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How the Opinions of Racial Minorities Influence Judgments of Discrimination

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We investigated the influence of target versus non-target group members on judgments of racial discrimination. In Study 1, Black individuals were regarded as better sources of information about racial discrimination than White individuals. In Study 2, Black peers were more influential than White peers on judgments of discrimination. In Study 3, the influence of Black peers was moderated by internal concern with prejudice, and mediated by the perceived credibility of the peer. We discuss these findings in terms of targeted social referencing, whereby members of relevant target groups exert more influence than members of non-target groups over assessments of discrimination.

... I received a call from an associate of an executive search firm who, after verbally tap dancing for several minutes, essentially asked whether I wished to be considered for a job as a corporate director of equal opportunity. At the time I was stunned, for it was clear to me that I had no credentials for (let alone interest in) the job. I was an expert neither in personnel nor employment law; I was, however, black, which seemed to be the most important qualification. (Cose, 1997, p. 156)

In the situation just described, commentator Ellis Cose lacks professional expertise in personnel or employment law yet is sought out as a director of equal opportunity. His only qualification for this job is his racial group membership, which is used as a proxy for expertise in this area of corporate policy. In this article, we argue that, in the domain of prejudice and discrimination, individuals may behave similarly to the search firm executive just described, turning to those people thought to have “the most important” qualification for making judgments in this often fraught domain—membership in the group potentially affected by the prejudice and discrimination. We predict that, when making determinations about the level of discrimination indicated by an ambiguous behavior, individuals will be more influenced by the opinions of members of potentially affected target groups than by the opinions of members of nontarget groups.

THE INFLUENCE OF TARGET GROUP MEMBERS

When individuals look to, and are influenced by, the responses of target group members, they are practicing a specific form of social referencing (Feinman, 1982; Klinnert, Campos, Sorce, Emde, & Svejda, 1983). Although this term has primarily been used to describe how infants encountering a novel situation will often look to their caregiver for encouragement or reproach (see, e.g., Hornik & Gunnar, 1988; Zarbatany & Lamb, 1985), evidence for adult social referencing can be seen in Sherif’s (1936) examination of the autokinetic effect as well as Latané and Darley’s (1968) “smoke-filled room” study, where participants seemed to take their cues about whether the smoke constituted an emergency by looking to the other bystanders in the situation.
Targeted Social Referencing

We argue here that, when social referencing occurs in the domain of discrimination, the opinions of members of certain groups are given extra weight. In contrast to the familiar notion that people tend to be more influenced by similar others, including people of their own race (e.g., Dembroski, Lasater, & Ramirez, 1978), or give greater weight to members of high-status groups (e.g., Eagley, 1983; Kirchler & Davis, 1986), we propose instead that, in the face of potential discrimination, adults target those individuals presumed to provide the most information about the offensiveness of an action or comment—members of the target category. In short, we define targeted social referencing as paying particular attention to members of relevant target groups in situations where discrimination is a possibility, and giving extra weight to the reactions of these individuals when making decisions about appropriate behavioral responses.

Crosby, Monin, and Richardson (2008) used eye tracking to examine whether target group members are more likely to be looked at than nontarget group members when controversial comments about race are made. When anti-affirmative action comments were made in a conversation about college admissions, participants looked more to the one Black discussant. It is important to note that this occurred only when participants believed the Black discussant could hear the controversial comments. When participants believed that the Black discussant’s headphones were off, they did not look at him during the controversial comments, even though the footage and soundtrack were identical across participants. This finding indicates that members of relevant target groups are given special attention when they can hear (and presumably respond to) controversial comments, suggesting that the responses of members of target groups may be particularly influential in group-relevant domains.

Group-Based Expertise

Why would members of target groups be the focus of attention in these situations? We propose that members of target groups appear to be “prejudice experts” by virtue of their group membership. Experience with prejudice and injustice is hypothesized to provide members of target groups with insight into both discrimination and morality more broadly (see Essed, 1992; Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998; Vorauer, 2006). In fact, Vorauer and Sakamoto (2008) found that, when status differences are seen as illegitimate, Whites see minority group members as having more “moral expertise” than other Whites. Thus, individuals who are potential targets of prejudice are seen as knowing more about moral behavior, and therefore seen as more credible sources of information in this domain.

In line with this perception, Apfelbaum, Sommers, and Norton (2008) found behavioral evidence for this influence, documenting that Whites followed the lead of Black interaction partners in a race-related person identification task. If a Black interaction partner mentioned race, Whites were more likely to do so, and Whites were particularly unlikely to mention race if a Black interaction partner avoided using race to identify people. In the domain of gender, Czopp (2011) found that men saw a sexist comment as less offensive, and the target of the comment as less competent, when a woman (as opposed to a man) heard the comment and failed to confront it. Based on these findings, it seems likely that, when faced with ambiguous situations where the “correct” action is unclear, nontarget group members take their cues regarding appropriate behavior from members of relevant target groups.

Divergent Findings and Individual Differences

Despite these findings, empirical evidence for the influence of members of target groups on judgments of discrimination is mixed. Blanchard, Crandall, Brigham, and Vaughn (1994) found that the opinion of a live confederate had a strong impact on female participants’ responses concerning how a university should respond to incidents of racial discrimination but reported no statistically significant effect of the confederate’s race (Black vs. White) on participant responses. In addition, members of target groups who blame their own setbacks on prejudice are seen as complainers, even when such blame is empirically justified (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Drury and Kaiser (2011) reported that nontarget claims of discrimination on behalf of targeted individuals were seen as more legitimate than the same claims made by target group members. Similarly, Rasinski and Czopp (2010) found that Black individuals who confronted racist statements were seen as marginally ruder than White individuals who confronted the same statements. Further, participants in this study were more likely to agree with the confronter when the confronter was White, and confrontation by a Black individual was more likely than confrontation by a White individual to cause participants to agree with the perpetrator’s racist statements.

One way to reconcile these seemingly divergent findings may be to examine how concerned individuals are with individual and structural prejudice. In Vorauer and Sakamoto’s (2008) work, White individuals who saw intergroup differences as illegitimate were more likely to value the opinion of minority individuals and more likely to see these target group members as having expertise in the domain of morality. As noted by Vorauer and Sakamoto, nontarget group members who see group differences as illegitimate are likely to be lower in prejudice (see Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, &
Hume, 2001). Similarly, Rasinski and Czopp (2010) reported that individuals who showed more negative attitudes on the Attitudes Toward Blacks scale (Brigham, 1993) were more likely to find White confronters more convincing and Black confronters more biased.

We thus hypothesized that individual differences in concerns about racism may moderate the degree to which nontarget group members look to, and are influenced by, relevant target groups when making judgments of discrimination. Individuals who are highly concerned with being prejudiced should be especially likely to be influenced by target group members when making these judgments, whereas individuals who are unconcerned with being prejudiced should be less influenced by the views of target group members. If concern with prejudice moderates the degree to which social referencing occurs, then the characteristics of various participant populations may affect the degree to which social referencing is observed. We would thus hypothesize that targeted social referencing will be present in populations high in concern with prejudice (tested in our Study 2) but may be moderated by concern with prejudice in the broader population (as tested in our Study 3). To test this moderation, we focused specifically on Plant and Devine’s (1998) Internal Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice scale (IMS). This measure captures an individual’s level of concern with being racist, and is significantly correlated with racial attitudes captured through the Attitudes Towards Black scale (Brigham, 1993) and the Modern Racism scale (McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981). By controlling for the second scale in the Plant and Devine measure, External Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice (EMS), we were able to specifically assess the role of internal concerns. Based on past research (e.g., Crosby & Monin, 2007), we expected that IMS, but not EMS, would moderate targeted social referencing.

THE PRESENT STUDIES

In three studies, we investigate the effect of target group opinions in the domain of racial discrimination. Study 1 examined whether Black individuals are perceived as having more credibility in the domain of racism than White individuals. Studies 2 and 3 directly examined the influence of Black versus White peers on judgments of the absence or presence of racial discrimination. Study 2 focused on college student participants, and Study 3 focused on an online community sample. Study 3 also added Plant and Devine’s (1998) Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice scales (IMS and EMS), allowing us to determine if concern with being prejudiced moderates the extent to which target group members influence judgments of discrimination. Finally, Study 3 tested perceived credibility of Black versus White peers as a mediator of social influence.

STUDY 1

Study 1 was designed to determine whether Black individuals were seen as more credible sources of information than White individuals about racial discrimination, and whether this perceived credibility extended to other forms of discrimination. Participants were presented with one of three types of legal cases (racial discrimination, anti-Semitism, or a slip-and-fall liability case), and then given brief descriptions of three individuals (a White college student, a Black college student, and a White law school student). They were asked how much each individual would know about the case and how much they would like to see the responses of each individual.

Method

Participants. Two hundred seventy-five individuals participated in an online study through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk website (see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Participants were paid $0.25 for participating. Sixteen individuals failed the manipulation check (a multiple-choice response to “What kind of legal case did you read about?”) and were excluded from analyses, as were 14 Black participants. Of the 245 participants retained for analyses, 96 were male and 149 were female, 12 were Asian or Asian American, 7 were Latino/a, 213 were White, 9 were multiracial, and 4 individuals chose “other.” Based on qualifications set through Mechanical Turk, all participants were located in the United States.

Procedure. Participants saw a brief description of the study on the Mechanical Turk website. If they chose to participate, they were given a link to the study webpage, where they provided consent and completed the study.

Materials. The questionnaire was designed using Qualtrics software. Participants were randomly assigned to read about one of three legal cases—a racial discrimination lawsuit, an anti-Semitism lawsuit, or a slip-and-fall liability case. Participants were then asked to imagine that they were to complete a series of similar jury-like decisions and that they would be rewarded for more accurate judgments. They were then given brief descriptions of three individuals with whom they might consult (a White college student, a Black college student, and a White law student, presented in randomized order) and asked how much each individual would know about the topic and how much they would like to see each individual’s response.
Results

Ratings of how much participants thought each individual knew were highly correlated with how much participants wanted information from each individual (White college student $r = .63$, $p < .001$; Black college student $r = .67$, $p < .001$; White law student $r = .68$, $p < .001$). Thus these two items were averaged to form a single measure of source credibility. A 3 (case type: racial discrimination vs. anti-Semitism vs. slip and fall liability) × 3 (other individual: White college student vs. Black college student vs. law school student) mixed-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed, with case type as a between-subjects variable and ratings of the other individual as a within-subjects variable. There was a significant within-subjects effect of person, $F(2, 484) = 306.55$, $p < .001$, demonstrating that, across all three types of legal cases, participants thought the law student would be the most credible. However, as predicted, this main effect was qualified by a significant Person × Case Type interaction, $F(4, 484) = 9.83$, $p < .001$, indicating that the case type differentially affected credibility ratings of the three sources.

Because our primary interest was in how credible Black individuals were compared to White individuals, we conducted focused contrasts within each case type. As seen in Table 1, credibility ratings of Black and White college students were not significantly different from each other for the anti-Semitism case, $F(1, 78) = 1.31$, $p = .26$, or the slip and fall liability case, $F(1, 85) < 1$, but these ratings of White and Black college students were significantly different from each other in the racial discrimination case, $F(1, 79) = 36.22$, $p < .001$, White $M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.66$, Black $M = 5.90$, $SD = 1.84$.

To examine the specificity of the Black college student’s perceived credibility, we also conducted focused contrasts comparing how credible Black and White individuals were as sources of information about racial discrimination versus anti-Semitism. There were no significant differences in how credible White college students were in the domain of racial discrimination versus anti-Semitism, $t(242) = -1.37$, $p = .17$, but there was a significant difference in how much more credible Black college students were thought to be as sources of information about racial discrimination ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 1.84$) versus anti-Semitism ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 2.17$), $t(242) = -4.02$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

Overall, Black individuals were seen as more credible sources of information than demographically similar White individuals in the domain of racial discrimination but not in the domain of anti-Semitism or in a legal case unrelated to discrimination. The finding that Black college students were not rated as more credible than White college students in the cases unrelated to racial discrimination helps rule out the possibility that high ratings of Black individuals were driven simply by social desirability concerns, as this would have led to the prediction that Black college students would be rated higher for all three cases. In addition, these findings suggest that participants perceived Black individuals to be particularly credible in the domain of racial discrimination, where they might be presumed to have personal experience. This suggests that Blacks’ credibility is perceived to be specific to the domain of racial discrimination, rather than encompassing discrimination more generally.

STUDY 2

Given the evidence provided in Study 1 that Black individuals are seen as more credible sources of information than White individuals in the domain of racial discrimination, in Study 2 we investigated the influence of Black and White individuals when they say discrimination is present (detect discrimination) and when they say discrimination is absent (deny discrimination). In this study, participants provided their own judgments of whether something constituted discrimination after seeing the responses of a (fictitious) previous participant. Our procedure was inspired by Crandall, Eshleman, and O’Brien, (2002, Study 7), who gave participants the (fictitious) responses of “four previous participants” of unspecified race. In the present study, participants saw the responses of just one previous participant, and the race of the previous participant was manipulated to be either Black or White. Responses to questionnaire items, which all involved whether certain behaviors towards Black individuals constituted discrimination, were given as either all low (indicating that the behaviors did not constitute discrimination) or all high (indicating that the behaviors did constitute discrimination). Our goal was to determine if previous responses by a Black individual would be more
influential than previous responses by a White individual.

Method

Participants. One hundred three non-Black adult volunteers (M_{agg} = 23.75), recruited on the campus of a large West Coast private university, completed an anonymous questionnaire. During debriefing, 13 participants expressed suspicion about the procedure, explicitly guessing that the responses of previous participants were created by the experimenters, and/or that the purpose of the study was to examine the effect of other people’s opinions on their own. These participants were dropped from our analysis. We also dropped 15 individuals who failed the open-ended manipulation check (“Do you remember the race of the person whose responses you saw?”) resulting in a final sample of 75 (22 women and 53 men; one Asian, seven Latino/a, one Native American, 65 White, one individual of mixed race). A separate sample of 65 adult volunteers (M_{agg} = 20.54; 32 women and 33 men; 12 Asian; 6 Latino/a; 3 Native American; 36 White; 2 mixed race individuals; and 6 individuals who reported their race as “other”) completed a pretesting version of the questionnaire without any response from a previous participant. This group of participants was recruited several weeks earlier than the main study participants and served as a baseline for comparison. Baseline participants were recruited in the same manner, and from the same college campus, as the main study participants.

Design. The design was a 2 × 2 factorial in which race of the previous participant (Black vs. White) was crossed with the opinion of the previous participant (denying vs. detecting discrimination).

Procedure. Participants were approached on a college campus by one of three non-Black female experimenters (one White, one Asian American, and one Native American) and asked to complete a short questionnaire about “social and political attitudes.” Experimenters handed participants a questionnaire that listed the five discrimination items (Cronbach’s α = .80) provided by the previous participant (depending on condition) completed a short questionnaire about “social and political attitudes.” Experimenters handed participants a questionnaire that listed the five discrimination items (Cronbach’s α = .80) provided by the previous participant (depending on condition) and asked to complete a short questionnaire about “social and political attitudes.” Experimenters handed participants a questionnaire that listed the five discrimination items (Cronbach’s α = .80) provided by the previous participant (depending on condition) and asked to complete a short questionnaire about “social and political attitudes.”

Results

The five discrimination items (Cronbach’s α = .80) were collapsed into a single mean for analyses. The 2 (previous participant opinion: detect vs. deny discrimination) × 2 (previous participant race: White vs. Black) ANOVA revealed a main effect of the previous individual’s opinion, F(1, 71) = 21.52, p < .001, suggesting an initial conformity effect: Participants who saw a previous participant detect discrimination gave higher ratings of discrimination than participants who saw a previous participant deny discrimination. However, this
effect was qualified by the predicted interaction between previous participant opinion and previous participant race, \(F(1, 71) = 7.05, p = .01\). In both directions, the discrimination ratings of a Black previous participant exerted more pull on the participants, especially in the case of denial (see Figure 1). Planned contrasts testing simple effects revealed that participants’ discrimination ratings were significantly lower when they viewed a Black than a White previous participant denying discrimination [Black deny \(M = 3.27, SD = 1.18\); White deny \(M = 4.43, SD = 1.79\); \(t(71) = -2.32, p = .02\)], but that participants’ discrimination ratings were not significantly higher when they viewed a Black than a White previous participant detecting discrimination [Black detect \(M = 5.90, SD = 1.55\); White detect \(M = 5.14, SD = 1.67\); \(t(71) = 1.46, p = .15\)].

Discussion

Because all of the instances of possible discrimination presented in Study 2 involved potential racism against Blacks, and because the instances of possible discrimination used were intentionally ambiguous and open to interpretation, we expected participants to defer to Black individuals when making their determinations of discrimination. This is indeed what occurred, with participants seemingly more influenced by the opinions of a Black previous participant than the opinions of a White previous participant. This difference in influence between Black and White peers was significant when peers denied discrimination. When peers detected discrimination, the pattern of means was in the predicted direction (more influence by a Black peer than a White peer) but not statistically significant. Thus, in addition to allocating attention to relevant target group members when encountering potential instances of discrimination (Crosby et al., 2008), student participants were also more influenced by members of these groups denying racial discrimination than by members of the majority taking a similar position.

Study 3 was designed to replicate the effects of minority influence on discrimination judgments in a nonstudent population and to reconcile the findings of Study 2 with studies that do not find greater influence of Black individuals on judgments related to racial discrimination (Blanchard et al., 1994; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). Because we predicted that individual differences in concerns with racism might moderate the influence of target group members on judgments of discrimination, we measured IMS/EMS (Plant & Devine, 1998) in Study 3. Study 2 was conducted with a college participant pool, and college is often a time when concerns with prejudice are heightened (Crandall et al., 2002). We thus focused Study 3 on a noncollege sample to determine whether concern with being prejudiced moderates targeted social referencing. In addition, building on the findings of Study 1, we added a measure of perceived credibility to examine a possible mediation by credibility of the influence of Black and White individuals on judgments of discrimination. Finally, in Study 3 we added a distinct control condition with no information from another individual.

Method

Participants. Five hundred and fourteen participants completed an online survey through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk website. Participants were paid $0.50 to complete the survey. Forty-three participants were dropped from analysis because they failed to provide a valid worker identification number, failed to complete the full questionnaire, and/or because they failed the manipulation check. We also dropped 25 Black participants from analysis. Of the 446 remaining participants, 193 were male and 253 were female. Self-reported race and ethnicity of the sample was as follows: 38 Asian or Asian American, 24 Hispanic or Latino/a, 5 Native American, 360 White, 18 Mixed or multi racial, and 1 “other.” As in Study 1, all participants were located in the United States.

Procedure. Participants saw a brief description of the study on the Mechanical Turk website. If they chose to participate, they were given a link to the study webpage, where they provided consent and completed the study.

Materials. The questionnaire used in Study 2 was adapted to an online format using Qualtrics software. Participants were told that they might be assigned a “virtual partner” for the study, whose responses they would see in the form of a screenshot. This partner was described as another participant in the same study whose response was randomly chosen for the participant to view. Participants saw the same five items used in Study 2, and virtual partner responses were the same high or low
discrimination responses used in Study 2. Participants were assigned to one of five conditions: Black partner denying discrimination, Black partner detecting discrimination, White partner denying discrimination, White partner detecting discrimination, or a no-partner control condition. After providing their responses on the five discrimination items, participants were asked how knowledgeable their partner was, how helpful their partner was, and how much they thought they would like their partner. They also completed a multiple-choice manipulation check (“What was your partner’s race?”) as well as Plant and Devine’s (1998) IMS and EMS.

Results

Motivation to respond without prejudice. Both the Internal Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice (IMS) and External Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice (EMS) proved reliable in this sample (IMS Cronbach’s α = .87, EMS = .86). Mean IMS was 7.02 (SD = 1.75), and mean EMS was 4.09 (SD = 2.00). IMS and EMS were significantly negatively correlated, r(444) = –.17, p < .001.

Discrimination ratings. As in Study 2, the five discrimination items were reliably correlated (Cronbach’s α = .81) and were combined into a single measure of discrimination. The mean discrimination rating in our control (no partner) condition (N = 88) was 4.50 (SD = 1.50). For individuals in the control condition, there was no significant correlation between discrimination ratings and IMS, r(86) = .04, p = .69, or EMS, r(86) = .09, p = .41.

Focusing on the participants who were exposed to a virtual partner, a 2 (virtual partner opinion: detect vs. deny discrimination) x 2 (virtual partner race: White vs. Black) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed a main effect of the virtual partner’s opinion, F(1, 354) = 68.83, p < .001, suggesting that, as in Study 2, participants who saw another participant detect discrimination gave higher ratings of discrimination than participants who saw another participant deny discrimination (Detect M = 4.76, SD = 1.89; Deny M = 3.22, SD = 1.68). In addition, there was a significant main effect of partner race, F(1, 354) = 6.19, p = .01, such that participants with White partners gave higher ratings than participants with Black partners (White partner M = 4.21, SD = 1.94; Black partner M = 3.82, SD = 1.95).

Moderation by IMS. To explore the relationship between Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice and discrimination ratings, we conducted a regression analysis for the 358 participants who received the responses of a “virtual partner.” Using R software (R Development Core Team, 2008), we entered the contrast-coded race (–1/2 for White and 1/2 for Black) and opinion (–1/2 for deny discrimination and 1/2 for detect discrimination) of the virtual partner, as well as their interaction, into a regression equation with IMS (centered), EMS (centered), and the interactions of centered IMS and EMS with each of the two manipulations and their interaction (see Table 2, Model 1). This regression revealed a main effect of partner opinion, b = 1.54, t(346) = 8.30, p < .001; a main effect of partner race, b = –.49, t(346) = –3.92, p < .001; a main effect of IMS, b = .16, t(346) = 2.92, p = .004; the interaction of virtual partner race and IMS, b = .40, t(346) = 3.63, p < .001; and the three-way interaction among IMS, virtual partner race, and virtual partner opinion, b = .51, t(346) = 2.33, p = .02.

Simple effects of partner opinion. Given the large effect of the virtual partner’s response, b = 1.54, t(346) = 8.30, p < .001, to interpret the three-way interaction between IMS, race, and opinion, we separately examined the simple effects of race and opinion for partners who denied discrimination, on one hand, and partners who detected it, on the other (see Aiken & West, 1991). Looking first at participants who observed a partner who denied discrimination, we found an effect of partner race, b = –.64, t(346) = –2.38, p = .02, and an effect of IMS, b = .16, t(346) = 2.00, p = .05, but no interaction between partner race and IMS, b = .14, t(346) = .92, p = .36. These participants gave lower ratings when their partner was Black than when their partner was White (i.e., a Black partner was more influential), and low IMS individuals gave lower discrimination ratings than high IMS individuals. When participants observed a partner who detected discrimination, by contrast, there was a highly significant interaction between IMS and partner race, b = .65, t(346) = 4.23, p < .001, as well as an effect for IMS, b = .17, t(346) = 2.14, p = .03, but no main effect for partner race, b = –.35, t(346) = –1.36, p = .17. The interaction between partner race and IMS reflects that when the partner detected discrimination, high-IMS individuals were more influenced by a Black than a White peer, simple slope b = .79, t(346) = 2.16, p = .03, whereas low-IMS individuals were more influenced by a White than a Black peer, b = –1.49, t(346) = –3.92, p < .001. In sum, as seen in Figure 2, Black partners who deny discrimination are more influential than White partners who deny discrimination for individuals both high and low in IMS, whereas Black partners who detect discrimination are more influential than White partners who detect discrimination for participants high in IMS, but participants low in IMS were more influenced by a White partner than by a Black partner detecting discrimination.

Simple effects by IMS. To facilitate comparison with Study 2 (conducted on a population that may have been more concerned about being prejudiced than the...
population used in Study 3), we also decomposed the three-way interaction by comparing effects for individuals high (+1 SD) vs. low (−1 SD) on IMS (Aiken & West, 1991, p. 18). As predicted, whereas the interaction between race and opinion was significant for high-IMS individuals (replicating Study 2), $b = 1.18, t(346) = 2.18, p = .03$, it was not significant for low-IMS individuals, $b = -.61, t(346) = -.15, p = .25$. Looking further at high-IMS individuals, the significant two-way interaction can be explained by the fact that when the target denied discrimination, race did not matter, $b = -.39, t(346) = -.97, p = .33$, whereas it did when the target detected discrimination, $b = .79, t(346) = 2.16, p = .03$. There is no interaction between race and opinion for low-IMS individuals because the Black other always leads to lower ratings of discrimination for these participants: He is more influential than a White other when denying discrimination, $b = -.89, t(346) = -2.44, p = .02$, and he is less influential than a White other when detecting discrimination, $b = -1.49, t(346) = -3.92, p < .001$.

**Mediation by credibility.** We hypothesized that credibility as a source of information would act as a mediator for individuals high in concern with prejudice. To examine this, we created a composite credibility variable by averaging standardized participant ratings of how much their partner knew, how helpful their partner was, and how much they liked their partner (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .78$). To examine this hypothesis, we first predicted credibility with the same model as previously presented (Table 2, Model 2). We found that IMS moderates the effect of both partner opinion on credibility, $b = .18, t(346) = 3.53, p < .001$, and partner race, $b = .12, t(346) = 2.39, p = .02$. The significant interaction between partner race and IMS reflects that, as predicted, high-IMS individuals see Blacks as more credible sources of information than Whites in this context, simple effect $b = .39, t(346) = 3.09, p = .002$, whereas low-IMS individuals do not grant the Black peer any special credibility, $b = -.04, t(346) = -.31, p = .76$. Opinion also had an effect on its own, $b = -.26, t(346) = -2.97, p = .003$, and interacted with partner race, $b = -.46, t(346) = -2.66, p = .008$. We also found an unexpected significant two-way interaction between partner race and EMS, $b = .11, t(346) = 2.52, p = .01$. For participants low in EMS, race was not a significant predictor of credibility, $b = -.05, t(346) = -.40, p = .69$, whereas for participants high in EMS it was, $b = .53, t(340) = 3.28, p = .001$.

To examine the effect of credibility on influence, we ran the initial model predicting ratings of discrimination but added a term for credibility, as well as an interaction term of credibility and partner ratings, and interaction terms combining these new terms with EMS and IMS (Table 2, Model 3). In this model, the target three-way interaction between IMS, partner race, and partner ratings is no longer significant, $b = .34, t(340) = 1.54, p = .13$, but the interaction between partner ratings and credibility is significant, $b = .74, t(340) = 3.16, p = .002$. We still observe a main effect of IMS, a main effect for partner opinion, and a main effect for partner race, moderated by IMS.

To test whether credibility indeed plays a mediating role in the IMS×Partner Race×Partner Opinion interaction, we computed a bootstrap confidence interval (Shrout & Bolger, 2002) for the product of the coefficients for Partner Race×IMS (predicting credibility) and for

![FIGURE 2 Mean discrimination ratings in Study 3 (as generated by regression model) by level of IMS, opinion of virtual partner, and race of virtual partner. Whereas the Black partner is only more influential for low-IMS participants when he denies discrimination, he is always more influential for high-IMS participants.](image-url)
Credibility \times Partner Ratings (predicting discrimination ratings). The bias-corrected 95% confidence interval, with 5,000 iterations, did not include zero (.02 to .23), suggesting that credibility was indeed a mediator of the target three-way interaction.

An analysis of the simple effects in the Partner Rating \times Credibility interaction on ratings of discrimination shows that credibility is a significant predictor of discrimination ratings when the partner says discrimination is present, \(b = .71, t(340) = 4.70, p < .001\), but is not a significant predictor when the partner says discrimination is absent, \(b = -.02, t(340) = -.14, p = .89\). In summary, high IMS individuals think Blacks are more credible sources of information about discrimination than Whites are, and this difference in credibility matters most when the source detects discrimination, resulting in the observed three-way interaction.

Discussion

In this study, as in Study 2, participants gave lower ratings of discrimination when a Black individual denied discrimination than when a White individual denied discrimination. In addition, individuals who were high in internal motivation to respond without prejudice (IMS: Plant & Devine, 1998) were more influenced by the opinions of Black individuals than by the opinions of White individuals in the domain of detecting discrimination. High IMS individuals believed that Blacks were more credible sources of information about discrimination than Whites, and the analysis of moderated mediation provides evidence that perceived credibility is the mechanism by which influence occurs.

In Study 3, high IMS individuals show a pattern similar to the overall pattern observed in Study 2—greater influence by Black sources in the domains of both denial and detection. One possible explanation is that the college student population in Study 2 was higher in IMS overall, and thus more similar to the high IMS individuals in Study 3. Indeed, the regression model obtained in Study 3 suggests that high-IMS individuals look very much like the student respondents in Study 2, with a significant interaction between race and opinion for these individuals. In both cases the conformity effect (the difference

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**Table 2**

Study 3 Regression Equations for the Mediation Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) (t(346)) (\text{sig})</td>
<td>(b) (t(346)) (\text{sig})</td>
<td>(b) (t(340)) (\text{sig})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>42.98</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-.49</td>
<td>-2.66</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>8.30</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMS</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMS</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race \times Opinion</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race \times IMS</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion \times EMS</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race \times Op \times IMS</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race \times Op \times EMS</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** IMS and EMS are centered, Race is coded [−½: White; +½: Black] and Opinion is coded [−½: Deny; +½: Detect]. The proposed mediator, “Credibility,” is the average of the standardized values of Liking, Helpful, and Knowledgeable (Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .78\)). The two dotted boxes mark the three-way interaction, which is no longer significant when controlling for Credibility, while the two grayed boxes mark the two legs of the indirect path, the product of which is estimated with a bootstrap 95% CI to test mediation. Bootstrap confidence interval computed with 5,000 iterations and bias corrected, around the product (.09) of the Race \times IMS coefficient predicting Credibility (.12) and the Credibility \times Opinion coefficient predicting discrimination ratings (.74).

* \(p < .05\). ** \(p < .01\). † \(=.05 < p < .10\).
between the detecting vs. denying conditions) is greater with the Black peer than with the White peer. One difference between the two is that the interaction was driven primarily by the Black other who denied discrimination in Study 2 but driven primarily by the Black other who detected discrimination in Study 3. Because Study 2 was more public than Study 3 (requiring participants to hand their responses back to a live experimenter), it is also possible that concerns with appearing prejudiced (in addition to concerns with being prejudiced) contributed to the results observed in Study 2. This concern with appearing prejudiced may have led all participants to conform more with the Black peer than the White peer in both detecting and denying discrimination. This suggests future studies that systematically vary the response format (public vs. private) while measuring both IMS and EMS.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In three studies, we examined the influence of members of target groups on determinations of discrimination. In Study 1, we found that Black individuals were thought to be more credible sources of information about racial discrimination than were demographically similar White individuals. In Study 2, student participants were more influenced by the opinions of Black individuals than by the opinions of White individuals as to what constituted discrimination. In Study 3, we utilized an online community sample to examine when and how social referencing occurred. In this study, high IMS individuals (Plant & Devine, 1998) were more influenced by the opinions of Black peers than by the opinions of White peers who detected discrimination, and this influence was mediated by perceived credibility. In both Studies 2 and 3, Black individuals who denied discrimination were more influential than White individuals who denied discrimination. This suggests that the degree to which a target group member can influence perceptions of discrimination depends both on the opinion expressed (denial vs. detection) and the characteristics of the audience (level of concern with prejudice).

The present findings help to shed light on how people respond to the actions of target and nontarget group members in the face of discrimination. First, the finding that target group members are consistently more influential when they say discrimination is not present is consistent with research showing negative evaluation of target group individuals who point out discrimination (Drury & Kaiser, 2011; Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003). Overall, target group members who do not point out discrimination are likely to be seen as more credible and evaluated more positively than those who point out discrimination. By contrast, the reaction to target group members who detect discrimination is moderated by internal motivation to avoid prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998). Although individuals low in concern with prejudice may not find these claims credible, individuals who are highly concerned with being prejudiced see target group members as more credible sources of information than nontarget individuals, and are thus more influenced by the views of target group members. This moderation corroborates findings by Vorauer and colleagues (Vorauer, 2006; Vorauer & Sakamoto, 2008) that individuals who are low in prejudice, and who see race-based status differences as illegitimate, see minority group members as uniquely valuable sources of information. Individuals high in IMS are likely to be low in explicit prejudice (see Plant & Devine, 1998) and to see race-based inequalities as unjust. In addition, the moderation observed in Study 3 suggests that failures to observe effects of race in past research (e.g., Blanchard et al., 1994) may result from different levels of IMS in different participant populations and the failure to control for these individual differences in motivation to respond without prejudice. A growing body of research demonstrates the importance of individual differences in responses to intergroup interactions (e.g., Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Vorauer & Turpie, 2004), and the present studies add to our knowledge about how individuals who are motivated to avoid prejudice approach these interactions.

Future Directions

One area for future research would be to determine if Black individuals are influential by, for example, changing participants’ perception of the individual items or by a more global heuristic process that indicates that Black individuals should be trusted in the domain of discrimination judgments. A manipulation of cognitive load might help determine whether thoughtful processing is necessary for the observed social influence. In addition, it would be important to know whether the opinions of relevant target group members are really changing participants’ internal perceptions of the level of discrimination in a situation, or merely what participants are willing to report as the amount of discrimination in the situation. Given the strong norms against seeming racist (Crandall et al., 2002), it would be difficult to separate informational influence from normative influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) in the current studies. To examine effects on perceptions of discrimination, future studies might investigate whether the judgments made in ambiguous situations persist over time or in other social contexts. Changes in either internal perceptions or external reports of discrimination would both have important social consequences.

The Problem With Referencing

Paying attention to potential victims of discrimination can obviously result from the best intentions, and empowering
target group members by giving them a voice in social issues that directly affect their interests is undoubtedly an important step toward the promotion of egalitarian values in society. One potential problem with this phenomenon, however, is that it can place target group members in the constrained position of acting as arbiters of prejudice—whether they like it or not. If a potentially racist joke is funny only if a target group member says so, then members of target groups must bear the responsibility of representing their groups when they decide whether to laugh and whether to object. Anyone who has been asked to provide the Black, Latino, gay, or female “perspective” on an issue understands that such a request is both an enormous responsibility and an impossible challenge given the diversity of such groups.

Conclusion

Determining the absence or presence of discrimination is a high-stakes endeavor. The concern with appearing racist hangs over many interracial interactions (see, e.g., Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005; Vorauer, Main, & O’Connell, 1998), and people use a wide array of strategies to avoid being characterized as racist (see, e.g., Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Monin & Miller, 2001; Overstreet & Yule, 2001). Given this ubiquitous concern, individuals may hesitate before ascribing this label to another individual, and seek out corroborating information before taking any action on perceived prejudice or discrimination. We have provided evidence that, in the domain of discrimination, opinions ascribed to members of relevant target groups may be more influential than opinions ascribed to nontarget group members. In particular, individuals who are most concerned with being prejudiced believe that target group members are more credible sources of information about discrimination and defer to target group judgments in this domain. Although it is notable that individuals who are concerned with being prejudiced are influenced by the discrimination judgments of members of target groups, the observed referencing also raises the ironic possibility that high-IMS individuals may be reluctant to intervene against discrimination without information from target-group individuals. We hope that by contributing to the existing knowledge about how individuals identify discrimination, we will also improve our understanding of how likely people are to intervene against discrimination when they witness it.

REFERENCES


