

RUNNING HEAD: CAUSAL LOCI OF ATTRIBUTIONS TO PREJUDICE

The internal and external causal loci of attributions to prejudice

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Abstract

In two studies we examined the causal loci of attributions to prejudice. We asked participants to consider a situation in which they were rejected, and manipulated whether the rejection was attributable to an exclusively external cause or attributable to bias against one's gender group. In contrast to the existing view that attributions to prejudice are external, results from both studies supported our prediction that attributions to prejudice also have a substantial internal component. In Study 2, we examined the affective consequences of attributions for rejection and found that for women, attributions to prejudice were more harmful than an exclusively external attribution. For men, however, attributions to prejudice were less harmful than an exclusively external attribution. Results are discussed in terms of the ways in which attributions to prejudice differ from purely external attributions.

The internal and external causal loci of attributions to prejudice

In recent years, social psychologists have shown an increasing interest in the psychological meaning and consequences of attributing one's outcomes to prejudice and discrimination (Heatherton, Kleck, Hebl, & Hull, 2000; Swim & Stangor, 1998). One way of exploring the meaning of such "attributions to prejudice" is to investigate their location on psychological dimensions identified by attributional theory. We investigate attributions to prejudice in terms of one of the most fundamental dimensions of attribution—causal locus (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967). The causal locus of an attribution refers to where a cause is perceived to reside. An attribution is "internal" when an aspect of the self is perceived to be causing an event and "external" when something or someone in the environment is perceived to be causing it.

Attributions to prejudice as external attributions

The existing view of attributions to prejudice assumes that they are external to the self (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Crocker & Quinn, 1998). The stigmatized individual is described as facing two attributional alternatives for a negative outcome: locate the cause internally by attributing the outcome to one's personal qualities, or locate the cause externally by attributing the negative outcome to another person's prejudice (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker et al., 1991).

The logic of this view appears to be implicitly based on assumptions about who is blamed for the outcome. When a stigmatized individual blames his or her own faults for a negative outcome, the attribution is characterized as internal. When a stigmatized individual blames a prejudiced other, the attribution is characterized as external. The clearest example of treating

blame and causal locus as theoretically synonymous comes from predictions regarding how the perceived legitimacy of attributions to prejudice affects causal locus. Crocker and Major (1994, p. 305) argue that when prejudice is perceived as illegitimate, attributions to prejudice are external attributions because the prejudiced person, not the target, is blamed for the outcome. In contrast, when prejudice is perceived as legitimate, Crocker and Major suggest that attributions to prejudice might be internal because the target of prejudice blames the self for the outcome.

Making assumptions about causal locus based on blame assignment is problematic because cause and blame are not identical concepts (Shaver, 1985). For example, people can see their group membership as a cause of prejudicial treatment without assigning blame to the self or their group membership. While causal locus refers to locating the proximal causes of an event, blame assignment is related to judgments of intent to cause harm, mitigating circumstances, justifications, and cultural values (Alicke, 2000; Shaver, 1985). Thus, theoretical assumptions about causal locus should be considered separately from the locus of blame.

Attributions to prejudice as both internal and external

Causality is assigned to aspects of the self or the situation based on the perceived necessity of their presence in bringing about the outcome in question. As Kelley's (1967; see also Heider, 1958) "covariation principle" states, people tend to assign causality to those factors perceived to be present when the outcome occurs and absent when it does not. Thus, events are attributed internally when something about the self is perceived to covary with the outcome, and attributed externally when the event is perceived to occur in the presence of an external factor. Under certain circumstances, people attribute events to the combination of internal and external factors. When something internal to the self and something external to the self are both seen as necessary conditions for an event to occur, the resulting attribution has two causal loci, one

internal and one external (McClure, 1998).

From our perspective, this is exactly what happens when a person makes an attribution to prejudice. Suppose, for example, that a woman is rejected when applying for a promotion and attributes the rejection to her employer's sexism. One necessary condition implied by this attribution is that the employer is biased against women. The second necessary condition implied by the attribution is the target's gender. Attributing her rejection to her employer's sexism implies that she would not have been rejected if she were a man. Although the target of discrimination may not blame herself for the rejection, the stigmatizing aspect of the self is a necessary cause of the discriminatory treatment, no matter how illegitimate. Therefore, attributions to prejudice are likely to have two causal loci. The prejudiced person is one cause that is external to the target of prejudice, and the target's group membership is a second cause that is internal.

Although attributions to prejudice have sometimes been described as attributions to "group membership" (e.g. Crocker & Major, 1989, p. 613-614), some social psychologists have ignored the possibility that attributions to group membership might be internal. In contrast, social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and self-categorization theories (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) suggest that group memberships represent valid self-definitions. Therefore, if the self can be defined in terms of group membership, attributions to group membership can be internal. Supporting this view, Oakes, Turner, and Haslam, (1991) found that when targets' behavior covaried with their group membership, perceivers attributed their behavior internally to the targets' group membership. Although the present research concerns attributions for one's own outcomes rather than the behavior of others, the theoretical rationale is the same. When group membership covaries with an outcome, as is the case with discrimination, that outcome will be

attributed internally to the group membership that covaries with that outcome.

The affective consequences of attributions to prejudice

Existing assumptions about the causal locus of attributions to prejudice are important because they shape theoretical predictions about the affective consequences of attributions to prejudice. Based on the assumption that attributions to prejudice are external, the discounting hypothesis suggests that attributions to prejudice for negative events can be self-protective (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker et al., 1998; Crocker et al., 1991). Because external attributions imply that the situation brought about the negative outcome, they reduce the potential for threats to self-esteem and negative affect compared to when some aspect of the self is seen as causing the negative event. According to the discounting perspective, when rejection, negative treatment, or a negative evaluation can be attributed externally to another person's prejudice, it eliminates the self-relevant implications and thus protects the individual from psychological harm. However, we argue that the theoretical rationale for predicting that attributions to prejudice are self-protective is flawed because attributions to prejudice are not exclusively external attributions.

Furthermore, making predictions about the consequences of attributions to prejudice based exclusively on assumptions about causal locus might be too narrow a focus to capture the subjective experience of making such an attribution. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that group differences in power and status are important determinants of the meaning and consequences of attributions to prejudice (Schmitt & Branscombe, in press). For groups that are relatively disadvantaged in the social structure (e.g., women), attributions to prejudice are linked to an aspect of the self that is devalued within the broader society and is therefore likely to be the target of negative treatment across a wide variety of situations (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). Thus, unlike external attributions, which locate the cause within the immediate situation,

attributions to prejudice among disadvantaged group members imply that devaluation and negative treatment can be expected in other situations as well. Furthermore, encounters with discrimination from a more powerful outgroup imply a lack of control over one's outcomes. Therefore, for disadvantaged groups, attributions to prejudice are likely to be more psychologically costly than external attributions because they have negative implications that extend beyond the immediate situation, while external attributions do not.

For relatively privileged social groups (e.g., men), however, attributions to prejudice implicate an aspect of the self that is associated with status and power, and is not likely to bring about negative consequences very frequently. While they might imply a lack of power and control in the immediate situation, this lack of control is not likely to extend beyond the immediate context. Thus, for privileged groups, attributions to prejudice implicate a unique set of circumstances with a relatively localized relevance, and in that sense are similar to external attributions. Because of these differences in the meaning of attributions to prejudice, attributions to prejudice are likely to be psychologically more costly for members of disadvantaged groups than for members of privileged groups. Indeed, this hypothesis has been supported by a research comparing perceptions of discrimination in privileged and disadvantaged groups (Branscombe, 1998; Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, in press).

In summary, we suggest that attributions to prejudice are psychologically quite different from external attributions. Because an aspect of the self is a necessary condition for prejudice and discrimination to occur, we predict that attributions to prejudice will have an internal component. Furthermore, we suggest that the consequences of attributions to prejudice can only be understood by looking beyond causal locus to the position of the targets' group membership in the social structure. We predict that, compared to truly external attributions, attributions to prejudice will be

harmful for members of disadvantaged groups, but less harmful for members of privileged groups.

Overview

Because previous theorizing has treated attributions to prejudice as synonymous with more exclusively external attributions, the logic of our experimental design was to test for ways in which attributions to prejudice differ from exclusively external attributions. We do expect that attributions to prejudice will have an external component because the prejudiced other is outside of the self. However, we argue that they also have a substantial internal component—the target’s own group membership. In two studies, we tested this hypothesis by manipulating the plausibility of different attributions for a rejection. In one condition, we made a purely external attribution plausible, while in the other condition we made an attribution to prejudice plausible. We then examined the causal loci of attributions on separate measures of internality and externality. We expected that attributions in the condition where prejudice was plausible would be more internal than attributions in the other condition. In Study 2, we extended our analysis to the differential affective consequences of attributions to prejudice among privileged and disadvantaged groups by comparing the affective consequences of making an external attribution versus an attribution to prejudice in women and men. Although we had no reason to suppose that affect would differ between women and men when making an external attribution, we predicted that women would feel more negative affect than men when making an attribution to prejudice.

Study 1

In Study 1, we asked male and female undergraduates to imagine that a professor refused their request to be allowed into a course that required the professor’s permission to enroll. To manipulate the plausibility of different attributions, we manipulated social comparison information regarding whom the professor accepted or rejected. In one condition, participants learned that no

one was accepted, making the plausible attribution exclusively external because everyone regardless of group membership or personal characteristics is treated similarly. In the other condition, we made an attribution to prejudice plausible by telling participants that students of the participant's gender were being systematically excluded.

We predicted an interaction between the locus scale type (internal or external) and attribution condition. While we expected attributions to be relatively similar in externality across conditions, we predicted a greater difference in the internality of attributions. Attributions should be more internal in the condition in which an attribution to prejudice was plausible compared to the condition in which no one was accepted. We expected the externality of attribution to be high in both conditions because the professor's actions are necessary for the rejection to occur in both conditions.

Method

Participants and procedure. Participants were female ($n = 64$) and male ($n = 56$) undergraduates at the University of Kansas who were participating for credit in an introductory psychology course. Participants received a questionnaire booklet that asked them to imagine that they attempted to get into a course that had reached full enrollment. In order to enroll in the course, they needed a "closed class opener," official written permission to enroll from the professor teaching the course. This situation is one with which students are very familiar and must contend with every semester. Female participants read a scenario describing a male professor, while males students read about a female professor. The friend who provides the social comparison information was described as being of the same gender as the participant. In all conditions, participants read "You need a closed-class opener for a course required by your major. You stop by the professor's office and politely ask to be let into the class, explaining that

you need the course to graduate. To your disappointment, the professor turns down your request.” Participants then read “Your friend, a reliable source, happens to work in the office of the professor's department and has access to the records of who received closed class openers from the professor.” Participants in the “Everyone Excluded” condition read, “She[He] tells you that no one else received a closed class opener from that professor either.” In the “Prejudice” condition participants read, “She[He] tells you that no women[men] received a close class opener from that professor, but that about ten male[female] students did receive closed class openers from that professor.”

Measures. After reading the scenario, participants completed measures of the internality and externality of the locus of attribution. We carefully chose items for the measurement of causal locus that did not imply blame, but tapped the degree to which aspects of the self or situation were perceived as causes of the rejection. Internality was measured with two items: “The professor refused to give me a closed class opener because of something about me” and “The professor refused to give me a closed class opener because of who I am.” The measure of internality was reliable, $\alpha = .93$. Externality was also measured with two items: “The professor refused to give me a closed class opener because of something about him or her” and “The professor’s decisions were due to his/her attitudes or personality.” The measure of externality was also reliable, $\alpha = .75$. As a manipulation check, we assessed attributions to prejudice with two items: “The professor’s actions were due to gender discrimination” and “The professor’s decision was based on my gender group membership.” The manipulation check was reliable, $\alpha = .99$. Participants responded to all items using a 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) Likert-type response scale.

Results

Manipulation check. The manipulation check revealed that attributions to prejudice did reliably differ across conditions. As intended, attributions to prejudice were reliably higher in the condition in which the professor only rejected members of one's own gender ($M = 6.16$, $SD = .94$), compared to the condition in which the professor rejected everyone ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 1.17$), $F(1,116) = 504.27$, $p < .001$. Participant gender did not reliably affect attributions to prejudice, $F(1,116) = .21$, $p < .65$, and the interaction between gender and condition was not reliable, $F(1,116) = .07$, $p = .79$.

Loci of attributions. We analyzed the loci of attributions with a Mixed Factor ANOVA design, with attribution condition and participant gender as between-subject factors, and the type of locus dimension (internal or external) as a within-subject factor. As predicted, we found a reliable interaction between the internal-external locus dimension factor and attribution condition, $F(1,116) = 70.25$, $p < .001$. Participant gender did not reliably moderate this interaction, $F(1,116) = .53$, $p = .47$. We then performed separate ANOVAs for the internal and external locus measures. As predicted, the internality of attributions reliably differed by condition, $F(1,118) = 70.73$, $p < .001$. As shown in Figure 1, internality was higher in the Prejudice condition ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.56$) compared to the Everyone Excluded condition ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.18$). The externality of attributions did not reliably differ between the Prejudice ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.21$) and Everyone Excluded ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.61$) conditions, $F(1,118) = .10$, $p = .75$.

Discussion

Our manipulation of the plausibility of attributions to prejudice was successful. In the condition in which no one was accepted by the professor, attributions were primarily external. In the condition in which only members of one's gender group were rejected, attributions to

prejudice were significantly higher than in the condition in which everyone was excluded. As predicted, the difference between conditions in the causal loci of attribution was greater in terms of internality than externality. Although externality did not differ between the Everyone Excluded and Prejudice conditions, internality was significantly higher when the rejection was attributable to prejudice compared to when it was attributable to an exclusively external cause. Thus, these results support our hypothesis that attributions to prejudice have a substantial internal component.

Study 2

In Study 2, we first sought to replicate Study 1's finding that attributions to prejudice have a substantial internal component. We asked participants to imagine themselves having their request to be allowed to enroll in a class denied. We manipulated the plausibility of either making an attribution to prejudice or making an attribution to the professor's disposition. We varied social comparison information (whom the professor rejected or accepted) and whether the professor had a reputation for having a hostile disposition toward everyone, or for being hostile toward the participant's gender. We again measured causal locus on separate measures of internality and externality, and predicted an interaction between the locus scale type (internal or external) and attribution condition. We predicted that attributions would be more internal in the condition in which an attribution to prejudice was plausible compared to the condition in which no one was accepted, but that the externality of attributions would be relatively more similar across conditions.

In addition, we measured affect to investigate the emotional consequences of attributions to prejudice. Unlike purely external attributions, we expected attributions to prejudice to have different emotional consequences depending on the target's group membership. We predicted a

two-way interaction between attributional condition and participant gender. We expected that women would feel worse when an attribution to prejudice was plausible compared to when an exclusively external attribution was plausible. However, we expected a significantly smaller effect of attributional condition in men, with attributions to prejudice being less harmful in men than women.

Method

Participants and Procedure. Participants were female ($n = 52$) and male ($n = 44$) undergraduates participating for course credit in an introductory psychology course. As in Study 1, all participants read about a situation in which a professor had turned down the participant's request to be allowed to enroll in a course. Other information varied by condition, altering the plausibility of different attributions. In the "Everyone Excluded" condition, the participant learned from a friend that the professor had a reputation for being hostile toward all students, and that no one received a closed class opener from the professor. In the "Prejudice" condition, the friend reported that the professor had a reputation for being hostile toward the participant's gender, and that other members of the participant's gender had been systematically excluded by the professor. As in Study 1, female participants read about a male professor and a female friend, while male participants read about a female professor and a male friend.

Measures. After reading the scenario, participants completed the same measures of internality and externality as used in the previous study. The reliabilities of the internality and externality measures were $\alpha = .91$, $\alpha = .76$. Participants responded to a single item measuring attributions to prejudice as a manipulation check ("The professor's actions were due to gender discrimination"). Participants responded to all items on a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Participants also completed a measure of affect that consisted of a list of 12

emotions (Angry, Blue, Fearful, Cruel, Discouraged, Worried, Agreeable, Fine, Secure, Cooperative, Active, Calm) from the Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist (Zuckerman & Lubin, 1965). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they would feel each of these affective states if the scenario they read previously had happened to them. Participants responded on a 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very Much) scale. In order to create one score of the negativity of affect, we averaged responses to the 12 items after reverse-scoring the positive affect items. The affect measure was reliable, $\alpha = .79$.

Results

Manipulation check. Attributions to prejudice were reliably higher in the Prejudice condition ($M = 6.20$, $SD = 1.07$) compared to the Everyone Excluded condition ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.23$), $F(1,92) = 350.93$, $p < .001$. Participant gender did not reliably affect attributions to prejudice $F(1,92) = .84$, $p = .36$, nor was the interaction between gender and condition reliable, $F(1,92) = 1.36$, $p = .25$.

Loci of attributions. We analyzed the loci of attributions with a Mixed Factor ANOVA design, with the scenario condition and participant gender as between-subject factors, and the type of locus dimension (internal vs. external) as a within-subject factor. As predicted, we found a reliable interaction between the internal-external locus dimension factor and scenario condition $F(1,92) = 45.07$, $p < .001$. This interaction was moderated by participant gender, $F(1,92) = 5.95$, $p < .05$, but was reliable for both women and men, respectively, $F(1,50) = 37.63$, $p < .001$, $F(1,42) = 4.71$, $p < .05$.

We then performed separate ANOVAs for the internal and external locus measures. As shown in Figure 2, the internality of attributions was reliably higher in the Prejudice condition ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.48$) than in the Everyone Excluded condition ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 1.31$), $F(1,92)$

= 107.86, $p < .001$. However, the effect of condition on internality was qualified by a two-way interaction between participant gender and condition, $F(1,92) = 7.68$, $p < .01$. For women, the internality of attributions was reliably higher in the Prejudice condition ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.57$) than in the Everyone Excluded condition ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 1.40$), $F(1,92) = 94.34$, $p < .001$. Similarly, for men, internality was reliably higher in the Prejudice condition ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.21$) than in the Everyone Excluded condition ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.14$), $F(1,92) = 26.78$, $p < .001$. Thus, although the effect was reliably larger for women than men, internality was higher in the Prejudice condition compared to the Everyone Excluded condition for both women and men.

Externality was significantly higher in the Prejudice condition ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 1.04$) than the condition in which everyone was rejected ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.76$), $F(1,92) = 9.98$, $p < .01$. However, as the significant interaction between locus dimension and condition demonstrates, the attributions in the two conditions differed more in terms of internality than externality. Gender did not reliably affect externality, $F(1,92) = .66$, $p = .42$, nor did it moderate the effect of condition on externality, $F(1,92) = .04$, $p = .83$.

Negative affect. We performed a 2 (participant gender) X 2 (attribution condition) between subjects ANOVA on the measure of affect. Affect reliably differed by gender, $F(1,92) = 7.82$, $p < .01$. However, the experimental manipulation reliably moderated this effect, $F(1,92) = 11.69$, $p < .001$. As shown in Figure 3, women ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.07$) and men ($M = 4.52$, $SD = .94$) did not differ in affect in the Everyone Excluded condition, $F(1,92) = .19$, $p = .66$. In the Prejudice condition, however, women ($M = 4.93$, $SD = .57$) scored reliably higher in negative affect than did men ($M = 3.84$, $SD = .79$), $F(1,92) = 19.65$, $p < .001$. Examining the effect of condition separately for women and men, we found that women reported more negative affect in the Prejudice condition than in the Everyone Excluded condition, $F(1,92) = 4.76$, $p < .05$. In

contrast, men reported less negative affect in the Prejudice condition than in the Everyone Excluded condition, $F(1,92) = 6.96, p < .01$.

Discussion

Our findings support the idea that attributions to prejudice, in addition to having an external component, also have a substantial internal component. Furthermore, we found that the affective consequences of an attribution to prejudice were quite different from those of a more exclusively external attribution. Participant's group membership moderated the effects of making such an attribution. For women, a disadvantaged group, we found that they felt worse when making an attribution to prejudice compared to when rejection was attributable to an exclusively external cause. For men on the other hand, attributing rejection to prejudice against one's privileged group membership resulted in more affective protection than did an external attribution. Thus, an attribution to prejudice had different effects depending on whether the aspect of the self that it implicated was a disadvantaged or privilege group membership. Furthermore, our findings suggest that causal locus alone cannot explain the affective consequences of attributions to prejudice. While both women and men attributed cause internally more in the Prejudice condition than in the Everyone Excluded condition, the effect of attributional condition on affective responses was in opposite directions for women in men. Therefore, in this study, the affective consequences of attributions to prejudice cannot be explained in terms of their causal locus.

General Discussion

Although assumptions about causal locus have guided theory and research on attributions to prejudice for more than ten years, the studies presented here are the first to empirically test these assumptions. Our findings strongly suggest that the assumption that attributions to prejudice are external is, at best, incomplete. Although we did find that attributions to prejudice

have an external aspect, we also found that they have a second causal locus that is internal. Thus, because they have an internal component, attributions to prejudice cannot be treated as synonymous with exclusively external attributions.

Implications for the discounting hypothesis

Crocker and Major (1989) proposed that attributions to prejudice could protect the well-being of disadvantaged groups based on the assumption that such attributions are external and discount the role of the self in bringing about negative outcomes. Our findings do not support this fundamental assumption of the discounting hypothesis. As our data show, attributions to prejudice do have a substantial internal component. When making an attribution to prejudice, not all aspects of the self can be discounted as causes of the event. The stigmatizing aspect of the self that is the target of the prejudiced person's bias is perceived as necessary for the event to have occurred and therefore will not be discounted (McClure, 1998). Thus, predictions regarding the self-protective aspects of attributions to prejudice should either be discarded or based on a new theoretical rationale that does not rest on the assumption that attributions to prejudice are external.

As Oakes et al. (1991) persuasively argued and found, attributions to group membership are a special case of internal attributions. Of course, group memberships are not always included in the individual's salient self-definition. However, people do define themselves in terms of group memberships when social categorization provides a meaningful way of making sense out of their current social environment. When encountering discrimination, attributing negative treatment to one's social category is a meaningful way of making sense of that treatment. Both self-categorization and attribution processes work in tandem to help people explain the social world (Oakes et al., 1991).

As noted earlier, we believe existing assumptions about the causal locus of attributions to prejudice are flawed because they were not considered separately from the assignment of blame. Causal locus simply refers to identifying the proximal causes of an event, while blame assignment entails an ethical judgment (Shaver, 1985). Thus, our finding that an attribution to prejudice has an internal component does not mean that our participants were blaming themselves for the encounter with discrimination. Indeed, we were careful to construct measures of causal locus that did not imply blame. What our findings do suggest is that targets of discrimination who make attributions to prejudice recognize that some aspect of the self is a necessary condition for discrimination to occur.

While our work challenges the theoretical assumptions of the discounting hypothesis, tests of the discounting hypothesis' predictions for self-esteem and affect have represented a different sort of challenge to that perspective. Indeed, there is growing evidence that attributions to prejudice made by members of disadvantaged groups are relatively harmful, rather than self-protective. For instance, members of disadvantaged groups are very reluctant to attribute negative feedback to prejudice even in contexts in which prejudice is a highly probable explanation (Ruggiero & Taylor, 1995, 1997). When members of disadvantaged groups do attribute a negative outcome to prejudice, it has harmful effects on self-esteem, feelings of control, and affect (Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993; Dion & Earn, 1975; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999; Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997). Furthermore, among members of disadvantaged groups, perceived discrimination against the ingroup is negatively related to a number of indicators of psychological and physical well-being (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, Manning, & Lund, 1995; Branscombe et al., 1999; Klonoff, Landrine, & Campbell, 2000; Schmitt et al., in press).

The importance of intergroup context

From a social identity perspective, prejudice and discrimination are intergroup phenomenon. For that reason, we argue that the meaning and consequences of attributions to prejudice cannot be understood without an examination of intergroup context. Indeed, the internality and externality of attributions alone could not explain the effects we observed. Although both women and men saw attributions to prejudice as internal, the affective consequences of these attributions were very different for women and men. These findings suggest the location of proximal causes of discrimination does a rather poor job of predicting and explaining the consequences of an attribution to prejudice. In order to explain the affective consequences of attributions to prejudice, we had to take into account the social structural context of intergroup relations.

Because we view the relative social structural position of the ingroup as an important determinant of the meaning and consequences of attributions to prejudice, we predicted that the ingroup's structural position would moderate their affective consequences (see Schmitt & Branscombe, in press). In fact, unlike more exclusively external attributions, we found that the affective consequences of an attribution to prejudice depended on the group membership of the person making it. Among women, we found that attributing rejection to prejudice results in more negative affect than an exclusively external attribution. This suggests that for members of disadvantaged groups, attributions to prejudice do not offer the kind of self-protection that exclusively external attributions might. In contrast, men felt less negative affect when attributing rejection to prejudice compared to attributing it to an exclusively external cause, suggesting that attributing rejection to prejudice against a privileged ingroup may offer psychological benefits beyond discounting the self as a cause. These findings add to a growing body of work supporting

the idea that attributions to prejudice are especially, if not uniquely, painful when the ingroup is disadvantaged relative to other groups (Branscombe, 1998; Schmitt et al., in press).

Because encounters with prejudice are a more frequent occurrence among members of disadvantaged groups than for members of privileged groups, attributions to prejudice are likely to be more stable and therefore more harmful among the disadvantaged (Branscombe et al., 1999). Furthermore, because power is associated with privilege, encounters with prejudice and discrimination are likely to be perceived as more controllable, and therefore less costly among privileged than disadvantaged groups (Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997). In short, the meaning and consequences of attributions to prejudice are different for privileged and disadvantaged groups because their respective group memberships have very different implications for their treatment and value within the larger social context. For members of disadvantaged groups, an attribution to prejudice implicates an aspect of the self that is devalued and is associated with negative outcomes. For members of privileged groups, attributions to prejudice implicate an aspect of the self that is associated with status, power, and positive outcomes.

Limitations

Our studies relied on asking participants to imagine themselves in a situation rather than actually placing people in it, and our results should be understood with that limitation in mind. However, our findings concerning the affective consequences of attributions to prejudice are quite consistent with studies in which attributions were made for events occurring within a laboratory setting (Dion & Earn, 1975; Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997). Furthermore, our chosen methodology offers several advantages over placing participants into a laboratory context in which they were lead to believe that they have experienced discrimination. First, it provides strong experimental control over the context in which an attribution is made. Secondly, we were

able to ask participants to think about a context that had some significance to them outside of the lab, and one that they encounter with some frequency.

Our studies only investigated attributions to gender prejudice, and that only in a single type of context. Therefore, without additional research, we must exercise some caution in generalizing these findings to other groups or situations. Although it remains an open question whether attributions to prejudice against other types of stigma have an internal locus, our data do suggest that attributions to prejudice should not be automatically assumed to be exclusively external.

Conclusions

Our findings challenge the assumption that attributions to prejudice can be characterized as primarily external attributions. We found that attributions to prejudice actually have two causal loci—one external to the self, and one internal to the self. Because we found that attributions to prejudice have a substantial internal component, our findings challenge the discounting perspective's predictions that attributions to prejudice made for negative outcomes will discount the causal role of the self, and therefore be self-protective. Furthermore, an exclusive focus on causal locus does a rather poor job of accounting for the affective consequences of attributions to prejudice. The relative position of one's ingroup in the social structure appears to be much better at predicting the affective consequences of attributions to prejudice. For members of disadvantaged groups, attributions to prejudice imply devaluation and negative treatment outside of the immediate context as well, and thus, they have more distal and painful implications. For members of privileged groups, attributions to prejudice have very localized implications, and are thus, less painful. Continuing research on attributions to prejudice should recognize group membership as an internal aspect of the self and an important moderator of the psychological consequences of attributions to prejudice.

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Figures

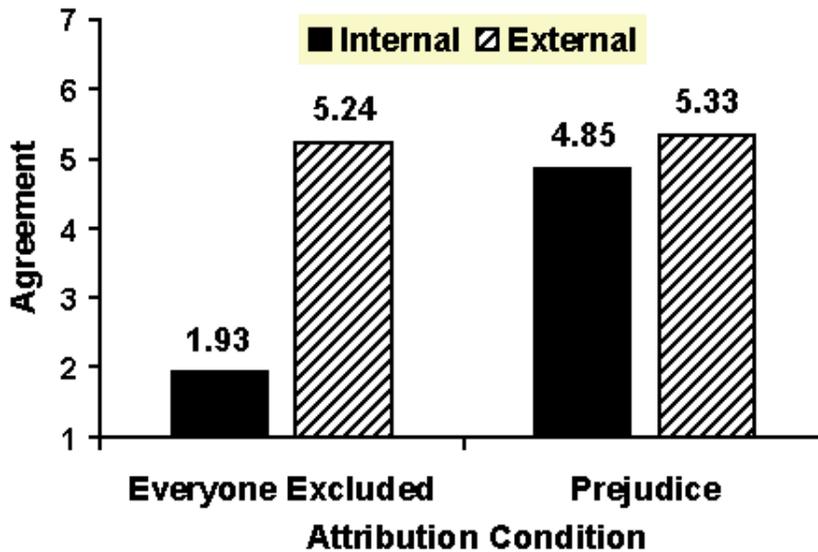


Figure 1. The effects of attributional condition on the internal and external causal loci of attribution, Study 1. Higher numbers indicate greater agreement with the internal or external attributional statements.

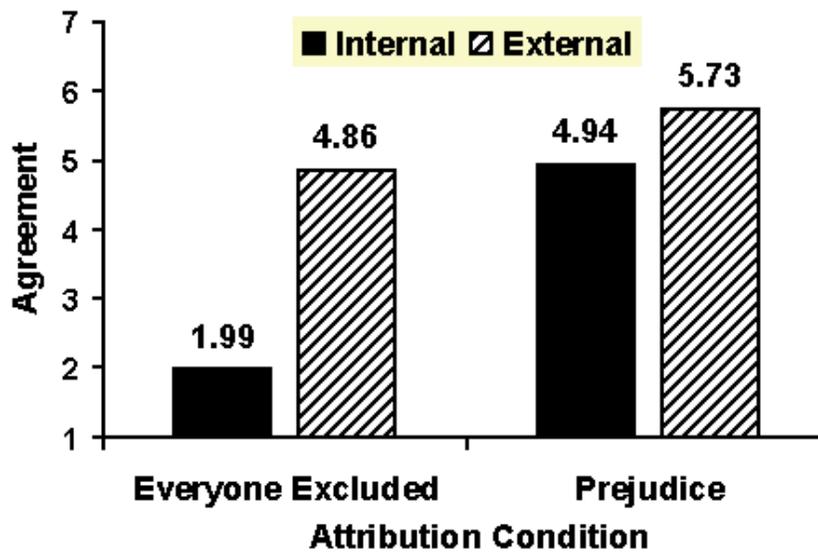


Figure 2. The effects of attributional condition on the internal and external causal loci of attribution, Study 2. Higher numbers indicate greater agreement with the internal or external attributional statements.

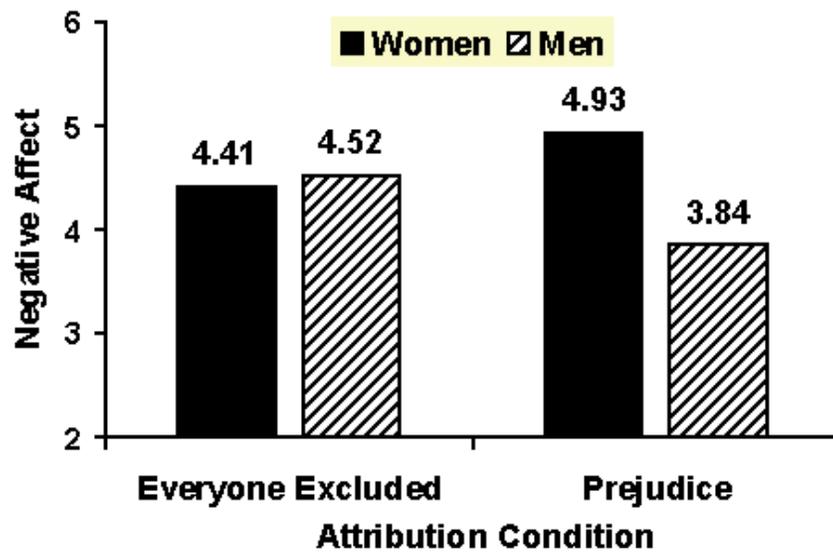


Figure 3. The effects of gender and attributional condition on negative affect, Study 2. Higher numbers indicate more negative affect.