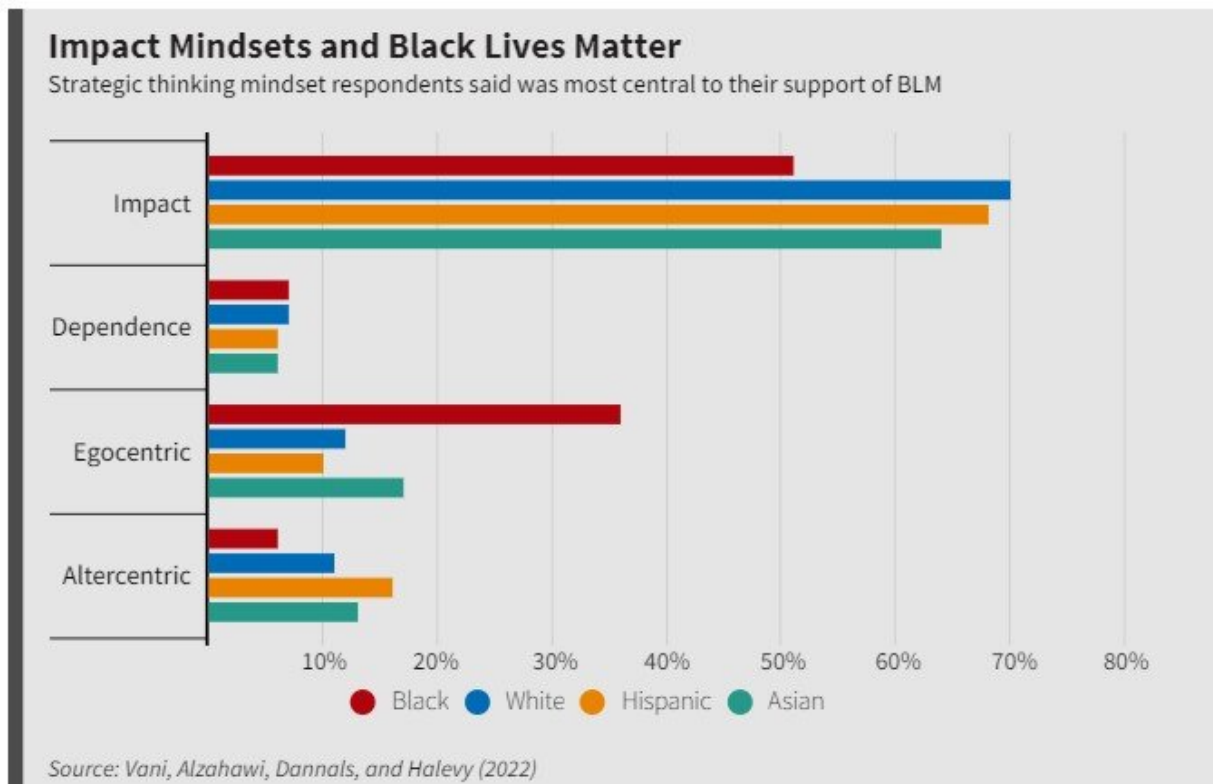


# How an 'impact mindset' unites activists of different races

September 19 2022, by Nadra Nittle



Credit: Stanford University

After the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020, more than 15 million Americans took to the streets to protest racial injustice. In just a few weeks, Black Lives Matter became one of the largest protest movements in U.S. history.

While BLM supporters came together under a common banner, the cause had different meanings for people of different races. Clearly, calls for racial justice resonate with Black Americans in a personal way not felt by white Americans. Yet a new study finds that people's choice to get involved with Black Lives Matter stemmed from a shared impetus that transcends racial identity: thinking about how their decisions impact others.

A new paper by a team of researchers from Stanford Graduate School of Business finds that most Black BLM supporters and their allies were joined by a form of [strategic thinking](#) known as an "impact mindset." That finding was unexpected, says Preeti Vani, a doctoral student in organizational behavior who coauthored the study.

"We expected to see people of different races be motivated by different types of strategic thinking, given differences in terms of how Americans of different races think about interactions with the police and think about their status in society," she says. "So, what was surprising to us is the fact that this notion of impact strategic thinking actually drives engagement with social change, not only for Black Americans but also for Hispanic, Asian, and white Americans."

The study, published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* journal, takes a new approach to analyzing why people join [social movements](#), says Nir Halevy, a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford GSB. "We treat people as decision-makers who make conscious choices about whether and how much to invest in participating in collective action," he says. Other research into why people take collective action often focuses on emotions or identity. "We wanted to add to those perspectives a more cognitive, judgment and decision-making perspective."

The researchers, who included Shilaan Alzahawi, a Ph.D. student in

organizational behavior, and Jennifer E. Dannels, Ph.D., an assistant professor of [organizational behavior](#) at Yale School of Management, also took a broader view of racial dynamics than is common in the field. "A lot of research has focused on Black Americans and white Americans, two groups at a time," Halevy says. "What we're trying to say is, "Let's zoom out; let's broaden the perspective. Consider the fact that there are multiple groups that vary in the kinds of prejudice that they face and the kinds of discrimination that they face and see how they engage with a particular social movement.'"

## **Thinking beyond self-interest**

Strategic thinking is often applied to competitive situations, such as figuring out how to get an edge on your competitors. In their paper, Vani, Halevy, and their coauthors argue for a broader definition of strategic thinking that characterizes it as a cognitive process through which people recognize that their actions and others' actions collectively determine outcomes for everyone.

An impact mindset is exemplified by the self-directed question, "How do my actions shape others' outcomes?" Three other mindsets are related to social interdependence: a dependency mindset ("How do others' actions shape my outcomes?"), an egocentric mindset ("How do my actions shape my outcomes?"), and an altercentric mindset ("How do others' actions shape their outcomes?"). A person may have any of these mindsets separately or jointly.

The researchers put the Impact-Dependency-Egocentric-Altercentric (IDEA) model to the test in a series of studies in which they collected data from several hundred respondents about their attitudes and support for BLM in the months following Floyd's killing. "Our first study looks at actual behavior that people have undertaken," Vani says. "How many times have you shown up at a protest? How many times have you been to

community events around race or racial justice? In our second study, we focused on the future, asking questions like, "Over the next couple of months, how many times do you intend to post information about Black Lives Matter on social media? How many times do you intend to donate money to Black-led organizations?"

In both studies, across racial groups, an impact mindset predicted support for BLM significantly more than other mindsets. In a supplemental study in which respondents were asked which of the four IDEA mindsets was most central to their support of BLM, impact mindsets were reported by nearly 51% of Black respondents, 64% of Asian respondents, 68% of Hispanic respondents, and 70% of white respondents.

When asked to think about their support for BLM, Black participants scored higher on egocentric mindsets. This was not unexpected, given the relevance of the movement for Black Americans. Even so, members of other races overestimated how much concern over personal outcomes shaped Black Americans' participation in BLM. Nearly half of participants of other races thought that Black BLM supporters were guided by an egocentric mindset, while around 36% of Black respondents self-reported an egocentric mindset.

Additionally, non-Black respondents significantly underestimated how many Black respondents chose impact as the primary mindset driving their movement participation. This misperception is consistent with a "holier-than-thou bias," where people consider their actions more ethical than others'.

## **What keeps activism alive?**

By exploring the commonalities and differences between BLM supporters, the research provides new insights into relations between

Black Americans and their allies. While Black Americans have a vested interest in backing BLM, they also support it because they are concerned about the injustices experienced by fellow members of their racial group and view the movement's success as a positive outcome for society in general. Non-Black people of color support racial justice movements when they value equality for all groups.

Previous research has shown that self-interest often shapes white Americans' racial attitudes. Yet this research details how an impact mindset explains why members of an advantaged social group are willing to engage in allyship, backing systemic changes that would largely benefit a disadvantaged group.

The researchers followed up with participants in both studies more than eight months later, after the initial surge of BLM-related activism had died down. Here, too, they found that having an impact mindset led to greater engagement with the movement over time. This promising finding demonstrates that having an impact [mindset](#) is indicative of both short-term engagement and long-term engagement with [social change](#).

Looking ahead, Vani hopes that this new lens on [collective action](#) will help us understand what sustains people's involvement in social movements beyond the first wave of mobilization. "What are the things that we can look for that we can inspire in people," she asks, "not so that they're just going to take action today but also to understand what inspires them to engage continuously, months or even years down the line?"

**More information:** Preeti Vani et al, Strategic Mindsets and Support for Social Change: Impact Mindset Explains Support for Black Lives Matter Across Racial Groups, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/01461672221099710](https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672221099710)

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: How an 'impact mindset' unites activists of different races (2022, September 19)  
retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-09-impact-mindset-activists.html>

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