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The effects of societal versus self-blame

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Running Head: RESPONDING TO SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION

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Abstract

While self-blame has been considered to be a useful coping tool for victims, its benefits within the context of group discrimination are equivocal. The present research hypothesized that women encouraged to engage in self-blame for sex discrimination would be more likely to endorse accepting their situation or endorse the use of individual, normative actions. In contrast, women encouraged to engage in societal blame for sex discrimination would be more likely to participate in non-normative actions aimed at enhancing the status of the group as a whole. Female students in Canada were subjected to a situation of discrimination and were encouraged to blame either themselves or social discrimination. They were then given the opportunity to respond to the discrimination by endorsing various actions. A profile analysis of the endorsed actions indicated that women encouraged to blame themselves were most likely to endorse accepting their situation, while women encouraged to blame society endorsed non-normative individual confrontation.

Responding to Sexual Discrimination:

The Effects of Societal Versus Self-blame

An employer has recently told his female employee that her productivity has

been low and that it was clear she was not attracting new clients. However, he would be willing to provide her with greater access to important clients if she were to see him on a social basis. She laughed politely and told him she would think about it. Personally, she believes that she has not performed as well as she could have, but at the same time, does not want to succumb to his solution. She seeks and finds a new job, resolving to work harder in her new position. Given her actions, she believes she has resolved her problem.

This scenario describes what, according to some research on victimization (Janoff-

Bulman, 1979; 1982), may occur when victims of discrimination blame themselves for the way they have been treated. It has been suggested that because individuals believe they have greater control over themselves than external events, engaging in self-blame provides a sense of personal control over future events. Thus, given the association between perceiving personal control and performing instrumental behaviors (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993), self-blaming individuals may be more likely to act to improve their situation. For example, the employee blamed her own lack of productivity for her employer's behavior and controlled the situation by changing jobs and improving her productivity at the new job. Thus, she appears to have resolved her problem, and self-

blame appears to have been an "adaptive" strategy for dealing with the situation.

The use of self-blame may indeed be an initial reaction to the experience of what is in fact group-based discrimination. The five-stage model of intergroup relations (Taylor & McKirnan, 1984) suggests that, upon encountering discrimination, disadvantaged group members initially believe that their disadvantaged status is due to a lack of individual merit ("I was not working hard enough"). Consequently, they respond to what is believed to be an individual problem with individual action, such as working harder at a new job [1].

While self-blame may lead one to improve what is believed to be an individual weakness, such a strategy may only be effective when the situation is indeed individually caused. Ironically however, much of the self-blame theory and research has been developed in regard to rape (Frazier, 1990; Janoff-Bulman, 1979; 1982; Meyer & Taylor, 1986), which is not a problem caused by individual victims. Further, the application of an intrapersonal solution (self-blame) to an intergroup problem may not improve the situation (Canadian Panel on Violence against Women, 1993), but rather may serve to maintain the status quo (Wright, Taylor & Moghaddam, 1990). For example, a rape victim may reason that she should have been able to defend herself (individual action). However, expecting women to defend themselves places further responsibility on them to alleviate a problem caused by the men who rape. The problem is therefore exacerbated in that, while society believes corrective action has been taken by women, in fact there is no evidence that the initiation and the severity of the assaults have been affected by this individual course of action (Bart & O'Brien, 1984). Therefore, as long as society continues to maintain and reinforce intrapersonal solutions (victim-blaming) for intergroup problems (e.g., rape), individual actions such as self-defense can do little to end women's victimization (Canadian Panel on Violence against Women, 1993).

Similarly, the employee who blamed herself for her boss's behavior took individual action, namely attempting to improve the situation by working harder at a new job. However, given the prevalence of sexual harassment in this society, it is highly likely that she would encounter such a situation again (Gutek, 1985). Thus, self-blame may promote participation in individualistic behaviors that may do little to eradicate the root of group-based discrimination, and hence, may serve to maintain the status quo.

Disadvantaged group members who blame themselves may further maintain the status quo by utilizing "normative" actions, which reflect the norms of the system and involve little conflict or extremism. Actions that are designed to work within the boundaries of the system serve as one way the system can

maintain control of dissent, thereby maintaining the status quo (Piven & Cloward, 1992). While the five-stage model does not explicitly incorporate the distinction between normative and non-normative actions, research has found that normative actions were more likely under conditions of an individualistic ideology, namely when members of a disadvantaged group perceive social mobility to be a function of individual merit, and mobility is possible if they work hard enough (Wright, Taylor & Moghaddam, 1990). Therefore, circumstances under which self-blame is incurred may foster participation in normative actions. The employee's response to her employer was a polite deferral, which neither insults nor succumbs to his request, but neither does it change the pattern of interaction. Thus, when individuals blame themselves for what is in fact group-based discrimination, a normative response that does not change the situation may be more likely.

Self-blame, then, appears to foster disadvantaged group participation in individual, normative actions that do not improve situations of group-based discrimination, but rather maintain the status quo. In essence, self-blame encourages members of the disadvantaged group to maintain their own oppression, in other words, it creates a hegemony. In doing so, self-blame may ultimately promote an acceptance of one's lower social status. In particular, repeated individual, normative efforts to overcome group-

based discrimination are likely to result in frustration and the perception that such situations cannot be controlled. Thus, a continued focus on failure may result in accepting the situation of discrimination, a response pattern that resembles learned helplessness behavior (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993). If the female employee continues to receive harassing comments from her employers, despite having taking action to reduce such treatment, she may conclude that her situation is an unavoidable "reality". Thus, an intrapersonal response (self-blame) to an intergroup problem (discrimination) may serve to maintain the status quo, and ultimately foster an acceptance of discrimination and the individual's negative social status.

Alternatively, societal blame, namely blaming society's poor treatment of

disadvantaged groups, is an intergroup explanation that may promote participation in actions that have a greater effect on changing the status quo. In particular, disadvantaged group members who recognize that their negative social status is not due to their own merit, but to their membership in a particular social group, may be more likely to participate in actions to benefit the group as a whole, rather than themselves as individuals (Taylor & McKirnan, 1984). For instance, had the employee blamed social acceptance of men's harassment of women, she may have recognized that taking a different job would not eliminate the problem for her, and indeed for other women. As a result, she may have adopted a more group-oriented course of action, such as getting other women together as a group to file a complaint, which may be more effective in decreasing sexual harassment in the company.

The individual who blames society, however, is also likely to be aware that the system is flawed and that normative actions, such as filing a complaint with personnel, may have little effect. Consequently, one who blames society for discrimination may tend to use non-normative actions, namely behaviors that do not reflect the norms of the system. If the employee had blamed society's acceptance of sexual harassment, she may have contacted legal services, or informed the media of the situation for women in her company. Thus, unlike self-blame, societal blame not only provides disadvantaged group members with an attribution for discrimination that recognizes their victimization, but may also encourage participation in actions that may have greater effect on changing the status quo.

While the five-stage model (Taylor & McKirnan, 1984) extends the self-blame literature (Janoff-Bulman, 1979; 1982) by suggesting a more effective locus of blame, research has not investigated the effects of self versus societal blame explicitly. Instead, disadvantaged group member action has been explored as a function of ease of social mobility (Wright, Taylor & Moghaddam, 1990), or distribution of rewards (Taylor, Moghaddam, Gamble & Zellerer, 1987). However, society has a tendency to explicitly blame the victim for intergroup situations as exemplified in sexual harassment and rape

cases in which the victim appears to be on trial more so than the offender. Moreover, self-

blame has been labelled as adaptive (Janoff-Bulman, 1979; 1982), thus, the implications of disadvantaged group members' self and social attributions is of interest.

The present experiment was therefore designed to examine the effects of locus of blame on women's responses to a situation of explicit sexual discrimination. It was hypothesized that female victims of discrimination encouraged to engage in self-blame would be more likely to endorse individual, normative actions or accepting their discrimination. In contrast, women encouraged to blame society, would be more likely to endorse non-normative actions aimed at enhancing the status of the group.

Method

Participants

Female (n=82) Introductory Psychology students [2] were contacted by phone and asked to participate in an experiment on creativity. They received an experimental credit in partial fulfilment of their course requirements or five dollars.

Procedure

In order to investigate responses to sexual discrimination as a function of locus of blame, a realistic situation of discrimination, similar in context to Wright, Taylor & Moghaddam (1990) was induced. A female experimenter described the study as an exploration of how highly creative individuals develop creative products such as advertising slogans or stories, and proceeded to explain what participants could expect in the study. To isolate and observe the highly creative individuals, participants were told that they would complete a "creativity task" in which they would write a short story. Participants would be considered highly creative if their stories passed a predetermined creativity score, otherwise they would be categorized as

showing low creativity.

The experimenter then described an alleged second part of the study in which the highly creative participants could expect to participate in interesting activities. In particular, they were told that if they passed the predetermined score, the primary experimenter would invite them to join a "high creativity group". The role of the high creativity group was to further improve stories created by participants in the low creativity groups of past experimental sessions, thereby further providing a status differential between the high and low creativity group. If participants did not pass the predetermined creativity score, they were told they would be placed into the "low creativity group". This group would be asked to complete several less interesting language tasks (alphabetizing, sentence completion), in order to assess the potential relationship between the lack of creativity and poor language skills. The purpose of these group delineations was to establish a desirable and undesirable group status, thus motivating participants to want to be in the high creativity group and not be assigned to the low creativity group. Participants completed an informed consent and were asked if they had any questions.

Once the task had been described, a situation of potential sexual discrimination was made salient via special instructions for the creativity task. All participants were told that they would be given five minutes to write a story using a list of 10 stimulus words. Their goal was to use all the words and to do so as creatively as possible. Participants in both conditions were then warned that past studies have shown that women do not score as high as men on standard creativity measures, and they were encouraged to try their hardest. In order to make societal blame salient, participants in the societal blame condition were further told that, while differences between the sexes may exist, society often considers the women to be worse, rather than simply different, thus, they would have to try harder to prove their differences are not "bad".

Upon completion of the stories, the female experimenter collected the stories and told participants that she had to inform the "primary" experimenter (who

was allegedly conducting another experimental session) that the stories were ready for his assessment. The experimenter was male in order to reinforce that the discrimination was sex-based. The female experimenter then left the room and returned with the male experimenter.

The locus of blame manipulation was made explicit by means of the primary experimenter's behavior and comments to the female experimenter. In the self-blame condition, the experimenter appeared to read all the stories carefully so that non-entry into the high creative group would be attributed to the individual's personal performance. After the primary experimenter had read the stories, participants heard him say to the female experimenter,

> None of the women's stories passed the predetermined creativity score,
> but I'll take ____(the men's names were read aloud). They can follow me
> to the experimental room where we will start the high creativity task [3].

To reinforce self-blame for their failure to enter the high creativity group, the female experimenter asked the primary experimenter, "Did anyone in your session pass the score?", to which he responded, "All did, even the women".

In contrast, in the societal blame condition, the primary experimenter visibly separated the women's stories from the men's and only read the latter. After reading the men's stories, he said to the female experimenter,

> I can't use the women's stories but all the men's pass the score. ____(the
> men's names were read aloud) can follow me to the experimental room
> where we will start the high creativity task.

To reinforce societal blame for failure, the female experimenter asked "Did anyone in your session pass?", to which the primary experimenter responded, "All the men did".

After the primary experimenter left the room, the female experimenter told participants that, due to time constraints, any questions regarding their group assignment would be answered immediately following the experiment. They were then told that, before they began the low creativity task, they would

complete some questionnaires that were independent of the present study.
They were told that a senior graduate student who had been working with the
primary experimenter had asked if she could distribute these questionnaires.
The questionnaires, which contained the manipulation checks and responses
to the discrimination were made to appear independent of the study to
maintain the deception that the experiment was investigating creativity rather
than discrimination. After completing the questionnaire, participants received
oral and written debriefing, along with their experimental credit or five dollars.

Materials

  Manipulation Checks. To ensure that the women did indeed perceive the
situation to be discriminatory, they were asked to indicate the extent to which
they perceived their treatment in the present experiment to be fair, using a
scale ranging from "extremely unfair" (-3) to "extremely fair" (+3). As well,
using a single item rating scale developed by Peterson, Schwartz & Seligman
(1981), ranging from "very much due to others or circumstances" (-3) to "very
much due to me" (+3), participants were also asked to indicate the extent to
which they believed their assignment to the low creative group was
attributable to internal or external factors.

  Actions. Measures of five actions were adapted from Wright, Taylor &
Moghaddam (1990). Using a scale ranging from "extremely unlikely to
participate" (-3) to "extremely likely to participate" (+3), participants indicated
the extent to which they would participate in each of five behaviors if they had
the opportunity to respond to their treatment in the present experiment. Items
included, "accept the situation, that is, your assignment to either group, as is";
"request an individual retest of your creativity score"; "confront the
experimenter and demand an explanation of your particular group
assignment"; "Ask that the group be retested for their creativity"; "get together
with other students to confront the experimenter, demanding an explanation
for your group assignment". Individual behaviors reflected actions aimed at
enhancing one's individual status, while participation with the group reflected
actions aimed at enhancing group status. Requests for retests reflected

normative actions, while confrontation reflected non-normative actions.

Results

Manipulation Checks

$\underline{T}$ tests were performed to assess whether the groups differed in their perceptions of fairness and attributions as a function of locus of blame. Results indicated that women encouraged to use self-blame felt that their assignment to the low creative group was more fair ($\underline{M}$ = .13) than women encouraged to use societal blame ($\underline{M}$ -1.22), $\underline{t}$ (76) = 2.85, $\underline{p}$ < .01. Consistent with the hypotheses, women encouraged to use self-blame were less likely to believe that their assignment to the low creative group was due to external factors ($\underline{M}$ = -.32) than women encouraged to use societal blame ($\underline{M}$ = -1.17, $\underline{t}$ (79) = 1.94, $\underline{p}$ <.05).

Effect of locus of blame on action

To assess differences in women's actions as a function of locus of blame, a profile analysis was performed on the five actions, namely, acceptance, individual and group retest, individual and group confrontation. The levels test, assessing whether the mean level of endorsement of the combined action variables differed as a function of locus of blame, was significant, $\underline{F}$ (1, 77) = 4.51, $\underline{p}$ < .05, $\eta 2$ = .055. Thus, women encouraged to blame society appeared endorsed participation in individual ($\underline{M}$ = .05) and group retest ($\underline{M}$ = .18) as well as individual ($\underline{M}$ = .77) and group confrontation ($\underline{M}$ = .23), but not accepting their situation ($\underline{M}$ = -.15). In contrast, women encouraged to blame themselves appeared to endorse acceptance ($\underline{M}$ = 1.07), but not participation in individual ($\underline{M}$ = -.71) and group retest ($\underline{M}$ = -1.05) nor individual ($\underline{M}$ = -.29) and group confrontation ($\underline{M}$ = -

1.02). The test of parallelism, assessing whether women's endorsement of particular actions differed as a function of locus of blame, was also significant, Pillais $\underline{F}$ (5,73) = 2.42, $\underline{p}$ = .05; $\eta 2$ = .142. In order to assess the simple effects across the locus of blame, multiple t-tests were performed on the actions using Bonferroni's method of controlling for Type I error. Only differences

significant at .01 were considered significant. Consistent with these hypotheses, these comparisons indicated that women who were encouraged to blame themselves were more likely to accept their situation (M = 1.07) than women encouraged to blame society (M = -.15, t (78) = 3.18, p < .002. In addition, women encouraged to blame themselves were less likely to participate in individual confrontation, t (78) = -2.42, p < .01; group retesting, t (78) = -2.83, p < .006 and group confrontation, t (78) = -2.82, p < .006 than women encouraged to blame a sexist society. Women in the self-blame condition were equally likely to demand individual retesting (M = -.71) as women in the societal blame condition, M .05, t (77) = -1.93, p < .05.

In order to assess how the profiles of action-taking differed, orthogonal contrasts were performed within the self and societal blame groups. Results indicated that women in the self-blame condition were more likely to accept their situation than to participate in other actions, t (160) = 4.11, p < .001, and in fact, acceptance was the only response with a mean score rating greater than zero (neutral). These women were also less likely to endorse both group actions (retest and confrontation) than individual actions (retest and confrontation), t (160) = 2.76, p < .01. Women in the self-blame condition were no more likely to endorse normative actions, namely requests for retests than they were to endorse non-normative actions, namely confrontation, at either the individual or group level. Contrasts conducted on the responses of women in the societal blame condition showed that they were more likely to endorse the use of individual confrontation than individually request a retest, t (160) = 2.58, p < .01. No other contrasts were significant.

Discussion

Consistent with the five stage model (Taylor & McKirnan, 1984), women who were given cues to blame themselves for discrimination were less likely to endorse the use of group-oriented in comparison with individual actions. Moreover, despite also being provided with information suggesting that bias in the test criteria existed, these women were also unlikely to endorse either individual or normative actions, as evidenced by the negative mean scores.

Instead, consistent with learned helplessness theory (e.g., Peterson, Maier & Seligman, 1993), these women were most likely to accept their situation. Women's helplessness behavior, namely, acceptance of their situation, may reflect past experiences with "objective criteria". In an educational setting, standardized tests which often reflect language or status bias are not uncommon, yet because they are considered an "objective" method of assessment, their use is continued. Participants may have learned that individual effort to negotiate these scores is often unrewarded, and acceptance may appear to them to be the only option. Thus, even when it is acknowledged that such tests may not be the most appropriate way of measuring aptitude, students have come to accept them as commonplace.

The implications for self-blame and this kind of acceptance behavior within the disadvantaged group may be most apparent in the workforce, for instance, when a woman re-enters the workforce after raising a family. Despite the fact that raising a family has provided her with many skills beneficial in the workforce, she is told that she has no experience. Rather than challenging the existing criteria for "experience", she may reason that she should have put more emphasis on a career versus family and consequently, stops her job search outside the home. Thus, the advantaged group standards that may serve to differentiate among advantaged group members are applied to and accepted by the disadvantaged group, however inappropriate. The status quo is maintained and self-blame therefore appears to be a useful hegemonic tool whereby the disadvantaged group comes to accept oppressive advantaged group institutions and practices.

The unilateral endorsement of accepting the situation was somewhat surprising given that the women who were encouraged to use self-blame did not express strong self-

blame. Instead, these women appeared to be neutral in placing their blame on either themselves or external factors. Greater protest might have been expected given the anecdotal evidence in which the women expressed embarrassment and disappointment at their failure. Moreover, women

encouraged to use self-blame thought their group assignment was fair. The apparent concern and justification for their own failure therefore suggests that these women did indeed take personal responsibility for their performance on a task that had also been described as discriminatory. This ambivalence is not entirely surprising and is perhaps the most realistic scenario in a society that conveys a belief that individual effort can conquer group-based disadvantages. Woman may recognize social discrimination (external attribution) but also feel responsible for not meeting the criteria necessary to overcome such discrimination (internal attribution). This reaction is consistent with research which has found that while women are willing to acknowledge they have been personally discriminated against, they do not admit to being personally disadvantaged, indicating that they may believe that with enough individual effort they will ultimately overcome discrimination (Crosby, Pufall, Snyder, O'Connell & Whalen, 1989). Taking personal responsibility for a socially based problem may further promote acceptance of discrimination, in that individual effort does not often break down systemic barriers and consequent failed effort can contribute to feelings of helplessness.

In contrast, women who were provided with strong cues to employ societal blame did not appear to take personal responsibility for performance as evidenced by the endorsement of external attributions and perceptions of unfair treatment. Further, consistent with expectations, these women did not accept their situation, but rather endorsed the use of non-normative over normative individual action. Unexpectedly however, they endorsed the use of individual rather than a group-oriented confrontation. While the use of individual versus group oriented action when blame is attributed to social factors is inconsistent with the five stage model, it is indeed consistent with past research indicating that disadvantaged group members prefer participation in individual actions (Crosby, et al., 1989; Matheson, Echenberg & Taylor, 1990; Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam & Lalonde, 1990; Taylor, Moghaddam, Gamble, & Zellerer, 1987). Thus, the tendency of disadvantaged group members to endorse individual strategies in spite of endorsing "anti-

establishment" behaviors, may reflect the acceptance of an individualistic ideology. In particular, disadvantaged group members using societal blame may believe that individual action is the most immediate and effective course of action, in comparison to collective actions which may be difficult to organize and to obtain group support and success. It is possible that had these women been certain that they were not alone in their interpretation of the experience as discrimination, collective actions would have been more likely. This possibility is consistent with consciousness-

raising literature which suggests that women need the necessary social support before they will participate in collective behaviors (Bowles & Duelli Klein, 1983). While women in the present study were not alone, in that experimental sessions were conducted in groups, participants were not permitted to discuss their reactions, thereby eliminating the potential benefits of social resources and a common understanding of the situation. Thus, while disadvantaged group members who attribute discrimination to societal factors, they may nonetheless endorse individualism as the best course of action.

Individual responses may not however, be viewed as the best course of action by women in other cultures. As in many Western cultures, Canadian culture is influenced by an individualistic, liberal ideology whereby individual effort is the measure of merit, despite the fact that systemic barriers often render effort useless. In cultures where collective efforts are more valued, for instance on an Israeli kibbutz (cooperative), women may be more likely to view group action as a more effective course of action, regardless of whether social support is perceived. Future research should therefore clarify the extent to which response to discrimination are culture-bound.

The differential effects of self and societal blame suggest that societal blame allows for greater recognition of discrimination, and the endorsement of non-normative actions. In contrast, self-blame appears to promote a lack of recognition of unfair treatment, and ultimately, its acceptance. Thus, self-blame, while previously promoted as adaptive in intergroup situations, appears to serve to maintain the status quo, not through oppression by the advantaged

group, but by a more disturbing source, namely, acceptance by disadvantaged group members themselves.

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<center>Endnotes</center>

FOOTNOTES

.   The additional stages of the five stage model are not discussed in the present paper given that the hypotheses and experiment design addresses only one stage of the model, namely the conditions under which minority group members participate in individual or collective actions.

.   Pilot tests indicated that women were more likely to believe the manipulation if men were also in the experiment, thus male participants were also called in order to make the manipulation appear realistic.

.   The men in both blame conditions were taken to a different room to be debriefed and given credit or five dollars.