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The Effect of Sadism and Racism Levels on a Person's Willingness to Harm an Innocent Victim

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Sadism, Racism, and Willingness to Harm

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Background

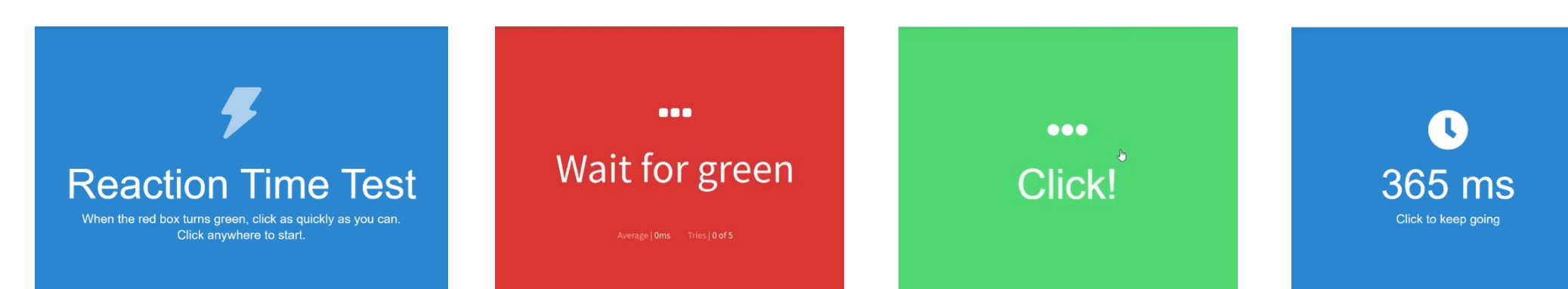
- Sadism is more than a psychological disorder; it is an aspect of daily life. Therefore, the term everyday sadism is applied (Buckels et al., 2013).
- Someone with a sadistic personality is someone who enjoys and gets pleasure from causing harm to others (O'Meara et al, 2011).
- There are examples of sadism in everyday choices and preferences (Greitemeyer et al., 2018; Buckels et al., 2018).
- There is research that shows that implicit racial biases affect people's behavior and attitudes, and that bias often stems from their communities (Hehman et al., 2017).
- The purpose of our study was to show that people with higher sadism levels will be more willing to harm others and to show that people have implicit racial biases that make them more willing to harm based on race.
- Our hypothesis is that those with high sadism levels will assign higher punishment times than those with low sadism levels and that participants facing a black opponent will assign higher punishment times than those facing a white opponent.

Methods

- There were 59 participants all from Ouachita Baptist University. Participants were 83.3% female and 16.7% male . These participants were 5% African American, 10% Asian, 81.7% Caucasian, 1.7% Hispanic, and 1.7% identified as "other".
- Participants took the Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (disguised with questions from the BFI-2) to assess their sadism levels.
- Participants were told that they would compete with an opponent in another room and that they would each receive each other's demographic form (there was no actual opponent).
- The "opponent" was randomly assigned to be either black or white, always remaining the same age and gender as the participant.
- The participants were told that the winner of each round could assign a punishment time to the loser, the time being how long the loser had to place their hand in ice water.
- Participants then completed a reaction time test on a computer and told their reaction time to the researcher, who pretended to be conversing with the researcher that was with their opponent.

Methods (Cont.)

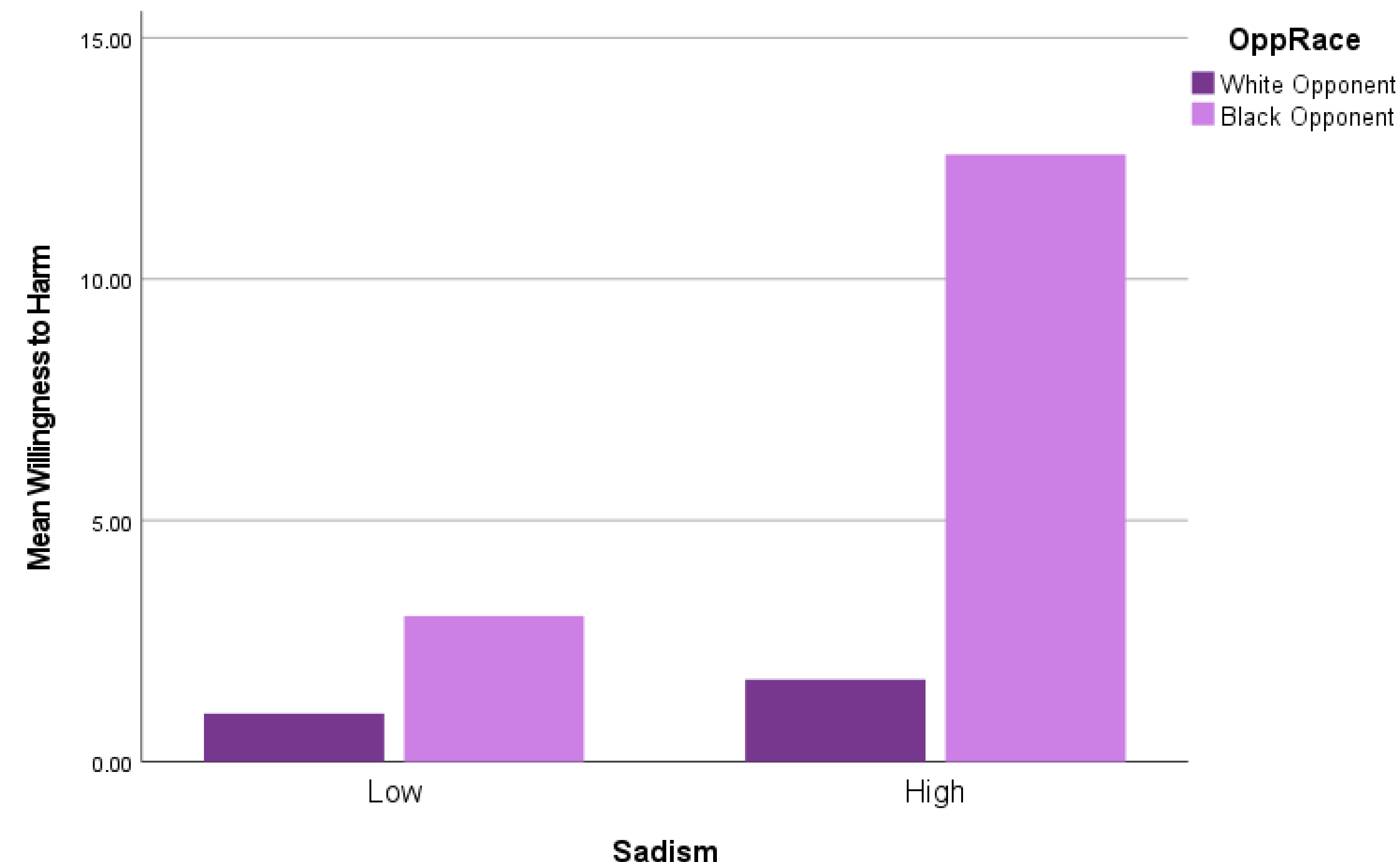
- The participant would lose the first round and their opponent would give them a punishment time of zero seconds.
- The participant would win the second, third, and fourth round, and would give their opponent a punishment time.



Results

- There was a marginally significant main effect of sadism on the participants' willingness to harm their opponent, $F(1, 55)=3.16$, $p=.081$, with those that had high sadism levels ($M=8.44$, $SD=15.49$) being more willing to harm their opponent than those with low sadism levels ($M=2.33$, $SD=6.54$).
- There was a significant main effect of the opponent's race on the participants' willingness to harm their opponent, $F(1, 55)=4.99$, $p=.030$, those with a black opponent ($M=6.30$, $SD=13.22$) being significantly more willing to harm than those with a white opponent ($M=1.27$, $SD=1.92$).
- The interaction observed between sadism and racial bias was not significant, $F(1, 55)=2.35$, $p=.131$.

Figure 1. Willingness to harm by sadism levels and race



Conclusions

- Consistent with our hypothesis, those with higher sadism levels are more likely to harm innocent people.
- If the innocent person is thought to be black, participants were more willing to harm than if that person is thought to be white, which also supported our hypothesis.

Limitations:

- We had a small sample size that consisted of only students at a southern Baptist university.
- Many participants were psychology students that have learned to expect deception when participating in studies.

Further Research:

- With further research, it is expected that a person with higher sadism levels facing a faux black opponent would be the most willing to harm.
- Future research should also branch out to investigate implicit racism towards other persons of color.
- There should be a larger pool of participants with an even split between all conditions.
- Participants should be able to see their opponent in order to witness the punishment play out, which is a key component of everyday sadism.
- A connection between implicit racial bias and sadism should be explored.

References

