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Yes We Can! Prejudice Reduction Through Seeing (Inequality) and Believing (in Social Change)

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Abstract

We investigated the effect of differential perceived efficacy to reduce racial inequality (in the context of increased awareness of illegitimate in-group advantages) on White Americans' intergroup attitudes and antidiscrimination behavior. White American university students read a passage describing the underrepresentation of African Americans in their university's faculty and then wrote letters to the university administration in support of appointing more African Americans to the faculty. We experimentally varied feedback concerning efficacy to change institutional racism. Before writing their letters, participants were told that there was a low, moderate, or high chance that their efforts would be effective. Later in the experiment, participants' perceived efficacy to influence their university system was measured. Intergroup attitudes improved and antidiscrimination actions increased among participants with higher perceived efficacy in comparison with participants with low perceived efficacy. Collective guilt partially mediated the effects of efficacy beliefs on antidiscrimination actions and fully mediated the effects of efficacy beliefs on intergroup attitudes.

Keywords

efficacy, prejudice reduction, intergroup relations, intergroup emotions, antidiscrimination action

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Many contemporary interventions aimed at improving intergroup relations have been found to be minimally effective, ineffective, or even counterproductive (Hite & McDonald, 2006; Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). We propose that a critical omission in many attempts to improve intergroup relations is that these attempts do not elicit a sense of efficacy to influence social systems. "Yes we can" emerged as the winning slogan in the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. Barack Obama's message of collective efficacy inspired millions of jaded Americans to believe in their collective ability to enact change. In this study, we investigated whether efficacy to achieve change can foster improved intergroup attitudes and induce antidiscrimination behavior.

Numerous studies have documented the importance of efficacy beliefs in predicting behaviors in multiple domains, including activism on behalf of in-group interests (Edwards & Oskamp, 1992; Klandermans, 1989; van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004). However, the role of efficacy beliefs in enhancing antibias efforts benefiting out-groups, a demonstrably different construct than efforts on behalf of in-groups (Dovidio, Gomez, Saguy, & Gaertner, 2009; Wright & Lubensky, 2009), remains untested. Furthermore, the majority of studies in this area focus on the impact of efficacy on behavior endorsement. In our study, we aimed to broaden this research focus by examining the impact of heightened perceived efficacy on actual antidiscrimination behavior, as well as intergroup attitudes. Whereas a number of studies have examined conditions under which members of disadvantaged groups take action on their own behalf (Wright, 2009), in this study, we explored the conditions under which advantaged-group members act in support of disadvantaged groups.

Bandura (1997, 2006) posited that perceiving a system to be unchangeable undermines personal and collective efficacy and curtails efforts to enact change. Conversely, perceiving a system to be modifiable, and oneself to be efficacious, fosters action and perseverance. We contend that institutionalized racism is often seen as an intractable system, and that, consistent

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with Bandura's theory, low perceived efficacy impedes the motivation and efforts of majority-group members wishing to work toward a more egalitarian system. We propose that equipping majority-group members with high perceived efficacy to combat institutionalized racism can reduce these individuals' racial prejudice and increase their efforts to reduce racial inequality.

We began our experiment by heightening White participants' awareness of illegitimate racial inequality, a technique that some studies have linked to reduced racial prejudice (e.g., Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005), but that other studies have not (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Schiffhauer, 2007; Stewart, LaDuke, Bracht, Sweet, & Gamarel, 2003). In our study, we hypothesized that White participants would report more positive attitudes toward African Americans and be more likely to engage in antidiscrimination actions when they perceived greater collective efficacy to reduce racial inequality.

In the low-efficacy condition, we aimed to simulate participants' perception of their collective efforts as being significant but nonetheless ineffective against institutional racism—emulating White individuals' experience of being confronted with privileges based on their ethnicity, and therefore motivated to reduce racial inequality, but frustrated by their inability to effect change (Tatum, 1997). In the high-efficacy condition, participants in the same privilege-awareness context were informed they could affect inequality, even when facing an entrenched discriminatory system.

Improved intergroup attitudes and actions can develop through self-directed and other-directed negative affect (e.g., guilt, anger) in majority-group members who become aware of illegitimate intergroup inequality (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Dovidio et al., 2004). We focused on the potential mediating role of collective guilt—remorse when one's group has illegitimately harmed another group and not repaired the damage (Branscombe, Doosje, & McGarty, 2002)—in efficacy-induced improvements of intergroup attitudes and actions. Powell et al. (2005) found that collective guilt can lower prejudice held by members of privileged groups toward members of disadvantaged out-groups, theoretically because of increased motivation to reduce inequality and thereby lessen their discomfort. We hypothesized that perceived higher efficacy to reduce inequality would improve individuals' intergroup attitudes and actions, partially as a result of increased collective guilt.

Studies show that factors that impede the function of an emotion can act as deterrents both to feeling that emotion and to engaging in actions consistent with goals associated with that emotion (Brehm, 1999; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Brehm, 2004). We propose that the perception of efforts to reduce inequality as futile can act as a deterrent to collective guilt. However, awareness of one's group's illegitimate advantages and the belief that inequality can be reduced prompts collective guilt precisely because the function of collective guilt—to reduce inequality—can be fulfilled. Thus, we predicted that collective guilt would play a mediating role in the relationship between efficacy beliefs and intergroup attitudes and actions. As studies commonly find a principle-implementation gap in racial attitudes and actions (e.g., Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2007), we expected to obtain a low correlation between these outcome measures. Our research is novel in that it examined links between efficacy beliefs and intergroup attitudes, links between efficacy beliefs and concrete antidiscrimination actions, and the mediating role of collective guilt in these relationships.

Method

White Georgia State University students ($N = 82$) participated in our study in exchange for course credit. Participants, tested individually, were informed that the session would include separate experiments conducted by different researchers. A White experimenter self-identified as a fellow university student gave participants a choice of activities. Participants learned that initially the plan had been for them to complete a challenging "math and reasoning task," but that, because there were enough participants in that study, the professor had permitted the experimenter to elicit help on a personal project. Participants were told that this project concerned racial equality on campus and that if they agreed to participate, they would read a short passage and write a brief response statement.

Five participants chose the math and reasoning task. The remaining 77 participants read a passage describing the underrepresentation of African American faculty at their university. The passage indicated that this limitation of African American role models was harmful to African American students. Participants also read the following fictional statement: "An external analysis . . . indicated that African American applicants were not denied positions because they were lacking the necessary qualifications." This statement communicated that the racial inequality in the university faculty was illegitimate. This disparity was then linked in the passage to White privilege: "It is clear that a disadvantage exists here, and where there is a group that is disadvantaged, there is a group that is advantaged. White people at this university still hold the advantage. . . ."

After participants read the passage, the experimenter explained that they would have 15 min to write an anonymous statement expressing the need for more African American professors and that the letter would be sent to the university chairpersons. The aim of the letter was to facilitate change in future faculty hirings.

Manipulation of efficacy to reduce inequality

Prior to writing their statements, participants received information from the experimenter concerning the likely efficacy of their efforts, according to their randomly assigned condition: high efficacy, moderate efficacy or low efficacy. In the high-efficacy condition, the experimenter stated:

> We're really optimistic about the effect this is going to have on the university. The administration has been

> responsive to concerns we've expressed about racial inequality on campus. We think there's a good chance we'll be hiring several more African American professors within the next 2 years, thanks to all the written support for change we're getting from students. I'd guess that there's probably a 95% chance that our efforts will affect the administration's hiring practices. . . .

Participants in the low-efficacy condition were told there was probably only a 5% chance that their efforts would be effective, given the university administration's unresponsiveness to similar efforts in the past. In the moderate-efficacy condition, students were told that they probably had a 50% chance of successfully changing the university administration's hiring practices.

After reading the passage, listening to the experimenter's assessment of their chances of success, and writing their statements, participants were informed that they would work next on an unrelated task for another researcher. They then completed a battery of questionnaires comprising the following measures.

White guilt

We administered the 5-item White Guilt Scale (Branscombe, Slugoski, & Kappen, 2004; α = .79) to assess race-based guilt (e.g., "I feel guilty about White Americans' harmful actions toward African Americans") on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated greater race-based guilt.

Intergroup attitudes

We used the 20-item Attitudes Toward Blacks Scale (Brigham, 1993; α = .88) to assess attitudes toward African Americans on a 7-point scale. Higher scores indicated more positive attitudes toward this group.

Antidiscrimination actions

Participants were given the opportunity to take antidiscrimination flyers to distribute on campus. The flyers were specifically about the need for action to address racial inequality in faculty representation at the university. The experimenter offered a closed folder containing 50 flyers to each participant and asked participants to take as many flyers as they thought they could distribute. The experimenter stepped outside the room to give participants privacy while they took flyers from the folders. The number of flyers remaining in the folder was subtracted from 50 to determine the number taken by each participant.

Perceived efficacy

Participants rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all optimistic*, 7 = *very optimistic*) how optimistic they were that African American faculty representation on campus would increase. Perceived-efficacy measures, rather than efficacy manipulations, are standard in studies on the effects of efficacy on behavior endorsement (Brunstig & Postmes, 2002; Hornsey et al., 2006).

White guilt was the first measure administered, and perceived efficacy the last measure administered. The order of the intervening attitudes and actions measures was counterbalanced across participants.[1] Finally, we retrieved participants' flyers and then debriefed participants on ways to work toward reducing inequality.

Results

Preliminary analyses

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the effects of efficacy feedback on perceived efficacy yielded a significant effect, $F(2, 79) = 12.39$, $p < .0001$. Perceived efficacy was greater in the high-efficacy condition (participants told there was a 95% likelihood of success; $M = 5.13$) than in the low-efficacy condition (5% likelihood of success; $M = 3.63$), $p < .0001$. There was also significantly greater perceived efficacy among participants in the moderate-efficacy condition (50% likelihood of success; $M = 4.93$) than among those in the low-efficacy condition, $p < .001$. However, there was no significant difference between the perceived efficacy of participants in the moderate-efficacy condition and that of participants in the high-efficacy condition, $p = .57$, possibly because of participants' preexisting pessimism concerning their ability to change institutionalized racism. Even a 50% chance of success may have seemed unusually promising.

Structural equation models

We conducted structural equation modeling (LISREL 8.71; Scientific Software International, Inc., Lincolnwood, IL) on our data to test the hypothesized relationships among efficacy-feedback conditions (dummy-coded), perceived efficacy, collective guilt, and intergroup attitudes and actions. In addition, we correlated the residual variance of the dependent measures. The differences between the effects of the higher-efficacy conditions (50% and 95% efficacy feedback combined) and the effects of the low-efficacy condition (5% efficacy feedback) were assessed.[2] We predicted that there would be a direct relationship between efficacy feedback and perceived efficacy, and that higher perceived efficacy would directly affect both intergroup attitudes and intergroup actions. We also predicted that perceived efficacy would affect intergroup attitudes and actions indirectly via collective guilt.

Fit statistics indicated a good model fit, $\chi^2(3) = 4.66$, $p = .20$, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .08, standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) = .06, comparative fit index (CFI) = .97, Akaike's information criterion (AIC) = 28.66. However, the direct path from perceived

efficacy to attitudes was nonsignificant, $b = 1.25$, $SE = 1.12$, $p = .26$. A revised model with the path from perceived efficacy to attitudes set to 0 fit well, $\chi^2(4) = 5.75$, $p = .22$, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .06, CFI = .96, AIC = 27.75. All paths in the final model were significant (see Fig. 1). Efficacy feedback affected participants' perceived efficacy to produce social change in the predicted direction. Furthermore, greater perceived efficacy had a significant effect on the behavioral choice to take more flyers (shown in the figure as intergroup actions). Higher perceived efficacy also predicted greater collective guilt, which, in turn, predicted both more positive intergroup attitudes and actions. Compared with our initial model, the more parsimonious model illustrated in Figure 1 fit equally well, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 1.09$, $p = .30$. All indirect paths from efficacy feedback to both outcomes were significant ($p < .05$). The outcomes were uncorrelated ($r = .18$, $p = .07$).

Discussion

In the context of heightened awareness of illegitimate in-group advantages, greater perceived efficacy to reduce racial inequality increased White participants' engagement in antidiscrimination action. This direct effect of efficacy on intergroup actions was accompanied by an equally important indirect effect on these actions, via the influence of efficacy on collective guilt. White participants with higher perceived efficacy to reduce inequality experienced greater collective guilt, which, in turn, fostered greater antidiscrimination action. Greater perceived efficacy was also associated with more positive intergroup attitudes, an effect fully mediated by collective guilt. Although the outcome measures were uncorrelated, they nonetheless both benefited from higher perceived efficacy to reduce inequality. Recent research suggests that advantaged-group members are particularly likely to help disadvantaged-group members when they perceive intergroup inequality to be illegitimate (Wright & Richard, 2010). Our study shows that in the context of awareness of illegitimate inequality, perceived efficacy further facilitates helping of the disadvantaged by the advantaged.

This research suggests that efficacy to reduce inequality should be a critical component of models of prejudice reduction and antidiscrimination action. Furthermore, it extends the efficacy literature by demonstrating that efficacy is relevant to intergroup attitudes, via elicitation of collective guilt. To our knowledge, the research presented in this article is the first to establish a link between perception of efficacy and feelings of collective guilt, and to explore the implications of this link for intergroup attitudes and actions. By incorporating a behavioral measure, rather than a measure of self-reported willingness to act, we have illustrated the importance of collective guilt in producing social change.

Our results are also interesting in light of findings that perceiving social stratification to be malleable may foster resistance to change in advantaged-group members (Dovidio et al., 2009; Wright, 2009). In our study, all advantaged-group members were confronted with illegitimate intergroup inequality, but some participants had a heightened sense of perceived efficacy that change could occur through their own collective efforts. These participants' intergroup attitudes and actions were more positive than those of advantaged-group members who were aware of the inequality, but who believed their antibias efforts would be ineffective. An interesting avenue for future research would be to delineate conditions under which the perceived likelihood of social change benefits rather than harms advantaged-group members' intergroup attitudes and actions, and to identify potential emotional mediators (e.g., threat, guilt, empathy) of these changes. In addition, we note that participants in our study were initially given the choice of working on a project concerning racial equality or working on a challenging mathematics task. Therefore, our findings pertain to the 94% of participants who agreed to take part in the racial-equality project. The outcome for participants who are not given such a choice, and who therefore might not otherwise have participated, remains a question for future research.

An alternative explanation of our findings is that a change in social norms caused the attitude differences we observed across efficacy conditions. Learning that other in-group members have a positive attitude toward an out-group can prompt

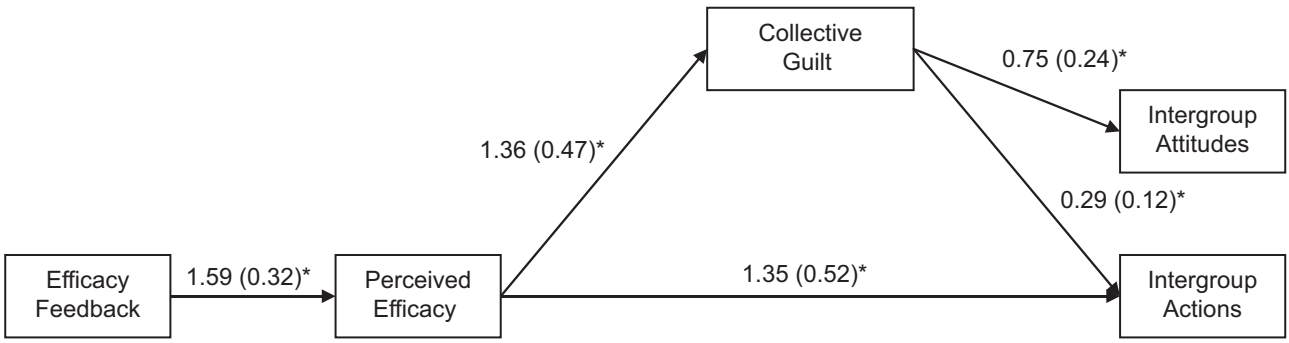

Fig. 1. Mediational analyses of the effects of efficacy feedback (high efficacy = 1, low efficacy = 0), perceived efficacy, and collective guilt on intergroup attitudes (racial prejudice) and actions (number of antidiscrimination flyers taken). Unstandardized betas are reported, with standard errors in parentheses. Asterisks indicate significant paths (*$p < .05$).

improved attitudes toward that group (Sechrist & Stangor, 2001). Therefore, participants in the high-efficacy condition may have reported more positive intergroup attitudes because they were told the administration supported the appointment of more African American faculty. However, in-group norm information was imparted equally across conditions: All participants were told there was support from fellow students for hiring more African American faculty. The only difference between conditions was the perceived likelihood that the university administration would respond to students' wishes. Because our participants were likely to see fellow students, rather than administrators, as their primary in-group, differential in-group support is an unlikely explanation of our results. In fact, one study (Sechrist & Stangor, 2001) found that members of college students' broader in-groups had significantly less ability to influence these students' attitudes than fellow students at the same college.

Conclusion

Many diversity training exercises involve heightening majority-group members' awareness of their group-based advantages (Peters, 1987). However, Tatum (1997) warned that diversity training that does not point to empowering paths to change has the potential to, paradoxically, exacerbate intergroup biases. Our findings demonstrate that efficacy to enact social change is, indeed, a critical ingredient in strategies to reduce prejudice and increase social action. This research broadens the scope of the efficacy literature by demonstrating the impact of efficacy beliefs and accompanying collective guilt on both attitudes and antidiscrimination actions. Furthermore, our findings pave the way for a new domain of inquiry within the field of bias reduction, drawing from the rich, but underapplied, efficacy literature.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Notes

1. Supplementary analyses revealed nonsignificant order effects.
2. Findings from models incorporating the three levels of feedback separately did not differ from those of the dichotomized model.

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