



# Intersectionality within the racial justice movement in the summer of 2020

Dana R. Fisher<sup>a,1</sup> and Stella M. Rouse<sup>a</sup>

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In an environment that is high in racial justice saliency, how do identities inform motivation for supporting specific issues in the crowd? This study examines the role that intersectionality played in mobilizing participants to join the mass demonstrations sparked by the murder of George Floyd. Building on recent studies that show how protest participants connect issue-based concerns with their identities to boost support for movements, we analyze data collected through surveys with a random sample of activists participating in the protests after George Floyd's death in Washington, DC, in 2020. We find that intersectional motivations played a significant role in mobilizing protest participants. Analysis of these factors helps explain the diversity of the crowd and provides insights into how the movement may contribute to greater success for racial justice and the degree to which the movement has staying power.

systemic racism | social identity | protest | intersectionality | racial justice

The United States has a long history of racial inequality, one which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (1, 2). Against this backdrop, the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man at the knee of a Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020, was a watershed moment for the movement against systemic racism in the United States. Floyd's death quickly sparked peaceful demonstrations, riots, vandalism, vigils, and all forms of activism across the United States and around the world. These mass mobilizations spread more widely and lasted longer than any previous social mobilization in US history (3, 4). Moreover, in contrast to previous periods of heightened activism around issues of racial justice (5–8), this wave of activism mobilized a more diverse group of participants with the aid of digital technologies, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, and a decentralized model of organizing (9, see also 10–17). All told, the death of George Floyd came to represent racial injustice, both nationally and internationally, and raised the salience of the movement in ways not previously seen (18).

The mass mobilization against systemic racism that took place during summer 2020 provides an ideal opportunity to explore how identities inform motivation for supporting specific issues in the crowd when the setting is high in racial justice saliency. Previous studies have examined the role of identity in mobilizing participation at the largest protest in US history: the 2017 Women's March (19, see also 20), as well as over a series of recent protests focused on a range of progressive issues (21, see also 22). Research has yet to assess participant motivations and the connections between varying identities and activism in the 2020 mobilizations against systemic racism, which combined struggles for racial justice and against police brutality (23). While issues related to systemic racism are most likely to be the main reasons for attending these events, other potential motivations have not been systematically examined. Accordingly, this paper analyzes what additional motivations that are connected to intersectional struggles mobilized participation in the protests against systemic racism in summer 2020, which began after George Floyd was killed.

Contemporary research has focused on the ways that intersectionality contributes to social movements, using multiple forms of data to understand movement framing, collective identity formation, and coalitional mobilization (19–21, 24–30). Scholars of intersectionality examine how intersections of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other categories of identity are linked to structures of inequality and produce different life experiences and forms of oppression (31–37). Some scholars suggest that these intersections divide people into silos with distinct and competing interests that deter the coalition building necessary for robust social movements (38, see also 36, 39). At the same time, others have noted that intersectional interests can be used to build coalitions within and across social movements, thereby increasing the number and diversity of activists (26, 34, 40–44, see also 45).

A growing area of inquiry explores efforts to achieve intersectional activism using data collected from protest participants and organizers (19–21, 46, 47). In their study

## Significance

After George Floyd was murdered by police in May 2020, protests against systemic racism erupted across the United States. These demonstrations turned out a much more diverse crowd than previous waves of demonstrations for racial justice. We analyze a unique dataset collected from participants in these protests during summer 2020 to understand what motivated participants to join the crowd. We show that personal identities to specific subgroups representing race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation are connected to specific intersectional motivations. Movements that activate individuals by connecting to a range of subgroup identities are more likely to engage diverse crowds, and therefore, have the potential to motivate greater social change.

Author affiliations: <sup>a</sup>University of Maryland at College Park College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, College Park, MD 20742

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<sup>1</sup>To whom correspondence may be addressed. Email: drfisher@umd.edu.

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of participation at the 2017 Women's March in Washington, DC, Fisher et al. analyze data collected from participants in the march, finding that activists were mobilized by a wide range of interests that connected with their specific identities (19, see also 21). Heaney comes to similar conclusions when he analyzes data collected from participants at Women's March events in five cities, concluding that participants "were more supportive of prioritizing intersectional activism than were activists at comparable protest events that were not mobilized using intersectional collective action frames" (20). Coming from a very different perspective, Bonilla and Tillery test the effects of identity frames associated with Black nationalism, feminism, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others (LGBTQ+) rights on mobilization in the Black Lives Matter movement through a survey experiment (48). The authors conclude that connecting to subgroup identities can generate support for the movement.

Intersectional activism may also be understood through a social identity lens. Social identity theory posits that while individuals bring their own identities to group connections, the groups to which individuals belong also contribute to individual attitudes and motivations (49). In other words, social identities structure the way people think about issues, which tie directly to a person's psychological association with a group. Moreover, individuals do not belong to just one group; rather, people have multiple and overlapping identities that interact to emphasize in-group similarities (50). The salience of these identities is activated, in part, by organizations that issue calls to action that steer individuals to affirm group commonalities (51). Such mobilization efforts by organizations have the potential to contribute to varying motivations of participants in a diverse protest setting. Consistent with specific threads in the expansive research on social capital and social networks (see particularly 52, 53), we note that organizations help underwrite the cost of activism and create incentives for participation, especially when there is the potential for multiple identities to be activated. In this respect, organizations serve as nodes that stimulate participation among group members (54, 55). We also recognize the role that moral shocks can also play in mobilizing activists with fewer or weaker ties to organizations (56). Moral outrage was seen as playing a substantial role in mobilizing protest participants with weak ties to social movement organizations to turn out for protests during this period of heightened activism in the United States (57).

Building on this previous research, we examine whether and how participants in protests after the murder of George Floyd were mobilized via motivations that crossed the social categories or group identities of race, gender, and sexual orientation—or what we call "intersectional motivations." By focusing specifically on motivation in this way, we use what McCall refers to as an "intercategorical approach" to studying an aspect of intersectionality (37). We also situate this research within the expectations of social identity theory and argue that in-group similarities likely lead to overlapping motivations for mobilization. Examining recent mass mobilizations against systemic racism is particularly valuable because they represent a potentially seismic shift in the ways that diverse groups work together on issues related to racial justice. Before the murder of George Floyd, research had found that participants at demonstrations focused on racial justice were predominantly people of color (5, 6, 8, 15, 58, 59, see also 17 for a discussion of the shifting support for US Black movements), while other progressive mobilizations in the United States were largely dominated by

Whites (57, 60). This segregation may be due to differences between cultures of organizing and issue priorities (61, see also 9). After the murder of George Floyd, however, demonstrations drew much more diverse crowds.

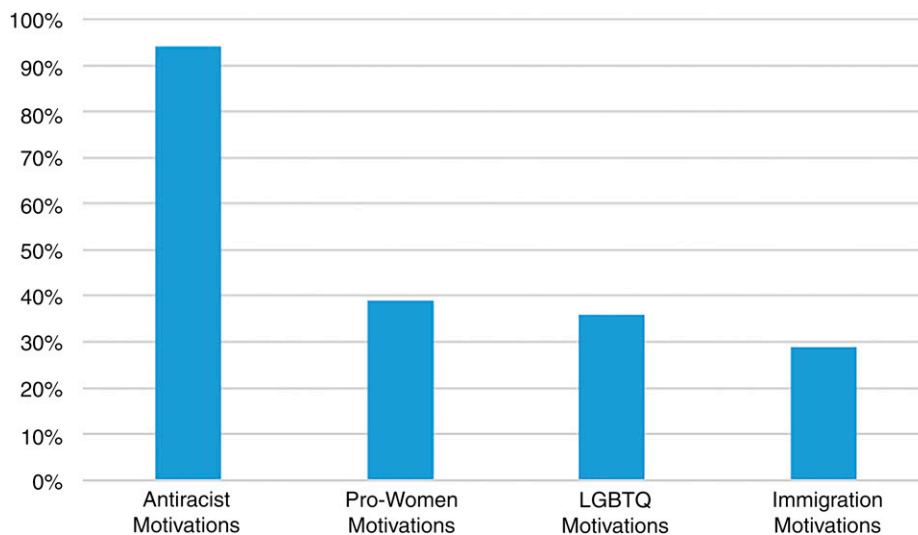
The increased diversity of participants in this wave of protest is likely due, in part, to the broader range of organizations that were able to mobilize their members to participate. In contrast to previous waves of activism against systemic racism that were mobilized predominantly by groups involved in the decentralized Black Lives Matter movement (9, 14), activists in the summer of 2020 were mobilized by a broader range of groups (15). In fact, numerous predominantly White organizations, like Indivisible and Sunrise, sent messages to their members calling for anyone who was comfortable being in a crowd during a pandemic to join the protests in solidarity (see, for example, 62, 63). In the section that follows, we build on the extant research to understand the role that intersectional motivations played in mobilizing the expansive and diverse engagement in the movement against systemic racism in summer 2020.

## Results

To understand intersectionality among participants within the protests against systemic racism, we build directly on the research by Bonilla and Tillery (48) and Fisher and colleagues (19, 21) and look specifically at intersectional motivations related to the social categories/social identities of race, gender, and sexual orientation among participants in the post-George Floyd protests (for details on data collection, how the variables were constructed, the survey questions on which they are based, and variable descriptives, see the *SI Appendix, Table S4*). One may expect that protests in response to the killing of an African American at the hands of police would engender a very narrow set of motivations among participants, with protest participants specifically reporting joining the struggle because of issues related to police brutality and racial equity. Consistent with that expectation, the overwhelming majority of participants at the post-George Floyd protests reported antiracist reasons as motivating factors (94%). Fig. 1 presents the distribution of intersectional motivations reported by protest participants (see also *SI Appendix, Table S3*).

In line with findings from recent research on intersectional activism (19–21, 48), the research on social identities (49, 50), as well as studies that look at how multiple issues become linked at protest events (64, 65), our data from participants in the protests after George Floyd was murdered also clearly show that many participants were also motivated by other reasons to participate (Fig. 1, See also *SI Appendix, S2*). Approximately one-third of protest participants reported being motivated by other intersectional motivations: pro-women's rights (39%), LGBTQ rights (36%), and immigration rights (29%). Similar to findings from research on the 2017 Women's March, which documented how protest participants were motivated by issues beyond women's rights to attend the event (19, 21), these results demonstrate that respondents were motivated to participate by more than just the issue of systemic racism. To the best of our knowledge, no work to date has closely examined how different identities are related to specific motivations within the movement against systemic racism after the killing of George Floyd.

What are the effects of intersectional motivations within this movement surrounding the events that occurred in summer 2020? To explore this question, we estimate three probit regression models that test the association among various sociodemographic variables and the reporting of women's rights, LGBTQ



**Fig. 1.** Distribution of intersectional motivations based on the percentage of respondents who selected these issues when asked, “What motivated you to participate today?” Respondents could choose as many motivations as appropriate ( $n = 534$ ).

rights, and immigration rights as motivations for joining the protests.\* Since almost everyone in the crowd reported having an antiracist motivation for attending the demonstrations, we do not examine this motivation.

The results of the probit regressions are presented in Fig. 2. Values above zero indicate factors associated with increased motivation and those below zero indicate factors associated with decreased motivation (the complete results in table form are available in the *SI Appendix, Table S5*). By controlling for the potentially confounding effects of age, educational attainment, and political ideology, we see that varying group identities play a significant role in predicting intersectional motivations. Moreover, in all cases, intersectional motivations themselves are strong predictors of one another: the pro-women motivation is associated with increased LGBTQ and immigration motivations, the LGBTQ motivation is predicted by pro-women and immigration motivations, and the immigration motivation is strongly associated with pro-women and LGBTQ motivations.

We turn first to the model that predicts the pro-women motivation. We find that those who reported other intersectional motivations—on LGBTQ issues ( $b = 1.296$ ) and immigration rights ( $b = 1.195$ )—were statistically more likely to report the pro-women motivation. Several other factors also matter for pro-women’s motivations. As one may expect and consistent with the previous research (19, 21), identifying as a female ( $b = 0.500$ ) is a strong predictor of this motivation. However, ideological liberalism predicts lower support for the pro-women motivation.

In our second model, we see that intersectional motivations continue to play an important role. Those who reported being motivated by immigration rights ( $b = 1.226$ ) or pro-women’s issues ( $b = 1.278$ ) were statistically more likely to express the LGBTQ motivation. Personal identity also exerts a powerful effect; respondents who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community ( $b = 0.807$ ) report being motivated by LGBTQ rights to participate in protests against systemic racism. In this model, activists who identify as Latina/o ( $b = -0.685$ ) and/or female ( $b = -0.315$ ), and those who are younger ( $b = -0.0128$ )

are less likely to mention LGBTQ rights as a motivation for participating.

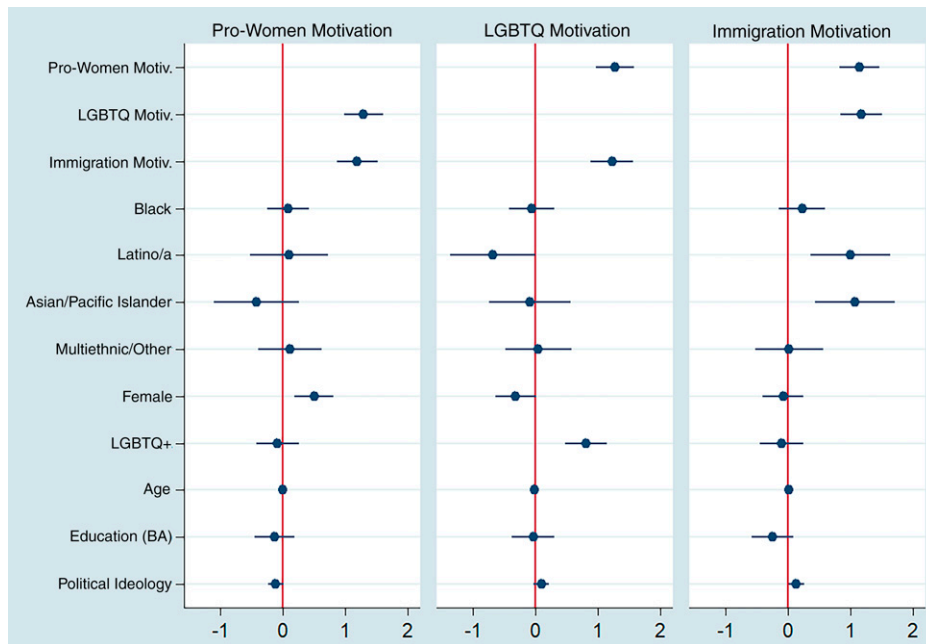
Finally, in our last model, we continue to observe the consistent effects of intersectional motivations. Respondents who reported immigration rights as a motivation for attending the protests were more likely to be motivated by the pro-women motivation ( $b = 1.139$ ) and LGBTQ rights ( $b = 1.174$ ). Personal identity measures also positively affect support for the immigration motivation. Participants who identified as Latina/o ( $b = 1.001$ ) or Asian ( $b = 1.071$ ) were more likely to report being motivated by immigration rights to participate in these protests. This finding makes a lot of sense as these two groups are well documented as prioritizing immigration rights (66, 67). Participants who reported greater ideological liberalism ( $b = 0.131$ ) were also more likely to be motivated by the issue of immigration.

## Discussion

In contrast to the analysis of participation at the 2017 Women’s March, which found that 39% of the crowd was not motivated by what we consider to be a pro-women motivation (19), data collected from the 2020 protests against systemic racism in Washington, DC, clearly show that almost all of the participants at the demonstrations were mobilized by an antiracist motivation (for details, see the *SI Appendix*). These findings are particularly notable since participants were much more racially diverse (45% were White) than during previous periods of protest against racial inequality in America (5, 9, 15, 59, 68).

At the same time, our analysis of data collected at protests against systemic racism after George Floyd was murdered provide clear evidence that participants in these events were motivated by more than just systemic racism. Along with the antiracist motivation, participants reported being activated to participate by intersectional motivations based on their subgroup identities. We find that individual intersectional motivations—in support of women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, and immigration rights—predicted support for one another. This finding regarding the overlapping character of identity and related motivations are consistent with the research that highlights how intersecting identities can create “solidarity and cohesion” that is a “powerful tool for grappling

\*Our analyses examine the effects of all motivations by including them as potential explanatory variables on the given tested motivation (the dependent variable). This methodology is consistent with the research by Fisher and colleagues (19, 21).



**Fig. 2.** Parameter estimates for intersectional motivations ( $n = 534$ ). Full table is available in the *SI Appendix, Table S4*. Dots represent coefficient estimates and lines represent 95% confidence interval. All models are estimated with probit regression. BA, Bachelor of Arts; LGBTQ+, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others.

with differences and uncovering shared values and bridging frameworks” (41, see also 26, 66). These intersecting identities were likely activated by calls to mobilize from organizations. Organizations are able to underwrite the cost of activism, and coupled with identity-based motivations and the moral shock of witnessing the murder of an unarmed Black man by a police officer on social media, these factors provided a dynamic catalyst for participation.

Our research also provides additional support for the findings by Bonilla and Tillery, who conclude that framing the Black Lives Matter movement in a way that appeals to subgroup identities will generate support for the cause and stimulate action in the form of contacting an elected official (48). Although Bonilla and Tillery specifically study the mobilization of the African American community, our research suggests that their findings may have broader applications by demonstrating how specific subgroups of protesters were activated by intersectional motivations related to the social categories of race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation to join the demonstrations against systemic racism. In particular, women were activated by a pro-women motivation, people who identified as LGBTQ+ were activated by an LGBTQ motivation, and Latinas/os and Asians were motivated by an immigration motivation. In some ways, these findings are intuitive, as we would expect subgroups to mobilize based on their specific identities, which hold specific salience for them. Moreover, these findings are consistent with the conclusions of Fisher and colleagues, who found that specific subgroups participating in the 2017 Women’s March were activated by identity-based issues (19).

At the same time, these findings provide a more nuanced understanding of the opportunities and limitations of identity-based coalitions that draw on intersections of gender, sexual orientation, and race and ethnicity. On the one hand, our research reinforces the findings from previous studies that show how intersectional interests can be used to build coalitions within and across movements (26, 40). On the other hand, our

research provides evidence regarding how particular identities are less linked to the LGBTQ motivation (see also 25).<sup>†</sup>

In addition, the results from this research provide important insights into why the protests against systemic racism after George Floyd was murdered turned out a more diverse crowd than previous waves of protests against racial inequalities. Not only did this moment hold salience for people concerned about systemic racism but it also mobilized individuals who felt connected to a number of other overlapping intersectional issues that were aligned with their personal subgroup identities connected to their gender, sexual orientation, race, and/or ethnicity. As a result, these mass mobilizations against systemic racism drew a broad crowd that included individuals with multiple identities that interact to affirm group similarities and were mobilized to participate due to intersectional motivations.

After participating in these demonstrations, these activists could be further mobilized for other activism around systemic racism. Future research should explore the degree to which individuals who participated in the movement against systemic racism in 2020 continued to engage in activism or other types of political participation. Both the size of the crowds that marched and the duration of the demonstrations, along with the diversity of participants in the streets, may be positive signs for efforts to address systemic racism (69). These factors are also likely to change the nature of mass mobilizations more generally. However, only time and future research will tell whether enduring political change will occur as a result of the demonstrations that took place in the summer of 2020.

<sup>†</sup>Our survey instrument aimed to collect data from respondents who identify as “nonbinary” so we could include additional categories of gender in our models and test how this category may affect intersectional motivations. However, since only 14 respondents chose this category (representing less than 3% of our sample) we did not include them in our final analyses. Alternate models run with the nonbinary category do not change the results.



## Materials and Methods

This paper presents analysis from data collected from in-person crowd surveys in Washington, DC, with participants during 4 days of protest against systemic racism in summer 2020 after George Floyd was murdered on May 25, 2020: the 2020 District Die-In, the 2020 George Floyd Protests on June 6, the 2020 Juneteenth Event,<sup>‡</sup> and the August 28, 2020 “Get Your Knee off Our Necks” March on Washington, DC. This period of protest around racial inequities has been called “the broadest in US history” (3).

Data were collected through crowd surveys at each of these protest events. Participants at all of the events were selected using a sampling methodology consistent with other studies of street demonstrations in the United States and abroad, which uses a field approximation of random selection at protest events (71, 72). Snaking through the crowd, researchers “counted off” protesters while participants were lining up and listening to speeches, selecting every fifth person as determined by researchers working in a particular section. This study was approved by the University of Maryland’s institutional review board (protocol no. 999342-1); all of the participants provided informed consent. This method

avoids the potential of selection bias by preventing researchers from selecting only “approachable peers” (73, 74). Given the large size of the crowds and the labor-intensive nature of the survey methodology, the samples presented here represent small, approximately randomized portions of the overall participant populations at each demonstration. In total, data were collected from 549 people who were randomly selected at these demonstrations (for details, see *SI Appendix, Table S1*). This paper presents analyses of the data collected from the 534 protest participants who answered the survey question regarding what issues motivated them to participate in these protests against systemic racism (for more details on data collection, the survey instrument, and the coding of the data used in the analysis, see the *SI Appendix*).

**Data Availability.** A copy of the survey, as well as the dataset and a codebook, can be found at the OSF (Open Science Framework) <https://osf.io/6t9ue/> (75).

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<sup>‡</sup>Although Juneteenth historically is viewed as a celebration for African Americans, in the wake of George Floyd’s murder and the response by law enforcement to peaceful protests in Washington, DC, Juneteenth 2020 was different. In the words of an article in the *The Washington Post*, in Washington, DC, “Students, teachers, military veterans and sports stars came to protest poor education and health care for African Americans, as well as police brutality and institutional racism” during Juneteenth 2020 (70).

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