And the Construal of Social Disadvantage

Brenda Major and Tanya Schmader

Explain why members of disadvantaged groups are the targets of discrimination can difficultly explain why members of disadvantaged groups are the victims of discrimination. Olson & Hafer, this volume; Taylor et al., 1999.

It has been suggested that attributing negative outcomes to factors outside one’s personal control is harmful to self-esteem. Schmader et al., in press) found that members of disadvantaged groups are more likely to attribute outcomes to factors outside their control than members of advantaged groups. This is because members of disadvantaged groups are more likely to construe outcomes as unjustified. These two tendencies have conflicting effects on construal processes among members of disadvantaged groups (Jost et al., this issue). Second, we have argued that how people construe their state of disadvantage is shaped by their appraisals of its legitimacy. When distributions (at the system, group, or individual level) are appraised as illegitimate, we suggest that members of socially devalued groups tend to attribute their lesser outcomes to qualities of themselves or their group and strive to devalue (rather than devalue) domains in which their group is at a relative disadvantage. When distributions are appraised as legitimate, however, we propose that members of disadvantaged groups tend to attribute their outcomes to factors for which they are not responsible and to devalue domains in which they are disadvantaged. Third, we have proposed that illegitimacy appraisals have important implications for the self-esteem of members of socially disadvantaged groups, again through their impact on construal processes. We have summarized evidence from our own research that suggests each of the above claims. Finally, we have observed that although discrete appraisals of illegitimacy that pertain to specific situations of potential prejudice may buffer self-esteem, the development of chronic appraisals of illegitimacy that generalize beyond specific events may have longer-term psychological costs. It is conceivable that these costs account for the widespread endorsement of legitimizing beliefs and value systems, even among the most disadvantaged, and for the fact that even the slightest of situational cues concerning procedural justice can reinforce the presumption of legitimacy.

REFERENCES


consequences of attributional ambiguity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 64*, 60–70.


Brenda Major and Tanya Schnell


Quinton, W., & Major, B. (2000, February). Antecedents to attributions to discrimina-
tion. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Personality a
Social Psychology, Nashville, TN.
nominal characteristics. Social Forces, 70, 367–386.
do not perceive the discrimination that confronts them: The role of self-esteem
mains in response to threatening intergroup comparisons: Perceived legitima
Schmader, T., Major, B., & Granzow, R. H. (in press). Coping with ethnic stere	ypes in the academic domain: Perceived injustice and psychological disengag
Multidimensional model of racial identity: A reconceptualization of African
do social dominance. In P. M. Sniderman, P. E. Tetlock, & E. G. Carmines (Eds
Prejudice, politics, and the American dilemma (pp. 273–211). Stanford, CA: Stanford
University Press.
cology, 33, 1–39.
Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavio
In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), Psychology of intergroup relations (pp. 7–24
Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
group discrimination discrepancy: Perceiving my group, but not myself, to be
and subjective physiological, and behavioral responses to potential stress.
tions to stigmas. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 55, 728–748.