
Identity, Belief, and Bias

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People often persist in long-held beliefs even in the face of evidence that invalidates them. In a classic study, opponents and proponents of capital punishment reviewed the same mixed scientific evidence concerning the ability of the death penalty to deter would-be murderers. Each side saw the evidence as, on the whole, confirming their prior beliefs (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). They tended to accept the research that supported their prior beliefs and to denigrate the research that contradicted them. As a consequence, they reported that the evidence made them even more extreme in their beliefs than they had been before. The tendency to evaluate new information through the prism of preexisting beliefs, known as assimilation bias, is robust and pervasive (Kahan, 2010; Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004; Tetlock, 2005; cf. Gerber & Green, 1999).

Although people acknowledge assimilation bias in others, they often fail to see it in themselves (Kennedy & Pronin, this volume; Pronin, Linn, & Ross, 2002). In one dramatic study, even so-called political experts displayed severe bias and had no awareness of it (Tetlock, 2005). The subjects, scholars in political science, persisted dogmatically in their economic and political theories, even when confronted with unambiguous evidence that those theories had led them to make erroneous predictions about world affairs. Moreover, knowledge and expertise does not protect against bias and error. Knowledge can simply provide more informational grist for the mill of people's prior beliefs (Kruglanski, Webster, & Klein, 1993; see also Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). For example, among political experts, expertise in a domain of world affairs predicted greater bias and worse accuracy when it was accompanied by ideological extremity and a thinking style that favored simplification (Tetlock, 2005).

People's beliefs and attitudes affect social policy, the law, and government decisions. They affect who will lead the country, whether we go to war, and what economic policies will be implemented. It thus is critical for people to remain both open to strong evidence and skeptical of weak evidence. It can be problematic, as is often the case, when they do not. This chapter reviews

research that my collaborators and I have conducted to better understand how people's beliefs, ideologies, and identities impede openness to new information and empathy to victims of social problems. Our research goes beyond the documentation of psychological biases to advance theory-driven intervention strategies. We review strategies, borne out of social-psychological theory and research, that encourage openness to probative evidence, willingness to compromise across partisan divides, and empathy to the struggles of others.

Three areas of research are summarized. The first explores the role of ideologies about race in shaping punitive reactions to minority victims. It focuses on how a color-blind ideology—a common ideology in the United States that downplays ethnic differences in experiences—can blind people to racial injustice. While a color-blind ideology can impede empathy, so can a multicultural ideology that downplays people's shared humanity. However, both color-blind and multicultural ideologies contain assets that, when combined into a hybrid value system, may promote a more constructive response to racial problems in America.

The second area of research focuses on the role of identity in resistance to persuasion and intergroup conflict. This chapter presents evidence that beliefs, when tied to political identities such as "liberal" or "conservative," are abandoned only with great reluctance. This can make adversaries unwilling to compromise, even when they would benefit materially by doing so. The chapter also reviews research suggesting that a particular kind of psychological intervention—one in which people affirm *alternative* sources of identity and self-worth—can help overcome closed-mindedness, mistrust, and intransigence in intergroup conflict.

The third area of research examines a subtle psychological bias that may lie at the root of much workplace discrimination. It arises from a tension between people's desire to maintain a personal identity as "fair" and "objective" and their sometimes unconscious prejudices against groups. People resolve that tension by creating *constructed criteria* of merit that justify the hiring of favored candidates. This permits workplace discrimination to persist seemingly without challenge to egalitarian principles. On the basis of this analysis of psychological process, our research offers a promising intervention strategy for reducing discrimination.

In each area of research, we ask a question too seldom raised in the social sciences: Given that a problem exists, how might it be overcome? Our approach is inspired by Kurt Lewin, one of the founders of experimental social psychology. As Lewin suggested, if one's theory of a social problem is accurate and powerful, one should be able to intervene to improve social conditions (Lewin, 1952).

I. A BLINDNESS IN COLOR-BLINDNESS: RACIAL IDEOLOGIES CONTRIBUTE TO VICTIM BLAMING

In a thought-provoking essay, the social psychologist Gustav Ichheiser (1970, pp. 70-72) suggested that the denial of intergroup difference gives rise to prejudice:

[W]e fail to understand that people whose personalities are shaped by another culture are psychologically different—that they see the (social) world in a different way and react to it as they see it. Instead we tend to resolve our perplexity arising out of the experience that other people see the world differently than we see it ourselves by declaring that those others, in consequence of some basic intellectual and moral defect, are unable to see things “as they really are” and to react to them “in a normal way.”... The prejudiced are not those who insist that people are different... but those who deny it.”

As Ichheiser (1970) suggests, if we start with the “false assumption” that people generally see the world in the same way, and then encounter others who differ or disagree with us, we will tend to “denounce and persecute” them (pp. 72-73; see also Ross & Ward, 1995). A form of this false assumption pervades the United States—the assumption that different ethnic groups are the same, in the sense that they experience similar social conditions and problems. It is a distortion of a color-blind value system, giving rise to what we refer to as a color-blind ideology. People go from the assumption that different ethnic groups *should* experience equality of conditions to the assumption that they *do*. People who endorse such an ideology, we expected, would be prone to attribute racial difference and disagreement to character defects in the other race. Indeed, people sometimes make sense of disagreements with outgroup members by marshaling stereotypes that cast them as inherently inferior (Kunda, Davies, Adams, & Spencer, 2002; Miller & Prentice, 1999). When color-blind individuals face disagreement with a member of another race, or simply confront evidence that key outcomes like economic status differ by race in society, they are relatively unlikely to see them as reflections of the unique experiences and problems confronted by other ethnic groups. Such individuals are prone instead to make sense of these differences by resorting to familiar personality factors (e.g., “They are lazy or irrational”) (see also Benorodo & Hanson, this volume).

In a series of studies, we investigated whether a color-blind ideology impedes interracial empathy. We identified white Americans who espoused a color-blind ideology or did not, and then had them respond to one of two minority victims (Cohen, Scrivener, & Miles, 2009). Both victims experienced

the same struggles, but whether those struggles were associated with their race or not was experimentally varied. We hypothesized that, when the victim's struggles were associated with race, people high in color-blindness would defensively resist the information and ascribe the victim's problems to defects in morality and character.

In studies with sample sizes ranging from 25 to 70, we first measured nonminority college students' endorsement of a color-blind ideology using a survey. Because the studies focused on perceptions of Black and White Americans, the survey included both items specific to the Black-White divide and items generally related to race in America. Examples included: "Black and White Americans see the world differently," "The problems African Americans experience are different from the ones White Americans experience," and "We should spend more time focusing on what makes ethnic groups similar rather than different." Participants responded using numerical scales assessing their degree of agreement with each item.

Several weeks later we presented these respondents with a minority victim whose problems were described as either relevant to race or not. For instance, in one study, participants reviewed an ostensibly authentic case report written by a social worker. It described a poor minority woman living in the city and applying for welfare. Her problems, such as lack of education and limited job opportunities, did not vary for the participants. However, for a random half of the participants, the woman's problems were explained, by her, as partially related to her race, while for the rest of the participants they were not. For example, in the race-relevant condition, the woman emphasized the "stress from coping with the problems many black Americans have to face in the United States." By contrast, in the race-irrelevant condition, these statements were altered slightly so that instead the woman emphasized the "stress from coping with the pressures of being a single mother in the United States." The manipulation was subtle, conveyed with a couple of sentences in a three-page report. We assessed how much the participants blamed the victim—that is, how much they ascribed her problems to personal defects like laziness and how much they recommended punitive measures like cutting her welfare benefits.

Ideology shaped empathy.¹ In the race-irrelevant condition, participants high in color-blindness were, if anything, *less* victim blaming and *more* empathetic than participants low in color-blindness (i.e., those who espoused more of a "multi-cultural" ideology). Color-blind individuals seemed relatively better able to see a common humanity with a victim who did not contradict their worldview. However, in the race-relevant condition, the pattern was reversed. High color-blind subjects' victim blaming rose sharply. They proved relatively more likely to denigrate the victim's moral character and

to recommend cutting her benefits and forcing her into a mandatory work program.

One unexpected finding was that individuals low in color-blindness—those who strongly agreed with the notion that “different races see the world differently”—also seemed to base their empathy on how much the victim’s problems concurred with their worldview. They engaged in marginally less victim blaming when the woman framed her problems as relevant to race rather than irrelevant to it. In this way, both groups could be sensitive to the victim’s problems but largely when those problems were framed in a way congenial to their worldview.

The same pattern replicated in the context of a problem less racially charged than poverty. When presented with a fellow college freshman—an ethnic minority member who was having academic troubles—color-blind individuals were less sympathetic and more punitive when that student ascribed some of his difficulties to the struggles of being an ethnic minority on campus than when he ascribed them to the struggles generally faced by new students making the transition to college.

A final key study demonstrated that color-blindness is not color-blind. Rather, people apply the ideology selectively to minority outgroups. It was only when the victim was black, rather than white, that color-blindness mattered. In the study with the poor woman applying for welfare, we randomly manipulated whether the welfare applicant was black or white. The rest of her case report was identical. Unlike responses to the black woman, responses to the white woman were generally positive regardless of whether she ascribed her problems to race or not.

A key implication is that a small manipulation, a subtle invocation of the role of race, had a large effect on victim blaming and empathy. It changed people’s reactions from empathy to defensive punitiveness. Ideology, it also seems, can be a double-edged sword: color-blindness related to greater empathy to victims when the ideology was not under threat, but less empathy when it was.

These processes can lead to ripple effects. People’s judgments of a single victim can then affect their attitudes and policy recommendations with regard to a social problem in general. Later, after reviewing the welfare case report described previously, participants indicated their attitudes on various social issues in the context of a seemingly unrelated study. One series of questions asked participants for their views of poverty—the extent to which they blamed poverty on the deficits of the poor rather than environmental circumstances. The responses mirrored subjects’ previous judgments of the welfare applicants. If they had read about a welfare applicant who ascribed some of her problems to race, color-blind subjects were relatively more likely to ascribe poverty in *general* to the

personal deficits of the poor than to their circumstances. They were also relatively more opposed to social policies aimed to redress poverty. However, in the race-irrelevant condition, this pattern reversed: color-blind participants were relatively more charitable and less victim blaming in their views of the poor.

This research suggests that responses to victims and social problems are driven, in part, by ideology. People are, to some extent, top down in their empathy. They use their ideology to judge the legitimacy of a victim's claims. Moreover, they then use these ideologically driven judgments to inform their more general views of social problems and social policy. Perhaps, as Ichheister (1970, p. 383) suggested, "[T]hey restore in this way their peace of mind, for now they can feel that they themselves are right and that 'something is wrong with the other'—to believe which is one of the most essential conditions of happiness in life."

What can be done to prevent such victim blaming? One possibility is to affirm people's identities and worldviews through alternative means. Ideologies express identities—who people are, their values, the way they want the world to be. Consequently, people may be more open to information that threatens long-held ideologies when they can affirm alternative identities (Cohen et al., 2007; Hahn & Cohen, 2009). For instance, one study found that having people reflect on an identity unrelated to their political beliefs—for instance, their identity as a "good student" or a "relationship partner"—made them less likely to denigrate victims of inequality (Hahn & Cohen, 2009). It is also possible to reduce defensive denigration by honoring the ideals in the ideology ("people should be treated equally") but differentiating those ideals from reality ("but people are often treated unequally"). People who espouse an ideology may assume that simply because a state of affairs *ought* to be true—such as racial equality—that this state of affairs *is* in fact true (Hahn & Cohen, 2009). We have found that color-blindness ceases to predict empathy when people are given a message that affirms racial equality as an *ideal* but that portrays the acknowledgment of current racial inequality as a necessary *means* to achieving that ideal. Indeed, this message lies at the heart of many powerful speeches about race in America—for instance, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream Speech." The ideal of racial equality was articulated, but the more subtle message was that attaining this ideal required a recognition of society's failure, as of yet, to reach it. More generally, research has found that people are more open to policies at odds with their ideologies when those policies are framed in ways that affirm rather than threaten their moral allegiances and identities (Kahan, 2010; Kahan, Braman, Cohen, Gastil, & Slovic, 2010).

II. THE ROLE OF IDENTITY IN RESISTANCE TO PERSUASION AND INTERGROUP CONFLICT

People generally resist arguments and evidence that challenge the validity of long-held beliefs. Partisans in negotiation resist agreements that demand compromise, even when the cost of inflexibility is heavy. Liberals and conservatives endlessly debate appropriate social policy, such as health-care policy, without either side yielding much ground. In one study, liberals and conservatives rejected welfare policies ascribed to the political opposition, even for policies that they would have strongly supported had they not known their source (Cohen, 2003). Similarly, Israelis and Palestinians rejected even their own side's peace proposal when led to believe, through an experimental ruse, that it was offered by the other side (Maoz, Ward, & Ross, 2002). People resist persuasion attempts and reject pragmatic negotiation compromises in part because acquiescing to those attempts, or accepting those compromises, would be costly to their sense of identity. Long-held beliefs and group allegiances are often tied to people's identity. As such they can be like treasured possessions that are difficult to give up (Abelson & Prentice, 1989).

Many economic and political factors underlie the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, commentators and researchers suggest that the conflict arises, in part, from the defense of identity and symbolic narratives tied to those identities (Kelman, 2006). For example, the sovereignty of Jerusalem's holy sites is arguably a symbolic issue. "To have 'sovereignty' over the Temple Mount," Margalit (2000) writes, "implies no practical difference. The Palestinians preside over its administration now and will continue to do so. But it makes all the difference in the world, or in the other-world, for the two contesting sides." After Israel acquired Jerusalem, "To lose Jerusalem" came to mean "to lose... the belief in things worth sacrificing your life for."

Because of the importance of identity, negotiation can benefit from social gestures that affirm each side's cultural narrative, even when these gestures have no material or economic consequence (Kelman, 2006; see also Cohen et al., 2007). For example, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, when adversaries express empathy for the other side's suffering, offer an apology for past injustice, or make a symbolic concession, such as acknowledging the other group's right to its own state, this can increase each side's willingness to negotiate and compromise, sometimes dramatically (Atran & Ginges, 2009; Ginges, Atran, Medin, & Shikaki, 2007; Nadler & Liviatan, 2006; see also Kelman, 2006).

By contrast, commonplace and intuitive strategies to overcome resistance to persuasion and compromise can often prove ineffective or even counter-productive. For instance, telling people to be unbiased (Lord, Lepper, & Preston, 1984) or highlighting their commitment to objectivity (Uhlmann & Cohen, 2007) fails to reduce bias and may even exacerbate it. People may adopt an "I think it, therefore it's true" mindset, in which they assume that a belief or even hunch, simply by virtue of being theirs, is objective and therefore worthy of being acted on (Uhlmann & Cohen, 2007; see also Kennedy & Pronin, chapter 12, this volume). As a result, encouraging people to be objective may lead them to persist in their prior beliefs more rather than less. One study found that asking partisans of capital punishment to be objective failed to lessen their tendencies to resist belief-disconfirming evidence and to accept belief-confirming evidence (Lord et al., 1984). In another set of studies, having people assert their commitment to objectivity prior to a mock hiring exercise increased their reliance on gender-stereotypical beliefs that they would have otherwise suppressed. They engaged in more gender discrimination, hiring a male over a female candidate for stereotypically masculine jobs like police chief (Uhlmann & Cohen, 2007).

One effective theory-driven intervention is to affirm alternative sources of identity through self-affirmation. If people focus on important sources of self-worth beyond the persuasion or negotiation topic, it becomes psychologically less painful for them to change their minds or compromise. By affirming alternative sources of self-worth, people momentarily broaden their sense of self to encompass domains beyond the provoking threat (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). They can thus yield without it being as costly to self-identity. An anecdote conveyed by former President Jimmy Carter is suggestive (Carter & Richardson, 1998). In the final hours of the peace talks at Camp David between the prime minister of Israel, Menachem Begin, and the president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, negotiations had reached an impasse. Prime Minister Begin was on the verge of abandoning the talks. Then, Carter gave Begin a series of photographs of him, Carter, and Sadat. Carter had personally addressed each of the photographs with the name of one of Begin's grandchildren:

I handed it to him. And he started to talk to me about the breakdown of the negotiations and he looked down and saw that I had written all of his grandchildren's names on the individual pictures and signed them, and he started telling me about his favorite grandchild and the characteristics of different ones. And he and I had quite an emotional discussion about the benefits to my two grandchildren and to his if we could reach peace. And I think it broke the tension that existed there, that could have been an obstacle to any sort of resolution at that time (p. 161).

Carter's actions broadened Begin's perspective beyond the economic and political calculus that can dominate negotiations. As Carter notes, "[W]hen the negotiators sit around a table and start talking, the human dimension tends to fade away, and you get bogged down in the legalisms and the language and the exact time schedule, when from a historic perspective they have no significance" (p. 161). Being reminded of big-picture values, like family, allows people to see conflict in a larger context. "Being right" or "getting one's way" fades in importance, making room for other motives, such as "being pragmatic" and "finding a compromise," that take into account broader costs and benefits. This strategy can prove especially beneficial in conflicts where compromise is psychologically painful but pragmatically wise.

Early research predicted that allowing political partisans to affirm an alternative source of identity before reviewing a counter-attitudinal persuasive report would increase their openness (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000). The participants were proponents and opponents of the death penalty. They reviewed a report concerning capital punishment. For death-penalty proponents, the report offered strong arguments and scientific evidence that challenged the deterrent efficacy, economic soundness, and moral justification of the death penalty. For death-penalty opponents, the report took the opposite position. (The report was fabricated but appeared to be an authentic article from a social science journal.)

For the self-affirmation manipulation, half of the participants were randomly assigned to complete a self-affirmation exercise before reading the persuasive report. These participants wrote about the importance of a personal value unrelated to politics, such as their relationships with friends, their sense of humor, or their creativity; or in another study they received positive feedback about their social intelligence. Participants thus received an affirmation of an important source of self-worth unrelated to the threatening information. Relative to a no-affirmation control condition, the affirmation made participants, regardless of their initial position, more open to the persuasive evidence. Affirmed proponents and opponents of the death penalty proved more likely to show substantive attitude change in the direction of the report they had read.

Another study addressed why partisans can be resistant to "objectively" good news, for instance news that the economy is improving or that the environment is becoming cleaner (Bastardi & Ross, 2004). The researchers posited that such good news can threaten people's partisan identity. If a person stakes his or her self-worth on an issue, the possibility that the issue is actually a nonissue may be too psychologically painful to admit. If true, affirmation should make partisans more open to such identity-threatening "good" news.

In one study, a group of roughly 30 environmentalists were found to be significantly more open to evidence that global catastrophe was not imminent if they had first received a self-affirmation unrelated to their identity as an environmentalist—for instance, when they had reflected on an alternative value, such as their relationships with friends and family. By contrast, they were relatively dismissive of such evidence without an affirmation of an unrelated identity—for instance, in a condition where they affirmed their commitment to environmentalism or wrote about a threatening personal experience. In a sense, these environmentalists, unless self-affirmed, preferred to believe that the world could end than be wrong. The results echo earlier research by Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956), who showed that doomsday groups had a vested interest in seeing their prophecies of world destruction come true and experienced psychological dissonance when they did not. The psychological drive for identity can eclipse even basic human motives to be rational, pragmatic, and optimistic.

Additionally, self-affirmation has been found to increase people's openness to health-risk information. Sherman, Nelson, and Steele (2000) began with the idea that people can feel threatened by information suggesting that they engage in behavior that puts their health at risk. Such information challenges not only their wish to be free of risk but also their identity as a rational actors. The researchers brought coffee drinkers to their laboratory and had them read a persuasive scientific report linking caffeine intake to cancer (the report was fabricated). Under normal circumstances, coffee drinkers, in contrast to those who did not drink coffee, dismissed the evidence. However, coffee drinkers asked to complete a self-affirmation, in which they reflected on an important personal value like social relationships, were relatively more open to and accepting of the report's findings. Subsequent studies have found that, under certain circumstances, such affirmation-induced attitude change persists over time and improves health behavior (see Epton & Harris, 2008).

Affirmation-induced openness is not simply a rose-colored glasses effect, in which people become more positive toward any new idea or information. Research finds that affirmation increases openness primarily to strong rather than weak counter-attitudinal arguments, while decreasing acceptance of weak rather than strong proattitudinal arguments (Correll, Spencer, & Zanna, 2004). Self-affirmation, it seems, gives people the inner security they need both to accept persuasive ideas that they would otherwise reject and to discard nonadaptive ideas to which they would otherwise cling. By allaying self-protective needs, affirmation permits other motives—such as motives for accuracy, objectivity, and self-improvement—to predominate (Kunda, 1990).

Another study tested whether affirmation could improve negotiation. Prochoicers engaged in a negotiation with a prolifer over abortion legislation (Cohen et al., 2007). At the outset, they completed an exercise designed to be either self-affirming (writing about a time when they lived up to a personally important value, such as relationships with friends) or self-threatening (writing about a time when they failed to live up to an important value). The study crossed that experimental manipulation with a manipulation of the salience of participants' political identity. In the political identity-salient condition, participants were asked to assert, prior to the negotiation, their "true beliefs" about appropriate abortion policy. In the political identity nonsalient condition, they were not. Participants then took part in a negotiation with their adversary over abortion legislation, and we counted the number of concessions they made. When political identity was not salient—when people were not focused on defending their political identity—there was no effect of affirmation. Because people had relatively less identity or ego at stake in the situation, an ego-but-tressing intervention had no impact. But in the condition where people were focused on their political identity, the political identity-salient condition, affirmation had a large effect. It nearly doubled the number of concessions participants made to their adversary. Moreover, in spite of having made so many concessions, affirmed participants did not feel resentful or pressured into having compromised. They left the session with a greater sense of trust and liking of their negotiation partner. Affirmed participants saw their adversary as relatively less biased by ideology and self-interest. They also felt more open to negotiating with her in the future. Such findings are noteworthy in light of the importance of trust in the resolution of intergroup conflict in the real world. A major obstacle is keeping both sides at the negotiation table, when mistrust continually threatens to bring stalemate and the escalation of conflict (Kennedy & Pronin, chapter 12, this volume; see Nadler & Liviatan, 2006). Affirmation may help to prevent the cycle of mistrust that drives negotiations apart.

These findings also illustrate the costs and benefits of drawing people's attention to their social and political identities. On the one hand, when people express their commitment to a political identity—for example, by asserting their "true beliefs" about abortion rights—their position can solidify and their intransigence increase. Among nonaffirmed negotiators, there was a trend in this direction, such that they compromised less when their political identity had been made salient in the "true beliefs" condition. On the other hand, however, when people express their commitment to a political identity, they may feel a greater obligation to make practical gains on behalf of the cause, rather than make symbolic last stands that result in endless stalemate. This appeared to occur among affirmed negotiators: When their political identity had been

made salient, they compromised more, indeed more than any other group in the study. The affirmation of higher values beyond the conflict at hand, it seems, permitted these participants to rise above the desire "to be right" and "get their way," and, much like Carter's gesture to Begin, allowed them to focus on finding a middle ground.

Affirmation processes also apply to the effects of racial identity on school achievement. Education is, in many ways, like persuasion. Openness to new information and ideas is critical. But if, as is often the case in the American school system, an ethnic minority student receives instruction from a White teacher, there may be a potential for mistrust that makes racial identity salient for the student (Cohen & Steele, 2002). In the eyes of African American students or Latino American students, it may be plausible that their race could be a factor in the treatment they receive in school, especially given pervasive negative stereotypes about their ethnic group's intellectual ability and the historical legacy of discrimination in the United States. The salience of race could make the school environment more psychologically threatening for minorities (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). For example, a minority student may wonder if a teacher's critical feedback reflects a genuine intent to help or racial bias (Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999). Given this, we wondered if affirmation would increase minority students' openness to instruction in an ethnically diverse school.

To address this question, we conducted a field experiment in an ethnically diverse middle school (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; see also Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009). The student body was split roughly equally between black Americans and white Americans, and virtually all the teachers were white. At the beginning of the school year, in the context of a randomized, double-blind experiment, seventh-grade students were assigned to complete either a series of self-affirmation exercises similar to the ones described previously, in which they reflected on an important personal value, or a series of control exercises, in which they wrote about an unimportant value or a daily routine. The exercises were presented as a regular classroom assignment. Random assignment occurred within each participating classroom, such that half the children completed affirmation exercises while the remainder completed control exercises. Similar exercises were repeated throughout the school year. Careful methodological steps ensured that teachers remained unaware of their students' condition assignment. Additionally, children remained unaware that they were part of an intervention study and that there were different versions of the exercises (see Cohen et al., 2006, 2009). We used a questionnaire to measure students' trust in their teachers—the extent to which they viewed their teachers as fair and "on their side"—both at the beginning of the year, prior to the intervention, and then at the end of the academic year.

In the control condition, a racial divide in perception emerged over the course of middle school (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; see also Cohen et al., 2006). Without affirmation, black students' trust in their teachers dropped more than did that of white students. Seventh grade, the grade in which the intervention was introduced, is a time when race and its significance become particularly salient, a factor that might explain this drop in trust (Simmons, Black, & Zhou, 1991). By contrast, affirmed black students displayed a significantly smaller drop in trust over their remaining tenure in middle school.

If affirmation maintains students' trust of their teachers, this might translate into better learning and grades. Consistent with this expectation, affirmed black students earned significantly better grades than did their peers in the control condition. For instance, the percentage of them earning a D or below in the intervention-targeted course fell from 20% in the control condition to 9% in the affirmation condition (Cohen et al., 2006.). The performance benefits of the intervention were still evident 2 years later (Cohen et al., 2009). While many mechanisms probably underlie this effect on classroom grades (Cohen et al., 2006, 2009), greater trust of school authorities may play a role.

These findings provide promising evidence of the applicability of self-affirmation and identity processes to the real world. Affirmation can bridge not only partisan divides but also racial divides. In real-world settings, where people have repeated encounters across racial and political lines, these processes can be recursive in nature (Cohen et al., 2009). In the absence of intervention, mistrust can feed off its consequences: People see bias where none may have existed. This perception of bias can then deepen the very mistrust that gave rise to the perception of bias, further fueling the perception of bias, in a repeating cycle (see Lord et al., 1979). A downward spiral of mistrust and retaliation may result (Kennedy & Pronin, chapter 12, this volume). Given this, if one can intervene early enough to interrupt the recursive process before it accelerates, lasting positive change may follow.

III. THE ROLE OF CONSTRUCTED CRITERIA IN LICENSING DISCRIMINATION

Many Americans experience a tension between their meritocratic values on the one hand and conscious or unconscious prejudicial beliefs on the other (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). The mandates of meritocracy demand that they hire people based on their merits rather than their group memberships. However, sexist and racist beliefs impel them toward discrimination. We have found that people can resolve this tension by changing their definition of merit (Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005). People spontaneously construct and reconstruct criteria of merit in a way that advantages positively stereotyped groups

(see also Hodson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2002; Norton, Vandello, & Darley, 2004). Such “constructed criteria” enable people to discriminate while resting assured of their personal fairness and objectivity. Indeed, a recent field experiment found that the phenomenon of shifting criteria of merit constitutes one of three key contributors to real-world discrimination in low-wage labor markets (Pager, Western, & Bonikowski, 2009).

In one study, participants reviewed either a male or a female candidate for the job of police chief in a mock hiring scenario (Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005). The candidate was described as either “book smart”—someone with a lot of administrative experience, who was well educated, and who also had a family and kids—or “street smart”—someone who made a lot of arrests, who was tough, worked a lot, and was single. Participants were then asked to rate the importance of each of these traits to the job of police chief.

Whatever credentials the male candidate had were seen by participants as relatively important for the job. For instance, when he had book smarts, book smarts were seen as important to being a police chief. In fact, there was a very strong correlation between ratings of the male candidate’s standing on a given trait (for example, “administrative skills”) and the perceived importance of that trait to the job. Even seemingly peripheral traits, like having children, or stereotypically feminine traits, like being family-oriented, were rated as more important when the male candidate had them than when he did not. Likewise, when the male candidate had street smarts, the book-smart traits were seen as relatively less important and street-smart traits like “being tough” and “making a lot of arrests” were rated as relatively more important. In short, participants’ response to the male candidate seemed to be, “This person will bring assets to the job.”

By contrast, there was no such effect when the candidate was female. If anything, there was a nonsignificant reverse tendency for subjects to see whatever credentials the female applicant had as less important to the job. On the whole, the relationship between the female candidate’s perceived standing on a given trait and the perceived importance of that trait was nil. Participants’ response was one of neutrality. They did not allow the female applicant’s credentials to affect their job criteria. Their response seemed to be, “I’m going to be neutral. On the one hand, she has certain credentials. On the other hand, here’s what’s important to the job. I’m not going to confuse the two.” In this way, participants applied different definitions of fairness when evaluating candidates of different genders. For male candidates, they defined fair as appreciating what the candidate could bring to the job. For female candidates, they defined fair as being neutral. In both cases, participants were fair, but what they failed to recognize was that they had applied different definitions of fairness to men and women.

Importantly, male job candidates face the same bias when they apply for jobs where they are stereotyped as not belonging. We found that people constructed hiring criteria that disadvantaged men applying for high-status jobs typically filled by females, such as "women's studies professor" (Uhlman & Cohen, 2005).

Participants thus defined the criteria of merit in a way congenial to the idiosyncratic credentials of the positively stereotyped applicant. As a consequence, they could discriminate while resting assured that their hiring decisions followed from "objective" standards of merit. Indeed, the more participants created discrimination-justifying criteria, the more they claimed their hiring decisions had been objective and rational. Those who had engaged in the most bias claimed they had the least. Participants, it seems, believed they had picked exactly the right man for the job when in reality they had picked exactly the right criteria for the man.

These results suggest a theory-driven intervention: Require people to commit to hiring criteria before reviewing applicant folders. In a follow-up study, we had a random subset of participants rate the importance of various criteria for the job of police chief, such as traits related to book smarts and street smarts, *before* they saw the applicants' credentials. Those participants who did not do this exercise engaged in gender discrimination. They preferred the male over the female candidate. By contrast, participants who had precommitted to hiring criteria showed no gender discrimination. When people no longer had the ability to construct biased hiring criteria, discrimination disappeared. More research is needed to assess whether the same de-biasing strategy would work in actual work settings with real stakeholders. Nevertheless, these results provide a promising foundation for effective intervention.

IV. CONCLUSION

The research discussed here illustrates the role of ideology in punitive reactions to victims; the role of identity in resistance to persuasion and intransigence in negotiation; and the role of constructed criteria in the maintenance of discrimination. People's long-held beliefs, ideologies, and identities can bias them in ways that contribute to inequality and intergroup conflict. However, theory-driven interventions, attuned to psychological processes, can reduce bias and change outcomes for the better.

NOTE

1. All effects reported in this chapter are statistically significant, below the conventional $P = 0.05$ threshold.

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