school, when talking about weekend plans with colleagues –because people usually assume heterosexuality...The fact that straight couples don’t have to think about these questions is a reminder of difference”

– Rose Saxe, lawyer, 2017

As the epigraphical quotes suggest, from schoolteachers, to lawyers, to professional athletes, there appears to be a phenomenological divide between minoritized and majority groups. Minoritized Americans tend to maintain that majority group Americans just do not “get” what they go through. In the words of Jill Stauffer (2015) and Claudia Rankine (2020), it is a feeling of “not being heard.” “...The isolation one feels when one, as a violated person or as one member of a persecuted group, has been abandoned by humanity” (Rankine, 2020, p. 201). This feeling of not being heard may exacerbate feelings of a phenomenological divide to the extent that the reference group marginalized people contend with is a group who does not listen to their experience.

This phenomenological divide may manifest as feelings of existential isolation (Helm et al., 2019a), which Yalom (1980) defines as the sense that others cannot share in one’s subjective experience. Indeed, research indicates that people from minoritized groups report higher levels of existential isolation (Pinel et al., 2021). Part of this sense of elevated existential isolation, at least

for those from stigmatized groups, may stem from a disparate recognition of the conditions of contemporary society and that operative reference groups typically include many people who do not share, or understand, their experiences. To this end, the present studies specifically test whether self-reported feelings that other people share and understand one's experiences depends upon the reference group.

Existential Isolation

Existential isolation (EI) refers to the “unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being” (Yalom, 1980; p. 355). No matter how close one gets to another, one can only experience the world through one's own sensory organs and cannot read another's mind, preventing a person from knowing with certainty how another experiences the world (Pinel et al., 2017). In this sense EI refers to an existential reality with which all humans contend (e.g., Sullivan et al., 2012). Yet people can become aware of their existential situation and experience a subjective sense of EI (Helm et al., 2019a; Yalom, 1980). People feel existentially isolated when they feel alone in their perceptions, as if others are not sharing in their subjective experiences.

Awareness of one's EI represents a threat to epistemic and affiliative needs. Many aspects of our social worlds depend upon socially constructed reality such as faith in cultural worldviews (Greenberg et al., 2008), adherence to social norms (Nolan et al., 2008), and even our self-concepts (Hergovich et al., 2002). Yet, when people feel existentially isolated, they feel alone in their experiences, possibly leaving them in a state of epistemic uncertainty (Helm et al., 2019a; Pinel et al., 2021).

Helm and colleagues (2019a) proposed the State-Trait Existential Isolation Model (STEIM), suggesting the experience of EI can be a state (i.e., in-the-moment and of short duration), trait (i.e., chronically activated and pervasive), or context-dependent (i.e., activated in

particular situations). Consistent with this theorizing, people can be primed to feel existentially isolated (Helm et al., 2019b; Pinel et al., 2017), and chronic feelings of EI have been found to correlate with a weak or fragile anxiety buffer (Helm et al., 2019b), elevated anxiety, stress (Constantino et al., 2019), depression, and likelihood of reporting suicide ideation (Helm et al., 2020a).

Research has long demonstrated that the people to whom one compares have notable impact on current feelings and emotions (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Fraley et al., 2011). Regarding the present focus on EI, imagine a LGBT individual whose family believes homosexuality is a sin. Additionally, imagine this individual has a supportive group of friends who endorse the LGBT community. Presumably, this individual would feel lower EI when considering their friends because they feel their perceptions and experiences are shared. Conversely, this person would feel elevated EI when considering their family because their subjective experiences (i.e., of their sexual orientation) do not coincide with the expressed views by their family.

Pinel and colleagues (2021) found initial evidence that those with minoritized identities reported higher trait EI than their majority status counterparts. Interestingly, individuals with minoritized identities did not report higher loneliness or need to belong than did those with majority identities. In the above example, it is possible that part of the reason that individuals with minoritized identities report high EI is because of their disconnection from the broader majority-group dominated culture (e.g., heteronormative, White culture, etc.). However, if led to focus instead on peer groups likely to share their experiential mindset (e.g., members of their ingroup), they may report lower feelings of EI. In contrast, if differences between majority vs. minority cultural norms have less operative impact for how majority group members experience the world (e.g., because majority group members assume their experiences or perceptions are the

norm), then differences in focus between one's ingroup and outgroup should have weaker effects on feelings of EI for majority group members.

Notably, although the aforementioned theorizing and hypotheses about the role of reference groups in the experience of EI were derived from the literature on EI, these ideas also converge with insights generated from the literature on felt (mis)understanding. Felt misunderstanding refers to "the feeling that arises when one realizes that [a person] has inaccurately perceived important aspects of the self" (Oishi et al., 2012, p. 259). Felt (mis)understanding focuses on the self as the object of consideration and tends to reference a specific interaction partner (e.g., Oishi et al., 2010) or set of interactions during a day (e.g., Lun et al., 2008), though some recent work has assessed an interpersonal variant of felt understanding at the group level (Livingstone et al., 2020).

There are clearly conceptual overlaps between these conceptualizations but also potentially important differences. As noted, EI primarily concerns whether others tend to share one's reactions, perceptions, and experiences, while felt (mis)understanding, for example, concerns whether the self is accurately perceived (or whether a person believes an outgroup can understand a person's ingroup). Research on felt understanding also tends to capture state reactions that occur in response to specific interactions (or days), whereas EI research tends to focus on the trait like internalization of disconnection from others. Nonetheless, research on felt (mis)understanding would likely also predict members of underrepresented groups would feel more misunderstood by the majority group than their ingroup. We return to the general issue of potential overlap and differences between EI and felt (mis)understanding in the General Discussion, noting for now that both perspectives converge on novel insights about the role of reference groups in social (dis)connection (broadly construed).

Potential Moderating Factors

There are of course other factors that may moderate potential effects of shifting reference groups for feelings of EI. If EI arises from feelings that one has different perceptions or experiences than others, then the degree to which one experiences EI in intergroup contexts might depend on the extent to which social groups are perceived to be similar in general (e.g., if one believes that two social groups are essentially the same, they would perhaps be less likely to assume their perceptions also differ). Thus, experiencing EI when referencing another group may partly depend on believing these groups are treated (un)equally, or have (un)equal social standing, by broader society.

Such beliefs, when applied to race relations, dismiss racism as a historical relic and are typically referred to as racial colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Racial colorblindness appears to be common, but variably endorsed, among White Americans (Bunyasi, 2015). Endorsing colorblind ideology has important intergroup consequences. For example, those endorsing such beliefs are particularly likely to appear biased by Black observers (Apfelbaum et al., 2008), actually report greater explicit and implicit racial bias (e.g., Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004), be less aware of cultural diversity concerns (Wang et al., 2014), and have less empathy towards other racial groups (Warren, 2013).

Broadly speaking, denying the relevance of historic oppression in contemporary society may represent a denial that race influences identity development and day-to-day experiences. This may introduce a further phenomenological divide, and thus predict more EI from underrepresented group members.¹ In the present context, the degree to which White people

¹ An alternative hypothesis would suggest that if a person believes that race does not influence identity development, then they should not feel differentially isolated from different racial groups.

experience EI when referencing Black people may depend on their level of racial colorblindness.

Overview of Studies

The present research is an initial foray into whether people feel members of other groups do not share their perceptions, experiences, or reactions. We test whether self-reported EI will vary based on the racial or sexual orientation group that is referenced. In other words, rather than assessing a global sense of EI, we will assess EI from specific social identities.

Study 1 assesses whether Black and White participants vary in their self-reported EI when referencing their own compared to the other racial group. Study 2 is a preregistered conceptual replication of Study 1 with a different social category. Study 3 offers an additional replication including a neutral control condition to better understand the direction of reference group effects.

Studies were approved by an Institutional Review Board. Deidentified data, materials, pre-registrations (for Study 2), and supplemental materials are available on OSF:

[https://osf.io/kzye5/?view_only=9455794ce60d483f81d32cd116a2f470]. We report all manipulations, measures, and exclusions, and confirm these are the only three studies conducted in this line of work to test these hypotheses.

Study 1

Study 1 recruited White and Black participants and asked them to complete an EI scale with reference to either White or Black individuals. We predict an interaction between participant race and scale reference. If feelings of EI are shaped by reference groups, Black participants should report greater EI in the Reference-White condition than in the Reference-Black condition. In contrast, White participants should report greater EI in the Reference-Black

condition than in the Reference-White condition. Lastly, an exploratory analysis examines the potential moderating role of racial colorblindness beliefs.

Methods

Data were collected online on Amazon's Mechanical Turk via CloudResearch (Litman et al., 2017). Participants were asked to complete a 3-minute survey in exchange for \$0.25.

Participants were recruited on the basis of race (i.e., if they identified as White/Caucasian, or Black/African-American). We used the race variable in the demographics section to confirm that participants were either Black or White, and excluded participants that did not fall into one of these categories.

Participants. An a priori power analysis utilizing G*Power (Faul et al., 2017) for an ANOVA (fixed effects, special, main effects, and interactions) with 80% power specifying a small-medium effect size ($\eta_p^2 = .02$) with 4 groups suggested a total sample size of 351 participants. To account for possible attrition, we collected data from a total of 402 participants. Of these, 4 were excluded for having missing data, 7 were excluded for indicating they were multiracial, and 10 were excluded for not selecting a race, leaving a final sample of 381 participants ($M_{age} = 37.14$, $SD = 12.84$) including 177 men and 203 women (1 participant did not indicate sex). Of these, 194 identified as White and 187 identified as Black.

Procedure and materials. Participants completed the survey online. After agreeing to participate, participants completed the materials in the order listed below:

Existential Isolation Scale. Participants first completed a 6-item Existential Isolation Scale (Pinel et al., 2017) that was modified to reference either White ($n = 190$) or Black ($n = 191$) individuals. The instructions asked participants to indicate the extent to which they "agree or disagree with each statement in reference to Caucasian/White people (African-

American/Black people).” Questions were also modified to reflect a racial group. For example, “I usually feel like people share my outlook on life” was modified to “I usually feel like Caucasian/White (African-American/Black) people share my outlook on life”. Both White and Black scale wordings had acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .89$ and $.87$, respectively).

Denial of Prejudice. Denial of prejudice was assessed with 4 items assessing racial colorblindness (Neville et al., 2000; $\alpha = .82$). Participants indicated their agreement with each item from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). An example item includes, “Racism may have been a problem in the past, but it is not an important problem today.” Higher scores indicate greater endorsement.

Demographics. Lastly, participants completed demographic single item questions assessing age, sex, race, level of education, income, subjective socioeconomic status (utilizing the subjective socioeconomic status ladder; Adler et al., 2008), and a political orientation item (9-point scale from 1—Very Liberal to 9—Very Conservative). The race variable was used to ensure recruited participants identified as Black or White.

Results

To assess the interaction hypothesis, we conducted a 2(participant race: White vs. Black) x 2(Scale Reference: White vs. Black) ANOVA. Results reveal a main effect of scale reference condition. Participants in the Reference-White condition reported greater EI ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.37$) than did those in the Reference-Black condition ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.21$), $F(1,377) = 43.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$ 90% CI[.06, .15]. The main effect of race was not significant, though White participants reported EI directionally lower ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.12$) than Black participants ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.54$), $F(1,377) = 3.05$, $p = .082$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$ 90% CI[.00, .03].

The predicted interaction was significant, $F(1,377) = 74.56, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .17, 90\%$ CI[.11, .22]² (see Figure 1). Probing this interaction revealed that among White participants, EI did not differ by condition, $F(1,192) = 2.35, p = .127, \eta_p^2 = .01, 90\%$ CI[.00, .05]. In contrast, Black participants reported greater EI in the Reference-White condition ($M = 4.67, SD = 1.35$) than in the Reference-Black condition ($M = 2.83, SD = 1.54$), $F(1,185) = 103.79, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .36, 90\%$ CI[.27, .44].

Looking at the interaction differently, Black participants reported more EI ($M = 4.67, SD = 1.35$) in the Reference-White condition than did White participants ($M = 3.42, SD = 1.06$), $F(1,188) = 50.24, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .21, 90\%$ CI[.13, .29]. In contrast, Black participants reported less EI ($M = 2.83, SD = 1.09$) in the Reference-Black condition than did White participants ($M = 3.66, SD = 1.17$), $F(1,189) = 25.56, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .12, 90\%$ CI[.06, .19].

² Results did not change when controlling for prejudice denial, education, income, subjective socioeconomic status, sex, age, and political orientation as main effects or interactions with independent variables: $F(1,351) = 32.71, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09, 90\%$ CI[.04, .13] (see supplemental materials for full inferential statistics).

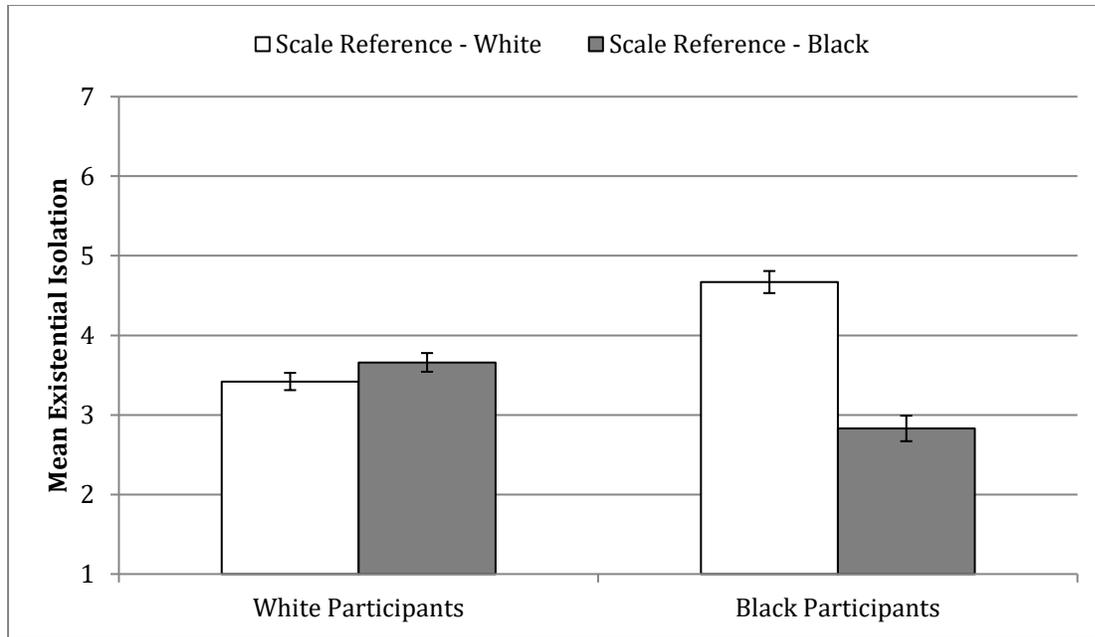


Figure 1. Participant race by scale reference interaction predicting existential isolation in Study 1. Error bars reflect standard error.

Lastly, we compared the race-congruent conditions (i.e., White participants in the Reference-White condition to Black participants in the Reference-Black condition) and the race-incongruent conditions (i.e., White participants in the Reference-Black condition to Black participants in the Reference-White condition). In the congruent conditions, Black participants reported significantly lower EI ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.09$) than did White participants ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.06$), $F(1,185) = 13.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$ 90% CI[.02, .13]. In the incongruent conditions, Black participants reported significantly greater EI ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.35$) than did White participants ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.17$), $F(1,192) = 30.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$ 90% CI[.07, .21].

Although controlling for denial of prejudice did not change the participant race by condition interaction, it is possible that prejudice denial may further moderate these relationships. We thus examined a participant race by scale reference by centered prejudice denial in multiple regression. Results reveal a significant 3-way interaction, $t(373) = 3.11$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, 90% CI[.003, .06] (see Figure 2).

To decompose this 3-way interaction, we utilized the SPSS plugin *PROCESS* (Hayes, 2013) Model 3. Confidence intervals utilize 5,000 bootstrapping resampling and refer to the simple slopes or raw mean differences depending on analysis. *PROCESS* results reveal among both White and Black participants in the Reference-White condition, as prejudice denial increases, participants report significantly less EI: $b = -.18$, $t(373) = 2.39$, $p = .018$, 95% CI[-.34, -.03] and $b = -.49$, $t(373) = 5.38$, $p < .001$, 95% CI[-.67, -.31], respectively. In the opposite direction, among both White and Black participants in the Reference-Black condition, as prejudice denial increases, participants report significantly greater EI: $b = .17$, $t(373) = 2.18$, $p = .030$, 95% CI[.02, .33] and $b = .40$, $t(373) = 4.30$, $p < .001$, 95% CI[.21, .58], respectively.

Looking at this interaction differently, at low (-1 SD) and average prejudice denial, White participants do not differ by condition in their EI, $M = -.40$, $t(373) = 1.57$, $p = .118$ 95% CI[-.90, .10] and $M = .10$, $t(373) = .61$, $p = .539$, 95% CI[-.22, .42], respectively. Only at high prejudice denial (+1 SD) do White participants report significantly greater EI in the Reference-Black condition ($M = 3.83$) than in the Reference-White condition ($M = 3.23$), $t(373) = 3.13$, $p = .002$, 95% CI[.22, .98].

In contrast, Black participants report significantly greater EI in the Reference-White condition than in the Reference-Black condition at low ($M = 5.10$ vs. $M = 2.40$) and average ($M = 4.41$ vs. $M = 2.96$) prejudice denial, $t(373) = 13.10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI[-3.11, -2.30] and $t(373) = 8.51$, $p < .001$, 95% CI[-1.79, -1.12], respectively. At high prejudice denial, Black participants' EI did not differ by condition, $M = -.20$, $t(373) = .71$, $p = .478$, 95% CI[-.77, .36].

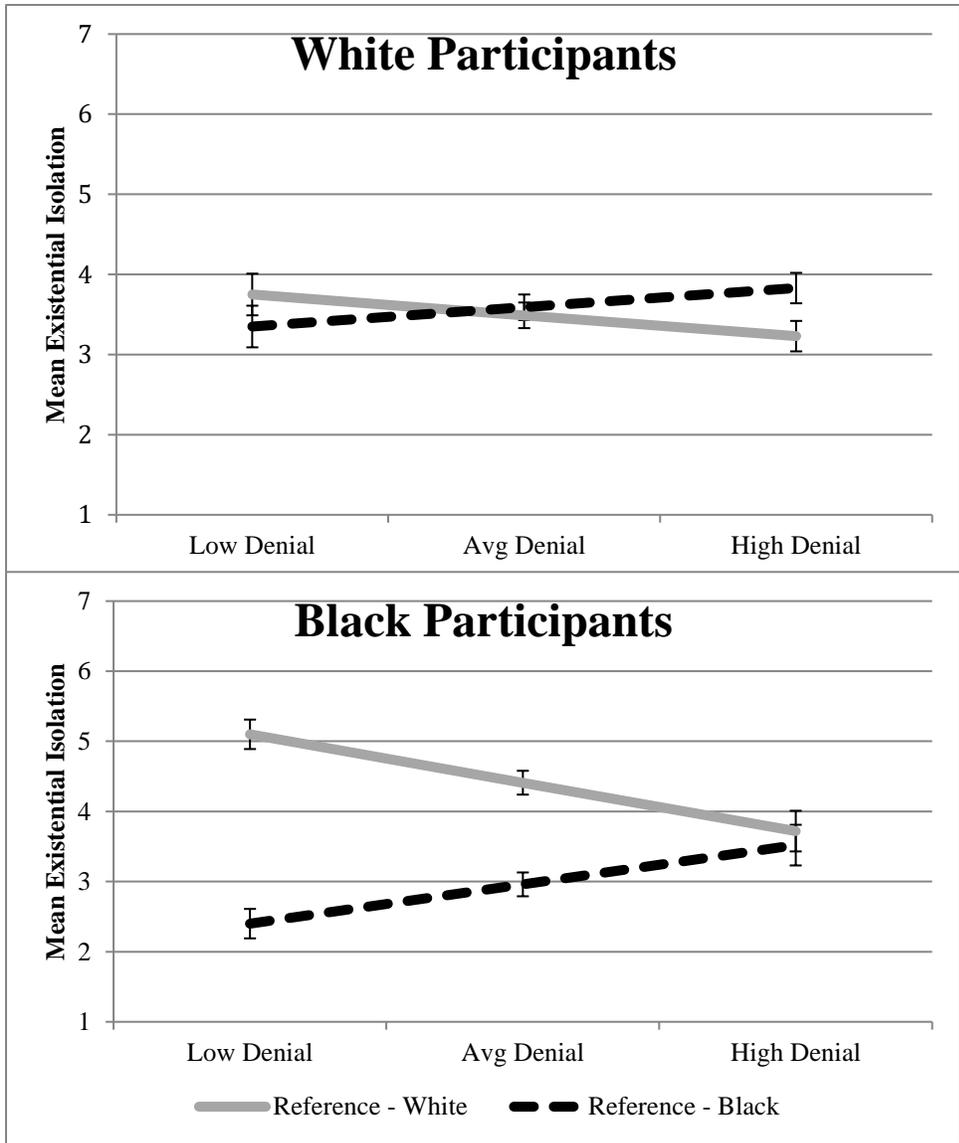


Figure 2. Three-way interaction between participant race, scale reference, and racial colorblindness predicting existential isolation in Study 1. Low = -1 standard deviation, Avg = mean, High = +1 standard deviation. Error bars reflect standard error.

Discussion

Results demonstrate that people report different degrees of EI depending on the social category of the participant and whom they are thinking about as their reference group. Unlike previous research, there was not an overall effect of participant race, though Black participants tended to report higher EI than White participants. This weaker main effect of participant race may in part reflect the impact of the reference group manipulation. Indeed, results found support

for the interaction hypothesis. Black participants reported lower EI when considering other members of their race compared to when considering White people. In contrast, White participants did not report significantly different EI when considering their own race or another race (though the mean EI reported in the Reference-Black condition was higher than in the Reference-White condition).

One interesting aspect of this interaction was that when comparing the race-congruent and race-incongruent conditions, Black participants reported less EI than White participants in the congruent condition, but greater EI in the incongruent condition. This may suggest that members of minoritized races (or at least Black participants) have more solidarity with their own race (and thus experience less EI when considering their own group). In contrast, White people may assume that other groups see and experience the world similarly as they do.

Study 1 also found a 3-way interaction between participant race, scale reference, and prejudice denial such that higher racial colorblindness endorsement predicted greater EI towards Black people and less EI towards White people (though the relative starting and ending values of these trends differed by participant race). Interestingly, higher prejudice denial appears to be associated with relatively less EI towards the majority group and more EI towards the minoritized group. This may reflect that those high in racial colorblindness, though believing that racial groups are treated equally, have been increasingly confronted with publicized alternative views of this reality (e.g., *Black Lives Matter*), ironically boosting the phenomenological divide. It should be reiterated, however, that the analyses were exploratory and thus interpretation speculative.

Thus far, Study 1 supported the hypothesis that self-reported EI can vary by scale framing with regard to race. Because race is generally associated with certain visible phenotypic

characteristics, it is less concealable than some other identities (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). Thus, perhaps those with a stigmatized and visible identity (i.e., being Black), readily assume that others who share such an identity would have similar perceptions or reactions and equally assume those who do not share the identity would not. Would these effects also occur when referencing others who share a concealable identity? Study 2 sought to replicate the general findings with a different social category: sexual orientation.

Study 2

Study 2 was conducted as a conceptual replication of Study 1 with a different social identity: sexual orientation. Sexual orientation was selected because it represents a concealable identity (Pachankis, 2007). Unlike individuals with visible identities, those with concealable identities or stigmas must face disclosure decisions regularly. Challenges associated with disclosure decisions, and potential threat and consequences of discovery, have pervasive implications for well-being and interpersonal relationships (Pachankis, 2007). Research has also found that those with stigmatized identities tend to report higher well-being when in the presence of others who share their stigma than when around those who do not (e.g., Frable et al., 1998; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). Additionally, the threat of discovery in each situation can lead to behavioral modification and increased stress (Lee & Craft, 2002; Moore & Tangney, 2017). Taken together, it is reasonable to expect that those with a concealable stigma would also report greater EI when considering those without a stigmatized status than when considering others who share their identity.

The hypotheses, methods, and analyses were preregistered. We hypothesized a replication of the scale reference by social identity interaction such that self-identified heterosexual participants will report greater EI when the scale references Lesbian or Gay

individuals than when the scale references heterosexual/straight individuals, and we anticipate self-identified Lesbian or Gay participants will report greater EI when the scale references heterosexual people than when the scale references other Lesbian or Gay people.

We also registered an exploratory moderation analysis utilizing a modified racial colorblindness scale such that the scale would reflect beliefs that homophobia is no longer a problem in the United States. If the general pattern from Study 1 replicates, greater denial of homophobia should predict higher EI regardless of participant sexual orientation. In other words, we did not necessarily anticipate a 3-way interaction between participant sexual orientation, scale reference, and prejudice denial predicting EI. Rather, we anticipated a 2-way interaction between condition and prejudice denial. We reasoned this would be the case for a few reasons. First, the effect size of the 3-way interaction in Study 1 was small. Additionally, simple slopes among Black and White participants in Study 1 suggested, regardless of participant race, as prejudice denial increased, so did EI towards Black individuals (and vice versa towards White individuals). We anticipate similar patterns in the present study (i.e., the 2-way interaction between condition and prejudice denial). However, there is not a strong reason to suspect that sexual minority and heterosexual individuals will also have different intercepts for prejudice denial, thus we do not anticipate a significant 3-way interaction. Of note, this represents the only exploratory analysis conducted.

Methods

Data were collected on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (mturk) via CloudResearch (Litman et al., 2017). Participants were recruited on the basis of sexual orientation (i.e., if they self-identified as heterosexual, or Gay, Lesbian, etc.).

Participants. Using the effect size of the interaction in Study 1 to determine an appropriate sample size for Study 2 in G*Power (Faul et al., 2017) using the same type of test with 95% power yielded a suggested total sample of 66 participants. Given the current study is being conducted with a novel social identity, and in the event the effect size of Study 2 is smaller than the one found in Study 1, we opted to collect a conservative sample of 400 participants.

A total of 394 participants completed the study for \$.25. Participant payment was based on available funding. Of these, 5 were excluded for having missing data, and 1 was excluded for listing “Hispanic” as their sexual orientation, leaving a final sample of 388 participants ($M_{age} = 36.13$, $SD = 12.09$) including 187 men and 200 women (1 participant reported “Other”). Of these, 310 identified as White, 28 as Black, 7 as Native American or Native Alaskan, 45 as Asian, 2 as Pacific Islander, and 9 as Other. Regarding sexual orientation, 205 identified as Heterosexual or straight and 183 identified as LGB+ (including Homosexual, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Other).

Procedure and materials. Participants completed the survey online. After agreeing to participate, participants completed the materials in the order listed below:

Existential Isolation Scale. Participants first completed the Existential Isolation Scale (Pinel et al., 2017), but this time modified to reference either Heterosexual/Straight ($n = 197$) or Homosexual/Gay or Lesbian ($n = 191$) individuals in both the instructions and question text. Both Heterosexual/Straight and Homosexual/Gay or Lesbian scale wordings had acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .91$ and $.94$, respectively).

Prejudice Denial. Denial of homophobia was assessed with 4 items adapted from the colorblindness scale used in Study 1. The colorblindness items were rephrased to reflect attitudes that homophobia is no longer an issue in American society. Items include, “Heterosexual/straight

people have certain advantages because of their sexual orientation”, “Sexual orientation plays an important role in who commits crimes”, “Homophobia in the U.S. occurs in rare, isolated situations”, and “Homophobia may have been a problem in the past, but it is not an important problem today.” Consistent with our pre-registered plan, one item (item 1) did not correlate well with the other three and was dropped, and reliability analysis indicated dropping a second item (item 2) would improve reliability from ($\alpha = .74$) to ($\alpha = .86$) and thus was removed. Results below are reported with the 2-item prejudice denial composite, but do not change when utilizing the 3-item version.

Demographics. Lastly, participants completed demographic questions assessing age, sex, sexual orientation, race, level of education, income, subjective socioeconomic status, and political orientation. Sexual orientation was assessed by asking participants “What is your sexual orientation?” and provided answer options for Heterosexual/Straight, Homosexual/Gay or Lesbian, Bisexual, Other. This variable was dummy coded into Heterosexual/Straight = 1; LGB+ = 2. Participants who identified as bisexual and Other ($n = 14$) were coded as 2 to better balance sample sizes. Excluding these participants did not change the results.

Results

A 2(participant sexual orientation: Heterosexual vs. LGB+) x 2(Scale Reference: Hetero vs. LGB) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of scale reference. Those in the Reference-Hetero condition reported greater EI ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.43$) than did those in the Reference-LGB condition ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.50$), $F(1,384) = 19.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$ 90% CI[.02, .09]. Results reveal no differences in self-reported EI between those identifying as Heterosexual ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.42$) and those identifying as LGB+ ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.54$), $F(1,384) = 1.69$, $p = .194$, η_p^2

= .004, 90% CI[.00, .02]. Results find the predicted interaction, $F(1,384) = 201.09, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .34, 90\% \text{ CI} [.28, .40]^3$ (see Figure 3).

Decomposing the interaction reveals that among Heterosexual participants, those in the Reference-Hetero condition reported lower EI ($M = 2.74, SD = 1.16$) than those in the Reference-LGB condition ($M = 3.92, SD = 1.42$), $F(1,203) = 42.13, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .17, 90\% \text{ CI} [.10, .25]$. Similarly, among LGB+ participants, those in the Reference-Hetero condition reported greater EI ($M = 4.30, SD = 1.24$) than those in the Reference-LGB condition ($M = 2.05, SD = .82$), $F(1,181) = 209.28, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .54, 90\% \text{ CI} [.46, .60]$.

Looking at this interaction differently, Heterosexual participants reported less EI in the Reference-Hetero ($M = 2.74, SD = 1.16$) condition than did LGB+ participants ($M = 4.30, SD = 1.24$), $F(1,195) = 82.68, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .30, 90\% \text{ CI} [.21, .38]$. Conversely, LGB+ participants reported less EI in the Reference-LGB condition ($M = 2.05, SD = .82$) than did Heterosexual participants ($M = 3.92, SD = 1.42$), $F(1,189) = 120.38, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .39, 90\% \text{ CI} [.30, .46]$.

We then compared the sexual orientation congruent conditions (i.e., Heterosexual participants in the Reference-Hetero condition vs. LGB+ participants in the Reference-LGB condition) and the sexual orientation incongruent conditions (i.e., Heterosexual participants in the Reference-LGB condition vs. LGB+ participants in the Reference-LGB condition). In the congruent conditions, Heterosexual participants reported greater EI ($M = 2.74, SD = 1.16$) than did LGB+ participants ($M = 2.05, SD = .82$), $F(1,192) = 22.40, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .10, 90\% \text{ CI} [.05, .18]$. In the incongruent conditions, Heterosexual participants reported lower EI ($M = 3.92, SD =$

³ Results did not change when controlling for prejudice denial, education, income, subjective socioeconomic status, political orientation, age, and sex as main effects or interactions with independent variables: $F(1,362) = 107.49, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .23, 90\% \text{ CI} [.16, .30]$ (see supplemental materials for full inferential statistics).

1.42) than did LGB+ participants ($M = 4.30, SD = 1.24$), $F(1,192) = 3.92, p = .049, \eta_p^2 = .02$, 90% CI[.00, .06].

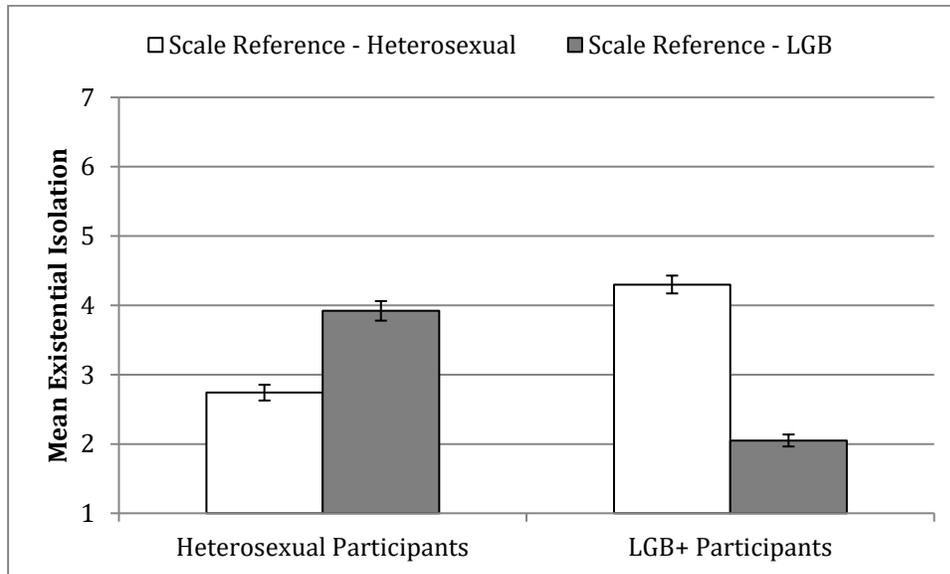


Figure 3. Participant sexual orientation by scale reference interaction predicting existential isolation in Study 2. LGB = Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual. Error bars reflect standard error.

To test the exploratory hypothesis regarding moderation by prejudice denial, we conducted a 2(sexual orientation: Heterosexual vs. LGB+) x 2(Scale Reference: Hetero vs. LGB) x centered prejudice denial regression predicting EI. Consistent with the exploratory hypothesis, results reveal a non-significant 3-way interaction, $F(1,380) = 1.08, p = .300, \eta_p^2 = .003$, 90% CI[.00, .02].⁴ However, we did find evidence for the predicted condition by prejudice denial interaction predicting EI, $F(1,380) = 33.91, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$, 90% CI[.04, .13] (see Figure 4). The 2-way interaction between participant sexual orientation and prejudice denial was not significant, $F(1,380) = 2.87, p = .091, \eta_p^2 = .01$, 90% CI[.00, .03].

⁴ While the 3-way was non-significant, the patterns of results closely resemble the patterns observed among Black and White participants in Study 1. Analysis and figures of the condition by prejudice denial interaction within heterosexual and LGB+ participants separately is included in the supplemental materials.

To decompose the condition by denial interaction, we utilized *PROCESS* (Hayes, 2013) model 1. *PROCESS* results reveal that at low and average denial, mean EI was higher in the Reference-Hetero condition ($M = 3.98$ and $M = 3.49$) than the Reference-LGB condition ($M = 2.39$ and $M = 3.06$), $t(384) = 8.39$, $p < .001$, 95% CI[1.22, 1.97] and $t(384) = 3.19$, $p = .002$, 95% CI[.17, .70], respectively. At high denial, mean EI was higher in the Reference-LGB condition ($M = 3.74$) than in the Reference-Hetero condition ($M = 2.98$), $t(384) = 3.93$, $p < .001$, 95% CI[-1.14, -.38].

Looking at this interaction differently, increased denial was associated with increased EI towards Lesbians and Gays, $b = .41$, $t(384) = 6.99$, $p < .001$, 95% CI[.30, .53], and with decreased EI towards Heterosexuals, $b = -.31$, $t(384) = 5.35$, $p < .001$, 95% CI[-.42, -.19].

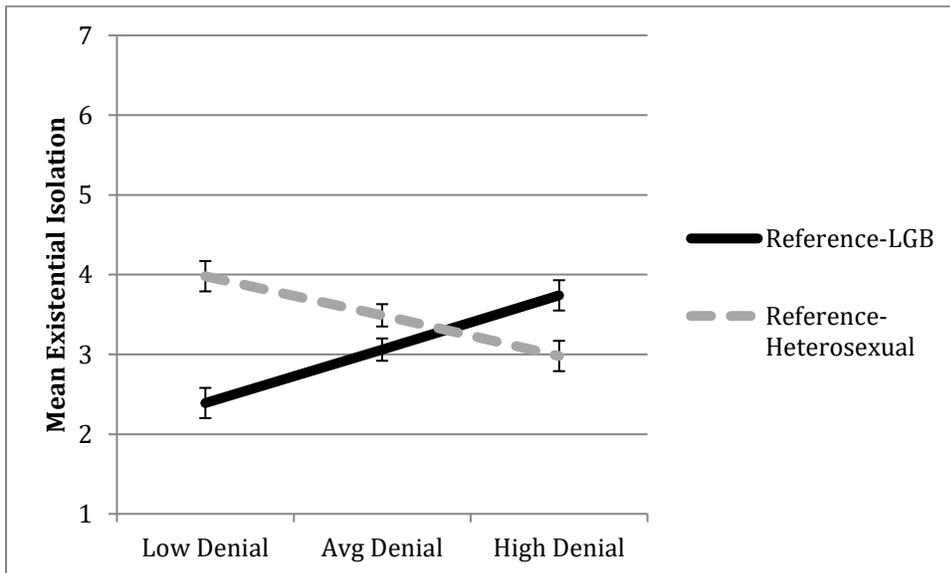


Figure 4. Study 2 interaction between scale reference condition and homophobia denial predicting existential isolation. LGB = Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual; Denial = homophobia denial. Error bars reflect standard error.

Discussion

Consistent with Study 1, Study 2 found support for the preregistered interaction between participant sexual orientation and scale reference. Both Heterosexual and LGB+ individuals

reported higher EI when the scale referenced a different sexual orientation than when the scale referenced their own. Also similar to White participants in Study 1 (i.e., the majority social identity), Heterosexual participants reported less variation than did LGB+ participants across conditions. Unlike Study 1 however, where White participants reported similar levels of EI regardless of the scale reference, Heterosexual participants' EI did depend on the scale reference. We return to this in the general discussion.

We also tested for possible moderation by prejudice denial. Consistent with the preregistered exploratory hypothesis, we did not find a 3-way interaction between scale reference, participant sexual orientation, and prejudice denial. Rather, we found a 2-way interaction between scale reference and denial. Regardless of participant sexual orientation, increased denial that homophobia is a contemporary problem was associated with lower EI towards heterosexuals, but greater EI towards Lesbians and Gays. This general pattern was consistent with Study 1. Together, increased endorsement that homophobia is no longer a problem in society was associated with greater shared perceptions with majority group members and less shared perceptions from minoritized individuals.

The assumption of Studies 1 and 2 is that the higher EI found in Pinel et al. (2021) occurs partly because people's generalized other is a reflection of American society's majority groups (i.e., White, heterosexual). However, Studies 1 and 2 did not include a condition that did not specify a reference group. Thus, it is unclear whether the congruent group specification decreased EI, the incongruent group specification increased EI, or both. Clarity on this point could be advanced with a neutral reference condition that does not specify a congruent or incongruent group.

Additionally, it is possible that the observed effects are due to frequency of contact with members of other groups. Specifically, perhaps White participants in Study 1 rarely interact with Black people, and thus have less experience to inform their sense of whether Black people have similar experiences as they do. Conversely, Black people are less able to avoid interacting with White people (Anicich et al., 2021), and thus have more experiences to inform whether they feel existentially isolated from White people. Study 3 was conducted to address these concerns.

Study 3

In Study 3, White and Black participants were recruited and first asked to report contact with White and Black people over the previous month. Following the contact questions, participants completed an EI scale with reference to White individuals, to Black individuals, or to a scale without a specific reference. Participants then completed a brief measure of depression, anxiety, and stress before completing demographic questions.

We expect to replicate the patterns observed in Study 1 such that Black participants will report higher EI when completing the scale with reference to White people than when completing the scale with reference to other Black people. We also predict that EI in both scale-reference conditions will significantly differ from EI in a no-reference control condition. Conversely, consistent with Study 1, we do not expect self-reported EI to vary by condition among White participants.

Analyses of the additional measures included in Study 3 can inform further questions. First, if the hypothesized effects are independent of contact with members of other races, they should not be reduced by controlling for amount of contact with members of other races. Second, a brief measure of mental health concerns was included as an exploratory outcome. Previous research has found EI to correlate with lower mental health (e.g., Constantino et al., 2019) and

lower well-being (e.g., Helm et al., 2019b), thus we examined whether these correlations could partially be explained by EI towards specific reference groups.

Methods

Data collection followed the same procedures as in Study 1, with the exception of an additional scale to complete.

Participants. Sample size was determined by utilizing G*Power (Faul et al., 2017) and the large interaction effect size ($\eta_p^2 = .17$) in Study 1. An a priori power analysis using an ANCOVA with 6 groups and 2 covariates with 95% power suggested a total sample size of 85 participants. We targeted 300 participants (150 Black, 150 White) as a conservative estimate.

A total of 304 participants completed the study for \$1.00. Of these, 14 were excluded for not identifying as either Black or White, leaving a final sample of 290 participants ($M_{age} = 40.58$, $SD = 13.55$) including 110 men, 179 women, and 1 who indicated Other. The sample consisted of 148 self-identified White and 142 self-identified Black participants.

Procedure and materials. The study procedure and methods were identical to Study 1, except racial colorblindness was not measured⁵, and the following scales were added:

Race Contact. To measure frequency of intergroup contact, we adapted a question from Shelton and Richeson (2005) that asked participants to “Think about your interactions with people outside your household over the past month, approximately what percentage of those interactions have been with...” and report the percentage of interactions using a sliding scale from 0% to 100% for both Black/African American individuals and White/Caucasian Individuals.

⁵ In hindsight, we acknowledge the utility of including a measure of prejudice denial given the results in Studies 1 and 2. However, at the time, we were focused on potential insights from inclusion of a neutral reference group condition and a measure of intergroup contact.

Existential Isolation Scale. Participants were randomly assigned to complete an EI scale referencing Caucasian/White people ($n = 97$; $\alpha = .92$), African-American/Black ($n = 94$; $\alpha = .90$), or without a specific reference (i.e., an unmodified EI scale; $n = 97$; $\alpha = .91$).

Mental Health. Participants completed the 21-item Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). This scale contains three 7-item subscales measuring depression (e.g., “I couldn’t seem to experience any positive feeling at all,” $\alpha = .94$), anxiety (e.g., “I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself,” $\alpha = .91$), and stress (e.g., “I found it hard to wind down,” $\alpha = .92$). Participants were asked to indicate how much each statement applied to them over the past week from 1 (did not apply to me at all) to 4 (Applied to me very much, or most of the time).

Results

Table 1 contains zero-order correlations with EI from each condition. We first assessed whether Black and White participants differed in their frequency of intergroup contact (see Table 2).

Table 1

Zero-order correlations between continuous variables and existential isolation from each condition

	Black Contact	White Contact	Stress	Anxiety	Depression
EI Neutral	-.247*	.026	.319***	.239*	.314**
EI Black	-.315**	.354***	-.018	-.021	-.016
EI White	.342***	-.393***	.071	-.024	.088
Black Contact	1	-.524***	.098	.190**	.077
White Contact		1	.099	.010	.021
Stress			1	.802***	.794***
Anxiety				1	.770***
Depression					1

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. EI = existential isolation. Each EI refers to EI within a condition. Contact = percentage reported contact with White or Black individuals over past month.

Table 2*Descriptive and comparative statistics for intergroup contact by participant race*

	Participant Race		Test of significance
	Black	White	
Black Contact	63.00 (29.47)	19.43 (22.18)	$t(286) = 14.22, p < .001, d = 1.68, 95\% \text{ CI}[1.41, 1.94]$
White Contact	37.39 (27.08)	71.54 (26.81)	$t(286) = 10.75, p < .001, d = 1.27, 95\% \text{ CI}[1.01, 1.52]$
Test of significance	$t(139) = 6.92, p < .001, d = .59, 95\% \text{ CI} [.41, .76]$	$t(148) = 15.51, p < .001, d = 1.28, 95\% \text{ CI}[1.06, 1.49]$	

Note: Contact = reported percent contact with White or Black individuals over past month. Significant tests compare the row (or column) means, respectively. Black participants reported significantly greater contact with White people than the amount of contact with Black people reported by White participants, $F(1,286) = 38.11, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .12, 90\% \text{ CI} [.07, .18]$.

We then assessed our hypothesis and conducted a 2(participant race: White vs. Black) x 3(scale reference: White vs. Black vs. No-Reference) ANOVA predicting EI. Results reveal a main effect of scale reference, $F(2,282) = 14.17, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09, 90\% \text{ CI} [.04, .14]$.

Bonferroni post hoc comparisons reveal that EI in the Reference-Black condition ($M = 3.17$) differed from the Reference-White condition ($M = 4.16$), $t(189) = 4.69, p < .001, d = .68, 95\% \text{ CI} [.39, .97]$ and the No-Reference condition ($M = 3.77$), $t(189) = 2.86, p = .007, d = .41, 95\% \text{ CI} [.13, .70]$. There was not a main effect of participant race, $F(1,288) = .03, p = .865, \eta_p^2 = .00, 90\% \text{ CI} [.00, .004]$.

Results also reveal the predicted interaction, $F(2,282) = 21.27, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .13, 90\% \text{ CI} [.07, .19]^6$ (see Figure 5). Decomposing this interaction reveals that among White participants, EI did not significantly differ by condition, $F(2,145) = 1.16, p = .317, \eta_p^2 = .02, 90\% \text{ CI} [.00, .05]$. Conversely, EI significantly differed across conditions among Black participants, $F(2,137)$

⁶ Results did not substantively change when controlling for contact with White and Black people, education, income, subjective socioeconomic status, sex, age, and political orientation as main effects or interactions with independent variables: $F(2,248) = 3.92, p = .021, \eta_p^2 = .03, 90\% \text{ CI} [.003, .07]$ (see supplemental materials for full inferential statistics).

= 37.60, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .35$, 90% CI[.24, .44]. Utilizing a Bonferroni post hoc test reveals that compared to the No-Reference condition ($M = 3.59$), Black participants reported greater EI in the Reference-White condition ($M = 4.88$), $t(92) = 4.81$, $p < .001$, $d = .99$, 95% CI[.56, 1.42] and less EI in the Reference-Black condition ($M = 2.61$), $t(92) = 3.77$, $p = .001$, $d = .78$, 95% CI[.36, 1.20].

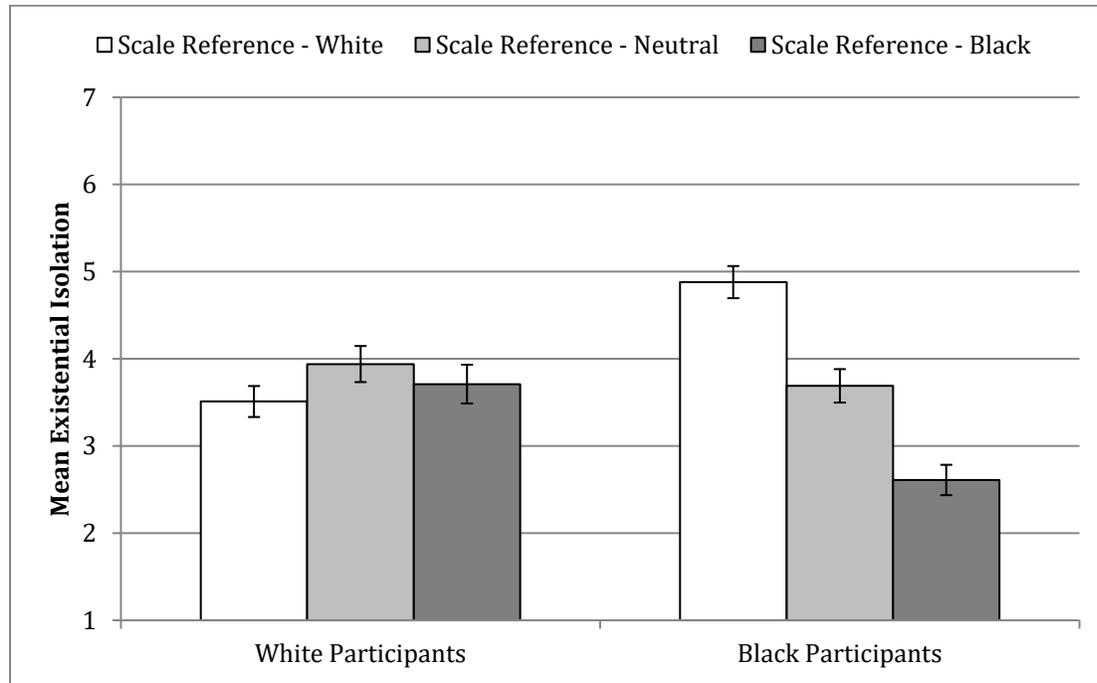


Figure 5. Participant race by scale reference interaction predicting existential isolation in Study 3. Error bars reflect standard error.

Racial differences in self-reported EI were examined within each condition separately. Within the Reference-White condition, Black participants reported significantly greater EI ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.25$) than did White participants ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.27$), $F(1,95) = 28.59$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .23$, 90% CI[.12, .34]. Within the Reference-Black condition, White participants reported significantly greater EI ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.54$) than did Black participants ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.18$), $F(1,92) = 15.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$, 90% CI[.05, .24]. Lastly, within the No-Reference condition, reported EI did not significantly differ for Black participants ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.33$)

and White participants ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.45$), $F(1,95) = 1.52$, $p = .221$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, 90% CI[.00, .08].

When testing the effects of scale reference on mental health via EI, we found no indirect effects from condition to stress, anxiety, or depression via EI for either Black or White participants (all indirect effect confidence intervals included zero).⁷

Discussion

Study 3 replicated the general pattern of findings observed in Study 1. Black participants reported greater EI when completing a scale referencing White people than when referencing Black people. Moreover, these conditions differed from a no-reference control condition, suggesting that the ingroup and outgroup reference can both decrease and increase EI, respectively. Also replicating Study 1, White participants' self-reported EI did not differ by scale reference conditions. These differences could not be accounted for by frequency of contact with Black or White people, political orientation, subjective socioeconomic status, income, or sex.

In an exploratory effort, Study 3 examined whether differences in scale-reference EI would predict subsequent mental health concerns. Contrary to expectations, self-reported EI did not predict subsequent depression, stress, or anxiety among Black or White participants. It is possible that the DASS-21 was not sensitive enough to be impacted by a brief scale-framing manipulation. We speculate further on this possibility in the general discussion.

General Discussion

The present research tested whether self-reported EI would vary based on the individual's minoritized status and the particular reference group in question. In Study 1, White participants reported similar levels of EI regardless of the scale reference while Black participants reported

⁷ Exploratory analyses examine basic relationships with mental health outcomes and EI within each condition for White and Black participants separately (see supplemental materials).

higher EI when referencing White people and lower EI when referencing Black people. In Study 2, both Heterosexual and LGB+ participants reported higher EI when the scale referenced individuals with a different sexual orientation than when the scale referenced others who share their sexual orientation. Study 3 replicated the effects observed in Study 1 and found that self-reported EI among Black participants in conditions with a scale reference significantly differed from a no-reference control condition. Across all studies, effects were robust to controlling for relevant demographic variables, and illuminate that reference group effects occur for individuals with concealable and non-concealable identities.

The present studies have several important implications. First, Studies 1 and 3 reveal that White participants appear to feel similarly existentially isolated from (and/or connected to) racial ingroups and outgroups. In other words, White participants felt that both Black and White people generally share their experiences and perceptions. Conversely, Black participants did not feel as though White people see the world the way they do but feel as though other Black people do. These general patterns were different for Heterosexual and LGB+ participants. Study 2 revealed that people tend to feel as though they see the world similarly to other members of their sexual orientation than to members of a different sexual orientation.

One possible explanation for the differences in these patterns could be social desirability concerns. White people may claim that they see the world similarly to Black people because to admit otherwise might convey privilege or prejudice. Another possibility could be the amount of experience with (or exposure to) differences in perspective. For example, people of color are likely acutely aware that American culture predominantly reflects White culture. In contrast, White people tend not to be aware of this fact (e.g., Kraus et al., 2019), or actively deny it (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2012). Research on intergroup disparities highlights that members of

advantaged groups may promote the status quo in order to maintain social hierarchies (e.g., Saguy et al., 2008). Thus White participants may assert that Black people see the world the same way they do in order to legitimize social stratification. Conversely, Black participants may highlight differences in perspective as a means to challenge power dynamics (Saguy et al., 2008). With this in mind, White participants may report no difference in their EI when thinking about people of their own race or a different race because White people are socialized to believe that racial identity does not play a major role in shaping one's attitudes, perspectives, and identity development.

Heterosexual participants, in contrast, are perhaps more aware of how sexual orientation plays a role in shaping attitudes and experiences (e.g., Worthen, 2018). Even though racial inequality and tensions have a much longer explicit history in the United States than rights for sexual minorities, (White) Americans may be more likely to acknowledge the effects of sexual orientation on development and identity than the effects of race. If true, it would make sense that Heterosexual participants reported different levels of EI depending on the scale reference.

While not testing awareness of cultural mores directly, Study 3 included a measure of contact with each racial group and found controlling for contact did not change the results. However, Study 3 only used a single item measure of contact with each racial group. Though this approach has been adopted by previous studies (Shelton & Richeson, 2005), the intergroup contact literature suggests important differences between quality and quantity contact (e.g., Van Dick et al., 2004). The present research only utilized a quantity measure, which does not present the full range of types of intergroup contact.

Studies 1 and 2 also found that denial that prejudice towards a minoritized group is problematic in contemporary America was associated with lower EI towards majority group

members and higher EI towards the minoritized group. As noted above, higher denial is associated with greater racial bias (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). Thus in the present context, the belief that minoritized groups are treated equally may ironically fuel the phenomenological divide between groups, regardless of the social status of the participant. Future studies might seek to replicate these effects with measures that tap into different dimensions of prejudice.

Implications for Social Connection

Experiences of EI represent the sense that one has different perceptions or reactions than others and represents a form of social disconnection. Perceived connection with others has numerous intergroup benefits. In terms of race relations, social validation from other Black students of one's experiences on predominantly White college campuses helps buffer against the consequences of racism (Lee & Ahn, 2013). In an experience-sampling study, participants reported more satisfaction and fewer negative physical symptoms on days when they felt understood by others (Lun et al., 2008).

While previous research underscores the importance of subjective validation, the present studies did not find evidence for scale reference effects on mental health concerns via EI. However, consistent with prior work (Constantino et al., 2019), EI in the neutral condition was significantly correlated with depression, stress, and anxiety. One possible reason for the null indirect relationships in the scale reference conditions could be because minoritized people are able to separate their beliefs about race relations from their mental well-being (e.g., Seder & Oishi, 2009). Another possibility is experiences of EI, particularly from White people or if differences in perspective are attributed to prejudice, may lead minoritized people to increase identification with their groups thereby offsetting the negative impact (see Schmitt &

Branscombe, 2002). Taken together, whether EI towards various social identities impacts mental health outcomes remains an open question.

Future research is also needed to examine different forms, nuance, and phenomenology of social disconnection. As noted in the introduction, there are clearly overlaps between the constructs of EI and felt (mis)understanding. Both have to do with the degree to which an individual feels as though others understand, perceive, and share one's perceptions and experiences. However, there are also conceptual differences, such as the trait vs. state focus of how they are typically conceptualized, and thus work is needed to better understand how they contribute to each other. It may be that EI captures a broader sense of social disconnection of which felt understanding is an important part. From this perspective, feeling misunderstood – particularly if experienced repeatedly – would contribute to a sense of EI. But so too would feeling that one does not “get” others (as opposed to others not “getting” oneself), as would feeling apart not just from people, but from the broader world. Indeed, Yalom (1980) discusses that people often feel apart from the universe or world in his original writings about EI.

In addition to such conceptual questions, it is important to ask if participants' responses in the present studies reflect EI or felt (mis)understanding. Although the present studies were not designed to address this issue (i.e., felt (mis)understanding was not measured), some speculative points are worth considering. First, the validation efforts of the EI scale reveal predictors of scale responses that follow from conceptualizations of EI but less cleanly from felt (mis)understanding. For example, felt misunderstanding was not found to predict health symptoms (Lun et al., 2008), though EI has been found to predict both depression and suicide ideation (Helm et al., 2020a). Second, of the six items in the scale, one item specifically asks whether “other people usually do not understand my experiences.” If the present findings are

more accurately considered as felt (mis)understanding, than this item should show stronger effects of the reference group manipulation (or if removed, the remaining five items should show weaker effects). Post hoc analyses do not support this interpretation (see supplemental materials).

Of course, these ideas are speculative and an important agenda for future research is the extent to which felt understanding contributes to, and overlap with, EI (and vice versa). By raising the specter of such integrative theorizing, perhaps especially in the context of marginalized identity, the present studies compliment prior work (e.g., Seder & Oishi, 2009) to offer a generative foundation for future insight.

Limitations

Despite the contributions of the present research, there are also additional limitations to those discussed above. First, the present studies only examine reference group effects for two social groups. While effects were observed for individuals with both concealable and non-concealable identities, it remains an open question about which social groups would most likely experience these effects. In general, we suspect that the effects would most likely occur among groups facing clear stigmas, or among groups whose experiences are often denied (e.g., those with mental illnesses or physical disabilities, those who have experienced trauma) *and* also have supportive communities (e.g., Black and sexual minority communities are thriving). In contrast, individuals with non-stigmatized minority identities or those without clear supportive communities should be less likely to exhibit these effects. Future work may also consider the effects of priming social identities separately from referencing identities within a scale. This question of simple group salience is different from the current focus on the sense of connection one feels to in or out-groups, but is important.

Another limitation to generalizability is that the present studies were conducted online with American participants; other study populations within the United States, or in other cultural contexts, may produce different effects. For example, it is possible that in more collectivist contexts with more emphasis on attending to the needs of others, members of minoritized and majority groups would be better at identifying and understanding the experiences of others, thus not leading to discrepant EI.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present work highlights the importance of social identities when considering experiences of existential isolation and epistemic validation. The work also underscores that minoritized groups members report feeling more existentially connected to others who share their social identity, and less connected to those who do not share their identity. Among majority group members, the evidence is mixed. Overall, these studies support recent public polling and sentiments that there exists a phenomenological divide between majority and minoritized groups in American society.

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