For more than half a century, social psychologists have examined stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, primarily from the perspective of members of dominant social groups. Recently, attention has turned to how potential targets of prejudice construe and cope with their predicaments (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Major, 1994; Steele, 1997). The current research extends this latter focus by examining the conditions under which people blame negative outcomes on discrimination. Perceiving that one is a victim of discrimination has important implications for self-esteem and psychological well-being (Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993; Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Major & Crocker, 1993), investment in life domains (Major & Schmader, 1998; Steele, 1997), group identification (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999), interpersonal relationships (Kaiser & Miller, 2001), and intergroup hostility (Branscombe et al., 1999). Thus, identifying the factors that lead individuals to feel they are targets of discrimination is both theoretically and practically important.

In the present research we examine the impact of ideology and relative group status on attributions to discrimination. We argue that the extent to which individuals endorse ideologies that legitimize the prevailing status hierarchy affects the likelihood that they will make attributions to discrimination in encounters with members of groups of different status. One legitimizing ideology is the belief in individual upward mobility. This is the belief that the status hierarchy is permeable and that individuals have the capacity to improve their own individual status. We hypothesized that endorsement of the ideology of individual mobility predicts whether members of low- or high-status groups are more likely to make attributions to discrimination in intergroup contexts.

**Group Status**

The relative status of the target’s social group is a potentially significant determinant of attributions to discrimination in intergroup encounters. Relative group status refers to the value or prestige typically accorded to one social group or category com-
pared with another. In all societies, the social categories that organize social relations (e.g., gender, occupation, ethnicity) are also status-valued categories (Ridgeway, 2001). That is, people who belong to one category (e.g., men, professionals, ethnic minorities) are widely perceived to be more socially worthy and competent than are those who belong to another category (e.g., women, laborers, ethnic minorities). They also typically hold more power. Individuals who belong to lower status categories are more likely to be exposed to negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination in their daily experiences than are members of high-status categories. Even members of high-status categories, however, can be targets of discrimination in some contexts (Crocker et al., 1998; Goffman, 1963).

How does relative group status affect the likelihood of perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination? Social–psychological theory makes competing predictions. Some theorists suggest that because of their more frequent encounters with prejudice, members of low-status groups are more vigilant than members of high-status groups to signs of prejudice in their social encounters (e.g., Allport, 1954; see Feldman Barrett & Swim, 1998, for a review). The vigilance hypothesis is compatible with research indicating that cognitions that are repeatedly primed are more likely to be activated in ambiguous circumstances (see Sedikides & Skowronsli, 1991, for a review). It is also consistent with Inman and Baron’s (1996) argument that prejudice is generally more central and accessible for members of traditionally oppressed groups than it is for other individuals. The vigilance hypothesis also can be derived from Crocker and Major’s (1989) attributional ambiguity hypothesis. They posited that members of chronically low-status groups are highly aware of the negative stereotypes others hold of their group and of their potential for being a target of prejudice in encounters with members of higher status groups. Members of low-status groups are more likely than members of high-status groups to report on surveys that they personally have been victims of discrimination (e.g., Crosby, Pufall, Snyder, O’Connell, & Whalen, 1989).

In contrast to a vigilance perspective, a minimization perspective suggests that members of low-status groups minimize the extent to which they personally have been victims of discrimination relative to high-status groups. This may occur because attributions to discrimination are more psychologically costly for members of low-status groups than for members of high-status groups. For the former but not the latter, attributions to discrimination reflect chronic, pervasive experiences rather than isolated occurrences (Branscombe, 1998).

What determines whether members of low-status groups are more or less likely than members of high-status groups to attribute their outcomes to discrimination? We believe that an important moderating factor is the extent to which individuals endorse ideologies that legitimize the prevailing status hierarchy among groups in society (Major, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1993, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Ideologies and Collective Representations

Political sociologists and psychologists have long argued that social ideologies—attitudes, beliefs, and values that are held consensually within society—help to sustain the perception of the social system as just and fair (e.g., Marx & Engels, 1846/1970). Ideologies that justify the hierarchical and unequal relationships among groups in society have been called legitimizing ideologies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Examples of legitimizing ideologies in North America include beliefs in a just world, in individual mobility, in personal control, and in the Protestant ethic. Within North America, these ideologies legitimize the status quo, chiefly by holding people and groups responsible for their outcomes and by locating the cause of good or poor outcomes within attributes or inputs of that person or group.

Although these ideologies are held individually, they gain their power to legitimize social and personal inequality through their collective endorsement within a culture (Major, 1994). Thus, legitimizing ideologies can be thought of as collective representations (Moscovici, 1998). Cultures differ in their relevant legitimizing ideologies. For example, legitimizing ideology manifests itself as belief in fate in Taiwan and as traditional gender norms in China (Pratto et al., 2000). Within the United States, the beliefs that opportunity for personal advancement is widespread, that individuals are personally responsible for their positions in society, and that the overall system of equality is equitable and fair are so widely held that they have been labeled America’s “dominant ideology” (see Kleugel & Smith, 1986).

Even those who are most disadvantaged in society typically endorse status-legitimizing ideologies (Kleugel & Smith, 1986). Nonetheless, all individuals do not endorse them equally (Katz & Hass, 1988; Rubin & Peplau, 1975). Individual differences in endorsement of legitimizing ideologies may emerge from social structural factors. For example, status-legitimizing ideologies tend to be more strongly endorsed by individuals who are high in the social hierarchy than by those who are low in the hierarchy (Kleugel & Smith, 1986). Individual differences in ideology may also result from socialization experiences, such as an authoritarian upbringing or direct personal experiences with injustices. Status-legitimizing ideologies tend to be more strongly endorsed by individuals who are highly prejudiced (Crandall, 1994) and who are high in social dominance orientation (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

In the current research we focus on the legitimizing implications of the belief that there is a possibility of individual upward mobility within a status hierarchy. The ideology of individual mobility is a pervasive aspect of North American and, to a lesser degree, Western European society (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In his early work on social identity theory, Tajfel (1982) described the belief that status hierarchies are permeable as a primary determinant of the behavior of disadvantaged groups. Consistent with his prediction, there is evidence that the perception of even a slight possibility of individual mobility based on merit can legitimize objectively unjust status hierarchies and decrease the likelihood that disadvantaged individuals will engage in collective action (Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990).

Ideology, Status, and Attributions to Discrimination

We hypothesize that the extent to which individuals endorse the ideology of individual mobility influences whether they perceive themselves as targets of discrimination in intergroup encounters. Because the status hierarchy is differentially beneficial for members of high- and low-status groups, we further hypothesize that the nature of this influence differs dramatically as a function of relative group status in intergroup encounters. In particular, we
predict that the more members of low-status groups endorse the ideology of individual mobility, the less likely they will be to attribute rejection by a member of a higher status group to discrimination. In contrast, we predict that the more members of high-status groups endorse the ideology of individual mobility, the more likely they will be to attribute rejection by a member of a lower status group to discrimination. We term this the status-legitimacy hypothesis.

Our hypothesis is derived from social justice theory and research demonstrating that people have a pervasive tendency to justify existing status hierarchies, even when these hierarchies are disadvantageous to themselves or their group (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Major, 2001; Kleugel & Smith, 1986; Major, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). This tendency can result in a lesser sense of personal (or group) deserving among members of disadvantaged groups relative to members of more advantaged groups (Major, 1994). For example, members of lower status groups (e.g., women) grant themselves fewer rewards given the same inputs and contribute more inputs given the same rewards than do members of higher status groups (e.g., men; Major, McFarlin, & Gagnon, 1989). The tendency to justify existing social hierarchies can also lead to the inference that members of lower status groups must be inferior in some way to members of higher status groups. Not only members of high-status groups but also members of low-status groups can make this inference. Members of low-status groups show more outgroup favoritism, especially on attributes relevant to group status differences (Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992), and display more ambivalence toward their ingroup (Jost & Burgess, 2000) than do members of high-status groups.

The tendency to justify the status hierarchy has fundamentally different implications for how members of high-versus low-status groups may respond when they find themselves in attributionally ambiguous intergroup encounters. Outcomes that are seen as inequitable are more likely to be attributed to discrimination than are those that are seen as equitable (Crocker & Major, 1994). Because of their lesser sense of deserving and feelings of relative inferiority, members of lower status groups may perceive being passed over for a desired outcome in favor of a member of a higher status group as fair and equitable rather than as discriminatory. In contrast, because of their greater sense of deserving and feelings of relative superiority, members of higher status groups may view being passed over in favor of a member of a lower status group as a violation of equity and as being caused by unfair discrimination.

In sum, we hypothesize that endorsing the ideology of individual mobility, the less likely they would be to perceive themselves as targets of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. In contrast, we predicted that the more members of low-status ethnic groups endorsed individual mobility, the less likely they would be to perceive themselves as targets of discrimination.

We also examined ethnic group identification as a potential predictor of perceived discrimination in this study. Prior research suggests that endorsement of legitimizing ideologies is negatively related to ingroup identification among members of low- but not high-status groups (Levin, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, & Federico, 1998). Furthermore, group identification predicts perceived discrimination among members of low-status groups (Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2001). Thus, we included group identification in our analyses to control for any potential overlap between identification and ideology in the prediction of perceived discrimination.

Overview of Studies

We conducted three studies to test our status-legitimacy hypothesis. Study 1 examined the relationship between the belief in individual mobility and perceived personal discrimination in a survey of members of higher and lower status ethnic groups. Studies 2 and 3 tested our hypothesis in laboratory contexts in which participants were exposed to a similar attributionally ambiguous event. Study 2 used ethnic group membership as a proxy for group status, whereas Study 3 used gender as a proxy for group status.

Study 1

Our first study tests the status-legitimacy hypothesis using ethnic group membership as a proxy for group status. We operationalized high status as being a member of the dominant ethnic group in the United States (European American) and low status as being a member of a disadvantaged ethnic group (African American or Latino American). We predicted that the more members of low-status ethnic groups endorsed individual mobility, the less likely they would be to perceive themselves as targets of discrimination.

We also examined ethnic group identification as a potential predictor of perceived discrimination in this study. Prior research suggests that endorsement of legitimizing ideologies is negatively related to ingroup identification among members of low- but not high-status groups (Levin, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, & Federico, 1998). Furthermore, group identification predicts perceived discrimination among members of low-status groups (Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2001). Thus, we included group identification in our analyses to control for any potential overlap between identification and ideology in the prediction of perceived discrimination.

Method

Participants

Participants were 421 undergraduate students (183 men, 236 women, and 2 students who did not indicate gender) from the University of California, Los Angeles. The sample consisted of 161 European Americans, 133 Latino Americans, and 127 African Americans. The measures reported in this study were collected in the context of a larger survey of political attitudes (Sidanius, Feshbach, Levin, & Pratto, 1997). Respondents completed the survey in return for the opportunity to win one of four $50 prizes, which were awarded at the completion of all data collection.
Measures

Individual mobility. Four items assessed the belief that the American system is open to the advancement of individuals from all ethnic backgrounds: “America is an open society where individuals of any ethnicity can achieve higher status,” “Advancement in ‘American society is possible for individuals of all ethnic groups,” “Individual members of a low status ethnic group have difficulty achieving higher status” (reverse coded), and “Individual members of certain ethnic groups are often unable to advance in American society” (reverse coded). Items were measured on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The four-item scale was internally consistent overall (Cronbach’s α = .74) and within each ethnic group separately (α = .88 for European Americans, α = .85 for Latino Americans, and α = .74 for African Americans). Mean scores ranged from 1 to 7 (M = 3.87, SD = 1.30) for the entire sample.

Ethnic group identification. To assess ethnic group identification, we asked participants to respond to four items immediately after indicating their ethnic group membership on the survey: “How strongly do you identify with other members of your ethnic group?” (1 = not at all to 7 = very strongly), “How important is your ethnicity to your identity?” (1 = not at all to 7 = very important), “How often do you think of yourself as a member of your ethnic group?” (1 = not at all to 7 = very often), and “How close do you feel to other members of your ethnic group?” (1 = not at all to 7 = very close). This measure was reliable overall (Cronbach’s α = .88) and for the three ethnic groups separately (α = .79 for European Americans, α = .93 for Latino Americans, and α = .87 for African Americans).

Perceived discrimination. A single item measured perceived personal discrimination: “I experience discrimination because of my ethnicity.” Participants responded on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).1

Group status. To check our operationalization of group status, we asked respondents the following: “There are many people who believe that different ethnic groups enjoy different amounts of social status in this society. You may not believe this for yourself, but if you had to rate each of the following groups as such people see them, how would you do so?” Respondents rated each group (“Whites/Euro-Americans,” “Black/African Americans,” and “Latinos/Chicanos”) on a scale ranging from 1 (low status) to 7 (high status).

Results

Perceived Group Status

A repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that the three ethnic groups differed in perceived social status, F(2, 411) = 1.084.05, p < .001. Consistent with our operationalization of group status, follow-up contrasts indicated that European Americans (M = 6.53, SD = 0.72) were perceived to have significantly higher status than African Americans (M = 3.20, SD = 1.43), p < .001, and Latino Americans (M = 2.98, SD = 1.29), p < .001. We combined Latino Americans and African Americans into a single low-status group for analyses.2

Mean Group Differences and Correlations Among Measures

High-status ethnic group members perceived significantly less personal discrimination as a result of their ethnicity (M = 3.68, SD = 2.15) than did members of low-status ethnic groups (M = 5.08, SD = 1.98), t(414) = −6.78, p < .001. High-status ethnic group members endorsed the ideology of individual mobility significantly more (M = 4.48, SD = 1.24) than did low-status ethnic group members (M = 3.45, SD = 1.27), t(418) = 8.18, p < .001. High-status ethnic group members, however, were significantly less identified with their ethnic group (M = 4.01, SD = 1.32) than were low-status ethnic group members (M = 5.24, SD = 1.50), t(419) = −8.57, p < .001. The belief in individual mobility was unrelated to ethnic group identification among the high-status ethnic group (r = .02), but was negatively associated with ethnic group identification among the low-status ethnic groups (r = −.35, p < .001; see also Levin et al., 1998).

Testing the Status-Legitimacy Hypotheses

We tested the status-legitimacy hypothesis using a three-step hierarchical regression analysis recommended by Aiken and West (1991). In Step 1, we included status as a dichotomous variable (0 = high-status ethnic group; 1 = low-status ethnic group) and ideology and group identification as continuous variables, predicting perceived personal discrimination. Ideology and identification were centered at their means (as were all continuous predictors in subsequent analyses). Step 1 revealed that the combined effect of these three predictors was significant (R2 = .17, p < .001). There was a significant effect for status (β = .21, p < .001). Overall, we found that low-status group members perceived greater personal discrimination than did high-status group members once we adjusted for group differences in ideology and identification. There was also a significant effect for identification (β = .28, p < .001), indicating that students who identified more with their ethnic group also reported experiencing more discrimination. Note that in Step 1, this positive relation between identification and perceived discrimination reflects the sample as a whole (the majority of whom were members of lower status ethnic groups). The ideology effect was not significant (β = .02, p > .10).

In Step 2, we added the 3 two-way interaction terms. The addition of these terms led to a significant increase in R2 (ΔR2 = .09, p < .001). Both the Status × Ideology (β = −.43, p < .001) and the Status × Identification (β = .28, p < .001) effects were significant. The Ideology × Identification effect was not (β = .07, p > .10). The pattern of the Status × Ideology interaction is shown in Figure 1, graphed at one standard deviation above and below the

1 The survey also contained an item assessing perceived group discrimination: “Other members of my ethnic group experience discrimination.” This item was highly correlated with the perceived personal discrimination item (r = .74, p < .001). We did not combine the two items into a single scale because of our explicit focus on perceiving personal discrimination and because these items are theoretically quite different. A parallel analysis on the group discrimination item revealed a significant interaction between ideology and group status that was identical to that found for personal discrimination. The interaction between group identification and group status, however, was not significant for perceived group discrimination.

2 African Americans were perceived to have significantly higher status than Latino Americans (p < .01). A parallel set of regression analyses, however, revealed no significant difference between these two ethnic groups in the relation between ideology and perceived discrimination or in the relation between group identification and perceived discrimination. Accordingly, we present the full regression results only for the analyses focusing on a dichotomous (high- vs. low-status) classification. Analyses comparing all three ethnic groups separately are available from Brenda Major.
total sample mean for ideology. Among high-status group members, greater belief in individual mobility was associated with increased perceptions of personal discrimination ($\beta = .41, p < .001$). In contrast, among low-status group members, greater belief in individual mobility was associated with decreased perceptions of personal discrimination ($\beta = -.20, p < .01$). The Status $\times$ Identification interaction revealed no association between group identification and perceived discrimination among high-status group members ($\beta = -.02, p > .10$) and a positive and significant association among low-status group members ($\beta = .34, p < .001$). We added the three-way interaction term in Step 3. The addition of this term did not increase the fit of the model ($\Delta R^2 = .00, ns$).

Discussion

Results of this first study indicate that in general, members of lower status (African American and Latino American) groups are more likely than members of higher status (European American) groups to report that they have been victims of personal discrimination based on their ethnicity. This finding replicates patterns observed in prior survey research (e.g., Crosby et al., 1989). Consistent with our status-legitimacy hypothesis, however, this effect was moderated by individual differences in the belief that there is a possibility of individual mobility for members of all ethnic groups in America. Among low-status group members, endorsing this ideology was associated with decreased reports of having experienced personal discrimination. In contrast, among high-status group members, endorsing this ideology was associated with increased reports of personal discrimination.

Greater ingroup identification also was associated with greater perceived discrimination among the low-status groups but not among the high-status group. The lack of a significant interaction between identification and ideology, however, suggests that these variables have independent relationships with perceived discrimination.

Although these initial results are supportive of our status-legitimacy hypothesis, the methodology of this study leaves open alternative interpretations. For example, individuals may reject status-legitimizing ideologies such as the belief in individual mobility because they perceive themselves to have been victims of discrimination rather than vice versa. Indeed, the relationship among these variables is likely to be bidirectional. In addition, the assessment of ideology and perceived discrimination within the same questionnaire may have inflated the relationships among these measures. Accordingly, we conducted a second study, in which we assessed the belief in individual mobility at an initial testing session and, at a subsequent session, exposed members of low- and high-status ethnic groups to a similar rejection by an outgroup member and asked them to make attributions for that event.

Study 2

All participants in the second study experienced a rejection in a standardized laboratory context, with ethnicity-based discrimination being one possible explanation for this rejection. European American (high-status) and Latino American (low-status) students were rejected for a desirable role in favor of a member of the other ethnic group. This rejection came either from a member of the participant's own ethnic group (ingroup rejection) or from a member of the other group (outgroup rejection).

We hypothesized that prejudice is a more plausible attribution in cases of intergroup rather than intragroup rejection (Baron, Burgess, & Kao, 1991). Furthermore, because status differences between groups are more relevant in intergroup contexts than in ingroup contexts, we reasoned that status legitimizing ideologies would more likely be activated in the outgroup rejection condition than in the ingroup rejection condition. Accordingly, we hypothesized that individual differences in the belief in individual mobility would moderate attributions to discrimination when rejection came from an outgroup member but not when it came from an ingroup member. We predicted that the belief in individual mobility would be associated negatively with attributions to prejudice among members of a low-status group rejected by a member of a high-status group but would be associated positively with attributions to prejudice among members of a high-status group rejected by a member of a low-status group. We did not expect individual mobility to predict attributions to discrimination in the ingroup rejection context. We also controlled for group identification in our analyses.

Method

Participants

A total of 67 undergraduate students (31 Latino American and 36 European American) from the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) participated for partial credit toward a course requirement. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 20 ($M = 18.22, SD = 0.49$). All participants were recruited randomly from the departmental participant pool by phone for a study on work group development and performance. All had first participated in a pretesting session in which they completed measures of individual mobility ideology and ethnic group identification.

Pretesting Measures

Individual mobility. We used the same four-item individual mobility measure used in Study 1. Participants responded to each item on a scale
from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The four items were combined into a single measure (overall $\alpha = .74$; $\alpha = .79$ for European Americans and $\alpha = .64$ for Latino Americans). Mean scores ranged from 1.5 to 5.0 ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.83$) for the entire sample.

**Ethnic group identification.** Ethnic group identification was assessed with the four-item Importance to Identity subscale of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSES; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), phrased to be ethnic with the phrase “The ethnic group I belong to is an important reflection of who I am”. Items were averaged to create a composite measure of group identification (overall $\alpha = .79$; $\alpha = .71$ for European Americans and $\alpha = .75$ for Latino Americans).

**Laboratory Procedures**

The design was a 2 (status: high/European American, low/Latino American) $\times$ 2 (rejection context: outgroup rejection, ingroup rejection) between-subjects factorial. Participants arrived at the laboratory and were escorted to one of three cubicles containing a networked computer. All participants were assigned to Cubicle C using a bogus selection process. They were told that two other students were also participating in the experimental session, in Cubicles B and D. In reality, only 1 participant was present during each session, with steps taken to increase participants’ perceptions that others were present (e.g., instructions given to the participant were repeated by the experimenter in the empty cubicles).

Participants were told that they had conducted work group development and performance. The experimenter explained over the intercom that the three students would work together on a series of problem-solving tasks in a structured work team group. The team would consist of a manager, a comanager, and a clerk. Participants were told that the manager role had already been assigned randomly to the participant in Cubicle B. The first task for the manager was to assign roles to the two remaining students (one of whom was the actual participant). The experimenter first described each role over the intercom. The comanager position was described as more desirable than the clerk position. To make this role even more desirable, the experimenter told participants that the members of the management team would be eligible to win $100 in a lottery to be held later, whereas the clerk would not.

After describing the work group study, the experimenter took a digital photograph of the participant and pretended to take pictures of the two bogus participants. Participants then were given 7 min to complete a set of application materials, which would supposedly be provided to the manager. The application materials consisted of a background information sheet (including ethnicity and other demographic information) and a personal statement (asking participants to identify problems found in the workplace that require teamwork to solve and to describe why teamwork is required to solve these problems).

**Ethnicity context manipulation.** While the participant awaited the manager’s decision, digital photos of the student in the manager role (Person B), the actual participant (Person C), and the other student applicant (Person D) appeared on the participant’s computer screen. These photos ostensibly were being displayed to all three students simultaneously. In the outgroup rejection conditions, the photos of both the manager and the other applicant (pretended as equivalently attractive) were of the same sex as the actual participant but of a different ethnic group (either Latino American or European American) than the participant. In the ingroup rejection conditions, the photo of the manager was of the same sex and same ethnicity as the actual participant, whereas the photo of the other applicant was of the same sex but of a different ethnic group (Latino American or European American). While the photos remained on the top portion of the screen, participants answered questions on the computer indicating how well they thought they would perform in the comanager role and in the clerk role on scales ranging from 1 (very poorly) to 5 (very well). They also indicated which role they preferred on a scale ranging from 1 (prefer to be Clerk) to 5 (prefer to be Co-Manager).

**The rejection.** After the work group task was described, participants “accidentally” heard over the intercom a (taped) comment by the manager to the experimenter, presumably as a result of an intercom malfunction. The manager stated that he or she “did not want to work with Participant C” (the actual participant) and “didn’t think they [the manager and clerk] would have a good chance to win the money.” Depending on the participant’s gender and the experimental condition, the taped comment was made by either a male or a female confederate, with either a slight Latino accent or a California European American accent. Shortly after the participant overheard this comment, the experimenter gave him or her a handwritten role assignment sheet ostensibly completed by the manager. In all conditions, this indicated that the manager had assigned the participant to the clerk role because the manager did not think they would work well together. Participants were given 3 min to digest this feedback, after which they completed a series of dependent measures on the computer. Participants were told that these responses were confidential and would not be shared with the other participants in the session.

**Attributions.** Participants were asked to indicate the reasons for their role assignment. The primary dependent variable was the degree to which participants believed that the decision was discriminatory. A second item assessed attributions to ethnicity, without reference to discrimination, using the phrase, “due to your race/ethnicity.” A third item assessed an external attribution, without reference either to discrimination or to ethnicity, using the phrase, “due to the manager’s personal preferences.” A fourth item assessed an internal attribution, using the phrase, “due to aspects of your written statement.” Participants responded to these items on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal).

**Manipulation checks and debriefing.** After participants completed the dependent measures, they were given a list on which they were asked to check all information they had about the other participants in the session. Embedded among other items in the checklist (e.g., sex, age) was “race/ethnicity.” To probe for suspicion, this questionnaire also solicited participants’ free responses to several questions about the experiment, including what they thought was the purpose of the experiment and whether they thought there was anything strange or odd about the experiment. After collecting the written form, the experimenter interviewed the participants further for suspicion. Participants were then fully debriefed, following guidelines suggested by Aronson, Wilson, and Brewer (1998). All participants were entered into the lottery, and the $100 prize was awarded at the completion of all data collection.

**Results**

**Manipulation checks.**

All participants correctly reported the ethnicity of the other, fictional participants. Review of the debriefing forms revealed that 7 participants were suspicious: 2 (1 European American, 1 Latino American) had arrived early enough to observe that no other participants had arrived before them, and 5 (3 European American, 2 Latino American) reported that they did not believe that anyone else was present. These 7 participants were dropped from subsequent analyses, leaving a total of 60 participants, 28 of whom were Latino American (7 male, 21 female) and 32 of whom were European American (18 male, 14 female).

As anticipated, participants of both ethnic groups preferred the role of the comanager to that of the clerk (European Americans: $M = 4.00$ on a 5-point scale, $SD = 1.14$; Latino Americans: $M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.74$).
$M = 4.00, SD = 0.98$). Participants of both ethnic groups also anticipated performing well in the comanager role (European Americans: $M = 4.13, SD = 0.75$; Latino Americans: $M = 4.14; SD = 0.59$) and in the clerk role (European Americans: $M = 4.03, SD = 0.74$; Latino Americans: $M = 4.18, SD = 0.72$). Two separate $2 \times 2$ (status) $\times$ (rejection context) between-subjects ANOVAs revealed no significant main effects or interactions for either of these ratings (all $ps > .10$).

**Mean Group Differences and Correlations**

**Attribution measures.** Attributions to discrimination were correlated positively and significantly with attributions to ethnicity ($r = .58, p < .001$). In contrast, attributions to discrimination were negatively correlated with the internal attribution ($r = -.37, p < .001$) and were uncorrelated with the external attribution ($r = .13, p > .10$). The three nondiscrimination items were not significantly associated with one another ($rs < .16, ps > .10$).

A $2 \times 2$ (rejection context) $\times$ (attrition) repeated measures ANOVA on the attribution measures revealed a significant main effect for type of attribution, $F(3, 57) = 61.16, p < .001$. Attributions to discrimination ($M = 2.15, SD = 1.17$) and to ethnicity ($M = 2.04, SD = 1.16$) did not differ, and both were lower than attributions to the written statement ($M = 3.48, SD = 1.27$) and to the manager’s personal preferences ($M = 3.81, SD = 1.04$; all $ps < .001$). These latter two attributions did not differ significantly. No other effects were significant.

**Moderator and control variables.** European American students ($M = 3.14, SD = 0.68$) endorsed individual mobility more than did Latino American students ($M = 2.81, SD = 0.58$), $t(58) = 2.01, p < .05$. Latino American students ($M = 3.41, SD = 0.95$) reported higher identification with their ethnic group than did European American students ($M = 2.51, SD = 0.78$), $t(58) = 4.05, p < .001$. The belief in individual mobility was uncorrelated with ethnic identification among European American students ($r = .04, ns$), whereas this association was negative but not significant among Latino American students ($r = -.26, p > .10$).

**Ideology and Attributions**

**Attributions to discrimination.** We used hierarchical regression to test the status legitimacy hypothesis that endorsement of the ideology of individual mobility moderates the effect of status and rejection context on attributions to discrimination. In Step 1, we included status (coded 0 = European American; 1 = Latino American) and rejection context (coded 0 = outgroup rejection; 1 = ingroup rejection) as categorical predictors and ideology as a continuous predictor. We controlled for group identification by entering this as a continuous predictor. There were no significant effects at Step 1 (identification: $\beta = -.05$; status: $\beta = .23$; context: $\beta = -.14$; ideology: $\beta = .01$; all $ps > .10$), nor was the overall model significant ($R^2 = .06, p > .10$). We added the 3 two-way interactions in Step 2. There was no significant change in $R^2$ ($\Delta R^2 = .04, p > .10$), and none of the two-way interactions was significant (Status $\times$ Context: $\beta = .19$; Status $\times$ Ideology: $\beta = -.24$; Context $\times$ Ideology: $\beta = -.06$; all $ps > .10$).

The three-way interaction entered at Step 3, however, was significant ($\beta = .52, p = .05; \Delta R^2 = .07, p < .05$). Follow-up tests revealed that, within the outgroup rejection condition, the predicted Status $\times$ Ideology interaction was significant ($\beta = -.68, p < .05$). The slopes contributing to this interaction, graphed at one standard deviation above and below the total sample mean for ideology, are shown in the top panel of Figure 2. As predicted, greater endorsement of individual mobility was associated with increased attributions to discrimination among European American students ($\beta = .52, p = .07$) but with decreased attributions to discrimination among Latino American students ($\beta = -.45, p = .07$).

Within the ingroup rejection condition, the Status $\times$ Ideology interaction was not significant ($\beta = -.01, p > .10$). However, the effect of status did approach significance ($\beta = .39, p = .06$; bottom panel, Figure 2). Latino American students rejected by an ingroup manager in favor of a European American applicant tended to attribute the rejection to discrimination more than did European American students who were rejected.
by an ingroup manager in favor of a Latino American applicant.\(^5\)

**Attributions other than discrimination.** We examined responses to the other attribution items using the same hierarchical regression approach. The overall model predicting attributions to race/ethnicity was not significant (\(R^2 = .20\)), nor was the overall model predicting attributions to the written statement (\(R^2 = .06\)) or to the manager’s personal preferences (\(R^2 = .10\)). There were no significant effects involving ideology in any of these models.

**Discussion**

This study provides further support for our hypothesis that ideology and group status moderate attributions to discrimination in intergroup encounters. As expected, attributions to discrimination were significantly greater following rejection by an outgroup member than rejection by an ingroup member. Within the outgroup rejection condition, the more low-status (Latino American) students endorsed the ideology of individual mobility, the less they attributed their rejection by a higher status (European American) student to discrimination. In contrast, the more high-status (European American) students endorsed the ideology of individual mobility, the more they attributed rejection by a lower status (Latino American) student to discrimination. Unlike Study 1, the belief in individual mobility was assessed at an earlier point in time than the discrimination attribution. Further, all participants were exposed to a discrete, attributionally ambiguous event of similar type and severity—rejection by an outgroup member in favor of another outgroup member. Thus, differences in the types of prejudicial events that members of high- and low-status groups encounter or imagine cannot explain the observed interaction between status and ideology.

The pattern of relationships observed among group status, ideology, and rejection context is important for several reasons. First, ideology was related to attributions to discrimination only within the outgroup rejection context, not within the ingroup rejection context. This illustrates that individual differences in ideology predict attributions to discrimination only when they are relevant to, and hence activated within, specific situations. It also reinforces the distinction between endorsing a legitimizing ideology and perceiving oneself (or ethnic minorities in general) as a victim of prejudice.

Second, no main effect for group status was observed. Members of a low-status ethnic group were no more or less likely than members of a high-status ethnic group to attribute the same ambiguous event to discrimination. Rather, the crossover interaction observed in the outgroup evaluator condition illustrates that members of low-status groups are sometimes more likely and sometimes less likely to attribute negative outcomes to discrimination than are members of high-status groups. The beliefs that an individual holds about the possibility of individual advancement moderate which pattern occurs. Thus, this study reconciles previous discrepancies in the literature. Vigilance theories predict that members of low-status groups will be more likely than members of high-status groups to attribute rejection by an outgroup member to discrimination. This occurs, however, only among members of lower status groups who endorse ideologies that legitimize their lower status.

Results of Studies 1 and 2 provide support for our status-legitimacy hypothesis using ethnic group membership as a proxy for group status. To show that these results generalize to other groups that differ in social status, we conducted a third study testing our hypothesis among men and women.

**Study 3**

Study 3 also extends our status-legitimacy hypothesis to explore whether ideology moderates the relation between group status and attributions to discrimination following outcomes that are potentially discriminatory in one’s favor. Legitimizing ideologies influence what individuals feel they are entitled to receive (Major, 1994). Members of low-status groups who endorse legitimizing ideologies may come to believe that they deserve their position of relative disadvantage, whereas members of high-status groups who endorse these ideologies may believe they are entitled to their position of relative advantage. One implication of this analysis is that endorsing status-legitimizing ideologies may inhibit members of high-status groups from perceiving that they may be unfairly advantaged because of their group membership.

To examine this issue, we placed half of our participants into an ingroup selection condition of the work group paradigm used in Study 2. In this condition, a same-sex peer selected the participant for the comanager role over a student of the other sex. Thus, men in the selection condition were led to believe that a male student chose them instead of a woman for the comanager role. Women in the selection condition were led to believe that a female student chose them instead of a man. We predicted that the more men endorsed the ideology of individual mobility, the less they would perceive that discrimination (acting in their favor) may have caused a man to select them over a woman. We did not expect ideology to be related to attributions to discrimination among women selected by a woman. The remaining half of the participants in this study were placed into an outgroup rejection condition paralleling that used in Study 2. In this condition, men were rejected by a woman, who instead selected a woman to be the comanager. Likewise, women were rejected by a man, who instead selected a man to be the comanager. We predicted that the more men endorsed the ideology of individual mobility, the more they would attribute their rejection by a woman to discrimination. We predicted that the more women endorsed the ideology of individual mobility.

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\(3\) One possible explanation for the tendency for low-status groups to view ingroup rejection as more discriminatory than did high-status groups is that rejection in favor of a member of a high-status group more closely reflects prototypes of discrimination than does rejection in favor of a member of a low-status group (Inman & Baron, 1996). An alternative explanation is that members of low-status groups may be more likely to expect ingroup members who gain positions of power to help out members of the ingroup. When this expectancy is violated, they may be more likely to attribute it to discrimination. This unexpected finding is intriguing and should be addressed in future research. We do not discuss it further, however, as it was not hypothesized a priori and does not directly relate to our current focus.
mobility, the less they would attribute their rejection by a man to discrimination. In an effort to assess the interpersonal implications of perceiving discrimination or preferential advantage, we also asked all participants to evaluate the competency and qualifications of the manager who selected (or rejected) them. As in our prior studies, we controlled for group (gender) identification in our analyses.

**Method**

**Overview and Participants**

A total of 81 (44 male, 37 female) European American undergraduate students from UCSB ranging in age from 18 to 21 (\(M = 18.60, SD = 0.75\)) participated for credit in a psychology course. All had participated in a pretesting session in which they completed measures of ideology and gender identification. They were later recruited at random from the departmental participant pool by phone for a laboratory study on work group development and performance.

**Pretesting Measures**

**Individual mobility.** The same four items from the first two studies were used to assess belief in individual mobility, except that the items were tailored to gender rather than ethnicity (e.g., “Advancement in American society is possible for both men and women”). The items were averaged to yield a single measure of individual mobility ideology (overall \(\alpha = .74\); \(\alpha = .76\) for women and \(\alpha = .71\) for men). Mean standardized scores ranged from \(-1.70\) to \(1.61\) (\(M = 0.02, SD = 0.87\)) for the entire sample.\(^4\)

**Gender identification.** As in Study 2, we used the identity subscale of the CSES (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) to measure group identification, rewording the items to be gender specific (e.g., “Being a woman [or man] is an important reflection of who I am”; overall \(\alpha = .59\); \(\alpha = .69\) for women and \(\alpha = .45\) for men).\(^5\)

**Laboratory Procedure**

The design was a 2 (status: high/men, low/women) \(\times\) 2 (context: outgroup rejection, ingroup selection) between-subjects factorial. The procedure was identical to that of Study 2, with the following exceptions. First, the sex rather than the ethnicity of the two other students was manipulated by means of digital photographs. All photographs were of European American students pretested to be equivalent in attractiveness. For participants in the outgroup rejection condition, the manager (Person B) and other applicant (Person D) were both members of the other sex but were the same ethnicity as the participant. For participants in the ingroup selection condition, the manager was the same sex as the participant and the other applicant was a member of the other sex. The second difference was that participants did not overhear a conversation between the manager and the experimenter. Instead, they received only the written feedback. We omitted the taped conversation in an effort to reduce suspicion. Feedback in the outgroup rejection condition indicated that the manager had assigned the participant to the clerk position because he or she “did not think we would work well together and wouldn’t make a good team” and that the other applicant “would make a better, more successful co-manager.” In the ingroup selection condition, the manager indicated that he or she had assigned the participant to the co-manager position because he or she “thought they would work well together and would make a good team” and that the participant “would be a better, more successful co-manager.”

As in Study 2, after seeing the photos but before receiving their role assignments, participants judged how well they would perform in the comanager role, how well they would perform in the clerk role, and which role they preferred.

**Attractions.** Our primary dependent measure was the extent to which participants believed their assignment to the role of either clerk or comanager was due to gender discrimination. A second item assessed attributions to gender, but without reference to discrimination (asking to what extent the decision was “due to your gender”). Two separate attributions (asking to what extent the decision was “due to the quality of your written statement” and “due to the effort you put into your written statement”) were combined into an internal attribution measure (\(\alpha = .62\)). A single item (“Role assignment was random”) served as a nondiscrimination external attribution. Participants responded to these items on scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal).

**Ratings of the manager.** Participants rated the extent to which the manager was qualified and was competent to make the role assignment decision. These were combined into a composite measure (\(\alpha = .79\)).

**Debriefing.** After completing the dependent variables, participants received a final questionnaire assessing manipulation checks and probing for suspicion. All were then debriefed and entered into the $100 lottery. The $100 prize was awarded on completion of all data collection.

**Results**

**Manipulation Checks**

All participants correctly identified the sex of the other two fictitious participants. Four reported either that they did not believe there were other participants present, that the manager was a confederate, or that the role assignment was rigged. Of these 4 participants, 1 woman and 2 men were in the selection condition and 1 man was in the rejection condition. These 4 students were omitted from further analyses.

Both men (\(M = 4.10, SD = 1.04\)) and women (\(M = 3.63, SD = 1.13\)) preferred the comanager role to the clerk role. A 2 (status) \(\times\) 2 (context) ANOVA revealed a status effect, \(F(1, 93) = 4.19, p < .05\); men had a stronger preference for the comanager role than did women. The context main effect and the interaction were not significant (\(ps > .10\)). Participants of both genders anticipated performing well in the comanager role (men: \(M = 4.21, SD = 0.65\); women: \(M = 4.02, SD = 0.75\)) and the clerk role (men: \(M = 3.77, SD = 0.99\); women: \(M = 4.00, SD = 0.79\)). There were no significant main effects or interactions for either of these ratings (\(ps > .10\)).

**Mean Group Differences and Correlations**

**Attractions.** Attractions to gender discrimination were correlated positively with attributions to gender (\(r = .76, p < .001\)) and negatively with attributions to internal factors (\(r = - .19, p < .06\)), to random factors (\(r = - .30, p < .01\)), and to evaluations of the manager’s competence (\(r = - .30, p < .01\)). The attribution to gender also correlated negatively with attributions to internal factors (\(r = - .25, p < .01\)) and random factors (\(r = - .33, p < .01\)) and to evaluations of the manager’s competence (\(r = - .27, p < .01\)). Finally, internal attributions, evaluations of the manager’s

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\(^4\) Ideology items were standardized in Study 3 because participants were drawn from pretesting sessions across two academic quarters. In one quarter, the questionnaire used a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) whereas the other scale ranged from 1 to 7.

\(^5\) Although the alpha for gender identification is low, the measure is used widely in research, and low alpha levels are not atypical (Tropp & Wright, 2001).
competence, and attributions to random factors were not significantly correlated with one another (rs < .15, ps > .10).

A 2 (status) × 2 (context) × 4 (attribution) repeated measures ANOVA on the four attribution measures revealed a significant main effect for type of attribution, $F(3, 73) = 18.57, p < .001$. Across conditions, attributions to gender discrimination ($M = 1.92, SD = 1.13$) were significantly lower than all other attributions (all ps < .001), and attributions to internal factors ($M = 3.19, SD = 0.96$) were significantly higher than all other attributions (ps < .01). Attributions to random factors ($M = 2.48, SD = 1.21$) and to gender ($M = 2.54, SD = 1.28$) did not differ significantly. We also observed a significant Context × Attribution interaction, $F(3, 73) = 8.19, p < .01$, reflecting that success and failure are explained differently. The simple main effect for type of attribution was significant within both the outgroup rejection ($p < .01$) and the ingroup selection conditions ($p < .001$).

Participants in the outgroup rejection condition were significantly less likely to attribute their rejection to discrimination ($M = 2.32$) or to random factors ($M = 2.26$) than to gender ($M = 2.91$) or to internal factors ($M = 3.25$). Attributions to discrimination and to random factors did not differ, nor did attributions to gender and to internal factors. In the ingroup selection condition, attributions to discrimination ($M = 1.32$) were significantly lower than attributions to gender ($M = 2.00$), which in turn were significantly lower than attributions to random factors ($M = 2.81$) or to internal factors ($M = 3.10$). Attributions to internal factors and to random factors were not significantly different.

Moderator and control variables. Endorsement of individual mobility was higher among men ($M = 0.15, SD = 0.74$) than women ($M = −0.15, SD = 0.67$), $t(82) = 1.82, p < .05$. Gender identification was higher among women ($M = 4.34, SD = 1.09$) than men ($M = 3.81, SD = 1.08$), $t(48) = −2.21, p < .05$. The relationship between belief in individual mobility and gender identification was negative and significant for women ($r = −.36, p < .05$) but not men ($r = −.03$).

**Ideology and Attributions**

**Attributions to discrimination.** We examined the relation of individual mobility endorsement and role assignment to men’s and women’s attributions to discrimination using hierarchical regression. In Step 1, the regression model included status (0 = female; 1 = male) and context (0 = outgroup rejection; 1 = ingroup selection) as categorical predictor variables and ideology as a continuous predictor. We controlled for group identification in the model by entering it as a continuous predictor variable at Step 1. At Step 1 ($R^2 = .22, p < .01$), identification ($β = −.03$), status ($β = −.10$), and ideology ($β = −.13$) were not significant. The effect for context ($β = −.43, p < .001$) was significant, indicating that outgroup rejection was more likely to be attributed to discrimination than was ingroup selection. At Step 2 we added the 3 two-way interactions. This did not improve the fit of the model ($ΔR^2 = .05, p > .10$), and none of the two-way interactions was significant (Status × Context: $β = .21$; Status × Ideology: $β = .24$; Context × Ideology: $β = −.13$; all ps > .10).

The addition of the three-way interaction in Step 3 improved the model fit ($ΔR^2 = .06, p = .01$). The Status × Context × Ideology interaction was significant ($β = −.45, p < .01$; see Figure 3). Among participants rejected by an outgroup member, the Status × Ideology effect was significant ($β = .51, p < .05$). As hypothesized, the more women endorsed individual mobility, the less they attributed their rejection by a man to discrimination ($β = −.38, p < .05$). By contrast, the more men endorsed individual mobility, the more they tended to attribute their rejection by a woman to discrimination ($β = .31, p = .08$). This effect is displayed in the top panel of Figure 3.

The Status × Ideology interaction among participants selected by an ingroup member was marginally significant ($β = −.45, p = .09$). This interaction is shown in the bottom panel of Figure 3. As predicted, the more men endorsed the ideology of individual mobility, the less they attributed the outcome to discrimination when a man selected them instead of a woman to be comanager ($β = −.63, p < .01$). In contrast, ideology was unrelated to attributions to discrimination among women who were selected by another woman ($β = −.02$).

**Attributions other than discrimination.** We examined the remaining attributions using the same hierarchical regression analyses described above. The overall model predicting the attribution to gender approached significance ($R^2 = .09, p = .06$), as did the Status × Context × Ideology interaction for this model ($β = −.34, p = .07$). Within the outgroup rejection condition, the Status × Ideology effect was marginally significant ($β = .41, p = .06$).
...The slopes of this interaction showed the same pattern as observed for attributions to gender discrimination, except that the simple slopes were not significant for either women (β = −.24, p > .10) or men (β = .35, p > .10). In the ingroup selection condition, the Status × Ideology effect was not significant (β = −.28, p > .10), nor was the slope for women (β = .15, p > .10) or men (β = −.23, p > .10). As in Study 2, the overall models predicting attributions to internal factors (R² = .10) and external (random) factors (R² = .14) were not significant (ps > .10).

**Ideology and Evaluation of Manager’s Competence**

Ratings of the manager’s competence and qualifications to make the decision were analyzed with a hierarchical regression analysis identical to that used to predict attributions. The overall model was significant (R² = .25, p < .01). There was a significant effect for context such that participants who were selected to be the comanager perceived the manager as more competent and qualified than the male manager who selected them to be (β = .58, p < .05). This relation was not significant for women (β = .25, p > .10).

![](image.png)

**Figure 4.** Evaluation of the manager by high-status (male) and low-status (female) group members as a function of context condition (rejection or selection) and belief in individual mobility (Study 3). *p < .05.

**Discussion**

Results of this study provide further support for our status-legitimacy hypothesis and extend it in two important ways. First, they extend to a different type of group-based hierarchy—one based on gender rather than ethnicity. Second, they extend to a different context—one of preferential advantage rather than disadvantage. As in Study 2, we observed no main effect of group status on attributions to discrimination. Rather, the crossover pattern of the interaction observed in the outgroup rejection condition illustrates that members of lower status groups are sometimes more likely and sometimes less likely than members of higher status groups to make attributions to discrimination. The pattern depends on the extent to which individuals endorse a status-legitimating ideology of individual mobility. As in Study 2, members of a lower status group (women) who were rejected by a member of a higher status group (a man) were significantly less likely to attribute the rejection to discrimination than the more they endorsed the ideology of individual mobility. In contrast, men who were rejected by a woman were more likely to attribute the rejection to discrimination than the more they endorsed the ideology of individual mobility.

Study 3 also provides important insight into the psychology of entitlement. The more men endorsed individual mobility, the more they denied that discrimination was a factor when a male manager selected them instead of a woman for the comanager role and the more competent and qualified they evaluated the manager to be. In contrast, endorsement of individual mobility was unrelated to women’s discrimination attributions or managerial evaluations when a woman selected them. Thus, legitimizing ideologies moderate how members of high-status but not low-status groups perceive situations in which they are potentially advantaged because of their group membership.

**General Discussion**

The research reported here reconciles competing theoretical predictions regarding how members of low- versus high-status groups will react to the predicament of being a potential target of prejudice and discrimination. As predicted, attributions to discrim-
In each study we found that greater endorsement of individual mobility was associated with lower perceptions of personal discrimination among members of lower status groups following rejection by an outgroup member. In contrast, endorsement of this ideology was associated with greater perceptions of personal discrimination among members of high-status groups following rejection by an outgroup member. Thus, beliefs about the legitimacy of group status differences provide a lens through which specific intergroup encounters are interpreted.

Our results do not provide evidence of a general bias on the part of low-status groups, relative to high-status groups, to minimize discrimination as a cause of their negative outcomes. Nor, however, do they indicate a general bias for members of low-status groups to maximize or exaggerate prejudice as a cause of their outcomes. Our research suggests that the greater discrimination that members of low-status groups report on surveys compared with members of high-status groups (e.g., in Study 1) is more accurately explained by the greater frequency or severity of discrimination experienced by the former rather than by hypervulnerability to prejudice on their part.

Our argument that members of lower status groups are not more likely than members of higher status groups to minimize discrimination does not imply the absence of a general tendency to minimize personal discrimination as a cause of one’s outcomes. Members of both low- and high-status groups tend to minimize personal discrimination relative to group discrimination (e.g., D. M. Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990). In addition, both low- and high-status participants in this research were less likely to attribute their rejection to discrimination than to the poor quality of their essays. Other studies have similarly shown that in the absence (but not the presence) of clear cues to prejudice, people are less likely to blame their poor outcomes on discrimination than on factors such as their effort or performance (e.g., Major et al., 2001). The strong bias toward internal causes prevalent in North America may contribute to this tendency.

The current research also demonstrates that intergroup status differences must be relevant to a situation for status-legitimizing ideologies to shape attributions to prejudice within that situation. In our second study, the Status × Ideology interaction was not significant when an ingroup member rejected the participant but only when rejection came at the hands of an outgroup member. At first blush, this might seem surprising because the ingroup rejection condition resembles a situation in which allegations of reverse discrimination might be made by members of high-status groups. We believe, however, that additional cues would need to prime either group identity or illegitimacy for members of high-status groups to blame rejection by an ingroup member in our experimental situation on reverse discrimination.

Implications for Theories of Stigma

This research has important implications for theories of stigma and social devaluation. Some theorists emphasize that social devaluation can become internalized into a lesser sense of deserving among the stigmatized (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Major, 1994), whereas others stress the resistance and resilience of the stigmatized (Crocker & Major, 1989; Steele, 1997). We believe that neither of these perspectives alone provides an adequate account of the phenomenology of stigma. How the stigmatized construe and cope with their predicament is influenced both by a powerful motive to protect and enhance self-esteem and by a powerful need to perceive one’s social world and the position of oneself within that world as just (Major & Schmader, 2001).

The current research shows that individual differences in endorsement of ideologies that legitimize the status quo affect the likelihood that individuals will perceive themselves as victims of discrimination or as fairly treated in intergroup encounters. Individual differences in endorsement of legitimizing ideologies may also account for the substantial variability in self-esteem and psychological well-being observed within members of stigmatized groups (Crocker & Major, 1994; Quinn & Crocker, 1999).

Implications for Theories of Privilege

This research also has implications for understanding the phenomenology of privileged groups. Members of high-status groups are in general more likely than members of lower status groups to endorse the belief that individuals can advance in American society, regardless of their group membership. We found that members of high-status groups who strongly endorsed the belief in individual mobility were particularly likely to claim on a survey that they personally had been victims of discrimination (Study 1) and in laboratory settings to attribute rejection by a member of a lower status group to discrimination (Studies 2 and 3). For high-status individuals who strongly endorse status-legitimizing ideologies, being rejected by a member of a lower status group in favor of another low-status group member may violate their assumptions about the competence and deservingness of different groups within the status hierarchy. This may lead them to perceive that inequity has occurred. In addition, a strong belief in the current system is just and fair may make individuals who are advantaged within that system sensitive to possible threats against it (e.g., affirmative action) and to label such threats as discrimination.

Endorsing status-legitimizing ideologies may also inhibit members of privileged groups from seeing that they might be unfairly advantaged because of their group membership. In our third study we found that the more men endorsed ideologies that justify gender inequalities, the less likely they were to say it was discriminatory when another man selected them instead of a woman for a managerial role. These same men were also more likely to
believe that the male manager who made the decision was competent and qualified. These men may not have believed that discrimination contributed to their selection because they believed they deserved to be selected over the female applicant. Additional research is needed on this provocative issue.

Limitations

We believe that results of this study have important implications for intergroup perceptions and intergroup relations. Nonetheless, some limitations must be noted. First, because ideology was assessed as an individual-differences variable, our design is essentially correlational. We are currently exploring whether a similar pattern emerges when legitimizing ideology is manipulated. Second, we assessed the impact of ideology and status in situations in which cues to discrimination were very subtle. It is possible that ideology endorsement is less important in situations in which cues to discrimination are blatant (Major et al., 2001). Third, this research included no measures of the processes assumed to underlie the impact of group status and ideology on attributions to discrimination. Future research should examine whether perceptions of relative competence, qualifications, and deserving mediate this link, as we assume.

Conclusion

We have shown that group status and status-legitimacy beliefs affect attributions to discrimination within intergroup encounters. Beliefs about the legitimacy of group status differences also shape other coping processes among members of low-status groups, including selective valuation (Schmader, Major, Eccleston, & McCloy, 2001), social comparison (Bylmsa, Major & Cozzarelli, 1995), group identification (Jost & Burgess, 2000), and collective action (Ellemers, Wilke, & Van Knippenberg, 1993). Status-legitimacy beliefs may also prove useful for understanding the behavior of members of high-status groups, especially in response to improvement in the situation of low-status groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). We believe that an important avenue for future research is to explore the costs and benefits of endorsing status-legitimizing ideologies. Endorsing ideologies such as the belief in individual mobility, in personal control, and in a just world may allow individuals to maintain a perception of the world as ordered, predictable, and controllable. These perceptions have been shown to be associated with better psychological functioning (S. E. Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994). Nevertheless, endorsing legitimizing ideologies is also likely to lead members of lower status groups to perceive objectively unjust situations as fair and to inhibit social change.

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