View from the Right: Political Orientation and the Automatic Association Between Black and Physical Threat

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Background/Introduction

Stronger conservatism is associated with anti-Black attitudes (Broussard, 2015). More conservative versus liberal individuals also display stronger implicit anti-Black attitudes on implicit measures indexing associations between Black versus White with negativity versus positivity (e.g., Payne et al., 2010; Stern & Axt, 2019).

Recent work indicates that instead of merely associating Black with negativity, White Americans may instead (or additionally) automatically associate Black with realistic physical danger threat.

It has been argued that more conservative individuals evince a "fear bias" in response to danger threats (Lilienfeld & Latzman, 2014). Furthermore, increased conservatism is related to the perception that an out-group is physically threatening absent any actual threat-relevant indication (Crawford, 2014).

The Current Work

Across two pilot studies and three primary studies, the current work tested whether increased conservatism versus liberalism predicts stronger associations between Black versus White with physical danger threat (and in Study 1 and 3, with negativity).

Pilot Studies

In Pilot Studies 1a and 1b, we distinguish among unique types of anti-Black "threat" perceptions that may be differentially associated with political orientation. Different threat-associations (e.g., realistic, symbolic, distinctiveness) result in different judgments and behaviors.

Threat-Associations

Symbolic
A person or group's morals and beliefs.

Distinctiveness
A person or their group's identity.

Realistic Threats
A person or group's physical existence and safety.

Results

Pilot Studies 1a and 1b suggest that anti-Black physical danger threat perceptions and not symbolic or distinctiveness threat perceptions are associated with political orientation.

Study 1

Purpose: To clearly isolate the relationship between political orientation and the threat connoted by unambiguously Black versus White faces.

Procedure: Participants (N = 122) viewed images of faces of Black and White men and rated the danger and negativity connoted by each face (0 = *Not at all*, 6 = *Very much*).

Results: Analyses revealed a positive relationship between Danger rating and Political Orientation for Black faces, $b = .11$, $t(1458) = 2.60$, $p = 0.009$, 95% CI [.03, .20], $d = .24$, and a nonsignificant negative relationship between Danger rating and Political Orientation for White faces, $b = -.072$, $t(1458) = -1.93$, $p = .05$, 95% CI [-.15, .01], $d = .17$. This indicates that a stronger Black-threat associations is related to stronger conservatism.

Political Orientation was uninfluenced by a Race x Negativity interaction, $F(1, 1458) = 0.33$, $p = .57$.
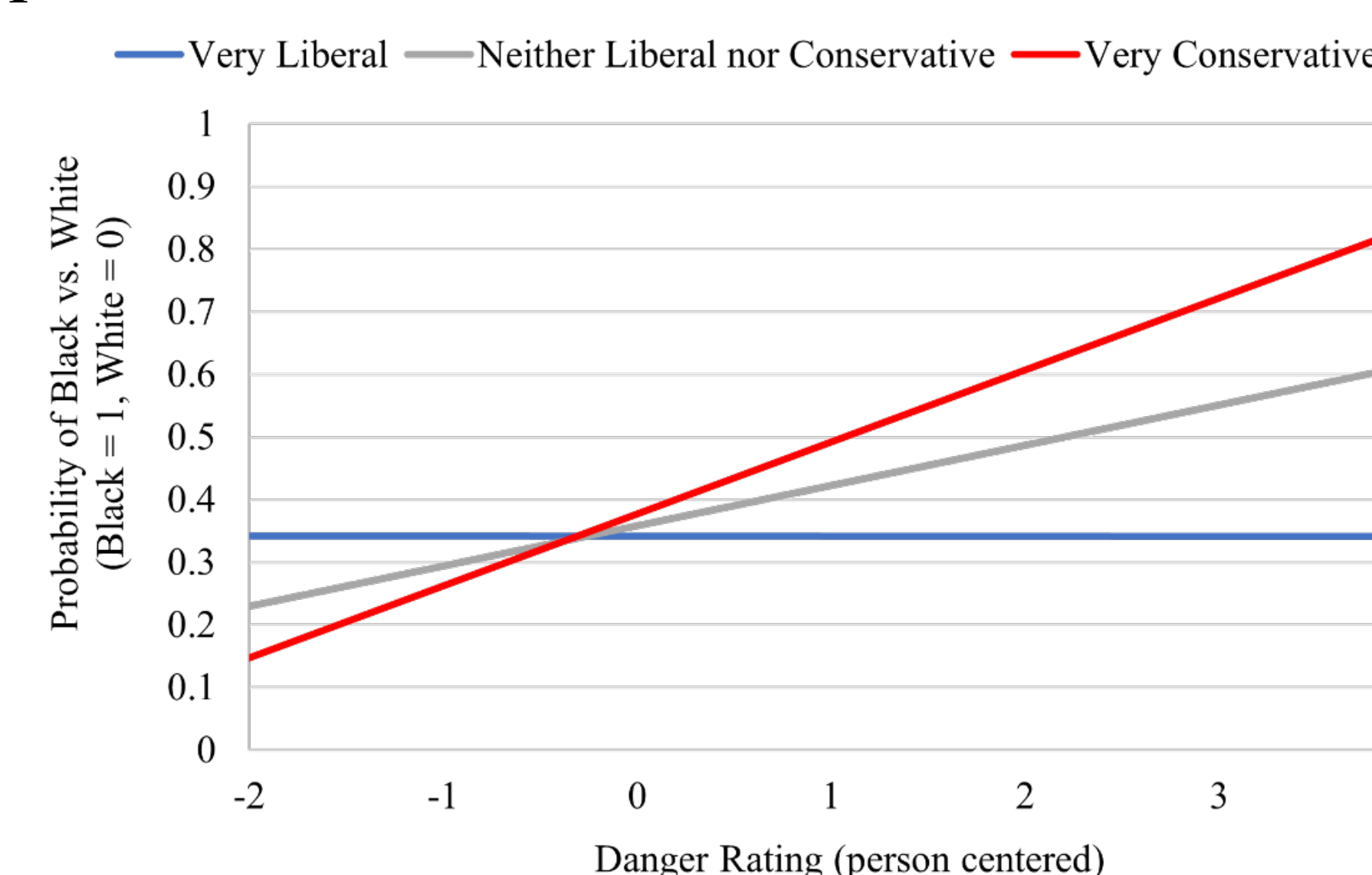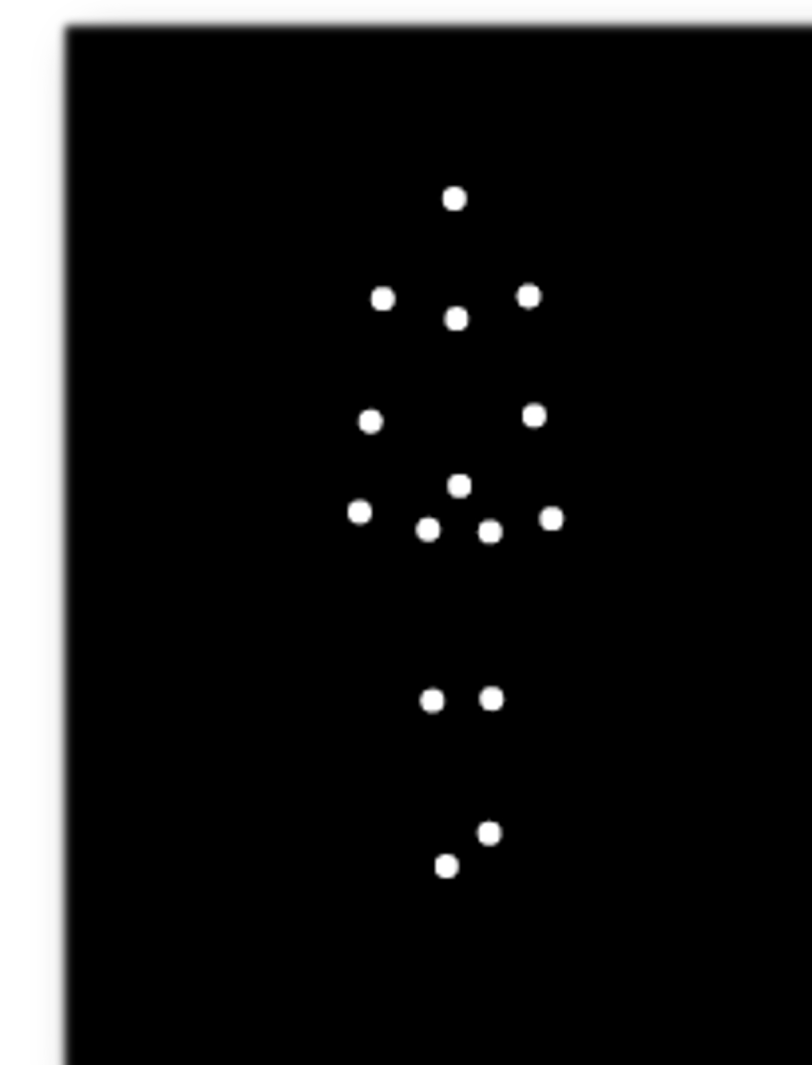
Study 2

Purpose: To test if higher levels of conservatism moderate the association between Black (versus White) and realistic (i.e., physical danger) threat using projective targets.

Procedure: Participants (N = 134) saw four different PLWs in a randomized order and rated each on physical threat (1 = *Not dangerous*, 7 = *Extremely dangerous*).

Results: We found no relationship between Physical Danger Threat and Race at Political Orientation level 1 (Very Liberal), $b = -.0003$, $t(520) = -0.01$, $p = .99$, 95% CI [-.28, .28], $d = -.0009$; we found a positive relationship between Physical Threat and Race for participants at both Political Orientation level 3 (Neither liberal nor Conservative), $b = .28$, $t(520) = 3.97$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.14, .42], $d = .35$, and level 5 (Very Conservative), $b = .56$, $t(520) = 3.65$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.26, .86], $d = .32$.
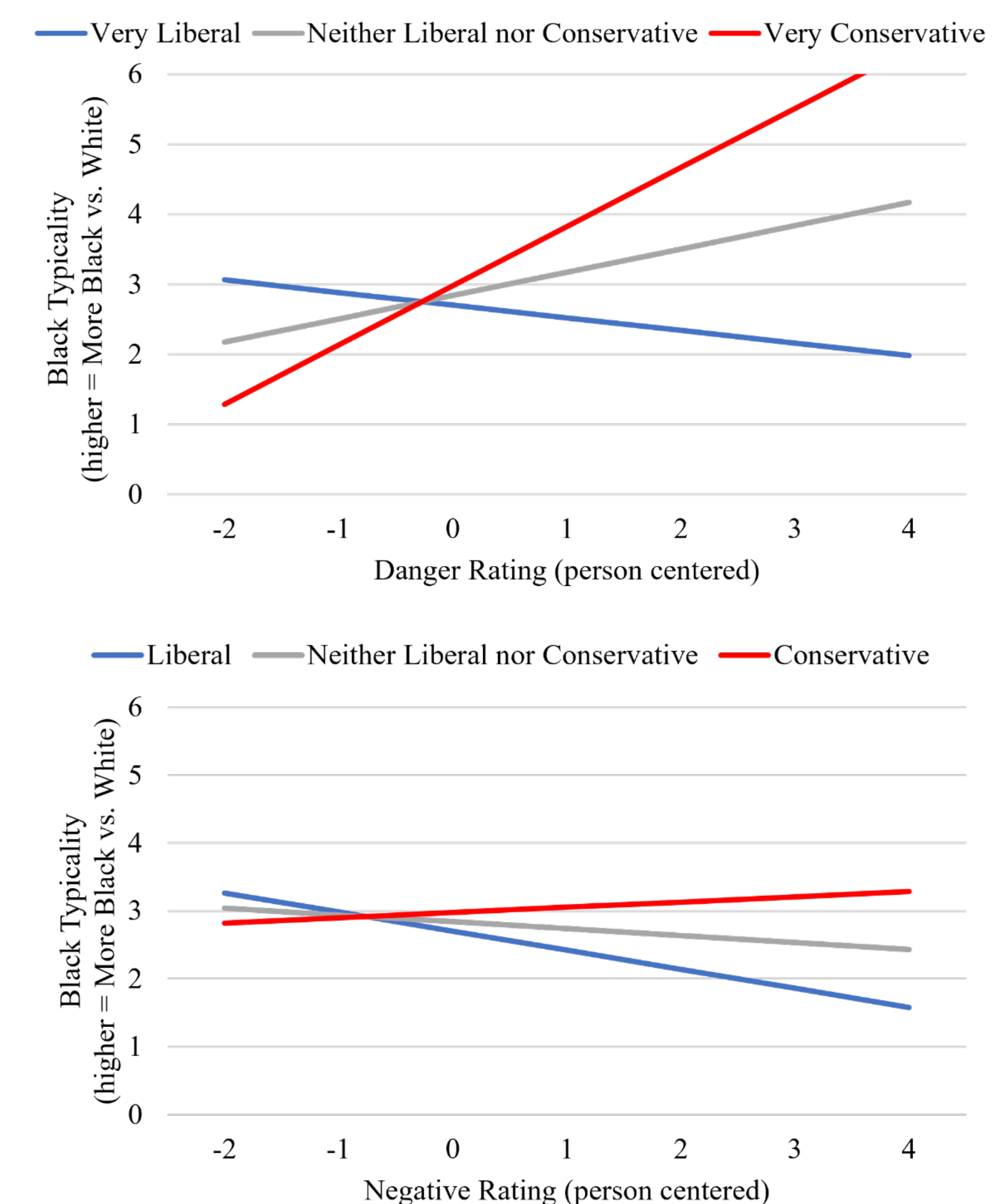

Study 3

Purpose: To test the moderating effect of political orientation on associations linking Black versus White with physical threat and Black versus White with negativity.

Procedure: Participants (N=153) were asked to rate the degree to which forty-one first names (typically associated with men) were negative and dangerous (0 = Not at all, 6 = Very much, separately for negative and dangerous).

Results: We found no relationship between Black typicality and Danger Threat at Political Orientation level 1, $b = -.18$, $t(5871) = -1.13$, $p = .26$, 95% CI [-.49, .13], $d = .04$; there was a positive relationship between Black typicality and Danger Threat at level 3, $b = .33$, $t(5871) = 3.24$, $p = 0.001$, 95% CI [.13, .53], $d = .49$, and at level 5, $b = .85$, $t(5871) = 3.59$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.39, 1.31], $d = .94$ (see Figure to the right, top panel).

Perception of the Black typicality of the name was not influenced by a Political Orientation x Negativity interaction, $F(1, 5871) = 0.95$, $p = .33$ (see Figure to the right, bottom panel).

Conclusions and Implications

Results imply that increased conservatism versus liberalism is associated with a strengthened perception of Black people as a physical threat. These effects have implications for understanding conservative versus liberal anti-Black attitudes. More conservative Whites may assume Black typicality based on how dangerous they perceive a stimulus and may perceive physical danger based on how Black they perceive a stimulus. Consequently, threat-based anti-Black bias of conservative versus liberal Americans may be activated and influence behaviors and judgments (e.g., political preferences, decisions, activism) even in the absence of strong Black or danger cues.