Why did you choose that person over me? Ingroup rejection and attributions to discrimination

Laurie T. O’Brien a,⁎, Brenda Major b, Stefanie Simon a

a Department of Psychology, Tulane University, USA
b Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 19 October 2011
Revised 25 March 2012
Available online 21 April 2012

Keywords:
Attribution to discrimination
Ingroup rejection
Ingroup bias
Loyalty

ABSTRACT

The present research examined the attributions that people make when an individual rejects a member of his or her own group in favor of a member of an outgroup (i.e., ingroup rejection). Study 1 showed that Latinos rejected by an ingroup member (perpetrator) made more attributions to discrimination than Whites under similar circumstances. Study 2 showed that Latinos made more attributions to discrimination for ingroup rejection when the perpetrator was Latino as compared to when the perpetrator was White, whereas Whites’ attributions to discrimination were relatively low regardless of perpetrator’s ethnicity. Study 3 showed that priming loyalty norms increased attributions to discrimination among Latinos in response to ingroup rejection, but not in response to outgroup rejection. This research brings a new perspective to discrimination research by focusing on intragroup rejection and nonprototypical cases of discrimination.

© 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Attributions to discrimination involve a judgment that an outcome is unfair and based on the victim’s membership in a particular group (Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). It is thus not surprising that discrimination is prototypically viewed as an intergroup phenomenon—it is something that members of one group do to members of another (typically lower status) group (Baron, Burgess, & Kao, 1991; Imman & Baron, 1996; Rodin, Price, Bryson, & Sanchez, 1990). However, there is a growing body of research on the circumstances under which people discriminate against members of their own group (e.g., Derks, Van Laar, Ellemers, & de Groot, 2011; Ellemers, van den Heuvel, de Gilder, Maass, & Bonvini, 2004; Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002). At the same time, research has yet to examine how people respond to and interpret this type of intragroup discrimination—situations in which people reject a member of their own ingroup in favor of a person from another group.

Addressing this issue is of considerable importance. As the workplace becomes increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity and gender, members of traditionally low status groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, women) are more likely to be managed by members of their own ethnicity or gender who have attained positions of power. The focus of the current paper is on Latino Americans and how they respond to rejection from ingroup members in powerful positions. It is important to understand the circumstances under which people will attribute these rejections to discrimination as these attributions have both implications for intragroup relations and legal decisions. In addition, these attributions may have implications for the psychological well-being of individuals who are rejected by their own ethnic group. Experiences of rejection can lead to lower feelings of belonging, reduced control over the environment, decreased self-esteem, and reduced feelings of meaningfulness (Williams, 2007). Moreover, although rejection by any group is painful (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007), rejection by members of one’s own ethnic group is particularly painful (Bernstein, Sacco, Young, Hugenberg, & Cook, 2010). The current research will examine when people attribute instances of ingroup rejection to ingroup discrimination, whether the relative status of the group moderates these attributions, and the influence of loyalty norms on attributions to discrimination.

INGROUP BIAS

One of the most robust findings in the literature on social identity is that of ingroup bias (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992). The tendency to favor members of one’s ingroups over outgroups has been found to extend across all forms of group membership (Brewer, 2007). Even when group membership is based on arbitrary characteristics (e.g., the flip of a coin), people show preference for and bestow greater monetary rewards to members of their own group as compared to members of other groups (e.g., Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Harststone & Augustinos, 1995; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; see Mullen et al., 1992 for a review).
Ingroup bias appears to be a normatively prescribed behavior. According to Brewer (2007), the essential characteristics of an individual's relationship to his or her ingroup are loyalty and preference. Loyalty is represented in adherence to ingroup norms; preference is represented in differential acceptance of ingroup members over outgroup members. People often show blind trust and loyalty to their ingroup members even when those individuals are complete strangers. For example, when people are offered a choice between an unknown monetary allocation made by an allocator who has total control of the distribution of the money, they overwhelmingly choose an ingroup allocator over an outgroup allocator—as long as they believe that the allocator is aware of their shared group membership. When people believe that the allocator does not know their group membership, however, they are no more likely to choose the ingroup allocator than the outgroup allocator (Foddy, Platow, & Yamagishi, 2009).

A norm of ingroup loyalty appears to underlie this behavior. People are more likely to cooperate in a prisoner's dilemma when they are playing with an ingroup member than if they are playing with an outgroup member, but only if they believe the person that they are playing against is aware of their group membership (Yamagishi, Mifune, Liu, & Pauling, 2008). Likewise, when forced to choose, people are more likely to give money to a member of their own ethnic group than a member of a different ethnic group, but only when they think that the others are aware of their own ethnic identity (Habyarimana, Humphreys, Posner, & Weinstein, 2009). These findings illustrate that people are aware that they are expected to show loyalty and preference to ingroup members over outgroup members. Ingroup rejection, on the other hand, is generally counter-normative and may lead to sanctions. Several studies have shown that people who reject ingroup members receive disapproval from other ingroup members (Branscombe, Wann, Noel, & Coleman, 1993; Castelli, Tomelleri, & Zogmaister, 2008). Little research, however, has examined how people explain ingroup rejection shown by members of their own group.

### Group status, ingroup rejection, and attributions to discrimination

In the current paper, we examine the circumstances under which people attribute ingroup rejection to discrimination, a topic that few researchers have examined. The available research suggests that, in general, people are less likely to make attributions to discrimination for ingroup rejection as compared to outgroup rejection (Baron et al., 1991; Inman & Baron, 1996). In contrast, a substantial body of research has examined factors that shape discrimination attributions for outgroup rejection. A key finding from this research is that group status matters—identical events are more likely to be attributed to discrimination when the “perpetrator” is a member of a higher status group and the “victim” is a member of a different, lower status group than the reverse (Inman & Baron, 1996; see Major, Quinton, et al., 2002 for a review).

In the current research, we examine how group status affects people's attributions for ingroup rejection. Specifically, we predict that compared to members of a high status group, members of a low status group will make more attributions to discrimination when a member of their group engages in ingroup rejection. We base this prediction on research examining the function served by ingroup bias among members of low status groups. According to Scheepers, Spears, Doosje, and Manstead (2006a, 2006b), ingroup bias can serve as an instrumental function in which it facilitates social change. Compared to high status groups, low status groups are more likely to use ingroup bias to facilitate social change and improve the relatively poor position of their group (see also Spears, Jetten, & Doosje, 2001). One implication of Scheepers and colleagues' perspective is that members of low status groups may be more likely than members of high status groups to expect that their fellow ingroup members will show ingroup bias when they are in a position to materially benefit the ingroup. Consistent with this perspective, when status is made salient, members of a low status group are more likely to place trust in an ingroup (but not an outgroup) member in a powerful position (Rotella, Richeson, Chiao, & Bean, 2011). Feelings of trust and expectations of loyalty, in turn, may lead to perceptions of injustice and feelings of betrayal when an ingroup member engages in ingroup rejection. Thus, members of a low status group may be more likely than members of a high status group to react negatively to ingroup rejection and attribute it to discrimination.

Several studies have found stronger ingroup bias among low status groups than high status groups (e.g., Branthwaite & Jones, 1975; Branthwaite, Doyle, & Lightbown, 1979; Brewer, 1979; Brewer & Campbell, 1976; Ellemers, van Dyck, Hinkle, & Jacobs, 2000; Ellemers, Van Rijswijk, Roefs, & Simons, 1997; Mummendey, Simon, Dietze, & Grünewald, 1992; see Mullen et al., 1992 for a review). For example, when English (high status) and Welsh (low status) participants were asked to distribute shillings between their ingroup and the outgroup, the low status Welsh were more likely than the English to show ingroup favoritism (Branthwaite & Jones, 1975). These findings are consistent with the idea that ingroup loyalty norms may be stronger among low status groups than high status groups. For example, low status ethnic minority groups are often accused of “selling out” and “acting too White” when they do not adhere to ingroup norms (e.g., Ogbu, 2004).

However, there are also theoretical and empirical reasons to predict that compared to high status groups, low status groups will make fewer attributions to discrimination when ingroup members engage in ingroup rejection. According to system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), people are motivated to justify and rationalize the status quo. One implication of this theory is that members of both high and low status groups may see rejection of members of low status groups as more deserved and justified than rejection of members of high status groups. Indeed, some studies have shown weaker ingroup bias, and even outgroup favoritism, among members of low status groups compared to high status groups, especially when groups are created in the lab (e.g., Bettencourt, Charlton, Dorr, & Hume, 2001; Ellemers et al., 2004; Jost et al., 2002; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1987; see Mullen et al., 1992 for a review). Thus, this perspective suggests that compared to members of high status groups, members of low status groups may be less likely to blame an ingroup member's rejection of another ingroup member on discrimination.

We are aware of only one study that directly examined whether members of high and low status groups differ in how they explain ingroup rejection (Major et al., 2002, Study 2). In this study, White (higher status) and Latino (lower status) participants were told that they would be competing against a member of the other ethnic group for a desirable co-managerial position. All participants believed that another participant (assigned to be manager) would make the decision about which applicant to hire. The key manipulation was the group membership of the manager. For half of the participants, the manager was an ingroup member (i.e., a member of their own ethnic group); for the other half, the manager was an outgroup member (i.e., a member of the other applicant's ethnic group). All participants subsequently learned that the manager had rejected them for the position and selected the other applicant. Thus, half of the participants were rejected by an outgroup member who selected a member of his or her own ethnic group instead of the participant. The other half were rejected by an ingroup member who selected a member of the other ethnic group instead of the participant.

In this research (Major, Gramzow, et al., 2002), Latino and White participants were equally likely to blame their rejection on discrimination when rejected by the outgroup manager. More relevant to the current study were the attributions made by Latinos and Whites who were rejected by an ingroup manager. Latino participants were significantly
more likely to attribute rejection by a fellow Latino in favor of a White to discrimination than were White participants who were rejected by a fellow White in favor of a Latino. Thus, the lower status group was more likely than the high status group to interpret ingroup rejection as discrimination. This finding is consistent with our prediction that low status groups are more likely than members of high status groups to expect that their fellow ingroup members will show ingroup bias when they are in a position to materially benefit the ingroup, and will feel more unjustly treated when an ingroup member does not display favoritism toward the ingroup.

Overview of studies

We conducted three studies to further investigate the impact of group status and ingroup loyalty norms on attributions for ingroup rejection. Across all three studies we operationalized group status using ethnicity, with White participants as the high status group and Latino participants as the low status group. We decided to focus on ethnicity as opposed to minimal groups created in the laboratory or other trivial groups because research suggests that intragroup processes are frequently stronger for essentialized groups such as ethnic groups (Bernstein et al., 2010; Mullen et al., 1992).

Study 1 sought to replicate the serendipitous findings of Major, Gramzow, et al. (2002) that showed Latinos were more likely than Whites to make an attribution to discrimination when an ingroup member rejected them in favor of an outgroup member. In addition, we sought to examine whether feelings of betrayal, an emotional response to violations of trust and loyalty by members of one’s group (e.g., Moreland & McMinn, 1999), would mediate the relationship between ethnicity and attributions to discrimination. Study 2 sought to examine the boundary conditions of the predicted effects by examining reactions to ingroup rejection displayed by both ingroup and outgroup members. Specifically, we examined the extent to which Latinos and Whites attributed ingroup rejection to discrimination when the perpetrator was Latino as compared to when the perpetrator was White. Study 3 directly investigated the influence of loyalty norms among Latinos as a determinant of their attributions for the behavior of ingroup members who engage in ingroup rejection. We manipulated the salience of loyalty norms among Latino participants who read about an ingroup member who rejected another Latino person (in favor of a White person) or who rejected a White person (in favor of a Latino person).

Study 1

Study 1 used the same high impact paradigm that was used by Major, Gramzow, et al. (2002). In this “target” paradigm, White and Latino participants were led to believe that a member of their own ethnic group had personally rejected them in favor of a member of a different ethnic group. White and Latino participants were led to believe that they would be competing against a member of another ethnic group (Latino or White, respectively) for a favorable co-manager position. Furthermore, they were led to believe that a member of their own ethnic group, previously assigned to the role of a manager, would make the decision about who would get the favorable position. All participants subsequently learned that their ingroup member had rejected them for the co-manager position and had selected the other applicant. After learning the manager’s decision, participants made attributions for the decision and reported their feelings of betrayal.

We predicted that Latinos would be more likely than Whites to make attributions to discrimination following rejection from an ingroup member who selected a member of the outgroup. In addition, we predicted that compared to Whites, Latinos would feel more betrayed after being personally rejected by a member of their own ethnic group in favor of a member of the other ethnic group. This prediction is based on our assumption that lower status groups are more likely than higher status groups to attribute ingroup rejection to discrimination because the former have stronger ingroup loyalty norms. Hence, when ingroup rejection occurs, it is a greater violation of ingroup loyalty norms for members of low status groups. Feelings of betrayal are the most common emotional response to violations of trust and loyalty by members of one’s group (Moreland & McMinn, 1999). Because feelings of betrayal are an indication of violated ingroup loyalty norms, we predicted that betrayal would mediate the relationship between group status and attributions to discrimination.

We also examined an alternative explanation for the predicted group differences in attributions to discrimination following ingroup rejection that has nothing to do with group loyalty norms. Group identification is generally positively associated with attributions to discrimination, especially under conditions of attributional ambiguity (Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003; Operario & Fiske, 2001; Sellers & Shelton, 2003), and Latinos are generally more identified with their ethnic group than are Whites (e.g., Major, Gramzow, et al., 2002). Hence, it is possible that ethnic differences in group identity may account for higher attributions to discrimination among Latinos who experience rejection by an ingroup member. In order to address this possibility, all participants completed a measure of ethnic identity prior to the experiment, and we examined the relation of identification to attributions to discrimination.

Method

Participants. Fifty-two undergraduate students (30 Latinos and 22 Whites) at a western public university participated in the study. Students who had previously participated in an online pretesting session were recruited by phone and email for a study on work group development and performance in return for a nominal payment. Five participants who expressed suspicion (3 Latinos, 2 Whites) about the experimental procedures were removed from the analyses. The mean age of participants was 19.9 and 53% were female.

Procedure. Participants arrived individually at the laboratory and were escorted to one of three cubicles containing a networked computer. All were assigned to Cubicle C using a bogus selection process and were told that two other students were also participating in the session. Steps were taken to increase participants’ perceptions that others were actually present (e.g., instructions given to the participants were repeated by the experimenter in empty cubicles).

Participants were told that the study concerned work group diversity. The experimenter explained over the intercom that the three students would work together on a series of problem-solving tasks in a structured work group team. The team would consist of a manager, a co-manager, and a clerk. Participants were told that the manager role had already been randomly assigned to the participant in Cubicle B and that the first task for the manager was to assign roles to the two remaining participants in Cubicles C and D. The experimenter described each role over the intercom. The co-manager position was described as more desirable than the clerk position. To make the co-manager position even more desirable, participants were told that both the manager and co-manager would be eligible to win $100 in a lottery, whereas the clerk would not be eligible. Participants also were told that the number of lottery tickets that the management team received would depend on their joint performance.

The experimenter then took a digital photograph of the participant and pretended to take pictures of the other two bogus participants. Participants were then given seven minutes to complete application materials that would ostensibly be given to the manager. These consisted of a “background information” sheet, which included ethnicity and other demographic information, and a personal statement which
asked participants to identify problems found in the workplace that require teamwork to solve and to describe how teamwork would help solve the problems.

While the participants awaited the manager’s decision, digital photos of the actual participant, the bogus manager, and the bogus other applicant appeared on the participant’s computer screen. These photos were ostensibly being displayed to all three students simultaneously. All participants saw photos of two same-sex others in addition to photos of themselves. These photos indicated that the manager was the same ethnicity as themselves, whereas the other applicant was of a different ethnic group than themselves (either Latino or White).

The experimenter then gave participants a handwritten sheet, ostensibly completed by the manager, which indicated that the manager had assigned the participant to the clerk role (and by implication, the other applicant to the co-manager role). The manager wrote on the sheet that he/she thought this role assignment would give the management team (i.e., the manager and the co-manager) “a better chance to win the money”. Participants were given three minutes to digest this feedback, after which they completed the dependent measures. They were told that their responses were confidential and would not be shared with the other participants in the session. Finally, all participants were fully debriefed, following guidelines suggested by Aronson, Wilson, and Brewer (1998). All participants were entered into the lottery and the $100 prize was awarded at the completion of all data collection.

**Measures.** **Attributions to discrimination.** Participants indicated the extent to which they thought that the manager’s decision was fair (reversed coded), due to race/ethnicity, and due to discrimination Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely). Ratings were combined into a composite scale (α = .66).

**Betrayal.** Participants indicated the extent to which they felt betrayed on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (do not feel) to 5 (completely feel). This item was embedded in a list of other emotion words.

**Manipulation check.** As a manipulation check, participants were asked to indicate the ethnicity of the manager. Seven Latinos who failed to identify the manager as Latino were excluded from the analyses.1

**Ethnic identification.** We used the four-item identity centrality and the 4-item private-regard subscales of Luhtanen and Crocker (1992) to assess identity centrality (importance of ethnic group to self-concept) and private regard (liking for ethnic group), respectively. All items were phrased in terms of ethnicity and participants responded to them on seven-point, Likert-type scales. These measures were completed in a mass prescreening session held several weeks before the participants came into the lab.

**Results**

**Attributions.** Consistent with predictions, Latinos (M = 2.46, SD = .84) were significantly more likely to attribute being rejected by an ingroup member in favor of an outgroup member to discrimination than were Whites (M = 1.97, SD = .59), t(38) = 2.14, p < .05, d = .73.

**Betrayal.** Also as predicted, Latinos (M = 2.16, SD = 1.17) were significantly more likely than Whites (M = 1.35, SD = .59) to report feeling betrayed after ingroup rejection, t(37) = 2.75, p < .01, d = .92.

**Mediation analyses.** To test our hypothesis that the effect of ethnicity on attributions to discrimination would be mediated by group differences in feelings of betrayal, we conducted mediation analyses. Consistent with the t-tests reported above, regression analyses revealed a significant effect of ethnicity on attributions to discrimination, β = .33, p < .05, and a significant effect of ethnicity on betrayal, β = .41, p < .01. Furthermore, the effect of betrayal on attributions to discrimination was significant even after controlling for ethnicity, β = .75, p < .001. However, the effect of ethnicity on attributions to discrimination was no longer significant after controlling for betrayal, β = .03, p = .80. The Sobel test indicated that the indirect effect of ethnicity on attributions to discrimination via betrayal was significant, z = 2.53, p < .05. This demonstrates that the relationship between ethnicity and attributions to discrimination was fully mediated by group differences in feelings of betrayal.

**Group identification and attributions to discrimination.** As expected, Latinos (M = 4.21, SD = 1.23) were more identified with their ethnic group than were Whites (M = 3.03, SD = 1.55), t(36) = 2.61, p < .05, d = .84; however, Latinos (M = 4.79, SD = 1.52) did not differ from Whites (M = 4.64, SD = 1.14) in their private regard (liking) for their ethnic group, t(36) = 1.19, p = .24, nor private regard, r = −.12, p = .49, was related to attributions to discrimination in this context. Because attributions to discrimination were unrelated to group identity, differences between Whites and Latinos in group identity cannot explain group differences in attributions to discrimination.

**Discussion**

As predicted, Latino participants rejected by a member of their own ethnic group in favor of a White peer were more likely to blame their rejection on discrimination than were Whites rejected by a member of their own ethnic group in favor of a Latino peer. Thus, the present study replicated the earlier findings of Major, Gramzow, et al. (2002). This finding is particularly noteworthy because past research suggests that Latinos are no more likely than Whites to make attributions to discrimination for outgroup rejection (Major, Gramzow, et al., 2002).

Furthermore, in accord with our loyalty explanation for group differences in attributions to discrimination, Latino participants also were more likely than Whites to report feeling betrayed following rejection by an in-group member in favor of an outgroup member. The higher feelings of betrayal observed among Latinos support our hypothesis that ingroup discrimination violates stronger ingroup loyalty norms among lower status groups. Feelings of betrayal mediated the relationship between ethnicity and attributions to discrimination.

Study 1 also helps to rule out an alternative explanation for group differences in attributions to discrimination in cases of ingroup rejection. This phenomenon does not simply result from the fact that Latinos are no more likely than Whites to reject a Latino peer. This is consistent with the finding that past research suggests that Latinos are no more likely than Whites to make attributions to discrimination for outgroup rejection (Major, Gramzow, et al., 2002). This finding is particularly noteworthy because past research suggests that Latinos are no more likely than Whites to make attributions to discrimination for outgroup rejection (Major, Gramzow, et al., 2002).
study suggests that, in cases of ingroup rejection, identity may not play a role in attributions to discrimination.

Study 2

Study 2 sought to further examine the circumstances under which people attribute ingroup rejection to discrimination. Study 2 examined attributions to discrimination when participants were not the direct target of the ingroup rejection but rather observed ingroup rejection. There are two benefits of using an “observer” paradigm in which participants make attributions for an instance of ingroup rejection that does not directly involve them. First, investigating the attributions of observers in a different paradigm allows for an examination of the robustness of the effect observed in Study 1. Second, using an observer paradigm allows us to examine how people interpret ingroup rejection that occurs within their own group and within the outgroup.

Latino and White participants learned about a senior project manager who reviewed two applications for a research assistant, one from a White applicant and one from a Latino applicant. In one condition, the manager was Latino and rejected the Latino applicant while selecting the White applicant. In the other condition, the manager was White and rejected the White applicant in favor of a Latino applicant. Thus, all participants read about a manager who rejected an ingroup member in favor of an outgroup member. After participants read about the case, they made attributions for the manager’s decision. The design of Study 2 allowed us to directly compare the attributions of participants who observed a Latino manager reject the ingroup to the attributions of participants who observed a White manager reject the ingroup.

Study 1 suggested that, compared to Whites, Latinos have relatively stronger loyalty norms. Based on our assumption that stronger ingroup loyalty norms emerge among low status groups from their desire to advance the relatively low status of their ingroup, we expected that Latino observers’ attributions to discrimination would be relatively higher when they witnessed a Latino manager engage in ingroup rejection as compared to when they witnessed a White manager engage in ingroup rejection. In contrast, based on our assumption that Whites have relatively weaker ingroup loyalty norms, we did not expect White observers’ attributions to discrimination to differ between conditions.

Method

Participants. Participants were recruited by email to participate in an online study of work group development in exchange for an online gift certificate. Sixty-two undergraduate students (31 Latinos and 31 Whites) at a western public university participated. The mean age of participants was 20.8 and 57% were female. Participant sex did not qualify any of the analyses reported in the present research and thus is not discussed further.

Procedure. Participants completed all materials online. They were told that they would be reviewing the hiring decision of a senior project manager who was in charge of hiring one of two student applicants to work for a professor at their university. Participants were randomly assigned to a condition in which the senior project manager was either White or Latino. In order to manipulate the manager’s ethnicity, he was referred to with either a stereotypically White name (e.g., Scott) or a stereotypically Latino name (e.g., Miguel). Next participants reviewed applications from two different applicants. We constructed two applications on the basis of pilot testing that depicted two equally competent and likeable applicants, one of whom was White (Matthew) and one of whom was Latino (Enrique). We counterbalanced which application was designated as Enrique’s and which application was designated as Matthew’s.

At this point, we introduced the ingroup rejection information. Participants were always told that the manager rejected the applicant of his own ethnicity and selected the applicant of the other ethnicity. Thus, half the participants read that a Latino manager rejected the Latino applicant and selected the White applicant whereas the other half read that a White manager rejected the White applicant and chose the Latino applicant. Participants then completed the dependent measures and read a written, online debriefing.

Measures. Attributions to discrimination. Participants indicated the extent to which they thought that the manager’s decision was fair (reverse coded), due to race/ethnicity, and due to discrimination on Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely). Ratings were averaged to form a composite attribution to discrimination (ATD) score that was highly reliable ($\alpha = .81$).

Manipulation check. As a manipulation check, participants were asked to guess the ethnicity of the manager and the applicants. Six participants who failed to identify the manager as Latino were removed from the analyses. All participants correctly identified the ethnicity of the applicants.

Results

We conducted a $2 \times 2$ (Participant Ethnicity: White vs. Latino)×2 (Manager Ethnicity: White vs. Latino) analysis of variance on participants’ attributions to discrimination. The main effect of Participant Ethnicity was not significant, $F (1, 52) = 9.96, p < .01$. The main effect of Manager Ethnicity was significant, $F (1, 52) = 14.13, p < .01, \text{SD} = .82$, indicating that participants in the Latino manager ($M = 1.95, \text{SD} = .59$) condition made greater attributions to discrimination than did participants in the White Manager condition ($M = 1.50, \text{SD} = .51$). This main effect, however, was qualified by the predicted interaction with Participant Ethnicity, $F (1, 52) = 4.67, p < .05, \text{SD} = 1.19$. See Figure 1. As expected, Latino participants who read that a Latino manager rejected an ingroup applicant attributed his behavior more to discrimination ($M = 2.17, \text{SD} = .57$) than did Latino participants who read that a White manager rejected an ingroup applicant ($M = 1.40, \text{SD} = .40$), $F (1, 52) = 14.13, p < .01, \text{SD} = .56$. In contrast, White participants’ attributions to discrimination did not differ when the manager was Latino ($M = 1.74, \text{SD} = .56$) versus White ($M = 1.60, \text{SD} = .60$), $F < 1, \text{SD} = .24$.

Discussion

Study 2 extends the findings of Study 1 to a different paradigm and illustrates that the greater tendency of Latinos than Whites to attribute ingroup rejection to discrimination is specific to actions of their own group. We hypothesized that stronger ingroup loyalty norms present among members of lower status groups lead them to perceive ingroup rejection more negatively than members of high status groups. Based on this assumption, we predicted that Latinos who observed a Latino manager reject an ingroup applicant would attribute that behavior to discrimination more than would Latinos who observed a White manager reject an ingroup applicant. In contrast, we predicted that Whites’ attributions to discrimination would be unaffected by the ethnicity of the manager and person hired. Results were fully consistent with these predictions.

---

2 Separate analyses revealed that the inclusion of these 6 participants slightly weak- ened the effects, but did not substantially alter any of the findings.
Thus far, we have speculated that ingroup rejection violates the stronger ingroup loyalty norms present among members of low status groups (e.g., Hertel & Kerr, 2001). Neither of the above studies, however, manipulated loyalty norms to determine if they have a causal effect on attributions to discrimination among Latinos. Study 3 directly investigated the importance of loyalty norms among Latinos as a determinant of their attributions for the behavior of ingroup members who reject an ingroup job applicant. One implication of our analysis is that situational factors that prime ingroup loyalty norms should increase the likelihood that ingroup rejection will be attributed to discrimination. However, priming ingroup loyalty norms should only increase the likelihood that a rejection will be attributed to discrimination if it is an ingroup rejection. Because selecting an ingroup member over an outgroup member (outgroup rejection) is consistent with loyalty norms, priming ingroup loyalty norms should not affect attributions to discrimination in cases of outgroup rejection.

To examine this issue, in Study 3, we adapted the procedures from Study 2 and manipulated the salience of loyalty norms among Latino participants who read about a Latino manager who rejected either an ingroup (Latino) applicant or an outgroup (White) applicant. Specifically, Latino participants examined a personnel decision by a Latino manager who had to choose between two equally qualified applicants, one White and one Latino. In one condition, the manager acted in a manner consistent with ingroup loyalty norms by rejecting the White applicant and hiring the Latino applicant. In the other condition, the manager acted in a manner that violated ingroup loyalty norms by rejecting the Latino applicant and hiring the White applicant. Just prior to reading the above information, participants were exposed either to a loyalty prime or a neutral prime. We predicted that exposure to the loyalty prime (vs. neutral prime) would increase attributions to discrimination when the Latino manager rejected a Latino applicant and hired a White applicant. However, we predicted that the loyalty prime (vs. neutral prime) would not affect attributions to discrimination when the Latino manager acted consistently with ingroup loyalty norms by rejecting a White applicant and hiring a Latino applicant.

**Method**

**Participants.** Seventy-two (47 females, 25 males, with a mean age of 20.5) undergraduate students at a western public university who self-identified as Latino were recruited by email to participate in an online study in exchange for an online gift certificate. One participant who did not follow the instructions on the priming task was removed from the analysis.

**Procedure.** Participants were told that they were participating in two different studies. As part of the ostensible first study, participants unscrambled 20 sentences (see Srull & Wyer, 1979). In the Loyalty Prime condition, 15 of the sentences contained words related to loyalty (e.g., disloyalty, unfaithful, trustworthy, allegiance). Sample sentences in the Loyalty Prime condition include *Unity leads to strength and Count on each other.* The Neutral Prime condition was adapted from McCoy and Major (2007) and included sentences such as *She like fluffy cakes and A calculator saves time.*

Once participants completed the sentence scrambling procedure, they were told that they were beginning the next study. As in Study 2, participants were told that they would be reviewing applications from two students who had applied to work for a professor at their university. In Study 3, the senior project manager in charge of hiring for the professor was always referred to as Antonio to lead participants to believe that the manager was Latino. Next participants reviewed applications from two different applicants named Enrique and Matthew. We used the same two applications as in Study 2 and counterbalanced which application was designated as Enrique’s or Matthew’s.

At this point, we introduced the rejection manipulation. Half of the participants were told that Antonio had hired Enrique (and rejected Matthew), whereas the other half of the participants were told that Antonio had hired Matthew (and rejected Enrique). Once participants learned Antonio’s hiring decision, they completed the dependent measures and then received a written debriefing.

**Measures.** *Attributions to discrimination.* Participants indicated the extent to which they thought that the manager’s decision was *fair* (reverse coded), *due to race/ethnicity,* and *due to discrimination* on Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely). Ratings were combined into a composite scale (*α* = .81).

**Manipulation check.** As a manipulation check, participants were asked to guess the manager’s ethnicity and the ethnicity of the applicants. Three participants who failed to identify the manager as Latino were removed from the analyses. All participants correctly identified the ethnicity of the applicants.

**Results**

We conducted a 2 (Prime: Loyalty vs. Neutral) × 2 (Rejection Type: Ingroup vs. Outgroup) ANOVA on participants’ attributions to discrimination. None of the main effects were significant, *ps > .11.* Consistent with our predictions, there was a significant interaction between the Prime and Rejection type, *F*(1, 64) = 4.72, *p < .05, *d* = 1.08. See Figure 2. As expected, Latino participants in the Ingroup Rejection condition made greater attributions to discrimination when exposed to a Loyalty Prime (*M* = 2.49, *SD* = 1.02) than when exposed to a Neutral Prime (*M* = 1.71, *SD* = .55), *F*(1, 64) = 7.15, *p < .05, *d* = .99. In contrast, exposure to the Loyalty Prime did not affect participants in the Outgroup Rejection condition, *F* < 1, *d* = −.14. Participants in the Outgroup Rejection condition made equivalently low attributions to discrimination in both the Loyalty Prime (*M* = 1.77, *SD* = .76) condition and the Neutral Prime (*M* = 1.89, *SD* = .99) condition.

---

*Inclusion of these 3 participants in separate analyses slightly weakened, but did not substantially alter the findings.*
Discussion

Study 3 demonstrated a causal relationship between loyalty norms and attributions to discrimination in cases of ingroup rejection among members of low status groups. Consistent with our hypothesis, when a Latino manager engaged in ingroup rejection, a loyalty prime increased attributions to discrimination. However, when a Latino manager rejected an outgroup member, a loyalty prime had no impact on attributions to discrimination.

In the present study, participants were not more likely to attribute an instance of outgroup rejection to discrimination than an instance of ingroup discrimination. This finding may seem surprising given that intergroup rejection is a more prototypical form of discrimination than ingroup rejection, and hence is more likely to be labeled as discrimination (Baron et al., 1991; Inman & Baron, 1996). However, in context of the present study, the target of the outgroup rejection was a White applicant—someone who is not prototypically considered a victim of discrimination. Moreover, the target of the ingroup rejection was a Latino applicant—someone who is prototypically considered a victim of discrimination. Thus, in the present study, both the ingroup rejection and the outgroup rejection condition involved some prototypic and nonprototypic elements of discrimination. Our goal was to show that priming loyalty norms would not affect perceptions of discrimination in a situation where the ingroup was behaving consistently with group norms. Consistent with our predictions and our assumption that outgroup rejection is normatively appropriate, attributions to discrimination were relatively low in cases of outgroup rejection regardless of exposure to the prime.

General discussion

Three studies examined how people interpret situations where an individual rejects a member of his or her own group in favor of a member of another group, with a focus on the impact of group status and loyalty norms on attributions to discrimination and feelings of betrayal. Ingroup loyalty norms encourage ingroup favoritism (Brewer, 2007). We argued that ingroup loyalty norms are stronger among members of low status group, particularly in situations where a member of the low status group has the potential to improve the status of the group (e.g., Scheepers et al., 2006a, 2006b). As a result, when members of their group fail to follow the expected pattern of ingroup favoritism and instead reject an ingroup member, members of low status groups may be more likely to attribute the behavior to discrimination—to unfair treatment based on group membership.

In Study 1, we replicated the serendipitous findings of Major, Gramzow, et al. (2002), demonstrating that Latinos who were rejected by an ingroup perpetrator made more attributions to discrimination than Whites under similar circumstances. Furthermore, consistent with our argument that Latinos have stronger ingroup loyalty norms, we found that Latinos felt more betrayed than Whites, and that feelings of betrayal mediated the relationship between ethnicity and attributions to discrimination.

Study 2 demonstrated that Latinos made greater attributions to discrimination only when a member of their own ethnic group engaged in ingroup rejection, but not when a White engaged in ingroup rejection. This finding is consistent with our argument that stronger ingroup loyalty norms among lower status groups are specific to members of the ingroup and arise out of a desire to benefit the ingroup. In contrast to Latinos, Whites were relatively unlikely to make attributions to discrimination regardless of whether they witnessed a White or a Latino engage in ingroup rejection.

Finally, Study 3 demonstrated directly that loyalty norms play a causal role in increasing attributions to discrimination among Latinos observing ingroup rejection. Consistent with our hypothesis, the activation of loyalty norms led Latino participants to make greater attributions to discrimination when a Latino manager rejected a Latino applicant in favor of a White applicant, but not when a Latino manager rejected a White applicant in favor of a Latino applicant. Thus, the activation of loyalty norms does not increase attributions to discrimination in every case of group-based rejection—only in circumstances that violate loyalty norms.

Implications

The findings of the present research represent an important first step in understanding how members of low status groups interpret rejection from ingroup members in powerful positions. As more individuals from low status groups climb the corporate ladder, more members of low status groups will achieve powerful positions where they manage and sometimes reject members of their own group. It is of important theoretical and applied significance to understand the unique expectations that people have for high achieving members of low status groups and how people interpret their actions.

The present research uniquely demonstrates a somewhat counterintuitive byproduct of potentially stronger ingroup loyalty norms among low status groups. When ingroup loyalty norms are violated by rejecting an ingroup member in favor of an outgroup member, members of low status groups are more likely to react negatively—by labeling the behavior as discrimination and by feeling betrayed. While past research has suggested that attributions to discrimination can serve a self-protective function for targets of rejection when the rejection comes from a prejudiced outgroup member (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989), it seems unlikely that attributions to discrimination would serve the same self-protective function when the rejection come from an ingroup member. The self-protective nature of attributions to discrimination rests on the assumption that these attributes are external to the self (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major, Quinton, et al., 2002). However, in cases where rejection comes from a member of one’s own group, an attribution to discrimination may be less external, and therefore less protective. The close link between attributions to discrimination and feelings of betrayal in Study 1 underscores the argument that the emotional consequences of attributions to discrimination for ingroup rejection are likely to be different than the emotional consequences of attributions to discrimination for outgroup rejection. It would behoove future researchers to further investigate the implications of nonprototypical forms of discrimination because they may have distinct consequences for targets that do not occur following more prototypical forms of discrimination.

We believe that there are several boundary conditions on the findings in the present paper. First, the present findings do not imply that members of low status groups will always see more discrimination than members of high status groups. When an ingroup member is rejected by an outgroup member, the available research suggests that low and high status groups see equivalent amounts of discrimination.
First, we believe that the effects of group status on loyalty norms and individualism, and only a small difference in collectivism, such that differences in collectivism account for the present findings. However, in the future it will be important to expand this research to examine other low status groups. By showing that the present pattern of findings replicates with other groups that vary in status, future researchers could help to rule out alternative explanations. Ultimately, it may turn out that the present findings are limited to group differences between Whites and Latinos. Nonetheless, considering the growing number of Latinos in the American workforce, it is of utmost importance to understand differences between Whites and Latinos in the interpretation and experience of ingroup rejection.

Conclusions

Research on attributions to discrimination has focused almost exclusively on prototypic forms of discrimination in which members of high status groups engage in harmful and unfair treatment of members of low status groups (Jetten, Schmitt, Branscombe, Garza, & Mewse, 2011). Undoubtedly, this particular form of discrimination has been a major impediment to social equality and there are thus good reasons for prior researchers’ focus on it. Nonetheless, the term discrimination refers to unfair treatment of someone based on their membership in a particular group. Thus there are many other possible forms of discrimination that do not include a high status perpetrator harming a low status victim. We contend that cases in which a low status group member rejects another low status group member in favor of a high status group member constitute a form of discrimination that is relatively understudied in the field of psychology, with the exception of research on women and the Queen Bee phenomenon (e.g., Ellemers et al., 2004). Investigating how people respond to and interpret these nonprototypic forms of discrimination may yield new insights into both intergroup and intragroup relations.

The current set of studies brings a new perspective to the attributions to discrimination literature by focusing on cases of intragroup rejection. This research thus has important theoretical implications for prototype theories of discrimination (e.g., Inman & Baron, 1996; Rodin et al., 1990) because it suggests that discrimination prototypes may differ for members of high status and low status groups (see also Fourny, Prentice-Dunn, & Klinger, 2002). It also has important practical implications for understanding when there will be real-world group differences in perceived discrimination. As increasing numbers individuals from low status groups achieve positions of power in the workplace, this work has important implications for understanding why the decisions of powerful members of low status groups may be closely scrutinized by members of their own group.

Limitations and future directions

One limitation of the present research is that we are not able to definitively rule out the possibility that the present findings may result from some other group difference between Whites and Latinos other than the difference in group status. Although we would argue that this limitation applies to any research that uses ethnicity as a proxy for group status, that does not negate the possibility that some other group difference besides group status may be responsible for the varying patterns of attributions among Whites and Latinos. One possibility discussed previously is that the group differences observed in the present research stem from differences between Latinos and Whites in group identity, such that Latinos are more identified with their group. However, the results of Study 1 speak against this possibility as group identity was unrelated to attributions to discrimination among either group.

Another possibility is that the group differences observed in the presented research stem from cultural differences in individualism and collectivism among Whites and Latinos (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). It is possible that, compared to individualistic cultures, collectivist cultures are more likely to expect loyalty to the ingroup and to perceive discrimination when a powerful ingroup member rejects a deserving person from the ingroup. The current research cannot definitively rule out the possibility that group differences in collectivism account for the present findings. However, it is worth noting that Oyserman et al.’s (2002) meta-analysis of differences between White and Latino Americans in individualism/collectivism found no significant differences between the groups in individualism, and only a small difference in collectivism, such that Latino Americans were slightly higher in collectivism.

Despite this limitation, we chose to focus on Latinos for two reasons. First, we believe that the effects of group status on loyalty norms and attributions to discrimination are likely to be strongest in an entitative group with a shared history (Bernstein et al., 2010). Second, we thought it important to replicate and build upon the unpredicted finding in a previous study that showed Latinos make more attributions to discrimination for ingroup rejection than Whites (Major, Gramzow, et al., 2002). However, it is worth noting that Oyserman et al. (2002) meta-analysis of collectivism found no signifiant differences between the groups in in-group bias when they have the power to materially benefit their group and improve their group’s status (Scheepers et al., 2006a, 2006b). Several moderating factors appear to explain the contradictory findings. First, studies are more likely to find evidence of stronger ingroup favoritism among low status groups than high status groups when the studies include real groups with a history as opposed to minimal groups created in the laboratory (Mullen et al., 1992). Second, as discussed previously, low status groups are more likely to show ingroup bias when they have the power to materially benefit their group and improve their group’s status (Scheepers et al., 2006a, 2006b). In all three of the present studies, the powerful ingroup member had the opportunity to materially benefit their own group and instead chose to benefit the outgroup. Thus, we believe that two elements of the current study made it especially likely that Latino participants would expect ingroup favoritism from a powerful Latino: (1) Latinos are a real group with a shared history, and (2) the outgroup favoring Latino had an opportunity to materially benefit someone from the ingroup and chose to benefit the outgroup instead.

References


