

Framing Intergroup Inequality as Structural Improves White American Support for Equity-Enhancing Policy

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Abstract

Economic inequality harms the majority of Americans, yet psychological processes can hinder White Americans' recognition of its racial patterning and structural causes, which has implications for support of equity-enhancing policies. The researchers hypothesized that making the racial components of inequality salient would, all else equal, decrease White Americans' support for policies aimed at ensuring economic equality. However, they also hypothesized that providing context for racial inequality, by highlighting its structural causes, would increase White Americans' support for policies aimed at ensuring economic equality. Though the individual study results were idiosyncratic, these hypotheses were supported in a meta-analysis across two experiments (N1 = 873; N2 = 756) that manipulated both the racial salience of inequality and the provision of structural context. The studies indicate that intergroup concerns among White Americans can impede efforts to address inequality, but contextualizing racial inequality as structurally-derived can help to overcome such obstacles.

Framing Intergroup Inequality as Structural Improves White American Support for Equity-Enhancing Policy

By some indicators, economic inequality in the US is at its highest levels since the 1920s (Piketty, 2014), and has been racially patterned since the nation's founding (Kraus et al., 2019). Although policies that redistribute resources away from the wealthiest people in US society would benefit the overwhelming majority (Saez & Zucman, 2016; Hamilton & Darity, 2010), White Americans appear to be less supportive of these policies insofar as they see them as threatening their racial ingroup status (Brown, Jacoby-Senghor, Raymundo, 2022). In the present research, we investigate ways to message about equity-enhancing policies that bolster support among White Americans.

Growing inequality remains a major societal problem (e.g. McCall, 2016; 2013), but policy experts have struggled to motivate support for equity-enhancing policy. Attempts to inform people about policy interventions have had mixed success (e.g., Heiserman et al., 2020; McCall et al., 2017). Some research concerning White American support for equity-enhancing policy indicates that White Americans stereotype Black Americans as poor and are less supportive of policies when they believe the beneficiaries of these policies are Black (Lei & Bodenhausen, 2017; Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; 2021). Several studies suggest that perceptions of inequality are shaped by individual-level support for societal hierarchy (Kteily, Sheehy-Skeffington, & Ho, 2017), and that equality is threatening to White Americans' ingroup status (e.g., Lowery, Unzueta, & Knowles, 2013; Brown, Jacoby-Senghor, Raymundo, 2022). White Americans are also more motivated to maintain the status quo (e.g., Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014) and, when threatened, endorse more conservative political ideology (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Craig, Rucker & Richeson, 2018).

Some scholars have advocated adopting race-neutral policy messaging to allay White racial threat (Saha & Shipman, 2008; Sniderman et al., 1996 [as cited in Brock-Petrossius & Gilens, 2024]). Some research indicates that messages focusing on class-based inequality more effectively raise White American support for equity-enhancing policy than messages emphasizing racial inequality (English & Kalla, 2021). Yet, race-neutral political messaging is likely to have pernicious consequences for advancing racial equality. Race-neutral messages contribute to color-blindness, which perpetuates subtle racism and inhibits efforts to address inequality (Dovidio, Gaertner & Saguy, 2015; Chow & Knowles, 2015; Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Race-neutral messaging is also likely to contribute to ignorance of the racial patterning of inequality and its persistence over time (Kraus et al., 2017). Recognizing the systemic racialization of inequality is therefore necessary to promote meaningful advancement in racial equity and to combat political backsliding (Bonam et al., 2019).

White Americans make up the majority of the US population, so persuading them to support equity-enhancing policy without conveying inequality in a colorblind fashion is an important avenue of research. What kinds of policy messages garner White American support without raising concerns about status loss? How racial inequality is invoked and framed matters: Some empirical research indicates that making a superordinate, common ingroup identity salient can reduce intergroup threat among Black and White Americans (Riek et al., 2010; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2014). Other work indicates that nonjudgmental listening combined with data on structural racism can reduce misperceptions of the racial-wealth gap (Callaghan et al., 2021). Still, other work finds that messages identifying a common adversary (Lake & Voss, 2018) or highlighting shared discrimination experiences (Niederdeppe et al., 2025; Cortland et al., 2017) can improve cross-racial solidarity and equity-enhancing policy support.

Identifying the social structures that perpetuate racial inequality may improve support for equity-enhancing policy, but White Americans appear to be ignorant of such structures. Structural racism is the collection of policies, laws, and institutions which contribute to racial inequality (Rucker & Richeson, 2021b). Structural racism is distinct from interpersonal racism, which is characterized by prejudice and discrimination towards members of a marginalized racial group. Despite the fact that structural racism contributes significantly to persistent racial inequality (Richeson, Rucker & Brown, 2025), White Americans perceive interpersonal racism as more common than structural racism (Unzueta & Lowery, 2008; Rucker & Richeson, 2021b). These perceptions have been linked to ignorance regarding the history of racism in the US and the denial of current racism (Nelson, Adams & Salter, 2019; Bonam et al., 2019), and are likely motivated by efforts to protect White Americans' racial ingroup identity and justify their position atop the racial hierarchy (Knowles et al., 2014; Kteily & Sheehy-Skeffington, 2017) .

White Americans might be compelled to deny the existence of structural inequality insofar as recognizing structural racial inequality implicates their racial group. Unzueta and Lowery (2008) found that structural inequality messages which highlight White people as the beneficiaries of unfair group advantages threatened White Americans' self-image and made it harder for White Americans to personally distance themselves from racial inequality.

Alternatively, previous work has demonstrated that framing racial-economic inequality in structural terms may improve policy support among White Americans (Adams et al., 2008). Adams and colleagues (2008) found that structural messaging about racial inequality increased acknowledgement of systemic racism and improved support for anti-racist policies relative to a standard (i.e., interpersonal) account of racial inequality. Consistent with this argument: Recent correlational work finds that individuals who hold structural understandings of racial inequality

are more likely to recognize racial disparities in the criminal justice system (Rucker & Richeson, 2021a).

Racial status threat may help to explain these discrepant findings. Learning about racial inequality in structural terms can activate White racial threat *if* White Americans are explicitly implicated as the perpetrators or beneficiaries of inequality. Alternatively, framing racial inequality in structural terms may be less likely to activate White Americans' group status concerns, particularly if a structural account of racial-economic inequality focuses on the policies and laws that create and maintain inequality, as opposed to racially prejudiced actors. Thus, efforts to raise awareness of, and reduce the extent of, racial-economic inequality may benefit from messages that emphasize its structural foundations. Across the present research, we explore how messages that highlight racial-economic inequality and detail how inequality is embedded in social structures shape support for equity-enhancing policies, and potentially deactivate racial threat among White Americans.

The Current Research

The above analysis sets the stage for our two primary hypotheses: First, we hypothesized that making race salient would reduce White Americans' support for equity-enhancing policies relative to framing inequality in class-based (and thus, race-blind) terms. However, for our second hypothesis, we predicted that framing racial inequality in structural terms would improve White Americans' support for equity-enhancing policy relative to merely making race salient. We test these hypotheses with two experiments that manipulate the racial salience of economic inequality and the provision of structural explanations for the persistence of inequality, and then we examine White American support for equity-enhancing policy under each of these messaging conditions.

Study 1

In Study 1, we examined how messages that make race and structures of inequality salient shape White Americans' support for equity-enhancing policy. We designed an experimental survey with three conditions. In the *Class Inequality* condition participants were exposed to information about rising economic inequality and structural barriers to economic mobility in the U.S. In the *Racial Inequality* condition, participants were exposed to information about both rising economic inequality and the structural forces (e.g., laws, institutions) that perpetuate racial economic inequality. In the control condition (*Racial Demographics*), participants were exposed to information that made race salient, but did not explicitly discuss racial inequality. We tested two primary hypotheses in this study: First, we predicted that White Americans in the *Racial Demographics* condition would report less support for equity-enhancing policies relative to those in the *Class Inequality* condition. Second, we predicted that White Americans in the *Racial Inequality* condition would report significantly more support for equity-enhancing policy relative to those in the *Racial Demographics* condition.

Method

The methods and materials for this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board at [blinded for review].

Transparency and Openness

Details of our manipulations and the measures used in this study can be found in the Supplementary Materials. All data and analysis code can be found [here](#). Data were cleaned and analyzed using R version 4.4.2 and R Studio version 2024.12.0+467 (2024). We did not pre-register this study's design and analysis, as previous literature has provided mixed evidence for

the effects of framing racial inequality in structural terms. For this reason, we view these and other data on similar questions as exploratory, not definitive.

Participants

We conducted a power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the sample size needed to replicate the effect of exposure to racialized inequality on racial threat found in a pilot study, $d = .26$. To account for attrition, we recruited 930 White American participants via TurkPrime Panels, an online survey recruiting platform that allows for targeted sampling of demographic subgroups. We excluded those who admitted (at the end of the survey) that some of their responses were jokes or random ($n = 57$). Thus, 873 participants remained for analysis. All analyses use these participants except in cases of missing data. A sensitivity analysis revealed that our sample of $N = 873$ participants provided us with 80% power to detect an effect size of $d = .21$. The sample was on average 51.89 years old ($SD = 15.10$), and less male ($n = 325$) than female ($n = 539$), ($n = 4$) identified as something not listed. On average, participants were socially ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.75$) and economically ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.73$) moderate (1 = *Very Liberal*, 7 = *Very Conservative*).

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants read through one of three articles and completed a manipulation check (Supplementary Methods 1). Participants then reported their support for equity-enhancing policies, responded to a measure of perceived anti-White bias, and responded to several additional psychological measures (Supplementary Methods 2). Finally, participants completed a general demographics survey, after which they were debriefed and compensated for their participation.

Materials and measures

Inequality framing manipulation. Participants were assigned to one of three experimental conditions. In the *Class Inequality* condition, participants read an article which detailed rising economic inequality in the U.S. Likewise, participants in the *Racial Inequality* condition also read an article about rising economic inequality, however they received additional information concerning racial disparities in opportunity and economic outcomes. Participants in the *Racial Demographics* control condition read an article describing racial demographics in the contemporary U.S (Supplementary Methods 3).

Support for equity-enhancing policy. We administered four items, adapted from previous research (McCall et al., 2017), to assess support for equity-enhancing policies (e.g., reducing income gaps, federal job guarantee programs; for item details, see Supplementary Methods 4). Responses were measured on a Likert-style scale ranging from 1 (the government should not implement this policy) to 7 (the government should implement this policy), and formed a reliable composite measure ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.66$; $\alpha = .85$).

Perceived anti-White bias. To measure threat perceptions, we assessed judgments of anti-White bias using an 8-item measure adapted from Wilkins and Kaiser (2014). A sample item included was, “Whites are victims of racial bias”. Participants provided responses on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). We averaged participants' responses into a composite with higher numbers reflecting greater perceptions of anti-White bias ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.19$; $\alpha = .85$).

Results

Participants in the *Racial Demographics* (87.9%), *Class Inequality* (84.1%), and *Racial Inequality* (97.2%) conditions all showed better than chance recall of the information presented in the experimental materials ($t(289) = 15.86$, $p < .001$, $d = .93$). A chi-square test revealed

significant differences between conditions in recall, $\chi^2(2, N = 873) = 28.03, p < .001$. We speculate that this recall pattern may be due to the novelty of the structural framing of the *Class Inequality* condition.

Support for Equity-enhancing Policy

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) examined the composite of equity-enhancing policy support as the dependent variable across conditions and revealed an overall effect of condition (see Figure 1), $F(2, 868) = 6.19, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .01$. We then examined pairwise comparisons to test condition differences in support for equity-enhancing policy. White Americans supported equity-enhancing policy more in the *Class Inequality* condition ($M = 4.59, SD = 1.71$), relative to those in the *Racial Demographics* condition ($M = 4.11, SD = 1.58$), $t(868) = 3.51, p < .001, d = 0.29$. For our second hypothesis, White Americans reported significantly greater support for equity-enhancing policy in the *Racial Inequality* condition ($M = 4.38, SD = 1.66$), relative to those in the *Racial Demographics* control condition ($M = 4.11, SD = 1.58$), $t(868) = 1.98, p = .049, d = 0.17$. We did not observe a statistically significant difference between the *Racial Inequality* condition ($M = 4.38, SD = 1.66$) and the *Class Inequality* condition, $t(868) = 1.50, p = .133, d = 0.12$.



Figure 1. Support for Equity-enhancing Policy by Condition Assignment in Study 1

Note: Individual colored dots represent unique responses, whereas single black dots indicate means and bands represent 95% confidence intervals. Experimental conditions are color-coded: Green dots represent participants in the *Class Inequality* condition, red dots represent participants in the *Racial Demographics* condition, and blue dots represent participants in the *Racial Inequality* condition. Higher scores indicate greater policy support.

Perceived anti-White bias

We also explored between-condition differences in racial threat, measured by reports of anti-White bias. A one-way ANOVA revealed a non-significant effect of condition, $F(2, 869) = 2.29, p = .102, \eta_p^2 = .01$. Given that we were specifically interested in the difference in racial threat between the two racially-salient conditions, we examined pairwise comparisons of racial threat between the *Racial Inequality* and the *Racial Demographics* conditions. As displayed in

Figure 2, we found a significant difference in reported anti-White bias between the *Racial Inequality* ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.15$) and the *Racial Demographics* conditions ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.16$), $t(869) = 2.03$, $p = .042$, $d = 0.17$).

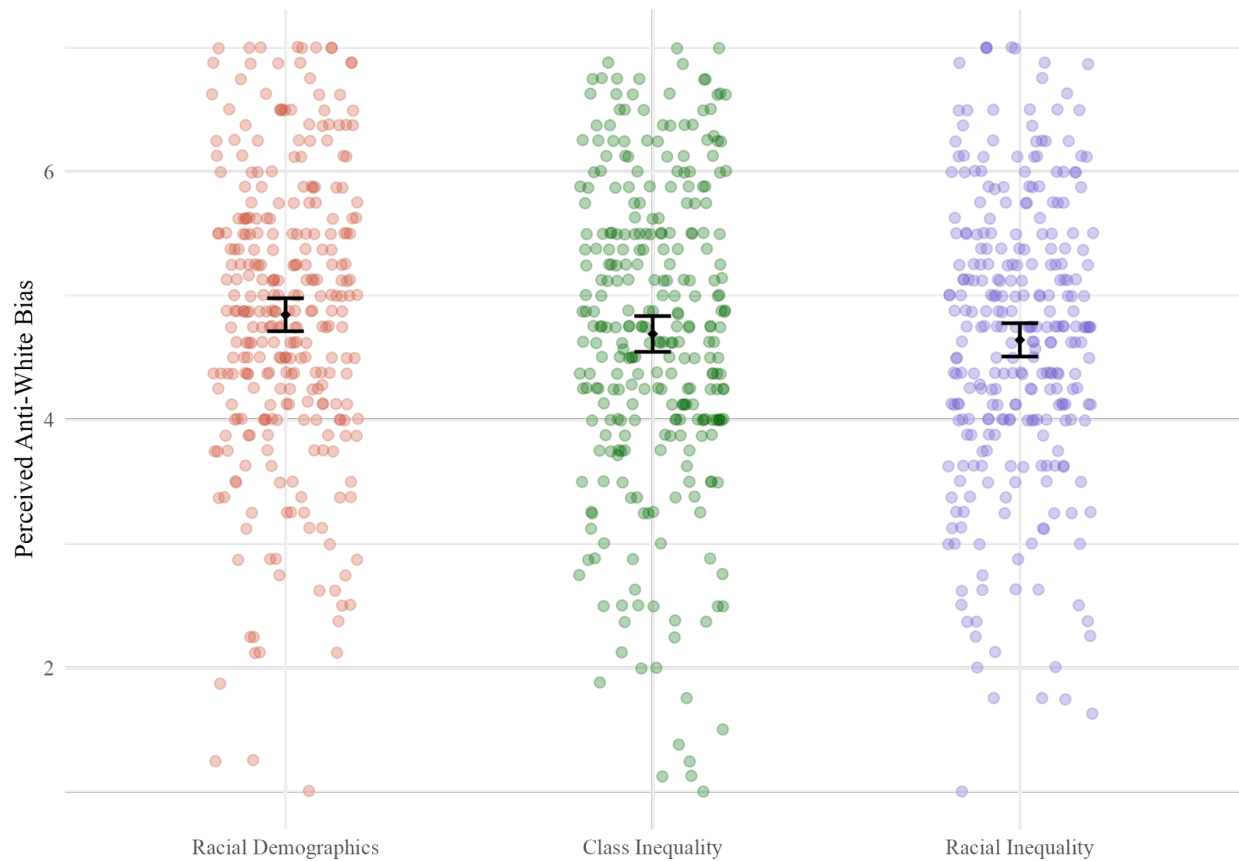


Figure 2. Racial Threat (Measured by Perceived Anti-White Bias) by Condition Assignment in Study 1

Note: Individual colored dots represent unique responses, whereas single black dots indicate means and bands represent 95% confidence intervals. Experimental conditions are color-coded: Green dots represent participants in the *Class Inequality* condition, red dots represent participants in the *Racial Demographics* condition, and blue dots represent participants in the *Racial Inequality* condition. Higher scores indicate greater perceived racial threat among White Americans.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 offered some initial support for our two hypotheses: making race salient reduced White Americans' support for equity-enhancing policy relative to discussing inequality in class-based terms, but contextualizing racial inequality increased policy support. However, our observed effects were small. The *Racial Inequality* condition did not overtly detail the structural causes of inequality, and some work suggests that text-based manipulations may be less persuasive than other forms of media (Glasford, 2013; Goldberg et al., 2019). Our analysis of racial threat indicates that structural messages about racial inequality were less threatening than messages making race salient. Together, these results suggest that using a more immersive methodology and a more fine-grained approach may be fruitful. We conducted Study 2 and a mini meta-analysis of both studies to test our predictions.

Study 2

Study 2 sought to replicate and extend the findings from Study 1. We again designed an experiment where White Americans received messages about societal economic inequality. In the present study, we manipulated the presence or absence of structural explanations of race-based and class-based inequality in a 2 (Racial Salience) X 2 (Structural Explanation) experimental design with four conditions (described below). Our measures of equity-enhancing policy and racial threat remained the same as in prior research. We used video media to deliver messages about inequality and equity-enhancing policy given the effectiveness of this methodology in other studies (Callaghan et al., 2021; Kraus & Vinluan, 2023). We again tested two primary hypotheses in this study: First, we predicted that White Americans in the *Racial Salience Only* condition would report less support for equity-enhancing policies relative to those in the *Class Inequality Only* or *Class Inequality + Structural Explanation* condition. Second, we predicted that White Americans in the *Racial Salience + Structural Explanation* condition would

report significantly greater support for equity-enhancing policy relative to those in the *Racial Salience Only* condition.

Method

The methods and materials for this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board at [blinded for review].

Transparency and Openness

Details of our manipulations and the measures used in this study can be found in the Supplementary Materials. All data and analysis code can be found [here](#). Data were cleaned and analyzed using R version 4.4.2 and R Studio version 2024.12.0+467 (2024). We did not pre-register this study's design and analysis, as we considered this study to be exploratory in nature.

Participants

In Study 1, a sensitivity analysis revealed that our sample of $N = 876$ participants provided us with 80% power to detect a small effect size ($d = .246$). Given this, we recruited 810 White American participants via Prolific Academic. We excluded those who: did not complete the survey or were under the age of 18 ($n = 22$), indicated that their responses were jokes or random ($n = 9$), indicated that they were not White ($n = 17$), or failed an attention check ($n = 6$), leaving a sample of $N = 756$ participants. We made no further exclusions except in cases of missing data. Given the increase in immersiveness of our experimental materials we felt confident about our capacity to detect a slightly larger effect in Study 2 (see below). The sample was on average 40.58 years old ($SD = 12.95$), and slightly less male ($n = 325$) than female ($n = 414$). Several identified as non-binary ($n = 8$), agender ($n = 2$), trans man ($n = 2$), and bigender ($n = 1$). The sample was generally moderate in terms of political orientation ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.74$; 1 = *Very Liberal*, 7 = *Very Conservative*).

Procedure

After consenting, participants were assigned to one of the four conditions (described below), wherein they watched an informational video ostensibly based on research from scholars at an elite university. Participants then responded to a manipulation check asking them to indicate which of two options (that inequality was rising or declining) most closely matched the conclusions of the video they watched (all videos explicitly indicated that inequality was rising). Participants then reported their support for equity-enhancing policies, responded to a measure of perceived anti-White bias and several psychological measures (see Supplementary Methods 5), and reported their demographic information.

Materials and measures

Inequality framing manipulation. Participants watched one of four [videos](#). In the *Racial Salience Only [Class Only]* condition, participants watched a video which detailed rising racial-economic [economic] inequality in the U.S. (e.g., rising racial [class-based] disparities in wealth, opportunity, and outcomes). In the *Racial Salience + Structural Explanation [Class Inequality + Structural Explanation]* condition, participants watched a similar video which detailed additional information concerning the structural barriers that make it harder for Black [poor] Americans to achieve their goals (i.e., redlining and loan discrimination; see Supplementary Methods 6).

Support for equity-enhancing policy. After watching the video, participants responded to the same measures of equity-enhancing policy support used in Study 1 ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.54$; $\alpha = .85$).

Perceived anti-White bias. As a proxy for racial threat, we again measured perceptions of perceived anti-White bias using Wilkins and Kaiser's (2014) scale ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.61$; $\alpha =$

.93).

Study 2 Results

Participants in all conditions showed better than chance recall of the information presented in the experimental materials (> 94%). Participants also showed no differences between conditions in terms of their recall of article information, ($\chi^2(3, N = 873) = 4.15, p = .246$).

Support for Equity-enhancing Policy

Using a two-way ANOVA, we found no significant main effect of structural messaging on equity-enhancing policy support ($F(1, 752) = 0.05, p = .828, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$). In support of our first hypothesis, we did find a statistically significant main effect of racial salience ($F(1, 752) = 3.89, p = .049, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$) such that White Americans supported the policies more when economic inequality was discussed in class-based rather than race-based terms. We found no significant interaction effect ($F(1, 752) = 2.35, p = .125, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$). Despite the overall lack of significance of the interaction, we examined targeted differences between means to test our second hypothesis (Figure 3).

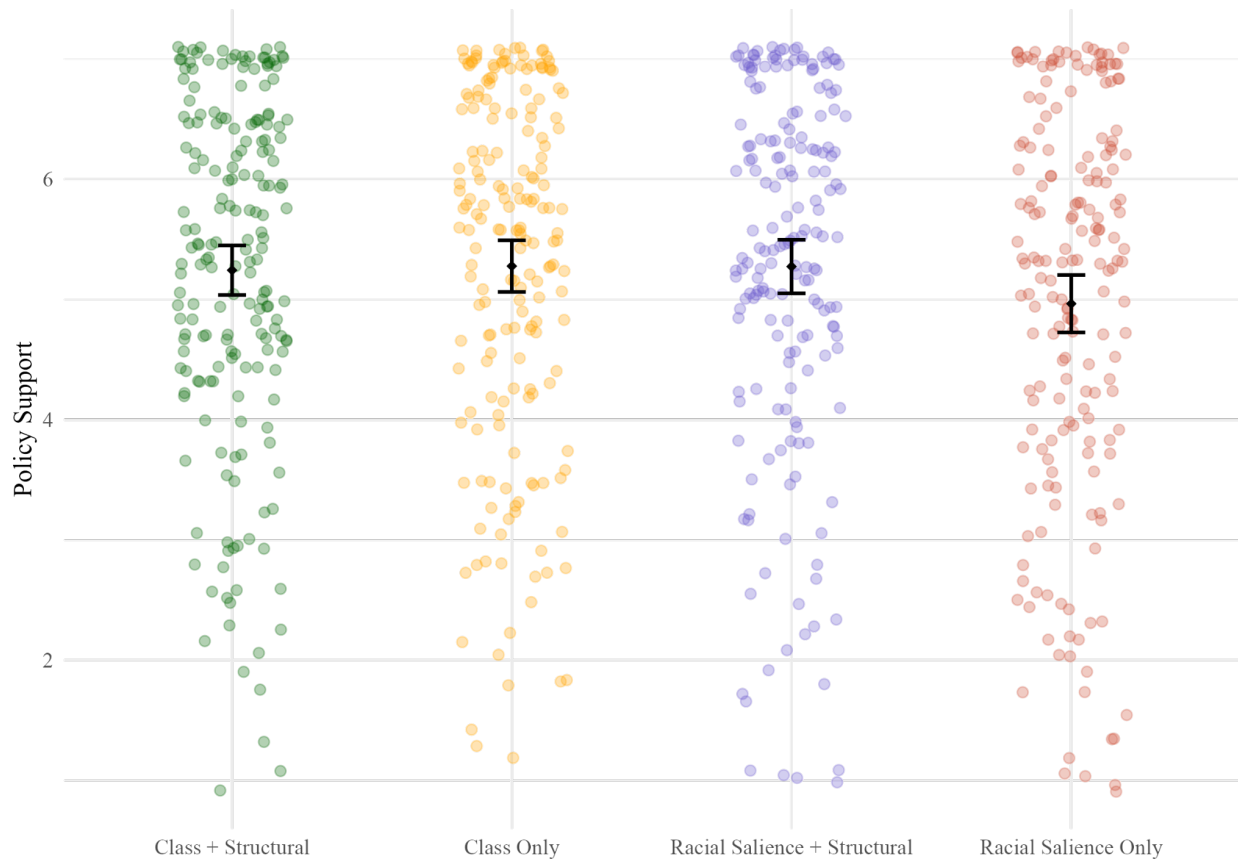


Figure 3. Support for Equity-enhancing Policy by Condition Assignment in Study 2

Note: Individual colored dots represent unique responses, whereas single black dots indicate means and bands represent 95% confidence intervals. Experimental conditions are color-coded: Green dots represent participants in the *Class Inequality + Structural Explanation* condition, yellow dots represent those in the *Class Inequality Only* condition, blue dots represent participants in the *Racial Salience + Structural Explanation* condition, and red dots represent participants in the *Racial Salience Only* condition. Higher scores indicate greater policy support.

In a test of our second hypothesis, participants in the *Racial Salience + Structural Explanation* condition ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.54$) did not report more support for equity-enhancing policies relative to those in the *Racial Salience Only* condition ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.65$; $t(752) = -1.94$, $p = .053$, $d = .19$), although the pattern of means was aligned with our predictions.

Perceived anti-White bias

We next explored whether participants in the *Racial Salience Only* condition reported greater perceived racial threat (measured as perceptions of anti-White bias) than those in the *Racial Salience + Structural Explanation* condition. Using a two-way ANOVA, we found no significant main effect of context on perceived anti-White bias ($F(1, 752) = 0.00, p = .969, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$). We also found no significant main effect of race on perceived anti-White bias ($F(1, 752) = 0.49, p = .483, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$), and the interaction effect was not significant ($F(1, 752) = 1.01, p = .316, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$). Despite the overall lack of significance of the interaction, we examined targeted differences between means to test our specific hypothesis. Perceived anti-White bias was lower in the *Racial Salience + Structural Explanation* condition ($M = 3.7, SD = 1.59$) than in the *Racial Salience Only* condition ($M = 3.94, SD = 1.57$), although pairwise comparisons found that this was not statistically significant, $t(752) = 1.45, p = .148, d = 0.15$; Figure 4).

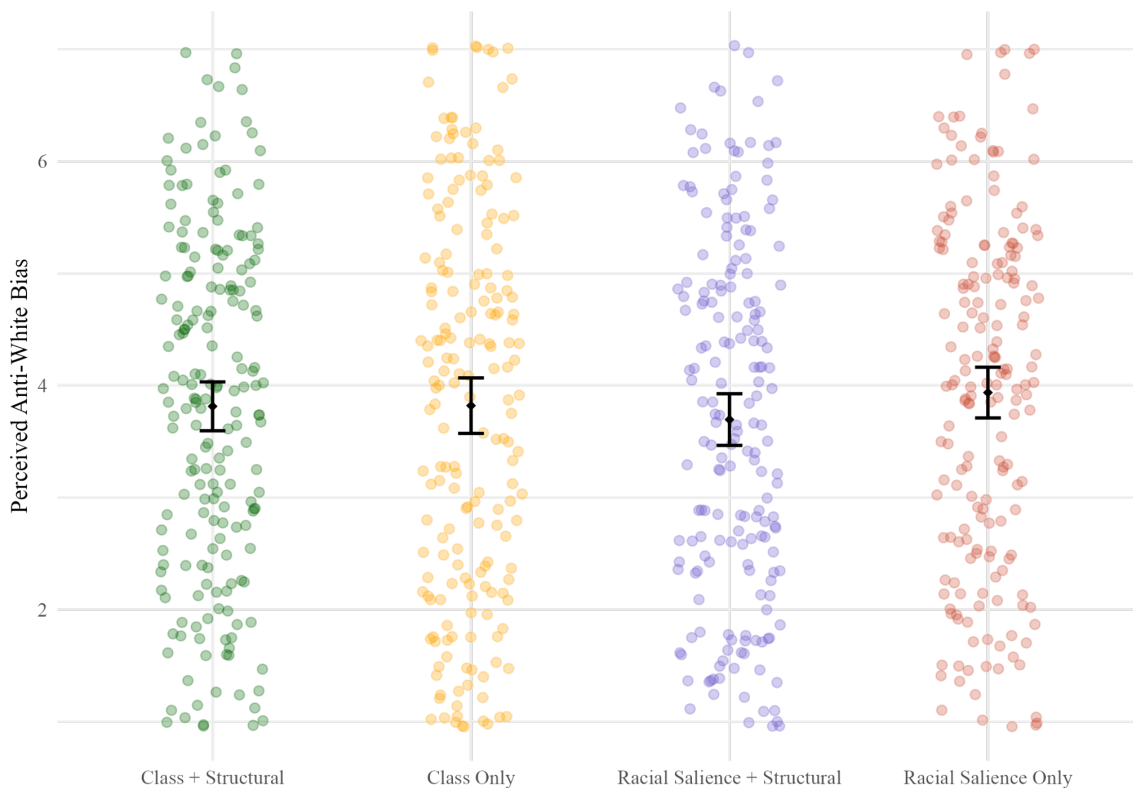


Figure 4. Racial Threat (Measured by Perceived Anti-White Bias) by Condition Assignment in Study 2

Note: Individual colored dots represent unique responses, whereas single black dots indicate means and bands represent 95% confidence intervals. Experimental conditions are color-coded: Green dots represent participants in the *Class Inequality + Structural Explanation* condition, yellow dots represent those in the *Class Only* condition, blue dots represent participants in the *Racial Salience + Structural Explanation* condition, and red dots represent participants in the *Racial Salience Only* condition. Higher scores indicate greater perceived racial threat among White Americans.

Mini Meta Analysis

Internal meta analyses allow scholars to test effects measured across studies (Goh, Hall, & Rosenthal, 2014). Here, we conduct internal meta analyses of our main hypotheses, examining the effect of structural inequality messaging about racial inequality on support for equity-enhancing policies across both studies. Given the mixed evidence of condition differences in racial threat across both studies, we also meta-analyzed condition differences in racial threat. Our meta analysis covers Studies 1 and 2, and our total sample includes 1,629 participants.

To examine our first hypothesis that making race salient would reduce White Americans' support for equity-enhancing policy relative to discussing inequality in class-based terms, we compared class and race salience conditions across the two experiments. When meta-analyzed across two samples, we found a significant difference in support for equity-enhancing policy, such that when inequality was framed as class-based, participants were more supportive of equity-enhancing policy relative to those for whom race was mentioned but not contextualized in structural terms ($Mean ES = 0.25$, $95\% CI = [0.12, 0.37]$, $z = 3.80$, $p < .001$; Figure 5).

For our second hypothesis, we examined if structural racial inequality messages improved policy support relative to merely making race salient. Across two samples, exposure to

structural explanations for racial inequality significantly increased support for equity-enhancing policies, *Mean ES* = 0.18, *95% CI* = [0.05, 0.30], $z = 2.70$, $p = .007$; Figure 5.

We next examined condition differences in racial threat between the conditions where racial inequality was contextualized in terms of structures and where race was mentioned but not contextualized. Across two samples, exposure to structural explanations for racial inequality significantly reduced racial threat, *Mean ES* = 0.17, *95% CI* = [0.04, 0.29], $z = 2.54$, $p = .01$.

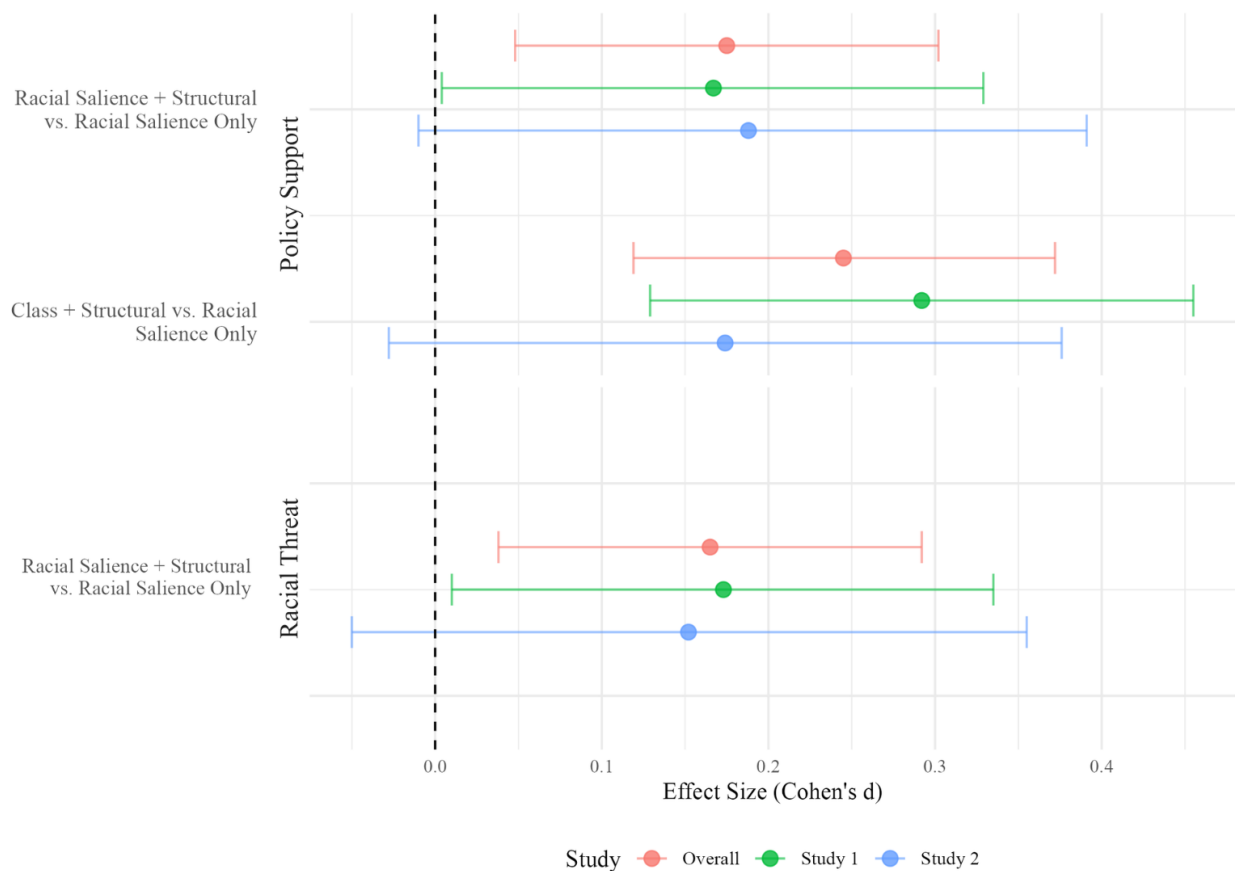


Figure 5. Forest Plot of Mini Meta Analyses across Studies 1 & 2

Note. Results from an internal meta-analysis of the effect of structural and racial messaging about inequality on support for equity-enhancing policies and racial threat. Overall and individual study estimates are labeled in the legend and plotted along the X axis. Means are represented by a dot and indicate the standard effect size (Cohen's D), bands indicate 95% confidence intervals surrounding the estimate.

Discussion

Overall, our findings from Study 2 and the mini-meta analysis provide additional support for our hypotheses. Class-based inequality messages increased support for equity-enhancing policy relative to when race was salient. However, structural racial inequality messages also significantly increased support for equity-enhancing policy relative to when race was salient. Moreover, in exploratory analyses we found that reductions in racial threat might explain why discussing racial inequality in structural terms engenders greater policy support among White Americans.

General Discussion

Economic inequality within the United States is racially patterned, meaning that those who are most harmed by economic inequality tend to be those who are racially marginalized. Although most Americans agree that inequality within the United States is too high, efforts to redress racial and economic inequality receive mixed support (McCall et al., 2017; Heiserman et al., 2020). This is due, in part, to White Americans' concerns that equity-enhancing policies will induce racial ingroup status loss (Brown, Jacoby-Senghor & Raymundo, 2022). As such, some scholars have argued that policy messages addressing racial inequality are ineffective, and advise adopting race-neutral messaging (e.g., English & Kalla, 2021). In the present research, we demonstrate that although making race salient can reduce support for equity-enhancing policies, properly contextualizing racial inequality by identifying the structural correlates of racial-economic inequality does not. In fact, structural frames for racial inequality improved support for equity-enhancing policy in our studies, and may even reduce racial threat among White Americans.

Our findings contribute to an ongoing scholarly debate regarding the efficacy and potential consequences of making racial inequality salient for White Americans. We argue that discussing inequality in racial terms is necessary to redress racial inequality and combat what scholars have referred to as ‘epistemologies of ignorance’ (Bonam et al., 2019; Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Although colorblind policy messages may avoid activating racial threat among White Americans in the short run, they contribute to ignorance regarding the extent of racial-economic inequality, which reinforces racial stereotypes and justifies racial inequality (Dovidio, Gaertner & Saguy, 2015; Chow & Knowles, 2015; Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Uncovering methods for inspiring action to reduce inequality without misrepresenting the nature of inequality is a pressing area of research, and we join other scholars in these efforts (Niederdeppe et al., 2025; Christiani, Kelly & Morgan, 2024; Brock-Petrossius & Gilens, 2024).

Our findings suggest that a structural account of racial-economic inequality may improve policy support among White Americans, possibly by reducing racial ingroup threat. White Americans tend to see increasing equality as threatening to their racial ingroup identity, even when it would benefit them economically (Brown & Jacoby-Senghor, 2021). A structural account of racial-economic inequality may reduce threat by demonstrating that inequality is embedded in societal structures under which both Black and White Americans live. Future work investigating how recognizing that structures of inequality affect all who live within them—while noting that they affect some more than others—may improve cross-racial solidarity and support for egalitarian policies and actions (Pinedo, Diemer & Frisby, 2024).

Although we intentionally designed our study materials to conservatively test the manipulation of racial salience and structural framings of inequality, the effects we found were smaller than expected. We were underpowered to detect significant effects at the individual study

level. Previous work on structural inequality frames has indicated that White Americans' responses to these frames may be nuanced (Unzueta & Lowery, 2008; Adams et al., 2008). Our findings support this: Across both studies, we followed an intent-to-treat analysis framework and included participants who failed the manipulation check. These participants indicated that racial [economic] inequality was declining, contradicting the information they received in the manipulation. Though these responses could indicate inattention, the denial of ongoing racial and economic inequality is a psychological process (Mueller, 2017; Bonam et al., 2018). In supplementary analyses, excluding these participants elicited stronger support for our second hypothesis about structural racial inequality messaging. In other words, exposure to structural explanations for racial inequality significantly improved policy support relative to merely making race salient (Supplementary Analyses). These findings suggest that structural framings of racial-economic inequality may be uniquely threatening among White Americans who deny the existence of racism.

Although our messages appear to have effectively shifted policy attitudes among White Americans in the short-term, their long-term impacts are unclear (Callaghan et al., 2021). Future work should test the efficacy of structural inequality messages among a nationally representative sample of prospective voters, with follow-up assessments. Another key limitation of our study is our focus on a White American sample. Although improving White Americans' support for equity-enhancing policies is essential to reducing racial-economic inequality, future studies should examine the efficacy of these messaging frames across racial groups and outside of the US context. Lastly, the relationship between interventions of this kind and reports of critical consciousness should also be pursued in future scholarship to determine the enduring nature of their impact (Pinedo et al., 2023).

Although racial threat emerged as a prospective mechanism through which structural inequality messages shape support for equity-enhancing policies, there are alternative mechanisms which might explain these processes. It is possible that the alignment between how inequality was framed (as derived from policies) and the solution proposed (policy-based) may have contributed to improved policy support in the structural messaging condition. It is also possible that describing inequality in structural terms increases the perceived magnitude of the problem, thereby increasing support for policies to redress it. Addressing these alternative explanatory mechanisms is beyond the scope of this paper, but future work should explore these in more detail.

Our findings have implications for policymakers interested in addressing racial and economic inequality. White Americans are motivated to maintain the status quo, and colorblind policies serve to reinforce the status quo by contributing to ignorance regarding the extent of racial-economic inequality. We find that framing racial inequality as structural meaningfully enhances support for equity-enhancing policies. Policymakers should consider implementing structural racial-economic inequality messages to garner support for policies aimed at addressing the unequal systems and structures that perpetuate racial inequality.

Conclusion

In this paper, we address debates regarding the efficacy of messages which highlight racial inequality. We find that structural inequality messages improve White Americans' support for equity-enhancing policies when inequality is presented in racialized terms, and we speculate that these findings may be explained by reduced racial ingroup threat. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that foregrounding racial-economic inequality does not necessarily reduce support

for equity-enhancing policies, and when properly contextualized, can meaningfully improve support for equity-enhancing policies among White Americans.

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