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**Kindness in Black and Latino Households**

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**Denison University Summer Scholars Project 2022**

**Abstract**

When thinking about kindness and the various thresholds of kindness, I began to think about the understandings of kindness within marginalized communities. I asked people of color to describe their understanding of kindness, and where these definitions came from with the hopes of further investigating the way their families and cultural communities have influenced them. The understanding of kindness within a Black communities and Latino communities has been defined as support and genuine care. The way this is expressed may look differently to different communities, but there is a shared understanding that kindness is a display of interconnectedness and support. Kindness as a practice is one that allows individuals to reflect on others' needs and recognize a shared humanity. Kindness can be misunderstood at times, due to a lack of understanding. Kindness is a motivator to creating personal relationships and human connection, but if a miscommunication occurs, this will not create connection. Therefore, to bridge this gap we must understand the cultural implications of our definitions of kindness.

*Keywords: race, identity, kindness, Black, Latino*

## Introduction

Amidst the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, I remember seeing posts encouraging people to “be kind”. When we had drive-by birthday parties to avoid close contact while still celebrating loved ones birthdays, I remember driving by the houses in Logan Square and on the front lawns of every apartment building was the same sign. The same black sign that read “In this house, we believe: Black Lives Matter, Women’s Rights Are Human Rights, No Human Is Illegal, Science is Real, Love Is Love, Kindness Is Everything” stood in front of every liberal millennial home. But these signs gave me some comfort knowing that the person living in that house believes in fighting for social justice, despite the fact that the person who put that sign up is a complete stranger to me. What do these signs mean? Does it mean that people who put up these signs are kind people? What does it actually mean to be kind?

When I began to research kindness, I started to think about myself. Do I consider myself a kind person? I think I do. I try to go out of my way to help others because that’s how I was raised. I was raised to be considerate and polite. To offer my seat to elders, to be respectful to everyone, to share my food when I ate around others. These were things I was told as a child and that have rang in my ears whenever I was put in a situation where there was someone who had less than I did. I know this is what my mom instilled in me, but what about others? Were my peers taught these same lessons? Coming to a predominantly white academic institution as a Latina, born and raised on the west side of Chicago by my single mother, I knew not everyone was raised the same way. Attending college was a difficult process in the beginning because I didn’t feel welcomed, I didn’t feel supported, I didn’t feel like I belonged. Then I met my friends, my sorority sisters, people who hung out in the multicultural lounge on the fourth floor of Slayter. There I felt welcomed and supported. When I was hungry and didn’t have enough

money on my meal plan, they were the ones who offered to buy me food. This was where I felt kindness the most at Denison.

People have many definitions of kindness and standards to what makes someone a kind person. Why is that? Are there people who are more kind than others? These are the questions I wanted to find answers to. Oftentimes, the researchers who are asking these questions are white and the people who are being asked are also white. Instead, I want to understand kindness through a cultural lens. I chose to only ask Black and Latino identifying people questions about kindness in the hopes to try to understand the similarities and differences in our environments that cause us to have different definitions of kindness. I conducted six focus groups and asked questions about how people define kindness and where they learned these definitions from. These questions led to deeper conversations that helped me understand that our environment does not decide our definitions of kindness but instead it is our environment and our personal experiences. During the focus groups, I listened to the opinions and experiences minoritized people living in the US. This helped me understand why it's so difficult to understand and define kindness because kindness is not a one size fits all sort of behavior. Kindness is experienced and conceptualized by everyone in their own individual way, but there are some similarities among these definitions of kindness.

In this paper, I will examine how kindness has been discussed and defined by Black and Latino identifying people. Furthermore, I will discuss the significant cultural understandings of kindness and how these are similar and different from Black culture and Latin culture. I sought to understand and conceptualize these understandings by asking people about the way they were raised and the things they were taught to believe. As well as discussing the lived experiences that further shape our individual understanding of kindness.



## Literature Review

### Defining Kindness

Why does kindness matter? This is one of the leading questions of my research. To understand why kindness matters, we must first understand what kindness does and how we as humans operate within the world. Humans are social beings who need community (Brownlie 2017). Sociologists have been trying to conceptualize the way in which humans create these communities and social networks (Brownlie 2017). Kindness can be understood as an example of prosocial behavior, which is defined as, “behaviour that benefits other people or society,” (Sanderson, p. 76, 2017). When people are kind to one another, it humanizes us. It’s easy to get stuck in our own realities and forget that others are experiencing some of the same human situations as us. When we are kind to another person, we recognize another person’s needs and how we can support them and benefit their life. Even within the first definition of kindness we can see that its purpose is to create community, “The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as the first, now obsolete, meaning of kindness: ‘Kinship; near relationship; natural affection arisen from this’” (Pollock, p. 123, 2011). Kindness is about relationships. This is even understood by children, “young children have been found to enact kindness through physically (e.g., ‘I helped someone get up who fell’) and emotionally (e.g., ‘I played with a new girl who was lonely’) helping others” (Binfet and Enns, p. 32, 2018). Even children understand that kindness is about helping other people. We never live completely independent lives, we are always surrounded by people who may affect and change our lives (Brownlie 2017).. Now, it is possible to completely ignore the needs of others and only worry about your own life, but this is not very popular because it can become very isolating. When we do something kind and acknowledge the needs of others, we recognize a shared humanity and interdependency (Brownlie 2017). We begin to

recognize that people need us and we need people. People encourage kindness because of this interdependency that we all have for one another. The more often we encounter kind people, the more likely we are to feel compelled to be kind to others (Baskerville et al. 2000).

Religious teachings often set the precedent for social interactions and how people are expected to behave and treat others. Christianity influences people's behaviors, even those who do not identify themselves as belonging to a religion (Bloom 2012). Some have argued that religion is a negative thing because it makes people do bad things, due to the fact that many violent acts have been justified by religion, such as the religious crusades (Bloom 2012). On the other hand, religion has been identified to make people better because there are religious duties to help the poor and give charity (Bloom 2012). I would argue that religion changes based upon one's interpretation of the text. Religious texts can be used as a motivator to create connection and relationship with people or it can be used as ammunition to push one's own political or personal views. The experience that people have with religion and the church can alter their attitude towards religion. A person who is continuously told that they will be damned to hell for their sexuality may not feel comfortable with the church or the idea of God. This can create resistance to other teachings the Bible and other religious texts impose upon one's personal life. These religious texts are meant to be implemented into people's lives. They are books of stories that have lessons within them that can often be applied to situations or experiences in our lives. People can either embrace these lessons or turn away from them for personal reasons. Therefore, even people who do not identify as belonging to a religious group, can still be affected by the teachings of the religion itself.

Contrastly, there are lessons about kindness and relationships that are imposed by religion. Christianity has proclamations about being kind and loving thy neighbor as well as

giving charity to the poor (Bloom 2012). The significance of these teachings for Christians is not the actions alone but also the position of one's heart. The Bible says that if you think about adultery, this is the same as committing adultery (Bloom 2012). In the same way, in order to be kind, you should not just commit kind acts, but you also must have the desire to help others without having selfish intentions. This idea of genuine kindness or genuine support, I believe comes from religious teachings, such as this. The Bible may not inherently make people more kind, but it does encourage its followers to be kind people.

Kindness is taught within religion, as well as within school settings. Many schools are teaching academics as well as social and emotional skills to create positive school climates (Kaplan et al. 2016). They are teaching students why kindness is important, mindfulness and self-awareness exercises, and gratitude exercises (Kaplan et al. 2016). When people perform kind acts as well as recognize kind acts done to them it has been found to have positive effects on the individual's mental health (Kaplan et al. 2016). Similarly, kindness has been found to improve the mental health of diabetes patients. About 12% of people with diabetes suffer major depression (Friis et al. 2016). A study was conducted to identify the effects of self compassion and kindness on these patient's mental health. They found that self kindness can be taught by practicing mindfulness and acceptance rather than self-criticism (Friis et al. 2016). When people stop blaming themselves for their situation and reframe their thought process to accept the reality, they are able to have compassion for themselves and be kind to themselves. It's hard to be kind to ourselves but it's important to try to recognize that we may not be able to change our situations and rather than stressing about what we could have done to prevent the current situation, we should accept it and move on to make the situation better.

When understanding kindness in different spaces, we must consider the social expectations and behaviors of the setting. Different environments may warrant different behaviors. Within these settings, kindness can affirm social inclusion and make people feel welcome. Within academic spaces, it can be difficult to create inclusive environments for students of color (Estrada et al. 2018). Kindness is defined as “doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them, taking care of them,” (Synder and Lopez, p. 20, 2007). When there is an absence of kindness, this can lead a person to feel unsafe and unwanted. This is often the experience people of color have within spaces that are predominantly white. Therefore to create more social inclusivity there are actions people can do to create a more kind environment. These are defined as macro cues, “physical touch, facial expressions that convey care, sharing, helping, politeness, and other easily perceived prosocial actions,” (Estrada et al 2018, p 263). In addition to these there are micro cues that can also affirm social inclusivity such as, “interacting, eye contact, subtle mimicry, voice tone, and actions that convey vulnerability” (Estrada et al 2018, p 263). Kindness is not often received by minoritized people in predominantly white spaces and this is what discourages people of color stepping into these spaces. This is why it is important to make everyone feel welcome and treat everyone with kindness.

### Latino Culture

When conceptualizing Latino culture it is important to recognize that there is no one, single, monolithic culture. Although culture is significant in the way that it influences one’s perception and relationship with others. Within Latino culture there is an emphasis on story-telling and the respect of elders’. These stories are often passed down from generation to generation through oral retellings (Espinoza-Herold 2007). The significance of these stories are the lessons embedded within them. The lessons Latinos are taught at a young age are deeply

instilled in us. These lessons become our core values. The stories demonstrate the importance of the lessons we are taught because we are told that if we are bad, el cucey (translation “the ghost monster”) will come and get us. The story of la bruja (translation “the witch”) and how she takes bad kids, scares us into behaving and listening to our parents. There is also a respect for the elders. Elders have more lived experiences and have a better understanding of the world that we do not, therefore they deserve the respect of being listened to (Espinoza-Herold 2007). It’s not completely clear why Latinos hold such a high regard and connection to their families, but this dynamic within Latino families has caught the attention of anthropologists.

Although, it is important to note that the research done to understand the Latino family structure may not hold true for every Latino in America. Anthropologists have defined this relationship to one’s family within Latin identifying people as, “familismo, the strong identification and attachment of persons with their nuclear and extended families,” (Smith-Morris et al. p. 36, 2012). Within Latino households, there is an emphasis on family. Family is the motivator to push for a better future (Smith-Morris et al. 2012). It may not be clear as to why this occurs within Latino culture, but it is a part of the culture. Family is important to many Latinos. Sometimes family is so important that we will put the needs of others over ourselves (Smith-Morris et al. 2012). This plays into the understanding of kindness for Latino families. Kindness is an action that means going out of your way to help someone else. The understanding of familismo is important in understanding the way in which kindness is defined amongst Latinos. But at the same time, some Latinos are beginning to redefine family traditions and structures that develop the understanding of kindness. This in turn affects the way kindness is understood by Latinos.

To understand the way Latinos experience the world, we must understand the social expectation and consider the role of race. Much of the research done to understand the role of race in society is focused on the Black experience in white America, so it can be difficult to clearly define the role of race for Latinos (Gonzalez-Sobrino and Goss 2018).

Gonzalez-Sobrino and Goss call for a “profound need to explore the experiences of new (and old) racial and ethnic groups that transgress the colour binary, even as they are informed by its historical and social structural dominance” (p 507, 2018). When trying to understand the reason the way kindness is understood in Latino communities, it is difficult to explain these theories due to the lack of research on Latino family structures and culture.

Latinos have a hard time clearly defining and understanding their place within society because Latino is not considered a race, but is rather identified as an ethnicity (Krysan and Lewis, 2006). In addition to this, Latinos may not be as easily identifiable as Black people or white people because there are light skinned Latinos, who are considered “Honorary Whites” and there are dark skinned Latinos who are considered “Collective Black” (Krysan and Lewis, 2006, pp 150-151). This colorism creates tension within the Latino community since some are able to benefit from their skin color while others are discriminated against for their skin color. The effects of this are seen within education, “light-skinned Latinos have between three and four years of educational advantage over dark-skinned Latinos,” (Krysan and Lewis, 2006 p 158). Therefore we can see that there are advantages some Latinos may experience because of their skin color. Although, this does not mean that Latinos experience this privilege in all aspects of their lives. In fact, “most Latinos experience discrimination in labor and housing markets as well as in schools, they quickly realize their nonwhite status” (Krysan and Lewis, 2006, p 165). It is important to understand that while Latinos are able to experience a privilege that is similar to the

privilege of white people this does not eliminate the discrimination that Latinos do experience. When trying to understand the social positioning of Latinos in America, there are many complexities that make it a topic that is difficult to clearly define.

In addition to this, the understanding of kindness is influenced by the environment in which Latinos live. Race and ethnicity is a persistent factor in the way Latinos are treated because “an individual’s race and ethnicity shapes how he or she is treated by the institutions of housing, education, labor markets, religion, and the criminal justice system, and issues of race and ethnicity are embedded in how these institutions operate” (Krysan and Lewis, 2006, p 65). There are specific ethno-racial communities that live in particular areas and these areas create a culture within it. For example, Chicago is a city that is very segregated and isolates people to stay within their own communities. Louis Wirth explains the effects of these tightly knit communities as, “come to share each other’s inner life and thus become one,” (2017, p 202). We see this reflected in the definitions of kindness because of a shared understanding of the world and environment in which individuals live that are influenced by these communities. We then later see that when people leave these communities and enter into the greater society, there is a tension within that individual,

“when the ghetto walls do finally crumble, at least sufficiently to permit the escape of some of the inmates, those that get a taste of the life in the freer world outside and are lured by its color are likely to be torn by the conflicting feeling that comes to hybrids generally, physically as well as social” (Wirth, p 205).

This illustrates the change that occurs when minoritized people leave their communities and enter a greater society which holds morals different from the ones within their communities. This

phenomenon typically results in a conflict of sorts between the conflicting morals and understandings of things such as kindness.

Within these communities, a set of social norms and expectations can be created. For example, machismo is defined as, “negative characteristics of sexism, chauvinism, and hypermasculinity,” (Arciniega, p 19, 2008). Latino men are characterized as “violent, rude, womanizing, and prone to alcoholism” (Arciniega, p 19, 2008). Many Latino men are held to these expectations and therefore when they step outside of the normative behavior they are often ridiculed (Arciniega 2008). Latino men are not expected to display kindness because this would make them appear weak. Therefore we can understand that when Latino men are told to define what kindness means, this may be difficult because they are not taught to be kind. Although, this does not mean that all Latino men are unkind.

Religion is a significant influence when understanding the view many Latinos have (Martini 2012). Latinos who identify as Evangelical, Protestant, or Catholic are more likely to be more actively involved with their religion and are more likely to support the idea that religion should be integrated within public life (Martini 2012). Therefore we can understand the significance of kindness and the lessons Latinos are taught about kindness. Many Latino churches have a close tie to their communities (Martini 2012); therefore when conceptualizing the definition of kindness in Latino communities it is important to also consider the religious influence. Martini states that with this understanding there is an, “expectation that religion should impact this ethnic group in a similar fashion,” (2012, p. 993). This explains some of the parallels we see amongst Latinos in their understanding of kindness and reinforces the unanimous definition within Latino communities. The role of religion within Latino communities is a significant factor when conceptualizing the behavior and beliefs of Latinos.

## Black Culture

Similarly to Latino culture, there is no monolithic Black culture. Black culture changes and varies upon the individual. Yet, it is necessary to understand the role of race in America. When thinking about race, we are forced to recognize the transition of racism from “blatant ‘Jim Crow’ racism of the past to more subtle forms,” (Krysan and Lewis, p 2, 2006). One of the terms to describe the new form racism has taken is “laissez-faire racism” and this form of racism “reproduces, sustains, and rationalizes black-white inequality,” (Krysan and Lewis, p 3, 2006). It is important to note that while explicit racism still occurs, laissez-faire racism has also played a significant role in the lives of people of color, specifically Black people in America.

It is necessary to recognize these subtle forms of racism and explicit forms of racism are the manifestation of a hierarchical understanding of race. In a focus group discussion consisting of all white people, it was stated that, “Blacks and Hispanics are more violent than white people... They have shorter fuses, and they are more emotional than white people,” (Krysan and Lewis, 2006, p 14). This understanding is not only harmful to Black people and Latinos, as we are forced to “act white” in order to appear less violent which inherently denies one’s culture; but it also ignores the external issues that cause Black people and Latinos to appear more emotional, such as structural and explicit racism. This perception of Black people and Latinos perpetuates the issue and therefore causes racism to essentially stay the same. The participants were asked, “How is it that in 2001 we can find a working-class white man who is convinced that many blacks are ‘trashy people’ controlled by emotions and clearly more susceptible to violence? How is it that a black woman defending herself and her home against a burglar ends up apprehended as if she were one of the ‘usual suspects?’”(Krysan and Lewis, 2006, p 15). Unfortunately, this is a question we are still asking in 2022. It was states that,

“Race is not just a set of categories, and racism is not just a collection of individual-level anti-minority attitudes. Race and racism are more fundamentally about sets of intertwined power relations, group interests and identities, and the ideas that justify and make sense out of (or challenge and delegitimize) the organized racial ordering of society,” (2006, p 16).

Race is not just some box you check on a census or application. Race is one of the biggest deciding factors of how an individual is treated in the world. Because race carries assumptions and prejudices along with them. Race is a privilege to some that automatically empowers one and race is a set of stereotypes that devalues another. Unfortunately, it is often the job of the minoritized to work ten times harder to prove these preconceived notions of the way in which they are expected to act and behave.

In addition to laissez-faire racism, researchers have also labeled subtle forms of racism as color-blind racism, cultural racism, aversive racism, symbolic racism, racial resentment, modern racism, and subtle racism (Krysan and Lewis 2006). Krysan and Lewis argue that, “the expression of racial prejudice... serves an important social function in a racialized social system. Typically this function is to disadvantage an individual or socially defined group viewed as subordinate,” (Krysan and Lewis, 2006, p 49). Because of this disadvantage, as I said before, it puts more work upon the minoritized group to try to eliminate the disadvantage. This is supported by the fact that, “in 1984, 33 percent of whites responded that ‘whites don’t care’; by 1998, 44 percent of white responded in this fashion,” (Krysan and Lewis, 2006, p 58). This means that many white people don’t care about the discrimination of Black people because they are able to benefit from it. In turn, this places the responsibility upon Black people to live against the stereotype and assumption that white people have.

This affects the mental health of Black people in America. Racist experiences contribute to psychological stress and poor health (Watson-Singleton et al. 2021) Racism lowers the level of self-compassion for oneself and undermines self-esteem (Watson-Singleton et al. 2021). Self-kindness was identified as a mediator for the psychological distress people experience when they experience a racist encounter (Watson-Singleton et al. 2021). This means that by being kind to oneself, the psychological effects of racism can be reduced, but this is not an easy fix to such a deep and stressful issue.

In addition to self-kindness, the assistance of mental health professionals can also help to reduce the psychological distress of racism. Racism is stressful as an external factor, but the effects of racism result in internalized racism (Steele and Newton, 2022). Black Americans experience lower self-esteem and psychological distress due to explicit racism and internalized racism (Steele and Newton, 2022). Internalized racism is defined as, “a negative view of oneself based on the perceived inferiority of one’s own culture or race... describes the self-hatred and self-alienation that come from (a) accepting negative racial/ethnic stereotypes about oneself and (b) accepting beliefs about the superiority of the beauty, language, and cultural norms and traditions of White people,” (Steele and Newton, 2022, pp 99-100). This increased psychological distress is difficult to address due to the lack of literature written to counselors to assist their clients with these issues and the lack of accessible resources available to Black communities (Steele and Newton, 2022). This is one way that professionals are advising Black people to cope with racism.

Another stressful place where Black people are dealing with racism is within the workplace. Within the workplace, racism may not be explicit within the workplace but instead takes on other subtle forms. Black women identified being overlooked for promotions or raises,

defending one's race, exclusion, and other microaggressions as stressors within the workplace (Hall et al. 2012). This stress can be acute or chronic. This stress can be chronic because oftentimes, Black women must work against the stereotypes. This can look like code switching which was defined as, "shifting is an internal process-a chipping away of the Black woman's sense of self, wholeness, and centeredness. It is invisible and can have devastating effects" (Hall et al. 2012, p 216). This internal process is often criticized by other minoritized communities as, "acting white" (Hooks, 2004). The reason this is often criticized is because it often denies one's true identity in order to appear less cultural and more white. The effects of this can be harmful to one's identity, which I will discuss more in the analysis section. Bell Hooks describes the harm of hiding one's identity in respect to Black men, "Whether in an actual prison or not, practically every black male in the United States has been forced at some point in his life to hold back the self he wants to express, to repress and contain for fear of being attacked, slaughtered, destroyed. Black males often exist in a prison of the mind unable to find their way out. In patriarchal culture, all males learn a role that restricts and confines" (Hooks, 2004, p xii). Code switching is harmful to people of color because it forces them to hide parts of themselves and conform to the normative, white behavior. By being forced to conform and alter one's identity, they deny their own identity and this is unkind to themselves.

### **Research Question**

My research question for this project was to investigate how kindness is understood and exemplified within the Black and Latino community. I wanted to understand the lessons people were taught as children and how these lessons did or did not shape us and our understanding of kindness. I expected to find some similarities between the Black and Latino communities

because both communities experience similar structural inequality, however, I knew that there would be some differences as well due to the different ways in which these respective communities experience racism. I expected to see that kindness was experienced in some similar ways, and I assumed that some of the lessons people were taught as children would not be the same.

I conducted this research to uncover the way that people of color understand kindness because I believed that this would give me insight into the way in which people of color have a different experience within the world. Many theoretical concepts, such as kindness are often defined by a white scholar who studied and researched a white population. And furthermore, these definitions do not take in the experiences of people of color because the way we grow up is different and the things we experience are different. Whiteness has been defined as the normal experience, and the experience of minoritized people is considered outside of the norm. I want to make these experiences normalized because they are the norm. The saying that there are “two Americas, the white America, and the minoritized America” is the reason I am conducting this research. The experience of people of color and the cultural traditions that are passed down are not abnormal, they are the realities of minoritized communities. The reality is that there are specific cultural traditions and there is an experience or racism or disadvantage to the way people of color have experienced life in America. This is not something that is often researched and when it is researched, it’s under a microscope and generalized and seen as the true experience of all people in those communities; they’re labeled as the “Black experience” or “Latino experience”. But then the experience of every individual is unique to their own lives and the way they have grown up and the hardships they have experienced. I want to investigate this and understand the different realities of people of color.

## Data and Methods

I decided the best way to collect data for this particular project would be to conduct focus groups. I conducted six focus groups, each separated by race and gender in order to search for commonalities and differences between each demographic, Black women, Black men, Black men, women, and non-binary, Latina women, Latino men, and Latino men, women, and non-binary. Each focus group was conducted via zoom in which each participant had the option to choose to have their cameras on or off. Each group was asked a set of questions which were: “How would you define kindness?”, “Where do you think that definition comes from for you? (e.g. family, religion)”, “Do you think your background affects your view on kindness? If so, how?”, “Can you think about and describe a specific instance where you did something kind for someone or someone did something kind for you?”, “Do you feel kindness within your community?”, “Do you think there are morals or beliefs you were raised with that make you a kind person? If so, can you identify these?”, “How do you experience kindness differently across different contexts (e.g. school, family, class)?”, “Is there anything else you think we should discuss about kindness?”, “Do you think there are particular people who are more kind than others?”. Each focus group was about 45 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. In focus group one there were five female participants, two Puerto Ricans, two Mexicans, and one Guatemalan. The youngest participant was 19 and the oldest was 38 years old. In focus group two there were five female participants, three African American, one African American and Dominican, and one Gambian. The youngest participant was 20 and the oldest was 22. In focus group three there were four male participants, one Mexican, one Peruvian, one Brazilian, and one Colombian. The youngest was 20 years old and the oldest was 25 years old. In the fourth focus group there were four male participants, one Nigerian, one Ghanaian, and two African-Americans. The youngest

was 21 and the oldest was 22. In focus group five there were five total participants, two male, two female, and one non-binary. Their ethno-racial identities were Peruvian, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Venezuelan, and Mexican. The youngest was 20 years old and the oldest was 36 years old. In focus group six there were four participants, one female, two males, and one non-binary. Two participants self-identified as African/Black American, one Somali, and one Nigerian. The youngest participant was 21 and the oldest was 22. I recruited participants via social media and snowball sampling. In which I reached out to friends and family and requested them to participate in the focus group or ask someone they knew who met the criteria to participate in my focus group. All participants had some college experience, 10 have graduated from undergraduate college and received their bachelor's degree, 15 are still pursuing their bachelors, and 2 have had some college experience. They each received a \$10 Amazon gift card. The focus groups were conducted on May 31, June 6, June 8, June 10, June 16, June 17 of 2022.

I chose to collect data in this form so that I could adopt an investigative role, which Parker and Tritter define as, "asking questions, controlling the dynamic of group discussion, often engaging in dialogue with specific participants," (2006, p 25). This format proved to be successful in that I was able to better understand the definitions of kindness participants came to understand through their environments and experiences. Participants were able to discuss with people of similar backgrounds which allowed me to see patterns in culture and gender and how these factor into their experiences. Within the Black focus groups, I was aware that we did not share the same ethno-racial background, so I made sure to ask questions to practice "cultural humility" (Steele & Newton, 2022, p 110). After each focus group, I listened to the audio recordings and manually transcribed each focus group. By doing so I was able to write notes and compare the discussions

against other focus groups. I coded for definitions of kindness, Latino experiences of kindness, and Black experiences of kindness which I will analyze further in the following section.

## **Results**

### Defining Kindness

When first thinking about kindness, it was seemingly straightforward behavior. With all of the bumper stickers and signs in front of your neighbor's house telling everyone, everywhere to "Be Kind". It must not be that hard, just be kind. But what does this actually mean? What happens when you try to hold a door open for someone with the intention of being kind, but the other person is upset that you made them run to the door so you're not holding the door for too long? Or when you give a homeless person money, but then post it on Instagram? Do these things make you a kind person? When I asked my participants about kindness, a few of them struggled with the first question of, "how do you define kindness?". It was often labeled as "kind of, like, going out of your way to do something with not expecting some type of acknowledgement from anybody else. Like it's coming from you and it's a genuine action" (Karmen, Latina Women Focus Group), one participant defined it as "an internal conviction to help or benefit others" (Elijah, Latino Men Focus Group), another participant said "it's unconditional at times" (Julian, Latino Mixed Gender Focus Group). Kindness is an action that has resulted from a sort of innate feeling. A feeling or desire to do something for another person's benefit. The one caveat was that these actions had to be without selfish intentions, there should be no expectation of praise for the giver.

On the other hand, some participants began to think about kindness less as an act but more of a characteristic a person has. Felix defined kindness as "a set of personality traits that I believe kind of relate to empathy, consideration, just being aware of people around you, and

being kind of open to your environment,”(Black Mixed Gender Focus Group). This led to a discussion of kindness being a more intimate behavior, as Jayden stated that “kindness is very intimate. It’s very- there’s a shared connection who really care about each other,”(Black Men Focus Group). This definition of kindness points more to the condition of someone’s heart, so similar to the previous definition in that it’s based on a feeling. This form of kindness was not explicitly tied to any sort of action but more the intention of the actions or behavior. Moreover, it was identified that there was a shared distinction among all the focus groups, that a kind act must be genuine and there can be no expectation of anything in return of the kindness given. Kindness could also be expressed between strangers or friends, family, spouses, etc. Although, it was not said that one version of kindness was more significant than the other.

I found that regardless of the form of kindness, it seemed that the reason or motivation for kindness varies. One reason being that when a person sees a need or desire of another person, they feel compelled to help. This “internal conviction”(Latino Men Focus Group) as Elijah described it, can be for strangers or for family. It seems that when we see people struggling, we are more likely to help. This feeling of empathy for others is what causes people to be kind to one another. Raquel described a time at work, as a pharmaceutical representative, when she was overwhelmed with orders. When her co-worker came in for their shift they asked, “is there something I can help you with?” When Raquel recognized how helpful this was, she began to do the same for others when she came in for her shift. Continuing the cycle of receiving kindness and paying it forward. We can see in this example how her co-workers recognized Raquel needing help and they offered to help her. This idea of “paying it forward” was shared among some other participants. A participant, Carolina, recalled a time when she was kind to a stranger. She had posted a listing on Facebook marketplace for her daughter's old stroller, but she decided

to give it to someone for free. She said a random woman had direct messaged her asking for the stroller for free because she could not afford it, but desperately needed one. Carolina is a single mother herself, who received a lot of additional help and support for her own daughter. She understood what it was like to receive help that you desperately needed, and she recognized the level of vulnerability this woman expressed when she asked for an item that was up for sale, for free. This is what encouraged Carolina to give her stroller to this woman for free, because it required a level of vulnerability and Carolina empathized with this woman.

When trying to understand the reasoning behind kindness, I came to realize that much of the reason is due to the human experience and the experiences of Latinos and Black people in America. Understanding what it is to receive kindness as well as witnessing the significance of being kind. Through the focus groups, I noticed the theme of kindness as necessary for community, which I will discuss further in the following sections. I uncovered many cultural definitions and understandings of kindness, but I will discuss this later in my paper. Although, a lot of this is due to the way we grow up and what we witness as children. And although many participants recognized the importance their backgrounds and upbringing had on their definitions of kindness, participants have begun to define kindness in a way that best serves their experience, and this may be apart from what they were taught as children. Some participants stated that they are re-defining what kindness means to them.

Redefining kindness for many participants meant turning away from the way they understood kindness as children and defining kindness in a way that is significant to their personal morals and perceptions of the world around them. This is often the result of experiencing specific hardships or injustices that made them realize that maybe “kill them kindness” was an ineffective practice. One participant, Teresa, recalled that when she was bullied

at school, her parents told her to kill them with kindness, and that just because other kids were bullies to her did no't give her the right to be a bully back. Later in the focus group, Teresa recognizes how doing this and allowing people to be microaggressive towards her has left her feeling conflicted. She expressed her fear of being labeled "the angry Black woman" by speaking up for herself. Teresa says, "you have to be kind, because if you're not kind you're viewed as aggressive" (Black Woman Focus Group). This is something I will discuss further in the following sections of my paper. Similarly, other participants have come to recognize that being kind to everyone sometimes puts them at risk to be taken advantage of. Some participants are turning away from the idea of "treat everyone with kindness" because not everyone deserves kindness and it may actually put themselves at risk.

Another way that participants are redefining kindness is by putting themselves first. A participant described this transition to redefining kindness,

"I'd say definitely like because of my cultural upbringing, it's very community oriented. There's a really large emphasis on putting the needs of your family and your community above yourself, which is kind of where that definition of kindness stems from, like prioritizing those communal needs over yours. And like with age, you know, you you're kind of- i've spent kind of critiquing that because it's like at what point are you, like, sacrificing your own needs to, like, please others," (Felix, Black Mixed Gender Focus Group).

This is something that is shared among many people of color, this value of family over yourself. But younger generations are beginning to realize that this practice is harmful to themselves. It is often expected that if an elder disrespects you or is unkind to you, you are still expected to respect them and treat them with kindness because they are older and have earned that respect.

Participants are recognizing that they are allowed to expect respect where respect is given, regardless of personhood. Similarly, one participant shared his understanding of kindness and how it has changed over time,

“My experience with kindness can be attributed to cultural, religious, I guess upbringing, but as I've gone through life, I feel like I kind of developed my own understanding of kindness. And so I do say that your upbringing as a child does play a role in defining kindness for individuals. But it can be something that's molded and that's how it felt in my life. So it's kind of been molded by the way in which I've interacted with others, kind of understanding their living situations and my living situations in comparison and thinking about the various aspects of how kindness can present itself throughout these various aspects that we see our lives.” (Karl, Black Mixed Gender Focus Group).

This understanding of kindness recognizes that kindness is different for everyone and these definitions are a reflection of our own upbringings and experiences. This is so important when we try to understand how kindness can be miscommunicated. Take this scenario for example: your friend is crying and upset and as their friend you understand that they don't like being touched when they're emotional, so you decide to sit next to them and patiently wait until they are ready to talk to you. This is the experience Yvonne recalled when I asked her focus group to describe a time when they experienced kindness. Kindness is not a one size fits all action. Kindness can be intimate when we understand the ways in which the people around us receive kindness. Kindness does not always require an action, and can sometimes be the way we understand people. Jayden defined himself as a person who is “neutral” to everyone because his understanding of kindness is rooted in connection and respect,

“I think you do have to respect someone to really genuinely be kind, to value who they are as a person, to just respect who they are, to love who they are, and encourage, and hype up who they are. In order just to have, just for your kindness to actually be felt. Cause that feels really good, when someone actually respects you, sees who you are, knows who you are. You know that that person cares about you, that they’re pouring into you. And the kindness is just like an extra layer. It's like a cherry on the top, like being kind to someone who you respect, who you love.” (Black Men Focus Group).

This form of kindness is what creates intimacy and connection. It is being able to understand the people around us and the way they receive kindness. When we receive kindness that is personal to us, it shows a level of intention and attention to detail that makes the receiver feel seen and understood.

The significance of understanding the ways kindness is defined is how we can begin to understand what creates community and human connection. Jaylee defined kindness as support. When I asked focus groups how they each experience kindness within their communities, Jayless said that in her hometown there is a certain type of kindness. Jaylee describes the people in her home community as supportive and understanding, “they show kindness, because they like, give you the opportunities and help you to try to, like, get there” (Latino Mixed Gender Focus Group). Kindness can be experienced between family members, friends, and even strangers. Even if a stranger may not know us on a personal level but their actions are received on a personal level, this can be significant. You may not know someone’s love language, but can accidentally show them love in the way they receive it best, simply by chance. The same can be experienced within kindness. An action can be a regular action to the giver, but an accidental act of kindness to the receiver. Francesca described an instance in which she received kindness in

which a stranger who spoke words of encouragement to her on graduation day. She recalled that she could not remember what the woman had said, but she remembers the feeling it left her with (Black Women Focus Group). Words of affirmation can be considered kindness because of how it makes the receiver feel. This support and encouragement Francesca felt, even though from a stranger, was an event she recalled as significant and kind. Kindness creates community.

This is important because kindness is a motivator for human interaction and connection. Kindness recognizes humanity and the need for human interaction. Silas recognized the significance of kindness. During his focus group, he shared his experience of living in Colombia as a child and living in poverty, “because of that I got to see lots of events or scenarios in which people were kind to me, and things like that in which I, like, I learned to see what kindness can do, and what it, how it affects the person the action is being done to” (Latino Men Focus Group). Many participants expressed their compulsion to be kind to everyone because you never know what someone is going through and how a seemingly simple act, to you, can be life changing to someone else. At the same time, not all kind acts will be necessarily life changing, but you might make someone's day by taking the time to ask a friend how they are doing. Felix recalled a time he experienced kindness from a friend as she stayed up with him to finish an assignment. Felix and his friend pulled an all-nighter, and this friend took the time and energy to stay up to watch Felix submit his assignment. Felix recalled this event with such gratitude and appreciation, “ I think people like being present in my life, I think those are the moments of kindness that I really think about and cherish” (Black mixed gender focus group). Kindness can sometimes look like being intentional about spending time with people or supporting people. Felix later identified these moments where his friends showed up for him, as the moments that he will reflect on and

that are important to him. Another participant, Karl, identified how significant kindness is for us as social individuals,

“Thinking about how those people can uplift us, and allow us to achieve whatever goal we have for ourselves, or look towards, kind of brings us out to the dark place that we'd be, maybe, at a certain time. Kindness is kind of that aspect, however we may define kindness I feel like there's a level to it that we feel is necessary for us to be able to get out of certain situation to be able to kind of push ourselves, motivate ourselves, to a certain level that we're able to achieve and think that the sky's the limit. And so, what I think about kindness in different ways, I feel like it's something that's very important.” (Black Mixed Gender Focus Group).

Kindness is important. Because although it may mean being at the risk of others taking advantage of us, it also is what makes us connected to one another. Kindness is a catalyst for human connection and togetherness. When we take the time to think about the needs of others and act on these thoughts by performing a kind act, we can begin to create community. Many people today are very rushed and flustered with all the tasks that must be done by the end of a 24 hour day. It can often be overwhelming to think about adding “be kind” to this never ending to do list. But in each focus group, I asked participants, “to recall or describe a time that they were kind to someone or someone was kind to them”. The responses I got back were somewhat small actions, such as being asked how your day was. Other responses were heartfelt stories about giving a friend a new pair of Jordans because they never owned Jordans. Kind actions do not have to be Hallmark movies that bring others to tears, kindness just requires a willingness to be selfless. Participants recalled these moments of kindness with such appreciation of others. Kindness is something that is complex at times, but it's also quite simple.

### Latino kindness

Throughout the Latino focus groups, I recognized that there were some common understandings of kindness, which I believe to be the result of shared experiences and lessons Latinos have received. Examples of kindness within the Latino community were described as sharing food, the way Latinos greet one another, and supporting one another. These actions were identified as examples of kindness and I will discuss in more detail how these actions are perceived as kind acts and why this is important to identify and understand.

In order to understand how definitions of kindness are significant to ethnoracial identities, I asked each focus group, “where does your definition or understanding of kindness come from?” In the Latino focus groups, many participants stated that it was their families and schools that taught them what kindness means. Carolina said that in her experience it was core values her family held as well as, “the way that both of my parents and all of my family, what they modeled” (Latina Women Focus Group). Kindness is a learned behavior. When children see their parents being kind to others, they are likely going to grow up and also display kindness (Baskerville et al. 2000). Similarly, another participant recalled a time when she spoke to her grandmother, and was told that she overmade food because her grandmother wanted to always prepare in case she brought friends over. Amelia said that she had asked her grandmother where that had come from and she said,

“they [her grandmother and great grandparents] used to live in Texas like 30 minutes from the border, and he [her great grandfather] used to drive out to the border where people would cross, and he would bring plates of warm food, for when they crossed the border,” (Latina Women Focus Group).

This is a quite common example of kindness I've seen within Latino families. Carolina also recalled her grandmother making food for the neighbors. This action recognizes the basic necessity of food, and by feeding others you are able to fill this need that everyone has. It also has been explained that when you have food for yourself, you should share with others. This is an example of putting the needs of others before yourself. This is what I sought out to understand; where do cultural traditions, such as this one, come from and how does this contribute to our understanding of kindness? This cultural tradition comes from experiences such as these, seeing your parents feed others and understanding how significant this action is. Sharing food and cooking for people is a form of intimacy and community. While this is a common experience amongst Latinos, it is important to note that not all Latinos experience this.

Similarly, not all Latinos have the desire to create connections within their communities. Some Latinos refrain from developing personal relationships within their communities for safety reasons. One participant, Elijah, described his community as more conservative,

“We're much more conservative out there in Date city. Usually you greet people with a handshake, and that's usually about it. If they're not immediate family or really close family friends, you usually don't go out of your way to either see them or talk to them... as a lot of us find out it's a lot easier to, to be okay for way low considering a lot of the migrant workers are undocumented.” (Latino Men Focus Group).

Here, lack of kindness can be seen as a form of protection. Since kindness in many communities tends to create more intimate relationships, it is important to undocumented Latinos to distance themselves from communities to ensure their immigration status stays as hidden as possible.

Unfortunately this is the result of ICE and deportation, many Latinos live in fear and are forced

to protect themselves. This forces some people to limit their kindness and therefore limits their connection to communities.

At the same time, we see a sort of Americanization amongst Latinos that is also used as a tool to protect oneself. A lot of the time people of color are forced to change or hide their identity to make the majority white population comfortable. Participants recalled certain traditions such as sharing food and greetings as examples of kindness they experienced within their communities that shaped their own understandings of what kindness looks like. Luis gave an example, “within Brazilian culture, they're very like when they greet each other when you meet people, you hug them and kiss them on the cheek” (Latino Men Focus Group). This is a popular greeting among Latinos and is seen as a sign of respect within the community. Yet in American culture, this is not deemed acceptable. Silas described his experience of being forced into American culture when he was adopted from Colombia to an American family,

“Once I moved here, I had to adapt to this thing where I could no longer, like, give people hugs right when I met them, or things like that. So I had a really hard time in middle school connecting to the boundaries of like- and I went to pretty much a primarily like white middle school. So I had to adapt to those boundaries and where, like my family taught me, the idea of like ‘Oh, you know everybody has a bubble, and you have to respect that bubble, you have to-’ and so I felt like so much of what I knew of kindness was taken away by that, or not be taken away by like restricted.”(Latino Men Focus Group).

This is not exclusive to Latinos in America, later in my paper I will discuss how Black people experience this same Americanization or code switching. In this instance, Silas described his experience with kindness and how it has been forced to change depending on his location.

Because in Colombia, hugging and kissing people when you greeted one another was a normal greeting that immediately indicated a sense of community and kindness amongst individuals. But when he came to the United States, he was no longer allowed to hug and kiss people as a greeting and this made him feel less a part of the community he was in. This awareness of what is acceptable behavior in certain spaces creates more work for minoritized individuals because we must constantly evaluate our behavior. This does not create community, it divides communities.

To further understand what kindness looks like in Latino communities, I asked participants, “how do you experience kindness within your communities?” Many participants responded by stating that they feel kindness within their community through interactions that indicate support, understanding, and sympathy. Jaylee described experiencing kindness in her hometown as feeling supported and being made aware of any resources that may be useful to her (Latino Mixed Gender Focus Group). Regardless if their families or communities fully understand their goals, they try to be supportive in the way they know how. Brandon also recalled an experience with kindness as receiving support from upperclassmen in college. He said that his scholarship group is a community in which he feels kindness and support,

“We all come from Chicago, and we, the majority of us, come from low- not not the best neighborhoods and low economic statuses. So we've we've all understood we are in a sense understand each other, so we don't- so we we were like a team in that we we understand each other, and that we're, we're not that different from one another. So we show kindness, but like just being supportive of one another.” (Latino Mixed Gender Focus Group).

These experiences with kindness allow us to understand the need for community and connection because within these communities we can support each other. While there are different communities we are a part of we can see how each of these communities express kindness can be the same.

When trying to understand how we come to our definition of kindness I recognized that some of these definitions are created through our personal experiences and circumstances. At the same time, upbringing was a significant factor. I asked participants to identify any morals or teachings that they were taught as children that make them kind individuals. Participants responded by identifying teachings such as “treat others the way you want to be treated” (Jaylee, Latino Mixed Gender Focus Group), “respect your elders” (Julian, Latino Mixed Gender Focus Group), “put yourself in other’s shoes” (Brandon, Latino Mixed Gender Focus Group). Participants identified these lessons as the small things that remind them to be kind. Although, this was not seen in Black focus groups. In many Black focus groups, participants responded to this question by stating that they are redefining their definitions of kindness. I will discuss this more in detail in the next section. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in the Black focus groups, participants identified racial tension and societal positioning as reasons they no longer felt it was effective to hold on to these ideas. By this they explained that as a Black person in the United States, the systems in place and the mainly white society are unkind to them, therefore they do not feel it serves them well to be kind when they know that their kindness will not be reciprocated. Contrastly, not all Latinos do not have this same experience. And while many of these same systems affect Latinos in similar ways that it affects Black people, Latinos are not affected by racism and systemic racism in the same way that Black people are. There is not enough research on Latinos and other non-Black minoritized ethnic groups to identify why this

phenomenon occurs (Gonzalez-Sobrinio and Goss 2018). Due to this lack of societal positionality, I believe this is partially what has led some Latinos hold on to the morals that they have been taught as children. Some Latinos have a difficult time understanding what racism or microaggressions look like for us, so it's not as obvious that the people around us are explicitly unkind. In addition to this, many of these lessons originate from religion and religious teachings. Participants also identified religious teachings that were passed down by parents and grandparents. Latinos who have identified as Catholic, Evangelical, or Protestant were more likely to feel that religion should be more integrated in personal lives (Martini 2012). With this understanding, we can see how this results in more kindness and a stronger connection to kind morals or teachings people were once taught as children. Similarly, participants do not identify as belonging to a religion, have identified religious teachings they were taught as children, "I myself am not religious, but because it's something so like my grandmother believes in, and how she teaches I guess morality like how she teaches her morals and passes them down onto me" (Amelia, Latina Women Focus Group). These things that we are told as children are often what we reflect on when we get older because we make the decision to keep them or discard them and create our own definitions of kindness. The reason most Latinos in each focus group recalled these lessons they were taught as children and have not turned away from is not completely clear. Regardless of our decisions as we grow older, these teachings we are taught as kids shape us in one way or another.

The way kindness can manifest itself may appear differently because of cultural and social expectations in certain communities. Within Latino communities, cooking for one another, greeting others with a hug and kiss, and support has been identified as popular examples of kindness. These actions create a community that is specific to Latin culture. The reason these

examples are most popular among Latinos is because of the environment in which most Latinos grow up in. On the other hand, the explanation for this definition of kindness is likely the result of individuals' experiences. It's important to understand the way kindness manifests itself within communities in order to better understand each community.

### Black Kindness

When trying to understand how kindness was exemplified in Black communities, the definitions were similar to Latino definitions of kindness. Much of the conversation surrounded the idea of kindness more than the concrete definition of kindness. Kindness was understood as acts of service, personality traits relating to empathy and awareness, being respectful, charitable actions, going out of your way for the benefit of others. These definitions are similar to the definition participants in Latino focus groups described. I then asked the focus groups, “where did this definition of kindness come from?” and again many participants stated that they come from family, community, school, etc. Then the conversation began to switch to what kindness looks like for Black men, women, and people who identify as non-binary. The conversation began to center more around Black people who are kind to a detriment and how kindness is often a necessity to humanize Black people. This is part of the reason why so many Black participants identified a need to redefine what kindness means.

Kindness was defined as unoptional in the Black women focus group. When I asked “where does their definition of kindness come from?” one participant, Zoe, said that her family is very traditional and Christian and there was an expectation of her as the eldest sister to tend to her younger sister's needs. She said that many women in her family are “kind to a detriment,” (Black Women Focus Group). Another participant responded to Zoe's comment by stating, “Black women have to be kind because we're- we're either labeled that “angry Black woman or

like we can't be tamed, or something like that," (Teresa, Black Women Focus Group). Here we see that kindness is not an option. Black women feel that they must be kind to avoid being labeled as aggressive. This often means that Black women are forced to be silent in situations where there are comments being made about their identity. Teresa described often experiencing this in college,

"all the condescending comments I have received, you kind of have to smile and be like oh, and pretend they're compliments and they're actually really microaggressive you can't really be like "Oh, no, that was pretty messed up", no you're gonna be like "Oh, okay" when in fact it was offensive. But you have to be kind, because if you're not kind you're viewed as aggressive, or abrasive" (Black Women Focus Group).

In the Black women focus group, this sentiment was shared among the group. They felt forced to bite their tongue because to talk back would be considered unkind to others. This meant that in order to be kind to others, Black women are forced to be unkind to themselves. Francesca explained a similar situation in which she felt she had to make herself smaller to avoid conflict and this meant that she was forced to be excessively kind and "kill them with kindness". As I began to explain in the previous section, Black women are seeing that this is an ineffective practice. When I asked "what morals did you grow up with that make you kind?" Francesca recalled that she was taught to "turn the other cheek". She then expressed her disagreement with this teaching, "I think that's a terrible thing to teach people. If someone is wrong to you, you better step up and tell them so they don't do it again," (Black Women Focus Group). The rest of the group shared that many of the things they were taught, they have begun to disagree with. Many of these lessons are implying that Black women should make themselves smaller for the convenience of others, and they don't agree that they should be forced to do this. Conversely

with the Latino focus groups who identified lessons such as “treat everyone with kindness,” many Black women have identified that these lessons create excuses for people who are unkind to them. Teresa stated that many of the lessons she was taught as a kid, she has now seen how these lessons force her to devalue her feelings and be kind to others, despite her own feelings wanting to do otherwise,

“I think empathy is a really good thing. I think being able to understand where people come from, especially in relation to kindness, that's a good thing. But I think, also there are a lot of times where you don't have to be empathetic. I think, like so often, like we always try like people, could use us, do terrible things to us. And we could be like ‘oh, well, they have this help going on so that kind of excuse it’ and it's like no. No matter what's going on you shouldn't treat someone like that, right” (Black Women Focus Group).

Black women express being forced to bite their tongues or ignore their own feelings and make their feelings insignificant for the benefit of others. With this understanding, we can see why Black women have expressed that kindness is an unfair necessity. In many situations, Black women are forced to be unkind to themselves in order to be kind to others. Kindness is used as a survival tool. This is not an exaggeration because many times, Black people are seen as aggressors and this perspective can be fatal. Therefore, to refute this prejudice, Black people are forced to be kind in ways that are often unkind to themselves. Initially I believed this experience to be exclusive to Black women, but in the Black men focus group, one participant explained his experience similar to those of Black women. Robert described that when he is in the presence of white people, he feels forced to make himself appear more approachable,

“the way that I'm built like physically and the way that I look, especially when I'm keeping a straight face, like, if you see me, like, I've had people when I'm walking on the street, cross the street when I'm walkin, and i'm just like chilling there, like, I go on walks almost every day, like, and there'll be times people will just, you know, grab they children and cross the street, and I'm like, yeah I'm not worried about you and your kids, and like if I see somebody, especially like if they're white, I gotta like put on this phony smile and make them feel comfortable. And that makes me uncomfortable, but they don't know that” (Black Men Focus Group).

This sort of change he is required to make is to make others, specifically white people, feel more comfortable in his presence. This is similar to the way in which Black women are forced to ignore microaggressions in order to avoid conflict and be portrayed as aggressive. Similarly, we see this same idea expressed by Latinos, by changing the way they greet others (i.e. handshakes or waves to a white person, but hugging or kissing another Latino). In each of these examples we see that minoritized individuals are forced to alter their behavior to assimilate to white people. And while this may seem like a quick fix in behavior, these shifts in behavior force minoritized individuals to change their authentic behavior. This is unkind, but is often necessary due to the prejudices set against people of color.

Contrastly, in the Black men focus group, lack of kindness was also identified as a form of protection. Here we see gender play an important role, because for Black men, to display kindness all the time means there is a risk of being taken advantage of. Jayden explains that he does not default to displaying kindness to everyone,

“Kindness for, like, some people is a default. But for me it's not a default because I have been kind of socialized to not be kind upfront. I've been socialized to be cordial or just to

be neutral. Just because, like if I'm too kind like that makes me more gullible, or like people will take advantage of me. And so, like, for me kindness, I can be kind, and I am kind. But, like most of the time, I'm just like neutral" (Black Men Focus Group).

Jayden recognizes his social positioning as a Black man and for him this means that there is an expectation that he is supposed to, "give off aggressiveness and assertiveness" (Black Men Focus Group). Jayden recognizes this as a trait due to toxic masculinity, and while he says that he is trying to unlearn these things it's difficult because it is a social expectation of Black men. The men in the focus group shared this same sentiment and expressed their struggle with the portrayal of Black men. Khalil states, "as a black man, you know people be takin, taking our kindness for granted" (Black Men Focus Group). Khalil says that he personally feels that while he tries to be kind to everyone and in return expects people to be "a decent human being... but you know that's not how the world works," (Black Men Focus Group). Jayden responded to Khalil's comment by saying,

"like the way that people get shocked at how nice he is, is like you can tell that people have, how they've been conditioned to having Black men in their life, or just seeing Black men on TV or through media that we're supposed to be, like, just neutral" (Black Men Focus Group).

Despite Khalil acting against the social behavior expected of Black men, many people are often shocked by his behavior and how kind he is. Khalil has often been told that he shouldn't act like that because people will take advantage of his behavior and despite the push back he has received he continues to try to be kind to everyone. The reason for this is not specific, it's just the way he is and how he feels comfortable behaving. Not all Black men can be categorized as a specific type of person or held to the same standards, but oftentimes they are expected to behave

in a particular manner. In this case, Black men are not expected to be kind, but Black men are kind.

As a result of the social expectation of Black women to always display kindness and Black men to not display kindness, participants in each focus group have said that they are beginning to redefine what kindness looks like and what it means. When I asked the focus groups, “what morals were you raised with that make you a kind person” as I previously stated, many Black women are turning away from these morals. The experience that they have had with morals such as “treat everyone with kindness” has not been beneficial to them because they are often taken advantage of in those situations. Whereas in the Black men focus group, participants responded with, “I don't really think that things like a set moral code or a set religion that, like, forces you to be kind. You have to choose that life for yourself” (Robert, Black Men Focus Group). Jayden agreed with this sentiment that, “kindness is a choice” (Black Men Focus Group). He stated that, “you go to certain life challenges and adversities, and like sometimes you may go through some really horrible things, and you kinda just lose that” (Black Men Focus Group). This understanding of kindness takes into account that the environment around us can cause us to make decisions that may go against the way we were raised. Kindness does not have to be given to everyone if the people around us are not kind. Karl defined kindness as,

“I feel like it’s a personal understanding of how your interactions may influence immediate family, friends, people within community. As well as understanding how social norms may be accepted and the certain way that you act, and think, and present yourself.” (Black Mixed Gender Focus Group).

This definition takes into the way we are taught to understand kindness as well as adapting to the environment we are in. The definition of kindness can change depending on the experiences a

person has or has not gone through. I believe that the reason Black participants have identified a need to redefine kindness speaks to their lived experiences. Collectively, Black people in America are prejudiced and experience the stress of being Black in America (Watson-Singleton et al. 2021). On the other hand, Latinos do not carry this same stress, and while Latinos also experience prejudice and racism, it is not to the level at which Black people experience it. This can be seen through the need to redefine kindness.

When trying to understand the shift of kindness and its definition we must consider the context of which kindness is experienced. In the United States, kindness has become a popular slogan, “be kind” posters in front of lawns and stickers on cars signifying that the owner of that property is a kind person. But this seemingly simple action is quite complex when we look at the social experiences of minoritized people in the US. Felix’s understanding of kindness in the US is different than his personal definition of kindness,

“I think kindness is simply like a neoliberal tool within the United States power structure, especially with the structural violence that exists in many different facets of American life and like those cultural norms and attitudes translate that into day to day life. So Max bringing up those examples of like be kind in the face of structural violence, that is that is kind of trying to, in a way, mold power dynamics in a way that's a reflection of kind of the interest of American society as a whole, and I think for the point to make sense, it's like to understand that American society itself is a very violent institution for you know, black and brown individuals for people who identify LGBTQ gbtq for people who identify as women, as non-binary, as their gender identities, etc., for anyone really outside of the scope of the cultural hegemon that is the United States, you know these cultural norms and attitudes do not translate and are not accepted by the American society. So

how we define kindness comes at a conflict to these power structures. Because you know a lot of us- there was some common points here and there, but, like, you know, kindness is attached to the communities, attached that a family, kindness being attached to material action, that's not something that's culturally shared with America at large, and in a way it can come at odds with a lot of like American values which again, are inherently tied to violence.” (Black Mixed Gender Focus Group).

The values of Black people and Latinos are not the same as the white values in the United States. This is because the United States does not take into account the experiences of non-white people. Therefore this tension we see with kindness displayed by Black people is because Black kindness is not the same as the “normative” definition of kindness. For Black people, kindness is not that simple because oftentimes the kindness white people expect from Black people is at the cost of Black people as we’ve seen in the previous examples. Oftentimes, minoritized groups are at the mercy of white America because white people are the ones in power who are allowed to define kindness and let that be the standard, which does not take into consideration the lived experiences of non-white people.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

Throughout my research, I have come to the conclusion that kindness is defined as support and genuine care. Kindness can take many different forms, but the understanding is the same. Kindness is personal and intimate and acknowledges a need for human connection and understanding. Kindness means to go out of your way to benefit someone else. It means to be empathetic and to put yourself in someone else's shoes and recognize how you can help them.

Kindness is a form of protection, in order to work against the stereotypes set against minoritized communities. The lack of kindness is also a form of protection because there are certain social expectations that do not allow Black or Latino men to display kindness. Kindness is what we are taught as children by our parents and lessons we learn from church. Kindness is being redefined by many people because the way they were taught to understand kindness and the experiences that they have had with kindness are not beneficial to themselves. Kindness is important because it drives relationships and connections closer. Kindness creates a level of vulnerability to create connection amongst humans.

Kindness is manifested differently within different communities because within these communities is a set of cultural expectations and behaviors. Many people of color are pushed towards one another because of the way the housing systems try to keep people of color away from white people. This community creates these shared experiences that allow for deeper connection within that community, but outside of that community there is often a feeling of displacement. When people of color enter white spaces, there is a change that happens for people of color. Oftentimes, this change means we are forced to hide the parts of our identity that do not fit within white spaces. We assimilate to white people in order to fit in. This implies that there is something wrong with people of color because this change only occurs for people of color. White people do not change when they enter spaces because they have the privilege to be themselves. Add kindness into this mix, and now people of color have to change their understanding of kindness to agree with the white understanding of kindness. This is where the miscommunication and lack of understanding comes from. When this miscommunication occurs it can be difficult to acknowledge when someone is being kind if you do not understand the way in which they display kindness. Many people of color do not feel kindness in white spaces. And with our

understanding of what kindness is, this means that people of color are not feeling supported or recognized for their own humanistic needs. It's important to understand the way that others receive kindness because if we do not have the same understanding, the receiver will never know our intention of being kind. It has been stated within scholarly literature that kindness is what pushes people together and creates community. Additionally it has been stated within my focus groups that kindness creates community. Why is there a separation and a distinction of white America and the America that people of color live in? It is because there is not a shared community between these two demographics. Many people of color feel unfamiliar and out of place within predominantly white spaces, and this is because of that lack of connection. In order to bridge this gap and create connection we need to understand the way that minoritized people understand and define kindness.

Our understanding of kindness is shaped by the lessons we are taught as well as the things we experience in relation to kindness. The lessons we are taught are like a guidebook our families give us, but as we get older and experience racism, microaggressions, and the reality of what it means to be a person of color in white America, this guidebook may no longer lead us in the direction we want to go. So we have to find our own guidebook and change it as we experience different things. Change is necessary and important, but it is unfair to expect people of color to always change. We need people to try to understand us instead of placing biases and expectations of us. Understanding one's values and behaviors is how you get to know them, and so similarly we must look at things such as kindness, a prosocial behavior, and understand how different people experience and understand kindness. The responsibility should not fall on one demographic to assimilate to the other, but should also be a shared understanding on both sides. In addition to this, by understanding what kindness means to different communities this will

display that genuine care and appreciation which will also lead to connection and relationship.

Kindness is an important step in building community with people.

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