A Peek Inside the Targets’ Toolbox: How Stigmatized Targets Deflect Discrimination by Invoking a Common Identity

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In an effort to identify effective strategies for reducing prejudice, this research tested whether stigmatized individuals can evoke a common identity to deflect discrimination. In an initial survey, gay/lesbian/bisexual participants reported a preference for evoking common identity in intergroup interactions. In two experiments, straight male perceivers in a managerial role-playing paradigm were more likely to select a gay man for an interview if he had primed a common identity. Evoking a common identity did not similarly benefit straight candidates. Findings suggest that integrating prejudice reduction and persuasion research can identify strategies that empower targets to effectively cope with prejudice.

Social psychology has long been interested in reducing prejudice and intergroup conflict. On the one hand, research into the causal antecedents of prejudice has identified many psychological variables that can reduce perceivers’ biases. Additionally, intergroup conflict theorists have examined when the socially disadvantaged engage in collective action to combat injustice (Van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009). It is interesting to note, however, that very little research intersects these two approaches by asking how those who are socially stigmatized can take an active yet individual role in reducing perceivers’ biases against them. In the present article, we focus on highlighting common identity as both a preferred and effective strategy used by those who are stigmatized to “manage their spoiled identity.” Although we firmly reject the notion that targets should have to shoulder the burden of reducing prejudice they encounter, those who are targeted by intergroup biases are often in the best position to anticipate the likelihood of bias and have the most to gain by reducing it. Indeed, by avoiding this question we risk relegating stigmatized individuals to having a purely passive role in the process of bias reduction (Major, Quinton, McCoy, & Schmader, 2000; Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998).

TARGET EMPOWERMENT IN THE PREJUDICE REDUCTION PROCESS

Goffman (1963) subtitled his book Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity for a reason. He was acutely interested in documenting how those who are stigmatized negotiate their identity to facilitate smooth interactions with those who would label them deviant. Similarly, we believe that the effective use of interpersonal influence strategies can empower targets to change perceivers’ attitudes and behaviors. Existing research on target responses to prejudice has predominantly focused on the effectiveness of individually confronting a perceivers’ biased behavior after it has occurred or engaging in collective action in response to group-level injustice. Although blatant confrontation increases perceivers’ guilt and reduces stereotyping, targets who confront are often disliked (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006) and confrontation is often avoided (Swim & Hyers, 1999). Similarly, collective action efforts are adopted when
group identification is high and bias is readily apparent but are less likely in ambiguous intergroup encounters (Ellemers & Barreto, 2009; Iyer & Ryan, 2009). As such, stigmatized individuals might prefer to use less direct strategies in their everyday interactions, particularly when the likelihood of bias is unknown. We hypothesized that highlighting a common identity would be both a preferred and effective interpersonal strategy for deflecting discrimination.

Common identity strategies involve highlighting characteristics shared in common among members of different groups (Brewer, 2000; Doise, 1978). Situations that cue a common identity reduce prejudice by allowing perceivers to view an outgroup target as part of the self (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1999). For example, when a Black target wears a baseball cap that advertises a shared team affiliation with a White perceiver, perceivers report greater self–other overlap and more positive racial attitudes (Nier et al., 2001). Although strategies like perspective taking also reduce prejudice by increasing self–other overlap (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), direct appeals to simulate the experience of being stigmatized are viewed as confrontational and can backfire (Stone, Whitehead, Schmader, & Focella, 2011). In contrast, highlighting a shared identity does not necessitate direct mention of prejudice against one’s group. In fact, finding common ground is a natural way to establish rapport. For this reason, this strategy should not only be effective at bypassing the negative consequences of explicitly mentioning bias but also be one that targets feel comfortable adopting.

**STUDY 1: IS COMMON IDENTITY A PREFERRED STRATEGY?**

Our initial goal was to determine whether stigmatized targets would prefer using common identity to other possible approaches like perspective taking (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), presenting oneself as counterstereotypical (Blair & Banaji, 1996; Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001), or highlighting value-behavior discrepancies (Rokeach, 1968; Son Hing, Li, & Zanna, 2002). Although each of these strategies are effective in reducing bias when manipulated by a neutral third party (i.e., the experimenter), no research has examined targets’ preference to use these to achieve their interaction goals.

Stigmatized targets often face a dilemma between enacting change to benefit themselves as individuals versus change to benefit the group (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). However, a meta-analysis revealed that, in general, people are more motivated to protect the individual rather than the collective self (Gaertner, Sedikides, Vevea, & Iuzzini, 2002). Thus, in everyday intergroup contexts, we expected stigmatized targets to prefer strategies that serve their individual-level goals (e.g., having a smooth interaction) over group-based goals (e.g., changing group attitudes). Strategies that remind outgroup perceivers of their egalitarian values (Rokeach, 1968), invoke perspective taking (Stone et al., 2011; Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009), or otherwise reveal hypocrisy (Son Hing et al., 2002) might reduce prejudice toward one’s group, but at a cost to oneself individually. Although counterstereotyping and concealment strategies can be effective ways to deflect discrimination (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, Visscher, & Fahey, 1996; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Quinn, Kahng, & Crocker, 2004), targets might feel inauthentic using them (Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005). In contrast, highlighting a common identity that spans intergroup boundaries does not necessitate denying ingroup membership (Dovidio et al., 1994), but could, as Goffman (1963) claimed, allow a stigmatize target to exert “strategic control over the image of himself and his products that others glean from him” (p. 155). As such, common identity might be uniquely preferred as a strategy associated both with individual and group-level goals.

In Study 1, gay/lesbian/bisexual participants were asked to imagine and make ratings of how they would interact with a straight coworker with whom they had been assigned to work. We predicted that participants would endorse individual-level goals of being liked over group-level goals of changing perceptions of the group but that both of these goals would predict targets’ preference for a common identity strategy.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 47 individuals (18 male, 29 female; 18–72 years old; $M_{age} = 27$) who identified as gay/lesbian ($n = 31$) or bisexual ($n = 16$). They were recruited either from the psychology subject pool or from an advertisement made at a local gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community center.

**Materials and Procedure**

As part of a larger survey, participants were asked, “Imagine that you have just started a new job. In your third week on the job, your boss paired you up with another coworker, named Chris, to work on a project together.” Other information in the scenario indicated that Chris is straight (at a concert … you ran into Chris with his girlfriend) and that he is unaware of participants’ own sexual orientation. We also attempted to manipulate Chris’s likely level of antigay bias. In the control condition, the scenario included no further information. In a joke condition, participants were asked to imagine they
had overheard Chris tell a joke about gays. Participants imagined their first meeting with Chris to discuss the project.

**Goals.** After reading the scenario, participants rated five possible goals they might have during their imagined interaction (1 = I would not do this, 5 = I would do this). Group-level goals included (α = .72) “I would try to change Chris’s beliefs and attitudes toward my group,” “I would try to change Chris’s prejudice against my group,” Individual-level goals included (α = .60) “I would try to be seen as an individual and not as a group member by Chris,” “I would try to be liked by Chris,” and “I would try to have a smooth interaction with Chris.” These two goal composites were only weakly correlated (r = .27, p < .10).

**Strategies.** Participants next rated the strategies they would use (common identity, affirmation, counterstereotyping, discrepancy, and perspective taking, concealment; see Table 1). Although these scales were moderately interrelated, none shared more than 50% of their variance in common, suggesting they tap into distinct constructs.

**Results and Discussion**

*Expectation to be Disliked*

An independent sample t test on a single item (“I would assume that Chris might not like me if he knew my sexual orientation”, ranging from 1 = I would definitely not do this to 5 = I definitely would do this,) did not yield strong evidence that the joke condition increased participants’ expectation of being disliked. Although participants in the joke condition (M = 2.21, SD = 1.06) expected to be disliked significantly more than those in the control condition (M = 1.77, SD = .81), t(50) = −2.04, p < .05, both means were low. Only two participants gave a response of 4 or 5. Thus, results should be interpreted as reflecting preference when the likelihood of bias is low or uncertain.

**Goals and Strategies**

A Joke Condition × Goals repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that participants endorsed individual-level goals more strongly (M = 3.69) than group-level goals (M = 2.27), F(1, 45) = 112.87, p < .001. A Joke Condition × Strategy repeated measures ANOVA yielded a main effect of strategy, F(5, 220) = 37.80, p < .001. Participants preferred common identity (M = 3.56) and affirmation (M = 3.77) over more direct strategies of prejudice reduction like perspective taking (M = 2.72) and discrepancy (M = 2.28), ps < .01. They also preferred common identity and affirmation to counterstereotyping (M = 2.20) and concealment (M = 2.13), ps < .01. There were no main or interactive effects of the joke condition in either analysis (Fs < 1.5).

**Predicting Strategies From Goals**

The predictive effects of goals on strategy preference was tested by individually regressing each strategy onto individual-level and group-level goals (centered) controlling for both the main and interactive effects of joke condition (Table 1). As expected, both individual-level goals (β = .43, p < .001) and group-level goals (β = .33, p < .01) predicted a preference for common identity. Individual-level goals also marginally predicted affirmation (β = .25, p = .09). In contrast, group-level goals predicted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Individual Goals β</th>
<th>Group Goals β</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Common identity</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.43***</td>
<td>.33**</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would try to highlight aspects that Chris and I share in common.</td>
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<td>(4 items)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affirmation</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.25†</td>
<td>.22</td>
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<td>I would ask Chris a question that would get him to talk about some</td>
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<td>positive or unique aspect about him. (1 item)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perspective taking</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>.36*</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would try to do things that would get Chris to see things from my</td>
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<td>perspective. (1 item)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.60***</td>
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<td>I’d ask Chris if he values equality and then remind him of ways in</td>
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<td>which he might unfairly stereotype people based on their sexual</td>
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<td>orientation. (3 items)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counterstereotyping</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.47**</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would try to emphasize that I have qualities and characteristics that</td>
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<td>go against people’s stereotypes about gays and lesbians. (2 items)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concealment</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>−.25</td>
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<td>I might try to avoid doing anything that would highlight my sexual</td>
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<td>orientation. (3 items)</td>
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*p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
use of counterstereotyping ($β = .47, p < .01$), perspective-taking ($β = .36, p < .05$), and discrepancy ($β = .60, p < .001$). Individual-level goals did not predict these strategies. Neither individual-level nor group-level goals predicted concealment ($ps > .10$).

In summary, when imagining an initial interaction with an outgroup member, gay/lesbian/bisexual individuals preferred highlighting common identity to accomplish both individual-level and group-level goals for the interaction. This preference for individual-level goals and associated strategies was present even when participants had evidence that their partner held biases about the participants’ group and despite the indication that many participants were highly identified with their group.1

Whereas the generally low expectations of being disliked by their partner tempers our ability to generalize these patterns to more clearly biased interactions, they align with our focus on examining strategies that people use proactively to avoid discrimination when the degree of prejudice is ambiguous. To our knowledge, this is the first study to ask targets to report preferences across a broad range of strategies. Although seeking common ground to get along and be liked is a strategy anyone might adopt, this approach can still be uniquely effective in reducing bias (Nier et al., 2001). Indeed, the other preferred strategy in this initial study—affirmation—is effective in reducing bias and backlash when employed by stigmatized targets (Stone et al., 2011). The following experiments were designed to test whether common identity is similarly effective at deflecting discrimination.

STUDY 2

Study 2 tested the effectiveness of highlighting a common identity in a mock hiring context. Straight men reviewed three job applications (one from a gay target) to decide which two applicants should get an interview. The gay candidate’s application emphasized self-promotion (personal strengths) or common identity (collective strengths). We predicted that straight men would be more likely to select the gay target for an interview when he highlighted a common identity rather than use self-promotion.

Method

Participants

Participants were 88 heterosexual male undergraduates randomly assigned to a common identity or self-promotion condition. One participant expressed suspicion and was excluded from analyses.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were asked to play the role of an account manager reviewing three applications and deciding which two candidates to interview for an advertising job. Each application included the candidate’s education, past work experience, and a short personal statement. We designed the applications so that the gay candidate was less qualified than one candidate but more qualified than the other based on grade point average (GPA) and work experience. The gay candidate’s sexual orientation was suggested by his past work experience as a committee member in charge of public relations and advertising for Wingspan, a community gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender organization. Pilot testing confirmed that most students interpreted this as evidence that the applicant was gay. The other two candidates also mentioned advertising experience, but the quality clearly differed. The strong applicant had the highest GPA, played a key role in two leadership programs, and had advertising experience. The weak applicant had the lowest GPA, had worked for the student newspaper, had managed a fast-food restaurant, and had Adobe Photoshop experience.

In pilot testing, 22 male undergraduates rated the quality of the applications (stripped of sexual orientation and strategy) as intended, $F(2, 40) = 12.43, p < .001$. The strong candidate was viewed to be significantly more qualified for the position ($M = 8.93$) than the target application ($M = 8.20$), $p < .05$, who was rated to be significantly more qualified than the weak candidate ($M = 6.61$), $p < .001$. The order of the applications was counterbalanced.2

Common identity manipulation. The strategy manipulation was embedded in a personal statement.3 In the common identity condition, the target referred to a superordinate identity (i.e., Americans), his preference for solving problems via team work, and used the pronoun “we” throughout the statement. For example, one excerpt from the statement read,

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1Analysis of an identity importance measure ($α = .75$; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) revealed the sample to be generally highly identified with their sexual orientation ($M = 4.39$, on a 1–7 scale). The preference for individual-level over group-level goals was apparent regardless of identification level.

2This study also included a manipulation of accountability in which participants thought either that the interview decision rested solely with them or that they would give anonymous advice to a manager. We thought participants would exhibit more bias when they felt less accountable, but this manipulation had no main or interactive effects.

3A pilot study demonstrated that the common identity and self-promotion statements did not significantly differ in perceived competence, $F(1, 29) = 3.20, p > .05$, or likeability, $F(1, 29) = .07, p > .10$. Participants in these two conditions did not differ in sexual prejudice (Herek, 1988), and this measure was not a significant covariate in analyses (all $ps > .10$).
If hired, I will always try to foster teamwork with the other project members. We will brainstorm ideas with clients to develop marketing strategies that fit the goals of that company. We will work to design a novel campaign that might integrate different types of media.

In the self-promotion condition, the target’s statement focused on his strengths as an individual and used the pronoun “I.” For example, the same excerpt read,

If I were to join the agency, my vision of the process involved includes several steps. In working with clients, I would brainstorm ideas that help to market their product to fit the goals and vision of that company. I would work diligently to design a complete and novel campaign that might integrate different types of media.

The filler applications were also self-promotional emphasizing independence, analytic skills, and leadership with the stronger applicant providing a longer and more cogent statement.

**Dependent Measures**

**Self-other overlap.** After reviewing each application, participants selected which set of interlocking circles best represented how similar they felt to that candidate (Aron, Aron, & Tudor, 1991).

**Applicant warmth.** Participants rated their warmth toward each applicant on a scale of 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm).

**Applicant competence.** Competence was rated with four items (α = .94, e.g., “This candidate is a good match or fit with my organization and its employees”; “This candidate possesses the skills necessary to perform the duties of this specific job”) on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 11 (strongly agree).

These three variables (self–other overlap, warmth, and competence of the gay candidate) were highly intercorrelated (r = .60, r = .70, r = .77, ps < .001) and thus standardized and averaged into a single evaluation variable (α = .93) compared to similar evaluations of the weak candidate.

**Interview decision.** Last, participants provided the names of two candidates to interview.

**Results and Discussion**

**Manipulation Checks**

A manipulation check on the target’s sexual orientation was embedded in a series of questions about the candidates (One of the candidates I reviewed was gay). A majority (90.8%) of participants correctly reported that one applicant was gay, and results are similar when those who did not make this identification are excluded from analysis.

**Interview Selection**

To examine the degree of bias in the interview selections and the role of common identity in reducing this bias, we compared participants’ selections of the moderately qualified gay target against their responses to a weakly qualified straight applicant. Because pretesting confirmed the difference in qualifications between these two applications, bias would be demonstrated if participants failed to see the gay candidate as better for the job and should be reduced to the extent that participants recognized the differences between the two applications.

A 2 (candidate: gay, weak) × 2 (strategy: common identity, self-promotion) mixed ANOVA on candidate choice revealed the predicted interaction, F(1, 85) = 12.00, p < .001 (see Figure 1). Participants in the self-promotion condition were equally likely to choose the weaker candidate (M = .63) compared to the gay candidate (M = .50), p > .10. However, after encountering a common identity strategy, they became sensitive to the gay target’s credentials and were more likely to select him for an interview (M = .79) than the weaker candidate (M = .25), p < .001.

**Applicant Evaluation**

When directly comparing global evaluations of the gay to the weak target in a mixed ANOVA model, the 2 (candidate: gay, weak) × 2 (strategy) interaction was significant, F(1, 85) = 23.83, p < .001. In the self-promotion condition, participants rated the weak candidate (M = 7.91) as positively as the gay target (M = 7.48), p > .22, despite the gay applicant’s superior résumé. After a common identity strategy, participants had a significantly more favorable impression of the gay target (M = 8.42) compared to the weak target (M = 6.36), p < .001.

**STUDY 3**

Study 2 provided evidence that targets can successfully employ a common identity strategy to deflect discrimination.

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*This percentage might fall short of 100% due to a general hesitance to make mention of someone’s stigmatized status (Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006).

*In Studies 2 and 3, the predicted interaction when examining only the choice of the target application is significant using multinomial logistic regression. However, this analytic approach does not allow for a direct test of the proportion selecting the gay versus weak candidate. Previous research has found that parametric tests of dichotomous dependent variables perform equally if not better than their nonparametric counterparts (Myers, DiCecco, White, & Borden, 1982). Thus, a mixed-model ANOVA was adopted, as it allowed us to statistically compare the selection of the gay to the weak candidate.*
Although a qualified gay candidate was not preferred over a weaker straight applicant when he used a standard self-promotion approach, he was evaluated more positively and more likely to be selected for an interview when he highlighted a common identity. Study 3 was conducted to rule out alternative explanations for these results. First, to rule out the possibility that the teamwork frame provided in the common identity condition would increase impressions regardless of who is employing it, Study 3 manipulated the moderately qualified target's sexual orientation between subjects, crossed with the strategy manipulation. Earlier work by Nier and colleagues (2001) suggests that activating a common identity is not universally effective in creating a positive impression but is instead uniquely suited to counteract possible biases one might have toward a stigmatized group. Thus, we predicted that common identity would increase the likelihood of a gay target being selected for an interview but would have little effect on outcomes for a straight target.

In addition, we included a measure of how confrontational the target seemed. In past research, prejudice reduction strategies can backfire when targets are viewed as being confrontational (Czopp et al., 2006; Stone et al., 2011). If common identity facilitates individual goals of getting along, the gay applicant might be viewed as less confrontational when using common identity instead of self-promotion.

Method

Participants

Male American participants were recruited from Mechanical Turk (see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011, for a discussion of the reliability of data from this participant pool). Only straight men who completed the full survey were included in the study (N = 89, M age = 30, SD = 8.98, range = 18–61). Most were Caucasian (75%), although Asians (10%), Blacks (3), Hispanics (6%), American Indian (1%), and mixed race (5%) were also represented. They were randomly assigned to condition in a 2 (target applicant: gay or straight) × 2 (strategy: self-promotion or common identity) between-subjects design.

Procedure

Participants completed an online version of Study 2 where they read the same company information and job description. The applications were slightly modified. First, we edited the self-promotion and common identity statements so that both began with a sentence about being creative, being dedicated, and having relevant experience. In addition, we manipulated whether the moderately qualified target applicant was implied to be gay. When he was gay, we used the same work experience used in Study 2. When he was straight, he mentioned volunteering with the local Boys & Girls Club to suggest a similar level of community involvement. Participants again evaluated each candidate, including a new “confrontational” rating, and selected two for an interview. Herek’s (1988) measure of prejudice against gay men was included at the end of the survey to be included as a covariate; there were no effects of condition on these ratings (ps > .13).

Results and Discussion

Candidate Choice

Employing a similar analytic strategy as in Study 2, we conducted a 2 (gay or straight target) × 2 (strategy type) × 2 (weak or moderate applicant) mixed analysis of covariance to directly compare selection of target applicant (either gay or straight) over the objectively weaker straight applicant. Antigay prejudice was a significant covariate, F(1, 84) = 4.68, p < .05, and was thus included in the model to better isolate effects of condition (prejudice did not moderate effects in preliminary analyses). This analysis of covariance yielded the expected three-way interaction, F(1, 84) = 3.82, p = .054 (see Figure 2). When the target applicant was straight, there was only a simple main effect to prefer him (69%) over the weak applicant (49%), p < .05; this was not moderated by the strategy he used (p = .26). However, when the target applicant was gay, the simple tendency to prefer him over the weak candidate (p < .05) was moderated somewhat by his strategy (p = .10). Participants did not significantly prefer a moderately qualified self-promoting gay candidate (70%) over a weaker straight candidate (61%), p = .63. They did prefer him (81%) to the weak candidate (33%) if he evoked a common identity (p = .01). This result provides clear evidence that common identity was uniquely beneficial for a gay target and did not have the same benefit when employed by a straight job candidate.
Evaluation of the Target

As in Study 2, the general evaluation of the target applicant compared to the weak applicant was examined in a 2 (sexual orientation) × 2 (strategy) × 2 (applicant) mixed ANOVA. Antigay prejudice was not a significant covariate in this analysis and thus was excluded from the model. Unlike Study 2, no effects were significant (all ps > .13).

Perception of Confrontation

Although Study 3 did not replicate effects of global evaluation observed in Study 2, we added in this study a rating of how confrontational each applicant seemed. Because we expected this item to be sensitive to the manipulation of strategy used by the moderate applicant, we focused our analysis on ratings of this target candidate. Analysis revealed a significant Sexual Orientation × Strategy interaction, $F(1, 84) = 6.05, p < .05$. Prejudice was not a significant covariate and thus was not included in this analysis. Neither main effect was significant (both ps > .10). Participants perceived a self-promoting job candidate as more confrontational if he was gay ($M = 4.22$) rather than straight ($M = 2.47$), $p < .01$. If he used common identity, this bias was eliminated ($M_{\text{gay}} = 3.09$, $M_{\text{straight}} = 3.47$), $p > .50$.

The aim of the current research was to investigate targets’ preference for and the effectiveness of one prejudice reduction strategy, common identity. Study 1 confirmed that gay targets prefer common identity to direct or confrontational prejudice reduction strategies. The results of two experiments then demonstrated that gay targets can effectively highlight common identity to reduce the chance that perceivers will discriminate against them. Specifically, when a gay candidate emphasizes personal achievement, he is not preferred over an objectively less qualified straight candidate; but if he employs common identity language, heterosexual male participants either evaluate him more favorably (Study 2) or view him as being less confrontational (Study 3) and are more likely to select him for an interview. It is also important that in Study 3, we observed that the same common identity manipulation is not universally more effective than self-promotion for anyone but rather is uniquely beneficial in reducing bias. In fact, these findings suggest that a moderately qualified straight candidate is better off using self-promotion than common identity. Although self-promotion is widely accepted as an effective impression management strategy for job seekers (Proost, Schreurs, DeWitte, & Derous, 2010; Zhao & Liden, 2011), it might not be effective at reducing bias for members of stigmatized groups. Prior research has demonstrated that women who employ self-promotion are perceived as being competent but penalized for lacking warmth and are viewed as less hirable (Phelan & Rudman, 2010; Rudman, 1998). Similarly, we saw some evidence in Study 3 that a gay target who self-promotes is viewed as being confrontational. In light of evidence that socially devalued group members often seek to self-promote in an effort to disconfirm a stereotype of incompetence about their group (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010), it is important to show that this may not be the most beneficial strategy to use. In addition, the common identity strategy employed in this study could have backfired if it was perceived as confirming effeminate stereotypes about gay men. However, at least in Study 2, common identity increased self–other overlap and a general evaluation of the gay target as being both competent and warm. Because there are theoretical reasons why self-promotion might be harmful and common identity helpful when used by stigmatized targets, future research is needed to tease apart these effects.

It is not clear why the effects of common identity on the evaluation of the target observed in Study 2 did not replicate in Study 3. Recall that Study 2 took place in a laboratory with college participants who might have seen themselves as more similar to the applicants (i.e., recent university graduates) and thus spent more time elaborating on the information they read. Future research is
needed to clarify processes by which common identity is effective with different types of perceivers. In addition, although we did not see any evidence that straight men (even those high in prejudice) reacted against the insinuation of sharing common identity with a gay target, a more blatant form of the strategy could conceivably have this effect.

The Target’s Active Role in Prejudice Reduction

Past research has identified the costs and benefits of confronting bias when it happens (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Kaiser & Miller, 2001) but has seldom suggested alternative individual strategies for deflecting discrimination before it occurs. In many intergroup interactions, the likelihood of bias is ambiguous, but this need not prohibit targets from maximizing the likelihood of positive outcomes. Whereas individual confrontation, taking collective action, or using other direct tactics can challenge or threaten outgroup members’ beliefs and behaviors, the common identity message used here is effective, in part, because it avoids drawing attention to intergroup differences and instead subtly draws a superordinate boundary around both the target and the perceiver. This makes it a strategy that not only is effective as a preemptive approach but also one that targets report a preference to use. In a related line of research, we have shown that affirmation (the other preferred strategy by targets in Study 1) is similarly effective at reducing bias when targets use it preemptively (Stone et al., 2011).

Limitations and Future Directions

These results shed light onto how targets seek to manage their “spoiled identity” in everyday life. However, the limitations of these studies also highlight the need for further research. Future work should examine when the benefits of common identity extend to the target’s group as a whole. If highlighting a common identity facilitates a smoother interaction, it could instigate recursive patterns that change a perceiver’s general attitudes toward an outgroup in the long term. Finally, it would be important to assess targets’ own feelings when employing this strategy. Although common identity might be a preferred strategy in contexts where the expectation of bias is low, it is unlikely to be preferred in contexts or among individuals with a strong expectation of intergroup conflict. In addition, stigmatized targets often gain more psychologically by possessing a dual identity that incorporates both a superordinate category as well as their own distinctive subgroup identity (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). Future research will need to examine whether advertising a dual identity is equally beneficial to a common identity strategy in deflecting discrimination as well as validating one’s own sense of identity.

Finally, the present research has the potential to inform training programs for people facing costly acts of discrimination. Given the negative outcomes that stigmatized individuals endure as a result of other people’s biases, it is important to identify the strategies they might naturally employ to successfully deflect discrimination. This is not to suggest that stigmatized individuals should shoulder the burden of prejudice reduction; targets are not responsible for the biases directed toward them and their group. Nevertheless, like negotiation training, this research aims to give targets an active role in the way they are evaluated as a means to overcome the social barriers that may impede their advancement.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was funded by a National Science Foundation grant (BCS-0548405) awarded to the first and last authors.

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