

*Perceiving and Reacting to Prejudice:*

*Impact of Shared Attitudes and Beliefs about Status Inequality*

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Inequalities exist among social groups in the distribution of tangible and intangible social goods such as access to food, medical care, shelter, respect, and power in virtually all societies. An enduring question for political philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists concerns how these inequalities are maintained and perpetuated. Shared beliefs about *why* status inequalities exist, or status ideologies, are an essential element of this process (Jost & Banajii, 1994; Major, 1994; Major & Schmader, 2000; Sidanius & Pratto, 1993). Status ideologies explain status differences among individuals and groups, proscribe rules for gaining status, and justify the status quo (Jost & Banajii, 1994; Major, 1994). We begin this chapter by briefly reviewing research on status ideologies and discussing the role that a particular status ideology – meritocracy plays in legitimizing status inequalities in contemporary western capitalist societies such as the United States. We then discuss how the content of people's status ideology shapes their affective and physiological reactions to prejudice and discrimination directed against themselves or their social group. Collectively, this research indicates that culturally shared attitudes and beliefs about the causes of status inequality in society exert an important effect on individual

psychological processes, shaping perceptions of personal entitlement, attributions for rejection, affective reactions to prejudice against one's social group, and physiological responses during interactions with members of higher status groups.

### *1. Status Ideologies and Cultural Worldviews*

A status ideology is an integrated and shared system of social attitudes, beliefs, and values, or lay theory, that describes and explains existing status differences in society and the rules or standards necessary to be a person of value and status (Crandall, 1994; Jost, Burgess & Mosso, 2001; Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, (2007). Thus, they are both descriptive and proscriptive. Like other lay theories, status ideologies are structured and coherent systems of attitudes, beliefs, rules and concepts that are used for everyday sense making (Levy, Chiu & Hong, 2006). Other related terms used in the literature to describe this construct include stratification beliefs (Bobo & Hutchings, 1996), social mobility belief structures (Hogg & Abrams, 1988), hierarchy enhancing (or attenuating) myths (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993), and system-justifying beliefs (Jost & Banajii, 1994).

Status ideologies are a key component of people's cultural worldview in that they operate implicitly and explicitly to guide perceptions, expectations, and interpretations of the social world (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Furthermore, they are products of the local sociocultural environment in which an individual exists (e.g., nation, region, ethnic group) as well as his or her personal experiences (Shweder, 1995). Levy et al. (2006), observe that "when a lay theory or its

meaning is widely shared in a particular group, it becomes a symbolic element in the group's shared reality or cultural worldview" (p. 12). Status ideologies are often broadly known and widely shared within a cultural context. Different cultures have different status ideologies to explain social inequality (e.g., the caste system in India). In Westernized, capitalist countries, the dominant status ideology is meritocracy. This ideology holds that any individual, regardless of group membership, can be successful if he or she works hard enough or is talented enough (Kleugel & Smith, 1986; Plaut, Markus & Lachman, 2002). Meritocracy is ubiquitous in the U.S. It is inculcated in American culture through shared stories, e.g., *Horatio Alger* and *The Little Engine that Could*, cultural messages (e.g., the Nike "Just do it" ad campaign), and exemplified by the belief in "The American Dream." Meritocracy is a dominant cultural worldview in the U.S.

Meritocracy is widely endorsed by individuals of all levels of social status in the U.S. (Crandall, 1994; Furnham & Proctor, 1989; Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Kleugel & Smith, 1986). The sheer pervasiveness of the message that anyone has the opportunity to succeed in America through hard work and talent, however, means that most citizens are aware of a meritocracy worldview, even if they do not personally endorse it. Consequently, their thoughts, behaviors, and feelings may be influenced by the message of meritocracy whenever cues in the environment (e.g., motivational posters, advertisements, news stories about individuals who succeed despite adversity, make it salient. Specifically, when the

belief in meritocracy is activated, individuals are likely to construe and explain the world around them in a manner consistent with this activated belief system.

A variety of conceptually related beliefs contribute to a meritocratic ideology. Such beliefs include, for example, the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE), and beliefs in a just world, meritocracy, personal responsibility, and individual mobility (Crandall, 1994; Katz & Hass, 1988; Lerner, 1980; Major, Gramzow et al., 2002; Rubin & Peplau, 1975). Although these beliefs are only moderately correlated with each other, collectively they form a coherent ideology in which status in society is believed to be fairly distributed, based on merit, and individually deserved (Crandall, 1994; Furnham & Proctor, 1989; Katz & Hass, 1988; O'Brien & Major, 2005).

Status ideologies, like other aspects of people's cultural worldview, serve important psychological functions. Perhaps most importantly, status ideologies reduce epistemic uncertainty. By providing a coherent explanation of existing status differences in society they help to satisfy humans' need to see their world as orderly, predictable, and meaningful and allow them to function more effectively (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). By providing an understanding of how status is achieved, they also provide rules for how one's own status might, or might not, be improved.

Meritocracy is also system justifying, in that it preserves a view of existing unequal status arrangements in society as fair, just, and deserved (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Major, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1993). Consider, for example, the belief that hard work leads to success, or the belief that people get what they

deserve. These beliefs justify status inequalities by holding people responsible for their station in life and by locating the cause of their outcomes within their own efforts, merit, or deservingness. They lead to the inference that those who have high status must be more talented, hardworking, smart, or in other ways more meritorious than those who have lower status. Indeed, research has shown that the more individuals endorse beliefs associated with meritocracy, the more they blame members of lower status groups for their relative disadvantage (e.g., Crandall, 1994). The apparent consensuality of meritocracy in western, capitalist societies gives it social validity and increases its power to legitimize status inequality (Ridgeway, 2001; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Why would people endorse beliefs and ideologies that justify the current status hierarchy, even when they are disadvantaged by it? Justice scholars have offered three major explanations. First, people have a natural tendency to assume that what is “ought” to be (Heider, 1948). This tendency to assume that what is “ought” to be is commonly known as the naturalistic fallacy. Cognitive biases, such as the naturalistic fallacy and other status quo bias, lead people to assume that existing social hierarchies are good and better than any possible alternatives (Eidelman & Crandall, in press). Second, people from high status groups have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo as well as the power and means to see that beliefs that justify the status quo are prominently represented in the culture. Thus, high status groups endorse legitimizing beliefs because they reinforce their relatively privileged position in society (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Third, people are motivated to endorse beliefs that legitimize the

status quo because of a psychological need to believe that the world (at least the world relevant to the self) is a just and fair place (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994; Lerner, 1980). Jost and colleagues, for example, theorize that people have a fundamental need to preserve the belief that existing social arrangements are fair, legitimate, justifiable, and necessary.” Legitimizing the social hierarchy helps individuals to maintain their belief that the world is a fair, predictable place.

A number of studies provide support for the idea that people are motivated to believe in a just world. When people encounter examples of blatant injustice, such as an innocent victim, for example, they sometimes respond by derogating the victim if they cannot restore justice in some other manner (see Lerner & Miller, 1978). Likewise, when people are exposed to threats to the existing social system (e.g., claims that it is unfair), they often respond by justifying the system all the more (see Jost & Hunyady, 2002; *other cites* for a review). Nonetheless, a growing number of studies, indicates that people differ in the extent to which they justify the existing status system. Furthermore, differences in system-justifying behavior are linked to differences in people’s status ideologies. People who strongly endorse meritocracy behave in ways that legitimize the status hierarchy, whereas people who strongly reject meritocracy do not (e.g., Major, Gramzow et al., 2002; Major et al., 2007).

Although meritocracy is widely known and endorsed in U.S. society, people differ in the strength of their endorsement of this ideology. Given the complexity of modern societies, different reference groups can be found that provide at least some degree of validation for a variety of beliefs and values

(Anson et al., 2009). Hence, a person's status ideology may be consistent with his or her reference group, but inconsistent the status ideology that is dominant within the culture as a whole.

People who have repeatedly experienced a lack of contingency between their own efforts and their outcomes, or who have repeatedly witnessed this lack of contingency in the lives of others like themselves may come to reject meritocracy as a meaningful explanation of their reality and as a basis of their value (Major, Gramzow et al., 2002). Members of low status ethnic groups often are less likely to endorse meritocratic beliefs than are members of high status ethnic groups (e.g., Major, Gramzow et al., 2002; O'Brien & Major, 2005). Some endorse a status ideology that explains the existing status hierarchy in terms of bias, discrimination, and/or favoritism (Major & Townsend, unpublished data). Embracing a *system-de-legitimizing* worldview, such as the belief that status inequalities are due to discrimination, may be self-protective for those who frequently face devaluation. This worldview may protect personal and collective self-esteem by providing explanations other than a lack of individual effort or merit for one's own (or one's group's) social disadvantage (Crocker and Major, 1989). It may also enable members of socially devalued groups to anticipate and prepare for injustice, thereby lessening its sting.

## *II. Meritocracy and Maintenance of Status Inequality*

A meritocracy ideology leads to different inferences about the worth of members of different status groups. These inferences are often shared by members of low as well as high status groups and may sustain social inequality

both by altering perceptions of the treatment that members of different groups are entitled to expect and receive, and by preventing people from realizing when they are being treated unfairly (Major, 1994).

*Entitlement and Deserving.* Entitlement and deserving are affectively laden cognitive judgments that some individual or group *should* receive certain outcomes by virtue of who they are (entitlement) or what they have done (deserving) (see Lerner, 1980). The assumption that social status is based on merit leads to the inference that individuals and groups that possess more social goods (high status groups) must have greater inputs (e.g., intelligence, skill) and hence be more “worthy” than individuals and groups with fewer social goods (low status groups) (Jost & Hunyady, 2001; Major, 1994; O’Brien & Major, 2005; Ridgeway, 2001). Thus, endorsing the ideology of meritocracy produces an increased sense of entitlement among people from higher status groups and a decreased sense of entitlement among people from lower status groups (Major, 1994; see also Jost & Hunyady, 2002).

Evidence of this process was obtained by O’Brien and Major (2009) in two studies. In their first study they asked male and female college students to imagine that a professor had hired them to work on a project as a summer job, and then to indicate how much they deserved to be paid for the summer job. As predicted, the more men endorsed meritocracy beliefs the more money they felt they deserved to be paid for the summer job. The more women endorsed meritocracy beliefs, however, the less money they felt they deserved to be paid.



In a second study, O'Brien and Major (2009) manipulated rather than measured meritocracy. As noted above, meritocracy is a dominant and ubiquitous status ideology in the United States of which most citizens are aware. Consequently, situational cues may activate this ideology. Making meritocracy cognitively accessible may, in turn, lead to behaviors that are consistent with the activated belief (e.g., Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). To examine the impact of priming meritocracy on entitlement, O'Brien and Major brought male and female students to a laboratory, paid them \$8, and then asked them to work on a clerical task for 20 minutes. Subsequently, they asked participants to perform a scrambled sentence task (Bargh, 1996). This task contained a meritocracy prime manipulation devised by McCoy and Major (2007). The task required participants to unscramble 20 sets of 5 words into 4 word sentences. Depending on condition, the sentences unscrambled to make either meritocracy or neutral content salient. For example, in the merit prime condition, sample word sets include "effort positive prosperity leads to" (unscrambled to "Effort leads to prosperity") and "deserve people rich house it" (unscrambled to "Rich people deserve it."). The merit prime condition contained 15 prime sentences and 5 neutral sentences. The neutral condition contained 20 sentences, all of which unscrambled to neutral content unrelated to meritocracy (e.g., "a compute time calculator saves" and "cakes she fluffy likes cats"). After completing the scrambled sentence task, participants were asked to indicate the hourly pay that they deserved for the kind of work they had just completed.

As predicted, men said that they deserved significantly higher hourly pay when they were primed with meritocracy than neutral content. In contrast, women in the merit prime condition said that they deserved somewhat less pay than did women in the control condition, even though women in both conditions performed more work on the task than did men. In sum, these studies show that endorsing or activating meritocracy led to lower perceived entitlement among members of low status groups and higher perceived entitlement among members of high status groups.

A study by McCoy and Major (2007, Study 2) provided further evidence that priming meritocracy reduces perceived deserving among low status groups. Women read a (bogus) article documenting pervasive prejudice toward women at their own university (sexism condition), or pervasive prejudice toward a non self-relevant group (the Inuit in Canada). Prior to reading the article, women completed either a merit or neutral prime using the sentence unscramble task described above. McCoy and Major (2007) hypothesized that women exposed to sexism and primed with meritocracy would be more likely to endorse gender stereotypes that imply that men are more deserving of high status than women, and more likely to describe themselves in stereotypical ways that imply less deservingness for high status positions (i.e., as less competent and more warm) than women in the remaining three conditions. This hypothesis rests on the assumption that exposure to information that threatens an activated belief system may lead people to cling even more strongly to that belief system, an assumption

derived from cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, xxxx) and well documented by research on Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997).

As predicted, women who were primed with meritocracy (relative to those in the neutral prime condition) and who read about pervasive sexism were more likely than women in the other three conditions to stereotype women in ways that justified women's subordinate status. They also described themselves in more gender-stereotypical ways (as more warm than competent) than did women in the other three conditions. These data provide further evidence that activating cultural ideologies relevant to status can influence individual cognition in ways that maintain existing status hierarchies in society.

*Attributions to Discrimination.* Meritocracy also affects perceptions of and explanations for outcomes in intergroup contexts, especially when the cause of those outcomes is attributionally ambiguous. The more members of low status groups endorse meritocracy, the more they may attribute rejection to a lack of deservingness on their part, and the less they may attribute it to discrimination. In contrast, because meritocracy implies that high status group members deserve their position of relative advantage, the more members of high status groups endorse meritocracy, the more they may view outcomes that favor low, over high, status groups as violating distributive justice principles, or inequitable (e.g., "reverse discrimination"). Outcomes that are seen as inequitable are more likely to be attributed to discrimination than are those that are seen as equitable (Major, Quinton & McCoy, 2002). Consequently, greater endorsement of meritocracy should decrease the extent to which members of low status groups

see themselves as victims of discrimination and enhance the extent to which members of high status groups see themselves as victims of discrimination following rejection by an outgroup member.

Major and colleagues (Major, Gramzow, McCoy, Levin, Schmader & Sidanius, 2002) found support for this hypothesis in three studies. Their first study assessed the relationship between meritocratic beliefs (the belief in individual mobility) and perceived discrimination based on ethnicity among ethnic minority and European-American (EA) college students. As predicted, endorsement of individual mobility was negatively and significantly related to perceived discrimination among ethnic minorities but was positively and significantly related to perceived discrimination among EAs. In

In a second study, Latino-American or EA students were rejected for a desirable role by a member of their own ethnic group (ingroup-rejection) or the other ethnic group (outgroup-rejection), in favor of a member of the outgroup. As predicted, in the outgroup rejection condition, the more low-status (LA) students endorsed the belief in individual mobility, the *less* they attributed their rejection by a higher status (EA) student to discrimination. In contrast, the more high status students (EA) endorsed the belief in individual mobility, the *more* they attributed rejection by a lower status student to discrimination. Group status did not interact with individual mobility beliefs to predict attributions to discrimination in the ingroup rejection condition. This finding is important because it illustrates that individual differences in meritocracy endorsement predict attributions to discrimination only when they are relevant to, and hence activated within specific

situations. A third study replicated these findings with women and men. The more strongly women endorsed meritocratic beliefs, the less likely they were to attribute rejection by a man (higher status) to discrimination. In contrast, the more strongly men endorsed meritocratic beliefs the more likely they were to attribute rejection by a woman (lower status) to discrimination.

McCoy and Major (2007; Study 1) demonstrated that activating meritocracy beliefs also leads to system-justifying attributions for rejection in intergroup contexts. These authors examined the effect of an experimental priming manipulation (the sentence unscramble task) on men's and women's attributions for rejection by a member of the other gender. As predicted, a meritocracy prime (relative to a neutral prime) led individuals rejected by a member of a higher status group (women rejected by men) to see the rejection as more just, in that they blamed the rejection more on themselves than on discrimination. In contrast, a meritocracy prime led individuals rejected by a member of a lower status group (men rejected by women) to see the rejection as less just, in that they blamed the rejection more on discrimination than on themselves. McCoy and Major (2007; Study 2) also showed that priming meritocracy influenced perceptions of group-based discrimination. Women who read an article describing pervasive discrimination against women were significantly less likely to subsequently agree that women face sexism if they had previously completed a merit prime than a neutral prime.

In sum, the above studies indicate that endorsing or activating meritocracy justifies and maintains the status inequality by leading to a decreased sense of

entitlement among low status groups and an increased sense of entitlement among high status groups, and by minimizing the extent to which members of disadvantaged individuals interpret poorer personal or group outcomes in intergroup contexts as unfair.

### *III. Prejudice as Worldview Confirmation or Disconfirmation*

Although people attempt to structure their social worlds so that their worldviews are confirmed, there are occasions on which this strategy fails. Sometimes experiences or events in the world violate people's worldviews. What happens when people who believe that promotions are based on merit discover that they are not? What happens when people who believe that discrimination will hold them back succeed? In short, how do people react when their experiences are inconsistent with their worldview?

Several lines of theory and research predict that inconsistencies between one's worldview and one's experiences engender anxiety. For example, Heider's (1946, 1958) balance theory proposed that inconsistency, or imbalance, among attitudinal elements creates "tension" which represents a motivational force for cognitive change. Festinger (1957) described cognitive dissonance as a state of discomfort associated with any inconsistency between relevant cognitions, asserting that a motivational state of dissonance is aroused by the juxtaposition of two cognitive elements,  $x$  and  $y$ , when "not- $x$  follows from  $y$ " (see Greenwald & Ronis, 1978;p. 13;).

The idea that people are motivated to maintain consistency in their beliefs about themselves and their social world also plays a central role in a variety of

other psychological theories, including self-verification theory (Swann, 1992), expectancy theory (Olson, Roese & Zanna, 1996), uncertainty management theory (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002), Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg et al., 1997), lay theories of intelligence (Plaks & Stecher, 2007) and the meaning making model (MMM, Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006). These theories assume that people strive to maintain consistency in their beliefs and behaviors so as to increase a sense of predictability and control. Inconsistencies disrupt a person's predictive ability and create feelings of uncertainty (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). A recent set of experiments demonstrated that participants who interacted with a partner who violated stereotypical expectancies (e.g., a rich Latino; a poor White, or an Asian who spoke with a southern accent) exhibited cardiovascular and behavioral responses consistent with a psychological state of threat compared to those who interacted with a more expected or typical partner (Mendes, Blascovich et al. (2007)

According to Olson, Roese & Zanna (1996), disconfirmation of expectancies is unpleasant even when the experience that led to the disconfirmation is positive. They note that even when someone expects the worst but experiences the best, he or she will experience an initial negative affective reaction, even if the disconfirmation produces secondary affective reactions that are positive. In their view, disconfirmation of expectancies will generally produce initial negative affect because unpredictability and uncertainty are unpleasant, because disconfirmation can produce dissonance, and because the experience of surprise can itself be unpleasant in some circumstances.

*“All else being equal, people will prefer to have their expectancies confirmed and are likely to experience positive affect (satisfaction, vindication) on confirmation, or perhaps reduction of negative affect (uncertainty, fear). “ (p. 226), .. “it is possible that the confirmation of negative expectancies, though “satisfying” in some sense, may generate aversive affect for other reasons. An individual who expects the worst and has his or her fears confirmed may feel depressed or anxious about how things turned out. Such occurrences constitute secondary affect, however, from inferences that occur after the confirmation. The initial affective response to the confirmation itself should typically be positive (based on the assumption that the desire for a stable, predictable world is primary). Moreover, even secondary negative affect will be the exception rather than the rule (Olson et al., 1996; p. 226).*

A recent set of studies by Plaks and Stecher (2007) confirms that worldview violations are anxiety-provoking, even when the outcome is positive. They hypothesized that people’s lay theory of intelligence, i.e. whether they endorse an entity (intelligence is fixed) or incremental (intelligence is malleable) theory of intelligence, shapes how they react to performance feedback. People should be discomfited by performance outcomes that are inconsistent with their lay theory. For example, “Entity theorists, like everyone, should experience greater overall positive affect following improved performance compared with static performance. However....the epistemic disorientation created by unanticipated success means that for entity theorists, this joy will be mingled with anxiety” (2007, 670). As predicted, when given feedback that their own



performance had either declined *or improved*, entity theorists displayed more anxiety and greater effort to restore prediction confidence than did incremental theorists. However, when performance remained rigidly static despite a learning opportunity, incremental theorists evinced more anxiety and compensatory effort than did entity theorists.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the desire for consistency between one's beliefs and experiences comes from self-verification theory. In a substantial body of research, Swann and his colleagues have shown that people preferentially seek information consistent with their self-views, regard self-consistent information as more valid, surround themselves with others who share their view of themselves, and contest others who challenge their self-views (see Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003, for a review). Further, they show that this occurs even for individuals' whose self-concepts are negative. Underlying this motive for self-verification, in Swann's view, is a desire for predictability and control.

Major et al. (2007) posited that people also seek consistency between their understanding of status relations in society and their experiences, and are discomfited by experiences that violate their status ideology. They termed this perspective *worldview verification theory* (WVT). According to WVT, the consistency (or inconsistency) between the contents of people's status ideology and their experiences determines their initial affective responses to those experiences. People experience initial anxiety (threat) when they encounter information that disconfirms their status ideology or worldview, relatively independent of the valence of the experience.

Prejudice and discrimination are inconsistent with the belief that status in society is based on merit and deserved. Consequently, being a target of prejudice should be anxiety-provoking for people who endorse meritocracy, and motivate them to attempt to reaffirm the threatened worldview. In contrast, prejudice and discrimination are consistent with the status ideology of those who reject a meritocratic ideology. Consequently, being a target of prejudice should not be anxiety provoking for these individuals, because these events confirm their worldview. In its strong form, WVT predicts that people who reject meritocracy will experience initial positive affect upon encountering evidence of prejudice against themselves or their group, because it is worldview affirming. In short, WVT predicts that people who expect the system to be fair will be threatened by evidence that it is not fair, whereas that people who expect that the system is discriminatory will be threatened by evidence that it is fair.

Major et al. (2007) found support for WVT in three studies. Their first study examined the relationship between perceived discrimination against one's ethnic group and personal self-esteem among a sample of Latino/a-American (LA) university students. In this study, decreases in self-esteem were used as a proxy for threat or anxiety. As predicted, among LA participants who strongly embraced meritocracy, the more discrimination they perceived to exist against their ethnic group, the *lower* their personal self-esteem. Among LA participants who rejected a meritocracy ideology, in contrast, the more discrimination they perceived directed against their ethnic group, the *higher* their personal self-esteem. In a second experiment, they examined whether endorsing a

meritocracy ideology moderated the effects of exposure to discrimination against the ingroup versus a nonself-relevant group on self-esteem. Latino/a students who read that Latino/a students from their university were victims of pervasive discrimination had lower self-esteem than the control group (students who read about prejudice against a non self-relevant group) the more they endorsed meritocracy, but *higher* self-esteem than the control group to the extent that they rejected this ideology. In addition, consistent with the prediction that people will attempt to reaffirm a threatened worldview, high meritocracy endorsers in the ingroup prejudice condition blamed their ingroup significantly more for its low status than did low endorsers in that condition, whereas high and low meritocracy endorsers did not differ in the extent to which they held their ingroup responsible for its low status in the control condition.

The third study of Major et al. (2007) provided the most direct test of WVT. From the perspective of WVT, evidence that discrimination against one's group is rare is inconsistent with the worldview of individuals who reject meritocracy while it confirms the worldview of individuals who endorse meritocracy. Hence, WVT leads to the counterintuitive prediction that individuals who reject meritocracy will have lower self-esteem if they encounter information that prejudice against their group is rare (because this violates their worldview) than if they encounter evidence that it is pervasive (because this confirms their worldview). Just the reverse should be observed among individuals who endorse meritocracy. Women in this experiment read one of two articles: one describing prejudice against women in the U.S. as pervasive, or one describing prejudice against

women in the U.S. as rare. As predicted, among women who strongly endorsed meritocracy, reading that prejudice against women is pervasive decreased their self-esteem relative to reading that prejudice against women is rare. In contrast, among women who rejected meritocracy, reading that prejudice against women is pervasive increased their self-esteem relative to reading that prejudice against women is rare. This study also showed that women who strongly endorsed a meritocracy ideology were more likely to blame women for their low status when they read that sexism was pervasive rather than rare. In contrast, women who rejected meritocracy ideology were unlikely to blame women for their low status regardless of whether they read that sexism was pervasive or rare.

Recently, Major, Townsend, Sawyer and Mendes (2009) examined how the content of people's status ideologies shapes their physiological reactions to prejudice. According to the biopsychosocial (BPS) model of challenge and threat (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996) psychological states of challenge and threat produce distinct patterns of cardiovascular reactivity (CVR) and hormonal responses in motivated performance situations. Challenge states (when resources are appraised as exceeding demands) are dominated by SAM activation and are associated with enhanced cardiac performance, leading to increased cardiac output (CO) and vasodilation or decreased systemic vascular resistance (total peripheral resistance; TPR). In contrast, threat states (when demands are appraised as exceeding resources) are dominated by HPA activation and vasoconstriction (i.e., increases in TPR). We hypothesized that members of low status groups would exhibit a threat pattern of CVR when

interacting with a partner who expressed attitudes or behaved in a way that was inconsistent with the participant's status ideology compared to when they interacted with a partner who expressed attitudes or behaved in a way that was consistent with their status ideology.

In two experiments, members of a low status group (Latinas in Experiment 1, women in Experiment 2) interacted with a confederate who was a member of a higher status group (Whites in Experiment 1, men in Experiment 2) and who expressed either prejudiced or non prejudiced attitudes towards the participant's ethnic or gender group. We assessed patterns of CVR throughout the interaction. We assessed status ideology prior to the experiment by measuring participants' endorsement of the belief in individual mobility and the belief that status differences are legitimate. Consistent with predictions from WVT, interacting with a prejudiced other induced a threat pattern of CVR among individuals who endorsed meritocracy but not among those who rejected meritocracy beliefs. Conversely, interacting with a nonprejudiced other induced a threat pattern of CVR among individuals who rejected meritocracy but not among those who endorsed it. These findings provide further evidence that the content of people's status ideology functions as a worldview that shapes how they experience intergroup interactions. Encountering prejudice in interactions with higher status outgroups is inconsistent with the worldview of those who believe the system is based on merit, and hence threatening. In contrast, the absence of prejudice in interactions with higher status outgroups violates the worldview of those who believe the system is discriminatory, and hence threatening.

#### *IV. Conclusions and Future Directions*

*Still to be written*

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