



## Status legitimizing beliefs predict positivity toward Whites who claim anti-White bias<sup>☆</sup>



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine Whites' reactions toward Whites who claim to be victims of anti-White bias
- Whites react less negatively toward claimants when SLBs are activated
- SLB activation increases helping intentions toward anti-White bias claimants

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 12 December 2012

Revised 30 May 2013

Available online 15 August 2013

#### Keywords:

Anti-White bias

Discrimination

Status legitimizing beliefs

### ABSTRACT

Although Whites are increasingly likely to perceive themselves as victims of racial bias, research provides little insight into how anti-White bias claimants are perceived. Two studies examined whether Whites' endorsement of status legitimizing beliefs (SLBs) moderates their reactions toward White discrimination claimants. In Study 1, Whites who rejected SLBs reacted less favorably to an anti-White bias claimant relative to one who made a nondiscriminatory external claim, whereas Whites who endorsed SLBs expressed equally positive attitudes toward an anti-White bias claimant and a non-claimant. In Study 2, Whites who were not primed with status legitimizing beliefs displayed negative reactions toward an anti-White bias claimant compared to a non-claimant, whereas those primed with SLBs expressed more positive attitudes and a desire to help the anti-White bias claimant. Implications for affirmative action litigation are discussed.

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### Introduction

Whites in the United States are increasingly likely to see themselves as victims of racial discrimination (Norton & Sommers, 2011). Furthermore, the majority (58%) of White 18–24 years olds agree, “discrimination against Whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against Blacks and other minorities” (Public Religion Research Institute, 2012). Whites' perceptions of anti-White bias are also prominently featured in several recent high-profile Supreme Court cases that address affirmative action in college admissions and employment decisions (e.g. Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin, 2013; Ricci v. DeStefano, 2009; also see Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012; Plaut, 2011).

Although a number of studies have examined reactions to racial minorities' (e.g. Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003) and women's (e.g. Garcia, Schmitt, Branscombe, & Ellemers, 2010; Shelton & Stewart, 2004) claims of discrimination, research has surprisingly neglected to examine

reactions to Whites' claims of anti-White bias. Given the increased tendency for Whites to perceive themselves as victims of discrimination, coupled with the societal and legal implications of these claims, it is important to examine how anti-White bias claims are perceived.

#### *Status legitimacy and high-status groups' reactions to low-status groups' discrimination claims*

How do high status group members respond to discrimination claims? Theoretical perspectives examining reactions to discrimination claims highlight how beliefs about the legitimacy of status relations in society shape high-status group members' reactions to discrimination claimants (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Kaiser, 2006; Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006). Status legitimizing beliefs (SLBs) encompass a set of beliefs asserting that anyone can improve their social status as long as they work hard, are motivated, and are talented (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2011; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Moscovici, 1981; O'Brien & Major, 2005). SLBs rationalize the existing status hierarchy: making it appear fair and legitimate and include ideologies such as meritocracy (individuals' inputs correspond to their outcomes in society; e.g. Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003), the *belief in a just world* (the idea that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get; Lerner,

<sup>☆</sup> This research was supported by a GISOS grant from Wesleyan University to Clara L. Wilkins. We thank Bradford Baker for his assistance with method development.

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1980), and the *Protestant work ethic* (the idea that hard work is rewarded; e.g. Katz & Hass, 1988). Thus, there are a variety of related beliefs that collectively serve to justify the status system (Jost & Hunyady, 2005).

According to system-justifying perspectives, when low-status groups claim to experience racial bias, it challenges beliefs about the legitimacy of the status hierarchy and thus threatens high-status groups, who react by derogating discrimination claimants (Kaiser, 2006). Indeed, high-status groups generally respond negatively towards low-status individuals who claim discrimination relative to those who do not claim to experience bias (Kaiser, 2006; Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003; Schultz & Maddox, 2013; Shelton & Stewart, 2004).

Further, several empirical studies provide direct support for the role of system legitimacy in understanding how high-status groups react to low-status groups' discrimination claims (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Kaiser et al., 2006). For example, Jost and Burgess (2000) demonstrated that among men, stronger *belief in a just world* was associated with more negative reactions toward a woman who confronted sexism. Kaiser and colleagues (Kaiser et al., 2006) also demonstrated that Whites' greater SLB endorsement corresponded to greater negativity toward Blacks who blamed a negative outcome on discrimination (but not for those who blamed non-discriminatory internal and external causes). Therefore, when a low-status individual claims to be a victim of bias, the more high-status perceivers believe the system is just, the more negatively they react, because the claim challenges the perceived fairness of the existing social structure.

#### *High-status groups' reactions to high-status groups' discrimination claims*

In contrast to low-status individuals' claims of discrimination, high-status group members' discrimination claims do not threaten the status hierarchy; in fact, they support it. Given Whites' traditional position at the top of the racial status hierarchy in the US, a claim of anti-White bias could be perceived of as an attempt to maintain the social hierarchy and Whites' status relative to other social groups (Lee, Pratto, & Johnson, 2011; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Taylor, Fry, & Kochhar, 2011). Indeed, high-status groups are especially motivated to justify their high social standing (e.g. Jost & Banaji, 1994; Major, 1994; Major, McFarlin, & Gagnon, 1989). Theoretically, the more high-status individuals endorse SLBs, the more they are likely to believe their group is entitled to high status and to favorable outcomes relative to other social groups (Major, 1994). Consequently, the more Whites endorse beliefs that legitimize the status hierarchy, the more they are expected to react favorably to anti-White bias claims.

Indeed, past research suggests that among high-status groups, SLB endorsement may produce greater receptivity to high-status groups' claims of bias. For example, men primed with SLBs are more likely than those in a control condition, to blame discrimination when they are passed over for a position in favor of a woman (McCoy & Major, 2007). Major and colleagues (Major et al., 2002) also found that SLBs are associated with greater perceptions of personal discrimination among high-status groups following rejection by a low-status individual. Furthermore, when SLB-endorsing Whites are primed to perceive the status hierarchy as unstable, as a result of racial minorities' social advancement, they are more inclined to perceive anti-White bias than those in a control condition (Wilkins & Kaiser, under review). Thus, among high-status groups, SLB endorsement corresponds to increased perceptions of bias against their own group.

What remains unclear from the previous research is whether SLBs cause differential reactions to claims of anti-White bias. At first glance, our theorizing may lead to the assumption that Whites who endorse SLBs will react particularly favorably toward anti-White bias claimants. However, we believe that outright favoritism toward anti-White bias claimants is an unlikely response. Instead, we anticipate that SLB endorsing Whites' positivity toward anti-White bias claimants will manifest as the *absence of derogation* of anti-White bias claimants. We suspect that Whites' predominant reaction to White discrimination claimants will be to express disdain for these individuals, as aligning with them risks

being perceived as a racist: something that is morally and socially frowned upon. Indeed, Whites have great concern over being viewed as racist (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006; Plant & Devine, 1998; Shelton, West, & Trail, 2010; Sommers & Norton, 2006). And, Whites who claim anti-White bias are perceived as racist (Blodorn & O'Brien, 2013). This concern about appearing racist should lead Whites, on average, to distance themselves from anti-White bias claimants and to express negativity toward them. However, negativity toward anti-White bias claimants is expected to be mitigated among Whites who endorse SLBs. In other words, we hypothesize that SLB-endorsing Whites will express their increased positivity toward anti-White bias claimants by no longer displaying the typical pattern of disdain.

#### *Current research*

In this research, we examined how Whites react towards a White individual who fails to receive a promotion at work and either claims to have been a victim of racial discrimination or makes another attribution for his failure. We examined the relationship between status legitimizing belief endorsement and reactions toward the claimant (Studies 1 and 2) and reported willingness to help the target (Study 2). We hypothesized that on average, responses to anti-White bias claimants would be negative relative to non-claimants, and that this pattern would be particularly apparent among SLB rejecters. In contrast, SLB endorsement was predicted to correspond to relatively positive reactions toward claimants.

#### **Study 1A**

Study 1 was designed to test whether SLB endorsement moderates Whites' reactions to a White individual who claims anti-White bias. We expected that the default reaction to a discrimination claimant would be more negative than reactions to an individual who blames a negative outcome on another external factor. However, we expected that Whites who endorse SLBs would have equally positive reactions to claimants and non-claimants.

#### *Participants and procedures*

Participants were 199 Whites (54.6% female; Age:  $M = 38.07$   $SD = 13.31$ ) who were recruited online through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) (see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011 for a discussion of this sample) in exchange for 50 cents. After removing individuals who engaged in random clicking, 183 participants remained.

Participants were asked to form an impression of a purported participant in a previous study on "career success". All participants read about a White man in his 30s who failed to receive a promotion at work. After reviewing the man's demographic information, participants were assigned to one of two experimental conditions, which manipulated the target's attributions for the promotion decision. Specifically, the target indicated that he had failed to receive a promotion at work and that a coworker had been promoted instead of him. In the *discrimination claim condition*, the target indicated that the coworker was Black and further wrote: "all this stuff about "workforce diversity" is just reverse racism against guys like me". In the *no-claim condition*, the target wrote that he was unsure as to why he did not receive the promotion saying: "I guess it was more competitive than I thought". This control condition was designed to serve as an external claim because the target did not blame his negative outcome on either himself or on discrimination (see Kaiser et al., 2006 for use of a similar control).<sup>1</sup> Participants

<sup>1</sup> We recognize that any attribution will not be purely internal or external, and that the distinction is one of relativity. Discrimination can be viewed as stemming from internal causes (one's social identity) and external causes (another's bias). And competition can be seen as stemming from internal causes (not being good enough) and external causes (others being particularly capable).

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