



Reports

Perspective taking combats the denial of intergroup discrimination[☆]Andrew R. Todd^{a,*}, Galen V. Bodenhausen^b, Adam D. Galinsky^b^a University of Iowa, USA^b Northwestern University, USA

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ABSTRACT

Despite the continuing, adverse impact of discrimination on the lives of racial and ethnic minorities, the denial of discrimination is commonplace. Four experiments investigated the efficacy of perspective taking as a strategy for combating discrimination denial. Participants who adopted a Black or Latino target's perspective in an initial context were subsequently more likely to explicitly acknowledge the persistence of intergroup discrimination than were non-perspective takers (Experiments 1–3) or participants who adopted a White target's perspective (Experiment 1). Perspective taking also engendered more positive attitudes toward a social policy designed to redress intergroup inequalities (i.e., affirmative action), and this relationship was mediated by increased recognition of discrimination (Experiments 2a and 2b). Increased identification with the targeted outgroup, as reflected in automatic associations between the self and African Americans, was found to underlie the effect of perspective taking on sensitivity to discrimination (Experiment 3). The collective findings indicate that perspective taking can effectively combat discrimination denial.

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Introduction

“In matters of race relations and racism, the United States is a forgetful country—a nation in denial.”

Joseph Barndt (2007)

Although few people would dispute the existence of egregious displays of racism in the past, the denial of ongoing discrimination in contemporary society is commonplace. The gains through which racial and ethnic minorities have achieved equal legal standing in terms of basic rights have not been accompanied by corresponding equality in important life domains, such as family assets, access to quality education, desirable jobs, physical and mental health, among others. Data from both laboratory and field studies indicate that many of these disparities are directly attributable to disparate treatment and differential opportunities. An audit study in the labor markets of Boston and Chicago (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004), for instance, found that fictitious resumes bearing “Black-sounding” names (e.g., Jamal Jones) were approximately 50% less likely than equally qualified resumes bearing “White-sounding” names (e.g.,

Greg Baker) to receive callbacks from employers (see also Dovidio and Gaertner, 2000; Fryer et al., 2011; Pager et al., 2009; but see Heckman, 1998; Neal and Johnson, 1996, for counter arguments). Numerous other studies have obtained similar evidence of discrimination in contexts as varied as automobile sales, mortgage lending, and physicians' recommendations for medical procedures (Ayers, 2001; Burgess et al., 2008; Schulman et al., 1999; Smedley et al., 2003; Turner and Skidmore, 1999; Williams et al., 2005; for a review, see Pager and Shepherd, 2008).

Yet, in light of racial and ethnic minorities' legal gains, many majority group members view the issue of racism as a closed case. This denial of discrimination takes both institutional (van Dijk, 1992) and individual (McConahay, 1986) forms. For instance, the news media actively avoid framing discussions of intergroup disparities in terms of discrimination; apparently, “reporters assume that their readers will find it more difficult to accept discrimination as the explanation” for these disparities (Gandy et al., 1997, p. 177). Furthermore, even when majority group members do acknowledge ongoing intergroup disparities, they commonly attribute them to factors other than discrimination: More than half of Whites instead cite racial and ethnic minorities' alleged “lack of motivation and willpower” as the most plausible explanation (see Pager, 2007). Additionally, recent survey data suggest that a majority of White Americans now believe that anti-White bias is more prevalent than anti-Black bias (Norton and Sommers, 2011). Thus, it is unsurprising that social policies intended to redress problems of discrimination (e.g., affirmative action) seem wholly unwarranted among those who perceive racism as having already been vanquished (Bobocel et al., 1998).

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These radically different construals of social reality underlie many racial and ethnic minorities' feelings of alienation from the broader culture. An unacknowledged problem is an unsolved problem. A question of vital importance to future efforts to redress intergroup inequality, therefore, is how best to penetrate the pervasive discrimination denial (which some theoretical perspectives have equated with racism itself; e.g., McConahay, 1986) that characterizes majority group culture.

Perspective taking and combating discrimination denial

Several promising avenues for managing diversity and improving intergroup relations have been identified (Paluck and Green, 2009). As some have noted, however, many of these approaches emphasize the establishment of intergroup harmony rather than instilling an urgent sense of the need to address intergroup inequalities (Dixon et al., 2010; Dovidio et al., 2009). Dovidio and colleagues, for instance, argue that fostering positive feelings toward stigmatized groups may inadvertently obscure the need for social change. Thus, it is critical to identify approaches to intergroup relations that can simultaneously promote more positive intergroup sentiments and greater recognition of ongoing discrimination.

There are good reasons to suspect that perspective taking is one such strategy. The ability and propensity to contemplate others' psychological experiences is vital for traversing one's social world, and multiple studies have documented benefits of perspective taking for negotiating intergroup contexts in particular. Whereas some studies have found that perspective taking can short-circuit processes enabling the perpetuation of stereotypes (Galinsky and Moskowitz, 2000; Todd et al., 2012), others have shown that adopting the perspective of a particular outgroup member can engender more positive evaluations of that person's group (Batson et al., 1997; Dovidio et al., 2004; Galinsky and Ku, 2004; Galinsky and Moskowitz, 2000; Todd et al., 2011; Vescio et al., 2003).

One mechanism through which perspective taking benefits intergroup relations is by instilling a sense of psychological connectedness between the self and the perspective-taking target (Galinsky et al., 2005). Contemplating an outgroup member's mental states and life circumstances leads people to identify more strongly with that person's group as a whole. Given that racial and ethnic minorities tend to perceive more discrimination against their groups than do majority groups (Tropp, 2007) and that adopting an outgroup member's perspective causes people to see the world through the psychological lens commonly associated with that group (Galinsky et al., 2008), we reasoned that intergroup perspective takers should align their perceptions of discrimination with those of the targeted group. Providing additional support for this contention is research showing that the intergroup divergence in attributional reasoning – whereby negative facts about outgroups elicit dispositional explanations whereas negative facts about ingroups elicit situational explanations (Pettigrew, 1979) – can be weakened by perspective taking (Todd et al., 2012; Vescio et al., 2003). By creating a sense of shared identity with an outgroup, intergroup perspective taking could transform an objective outgroup into a subjective ingroup, one result of which could be a heightened sensitivity to situational, discrimination-based explanations for the persistence of intergroup disparities. Accordingly, we contend that perspective taking holds the promise of effectively addressing the paradoxical tension between promoting intergroup harmony and motivating support for social change.

Several studies provide tantalizing but ultimately inconclusive evidence that perspective taking heightens sensitivity to racial injustice. Dovidio et al. (2004), for instance, found that perspective taking increased feelings of moral outrage after watching a video depicting racial discrimination (see also Finlay and Stephan, 2000), suggesting an inverse relationship between perspective taking and discrimination denial. However, Dovidio and colleagues never assessed perceptions of

discrimination *per se*; rather, they inferred a heightened sensitivity to racial injustice based on perspective takers' self-reported affect after witnessing discrimination that was blatant and undeniable. The problem of discrimination denial can only be addressed if majority group members are willing to acknowledge discrimination even when it is not blatantly evident. Thus, a goal of the current research was to examine more directly the influence of perspective-taking on perceptions of discrimination, particularly in circumstances in which a target is depicted in a neutral (i.e., nondiscriminatory) context.

The current research

Four experiments investigated whether adopting the perspective of a stigmatized group member increases acknowledgment of discrimination against that group. **Experiment 1** provided an initial test of this hypothesis; it also examined a boundary condition (i.e., whether the effects of perspective taking are limited to the target's own social group) and an alternative hypothesis (i.e., that engaging in perspective taking simply makes people more liberal or “politically correct” overall). **Experiments 2a and 2b** examined a downstream implication of this perspective-taking-induced sensitivity to discrimination by assessing attitudes toward affirmative action, a social policy designed to counteract historical and contemporary intergroup inequalities. Finally, **Experiment 3** tested the hypothesis that increased identification with the targeted outgroup is one mechanism through which perspective taking heightens perceptions of discrimination. Although demonstrations of increased self–other overlap following *interpersonal* (e.g., Ames et al., 2008; Davis et al., 1996) and *intergroup* perspective taking (e.g., Galinsky and Moskowitz, 2000; Galinsky et al., 2008) abound, with the exception of Ames et al.'s (2008) neuroimaging study, these studies have relied almost exclusively on self-report measures. Thus, we sought to provide the first evidence that intergroup perspective taking strengthens automatic associations between the self and a targeted outgroup.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 served as our initial investigation into the effects of perspective taking on perceptions of intergroup discrimination. Participants composed a narrative essay about a White or Black male, either while taking his perspective or while adopting an objective-focus. Afterwards, participants reported their beliefs about whether racial discrimination remains a problem in the U.S. and about socio-political issues not directly tied to race (e.g., socialized medicine, gay marriage). Because these latter items could be answered in a relatively conservative or liberal manner, their inclusion afforded an examination of the possibility that engaging in perspective taking and/or being exposed to a Black target simply encourages politically liberal responding.

We anticipated that perspective takers would more readily acknowledge the existence of discrimination than would objective-focused participants, but that this effect would emerge only after having written about a Black target (i.e., a relevant group member). Moreover, we expected that adopting the perspective of a Black target would cause a shift in group-specific beliefs but would not affect beliefs about non-race-related sociopolitical issues.

Method

Participants and design

Fifty-eight undergraduates (59% female; 57% White, 36% Asian, 7% Latino/a) participated for course credit. They were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions in a 2 (Instruction Set: perspective taking, objective focus) × 2 (Target Race: Black, White) between-subjects design.

Procedure and materials

On arrival at the lab, participants were led to a cubicle where they performed several ostensibly unrelated experimental tasks. The first task was introduced as investigating “how people construct life event details from visual information.” Participants composed a brief narrative essay about an unknown target person. To emphasize the seemingly random selection of the target, we presented participants with 8 numbered boxes, each of which purportedly corresponded to a different person. After clicking on one of the boxes, participants saw a photograph of one of two target persons (either a young White or Black man, depending on condition), along with instructions to spend about 5 min writing about a day in his life. Participants in the *perspective-taking* condition were asked to vividly imagine what the target person might be thinking, feeling, and experiencing during the day. Participants in the *objective-focus* condition were asked to not get caught up in what the target person might be thinking, feeling, and experiencing during the day, but rather, to write as though they were a casual observer.

Next, purportedly as part of a different study assessing “attitudes and opinions,” participants received a paper-and-pencil questionnaire and rated their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*, 9 = *strongly agree*) with 14 sociopolitical statements. The critical items were “Too many Black people still lose out on jobs because of their skin color” and “Society has reached a point where Black and White people have equal opportunities” (reverse-scored; Gawronski et al., 2008); they were averaged to form a *perceptions of discrimination* composite ($\alpha = .74$). Also included were 12 items examining a range of sociopolitical issues that were unrelated to racial discrimination but that could be answered relatively liberally or conservatively (e.g., “It should be illegal for two individuals of the same sex to be married”); they were reverse-scored where appropriate and averaged to form a *liberalism* composite ($\alpha = .72$).

Results and discussion

Unless otherwise noted, preliminary analyses revealed that neither participant sex nor participant ethnicity moderated the effects of interest in any of the reported experiments. Thus, the data were collapsed across these variables.

Perceptions of discrimination

A 2 (Target Race) \times 2 (Instruction Set) ANOVA on perceptions of discrimination revealed the predicted interaction, $F(1, 54) = 5.90$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$ (see top panel of Fig. 1). Simple effects tests indicated that perspective takers reported greater perceptions of discrimination than did objective-focus participants when the target was Black, $t(28) = 2.70$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.99$, but not when he was White, $t < 1$, $p > .58$, $d = -0.20$. Furthermore, whereas perspective takers' perceptions of discrimination were stronger after having written about a Black target than a White target, $t(26) = 3.28$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.29$, objective-focus participants' perceptions of discrimination were unaffected by the essay target's race, $t < 1$, $p > .57$, $d = -0.21$.

Liberalism

A similar 2 \times 2 ANOVA on the liberalism composite revealed no differences based on Instruction Set, Target Race, or their interaction, $F_s < 1$, $p_s > .32$, $\eta_p^2_s < .02$ (see bottom panel of Fig. 1). This suggests that adopting a Black target's perspective did not encourage agreement with liberal positions more generally.

These results illustrate that contemplating the psychological perspective of a member of an historically-oppressed social group increases sensitivity to the discriminatory barriers faced by that group. That perspective taking had no effect on non-race-related

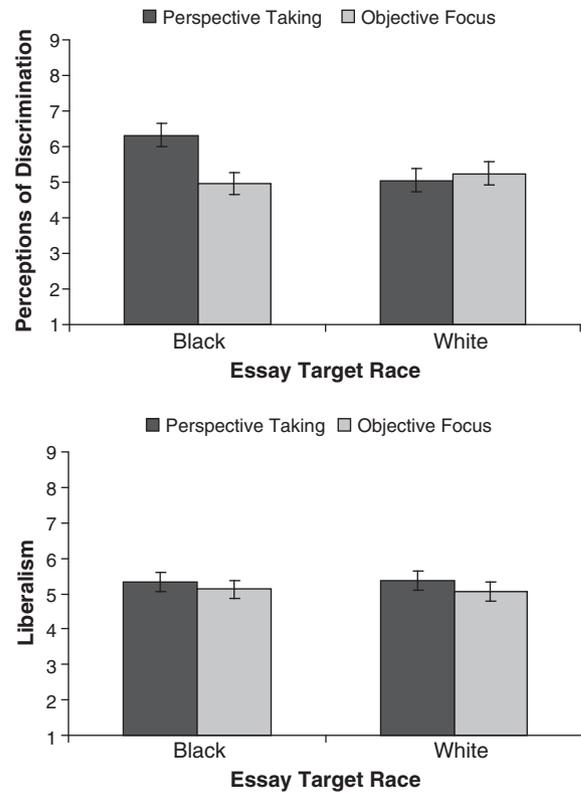


Fig. 1. Perceptions of discrimination (top panel) and liberalism (bottom panel) as a function of essay target race (Black vs. White) and instruction set (perspective taking vs. objective focus); error bars depict standard errors (Experiment 1).

policy issues suggests that it does not simply induce liberal responding. Because Blacks generally tend to be politically liberal (Dawson, 2001), one might predict that adopting a Black target's perspective should lead perceivers to report more liberal attitudes. Although we found no support for this prediction, it is possible that our inclusion of several sociopolitical issues on which Black democrats tend to be more conservative than non-Black democrats (e.g., gay marriage, abortion; Newport, 2008) prevented our ability to detect such an effect.

Moreover, the benefits of perspective-taking emerged only when participants had taken a relevant group member's perspective. Adopting a White male's perspective did not affect perceptions of discrimination, an issue we revisit in the *General discussion*. Thus, it appears that considering a stigmatized target's perspective arouses a group-specific mindset wherein only the targeted group benefits (see also Batson et al., 1997; Todd et al., 2011; Vescio et al., 2003), which accords with the notion that perspective-taking is geared toward securing *specific* social bonds (Galinsky et al., 2005).

Experiments 2a and 2b

Experiment 1 provided initial evidence that perspective taking can be a valuable tool for combating discrimination denial. Actually recognizing discrimination is a critical first step, but how people act upon this recognition is ultimately a question of greater importance. Experiments 2a and 2b examined whether the perspective-taking-induced sensitivity to discrimination would predict support for a social policy specifically designed to redress intergroup inequalities: affirmative action. We tested this possibility by having participants first complete the narrative-essay task from Experiment 1, after which participants in both experiments assessed the plausibility of two common (and arguably competing) explanations for the persistence of intergroup inequalities: (1) racial and ethnic minorities' lack of

motivation and willpower and (2) racial and ethnic minorities' experiences with discrimination (see Pager, 2007). Finally, all participants reported their attitudes toward affirmative action.

To establish generalizability across different social groups, we had participants write about either a Black (Experiment 2a) or Latino target (Experiment 2b). Furthermore, to ensure that the results of Experiment 1 reflect the benefits of perspective taking and not the detriments of an objective focus, Experiment 2a included a control condition wherein participants wrote their essays without receiving any additional instructions. Additionally, because evidence indicates that the default mindset of many majority group members in intergroup contexts is one of prejudice avoidance (Richeson et al., 2003; Trawalter and Richeson, 2006), Experiment 2b included a stereotype-suppression condition wherein participants wrote their essays while trying to avoid using group-based stereotypes. Given that stereotype suppressors exhibit less bias when outgroup reactions are assessed immediately following the suppression induction (e.g., Galinsky and Moskowitz, 2000; Macrae et al., 1994), as was the case here, we felt that including a stereotype-suppression condition would afford a particularly strong test of our hypothesis.

Based on Experiment 1 and previous research linking perspective taking to shifts in attributional thinking (Regan and Totten, 1975; Todd et al., 2012; Vescio et al., 2003), we predicted that perspective takers would more readily endorse discrimination (i.e., an external factor) and less readily endorse lack of motivation (i.e., an internal factor) as plausible explanations for intergroup inequalities than would control participants and stereotype suppressors. We also expected that perspective taking would engender more positive attitudes toward affirmative action. Finally, based on research documenting a positive relationship between perceptions of discrimination and attitudes toward affirmative action (Bobocel et al., 1998), we predicted that perspective takers' heightened positivity toward affirmative action would be mediated by their increased sensitivity to discrimination.

Method

Participants and design

Sixty-five undergraduates – 31 (55% female; 58% White, 42% Asian) in Experiment 2a and 34 (68% female; 53% White, 47% Asian) in Experiment 2b – participated for \$8. They were randomly assigned to a perspective-taking or control condition in Experiment 2a and to a perspective-taking or stereotype-suppression condition in Experiment 2b.

Procedure and materials

Participants first composed a day-in-the-life essay about either a Black (Experiment 2a) or Latino male (Experiment 2b). In both experiments, some participants received the same *perspective-taking* instructions from Experiment 1. Remaining participants in Experiment 2a wrote their essays without any additional instructions (i.e., *control* condition), whereas remaining participants in Experiment 2b were asked to avoid thinking about the target person in stereotypic ways (i.e., *stereotype-suppression* condition).

Next, ostensibly as part of a different study assessing “opinions regarding various explanations for the existence of racial/ethnic disparities,” participants in both experiments read a brief statement that “racial/ethnic minorities (e.g., Blacks and Hispanics) tend to have worse jobs, income, and housing than Whites.” They then answered questions (0 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much so*) tapping *motivational* (“To what extent do you think these disparities exist because most racial and ethnic minorities just don’t have the motivation or willpower to pull themselves up out of poverty?”) versus *discrimination-based* (“To what extent do you think these disparities are due to discrimination?”) explanations for these disparities (see Pager, 2007).

Following several filler questionnaires, participants in both experiments completed items assessing attitudes toward affirmative action. A first set of items had participants “vote” on two hypothetical public policy issues (Wolsko et al., 2006): “Public institutions shall not grant preferential treatment in school admissions, employment hiring, or business contracting to any individual or group on the basis of race or ethnicity” and “The U.S. Department of Transportation should be encouraged to award business contracts, in the amount of at least 10% of the federal highway construction spending budget, to construction companies owned by racial or ethnic minorities.” After recording their “vote” (*no*, *yes*), participants indicated their confidence (*not at all confident*, *somewhat confident*, *extremely confident*) in their decision. Following Wolsko et al. (2006), scores were calculated by assigning votes against affirmative action a value of 2 and votes supporting affirmative action a value of 3. Then, depending on level of confidence, a value of 0, 1, or 2 was either added (for a “pro” vote) or subtracted (for a “con” vote). For example, a “somewhat confident” vote opposing affirmative action was scored 1 (range of potential scores for each vote: 0–5). Participants then answered two additional questions (0 = *totally oppose/totally unnecessary*, 5 = *totally favor/totally necessary*): “Do you generally favor or oppose affirmative action programs for racial and ethnic minorities?” and “In general, do you think affirmative action programs targeting racial and ethnic minorities are necessary today?” These four items were averaged to form an *attitudes toward affirmative action* composite (α s = .77 and .75, in Experiments 2a and 2b, respectively).

Results and discussion

Explanations for intergroup inequalities: Black target (Experiment 2a)

A 2 (Instruction Set) \times 2 (Explanation Type) mixed ANOVA revealed the predicted interaction, $F(1, 29) = 6.41, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .18$ (see Fig. 2). Simple effects tests indicated that perspective takers rated discrimination as a more plausible explanation, $t(29) = 2.49, p = .02, d = 0.90$, and lack of motivation as a less plausible explanation, $t(29) = -1.31, p = .20, d = -0.47$, for intergroup inequalities than did control participants. Moreover, although control participants rated discrimination as a more plausible explanation than lack of motivation, $t(16) = 2.27, p = .04, d = 0.80$, this effect was magnified nearly three-fold for perspective takers, $t(13) = 5.51, p < .001, d = 2.28$.

Explanations for intergroup inequalities: Latino target (Experiment 2b)

A similar Instruction Set \times Explanation Type interaction also emerged here, $F(1, 32) = 5.38, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .14$ (see Fig. 3).¹ Simple effects tests revealed that perspective takers rated discrimination as a more plausible explanation, $t(32) = 2.76, p < .01, d = 0.98$, and lack of motivation as a less plausible explanation, $t(32) = -1.19, p = .24, d = -0.42$, for intergroup inequalities than did stereotype suppressors. Furthermore, although stereotype suppressors rated discrimination as a non-significantly more plausible explanation than lack of motivation, $t(15) = 1.71, p = .11, d = 0.77$, this effect was again magnified nearly three-fold for perspective takers, $t(17) = 6.13, p < .001, d = 2.16$.

¹ When Participant Ethnicity was included in this analysis, results revealed that the Instruction Set \times Explanation Type interaction was stronger among White participants than Asian participants—Participant Ethnicity \times Instruction Set \times Explanation Type interaction, $F(1, 30) = 6.32, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .17$. Specifically, whereas White perspective takers reported weaker endorsement of the *motivational* explanation than did White stereotype suppressors, the opposite effect emerged for Asian participants—Participant Ethnicity \times Instruction Set interaction, $F(1, 30) = 5.22, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .15$. Importantly, the effect of perspective taking on the *discrimination* explanation, however, was not significantly moderated by Participant Ethnicity.

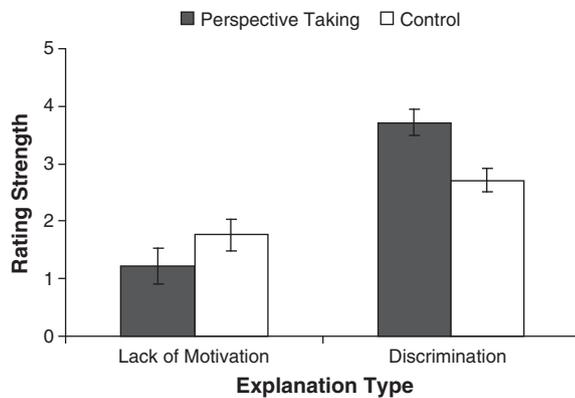


Fig. 2. Explanations for intergroup inequalities (lack of motivation vs. discrimination) as a function of instruction set (perspective taking vs. control); error bars depict standard errors (Experiment 2a).

Attitudes toward affirmative action

Additionally, perspective takers (Experiment 2a: $M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.22$; Experiment 2b: $M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.13$) reported more positive attitudes toward affirmative action than did control participants ($M = 1.12$, $SD = 1.13$), $t(29) = 3.90$, $p = .001$, $d = 1.45$ (Experiment 2a), and stereotype suppressors ($M = 1.36$, $SD = 0.90$), $t(32) = 2.20$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.78$ (Experiment 2b).

Mediation analysis

We next tested whether the effect of perspective taking on attitudes toward affirmative action is mediated by sensitivity to discrimination (see Figs. 4 and 5). Simultaneous regression analyses revealed that, when controlling for changes in perceptions of discrimination, the effect of perspective taking on attitudes toward affirmative action was reduced (though still reliable) in Experiment 2a, $\beta = .47$, $t(29) = 2.92$, $p < .01$, and in Experiment 2b, $\beta = .15$, $t < 1$, $p = .37$. Furthermore, bias-corrected bootstrapping analyses (Preacher and Hayes, 2008) indicated that the indirect effect through sensitivity to discrimination was reliable in both Experiment 2a, 95% CI [.05, .84], and Experiment 2b, 95% CI [.12, 1.09].

These findings indicate that the heightened recognition of discrimination resulting from perspective taking has important downstream implications for relevant public policy attitudes. Specifically, perspective takers viewed discrimination as a more plausible explanation for intergroup inequalities, and this increased sensitivity to discrimination, in turn, predicted greater support for affirmative action. Importantly, these effects emerged across two different

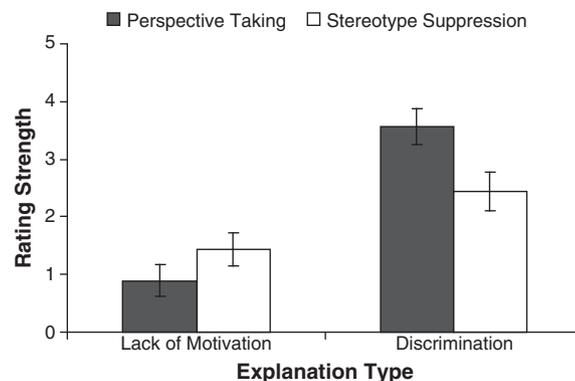


Fig. 3. Explanations for intergroup inequalities (lack of motivation vs. discrimination) as a function of instruction set (perspective taking vs. stereotype suppression); error bars depict standard errors (Experiment 2b).

stigmatized outgroups (Blacks and Latinos) and two different comparison conditions (control and stereotype suppression).

Experiment 3

Experiment 3 sought to uncover a mechanism – increased identification with the targeted outgroup – linking perspective taking to sensitivity to discrimination. Following the perspective-taking manipulation used previously, participants completed, in counterbalanced order, an Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998) assessing their automatic associations between the self and Blacks relative to Whites (Phills et al., 2011) and a measure of their perceptions of discrimination. To establish generalizability across different measures, here we assessed beliefs about Blacks' experiences with discrimination in several specific, everyday situations (Iyer et al., 2003; Swim and Miller, 1999).

We predicted that perspective takers would exhibit stronger automatic associations between the self and Blacks relative to Whites than would objective-focus participants. Moreover, we expected that this heightened identification with the outgroup, in turn, would predict stronger perceptions of discrimination.

Method

Participants and design

Thirty-seven undergraduates (84% female; 57% White, 43% Asian) participated for \$8. They were randomly assigned to a perspective-taking or objective-focus condition.

Procedure and materials

Participants first composed a day-in-the-life essay about a photographed Black male. As in Experiment 1, some participants received *perspective-taking* instructions, whereas others received *objective-focus* instructions.

Next, participants completed two dependent measures in a counterbalanced order. Preliminary analyses revealed no order effects; thus, the data were collapsed across this variable.

Racial identification IAT

As part of a “speeded categorization” task, participants completed an IAT assessing automatic associations between the self (versus others) and Blacks relative to Whites (Phills et al., 2011). Participants assigned four self-related words (*me, my, mine, myself*), four non-self-related words (*they, them, their, themselves*), eight facial images of Blacks (four male, four female), and eight facial images of Whites (four male, four female) to the categories Me, Not Me, Black, and White, respectively. In one critical trial block, participants pressed one response key whenever a self-related word or Black person appeared and they pressed another key whenever a non-self-related word or White person appeared. In the other critical block, the response mappings were reversed (i.e., one key for self-related words and Whites, another key for non-self-related words and Blacks). Incorrect responses were accompanied by a red “X,” which remained on screen until participants corrected their response. An inter-trial interval of 250 ms followed both correct and incorrect responses.

Perceptions of discrimination

As part of a task assessing “attitudes and opinions” on various sociopolitical issues, participants indicated (0 = never, 6 = very frequently) the extent to which they believe Blacks currently experience discrimination from the police, in the work force, from fellow employees, from teaching assistants and faculty, in the form of racially motivated glaring, and in the form of racial slurs (Iyer et al., 2003; Swim and Miller, 1999). These items were averaged to form a *perceptions of discrimination* composite ($\alpha = .78$).

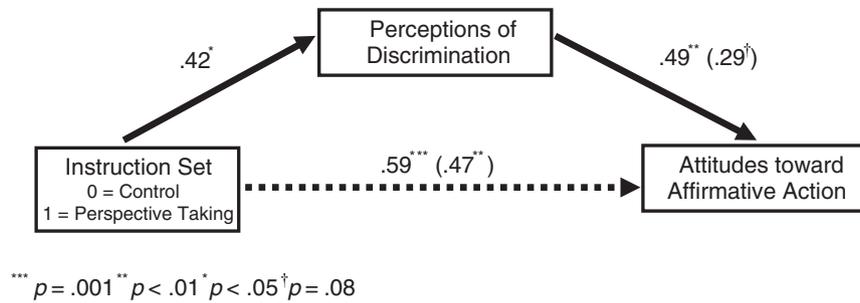


Fig. 4. Perceptions of discrimination mediate the effect of instruction set (perspective taking vs. control) on attitudes toward affirmative action. Numbers represent standardized regression coefficients; numbers in parentheses represent simultaneous regression coefficients (Experiment 2a).

Results and discussion

Automatic self–Black associations

IAT scores were computed using Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji's (2003) scoring algorithm, with higher *D*-scores reflecting stronger associations between the self and Blacks relative to Whites. As predicted, perspective takers ($M = -0.23$, $SD = 0.39$) exhibited significantly stronger automatic self–Black associations than did objective-focus participants ($M = -0.47$, $SD = 0.33$), $t(35) = 2.04$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.69$.²

Perceptions of discrimination

Also as expected, perspective takers ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.83$) reported significantly greater perceptions of discrimination than did objective-focus participants ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.63$), $t(35) = 2.08$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.70$.

Mediation analysis

We next tested whether the effect of perspective taking on perceptions of discrimination is mediated by changes in automatic associations between the self and Blacks relative to Whites (see Fig. 6). A simultaneous regression analysis revealed that, when controlling for changes in automatic self–Black associations, the effect of perspective taking on perceptions of discrimination was reduced, $\beta = .22$, $t(35) = 1.36$, $p = .18$. Furthermore, a bias-corrected bootstrapping analysis revealed that the indirect effect through self–Black associations was reliable, 95% CI [.03, .46]. A test of the reverse meditational pattern – that sensitivity to discrimination mediated the relationship between perspective taking and automatic self–Black associations – was not reliable, 95% CI [–.01, .23].

Once again, we found that perspective taking increased perceptions of ongoing discrimination. Extending the results of Experiments 1 and 2, these findings demonstrate that a strengthening of automatic associations between the self and the targeted outgroup appears to be one route through which perspective taking heightens sensitivity to discrimination.

General Discussion

Conventional wisdom warns that failing to recognize a problem is often the greatest barrier to overcoming it. Discrimination continues to be a well-documented force adversely affecting the lives of racial and ethnic minorities, yet its influence is routinely overlooked or denied by individuals and institutions. Four experiments, using three

different perceptions of discrimination measures, two different stigmatized minority groups, and three different comparison conditions, provided converging evidence for the viability of perspective taking as a strategy for combating discrimination denial.

Specifically, we found that participants who adopted the perspective of a Black or Latino, but not a White, target in an initial context were subsequently more likely than were those adopting an objective focus, those suppressing stereotypes, and control participants to explicitly acknowledge the existence of racial discrimination. These experiments went beyond previous research by assessing perceptions of discrimination directly (as opposed to drawing inferences based on participants' self-reported affect; Dovidio et al., 2004) and in a context wherein a target's experiences with discrimination were not explicitly cued. Additionally, we demonstrated that perspective takers' heightened recognition of discrimination can be explained – at least in part – by an increased psychological connection between the self and the targeted outgroup. Finally, we found that increased sensitivity to discrimination following perspective taking predicted support for affirmative action, a social policy specifically designed to redress intergroup disparities.

Strengths, limitations, and future Research Directions

These studies offer several noteworthy contributions. First, Experiments 2a and 2b established an important downstream, policy-related consequence stemming from perspective takers' heightened sensitivity to discrimination. Specifically, we found that, when presented with different explanations for the persistence of intergroup disparities, perspective takers rated discrimination as a more plausible explanation than did control participants. Critically, perspective takers' heightened sensitivity to discrimination, in turn, predicted greater positivity toward affirmative action, a social policy designed to offset the detrimental effects of intergroup discrimination.

Additionally, Experiment 3 provided the first evidence that perspective-taking strengthens automatic associations between the self and the group to which the perspective taking target belongs. Specifically, perspective takers exhibited stronger associations between the self and Blacks relative to Whites than did objective-focus participants; this increased identification, in turn, predicted greater sensitivity to the impact of discrimination on African Americans. Despite these strengths, we also acknowledge several limitations and offer a couple suggestions for future research. First, we relied on college student samples that may not be representative of the wider population. In this regard, it is noteworthy that, despite documentation of widespread discrimination denial using nationally-representative survey data (Pager, 2007), we found little evidence of discrimination denial in an absolute sense among our primarily liberal student participants. For instance, even control participants in Experiment 2a rated discrimination as a more plausible explanation for racial inequality than lack of motivation. Although effects of perspective taking still emerged in our sample, replication of

² When Participant Ethnicity was included in this analysis, results revealed that White participants exhibited marginally stronger self–White associations than did Asian participants, $F(1, 33) = 3.94$, $p < .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. Importantly, this effect was not moderated by Instruction Set.

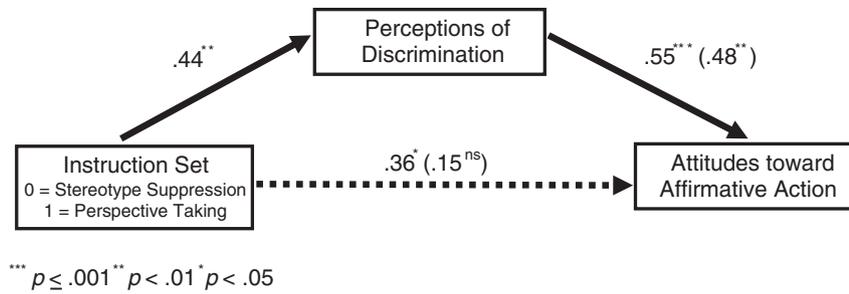


Fig. 5. Perceptions of discrimination mediate the effect of instruction set (perspective-taking vs. stereotype-suppression) on attitudes toward affirmative action. Numbers represent standardized regression coefficients; numbers in parentheses represent simultaneous regression coefficients (Experiment 2b).

our findings with a nationally-representative sample would strengthen our conclusions.

Another limitation lies in the possibility that increases in socially-desirable responding resulting from perspective taking could explain our findings. Two results, however, call this alternative explanation into question: First, Experiment 3 found that an indirect measure of racial identification mediated the effect of perspective taking on perceptions of discrimination. Because indirect measurement techniques such as the IAT are less vulnerable to social desirability biases than are comparable self-report measures (Nosek et al., 2007), it is unlikely that our findings are entirely attributable to social desirability biases. Second, Experiment 2b included a stereotype-suppression condition wherein participants were explicitly instructed to respond without bias. That perspective takers exhibited greater sensitivity to discrimination than did stereotype suppressors helps to further rule out a social desirability-based alternative explanation of the current findings.

Third, because the IAT assesses the relative strength of associations (Greenwald et al., 1998), it is possible that our results reflect a *weakening* of self-White associations rather than a strengthening of self-Black associations following perspective taking. Insofar as Whites are perceived as the perpetrators of discrimination (Iyer et al., 2003), it seems reasonable that perspective takers might disidentify with them. However, this line of reasoning places sensitivity to discrimination as an *antecedent* to changes in racial identification, a meditational pattern that was unsupported in Experiment 3. Also calling this alternative interpretation into question is research showing that interracial perspective taking strengthens automatic approach-oriented reactions to Blacks (as revealed, for instance, by closer seating distance) but has no effect on approach-avoidance reactions to Whites (Todd et al., 2011).

Finally, if increased identification with the targeted group underlies the relationship between perspective taking and perceptions of discrimination (Experiment 3) and if a majority of Whites deny the existence of discrimination (Pager, 2007), one might reasonably expect that adopting a White target's perspective could *decrease* perceptions of discrimination. Yet, we found no such evidence. Critically, however, this null effect is consistent with another study showing that

perspective taking with a White target did not engender "White-typical" behavior (Wheeler et al., 2001). One potential explanation for these null effects is that, because task instructions did not highlight the target's race (i.e., an intergroup context was not salient), White participants likely construed the White target in terms of his personal identity rather than his group (i.e., racial) identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987). Because it is less clear-cut whether Asian and Latino participants will view a White target in terms of his personal or racial identity, we conducted a supplementary content analysis of their essays. Results revealed that no Asian or Latino participants in the White-target condition (as compared to 33% of Asian/Latino participants in the Black-target condition) mentioned the target's race in their essays. Future research that systematically varies target group membership and target identity salience (i.e., individual-level vs. group-level; e.g., Verkuyten and Hagendoorn, 1998) could be informative in this regard.

Concluding remarks

Racial and ethnic disparities persist in many important life domains, yet majority group members routinely overlook the continuing impact of discrimination in producing these disparities. The current research documented the utility of perspective taking as a strategy for increasing sensitivity to these discriminatory barriers. One practical implication of these findings is that simply imagining the psychological experiences and life circumstances of a stigmatized group member seems to offer a fruitful approach for heightening people's appreciation for the discrimination endured by the group more generally. Introducing a perspective-taking mindset in this way could initiate self-generated thought processes (Tesser, 1978) that are more instrumental in effecting belief change than externally-imposed pressures to conform to egalitarian norms, which are vulnerable to backlash (Plant and Devine, 2001). Although it certainly cannot promise a full understanding of the harsh realities of discrimination, perspective taking may help to decrease the psychological alienation and mistrust that characterizes contemporary intergroup relations and thereby encourage more – and more positive – intergroup contact. Positive intergroup contact, in

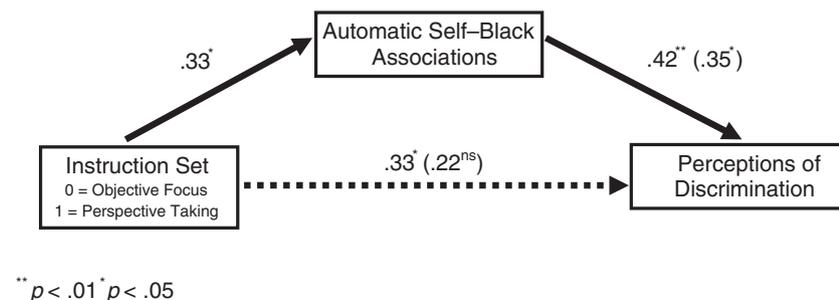


Fig. 6. Automatic self-Black associations mediate the effect of instruction set (perspective taking vs. objective focus) on perceptions of racial discrimination. Numbers represent standardized regression coefficients; numbers in parentheses represent simultaneous regression coefficients (Experiment 3).

turn, could promote future perspective taking, effectively creating a virtuous cycle that transforms the intergroup disparities of today into the intergroup equalities of tomorrow.

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