COVID, COMPASSION, AND ALTRUISTIC MOBILIZATION: EXPLAINING NON-BLACK PARTICIPATION IN THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT OF 2020*

Andreas Wimmer and Gerard Torrats-Espinosa†

What explains the massive increase in non-Black participation in the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, compared to previous years? Combining insights from the social psychology of compassion with arguments about framing from the social movement literature, we argue that the suffering brought about by the COVID pandemic prepared the ground for a more empathic emotional reaction to the killing of George Floyd compared to similar cases of police violence before the pandemic. Empathy led to protest participation if combined with frames such as systemic racism, triggering emotions of guilt or outrage, which in turn led to justice-seeking behavior. We support this argument with observational data at both the county and individual levels. We rule out a series of alternative explanations, including that individuals joined the protests because they had no other opportunities to socialize or to protest the first Trump administration.

This article focuses on the massive increase in non-Black participation in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that occurred during the COVID pandemic of 2020, after George Floyd was killed on May 25 by a group of police officers in Minneapolis. The BLM movement had already formed in 2014 after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and had regularly staged protests ever since. The 2020 protests, however, surpassed the preceding ones by far. They mobilized between 2.1 and 2.8 million Americans, the vast majority for the first time in their lives, making it one of the most attended protest movements in postwar history.[1]

The share of non-Black Americans among protesters increased equally dramatically. During the 2014 BLM protests, which had the most participants before 2020, approximately 1 percent of whites, 7 percent of Hispanics, and 7 percent of Blacks had attended a protest, according to survey estimates.[2] In June 2020, a comparable survey arrived at estimates of 6 percent for white respondents, a sixfold increase, again 7.5 percent for Hispanics, and 13 percent for Black respondents, about double the 2014 figure. In absolute terms, about three-quarters of participants in 2020 were not Black (averaging across the surveys of CIVIS, PEW, and NORC).

Non-Black protesters at BLM events represent what John McCarthy and Mayer Zald (1977: 1222) called conscience constituents: individuals who do not defend their own interests or identities, but those of others. There are many cases of protests where the majority or sizeable minorities of participants are conscience constituents. However, the scale of participation by political altruists (a term coined by Passy 2001) in the BLM protests of 2020 is rather unprecedented. In this article, we focus on non-Black participation as the motivations of Black individuals may very well be different, given that they are much more likely to become targets of police violence and given that the protests were explicitly framed as a defense of Black perspectives and interests.

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† Andreas Wimmer is the Lieber Professor of Sociology and Political Philosophy in the Department of Sociology at Columbia University. Gerard Torrats-Espinosa is an Assistant Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at Columbia University. Direct correspondence to andreas.wimmer@columbia.edu

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The presence of non-Black individuals at the protests is all the more puzzling as these happened in the middle of a pandemic, when people were asked to stay home and when joining crowds meant risking infecting oneself or one's family members with a deadly virus. We transform the puzzle into a cause by introducing a new socioemotional model of conscience constituency, relying selectively on elements of existing movement research (including the role of frames, emotions, and symbols), the psychology of trauma and compassion, as well as the social psychology of causal attribution. This new, multidisciplinary model answers important questions that the literature has so far not addressed sufficiently, most importantly about the conditions under which frames, symbols, and images will trigger movement-enhancing emotions and lead to mass participation in solidarity movements.

We argue that the suffering brought about by the COVID pandemic led to a more compassionate response to the murder of George Floyd compared to previous, similar episodes of police violence before the pandemic. Compassion is the emotional-moral mechanism that links individual suffering in one domain (the pandemic) to political action in a completely unrelated domain (racial justice and policing).

The underlying micromechanisms have been documented in the psychology of emotions: individuals who have themselves suffered are more likely to show empathic concern for a person under intense emotional or physical distress and to subsequently behave in other-regarding, altruistic ways. Such behavior will take on the form of justice-seeking political activism if there are frames of causal attribution that blame either members of one's own social category (leading to feelings of guilt and attempts at redemption) or other, more powerful actors (leading to moral outrage and demands for punishment). The BLM movement provided both types of frames.

The systemic-racism frame made all white people responsible for the violence against Black people, thus generating a moral urge, a sense of guilt, and the demand for political action to redeem past injustices and prevent their future recurrence. On the other hand, the distinction between allies and enemies of racial progress, such as racist whites and, most importantly, the police, allowed blaming others, develop feelings of outrage and anger against these others, and look for ways to curtail their power (such as by defunding the police).

We employ a two-pronged research strategy to test these hypotheses, using both county- and individual-level survey data, in line with two of the most common methodological approaches in social movement research: the event history approach and the use of survey data on protest participation (della Porta 2014, chapters 13 and 14). The results align with the hypotheses: at both the county and individual survey levels, suffering from COVID and holding previously held beliefs about the unjust nature of race relations increase protest participation. This combination of data allows us to mitigate some of the ecological fallacy problems associated with using only aggregated units of analysis (della Porta 2014, chapter 4). As with most studies based on observational data, however, we have to refrain from making firm causal claims.

But at least we can rule out several alternative explanations in a separate section. First, could it be that protest participation was mainly driven by the lack of opportunities for social gatherings during the COVID pandemic? Second, perhaps protesters were mainly concerned with expressing their anger and defiance of the Trump administration, or they could have been frustrated by the government's poor handling of the pandemic, or they simply wanted to signal partisan allegiance. Finally, protest frequency could respond to levels of previous police violence against Black citizens (as a standard threat model of mobilization would have it), or the 2020 protests could merely amplify the protests of previous years, or they could be explained by white exposure to African Americans, as expected if participation was mostly network driven.

The literature review explores the intersection of social movements, the psychology of emotions, and causal attribution in social psychology. These diverse fields provide the building blocks for our model of conscience constituency during the BLM protests, which we elaborate with corresponding hypotheses in the theoretical section. The first analysis section presents results from the county-level data, while the second analysis section does the same for individual-level survey data. The concluding section reviews the results and offers an outlook on the larger implications of this study.

THE LITERATURES: MOVEMENTS, COMPASSION, AND ATTRIBUTION

We build our model of non-Black participation in the BLM movement by revisiting various disconnected literatures: on social movements in sociology and political science, the psychology of trauma and compassion, and the social psychology of causal attribution. Our theoretical model will selectively incorporate elements of all three, while the remaining factors highlighted in the literature review will appear as control variables in our empirical analysis, ensuring that we do not overlook other known drivers of movement participation.

Social Movements

For the purpose of this article, we limit the discussion to research on why individuals join a movement, rather than why a movement emerges in the first place or how it relates to other movements or political actors. We divide the discussion into two parts, the first on participation in social movements in general and the second on conscience constituents more specifically.

We begin with structuralist accounts that emphasize opportunity costs, networks, and frames that motivate individuals to participate in movements (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). The most often discussed factors, according to the overview provided by Paul Almeida (2019), are biographical availability (McAdam 1986: 70), such as the lack of children or demanding day jobs, and relatedly the unstructured work routines (Orum 1974) of the unemployed and students, both of which may be especially important for time-consuming, high-cost activities such as protest participation (Wiltfang and McAdam 1991). We will revisit this hypothesis in the section on alternative explanations, as BLM protest participation during 2020 could have reached such high levels due to the unstructured daily routines generated by COVID layoffs and home-office work.

Other authors have pointed to social networks, showing that friends of protesting individuals are more likely to protest as well, a classic social influence argument. Similarly, individuals may be recruited to march by organizations they belong to, such as trade unions or other movement-friendly civil society organizations (McAdam 1986; Fisher et al. 2005). Participation is also enhanced through previous experience with other social movements, as well as today through exposure to movement information via social networks (Vasi and Suh 2016). For the purpose of building our theoretical model, we will not rely on these factors, but take them into account in the empirical analysis as control variables whenever the data permit. We will also explore, in the alternative explanations section, if movement participation increased so dramatically because it spilled over, via network effects, from African American activists to non-Black individuals.

Beliefs and ideologies also matter for movement participation. Movement frames that resonate with already established frames are more likely to encourage individuals to participate, and skillful movement entrepreneurs can craft frames that maximize resonance while allowing them to draw new constituents into the movement. This will be an important factor that we build into our theoretical model by showing how ideas about structural racism or white privilege that spread widely in the decade or so before the murder of George Floyd helped, in combination with the motivational drivers that let more and more people adopt these frames, to bring a large number of participants to the BLM protests of 2020.

Shifting to cultural-emotional, as opposed to structural factors, social movement scholars have paid increasing attention to the emotional dynamics that enhance and sustain collective mobilization (Jasper 2019; Van Ness and Summers-Effler 2019). This literature emphasizes that beyond opportunity costs, network influence, and frame resonance, emotions act as powerful motivators for movement participation, especially affective emotions, such as trust or hate that are intimately related to social categories, as well as moral emotions," such as pride, shame, or compassion (Jasper 2011; Jasper 2019; see also Agostini and van Zomeren 2021). For our research, it is crucial to understand which emotions are triggered under what circumstances and when and why these emotions reach a critical level to motivate widespread movement participation (in line with the research agenda of Kemper 2001; similarly, for the study of the emotions motivating collective violence, Petersen 2002). In the next section, we will argue that

the widespread suffering from COVID amplified emotions of compassion for the Black victims of police violence, which, in combination with the increasing availability of specific movement frames, generated strong emotions of guilt and outrage that propelled many people to join the protests.

The literature on conscience constituents (Passy 2001; Klandermans, Van Stekelenburg, and Damen 2015; Gundelach and Toubøl 2019; see the overview in Owen 2019, chapter 1) has often applied the same structuralist arguments about biographical availability, ties to other individuals or to organizations, and frames/beliefs/values (Owen 2019, who adds a new focus on the relationships between conscience and beneficiary constituents). The pioneering studies of Doug McAdam (1986), as well as Sharon Nepstad and Christian Smith (1999), pinpointed personal ties and/or organizational channels. More recent work emphasizes the role of specifically altruistic frames, such as "bearing witness" to the suffering of others (Russo 2018) or the Christian theology, the humanist component of the Enlightenment, the socialist tradition (Passy 2001), or more general values and norms of helping others without the expectation of reciprocity (Owen 2019).

Regarding the latter, conscience constituents can be interpreted as value-rational participants in Weberian terms: they optimize being "good people," in other words, and feeling good about themselves by acting upon the values of their political group (Wuthnow 2012; Passy 2001; Agostini and van Zomeren 2021; Wiltfang and McAdam 1991).[3] Similarly, they pointed out the value of appearing righteous in the eyes of one's network members (Tilly 2001; but see Carlsen, Ralund, and Toubøl 2020). Still, it remains somewhat unclear who embraces these norms and values and why they sometimes diffuse widely across a population, leading to mass participation in movements that were hitherto confined to hard-core believers. To answer this question, we suggest adding elements from the psychology of suffering and compassion, as we will do in the next section.

Moving to cultural-emotional approaches to the mobilization of conscience constituents, many authors emphasize the emotional power of symbols. James Jasper and Jane Poulsen (1995) showed in a pioneering article on the animal rights movement that exposure to pictures of suffering animals creates a moral shock that pushes individuals to join the cause, while the role of network ties recedes into the background. Thomas Olesen (2017; 2018) also focuses on visual symbols of injustice, specifically photos of the dead body of a Kurdish refugee boy found on the shores of Turkey. It galvanized a movement in support of refugees seeking entry to the European Union.

Consistent with this work, it is evident that the video of George Floyd's death created a powerful symbol of racial injustice and a moral shock. To understand why it triggered a mass movement beyond the core participants of BLM activists while other such videos did not have the same effect during the previous years, we need to consider additional mechanisms that came into play during the summer of 2020.

Suffering, Compassion, and the Attribution of Responsibility

To this end, we move beyond the social movement literature and hypothesize that an individual's own suffering, especially if it comes unexpected, is intense and sustained over time, as was the case during COVID crisis, prepares the ground for becoming more compassionate for the suffering of others, thus expanding the moral boundaries of belonging and making movement enhancing frames more plausible. These frames portray the suffering of others as unjustifiable and identify a perpetrator, triggering moral emotions conducive to movement participation, such as outrage or guilt. This argument rests on three strands of sociopsychological and psychological research that we now briefly summarize.

First, political scientists have shown, building on insights from the psychology of "trauma growth," that victims of violence in civil wars are more likely than others to participate in local politics after the war and to assume leadership roles in their communities (Blattman 2009; Bellows and Miguel 2009). Individual hardship, in other words, has the potential to transform into outward

orientation and a more positive political engagement with the world. We build on this basic insight in suggesting a causal link between COVID-induced individual hardship and participation in the BLM protests.

Second, and more directly relevant to the topic at hand, psychologists of emotions have shown that compassion (or empathy) is a proximate trigger of pro-social behavior (or "altruism"), thus modifying the hitherto dominant idea of universal self-interest (Batson and Shaw 1991; Strauss et al. 2016; see also the literature cited in Simas, Clifford, and Kirkland 2020: 258-259; for similar arguments in international relations literature, see Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 898). This is especially true for individuals with a history of personal adversities, who tend both to feel more compassionate towards the suffering of others and to behave in more pro-social ways in response (Vollhardt and Staub 2011; Lim and DeSteno 2016; Kaniasty and Norris 1995; Stellar et al. 2012). These insights will provide a basic theoretical foundation for our argument: that COVID suffering translated into a more compassionate response to the murder of George Floyd, allowing an altruistic engagement with police violence against Black men to spread among the non-Black population.

To be sure, experimental research from social and political psychology (see most recently Simas, Clifford, and Kirkland 2020) also shows that individuals generally display greater empathic concern toward ingroup members—those with whom they share identities (Cikara, Bruneau, and Saxe. 2011; Kunstman and Plant 2008; Stürmer, Snyder, and Omoto 2005), experiences (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2017), or affiliations (Hein et al. 2010), reducing the likelihood of helping those in the outgroup or even leading to *Schadenfreude* instead of empathy (Cikara, Bruneau, and Saxe et al. 2011) or the reinforcement of negative stereotypes if the victim is conforming to them (Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002, Skorinko and Sinclair 2013, Vitaglione and Barnett 2003).[4] This is called the "empathy gap" (Gutsell and Inzlicht 2012). By implication, empathic concern must be stronger for outgroup than ingroup victims to trigger altruistic behavior. We will argue, in line with the research cited above, that the widespread and sustained suffering brought about by COVID pushed the emotional intensity of compassion with George Floyd above that threshold.

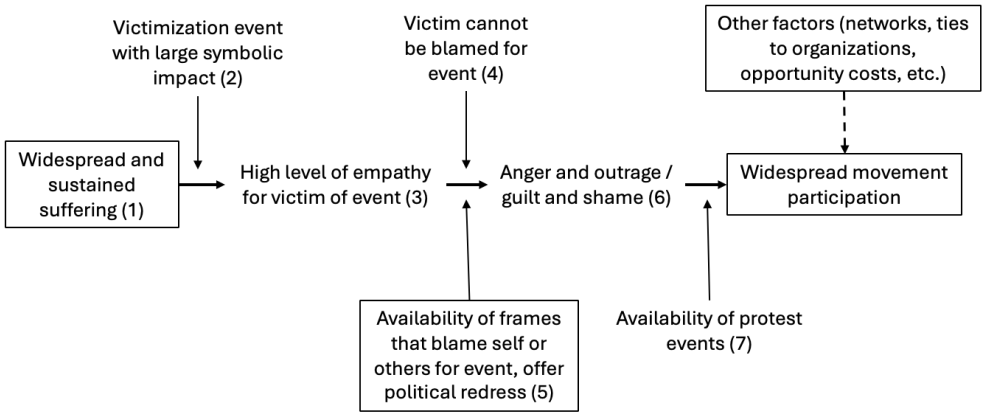
Third, whether empathy will trigger justice-seeking behavior depends on causal attribution and, thus, on cognitive frames that allow the identification of those responsible for the victim's suffering. If individuals blame the victim, feelings of empathy will not lead to justice-seeking behavior.[5] If the victim or her group cannot be blamed, individuals may hold others responsible, including potentially themselves. This depends on the availability of frames that expand the boundaries of moral responsibility to include outgroup members, or, in other words, which make it plausible that one's own kind of people may be responsible for the fate of others, even to the point where taken-for-granted social hierarchies are undermined (Li and Edwards 2021).

Depending on the nature of these frames of justification, individuals will blame their own group, leading to feelings of guilt and responsibility and a desire for self-rectification and redemption, which, in turn, may motivate individuals to join a social movement. Other frames of justification will attribute blame for the victim's suffering to others, rather than oneself. Feelings of moral outrage emerge, and justice may be sought in the form of punishing the perpetrators or advocating for systemic reform (Hoffman 1990; on the interplay between cognitive frames and moral emotions, see also Jasper 2019). In the next section, we will carry these insights forward to explicate which self-blaming and other-blaming frames were made available by the BLM movement, which translated empathicconcern into movement-enhancing emotions.

A CAUSAL MODEL OF CONSCIENCE MOBILIZATION

We are now ready to put the various pieces together into a model (see figure 1 on the next page) and a series of hypotheses. The causal chain starts with widespread and sustained individual suffering, such as during the COVID crisis (1). The second element is the eventful appearance of a powerful symbol of victimization, in our case, the video of the brutal murder of George

Figure 1. A Model of the Mobilization of Conscience Constituents



Note: Factors with observed variation in the data are in outlined boxes

Floyd (2). Together, the two elements produce intense feelings of compassion for the victim (3), which trigger a search for justification, bringing causal attribution and framing mechanisms into play. If the victim is blamed for their fate, no movement-enhancing emotions are generated. If the victim cannot be blamed (4), individuals may adopt movement frames that plausibly identify responsible actors and a political framework for redress. (5) Absent such frames, compassion would not tend trigger movement-enhancing emotions. Depending on the nature of these frames, (6) feelings of shame and guilt are directed against oneself, or outrage and anger at others responsible for the victim's suffering, all of which propel individuals to join a movement, obviously conditional upon the availability of protest events organized by political activists (7).

Before deriving hypotheses from this model, we note that other episodes of mass suffering, such as those brought about by natural catastrophes, war, or economic crises, could trigger similar mechanisms and lead to mobilizations for other altruistic causes, a thought we will come back to in the conclusion. Conversely, in other parts of the world, the COVID suffering triggered mass movements through the same mechanisms but for other political causes. In Poland, for example, protests against the country's harsh anti-abortion laws erupted in 2020 after a woman died from an amateur abortion. The fact that in the United States, COVID coincided with the videotaped murder of George Floyd is thus contingent. The following hypotheses are, therefore, tailored to the specific case at hand.

Widespread and Sustained Suffering

The widespread suffering from the COVID crisis had three aspects.[6] First, the pandemic directly threatened the health and lives of individuals and their families. Such threats were unequally distributed across the population, not only by individual characteristics such as race and socioeconomic status but also by geography. We thus hypothesize that counties with higher COVID death rates before George Floyd`s murder should show higher levels of participation in BLM protests (H1). At the individual level, those who have fallen ill with COVID or whose relatives caught the virus will be more likely to protest than others (H2).

COVID also led to a massive loss of jobs for millions of Americans. We hypothesize that counties with a higher increase in jobless rates from January (before the pandemic began to affect the economy) to May 2021 will see more protests. At the individual level, we expect that non-Black individuals who (a) have lost their jobs due to COVID, (b) work reduced hours due to COVID, or c) who had to take unpaid time off will be more likely to protest (H3).

The third aspect of the pandemic is the severe and dramatic change in daily life routines, most importantly through stay-at-home orders as well as the shift to online work for those with office

jobs. We propose that the restrictions in geographic mobility before May 25 should increase protest participation in heavily white counties (H4). This should also hold for the individual level, but the survey data do not allow us to test this hypothesis.

Victimization Event, Empathy, and Blame Attribution

George Floyd's murder, easily accessible in all its graphic detail on video, certainly represented a powerful symbol of victimhood that coincided, unlike previous episodes of police brutality, with the pandemic. The existing data do not allow us to test if the suffering brought about by COVID increased empathic compassion for George Floyd compared to the emotional response to victims of police violence before the pandemic. We also do not have systematic data to compare the emotional reaction to similarly brutal murders by the police where the victim could be made responsible for his own fate—for example, if the victim was a mass-shooter. The circumstances of George Floyd's death certainly exclude attributing responsibility to himself, which would preclude a compassionate response. These three elements of the model thus do not generate testable hypotheses within the empirical framework of our study but remain as empirical assumptions in the background. The next element brings in attribution and framing mechanisms.

Frames and Motivating Emotions

Here is where the psychological story ends and the framing element of our argument comes in. The BLM movement offered both a collective guilt and a moral outrage frame, thus channeling the strong empathic concerns triggered by the cruel fate of George Floyd and amplified by individuals' own, COVID-related suffering into justice-seeking behavior. The movement relied on terms and concepts such as "systemic racism," "white privilege," and "white supremacy" (Dunivin et al. 2022). While an entire social science literature has emerged around these concepts, with which we are not concerned here, they have, in the meantime, "traveled" outside these academic circles and become part of lay discourse adopted by social movements such as the BLM (compare to how movements influence popular discourse, Polletta and Amenta 2019; on the BLM specifically, Dunivin et al. 2022).

The "systemic racism" frame makes white individuals concerned with or even responsible for racial inequality more generally and for police violence against Black individuals more particularly. One possible reaction is to feel guilty for the extent of anti-Black violence, if only indirectly as a member of the category of non-Black citizens (on "white guilt," see Iyer, Leach, and Crosby 2003; Swim and Miller 1999). The movement offers redemption through participating in the protests, which was portrayed as "doing the work" of bringing about racial progress and preventing future suffering (on "white guilt" and civic action, see Dull et al. 2021).

Alternatively, responsibility can also be attributed to others. The movement offered the "allyship" frame (borrowed from the civil rights, feminist, and gay movements of the seventies) that allowed non-Black individuals to distance themselves from those members of their own category who are portrayed as "anti-black racists," thus effectively splitting the non-Black category into two subcategories with opposed moral standing (on category fission and disidentification, Wimmer 2008; on the externalization of blame as a reaction to guilt, Tangney and Dearing 2003). The moral status of allyship is certified by the movement and signaled to others by participation in the protest.

We derive three hypotheses from these considerations. First, and at the regional level, areas in which Google searches for the term "racism" were frequent before the outbreak of the May protests should see more protests subsequently (H5) because participation-enhancing frames had already diffused more widely.[7] At the individual level, non-Black individuals who believe that racism represents a severe problem in US society should be more likely to participate in BLM protests (H6). In line with the theoretical model, we treat the accessibility of frames as a factor that is independent from the impact of COVID. These six hypotheses will be tested using the two different data sources outlined above.

COUNTY-LEVEL ANALYSIS

We present each study in a separate section, each beginning with a description of the data, the modeling strategy, and the results. We begin with the aggregate analysis using either counties as units of observation or Designated Market Areas (DMAs), the level of aggregation for which Google Trends allows us to download data on Google search behavior.

County and DMA Data

The 194 DMAs are much larger than the 3,116 counties, and we, therefore, aggregate county-level control variables to the level of DMAs. The reduced number of observations increases standard errors and reduces variability, potentially smoothing out extreme values and local trends that might appear more pronounced at the county level. The DMA-level analysis thus yields more conservative estimates, making statistical significance harder to achieve and reducing the risk of spurious relationships. This higher threshold enhances our confidence in the robustness of the associations we identify.

Data on protests come from the Crowd Counting Consortium (Consortium 2020), which tracks protest movements at a very fine level of granularity.[8] We completed these data with information from Countlove, the source used by the *New York Times*. We only retain protests in the CCC data that are coded as BLM events or as other events related to racial inequality and injustice. The data also contain estimates of crowd sizes, but these varied quite significantly between the data sources (Fisher et al. 2019), and for many events, these estimates were missing. The main analysis thus uses the number of protests per 100,000 inhabitants. The time window is May 25 to June 30, 2020. We model protest participation using a negative binomial model that accounts for overdispersion and includes state fixed effects to account for unobserved characteristics of states. We use robust standard errors to correct for heteroskedasticity as recommended in the technical literature (Allison 2012; Cameron and Trivedi 2005).

The COVID data come from the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University. In the analysis below, we use the number of fatalities before May 2020, as the information on confirmed cases is much less reliable. The Bureau of Labor Statistics provides data on unemployment change between January and May 2020. Data on the reduction of geographic mobility come from the Google COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports.

Data on Google search trends for the term "racism" were available in Google Trends for Designated Market Areas. They represent a rank order of the frequency with which the DMA populations searched for different terms. We thus know which DMA searched the most for "racism" (its Eureka, in California), but not how much more often it did so than the second-ranked DMA. We used the time window of five years before May 2020, assuming that ideological conversion processes accumulate over the mid-term, and reverse coded this data for ease of interpretation.

A series of control variables come from a variety of data sources described in the online appendix A.1.[9] They capture many factors considered crucial by the social movement research briefly reviewed above, including the density of social ties (measured through Facebook friendships), the density of civic organizations, the political orientation of the county population (measured through the Democratic vote share in the 2016 elections), its racial, age, and socioeconomic composition, as well as average weather conditions. Some additional data were used to evaluate alternative explanations and will be briefly introduced in the corresponding section below.

Results of the County-level Analysis

Table 1 shows the result of the aggregated analysis. Regarding the control variables, most results align with expectations except that density of social networks (as measured by Facebook friendships) and the share of Democratic votes in the preceding elections are not significantly

Table 1. Negative Binomial Regressions of the Number of Protests per Capita in a County or DMA

	1	2	3
Units of Observations	*Counties*	*DMAs*	*Counties*
Proportion of individuals below the	0.139	0.002	0.0801
age of 25	(0.0894)	(0.239)	(0.0927)
Proportion of individuals above the	0.133	0.003**	0.101
age of 64	(0.0977)	(0.197)	(0.100)
Share of the white population	-0.434**	0.001*	-0.171**
(in quartiles)	(0.0890)	(0.0380)	(0)
Proportion of people with at least	0.405**	0.001	0.322**
a bachelor's degree	(0.0494)	(0.116)	(0.0469)
Proportion of unemployed people	-0.610	0.000	-0.293
(in 2019 in model 1)	(0.361)	(0.347)	(0.168)
Median household income	-0.292**	0.001	-0.290**
	(0.0445)	(0.0625)	(0.0474)
Gini index of household income	0.0969*	-0.001	0.111**
	(0.0350)	(0.0443)	(0.0344)
Proportion of Democratic votes in the	-0.0396	-0.001	-0.0247
2016 presidential election	(0.0269)	(0.0448)	(0.0290)
Average temperature in May-June 2020	-0.0111	-0.002**	-0.00887
(in Fahrenheidt)	(0.00799)	(0.00615)	(0.00807)
Population size in thousands	-0.000185	-0.001	-0.000273
	(0.000148)	(1.27e-10)	(0.000150)
Relative number of Facebook friendships	-0.00203		0.00271
per dyad in 2016 (scaled to a max of 100)	(0.0101)		(0.0149)
Number of civic organizations	2.150**		2.054**
per 1000 residents	(0.250)		(0.246)
State fixed effects	Yes	No	Yes
Rate of the cumulative number of COVID deaths	0.00939**	0.001**	
(centered and standardized)	(0.00307)	(0.00109)	
% change in unemployment rate between	0.487**		
January and May 2020	(0.0890)		
% reduction in distance traveled to/from	-0.0446**		
work from early Feb to late May	(0.00998)		
% reduction in distance traveled to/from work	0.0117**		
# Share of the white population	(0.00326)		
Rank order in searching for the term "racism" on		0.002**	
Google in previous 5 years		(0.0435)	
Number of black victims of fatal police shootings			0.00156
since 2000			(0.0254)
Number of protests in the			0.00467
previous three years			(0.0266)
White people's exposure to			-0.217
Black people			(0.451)
Observations	2783	205	2783

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; constants omitted; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

associated with the outcome. This latter finding reflects the cross-party support the movement received early on during the summer of 2020. We will briefly revisit this finding in the section on alternative explanations.

We find a positive and statistically significant association between the number of COVID deaths per capita and protest frequency in model 1, which aligns with H1. A one-standard-deviation increase in the number of deaths per 100,000 individuals (or eighteen deaths per

100,000) increases protest participation by one standard deviation (or four protests per 100,000 individuals). Obviously, COVID deaths might be endogenous to protest participation, creating a potential reverse causation problem. To avoid this problem, we count fatalities *before* the protests broke out in May 2020. Furthermore, existing research by epidemiologists, specifically on the BLM protests, shows that these did not increase COVID infection in significant ways (Neyman and Dalsey 2021; Dave et al. 2020).

Model 1 also shows a positive association, in line with H3, with changes in unemployment during the first five months of 2020 and protest frequency in May and June (with a 1.6 standardized coefficient). We also find that in heavily non-Black counties, the suffering from restrictions in geographic mobility in the wake of COVID also increased protest frequency, in line with H4: the sign of the coefficient for the interaction term becomes positively significant for heavily white counties, while in heavily non-white counties, mobility reductions (the main effect) are associated with fewer, not more protests.

Model 2 shifts to DMAs as units of observation, which is why the number of observations drops to 205. In line with expectations (H5), we observe more protest events in DMAs where people searched more for the term "racism" during the previous five years (with a standardized coefficient of 1.12). Note that we avoid endogeneity problems by using pre-2020 Google search volumes.[10]

Online appendix A.2 summarizes the results of a series of collinearity and robustness checks.[11] First, we checked for collinearity using Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) and found that the state fixed effects may be problematic in that regard. Excluding these produces substantially identical results for the main variables of interest. Next, we ran all models of Table 1 without the county of Minneapolis, where the protests originated, and without counties with a share of the Black population above 10% (roughly the mean), to reduce the possible problem of ecological fallacy. Results mostly hold up (see appendix table 2).[11]

Obviously, the threats of ecological fallacy and reverse causation make our results difficult to interpret in strictly causal terms. Regarding the latter, we note again that we only count COVID fatalities until the outbreak of the protests in May 2020. However, we cannot rule out that unobserved, omitted variables (such as public transportation infrastructure or reporting in local media) could influence both protest frequency and COVID fatalities.

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL ANALYSIS: DATA FROM THE NORC SURVEY

The June 2020 survey from the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research contains individual-level information on participation in BLM protests "during the past few weeks," (as the question was phrased). The overall sample size was 1,310, of which 377 were African Americans.[12] The survey does not offer respondents' county of residence but only a census region, which precludes combining the aggregate, county-level data analyzed above with the individual-level data into a single multilevel model.

The control variables are similar to the ones used at the county level: age, educational attainment, employment status, household income, race, and political party preference. Unfortunately, many standard variables that influence social movement participation (such as membership in organizations, previous protest activity, or social networks) and that we were controlling for in the county-level analysis are not available in the AP-NORC survey.[13] We add a control for how worried a respondent is about infection with COVID, which might influence participation in protests. We do not use questions about personal experience with police violence or policy preferences about police reform because these responses may be influenced by protest participation. The outcome is participation in at least one protest over the past weeks, and we specify models as logistic regressions. We add census region fixed effects to account for unobserved heterogeneity. Models with state fixed effects are reported in the robustness section. To test for multicollinearity, we calculated Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) for all variables and

found them unproblematic.[14] As in the negative binomial models, we specify robust standard errors to correct for heteroskedasticity as recommended by Colin Cameron and Pravin Trivedi (2005) and Paul Allison (2012).

Results from the Individual Survey Data

To test our conditional hypothesis about the impact of the COVID crisis on protest participation, we split the sample between a Black subsample, for which we do not expect the COVID-related variables to have much effect, and the non-Black subsample, for which the suffering-compassion-justice-seeking mechanism should operate.

As the results in table 2 show, many of the control variables mentioned above conform to standard expectations, while others do not (there is again no significant effect for party affiliation). For the sake of brevity, we do not discuss these results in detail here (see online appendix 3) but move on to the main variables of interest, starting with the non-Black subsample.

In line with expectations, non-Black individuals who suffered more from the impact of the pandemic are more likely to participate in protests (model 1): Those who were diagnosed with

Table 2: Logistic Regression of Individual Protest Participation

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Sample	*Non-Black Respondents*	*Black Respondents*	*Non-Black Respondents*
Age	-0.228	-0.422**	-0.270*
(1 = 18-29 to 5 = 65 or older)	(0.130)	(0.147)	(0.122)
Educational attainment	0.113	0.284	0.00941
(1 = no high school to 4 = BA or above)	(0.176)	(0.206)	(0.171)
Employment status	0.295	-0.176	0.339
(1 = employed)	(0.354)	(0.350)	(0.342)
Household income group	0.0618	-0.0259	0.00485
(1 = less than 10k to 9 = 150k or more)	(0.0712)	(0.0763)	(0.0692)
White	0.0798		-0.0310
(1 = yes)	(0.333)		(0.324)
Democrat	-0.00137	-0.325	0.243
(1 = yes)	(0.399)	(0.409)	(0.423)
Independent	0.458	0.581	0.514
(1 = yes)	(0.393)	(0.470)	(0.400)
Not worried about personal/family Corona	-0.0131	-0.0136	-0.0858
infection (1 = worried to 5 = not at all)	(0.0437)	(0.0403)	(0.133)
Controls for urban/suburban/rural	Yes	Yes	Yes
community and region fixed effects			
Corona virus diagnosed for respondent/	0.591+	0.407	
relative/friend (1 = yes)	(0.339)	(0.342)	
Anticipation of financial strain in 2021	0.0843	0.134	
(1 = much better to 5 = much worse)	(0.167)	(0.143)	
Resp or family either laid off or reduced	0.699*	0.294	
Hours or unpaid time off due to Corona	(0.322)	(0.318)	
Perceived severity of racism (from 1 = not	0.735**	-0.119	
at all serious to 5 = extremely serious)	(0.196)	(0.210)	
Disapproval of Trump (from 1 = strongly			0.0445
approve to 7 = strongly disapprove)			(0.107)
Disapproval of how the president handles			0.389
the coronavirus outbreak (1 = yes)			(0.576)
Observations	921	371	923

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; constants ommitted; * p<0.05, ** p<0.01; + This coefficient has a p value of 0.081

COVID (or who had relatives or friends who were), who were laid off due to the crisis (or who had a household member who was) or who worked reduced hours or had to take unpaid time off due to pandemic (confirming H2 and 3). We note that the COVID diagnosis variable just misses standard levels of significance with a p-value of 0.081. The only exception to that pattern is that those who anticipated their financial situation to worsen in the future were not more likely to have protested.

Also in line with expectations (H6), individuals who think that the problem of racism is severe were more likely to have participated in a protest.[15] The effects sizes are quite large: The average marginal effect of economic suffering from COVID represents a two-percentage-point increase in the probability of protest participation. We find a similar marginal effect of around two percentage points for those believing in the severity of the problem of racism, a meaningful difference when compared to the six-percentage-point baseline probability of participation for non-Black respondents.

Model 2 shows the same combination of variables for the Black population. None of them are significantly associated with movement participation. This supports our argument that the psychological mechanism linking personal suffering to compassion and justice-seeking behavior is not at play among those who already identify with the Black victims of police violence through the idea of "linked fate" and who are themselves possible targets of such violence.

The online appendix (A.4)[16] again briefly reports the results of two robustness checks. First, we run a subsample analysis of respondents younger than forty (below the median), the politically more progressively oriented and more social network-driven segment of the population (results hold; see online appendix table 2, model 1 at https://www.awimmer.com/articles). Second, we add state instead of region fixed effects to the equation, using the full sample to minimize the loss of observations (results hold; see online appendix table 2, model 2).

TESTING SOME ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

It is now time to address some alternative explanations for the massive protest wave of 2020. A series of plausible arguments, some based on existing social movement theories and some of a more specific nature, can be explored with existing data. First, local protest frequencies could reflect local levels of police violence against Black people, in line with standard political process theories, according to which threat may trigger organized resistance. This is what an earlier study of the BLM protests before 2020 finds (Williamson, Trump, and Einstein 2018). We obtained data on deadly police violence from the Fatal Encounters database maintained by the *Washington Post*. We do not find a positive association between the cumulative number of Black individuals shot dead by the police during the previous years and the number of protests observed in a county during 2020 (see model 3 of table 1).

Next, we explore if participants could be primarily motivated by concerns other than police violence against African Americans. In the circumstances of the pandemic, the BLM protests could have offered a rare opportunity to publicly and vocally oppose conservative political forces, most importantly, President Trump himself. model 3 in table 2, which is based on the NORC survey data, does not suggest this: The level of disapproval of the sitting president was not significantly associated with protest participation in 2020. Alternatively, one could imagine that individuals dismayed by Trump's handling of the pandemic could have lost confidence and trust in his government, which in turn could have motivated them to join a protest directed against another government agency, the police. However, according to model 3 in table 2, dissatisfaction with the handling of the COVID crisis was not associated with protest participation. Relatedly, we point to the results of another survey among participants to rule out alternative motivations: around 94 percent of those who had participated in the BLM protests did cite racial justice as one of their main motivations to participate (Fisher and Rouse 2022).

Could it be that protest participation simply reflects pre-existing political orientations, either more specifically on issues of racial justice and police violence, or more generally concerning political attitudes and party affiliation? The pandemic might have amplified these political forces, providing an opportunity to signal once partisan stances, but not added anything substantially new to them. However, BLM protest frequency from 2017 to 2019 does not explain county-level protest frequency in 2020 (model 3 in table 1). Furthermore, and as mentioned above, the democratic vote share in 2016 is not associated with the number of protests in a county (table 1), nor are Democratic individuals more likely to have joined the protests (table 2).

An alternative link between the pandemic and the protests could be the increased unemployment and thus the unstructured time that, according to some movement scholars, is conducive to collective action. Similarly, there were few opportunities to socialize with others in public spaces during the pandemic, making the protests attractive from an entertainment point of view. If protest participation was simply a function of unstructured time or the lack of other opportunities to socialize, pandemic-related variables should increase protest participation for everybody. Model 2 in table 2 showed, however, that COVID-related unemployment or underemployment were not factors explaining protest participation among Black survey respondents. Furthermore, COVID-related reductions in geographic mobility (and thus opportunities to socialize) increase protest frequency in heavily white counties but decrease it elsewhere (model 1 in table 1).

From a different viewpoint, one might argue that the 2020 protest wave evolved independently of the pandemic. It could be driven by the same factors that were responsible for previous BLM protests, which were simply amplified over time through institutions or interpersonal diffusion. Regarding the former, movement-enhancing frames such as systemic racism were propagated and disseminated by colleges over the past years, which might explain the increase in protest participation in counties with many colleges (even if they were already in summer break when the protests reached their peak). However, we see in model 2 of table 1 in the on-line appendix[9] that protest frequency is not associated with the number of universities and colleges in a county (data come from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and its Census of Employment and Wages).

Regarding the interpersonal diffusion mechanism, one could argue that the murder of George Floyd mobilized the Black population more than previous police killings, as the descriptive data mentioned in the introduction indicate. The more numerous Black protesters could have drawn more non-Black friends into the protests, independent of the emotional-moral mechanisms at the core of our argument. However, white protest participation increased sixfold, thus at a much higher rate than the twofold increase in Black participation. Moreover, exposure of whites to Blacks in their neighborhoods (a common measure of residential segregation) is not associated with protest frequency in a county (model 3 of table 1) as we would expect since residential exposure is likely correlated with interracial relationships (about which we do not have data either at the county or the individual level). Following the idea that the contagion of risky behavior, such as protest participation, needs multiple ties to spread across communities (Centola and Macy 2007), a high residential exposure to African Americans should have helped to reach the threshold.

There are certainly other motivations and emotional channels behind the mass participation in the BLM protests of 2020 that we cannot entirely rule out, including the role of a general frustration about life in the pandemic, the signaling of moral righteousness to friends, and various other factors. However, we consider the combined evidence strong enough to make our interpretation at least plausible.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the combination of aggregate and individual-level survey data suggests that personal suffering during the pandemic combined with ideological framing to generate an expansion of the moral boundaries of belonging among white and Hispanic individuals: the suffering of

people considered as "racial others" came to matter both morally and politically. Joining the protests appeared urgent and appropriate to address the emotional and moral distress generated by observing George Floyd's death and to redeem oneself from the guilt of white privilege and from complicity with systemic racism. Combined with the availability of protest events, organized by the BLM organizations, this led to an unprecedented spread of protests across the country, and unexpected white mobilization for racial progress. This is all the more remarkable because the pandemic also substantially increased the risk of protesting and thus created a disincentive to participate. The suffering-compassion-justice-seeking mechanism thus had to overcome a countervailing mechanism that the pandemic triggered as well.

How reliable are the results reported above? The observational nature of our data prevents us from making definitive causal claims about effect sizes. However, we believe that the controls in both the county- and individual-level regression models have accounted for the major sources of bias, thus making us confident that the direction of our estimates is correctly identified. In the county-level models, the demographic controls for age and race capture both the latent epidemiological risk of dying from COVID and the baseline propensity to participate in protests. Although there is heterogeneity in COVID outcomes and protest participation within the age and demographic groups we measure in our data, we believe that including these controls accounts for the underlying biases that could confound our estimates. Any unmeasured demographic confounder would have to be either negatively correlated with age and race/ethnicity or correlated with COVID deaths and protest participation but uncorrelated with age and race/ethnicity. We find these two scenarios highly implausible.

Similarly, any omitted political variable that could bias our results would need to correlate with COVID-19 deaths and protest participation, yet uncorrelated with the share of Democratic votes in the 2016 election and population size. Given the well-documented and strong correlation between political orientation and COVID-19 outcomes, we find this scenario implausible. The same logic applies to the individual-level models. Given the comprehensive set of relevant controls, we think it is unlikely that COVID outcomes and protest participation could be driven by unobserved variables not directly or indirectly captured by our covariates.

While contextually contingent in its origins, the mass movement of the summer of 2020 might very well be consequential. It is clear that 2020 represents a sea change in how many liberal or young Americans, in particular, see their society and the role of race and racism in it, greatly accelerating trends that were already underway beforehand. Speculating beyond the confines of the empirical analysis offered in this article, it could be that the 2020 protests will be as consequential as was the cultural and political revolution of the late 1960s (for evidence of the durable spread of BLM movement frames, see Dunivin et al. 2022; for a very optimistic assessment of the consequences of the movement for a "reinvigoration of democratic politics," written before the second term of President Trump, see Woodly 2022).

This study thus contributes to our understanding of one specific avenue of how cultural and political change could happen: through cascades of movement participation that shift the ideological and moral landscape within which large segments of the population form their political opinion. How durable such changes will be and how far they have institutional consequences is a different question. Our study thus suggests that collective suffering may very well be a trigger of cultural change. It would be fascinating to explore, from this angle, the past consequences of wars with mass participation, such as the two World Wars, epidemics such as the Spanish influenza, and natural disasters such as major earthquakes in more systematic ways.

Whatever the specific triggers for the spread of empathic engagement with the suffering of others, it is clear that the altruistic political movements have been crucial for modern history, which, in the language of political philosophy (e.g., Rawls 1971: 462-79), has seen a constant widening of the circle of empathy. This characteristically modern phenomenon emerged with the "invention" of the idea of human rights in the eighteenth century, which was preceded by the rise of the concept of the morally autonomous individual capable of empathy with others, which, in turn, was shaped by campaigns against the then widespread practice of judicial torture (Hunt 2007). Subsequent examples include the abolitionist movement of the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries (King and Haveman 2008), white participation in the US civil rights movement (McAdam 1986), the anti-Apartheid movement in the West (Culverson 1996), the Sanctuary Movement in favor of Central American refugees (Lippert and Rehaag 2012; Yukich 2013), or, most recently, the massive protests against citizenship restrictions for Muslims in India or the campus protests against Israel's war campaign in Gaza in the United States.

For Luc Boltanski (2007), the pragmatist French sociologist of values and morality, modern politics itself is based on the long-distance relationships established by observing someone else's suffering, a thought already formulated by Hannah Arendt. In this article, we built on this broad perspective and added a more precise argument about the conditions under which empathic engagement on behalf of others could possibly emerge and spread during periods of crisis and widespread suffering.

NOTES

[1] These figures are from the Crowd Counting Consortium (Ash Center 2020). The geographic reach of the movement also increased dramatically: during the three years preceding 2020, between thirty and 69 counties saw any BLM protests, mostly in the more diverse coastal cities. In 2020, there was at least one protest event in 1,329 counties.

[2] NORC survey of July 2015 "Law Enforcement and Violence: The Divide between Black and White Americans."

[3] Regarding white participation in racial justice movements before the BLM era, Warren 2010; Santos 2020; Owen 2019.

[4] Individuals also regulate with whom they feel empathy in the first place (Zaki 2014), for example, by not attributing emotions to stigmatized individuals to avoid feelings for them (Cameron, Harris, and Payne 2016).

[5] They will also blame the victim if they see themselves unable to help (Kogut 2011).

[6] For the sake of simplicity, we treat these three aspects as distinct and cumulative and refrain from analyzing interactions between them.

[7] We unfortunately cannot use more specific terms such as "systemic racism" because search volumes before 2020 were very low.

[8] A recent meta study of CCC and ACLED data, the only other available high-quality protest dataset, shows a very high degree of overlap of event counts for 2020 (Dorff, Adcox, and Konet 2023). It attests CCC a much better quality in identifying the issues that the protests were about, which is crucial for our purposes.

[9] Online appendix is available at https://www.awimmer.com/articles.

[10] In line with our theoretical model, we do not find an interaction effect between the prevalence of searches for "racism" and the COVID fatalities.

[11] The online appendix is available at available at https://www.awimmer.com/articles.

[12] Here is a detailed description of the survey from the survey codebook: "Data were collected using the AmeriSpeak Omnibus, a monthly multi-client survey using NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. . . . During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face-to-face). The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97 percent of the U.S. household population. . . . Interviews for this survey were conducted between June 11 and 15, 2020, with adults aged eighteen and over representing the fifty states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 1,310 completed the survey—1,220 via the web and 90 via telephone. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, depending on respondent preference. The final stage completion rate is 16.9 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 23.6 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 84.8 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 3.4 percent. The overall margin of sampling error is +/-3.7 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups. In addition, Blacks were sampled at a higher rate than their proportion of the population for reasons of analysis. The overall margin of sampling error for the 377 completed interviews with Blacks is +/- 5.3 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect" (NORC 2020: 1).

[13] The authors are currently developing a separate paper that utilizes an online experiment to further investigate the mechanisms linking COVID-19 experiences with protest participation. In these analyses, survey respondents were asked about their intentions to participate in a hypothetical future protest and were given the option to visit a webpage to sign a petition or donate to BLM. Respondents were also questioned about their affiliation with civil society organizations. The results (not shown here) of regressions predicting future protest participation and the intent to sign a petition or donate to BLM show that membership in a civil society organization as well as past protest is highly predictive of both outcomes. Past personal experiences with COVID are also strongly associated with both outcomes, in line with our findings from the AP-NORC survey that we report in this article.

[14] Model 2 reports a potentially problematic VIF value for one variable. Without this variable, results (not shown) remain substantially unchanged.

[15] Consistent with the county-level findings, there is no significant interaction effect between having been infected with COVID and the belief in the severity of racism.

[16] The online appendix is available at https://www.awimmer.com/articles.

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