The role of cognitive empathy in reducing political outgroup avoidance

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Abstract

In recent times there has been an upturn in the rates of political polarization and hostility in contemporary democracies, with increasing unrest and incivility between those of different voting factions. In this paper, we investigated whether higher levels of empathy might be associated with reduced levels of desire to be distant from political outgroups, and whether such effects were consistent across different partisan populations. Samples of 262 British voters and 353 American partisans completed measures of cognitive and affective empathy, ingroup identification, and desire to be distant from ideological opponents. Across both samples, reduced levels of outgroup avoidance were predicted by higher levels of cognitive empathy, and was greater in ‘Remain’ and ‘Democrat’ voters. However, the significant relationship between ingroup identification and distancing desires was not moderated by empathy or vote choice. As such, we believe that such desires to be separate from outgroups in these contexts may be conceptualized as being driven by ingroup identification and perceptions of intergroup incongruence, and that this is symmetrical across different voter groups. Nonetheless, we do provide evidence that higher levels of cognitive empathy may reduce outgroup avoidance.

Key words: polarization, perspective taking, political partisans, empathy, intergroup relations

Introduction

A range of empirical and polling data has demonstrated a growing degree of polarization across modern Western democracies. Nowhere has this been more pronounced than in countries such as the US, where political partisans increasingly dislike each other (Lelkes, 2016), sort themselves into distinct neighborhoods (Enos, 2017), and avoid each other's viewpoints (Frimer et al., 2017). In the UK, the 2016 British referendum on European Union (EU) membership (from here, 'Brexit') created a new self-reinforcing dichotomy of voters who wanted to 'Remain' in and 'Leave' the EU, while the US voting division of Republicans vs. Democrats is long established and heavily studied in social and political psychology. In this paper, we use these voting contexts to investigate the potential role of empathy in reducing levels of outgroup avoidance, as we seek to understand how to bring together the more partisan elements of our fragmenting societies.

Theoretical Explanations of Partisan Divisions

Polarization has become one of the most-studied topics in political psychology in the last decade, with scientists examining the roots, manifestations, and effects of these processes. The effects of partisan groups becoming more polarized include exaggerated perceptions of bias among outgroups (Ditto et al., 2019), hostility and intolerance between partisans (Crawford, 2014; Frimer et al., 2019; Wetherell et al., 2013), the motivated rejection of scientific findings (Nisbet et al., 2015; Washburn & Skitka, 2018), and stereotypical thinking between those individuals who vote in different ways (Brandt, 2017; Graham et al., 2012). However, we know that stereotypes and prejudice can be broken down through positive and mutually-humanizing exposure to outgroup members (Allport, 1954; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). As such, finding ways to bring political partisans together may offer a potential solution to the fracturing of democratic processes.

A popular idea in the social psychology of ideology postulates that political partisans are so polarized because they possess distinct and incompatible personalities (for a review, see Jost, 2017). For example, liberals have been consistently shown to be higher on indices of openness to experience, agreeableness, and commitments to universalism and benevolence than conservatives (Caprara et al., 2006). In contrast, conservatives tend to score higher in relation to conscientiousness, psychopathy, and narcissism (Jonason, 2014). These differences also extend into the moral domain, where liberals endorse more 'individualizing' moral foundations and conservatives are comparatively more focused on 'binding' foundations related to social

hierarchy and pathogen avoidance (Graham et al., 2012; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Harper & Rhodes, 2021). Liberals, for instance, are more likely to These core psychological differences may explain why political partisans often struggle to understand each other's motivations and beliefs.

Despite such differences, political partisans have been shown to act in symmetrical ways when engaging with their ideological opponents. Both Crawford (2014) and Brandt (2017) demonstrated how liberals and conservatives express prejudice towards groups traditionally associated with their outgroups (e.g., conservatives act prejudicially towards homosexuals, while liberals express prejudice towards deeply religious people). Such bias has also been reported as being bipartisan in nature in large meta-analytic studies (Ditto et al., 2019). This ideological symmetry extends to the motivated avoidance of hearing about why political opponents vote in the ways that they do. According to Frimer et al. (2017) anticipations of cognitive dissonance about one's own viewpoints and the undermining of a shared reality with ingroup members are both mediators of such avoidance. Bringing these strands of work together, partisans appear to build up secure worldviews within social bubbles, and subsequently protect the purity of these by actively avoiding outgroups (and, by extension, competing ideological arguments).

The contemporary ubiquity of online social media facilitates this ideologically motivated trend of outgroup avoidance. While widespread adoption of online media should increase the amount of access people have to information, this trend in online relationship maintenance makes it easier than ever to create so-called 'echo chambers', where entire networks are constructed around pure ideological principles and viewpoints (Bakshy et al., 2015). That is, instead of requiring an external agent such as a parent or teacher to arbitrate interpersonal or ideological conflict, people can now simply click a button to 'unfriend' or 'mute' people with whom they have such disagreements with. A lack of political variety in our social networks leads to fewer direct interactions between political 'opponents', and we fail to learn how to deal with ideological disagreement. What this means in practice is that both sides maintain a state of hypervigilance when negotiating contradictory opinions, which in turn, leads ingroups to perceive opposing viewpoints as personal attacks. This facilitates the enactment of hostile responses towards outgroups, which naturally increase the barriers to constructive political and intergroup relations (Edwards, 2013; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Without such contact, stereotypes are allowed to flourish, and perceptions (rather than realities) guide our judgements.

With repeated exposure, automatic responses to outgroups can be replaced with new appraisals driven by *knowing* these individuals (Tam et al., 2009; Teater, 2018; Turner et al., 2008; Zhang, 2016). That said, computational research has demonstrated that mere exposure to

outgroup messaging is not enough to simply see outgroup messaging in online environment. Ball et al. (2018) exposed partisan Democrats and Republicans to Twitter ‘bots’ that regularly retweeted outgroup political officials and found that ideological beliefs became stronger in both groups, although the effect was only statistically significant among Republicans (who became more conservative). Instead, it appears that forging meaningful intergroup relationships that allow for a fuller understanding of an outgroup’s motivations and beliefs is a more constructive method of bridging ideological divides (Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020; for meta-analytic evidence of the need for co-operative interactions to reduce prejudice online in non-political contexts see Imperato et al., 2021). This suggests that increasing one’s understanding of political outgroups through perspective taking may reduce feelings of difference that may be at the root of polarizing attitudes and behaviors designed to distance ourselves from outgroups.

Empathy and Perspective Taking

One potential moderator of polarization is empathy. Empathy is typically defined as the capacity to understand and share the emotional experience of another (Decety & Lamm, 2009), and relates to the extent to which outgroup members are viewed as *human* (Krumhuber et al., 2015). As such, empathy aids in understanding the mental state of an outgroup member and is considered a pre-requisite for resolving intergroup conflict (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016). This mechanism is thought to be powerful and wide-reaching. Empathizing with an outgroup member has not only been found to increase feelings of care towards them as an individual, but to their outgroup as a whole (Batson et al., 2002). Moreover, and directly relevant to the present research, the effect of empathy on polarization may be reliant on the strength of ingroup identification. Stürmer et al. (2006) reported increased outgroup-orientated helping behaviors in instances where similarities between the ingroup and outgroup were seen to overlap.

Empathy is commonly discussed in light of specific cognitive and affective dimensions (Blair, 2005). Specifically, while cognitive empathy denotes one’s capacity to understand and assume the emotional perspective of another (perspective taking), affective empathy typifies the vicarious sharing of, and responding to, another’s emotional state (Reniers et al., 2011). A small number of studies has explored the effect of empathy on perceptions and judgments of political outgroups. Contrary to what may be expected, trait empathy is a worse predictor of intergroup attitudes than a concept called parochial empathy (i.e., the difference between empathy for ingroup vs. outgroup members; Bruneau et al., 2017). Others have also reported this and advanced a motivated account of the effect of empathy on politically-related intergroup relations (Hasson et al., 2018; Zaki, 2014). However, this work typically uses empathic concern (Bruneau

et al., 2017), or a combination of self-reported “empathy, sympathy, and compassion” (Hasson et al., 2018, p. 1453) as its measure of empathy, broadly defined. These are affectively laden versions of empathy, and ignore the cognitive aspect of this construct.

Although no research to date has explored cognitive empathy’s link to polarization (and, by extension, outgroup avoidance), perspective taking has previously been associated with a reduction in non-political outgroup judgements, with this association further mediated by the strength of ingroup identification (Berthold et al., 2013). With the above literature in mind, it logically follows that the relationship between ingroup identification and outgroup avoidance may be moderated by the degree to which partisans can take the perspective of others (i.e., their level of cognitive empathy). We explore this possibility in the current work.

The Present Research and Hypotheses Tested

As stated above, we set out to investigate whether increased levels of empathy might moderate the relationship between ingroup identification and outgroup avoidance in the political sphere (operationalized as perceptions of difference between the self and members of one’s political outgroup, and a desire for social distance from them; Sunstein, 2002; Talisse, 2019). We study this phenomenon in two samples: (1) the UK in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, and (2) the US, comparing Republicans and Democrats. In the work that follows we use cross-sectional designs to examine whether higher levels of cognitive and/or affective empathy reduced the effects of ingroup identification on perceptions of outgroup difference, and to test whether any such effects might be further moderated by voting choice. In testing the moderated moderation, we can test competing hypotheses, as suggested by Washburn et al. (2015). That is, we contribute to ongoing theoretical debates about ideological (a)symmetries by examining whether any such effects of ingroup identification or empathy are equivalent in different voter groups (*the political symmetry hypothesis*), or if they differ (*the political asymmetry hypothesis*).

Methods

Participants

To determine our target sample sizes for both studies in this paper, we conducted an a priori power analysis using G*Power (version 3.1.9.2). Assuming an anticipated medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$) consistent with prior work on political intergroup relations (e.g., Frimer et al., 2017) and a standard alpha level of .05, the algorithm suggested that a minimum of 119 participants would be required to have 95% power in our planned analyses. We aimed to recruit a minimum of 250 participants for each analysis, divided evenly between each group (see

below). This oversampling accounted for potential missing data and participant withdrawals, and to allow for generalization in a more comfortable manner than would be possible with a minimally-powered study. All participants were recruited via advertisements placed on the crowdsourcing website *Prolific*, which allows people to engage in online research studies in exchange for small monetary rewards. For this project we placed four advertisements, which could only be viewed by those who had previously confirmed voting ‘Remain’ or ‘Leave’ in the UK’s referendum on EU membership, or who expressed an affiliation to either the ‘Democratic’ or ‘Republican’ affiliation within the US context (i.e., each group had its own advertisement). This information is routinely collected via *Prolific*’s pre-screening questionnaire when users sign up for an account on the website. Inclusion criteria suggested that participants should be fluent in English, and aged 18 years or over.

Sample one was comprised of 299 British participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.23$, $SD = 12.07$; 49.8% male), and sought to test our hypotheses within the context of the Brexit debate. Sample two was comprised of 400 American participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.55$, $SD = 11.23$; 50% male). All completers were reimbursed with £0.80 (approx. \$1.10) for their participation.

Materials

Demographics. Participants were asked to report their age, sex, and both how they voted in the 2016 EU Referendum, and how they would vote if the referendum were re-ran ‘today’.

Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy (QCAE; Reniers et al., 2011). The QCAE comprises 31 items that measure cognitive (19 items; e.g., “I am good at predicting how someone will feel”) and affective (12 items; e.g., “I am inclined to get nervous when others around me seem to be nervous”) dimensions of empathy using a 4-point scale. Each item is rated using a scale anchored from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”. We summed item responses to create composite scores for the total scale, and each empathy dimension (ranges = 31-124 for the whole scale, and 19-76 [cognitive empathy] and 12-48 [affective empathy] for each dimension; high scores indicated increased levels of empathy).

Three-Dimensional Strength of Group Identification Scale (3DSGI; Cameron, 2004). The 3DSGI comprises 12 items (e.g., “I have a lot in common with other [ingroup] voters”) that measure how strongly a respondent identifies with a group using a 6-point scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”. Although the scale can measure specific dimensions of ingroup identification (*centrality of group membership*, *ingroup affect*, and *ingroup ties*), we used the

measure in a unidimensional way, creating a composite ingroup identification score by summing responses across the items (range = 12-72; high scores indicated increased levels of ingroup identification).

Political Outgroup Contact Scale (POCS). The POCS is a purpose-created questionnaire comprising 20 items designed to measure political outgroup avoidance. The POCS first asked about how comfortable respondents would be to be associated with outgroup members (e.g., “your boss” or “a close friend”; eight items, rated on a ten-point scale from “Very Uncomfortable” to “Very Comfortable”). Participants were then asked whether they would positively interact with outgroup members (e.g., “Would you rent a house to a [outgroup member]”; four items, rated on a ten-point scale from “Definitely No” to “Definitely Yes”). Finally, there were a number of propositions about outgroup members (e.g., “[Outgroup members] are different from me”; eight items, rated on a ten-point scale anchored from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”). Aside from direct testing perceived similarity to and motivations to avoid associating with political outgroups, this is also consistent with the broad definition of polarization. This is because Talisse (2019) suggested that political polarization is about more than simply the endorsement of different policy proposals, but permeates into how partisans engage with, trust, and think about each other. A summed score was calculated for outgroup avoidance (range = 20-200). Due to the positive framing of most items, high scores on this measure were equivalent to lower avoidance motivations).

Procedure

After participants responded to our advertisements on *Prolific*, they initially entered their demographic information, such as to allow the Qualtrics survey software to pre-populate the 3DSGI and POCS measures with the appropriate ingroup/outgroup labels using a ‘loop and merge’ procedure. Following this, the QCAE, 3DSGI, and POCS measures were presented in a randomized order. Randomization was conducted for each participant by the survey software to reduce the likelihood of order effects influencing the data. On average, the study took less than 10 minutes to complete, and this procedure was approved by an institutional ethical review panel prior to data collection.

Planned Statistical Analysis

Pearson correlations were computed between the focal predictor (ingroup identification), the dependent variable (outgroup avoidance), and the moderator variables (total and dimension-

specific empathy) in relation to the whole sample, and specifically within each referendum voting group. We then used Model 3 of the PROCESS plugin for SPSS (version 3; Hayes, 2017) to run three moderated moderation models. In the first, we had the total QCAE score as the moderator. In the second and third models, we used cognitive and affective empathy domains in isolation. All scales scores were mean centered prior to analysis. Beta values reported in this paper are unstandardized, in line with Hayes' (2017) recommendations.

Results

Data Cleaning

Of the 299 British participants, 34 reported that they would vote differently if the EU referendum were re-ran 'today'. As such, they were removed, leaving a final sample with conviction in their initial vote. This was important as it enabled us to study those participants who were truly partisan in relation to EU membership, rather than potentially driven by specific issues within the debate that may have changed since the initial vote. A further three participants were removed as they were considered to have a disproportionate influence the dataset (Cook's $D > .015$; Leverage $> .030$), and so analyses were conducted on the remaining 262 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.03$, $SD = 11.86$ years; 52.7% male; 58.8% 'Remain' voters).

Of the 400 American participants, 47 reported that they have changed their voting choice since the 2016 US Presidential Election. As in Study 1, these participants were removed to leave a truly partisan sample, and to exclude those whose voting allegiances may be driven by individual political or temporal issues. As such, our analyses were based on the remaining 353 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.11$, $SD = 11.15$ years; 51.3% male; 48.4% 'Republican' voters).

Both samples retained a size that was larger than the original target of 250.

Sample Characteristics

In sample one, 'Remain' voters were significantly younger ($t(260) = -4.23$, $p < .001$), and exhibited greater levels of ingroup identification ($t(260) = 4.29$, $p < .001$) and outgroup avoidance ($t(260) = -5.72$, $p < .001$) than 'Leave' voters (Table 1a). In sample two, Democrats were significantly younger ($t(351) = 4.97$, $p < .001$), demonstrated higher levels of ingroup identification ($t(351) = -2.26$, $p = .024$), and exhibited greater levels of outgroup avoidance ($t(351) = 5.42$, $p < .001$) than Republicans (Table 1b). Taken together, we can see that partisans associated with parties and campaigns on the political left appear to be significantly younger and more prone to polarized thinking than those associated with parties or campaigns that are traditionally on the political right.

Table 1a. Means, standard deviations, and frequencies of demographic and questionnaire data across 2016 EU Referendum vote.

	Total (<i>n</i> = 262)	Leave (<i>n</i> = 108)	Remain (<i>n</i> = 154)	<i>p</i>
Age	38.03 ± 11.86	41.62 ± 12.17	35.52 ± 10.99	< .001
Sex	<i>n</i> _{Male} = 138	<i>n</i> _{Male} = 60	<i>n</i> _{Male} = 78	.436
3DSGI	47.50 ± 8.35	44.94 ± 7.67	49.30 ± 8.36	< .001
QCAE	90.49 ± 11.86	87.79 ± 13.18	92.38 ± 10.47	.002
QCAE - Cognitive	57.13 ± 8.25	56.01 ± 9.21	57.92 ± 7.43	.064
QCAE - Affective	33.36 ± 5.37	31.78 ± 5.55	34.46 ± 4.97	< .001
POCS	139.29 ± 38.14	154.47 ± 30.93	128.64 ± 39.18	< .001

Note. POCS is reverse-coded, such that high scores equate to less outgroup avoidance

Table 1b. Means, standard deviations, and frequencies of demographic and questionnaire data across 2016 US Presidential Election vote.

	Total (<i>n</i> = 353)	Republican (<i>n</i> = 171)	Democrat (<i>n</i> = 182)	<i>p</i>
Age	37.11 ± 11.15	40.06 ± 11.59	34.35 ± 9.98	< .001
Sex	<i>n</i> _{Male} = 181	<i>n</i> _{Male} = 83	<i>n</i> _{Male} = 92	.608
3DSGI	51.01 ± 9.63	49.82 ± 9.45	52.13 ± 9.69	.024
QCAE	93.13 ± 12.16	93.88 ± 12.21	92.43 ± 12.11	.264
QCAE - Cognitive	59.13 ± 8.73	59.75 ± 8.90	58.57 ± 8.55	.204
QCAE - Affective	33.99 ± 5.64	34.13 ± 5.31	33.86 ± 5.95	.659
POCS	116.99 ± 40.17	128.49 ± 36.87	106.19 ± 40.23	< .001

Note. POCS is reverse-coded, such that high scores equate to less outgroup avoidance

Among British voters, age was negatively associated with outgroup avoidance ($r = -.17$, $p = .007$), and ingroup identity was positively associated with total empathy ($r = .21$, $p = .001$), cognitive empathy ($r = .16$, $p = .008$), affective empathy ($r = .22$, $p < .001$), and negatively associated with acceptance of outgroup contact (i.e., ingroup identification was linked to more outgroup avoidance ($r = -.40$, $p < .001$). In ‘Leave’ voters, age was negatively associated with total empathy ($r = -.30$, $p = .002$), cognitive empathy ($r = -.27$, $p = .004$), and affective empathy ($r = -.26$, $p = .008$), and ingroup identity was positively associated with total empathy ($r = .21$, p

= .027), cognitive empathy ($r = .22, p = .020$), and outgroup avoidance ($r = -.20, p = .034$). Further, cognitive empathy was associated with outgroup avoidance ($r = .19, p = .047$). In ‘Remain’ voters, age was not correlated with any measured variables. However, ingroup identity was positively associated with affective empathy ($r = .19, p = .017$) and outgroup avoidance ($r = -.42, p < .001$). These correlational analyses are presented in Table 2a.

Among American voters, ingroup identity was associated with more outgroup avoidance ($r = -.39, p < .001$), as well as cognitive ($r = .14, p = .011$), affective ($r = .12, p = .027$), and total empathy ($r = .15, p = .004$). Moreover, outgroup avoidance was associated with lower levels of cognitive ($r = .18, p = .001$) and total ($r = -.14, p = .007$), but not affective empathy ($r = .03, p = .622$). In Republicans, ingroup identity was associated with increased age ($r = .18, p = .018$) and more outgroup avoidance ($r = -.48, p < .001$). In Democrats, ingroup identity was associated with more outgroup avoidance ($r = -.27, p < .001$), as well as more cognitive ($r = .19, p = .011$), affective ($r = .15, p = .046$), and total empathy ($r = .21, p = .005$). Further, outgroup avoidance was associated with lower age ($r = .15, p = .048$), and more cognitive ($r = .19, p = .009$) and total empathy ($r = .16, p = .036$). All correlational analyses are presented in Table 2b.

Table 2a. Inter-scale correlations and reliability statistics (British participants)

	Total							By referendum vote					
	α	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]	[6]	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]	[6]
[1] Age	-	-						-	.12	-.30**	-.27**	-.26**	.10
[2] 3DSGI	.78	.04	-					.11	-	.21*	.22*	.14	-.20*
[3] QCAE-Total	.91	-.13*	.21**	-				.11	.08	-	.94***	.82***	.20*
[4] QCAE-Cognitive	.91	-.10	.16**	.92***	-			.12	.07	.90***	-	.57***	.19*
[5] QCAE-Affective	.79	-.15*	.22***	.80***	.49***	-		.06	.19*	.76***	.40***	-	.16
[6] POCS	.96	.17**	-.40***	.04	.09	.05	-	.08	-.42***	.06	.11	-.03	-

Note. Above the diagonal = Leave, Below the diagonal = Remain

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ Cronbach's alpha = α

Table 2b. Inter-scale correlations and reliability statistics (American participants)

	Total							By party affiliation					
	α	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]	[6]	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]	[6]
[1] Age	-	-						-	.18*	-.16*	-.18*	-.07	-.12
[2] 3DSGI	.81	.12*	-					.14	-	.11	.10	.09	.48***
[3] QCAE-Total	.89	-.04	.15**	-				.05	.21**	-	.92***	.76***	-.11
[4] QCAE-Cognitive	.91	-.03	.14*	.91***	-			.10	.19*	.89***	-	.44***	-.15
[5] QCAE-Affective	.77	-.05	.12*	.75***	.40***	-		-.05	.15*	.76***	.37***	-	-.01
[6] POCS	.95	.09	-.39***	.14**	.18**	.03	-	.16*	-.27***	.16*	.19**	.04	-

Note. Above the diagonal = Republican, Below the diagonal = Democrat

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ Cronbach's alpha = α

Moderated Moderation Analyses

As above, we conducted a series of three moderated moderation analyses using Model 3 of the PROCESS plugin for SPSS (Hayes, 2017). In each of these analyses, ingroup identification was the focal predictor (X) and outgroup avoidance was the dependent variable (Y). Empathy (total, cognitive, and affective, respectively) was our first moderator (W), with vote group being the second moderator (Z). For clarity, model coefficients are presented in Tables 3-5, with the prose below describing the trends in the data.

Moderation by total empathy. In the British sample, the model for total empathy accounted for 25.8% of the variance in outgroup avoidance, and was statistically significant, $F(7, 254) = 12.58, p < .001$. Higher levels of ingroup identification and voting ‘Remain’ in the referendum were associated with higher levels of outgroup avoidance. In contrast, higher levels of empathy were associated with lower levels of outgroup avoidance. There were no significant interactions in the model, indicating a lack of moderation of the relationship between ingroup identification and outgroup avoidance by either empathy or voter group.

In the American sample, the total empathy model accounted for 24.8% of the variance in outgroup avoidance, and was statistically significant, $F(7, 345) = 16.21, p < .001$. The results mirrored those reported above for Britons, with higher levels of ingroup identification being positively associated with more outgroup avoidance. Similarly, being a Democrat was associated with higher levels of outgroup avoidance. Increased total empathy was associated with less outgroup avoidance. As in the British sample there were no significant interactions in the model, indicating a lack of statistical moderation.

Table 3. Moderated moderation coefficients for the ‘total empathy’ model, by sample

	British sample				American sample			
	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI (<i>B</i>)	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI (<i>B</i>)
3DSGI	-1.61 (2.17)	5.99	< .001	[1.08, 2.15]	1.32 (0.28)	-4.77	< .001	[-1.86, -0.77]
QCAE	-0.54 (0.27)	-2.78	.006	[-0.93, -0.16]	0.73 (0.22)	3.23	.001	[0.30, 1.17]
Vote group	21.85 (4.44)	4.92	< .001	[13.09, 30.60]	17.94 (3.82)	4.69	< .001	[10.42, 25.46]
3DSGI × QCAE	-0.00 (0.02)	0.03	.975	[-0.05, 0.05]	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.05	.961	[-0.04, 0.03]
3DSGI × Vote	0.99 (0.55)	0.08	.079	[-0.10, 2.07]	-0.57 (0.40)	-1.41	.159	[-1.37, 0.22]
QCAE × Vote	0.12 (0.38)	0.75	.746	[-0.63, 0.88]	-0.26 (0.31)	-0.83	.409	[-0.88, 0.36]
3DSGI × QCAE × Vote	0.01 (0.05)	0.76	.763	[-0.08, 0.10]	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.76	.445	[-0.07, 0.03]

Note. 3DSGI = Three-Dimensional Strength of Group Identification Scale, QCAE = Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy.

Vote group coded as 0 = Remain/Democrat, 1 = Leave/Republican. Outcome is reverse-coded, such that high scores equate to less outgroup avoidance.

Moderation by cognitive empathy. The moderated moderation model for cognitive empathy in the British sample accounted for 26.3% of the variance in outgroup avoidance, and was statistically significant, $F(7, 254) = 12.93, p < .001$. Greater levels of ingroup identification, and voting ‘Remain’, were both associated with more outgroup avoidance. Higher levels of cognitive empathy were predictive of lower levels of outgroup avoidance. There were no significant interactions, indicating a lack of moderation within this model.

Among American participants, this model accounted for 26.1% of the variance in outgroup avoidance, and was statistically significant, $F(7, 345) = 17.44, p < .001$. As for the ‘total empathy’ model, the findings mirrored those reported in the British sample. Higher levels of ingroup identification, and voting Democrat, were both associated with higher levels of outgroup avoidance. In contrast, higher levels of cognitive empathy were associated with less outgroup avoidance. There were no significant interactions, which is a gain indicative of a lack of statistical moderation.

Table 4. Moderated moderation coefficients for the ‘cognitive empathy’ model, by sample

	British sample				American sample			
	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI (<i>B</i>)	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI (<i>B</i>)
3DSGI	-1.58 (2.16)	-6.01	< .001	[1.06, 2.09]	-1.33 (0.27)	-4.88	< .001	[-1.87, 0.80]
QCAE-C	0.85 (0.28)	3.08	.002	[-1.40, -0.31]	1.18 (0.31)	3.83	< .001	[0.58, 1.79]
Vote group	21.35 (4.43)	4.82	< .001	[12.62, 30.08]	17.82 (3.78)	4.71	< .001	[10.39, 25.26]
3DSGI × QCAE-C	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.95	.342	[-0.03, 0.10]	0.01 (0.03)	0.51	.610	[-0.04, 0.06]
3DSGI × Vote	0.90 (0.54)	1.67	.097	[-0.16, 1.97]	-0.57 (0.40)	-1.42	.156	[-1.35, 0.22]
QCAE-C × Vote	-0.10 (0.54)	-0.18	.855	[-1.17, 0.97]	-0.40 (0.43)	-0.93	.353	[-1.25, 0.45]
3DSGI × QCAE-C × Vote	0.02 (0.07)	0.34	.733	[-0.11, 0.15]	-0.04 (0.04)	-1.22	.224	[-0.12, 0.03]

Note. 3DSGI = Three-Dimensional Strength of Group Identification Scale, QCAE-C = Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy (cognitive empathy dimension). Vote group coded as 0 = Remain/Democrat, 1 = Leave/Republican. Outcome is reverse-coded, such that high scores equate to less outgroup avoidance.

Moderation by affective empathy. The moderated moderation model for affective empathy accounted for 24.7% of the variance in outgroup avoidance in the British sample, and was statistically significant, $F(7, 254) = 11.89, p < .001$. As in the previous models, higher levels of ingroup identification, and voting ‘Remain’, were associated with higher levels of outgroup avoidance. However, levels of affective empathy did not predict a significant variation in outgroup avoidance. There was a significant interaction between ingroup identification and vote group, where the relationship between ingroup identification and outgroup avoidance was stronger in individuals who voted ‘Remain’ in the referendum (Figure 1). There were no other significant interactions.

Figure 1. Interaction between ingroup identification and referendum vote (British voters) on outgroup avoidance, controlling for affective empathy. Error bars represent 95% CI.

In the American sample, the affective empathy model accounted for 21.6% of the variance in outgroup avoidance, and was statistically significant, $F(7, 345) = 13.60, p < .001$. As before, greater levels of ingroup identification, and voting Democrat, were associated with more outgroup avoidance. Similar to the British sample, affective empathy did not predict changes in outgroup avoidance. However, there were no significant interactions in the model, suggesting a lack of statistical moderation in our American sample.

Table 5. Moderated moderation coefficients for the ‘affective empathy’ model, by sample

	British sample				American sample			
	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI (<i>B</i>)	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI (<i>B</i>)
3DSGI	-1.61 (2.20)	-5.74	< .001	[1.06, 2.17]	-1.19 (0.28)	-4.26	< .001	[-1.74, -0.64]
QCAE-A	0.63 (0.28)	1.49	.137	[-1.45, 0.20]	0.59 (0.46)	1.29	.197	[-0.31, 1.49]
Vote group	21.80 (4.50)	4.91	< .001	[13.23, 30.93]	18.40 (3.88)	4.74	< .001	[10.77, 26.04]
3DSGI × QCAE-A	0.07 (0.05)	1.35	.178	[-1.45, 0.20]	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.81	.417	[-0.11, 0.05]
3DSGI × Vote	1.33 (0.57)	2.33	.021	[0.20, 2.46]	-0.69 (0.41)	-1.69	.092	[-1.50, 0.11]
QCAE-A × Vote	0.94 (0.84)	1.12	.264	[-0.71, 2.59]	-0.32 (0.69)	-0.46	.649	[-1.68, 1.05]
3DSGI × QCAE-A × Vote	-0.01 (0.10)	-0.11	.913	[-0.21, 0.19]	0.02 (0.07)	0.28	.779	[-0.10, 0.15]

Note. 3DSGI = Three-Dimensional Strength of Group Identification Scale, QCAE-A = Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy (affective empathy dimension). Vote group coded as 0 = Remain/Democrat, 1 = Leave/Republican. Outcome is reverse-coded, such that high scores equate to less outgroup avoidance.

General Discussion

Contextualized within the contexts of the UK Brexit vote and the US political dichotomy of ‘Republican vs. Democrat’, this paper tested competing hypotheses as to whether empathy moderated the relationship between ingroup identification and outgroup avoidance. Moreover, we sought to understand whether this relationship is further moderated by vote choice. Our data suggest that although increased levels of total and cognitive (but not affective) empathy were associated with a reduction in avoidance in both contexts, the negative association between ingroup identification and outgroup avoidance was not moderated by these constructs. This finding supports a tribal hypothesis of outgroup avoidance, where ingroup identification drives the motivated avoidance of outgroup members consistently across different levels of empathy.

The capacity for understanding the perspective of another and the ability to resonate with their emotional state not only facilitates one’s own prosocial behavior but increases one’s accuracy when predicting the behavior of an outgroup (Blair, 2005; Decety & Lamm, 2009). As a function of this, outgroup members appear more humanized and so potential group conflicts are more readily resolved (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016; Halperin, 2016; Krumhuber et al., 2015). The findings of the present study suggest a negative association between total scores of empathy and outgroup avoidance, which, in the context of the Brexit vote, suggests that individuals who are better at sharing the emotional perspective of another perceive greater overlap between themselves and members of their political outgroup.

However, as empathy can be more accurately operationalized through cognitive and affective dimensions (Blair, 2005; Reniers et al., 2011), we sought to further investigate the independent contributions of these dimensions. Cognitive empathy, but not affective empathy, was negatively associated with outgroup avoidance. These results suggest that while one’s ability to assume the perspective of another (i.e., being able to understand and appreciate their emotional state) is associated with a reduction in outgroup avoidance, the capacity to resonate with and experience such emotional states was not. This finding resonates with previous evidence supporting a negative association between perspective taking and non-political prejudice towards outgroups (Berthold et al., 2013). It follows that understanding the reasons why a member of a political outgroup voted the way they did ameliorates, to some degree, outgroup avoidance, which may further facilitate outgroup-directed prosocial behavior (Seger et al., 2009). In turn, it may be that introducing realistic counter-examples of outgroups has the desired effect of reducing polarization in a more global psychological sense. Moreover, although partisans in the contexts that we studied often attempt to drive voting through manipulating emotive dialogue (i.e., by presenting highly affective situations such as immigration; Shaw et al.,

2017), the capacity to vicariously feel the emotions of an outgroup did not affect outgroup avoidance motivations in our samples. Being able to tease apart the distinct differences in empathic representation may be useful in understanding how political partisans often struggle to understand each other's political motivations.

A lack of interaction effects between empathy and ingroup identification across the models suggests that the negative association between ingroup identification and motivated outgroup avoidance is evident across both high and low levels of composite empathy, as well as its cognitive dimension, more specifically. These findings suggest that regardless of how well one can understand the perspective of an outgroup voter, increased ingroup identification is strongly associated with outgroup avoidance.

A consistent, yet partially unexpected finding throughout this paper was the positive association between voting 'Remain' in the EU referendum and 'Democrat' in the US context and increased levels of outgroup avoidance. One possible explanation for this finding might be the inherent contrast in how these political partisans not only perceive one another, but the underpinning ideology which contributed to their voting. Specifically, 'Remain' and 'Democrat' voters share a fundamental disagreement with outgroup-related values and the integrity in which the 'Leave' and 'Republican' campaigns were conducted. That is, the former are set-up as being explicitly anti-'Leave' and anti-Republican, and as such this may explain higher levels of outgroup avoidance motivations in these groups. In contrast, 'Leave' voters are more concerned with the perceived threats associated with EU membership (Abrams & Travaglino, 2018; Van der Vyver et al., 2018; Zhang, 2018), while the most recent Republican presidential message was based around regaining American power ("Make America Great Again"). As such, the difference in emphasis in being 'anti them' ('Remain' and 'Democrat' voters) versus 'pro us' ('Leave' and 'Republican' voters) at the campaign level may explain this divergence in motivated avoidance. Future research might look at the effects of campaign messaging on such avoidance motivations.

In all but one model (Model 3; affective empathy; Study 1), there was no interaction between ingroup identification and vote, suggesting that the negative association between ingroup identification and outgroup avoidance motivations is consistent between 'Remain' and 'Leave' voters. As such, our data broadly support a political symmetry hypothesis of polarization, at least from the perspective of motivated cognition (see also Frimer et al., 2017). Where this interaction was observed to be statistically significant, this was only when cognitive empathy was not being controlled for, and so should be considered with caution in light of the broader findings observed in relation to the apparent importance of this dimension of empathy.

Limitations and Future Direction

We relied on self-reports of empathy, and so our data are likely to be subjective in nature. Future research in this area might benefit from using vignettes as a means of assessing cognitive and affective empathic abilities. Further, while a trend for the manifestation of online ‘echo chambers’ has been identified (Bakshy et al., 2015), which in turn acts to propagate outgroup stereotypes, the specific role of social network purity, was not investigated in the present study. Moreover, as previous work has demonstrated that political dichotomies exhibit variation in personality traits (e.g., agreeableness, narcissism, and psychopathy; Caprara et al., 2006; Jonason, 2014), it is possible that such traits (particularly those associated with individual variation in empathy) may further moderate the relationship between ingroup identification and motivated outgroup avoidance.

One core avenue of future investigation might be to test interventions that seek to increase cognitive empathy and so reduce outgroup avoidance (and, by extension, polarization). It has long been acknowledged that outgroup prejudice can be broken down through repeated exposure to outgroup members (Allport, 1954), and that this can be fostered via positive and co-operative internet-mediated relations (Imperato et al., 2021; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). In turn this facilitates the generation of new appraisals and decreases perceptions of negative outgroup stereotypes (Batson et al., 2002). Therefore, it is possible that encouraging political partisans to actively engage with members of their political outgroup, may elicit a pervasive impact of empathy towards said outgroups and result greater motivations for cross-party contact.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, the present study is the first to test competing hypotheses as to the roles *both* cognitive and affective empathy and voting behavior play in moderating the relationship between ingroup identification and outgroup avoidance. We found that although ‘Remain’ voters (in the UK), ‘Democrat’ voters (in the US), and those with reduced levels of cognitive empathy reported higher levels of outgroup avoidance motivations, neither vote choice nor empathy moderated the negative association observed between ingroup identification and outgroup avoidance motivations in either study. Thus, we conclude that improving cognitively-oriented empathic mechanisms (e.g., perspective taking), possibly in the form of encouraging intergroup interaction and breaking down political stereotypes, has great potential for reducing outgroup avoidance in the political context. Despite some limitations, this work contributes to an emerging area of social psychology and provides compelling evidence to suggest a role of cognitive empathy in reducing broad-level political polarization.

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