



## Consensus and consistency: Exposure to multiple discrimination claims shapes Whites' intergroup attitudes<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Research suggests that intergroup disagreement about the prevalence of subtle racial bias in America occurs because Whites are not often exposed to minorities' experiences with this type of discrimination, due to housing, school, workplace, and friendship segregation. Although the objective of social movements (e.g., “I, too, am Harvard”) is to illuminate a consistent pattern of bias and to spur social action, it is possible that these movements may exacerbate the derogatory judgments (i.e., as complainers) found in previous research when a single claimant describes experiences with bias. Five studies are the first to draw on the consensus and consistency principles of Kelley's Covariation Model (1973) to investigate how exposure to *multiple* experiences of subtle bias brought by Black or White claimants affects Whites' perceptions of subsequent discrimination claimants and racial bias prevalence. The results supported the *consensus and consistency hypothesis* for Black claimants, as increased exposure to Blacks' discrimination experiences mitigated Whites' derogation of Black discrimination claimants as complainers and increased perceptions of the prevalence of anti-Black bias. Conversely, increased exposure to Whites' discrimination experiences supported the *derogation hypothesis*: exposure exacerbated complainer attributions for those claimants and had no effect on the perceived prevalence of anti-White bias. These results suggest increased exposure may be an effective tool for changing Whites' perceptions of and attitudes toward minorities' subtle bias experiences. We also discuss the contribution of these studies to our understanding of differences between intergroup and intragroup perceptions of discrimination.

“Oh I heard her say she was going to Harvard. I just assumed she mis-spoke.”

“Don't you wish you were White like the rest of us?”

“Our voices often go unheard on this campus, our experiences are devalued, our presence is questioned—this project is our way of speaking back, of standing up to say: We are here.”

—itooamharvard.tumblr.com

“Put yourself in someone else's shoes” we are often told as children. Though good advice, it is notoriously difficult to understand experiences that we have not personally had. Nowhere is this more apparent than in current intergroup conversations about racial bias—and, in particular, subtle racial bias—where Black and White Americans' different perspectives (see Carter & Murphy, 2015 for a review) can elicit accusations of playing the “race card” when racial/ethnic minorities attribute their experiences to racial bias. Some have suggested that these accusations arise because Whites are less aware of minorities' experiences with subtle bias. Indeed, modern racism tends to take a

subtler form than old-fashioned blatant racism, and Whites are less likely to detect and describe these subtler instances as biased (Sommers & Norton, 2006). In fact, Whites perceive that anti-Black bias is less prevalent than anti-White bias in modern society (Norton & Sommers, 2011), in spite of the persistent structural racism Black Americans still encounter (Robertson, Dewan, & Apuzzo, 2015). As such, a White person with limited knowledge about minorities' subtle discrimination experiences may dismiss minority discrimination claims and derogate the claimant (e.g., Kaiser & Miller, 2001). With this in mind, a main goal of social movements like Black Lives Matter and campus protests (e.g., “I, too, am Harvard”) has been to illuminate different individuals' experiences in order to establish a pattern that is undeniable and increase majority group members' awareness of the prevalence and persistence of minorities' experiences with discrimination. Yet, this objective assumes that White perceivers will conclude from multiple discrimination claims that bias is, indeed, prevalent (instead of dismissing the claims and responding defensively). This is an untested empirical question that the present research investigates.

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## 1. How will exposure to multiple discrimination claims shape Whites' perceptions?

Previous research reveals that Whites derogate minority discrimination claimants as oversensitive complainers who are unlikable and unhirable (Diebels & Czopp, 2011; Eliezer & Major, 2012; Unzueta, Everly, & Gutiérrez, 2014). Will exposure to multiple discrimination claims—each made by different individuals—provide a context that differentially shapes attitudes about subsequent discrimination claimants and influences people's judgments about the prevalence of racial bias in society? We investigated competing hypotheses.

### 1.1. Consensus and consistency hypothesis

One hypothesis is that exposure to multiple discrimination claims would reduce derogation of a subsequent discrimination claimant as a complainer. Kelley's Covariation Model (Kelley, 1973) demonstrates that consensus (i.e., agreement by others about the attribution) and consistency (i.e., observing the same stimulus multiple times) help perceivers draw conclusions about a target's behavior. Kelley's model also describes the role that distinctiveness (i.e., the extent to which the same person reacts differently to different stimuli) plays in person perception, though this construct is less relevant for the current research question that explores how exposure to multiple discrimination claims made by different individuals shapes people's downstream attitudes. The consensus and consistency hypothesis focuses on how these two social cognitive principles of person perception may apply to perceptions of discrimination claimants.

Specifically, one discrimination claim provides little information about whether others would agree that an experience is due to bias (low consensus) and about how frequently similar incidents occur (low consistency). In this case, a perceiver might dismiss the discrimination claim and subtype the claimant as a complainer (as in previous research; Kaiser & Miller, 2001). However, multiple discrimination claims from different individuals—all describing similar patterns of subtly-biased behavior such as being overlooked, negatively stereotyped, and treated worse than others—provide consensus and consistency information that may reduce derogatory attributions of subsequent discrimination claimants. Thus, the consensus and consistency hypothesis predicts that exposure to multiple discrimination claims will mitigate complainer attributions otherwise made for single discrimination claimants. That is, when consensus is high about the kinds of incidents people consider to be biased, and there is consistent information demonstrating that multiple people experience these kinds of incidents, exposure to multiple discrimination claims may create a context in which perceivers derogate a discrimination claimant less than when consensus and consistency information is low (i.e., exposure to only one discrimination claim).

### 1.2. Derogation hypothesis

Alternatively, exposure to multiple discrimination claims may backfire, yielding more negative attitudes about subsequent discrimination claimants. Indeed, past research shows that single discrimination claimants are derogated, and exposure to multiple discrimination claimants may exacerbate these effects. In this case, high consensus and consistency among discrimination claimants' experiences may not communicate a pattern of discrimination, but rather a tendency of group members to complain or play the victim. Thus, the derogation hypothesis predicts that perceivers may derogate discrimination claimants more when consensus and consistency information is high (vs. low).

## 2. Will exposure shape judgments of racial bias prevalence?

In addition to examining whether exposure to multiple

discrimination claims shapes Whites' perceptions of subsequent claimants as complainers, the present research investigates whether this exposure also shapes Whites' perceptions of the prevalence of racial bias in society. Is bias still a problem in today's society? Majority and minority individuals often disagree about this (Norton & Sommers, 2011), yet a central goal of voicing discrimination claims *en masse*, as done with campaigns such as “I, too, am Harvard,” is that these multiple experiences will raise awareness of the prevalence and form of anti-Black bias in society with the hope of motivating change or action. The effects of exposure to multiple discrimination claims may generalize beyond perceptions of claimants and shape perceivers' more general beliefs about the prevalence of bias. However, this is an empirical question that has not yet been tested.

Kelley's Covariation Model may be extended to predict how perceivers form group-based judgments about the prevalence of bias. Consensus and consistency information has been shown influence normative judgments of groups (Hewstone & Jaspars, 1983; Nook, Ong, Morelli, Mitchell, & Zaki, 2016). Based on this work, we expected that exposure to multiple discrimination claims would similarly shape descriptive norms about the prevalence of racial bias against that group. Specifically, the consensus and consistency hypothesis predicts that multiple discrimination claims would communicate a widely held and consistent pattern of discrimination (a descriptive norm regarding prevalence), increasing perceivers' beliefs about the prevalence of bias relative to when this information is low (i.e., exposure to only one discrimination claim). However, it is possible that perceivers may not generalize from multiple discrimination claims at all (showing no difference between high and low exposure conditions). Finally, it is also possible that perceivers may show reactance (reporting that bias is less prevalent when consensus and consistency information is high), as predicted by the derogation hypothesis.

## 3. Same process for perceptions of White and Black claimants?

While our main research question explores whether exposure to multiple (vs. single) discrimination claims by Black claimants affects White perceivers' subsequent judgments, the present research also explored whether Whites' perceptions of discrimination claimants differed in an intragroup (vs. intergroup) context. If multiple exposure reflects a benefit of providing consensus and consistency information that shapes both intergroup and intragroup perceptions, we would expect to find support for the consensus and consistency hypothesis for Whites' perceptions of *both* Black and White claimants. If multiple exposure exacerbates complainer attributions because *any group* (Black or White) who claims discrimination is perceived negatively, we would expect to find support for the derogation hypothesis, again for Whites' perceptions of Black and White claimants. However, we hypothesize that the effects of exposure will differ as a function of claimant race, reflecting an intergroup process.

Previous work shows that intergroup contexts are more likely to elicit group-level judgments (e.g., that group is friendly), while intragroup contexts are more likely to elicit individualized judgments (e.g., those individuals are friendly; Frey & Tropp, 2006). According to this argument, when Whites are exposed to multiple Black discrimination claimants (an intergroup context), they should be more likely to categorize them as a group and may determine that those discrimination experiences are representative of the group's experiences. Conversely, Whites may be more likely to perceive White discrimination claimants (an intragroup context) as individuals, impeding the group aggregation and consensus-consistency judgments afforded to claimants in the intergroup context. In this intragroup context, White discrimination claimants' experiences may not communicate a representative group experience in the way that Black claimants' experiences might. Moreover, while multiple discrimination claims from Blacks align with the pervasive structural and individual racism experienced by Black Americans, multiple discrimination claims from

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