



Whites' perceptions of discrimination against Blacks: The influence of common identity

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Common-ingroup identity typically improves intergroup attitudes.
- Studied effects of different group identities on orientations toward Blacks
- Common identity reduced recognition of discrimination and willingness to protest.
- Dual identity increased willingness to protest discrimination.

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ABSTRACT

The present research, consisting of three experiments, examined how different ways of representing the group identities of White and Black Americans affect Whites' recognition of discrimination against a Black person and their willingness to protest on behalf of that person. In Experiment 1 we predicted and found that inducing a common-group representation (as Americans), compared to a condition that emphasized separate racial-group identities, reduced Whites' recognition of subtle discrimination. This pattern was reversed under external threat. In Experiment 2, common identity reduced recognition of discrimination that was subtle, but not blatant. In addition, although a common-group identity did not facilitate Whites' willingness to protest blatant discrimination in Experiments 2 and 3, in Experiment 3 inducing a dual identity, which emphasizes both subgroup differences and a common-group representation, did. We discuss the implications of the results for when common- and dual-identity representations foster action on behalf of a minority group.

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Introduction

Categorization of people into the ingroup and outgroups spontaneously arouses a range of intergroup biases (see Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010, for a review), and thus recent approaches for improving intergroup relations have focused on altering the way people socially categorize others. For example, the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000, 2012) proposes that inducing people to recategorize ingroup and outgroup members within a common category (based, for example, on common school or national identity) redirects the motivational and cognitive processes that produce ingroup-favoring intergroup biases to increase positive feelings, beliefs, and behaviors toward others who were previously regarded primarily in terms of their outgroup membership. This model has received considerable empirical support (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000, 2012, for reviews). The present research, consisting of three studies, extends previous work on the effects of emphasizing common identity by examining how it influences sensitivity to biases against subgroups incorporated within the common identity, specifically Whites' sensitivity to racial bias experienced by Blacks.

In general, emphasizing the salience of common identity (e.g., as Americans) compared to racial subgroup membership (e.g., Blacks and Whites) may increase Whites' sensitivity to bias against Blacks for several reasons. Cognitively, people process information more deeply for ingroup than for outgroup members (Van Bavel, Packer, & Cunningham, 2008), retain information in a more detailed fashion for ingroup than outgroup members (Park & Rothbart, 1982), feel more personally connected to ingroup members (Aron et al., 2005; Smith & Henry, 1996), are more helpful toward ingroup than toward outgroup members (Dovidio et al., 1997; Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Clark, 1981), and are more sensitive to unfairness and violations of procedural justice for ingroup members (Tyler, 2005; Tyler & Blader, 2003).

However, emphasizing perceptions of common identity in place of separate group identities might, alternatively, reduce perceptions of bias based on subgroup (e.g., racial group) membership. Dovidio, Gaertner, and Saguy (2009), for example, proposed that emphasizing common identity can distract people from attending to subgroup-based differences (including inequities), because a primary emphasis on common identity reduces the salience of separate subgroup identities (see also Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009). According to self-categorization theory, belonging to a group also transforms the way people think about

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themselves and others. When people think of themselves in terms of their group identity, they perceive themselves and other ingroup members in terms of the group prototype – the “cognitive representation of features that describe and prescribe attributes of the group” (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 123) – and see themselves as interchangeable representatives of that prototype. In the United States, being White, not Black, is prototypic of being American (Devos & Banaji, 2005). Thus, making common American identity primarily salient may reduce Whites' sensitivity to the existence of race-based discrimination against Black Americans.

The present research included three studies addressing the question of how common identity affects Whites' perceptions of racial bias against Blacks, their responses to potential racial bias, and factors that may moderate these responses. Experiment 1 investigated the role of external national threat on how emphasizing common or different-group identities for Blacks and Whites affects Whites' recognition of race-based discrimination against Blacks. Experiment 2 examined the potential moderating role of the nature of discrimination against Blacks – whether subtle or blatant – on Whites' recognition of bias and willingness to take action against it. Experiment 3 built upon our initial findings to consider how the different ways people conceive of group identity can promote action by members of a majority group on behalf of a minority group.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 explored whether emphasizing common American identity, compared to making different racial identities salient, affects Whites' sensitivity to the existence of racial biases against Blacks that constitute barriers to their advancement in society. In general, majority-group members prefer to emphasize commonalities in their intergroup relations with minorities (Dovidio et al., 2009; Hehman et al., 2012; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008). This focus may facilitate harmony and improve their attitudes but, as noted earlier, may also make majority-group members less sensitive to intergroup injustices because it reduces attention to subgroup identities, and thus the distinctive experiences associated with these subgroup identities, particularly identities that are not prototypic of the superordinate group identity. From this perspective, Whites would be less likely to perceive racial bias against Blacks when American common identity is made salient than when separate racial group identities are emphasized.

However, situational elements such as external threat to the superordinate identity might moderate Whites' sensitivity to injustices against Blacks. External threat increases people's sense of social identity and its distinctive qualities and symbols (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Morin & Deane, 2002). One reason is that people rely on a strong sense of social identity to reduce feelings of uncertainty (Hogg, 2010), which is aroused by threat. Another reason is that enhanced social identity resulting from threat has direct instrumental value for defending against threat.

External threat can also facilitate greater inclusiveness among racial or ethnic subgroups that may originally have been perceived as less prototypical of the society. Davies, Steele, and Markus (2008), for instance, found that priming American participants with the 9/11 terrorist attacks increased their endorsement of inclusion of racial and ethnic groups already associated with an American national identity. Feelings of shared threat of terrorism (i.e., terrorists targeting all Americans, regardless of race vs. targeting primarily White Americans) also increased White Americans' positive attitudes toward Black Americans and sensitivity to and moral outrage expressed at discrimination that Black Americans face within American society (Dovidio et al., 2004). These latter findings suggest that, at least under conditions of external threat to a superordinate identity, Whites would likely be more sensitive to racial bias against Blacks in American society when common American identity, compared to separate racial identities is made salient.

In Experiment 1, White participants were first exposed to either a threat (America lags in educational attainment) or no-threat condition

(Canada lags in educational attainment). Participants then read a manipulation that emphasized common-group (American) identity of racial groups in the U.S. or separate racial-group memberships. Participants then read an excerpt (adapted from Napier, 2013), which stated that Black Americans pay off their educational debt more slowly than White Americans. The reasons for this discrepancy were ambiguous; the excerpt concluded by stating it is unclear whether the discrepancy exists because of discrimination on the job market or because Black Americans choose jobs that pay less well. The outcome of interest was perceptions that Black Americans pay off their debt more slowly than White Americans because of discrimination against Blacks on the job market.

We expected that when there was no threat, participants would be less likely to recognize racial bias in the common-identity than separate-identities condition. In the threat condition, we expected a reversal such that the common-identity condition would lead to greater recognition of racial bias than the separate-identities condition.

Method

Participants

Participants were 118 White residents of the United States (41 women, 76 men, and 1 unspecified) drawn from Amazon Mechanical Turk's online pool who participated in exchange for 50 cents. Participants' average age was 27.5 years ($SD = 7.4$).

Procedure

Participants read that the study explored reading comprehension. They were told that they would read and respond to a few articles.

Threat manipulation. First, participants were randomly assigned to read one of two threat conditions. In the threat condition, participants read excerpts from an article in the Huffington Post, which indicated that the U.S. ranks 17th in the world for education. In the no-threat condition, participants read the identical article, except that it indicated that Canada ranks 17th for education, with no mention of the U.S.

Group identity manipulation. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of two group-identity conditions. Participants in the common-identity condition, modeled after the procedure of Glasford and Dovidio (2011), read an ostensible excerpt from USA Today titled “Celebrating our American Identity,” in which the author explained that despite the diversity in America, its people are united by their shared values (e.g., “Even though there is so much diversity in the US, there is a common identity to all citizens who live here. The US is unique because Americans share the same core values. It is those shared values that unite us and make America so strong.”). In the separate-identities condition, participants read an article titled “Celebrating our Ethnic Identities,” in which the author instead explained that there are many distinctive identities in America, each with their own values and strengths (e.g., “Because there is so much diversity in the US, there are distinctive identities based on citizens' location in the country, ethnic background, etc. The US is unique because Americans have different core values because they come from different backgrounds. All of those different groups have distinctive strengths.”).

Discrimination scenario. Participants read that 60% of White Americans pay off their student debt within 2 years of graduation, but only 25% of Black Americans do so. Participants further read that “Whether or not this racial discrepancy in paying off debt is due to prejudice and discrimination in the job market remains unclear. While it is certainly possible that employers favor White job applicants and employees, it is also possible that Black Americans are more likely than White Americans to choose occupations that offer less pay and fewer opportunities for advancement.” Thus, the reason why Black Americans pay off their debt more slowly was left ambiguous.

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