

Although overt racism has been outlawed in the United States, current incarceration trends, poverty, higher education gaps, and wage gaps between White people and people of color suggest that societal systems favor White people, and are therefore inadvertently target people of color, but specifically Black people (NAACP, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013; College Board, 2015; AAUW; 2015). These clear patterns contrast starkly with some research examining patterns of race perception that favor Black people, indicating a pro-Black bias (Dovidio & Gartner, 2000; Rogers & Prentice-Dunn, 1981). This research suggests that when race is made obvious to participants, participants engage in effortful behavior to appear egalitarian, and as such favor a Black person over a White person in a variety of situations, indicating a pro-Black bias. The anti-Black bias appears again when people are angry or can attribute their prejudice to factors besides race. These findings suggest that racism occurs particularly when people are unable to actively engage in anti-racist behavior due to experiencing high negative emotions or unable to attribute prejudiced thoughts and behavior to a factor aside from race. As the presence of a pro-Black bias is documented in some literature, it is important to continue examining under what conditions pro-Black biases and anti-Black biases emerge. Peer pressure, for example, is a factor considered to be a factor that influences behavior and may be a condition under which racism emerges. The purpose of this research was to examine blame attribution according to race when the factor of peer pressure was or was not present (i.e., with peer pressure acting as a moderating variable).

A pro-Black bias emerges when race is made obvious to participants and when people do not experience high negative emotion, are not distracted, or cannot attribute their prejudice to non-race factors (Rogers & Prentice-Dunn, 1981; Dovidio & Gartner, 2000). Dovidio and Gartner (2000) examined the impact of race on hiring decisions. Participants were asked to make hiring decisions about Black or White candidates with weak, moderate, or strong credentials. When candidate's credentials were weak or strong, Black candidates were hired more than White candidates (i.e., pro-Black bias). When candidates had moderate credentials, the White candidate was hired more than the Black candidate, indicating an anti-Black bias. The anti-Black bias, according to the researchers, emerged because participants attribute their rationale for racist decisions to ambiguous data. The strong and weak credential conditions did not allow participants to make racist decisions. This example clearly illustrates both the pro-Black bias (e.g. when participants did not want to be perceived as racist and favored the Black candidate) and the anti-Black bias (e.g. when participants made racist decisions based on ambiguous data that could not be attributed to racist values). Determining when and in what context anti-Black racism is acted upon is essential to learn under what conditions racism is most likely to occur in order to

implement interventions to reduce racism. Results of this study also highlight the theory of aversive racism.

Aversive racism theory is a subtype of modern racism that occurs when people who have egalitarian values believe they are not prejudiced but unconsciously have negative beliefs about minoritized racial groups and therefore express subtle signs of discrimination (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). Acts of subtle discrimination occur when people can rationalize them not as racial discrimination, but some other qualifier or non-qualifier, such as ambiguous qualifications in a job application (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). These racist actions are not overly overt and recognizable, but rather occur when factors besides race explain the judgment, action, or rationalization made (Pfeifer & Bernstein, 2003).

Of importance is to consider is when the pro-Black bias shifts into an anti-Black bias, as the anti-Black bias is how societal systems put Black people at a disadvantage. In one experiment, Rogers and Prentice-Dunn (1981) found that initially, White college students shocked a victim less when the victim was Black than when the victim was White (i.e., a pro-Black bias). Next, the White college students were informed the victim was talking poorly about them. In response, the White college student shocked the Black victim more than the White victim, exemplifying an anti-Black bias. This experiment demonstrates that certain variables, in this case the victim talking negatively about the White college student participants, changes how White people act towards Black people. Examining this interaction with other variables known for influencing behavior, such as peer pressure, is essential to understanding how racism manifests. Although peer pressure may not disrupt and transform the pro-Black bias into an anti-Black bias as the Black victim's negative speech about the participant did, we were interested to see how peer pressure interacted with race.

There are two opposing explanations for the interaction of race and peer pressure. Participants may blame a Black adolescent more for a crime than a White adolescent under peer pressure because they can attribute their blame to peer pressure and not to the race of the adolescent. Opposing, participants will blame the Black person less because peer pressure is not an ambiguous factor and is well known for causing people, particularly adolescents, to behave in conforming ways (Tetlock, Self, & Singh, 2010). We believed that in our experiment, the latter would occur; participants would blame White and Black adolescents for a crime less overall under peer pressure, but when the adolescent was Black, participants would blame him to an even lesser extent than when he is White. This may occur because peer pressure is a salient force that most people recognize as influential. Therefore, accrediting prejudice beliefs towards succumbing to peer pressure (e.g., he should have known better, therefore I blame

him more) will not be a salient enough explanation to appear non-prejudiced, as most people experience peer pressure.

Peer pressure is a well-known, significant force that impacts how participants assign blame to an individual. Tetlock, Self, and Singh (2010) suggested that although Western culture blames individuals and ignores situational context, blame of individuals under peer pressure decreases. These findings reflect the current criminal justice system's structure for adolescents in which criminal culpability is reduced when the defendant is susceptible to influence (Steinberg & Scott, 2003; Ash, 2012). Adolescents are particularly susceptible to peer influence as their frontal cortex, which is in charge of higher order thinking and connecting consequences to actions, is not fully developed.

In accordance with aforementioned research, the presence of a pro-Black bias and peer pressure was investigated using a 2 x 2 (Race x Peer Pressure) between subjects experimental design. In this experiment, participants received a scenario vignette in which an adolescent stole a bike. The adolescent was or was not under peer pressure and was either Black or White. We hypothesized that when the adolescent was White, he would be blamed more than when he was Black, regardless of peer pressure. When the adolescent was under peer pressure, we predicted he would be blamed less, regardless of race. Although we predicted that the adolescent would be blamed less under peer pressure regardless of race, we predicted that when he was Black and under peer pressure, he would be blamed even less than when he was White and under peer pressure. These hypotheses reflected the pro-Black bias we expected to occur; when given the opportunity to appear non-racist, participants would overcompensate and favor the Black person more.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants ( $N = 73$ ) were recruited from introductory psychology classes at a liberal arts university in the Pacific Northwest in exchange for research credit. Three participants were eliminated for answering questions in the incorrect order, leaving 70 participants as a sample for analyses (51 White, 10 Asian, 10 Hispanic and/or Latino, and 6 other/mixed). Fifty-one participants identified as female, 18 as male, and 1 as other. Participants were tested in groups and were randomly assigned to each condition.

### **Procedures and Materials**

Participants read one of four fictional scenarios in which a 15-year-old male named Kevin, who was either Black or White and either under peer pressure or not, stole a bike from outside a store. His age, race, socioeconomic status, and family structure were described prior to how he stole the bike (e.g., "Feeling an immense of pressure from his friends to steal the bike" or "Deciding to steal the bike"). Participants then completed an adaptation of Kroner and Mills' (2004)

Criminal Attribution Inventory Scale of 9 items that measured how much blame participants assigned to Kevin using a Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). In some questions, a “1” indicated a higher level of blame for his crime (e.g. “Society is to blame for Kevin stealing the bike”). In other questions, reverse coding was used and a “7” indicated a higher level of blame (e.g. Kevin should be convicted of a crime). After completing the blame attribution inventory, participants completed a personality measure using a Likert scale that rated 8 characteristics of Kevin such as honesty, motivation, and compassion (1 = *not very*, 7 = *very much so*). A suspicion check asked participants to identify the purpose of the study and a manipulation check asked participants to identify Kevin’s race.

### **Results**

Participants’ blame index scores, individual blame items, and perception of personality characteristics were analyzed using a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Alpha was set at .05 for all tests. The blame index was created by averaging responses to six items (steal again, offend again, feels guilt, convict, punish, and severity of punishment) from the blame attribution inventory that were positively correlated for each participant ( $\alpha = .69$ ). Means and standard deviations for blame appear in Table 1 and for personality appear in Table 2.

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations and F-values of Blame Measures*

	Peer pressure		No peer pressure		<i>F</i> (1, 66)		
	Black	White	Black	White	Peer p.	Race	Peer p. x race
<i>n</i>	16	15	19	20			
Blame Index	3.35 (.79)	3.96 (.81)	4.27 (.92)	4.52 (.80)	13.62**	4.54*	0.82
Steal Again	3.31 (1.40)	4.20 (.94)	4.79 (1.44)	5.65 (.93)	25.53**	9.11*	0.96
Offend Again	4.31 (1.49)	5.07 (1.10)	5.16 (1.12)	5.45 (1.54)	0.06	0.11	0.48
Feels Guilt	5.75 (1.39)	5.53 (1.41)	4.63 (1.07)	4.35 (.93)	16.10**	0.75	0.91
Convict	3.38 (1.89)	4.00 (2.07)	4.21 (1.78)	3.95 (1.99)	0.72	0.15	0.34
Punish	5.13 (1.50)	6.07 (.88)	5.37 (1.21)	5.70 (1.46)	0.04	4.15*	0.95
Punish Severity	3.50 (1.46)	4.07 (1.16)	3.84 (1.34)	3.90 (.85)	0.09	1.14	0.76
Mental Illness	1.38 (1.50)	1.33 (.49)	2.00 (1.41)	2.40 (1.14)	8.32*	0.37	0.45
Society to Blame	3.63 (1.63)	3.00 (1.69)	3.11 (1.41)	3.25 (1.29)	0.14	0.45	1.15
Mental Control	3.25 (1.88)	5.67 (1.23)	5.53 (.96)	4.95 (1.15)	0.48	0.06	2.40
Admit to Family	3.56 (2.00)	4.33 (1.80)	3.74 (1.56)	3.75 (1.86)	0.22	0.82	0.76

*Note.* Standard deviations are listed in parentheses below each mean. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

[Table 2

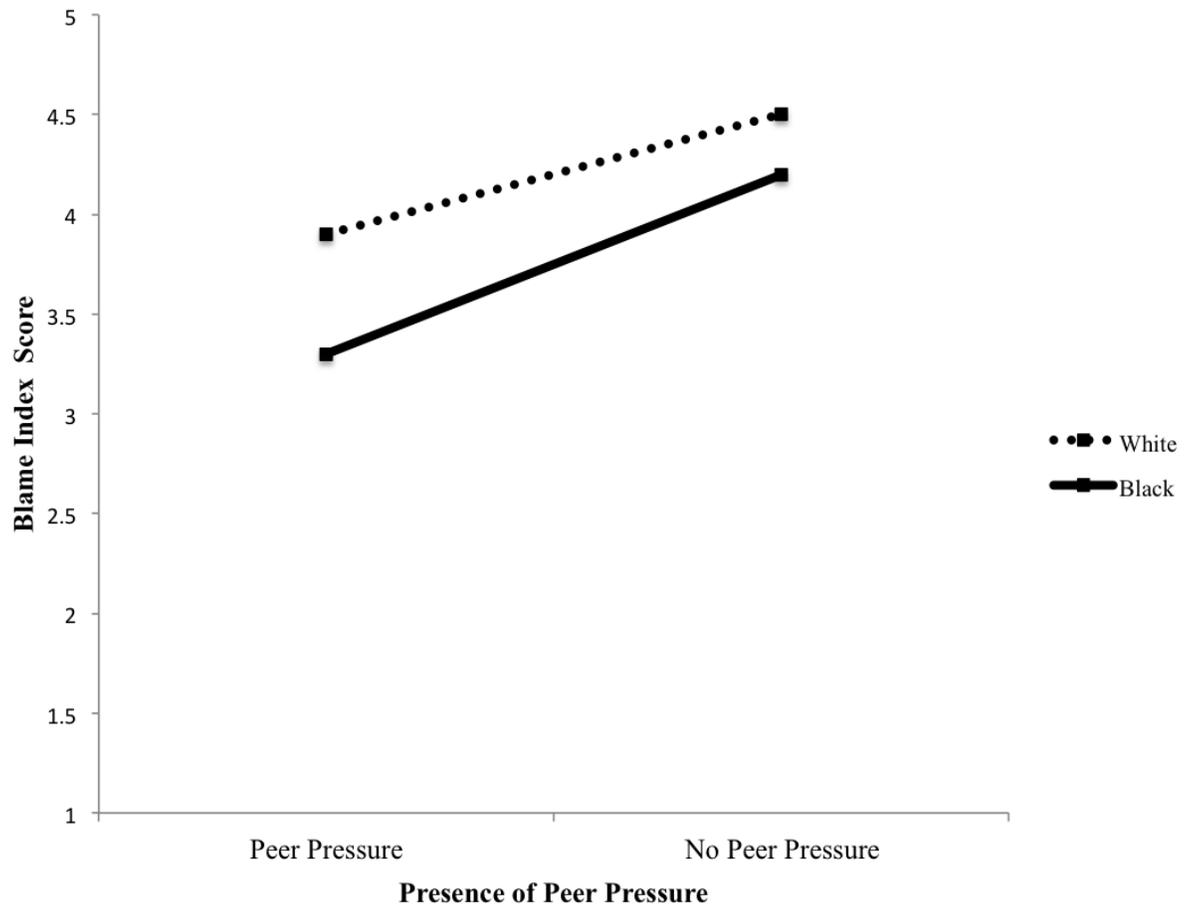
*Means, Standard Deviations and F-values of Personality Ratings*

	Peer pressure		No peer pressure		F(1, 66)		
	Black	White	Black	White	Peer p.	Race	Peer p. x race
<i>n</i>	16	15	19	20			
Honest	3.81 (1.11)	3.60 (1.06)	3.47 (1.47)	2.70 (1.03)	4.70*	2.98	0.96
Motivated	4.06 (0.85)	4.13 (1.12)	4.84 (0.96)	5.25 (0.91)	16.8**	1.07	0.53
Compassionate	4.00 (0.97)	4.07 (1.03)	3.32 (0.82)	2.58 (1.12)	20.54**	1.96	2.81
Independent	2.75 (1.34)	2.33 (0.90)	5.05 (0.91)	5.30 (0.80)	120.73**	0.12	1.90
Intelligent	3.63 (0.88)	3.13 (1.12)	3.95 (0.85)	3.90 (1.02)	5.43*	1.33	0.90
Conforming	6.19 (0.75)	6.40 (0.74)	3.53 (1.02)	3.10 (1.37)	143.37**	0.18	1.64
Delinquent	4.19 (1.42)	4.27 (1.22)	4.42 (1.07)	4.80 (1.00)	1.84	0.65	0.28
Responsible	3.06 (1.44)	2.73 (1.16)	3.21 (1.58)	2.40 (1.16)	0.09	3.37	0.60

*Note.* Standard deviations are listed in parentheses below each mean.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

As expected for the blame index, there was a main effect of race, such that participants blamed the adolescent more when he was White than when he was Black,  $F(1, 66) = 4.54, p = .04$ . A main effect of peer pressure was also found, such that participants blamed the adolescent less under peer pressure regardless of race,  $F(1, 66) = 13.62, p < .001$ . The interaction between race and peer pressure was not significant,  $F(1, 66) = 0.82, p = .37$ . Additionally, there was a main effect of race for two individual blame items, such that participants believed that Kevin would be more likely to steal again when he was White than Black,  $F(1,66) = 9.11, p < .01$ , and that he should receive more punishment when he was White than Black,  $F(1,66) = 4.15, p = .046$ . See Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Mean blame index scores graphed as a function of peer pressure and race show the main effects of race and peer pressure. Participants blamed the White teenager more than the Black teenager and assigned more blame in the no peer pressure condition than the peer pressure condition.

Ratings for individual items to measure perceptions of Kevin's personality were also analyzed (see Table 2). No main effects of race were found for any item. There was a main effect of peer pressure on several items of participants' rating of Kevin's personality such that under peer pressure, he was seen as more honest and less intelligent,  $ps < .05$ , and more motivated, more compassionate, and more conforming, but less dependent  $ps < .01$ .

### **Discussion**

As predicted, participants blamed Kevin less when he was Black, regardless of peer pressure and when under peer pressure, regardless of race. Additionally, when Kevin was under peer pressure, he was blamed less when he was Black than when he was White, as predicted. Personality measures did not differ according to his race but did according to peer pressure. The assignment of less blame to Kevin as a Black adolescent is consistent with other findings of a pro-Black bias and the theory of aversive racism (Dovidio & Gartner, 2000).

Blaming Kevin less under peer pressure is also consistent with other findings of decreased blame under peer pressure (Steinberg & Scott, 2003; Tetlock, Self and Singh, 2010). Another explanation for decreased blame under peer pressure is that college student participants may have blamed Kevin less as a function of their age. Adults age 18-22 (e.g. the age of most college students) are less susceptible to peer pressure than adolescents age 13-16, but are more susceptible to peer pressure than adults aged 24 and older (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005). As college students are closer to the age range of those most susceptible to peer influence, college students are likely better able to recognize peer pressure as a salient situational factor that influences behavior.

Although participants blamed Kevin less under peer pressure, being Black and under peer pressure resulted in less blame than being White and under peer pressure, as predicted. This result is consistent with other findings confirming that White individuals are blamed more for their actions than Black individuals. Nazione and Silk (2013) found that when medical students assigned responsibility for a patient's increased obesity as a result of not following diet suggestions, the White patient was held more responsible than the Black patient. It is suggested this bias occurs because modern doctors are overly sensitive to racial bias. Certainly, this lab-based empirical research does not capture the systemic and pervasive racism people of color experience, but is worthy of discussing to contextualize our results.

Personality measures revealed that participants did not believe Kevin's personality changed according to his race. This result is consistent with Evans, Hart, and Hicks (2003) finding that personality perception when an individual is portrayed negatively (e.g. committing a crime) does not differ according to race. This equal perception of Kevin's personality may also have occurred because perception of personality is often not directly involved in discussions of race,

conversely to the frequent direct discussion of the incarceration patterns of Black males. Therefore, participants would have been more likely to know they would be perceived as racist in the context of blame, as blame corresponds with the criminal justice system, rather than the context of personality. If Kevin was under peer pressure, he was seen as more honest, motivated, compassionate, and conforming but less intelligent and dependent. He may have been perceived along the aforementioned traits because participants, as college students, may feel relatable to Kevin under peer pressure. He was likely seen as more conforming because he conformed to peer pressure; this personality measure therefore served as a manipulation check. Additionally, he may have been seen as less intelligent and dependent because he did not inhibit his actions in the presence of peer pressure.

Limitations of the study include the use of a homogeneous sample. As the majority of participants in this study were White and all were undergraduate students at a liberal arts university, applying findings to other populations is not warranted. However, this limitation may also be a strength of the study in regard to the examination of how aversive racism manifests in a primarily White population. Additionally, the study captures the findings in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, a culturally liberal state. Findings may not be applicable to conservative states.

Strengths of the study include a primarily White sample, relatively large sample size, and high internal validity. Although the primarily White, undergraduate student sample decreases external validity, examining aversive racism in this population specifically has important implications. Although liberalism is associated with egalitarian values towards race, Nail, Harton and Barnes (2008) found that liberals discriminate racially in favor of Blacks except when the discrimination can be attributed to something other than race. Further investigating this phenomenon in a primarily White setting, as done in this study, may help increase the external validity of Nail, Harton and Barnes' (2008) finding. The relatively large sample size in this study helped increase power, therefore increasing the probability that the null hypotheses were appropriately rejected. High internal validity was established using an empirically supported measure to capture blame attribution, the Criminal Attribution Inventory Scale (Kroner & Mills, 2004).

Recent current events, such as the ruling on the death of Michael Brown and attention in mainstream media to the police shooting and murder of unarmed Black adolescents, may also have influenced results. Participants may have been hyperaware of race and racism than if the study had been conducted prior to the protesting that began in the summer of 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, calling international attention to the injustice of police brutality against minoritized

individuals. Therefore, the pro-Black bias may have been more prevalent in this study as people have become more sensitive to race-related topics.

This study has implications for adolescents in the criminal justice system. In the American criminal justice system, Blacks are convicted more than Whites even though oftentimes Whites commit more crimes, suggesting that the criminal justice system favors White people unfairly (NAACP, 2015). As a pro-Black bias is known to occur when race is clearly defined (e.g. race was clearly mentioned in the vignettes of this study to make participants more hyper aware of race), defense attorneys and/or defendants may want to call attention to race if the defendant is Black to place jurors and/or judges in a situation in which they may be more pressured to appear egalitarian and subsequently express a pro-Black bias. From the prosecutor's perspective, drawing attention to race if the defendant is Black may decrease how much blame the judge and/or jurors assign.

As Kevin was blamed less when under peer pressure, defense attorneys and/or defendants may want to draw attention to peer influences that may have influenced a crime, regardless of the defendant's race. However, if a defendant is Black, calling attention to the influence of peer pressure may result in even less blame than if the defendant is White and experienced peer pressure. Drawing attention to a defendant's personality (e.g. calling a positive character testimony) may be effective in boosting perceptions of certain personality characteristics. For example, results from this study suggested that when under peer pressure, adolescents are seen as less intelligent and dependent. To offset this perception for the defendant, a character testimony might be used to bolster these characteristics. A prosecutor may want to call attention to the lack of these characteristics, increasing the negative perception of the adolescent. The preceding suggestions may be more likely to work in favor of the defendant if the judge and/or jurors are liberal or claim to possess egalitarian views. Judges and/or jurors may be more likely express a pro-Black bias in traditionally democratic-leaning cities, counties, and/or states where there is more pressure to appear egalitarian in accordance with the rest of the community.

Future research should seek to examine how distraction and emotion impacts a pro-Black bias in individuals that claim to have egalitarian values. Some research has shown that people successfully repress prejudice under normal conditions but express it when angry or able to attribute judgments to factors besides race (Rogers & Prentice-Dunn, 1981; Dovidio & Gartner, 2000). Future research might also further examine factors of participants that contribute to a pro-Black bias. Results from this study and from Nazione and Silk's (2013) finding that medical students exhibit a pro-Black bias, suggest that education level may promote a pro-Black bias. Further research to investigate this suggestion and other factors contributing to a pro-Black bias is needed. Additionally, this study

might be replicated with the manipulation of race to Hispanic and/or Latino/a or Asian to determine if the pro-Black bias translates to a pro-minority bias.

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