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Was that discrimination?: Attention to status when inferring discrimination against bisexual
people

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in Psychological & Brain Sciences

by

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ABSTRACT

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To decide whether an act was discriminatory, perceivers often take the status of the victim's group into account: the same act is more likely to be seen as discrimination when the perpetrator is from a high-status group and the victim is from a low-status group (Major et al., 2002). However, such models fail to account for the fact that many people belong to groups that do not occupy one clear position on the status hierarchy (herein referred to as intermediate identities). For example, biracial people, bicultural people, and bisexual people may share some characteristics with a prototypical minority group *and* other characteristics with a majority group. Where do these targets fall in reference to their prototypicality as a victim (and therefore, their likelihood of being seen as facing discrimination)? Across three experiments ($N_{\text{total}} = 1765$), we investigated situations in which perceivers did or did not see bisexual individuals as targets of discrimination. In Study 1, participants found it plausible for both gay/lesbian and bisexual targets to face discrimination based on their sexual orientation. However, when evaluating scenarios that directly compared a bisexual target to a lesbian target (Studies 2 & 3a), participants were more likely to say that the lesbian target had faced discrimination. Interestingly, even in cases with direct comparison, participants expected a bisexual man and a gay man to be equally likely to have faced discrimination

(Study 3b). Overall, results indicate that whether a bisexual target is perceived as a victim of discrimination depends on context cues that may reflect the target's *relative* status.

Keywords: bisexual, attributions, discrimination, status asymmetry, prototype model

Was that discrimination?: Attention to status when inferring discrimination against bisexual people

There is a long history of research on discrimination. The bulk of this work focuses on situations in which a member of an advantaged or high-status group (e.g., White; male) disadvantages a member of a lower-status group (e.g., Black; female). Indeed, the same act is more likely to be seen as discrimination when the perpetrator is from a high-status group and the victim is from a low-status group than the reverse (see Major et al., 2002). However, not everyone fits neatly into these commonly studied high- or low-status categories. Indeed, a growing number of people hold *intermediate identities*—they belong to a group that may share some characteristics with a prototypical minority group *and* other characteristics with a majority group (Burke et al., 2022). For example, the U.S. is becoming increasingly biracial and bicultural, with more people than ever identifying with more than one race (U.S. Census, 2020; Pew Research, 2015). Further, bisexuality is the most commonly held identity in the American LGBTQ+ community (56%), and nearly 1 in 6 people from Generation Z identifies as bisexual (Gallup, 2021). Surprisingly, we know little about how perceivers evaluate people with intermediate identities.

The current research asks: when do perceivers think that someone with an intermediate identity has faced discrimination? To address this question, we focus on bisexual people as a target group and test hypotheses derived from the prototype model of attributions to discrimination (Inman & Baron, 1996). In particular, we examine whether perceivers are more likely to say that a bisexual person has faced discrimination when the context suggests that the bisexual person is relatively lower status.

The Prototype Model of Attributions to Discrimination

Inman and Baron (1996) proposed the prototype model of attributions of discrimination, which suggests that people use prototypes—culturally shared cognitive representations that guide the categorization of objects and events (Rosch, 1973)—to determine who are most likely to be perpetrators and victims of discrimination. Research shows people are more sensitive to discrimination when the perpetrator is from a high-status group (e.g., White, male) compared to a low-status group (e.g., Black, female; Inman & Baron, 1996). People are also more sensitive to discrimination when victims are from more prototypical social categories (e.g., race and gender-based) compared to non-prototypical social categories (e.g., age and weight-based; Marti et al., 2000). Most research, however, has examined differences in attributions to discrimination when perpetrators and victims are high and low status members within the same social category, such as race, gender or age (see Major et al., 2002, for review). For example, people more readily attribute negative acts to discrimination for Black victims when the perpetrator is White (Inman & Baron, 1996; Rodin et al., 1990; O'Brien & Merritt, 2022), for women when the perpetrator is a man (Inman et al., 1998; Rodin et al., 1990), and for gay/lesbian people when the perpetrator is heterosexual (Rodin et al., 1990). This phenomenon is known as the *status asymmetry* hypothesis—the belief that discrimination against low-status groups is typically perpetrated by members of higher-status groups (Inman & Baron, 1996; Rodin et al., 1990).

This model, however, doesn't account for people who share parts of their identities with more than one group—intermediate identities (e.g., people who are bicultural, biracial, or bisexual)—and may have attributes associated with each “end point” of more traditionally studied social identities. For example, bisexual people may share some features in common

with heterosexual individuals (opposite-gender attraction), and other features in common with lesbian/gay individuals (own-gender attraction). This begs the question of whether or not people in intermediate groups are seen as prototypical victims (or perpetrators) of discrimination. For example, would perceivers expect a Black-White biracial person to be a likely target of discrimination? Would they see the Black-White biracial person as a less likely target of discrimination compared to a Black person? Past research on status asymmetry and the prototype model leaves a lot of ambiguity about whether and how intermediate identities fit into the current model. We argue that perceivers may be more likely to say that someone with an intermediate identity faced discrimination when context cues suggest that the person is (relatively) disadvantaged or low status.

Bisexual People as a Test Group

We chose to investigate perceptions of discrimination against bisexual people. Bisexual people are an interesting test case for a few reasons. First, bisexual people report experiencing high rates of prejudice from by both heterosexual and gay/lesbian perpetrators (Dodge et al., 2016; Hequembourg & Brallier, 2009; McLean, 2004; 2008), and they are often subjected to having their identity questioned or invalidated (Burke & LaFrance, 2018; Mohr & Rochlen, 1999; Rust, 2000; Worthen, 2011; 2012). Second, our task focuses on an instance of potential discrimination at a workplace in which a target is passed over for a promotion. Bisexual people report high levels workplace scrutiny about their relationships (Glazer, 2012), and over 50% of bisexual people report experiencing one or more instances of workplace discrimination (this number was even higher for bisexual people of color; Tweedy & Yescavage, 2015).

Despite these high levels of reported discrimination, openly bisexual plaintiffs' lawsuits claiming discrimination are rare, and are rarely successful. For example, an examination of employment discrimination cases brought by bisexual plaintiffs on WestLaw (a legal research platform) yielded only eleven filed cases, of which only one was awarded damages (Tweedy & Yescavage, 2015). Therefore, it is critical to understand how perceivers evaluate whether a bisexual person has faced discrimination. There are various reasons why bisexual discrimination cases may be rare and so often unsuccessful (e.g., underreporting, not wanting to be seen as a troublemaker, etc.; Kaiser & Miller, 2003). However, the one we will focus on in this paper is that *others* may be less likely say that negative outcomes experienced by bisexual people are due to discrimination.

Most relevant to the current studies, there is debate about the status that bisexual people hold compared to both heterosexual and gay/lesbian individuals. For example, bisexual people are at times believed to be able to “pass” as heterosexual, therefore reaping the benefits of “heterosexual privilege” (Israel & Mohr, 2004). If so, perceivers may believe that bisexual people hold *more* status relative to gay/lesbian people. However, because bisexual people aren't heterosexual, they may be perceived as having *less* status than the majority group. Therefore, perceivers may 1) rely on context cues in order to determine the (relative) status of a bisexual individual, and 2) be more likely to view a bisexual person as the target of discrimination when context cues indicate that the person is a more prototypical victim (relatively low-status).

Gender as a Moderating Factor

An additional cue that could influence a bisexual individual's prototypicality as a victim is the person's gender. Whereas bisexual men are often perceived to be gay, bisexual women

are often perceived to be heterosexual (Matsick & Rubin, 2018). For example, bisexual men (relative to bisexual women) are more commonly stereotyped as identifying as bisexual in order to avoid “coming out” as gay (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Armstrong & Reissing, 2014; Dodge et al., 2016; Matsick & Rubin, 2018). Indeed, men, but not women, who express a one-time romantic interest in the same gender are more likely to be labeled as gay (Flanders & Hatfield, 2014). On the other hand, bisexual women are sometimes believed to be participating in same-gender performativity—engaging in same-gender sexual behaviors for an audience (Fahs, 2009), in order to win the pleasure and/or attention of men (Esterline & Galupo, 2013). Such same-gender performativity is abundant in movies and on television (Diamond, 2005; Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009), and witnessing same-gender performativity predicts endorsement of bisexual stereotypes and perceptions of identity instability for bisexual women (Oswald & Matsick, 2020). Therefore, potentially prejudicial acts may be perceived as discrimination at similar rates when they are perpetrated against bisexual men and gay men (because there is no perceived status asymmetry) but may be more likely to be perceived as discrimination when perpetrated against lesbian women compared to bisexual women (because bisexual women are presumed to hold higher status).

Overview of Studies

Here, we test whether and when heterosexual people see an ambiguous act of bias toward a bisexual person as discrimination. We chose to focus on heterosexual participants for our initial studies given that past research demonstrates that heterosexual people, relative to gay/lesbian people, hold more negative attitudes toward bisexual people (Roberts et al., 2015). Further, it is more likely that heterosexual people will be on juries making these types of legal decisions, by virtue of being the majority group. We used an ambiguous

discriminatory act because social norms prohibit outward expressions of prejudice, meaning discrimination is often subtle (e.g., being passed up for a promotion with a weak explanation) rather than blatant (e.g., being called a derogatory term; Bobo, 2001; Crandall et al., 2002), and because participants' biases may be easier to detect in ambiguous situations (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Therefore, in all studies, we used a vignette (adapted from Eliezer & Major, 2012) in which the target was rejected for a competitive funding opportunity after their boss overheard the target disclose their sexual orientation (but the reason the target is rejected is never explicitly stated). Aside from asking questions directly relevant to discrimination, we also asked about internal attributions (e.g., poor work record, lack of qualifications, etc.) since these factors can decrease attributions to discrimination (Major et al., 2002).

Based on the prototype model of attributions to discrimination, we formed three main hypotheses. First, because heterosexual people are the highest status group, we hypothesized that participants would be more likely to say that gay/lesbian people *and* bisexual people had faced discrimination compared to heterosexual people (Hypothesis 1). We also anticipated that participants' expectations about whether a bisexual target faced discrimination would likely vary based on the status they ascribe to the bisexual target. If a participant sees a bisexual individual as high-status (potentially due to beliefs about the bisexual individual having some "heterosexual privilege"; Israel & Mohr, 2004), then the participant would be less likely to see the bisexual person as a victim of discrimination compared to a gay/lesbian person (Hypothesis 2). Or, if the status ascribed to the bisexual person varies based on context, then a bisexual person may be seen as a likely target of discrimination when s/he is relatively low-status (e.g., when being compared to a

heterosexual target), but not when s/he is relatively high-status (e.g., when being compared to a gay/lesbian individual. That is, differences in the likelihood to discrimination for bisexual people and lesbian/gay people may only emerge when the groups are in direct comparison, since the comparison highlights differences in each group's status (Hypothesis 3).

We also varied the gender of the target, given past work on beliefs about the “true” sexual identities of bisexual men and women (Matsick & Rubin, 2018). If bisexual men are presumed to be gay, then they may be viewed as having similarly low status as gay men. If this is the case, then bisexual and gay men should be seen as equally likely to be victims of discrimination. In contrast, since bisexual women are often presumed to be heterosexual, then they may be seen as having a higher status when compared to lesbian and therefore, be less likely to be seen as victims of discrimination.

Study 1 examined attributions of discrimination based on sexual orientation among people randomly assigned to read about either a bisexual, gay/lesbian, or heterosexual target who was denied law school funding. Study 1 also examined whether attributions of discrimination differed based on target gender. Studies 2 & 3 examined if attributions of discrimination towards bisexual people would be more or less likely to emerge when the bisexual individual lost in a direct competition with gay/lesbian individual. This allowed us to test more directly if status asymmetry played a role in these attributions. Only Study 3 was preregistered, but materials and data for all studies can be found on OSF:

https://osf.io/rakge/?view_only=9ca049617ace40e49e535cfcedf2c202.

Study 1

Study 1 tested the hypotheses that participants would make fewer attributions of discrimination for heterosexual targets compared to sexual minority (bisexual and gay/lesbian) targets (Hypothesis 1), and fewer attributions of discrimination for bisexual targets compared to gay/lesbian targets (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we examined whether attributions of discrimination differed based on target gender. Below we report all measures and manipulations used, how we determined our sample size, and why some participants were excluded.

Method

Participants

Participants were 600 English-speaking U.S. adults who identified as heterosexual per a preselection function on Prolific (www.prolific.co). An a priori power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) showed that we should recruit a minimum of 600 participants to have 90% power with an alpha of .05 to detect a small main effect ($f = .13$) of target sexual orientation. Fourteen participants were excluded from analyses for identifying as something other than heterosexual on the actual survey. This left us with a total sample size of 586 people ($M_{age} = 34.73$, $SD = 14.40$). A sensitivity power analysis indicated that we ended up with 80% power to detect an effect size of $f = 0.12$ or larger, with an alpha of .05. The majority of participants were female (55%) and identified as White (73%), Asian (10%), Black (5%), Native American (1%), Latino/Latinx/Hispanic (5%), and multiracial (6%). Participants were told the study was about workplace attitudes and were paid \$0.65 for their online participation.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions for this 2 (target gender: male vs. female) by 3 (target sexual orientation: gay/lesbian vs. heterosexual vs. bisexual) between-subjects factorial design. After giving consent, participants read a vignette in which a target—who worked at a law firm—applied for, and was subsequently denied, a competitive law school funding opportunity after their male boss, Steve, overheard them disclose their sexual orientation. For example, in the female/bisexual target condition the manipulation read:

Later that day while having lunch in the breakroom with a work friend, Michelle and her friend are discussing the merits of various dating apps on the market. Michelle shows her friend a dating app she joined. Michelle says, “You can set your dating gender preferences here. For example, I’m bisexual so I have it set to both men and women.” Steve overhears this conversation. The following day Michelle learns that Steve did not choose her to receive the law school funding.

Next, participants answered questions about why the target didn’t get the funding, whether or not they believed the target was discriminated against, and their opinions about a sexual orientation discrimination lawsuit filed by the target. To measure perceived status asymmetry directly, participants were also asked to rate how disadvantaged they thought bisexual, gay/lesbian, and heterosexual people were by their sexual orientation. Finally, participants responded to a manipulation check item and answered demographic questions.

Measures

Attributions. Participants were told that “there are many factors that could impact who was selected for the funding” and then were asked to rate how much “each factor led to the

decision not to fund [the Target].” The factors included three internal attributions: their qualifications, their career ambitions, and their work record, and two items related to our discrimination questions of interest: their sexual orientation and their boss’ prejudice against people with their sexual orientation. Ratings were assessed on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The two discrimination attributions were averaged and created into a composite ($\alpha = .927$), and the three internal variables were averaged and created into a composite ($\alpha = .939$). Higher scores indicated more agreement that those items contributed to the target not getting the law school funding.

Discrimination claim. Participants were next asked to rate whether they agreed the “[Target] was discriminated against based on his/her sexual orientation” on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Lawsuit legitimacy. Participants were then told that the “[Target] has filed a lawsuit against the company and against Steve alleging sexual orientation discrimination. The lawsuit asserts that [Target] was denied law school funding due to discrimination based on [his/her] sexual orientation and seeks compensatory damages.” Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following four statements regarding the lawsuit: if the target’s lawsuit was valid, if they supported the target’s lawsuit, if the lawsuit should be taken seriously, and if the target’s case was legitimate. These questions were adapted from Small and colleagues (2021) and were assessed on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Items were averaged together to create a composite variable ($\alpha = .961$). Higher scores indicated the target’s lawsuit was seen as more legitimate.

Lawsuit rulings. Next, participants answered two questions about who they thought “a *real judge* would rule in favor of in this case” and “if they were allowed to decide the case,

who would they likely to rule in favor of” from 1 (*Definitely in favor of [Target]*) to 7 (*Definitely in favor of the firm and Steve*). The two items were averaged to create a composite variable ($\alpha = .771$). Higher scores indicated more agreement that participants and a real judge would rule in favor of the boss and the firm.

Perceptions of sexual orientation disadvantage. To assess status asymmetry, participants were asked their perceptions of disadvantage experienced by all three sexual orientation groups. Participants answered two questions adapted from Sanchez & Chavez (2010) on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): “[Bisexual/ gay/lesbian/ heterosexual] people do not seem disadvantaged enough by their sexual orientation to be discriminated against” and “[Bisexual/ gay/lesbian /heterosexual] people do not strike me as disadvantaged enough by their sexual orientation to claim discrimination.” Both items were reverse scored and averaged into a composite for each group (bisexual, $\alpha = .953$; gay/lesbian, $\alpha = .946$; heterosexual, $\alpha = .929$).

Manipulation check. Finally, participants were asked to correctly identify the sexual orientation of the target from a list of options (e.g., bisexual, gay/lesbian, heterosexual).

Results

Across measures there were no significant differences based on target gender (see supplementary materials for full analyses), so here we focus on the effects of sexual orientation.

Discrimination Variables

As predicted, there was a significant effect of target sexual orientation on participants’ ratings of whether the target was discriminated against, $F(2, 580) = 23.65, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.08$. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, both the gay/lesbian ($M = 4.43; SD = 1.81$) target and

the bisexual ($M = 4.11$; $SD = 1.90$) target were perceived as significantly more likely to have been discriminated against based on their sexual orientation compared to the heterosexual ($M = 3.17$; $SD = 1.91$) target (gay/lesbian vs. heterosexual $M_{diff} = 1.25$ ($SE = 0.19$), 95% CI [0.88, 1.63], $p < .001$; bisexual vs. heterosexual: $M_{diff} = 0.93$ ($SE = 0.19$), 95% CI [0.56, 1.30], $p < .001$). Contrary to Hypothesis 2, there was not a significant difference in discrimination ratings between the gay/lesbian target and the bisexual target, $M_{diff} = 0.32$ ($SE = 0.19$), 95% CI [-0.05, 0.69], $p = .092$. There was also a significant effect of target sexual orientation on beliefs that the target was denied funding due to discrimination-related factors, $F(2, 580) = 29.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.09$. This was in the same direction as the discrimination claim findings (gay/lesbian ($M = 4.40$; $SD = 1.69$) vs. heterosexual ($M = 3.16$; $SD = 1.84$): $M_{diff} = 1.24$ ($SE = 0.18$), 95% CI [0.88, 1.60], $p < .001$; bisexual ($M = 4.32$; $SD = 1.87$) vs. heterosexual: $M_{diff} = 1.16$ ($SE = 0.18$), 95% CI [0.80, 1.52], $p < .001$; gay/lesbian vs. bisexual: $M_{diff} = 0.08$ ($SE = 0.18$), 95% CI [-0.28, 0.44], $p = .669$)

Internal Attributions

There was a significant effect of target sexual orientation on beliefs that the target was denied the funding due to internal-related factors, $F(2, 580) = 5.82$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. The heterosexual ($M = 4.22$; $SD = 1.70$) target was seen as significantly more likely to have been denied the funding due to internal factors compared to the bisexual ($M = 3.77$; $SD = 1.94$) and gay/lesbian ($M = 3.68$; $SD = 1.70$) target (gay/lesbian vs. heterosexual: $M_{diff} = -0.55$ ($SE = 0.18$), 95% CI [-0.90, -0.19], $p = .003$; bisexual vs. heterosexual: $M_{diff} = -0.45$ ($SE = 0.18$), 95% CI [-0.80, -0.10], $p = .011$; gay/lesbian vs. bisexual: $M_{diff} = -0.10$ ($SE = 0.18$), 95% CI [-0.45, 0.26], $p = .598$). There was also a significant interaction of target sexual orientation and target gender, $F(2, 580) = 4.37$, $p = .013$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. The heterosexual man ($M = 4.53$,

$SD = 1.66$) was seen as more likely to have been denied the funding due to internal-related factors compared to the heterosexual woman ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.70$), $M_{diff} = -0.56$ ($SE = 0.25$), 95% CI [0.58, 1.16], $p = .029$.

Lawsuit Judgments

Mirroring the findings for discrimination attributions and claims, there was a significant main effect of target sexual orientation on ratings of lawsuit legitimacy, $F(2, 580) = 20.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$. Specifically, participants rated the gay/lesbian ($M = 4.44$; $SD = 1.80$) and bisexual ($M = 4.30$; $SD = 1.83$) targets' lawsuit as more legitimate relative to the heterosexual target's ($M = 3.36$; $SD = 1.92$) lawsuit (gay/lesbian vs. heterosexual $M_{diff} = 1.08$ ($SE = 0.19$), 95% CI [0.71, 1.45], $p < .001$; bisexual vs. heterosexual: $M_{diff} = 0.94$ ($SE = 0.19$), 95% CI [0.58, 1.31], $p < .001$). However, the perceived legitimacy of the lawsuit brought by gay/lesbian targets and bisexual targets did not differ significantly, $M_{diff} = 0.14$ ($SE = 0.19$), 95% CI [-0.23, 0.50], $p = .471$.

A similar pattern was also observed for lawsuit rulings, with a main effect of target sexual orientation on who participants rated they and a real judge would rule in favor of in a hypothetical lawsuit, $F(2, 580) = 18.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$ (gay/lesbian ($M = 4.16$; $SD = 1.59$) vs. heterosexual ($M = 5.02$; $SD = 1.65$): $M_{diff} = -0.86$ ($SE = 0.16$), 95% CI [-1.18, -.055], $p < .001$; bisexual ($M = 4.20$; $SD = 1.87$) vs. heterosexual: $M_{diff} = -0.82$ ($SE = 0.16$), 95% CI [-1.14, -.051], $p < .001$; gay/lesbian vs. bisexual: $M_{diff} = -0.04$ ($SE = 0.16$), 95% CI [-0.36, 0.28], $p = .791$).

Perceptions of sexual orientation disadvantage

A repeated measures linear ANOVA with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was conducted to test for differences in perceived disadvantage faced by each sexual orientation

group. There was a significant difference between all three groups, $F(1.36, 797.93) = 439.17, p < .001$. Similar to our other findings, participants perceived both gay/lesbian ($M = 5.33, SD = 1.79$) and bisexual ($M = 4.89, SD = 1.85$) groups as more disadvantaged than heterosexual people ($M = 2.83, SD = 1.84$; gay/lesbian vs. heterosexual: $M_{diff} = 2.50$ ($SE = 0.11$), 95% CI [2.29, 2.71], $p < .001$; bisexual vs. heterosexual: $M_{diff} = 2.06$ ($SE = 0.10$), 95% CI [1.86, 2.26], $p < .001$). However, consistent with our status asymmetry hypothesis, participants also rated gay/lesbian people as significantly more disadvantaged by their sexual orientation relative to bisexual people, $M_{diff} = 0.44$ ($SE = 0.05$), 95% CI [0.34, 0.54], $p < .001$.

Discussion

Results of Study 1 demonstrated that heterosexual people differ in their attributions of discrimination for targets of various sexual orientations. In line with Hypothesis 1, participants believed that bisexual and gay/lesbian targets were more likely to be discriminated against compared to the heterosexual target. This may be because, consistent with the prototype model, participants may view gay/lesbian *and* bisexual people as having less status than heterosexual people. In contrast to Hypothesis 2, we did not find evidence that participants expected bisexual targets to face less discrimination than gay/lesbian targets. This lack of difference may be because each participant only considered one person who applied for the funding, so sexual minority targets were never stated to be in direct competition (which might be needed in order to highlight the status asymmetry). We also found that participants' judgements regarding the lawsuit mirrored their attributions of discrimination. That is, participants viewed both bisexual and gay/lesbian targets' lawsuits more favorably than the heterosexual target's lawsuit.

Participants were more likely to say that the heterosexual targets hadn't gotten the funding due to internal factors compared to the sexual minority targets. This appeared to be particularly true for the heterosexual male target. This is also consistent with the status asymmetry hypothesis: since heterosexual men are less likely to experience discrimination compared to sexual minorities and women, internal factors likely had to be the driving factor behind the target not getting the funding.

Somewhat surprisingly, we did not find any main effect or interaction of gender of target on our variables of interest, even when considering bisexual targets. However, this result, too, may be specific to situations where sexual minority groups are considered in isolation. Because all bisexual targets were seen as likely to have faced discrimination, the status asymmetry between bisexual women (who are sometimes presumed to be heterosexual) and lesbian women was not highlighted. This could be because without an explicitly stated comparison group, people may have defaulted to assuming the funding went to a heterosexual person. If so, this status comparison would make bisexual women appear lower status.

Although participants didn't differ in their attributions of discrimination between the specific bisexual and gay/lesbian target, we did find significant differences in beliefs about the general amount of disadvantage the groups face based on their sexual orientation. That is, participants believed gay/lesbian people were more disadvantaged by their sexual orientation than bisexual people. This finding lends support to the idea that heterosexual people do perceive a status asymmetry between gay/lesbian and bisexual people. Although the prototype model predicts that this status asymmetry should lead to differences in

attributions to discrimination between bisexual and gay/lesbian people, our findings suggest that more nuanced comparisons may need to be made to detect such differences.

Study 2

Study 2 examined whether making status asymmetry between bisexual and gay/lesbian people more salient by directly comparing the two groups leads to differences in attributions to discrimination. Because the bisexual target is believed to have higher status than the lesbian target, we hypothesized that people would be less likely to make attributions to discrimination when a bisexual woman lost to a lesbian competitor than when a lesbian target lost to a bisexual competitor (Hypothesis 3). We did not manipulate target gender in this initial examination, as we were first interested to see if differences in attributions to discrimination would emerge. Below we report all measures and manipulations used, how we determined our sample size, and why some participants were excluded.

Method

Participants

We recruited 600 heterosexual participants for this two-condition (target sexual orientation: bisexual vs. lesbian) between-subjects design via Prolific (www.prolific.co) in order to have the same level of power detected in Study 1. However, sixteen participants identified as something other than heterosexual on the survey. This left us with a total sample size of 584 ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.43$, $SD = 13.82$). A sensitivity power analysis indicated that we had 80% power to detect an effect size of $f = 0.22$ or larger, with an alpha of .05 (Faul et al., 2007). Sixty-three percent identified as female, and participants identified as White (73%), Asian (10%), Black (8%), Native American (1%), Latino/Latinx/Hispanic (6%), multiracial

(2%), or identity not listed (1%). They were told the study was about workplace attitudes and were paid \$0.65.

Procedure and Measures

We again asked participants to read a vignette describing a female target who was passed over for a competitive funding opportunity, and to decide whether the target was discriminated against. Participants were also introduced to the target's female competitor, Julie. The vignette was the same as Study 1, with the exception of the introduction of the competitor who also applies for the funding opportunity. Participants were assigned to one of two conditions that varied only in terms of whether the target who was denied the funding was a lesbian target or a bisexual target. In all cases, the competitor had the other sexual orientation (bisexual or lesbian; see supplemental materials for full vignette). For example, in the bisexual target condition, the manipulation read:

After submitting their applications for the law school funding, Michelle and Julie sit down for lunch in the breakroom. They discuss the merits of various dating apps on the market. Michelle shows Julie a dating app she joined. Michelle says, "You can set your dating gender preferences here. For example, I'm bisexual so I have it set to men and women. However, since you're lesbian, you can set it to just women." Steve overhears this conversation. The following day Michelle learns that Steve did not choose her to receive the law school funding. Instead, he chose Julie to receive the funding.

Participants then answered the same dependent variables in Study 1 (but not perceptions of disadvantage), with the exception of one additional funding question about a possible cause of the boss's funding decision. Specifically, participants responded to whether the

target didn't get the funding due to the conversation she and the competitor had about their sexual orientations. Higher scores indicated more agreement.

Results

Correlations for all dependent variables can be found in the supplemental materials.

Discrimination variables

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, participants were more likely to agree that sexual orientation discrimination was the reason that the target had been denied the promotion when evaluating the lesbian target ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.96$) compared to the female bisexual target ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.91$), $M_{diff} = 0.56$ ($SE = 0.16$), 95% CI [0.24, 0.87], $t(582) = 3.48$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.30$. Similarly, participants were more likely to report that discrimination ($\alpha = .951$) hindered the lesbian target's likelihood of receiving the funding ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.87$) compared to the bisexual target ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.79$), $M_{diff} = 0.45$ ($SE = 0.15$), 95% CI [0.15, 0.75], $t(582) = 2.98$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.25$.

Internal Attributions

There was no significant effect of target sexual orientation (lesbian: $M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.53$; bisexual: $M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.59$) on how likely participants were to report that internal factors hindered the target getting the funding, $M_{diff} = 0.14$ ($SE = 0.13$), 95% CI [-0.11, 0.39], $t(582) = 1.08$, $p = .282$, $d = 0.01$.

Lawsuit Judgements

Also as expected, participants felt the lesbian target's lawsuit was more legitimate ($\alpha = .974$; $M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.93$) compared to the bisexual target's lawsuit ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.90$), $M_{diff} = 0.61$ ($SE = 0.16$), 95% CI [0.30, 0.92], $t(582) = 3.86$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.32$. Participants were also more likely to report that both they and a real judge ($\alpha = .814$) would rule in favor

of the lesbian target ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.63$) compared to the bisexual target ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.63$), $M_{diff} = 0.50$ ($SE = 0.13$), 95% CI [0.23, 0.76], $t(582) = 3.70$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.31$.

Discussion

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, participants were more likely to perceive a lesbian applicant's loss to a bisexual competitor as due to discrimination than a bisexual applicant's loss to a lesbian competitor. This is in line with our reasoning that when directly comparing a bisexual woman and a lesbian woman, people perceive a status asymmetry (seeing the bisexual woman as higher status), which may make them less likely to seeing the bisexual target as a victim of discrimination.

Similar to Study 1, we also found that participants' lawsuit judgements and rulings were consistent with their attributions to discrimination: they felt the lawsuit of the lesbian target was more legitimate than the bisexual target who lost out on the funding. Similar judgments could arise in situations involving subjective judgments of real-world lawsuits, with practical consequences for bisexual claimants.

Study 3

Study 3, which was pre-registered, sought to expand on the findings of Study 2 by further investigating how contextual cues about relative status influence attributions to discrimination. In particular, we expanded our comparisons such that bisexual and gay/lesbian targets were either pitted against each other or against a heterosexual competitor. If participants are attending to status asymmetry when making attributions to discrimination, then they should think that a bisexual target who loses to a heterosexual target (higher status) was more likely to have faced discrimination than a bisexual target who lost to a lesbian target (lower status). On the other hand, gay/lesbian individuals should be rated as

likely targets of discrimination regardless the identity of the competitor (bisexual or heterosexual) since both competitors are perceived as higher status (Hypothesis 3). Although no differences due to target gender emerged in Study 1, it is possible that gender differences would emerge when gay/lesbian targets directly compete against bisexual targets (better highlighting the status asymmetries). We intended to collect one sample in which participants saw either a male or female target, but, due a randomization error, samples evaluating male and female targets were collected separately. Therefore, Study 3a presents results from the female target conditions and Study 3b presents results from the male target conditions. We again measured perceptions of disadvantage, but this time about the targets specifically (instead of their sexual orientation group). We also asked participants to predict the gender of the bisexual target's romantic partner. This measure would allow us to explore whether potential differences regarding male and female bisexual targets were due to expectations that bisexual male targets were more likely to date same gender partners than bisexual women, which could lead to higher expectations that bisexual men would face discrimination (for being classified as gay). Below we report all measures and manipulations used, how we determined our sample size, and why some participants were excluded.

Study 3a

Method

Participants. We recruited 600 heterosexual participants via Prolific (www.prolific.co) using the sexual orientation preselection function. Results of an a priori power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) showed recruiting 580 participants would provide 90% power with an alpha of .05 to detect the smallest effect size ($d = .12$) observed in Study 2. Due to the error with randomization, we had to exclude 299 participants who

were presented with the male targets, which left us with a sample of 301. We then excluded two participants who identified as something other than heterosexual on the survey. This left us with a total sample size of 299 ($M_{age} = 39.61$, $SD = 14.54$). A sensitivity power analysis indicated that we had 80% power to detect an effect size of $f = 0.16$ or larger, with an alpha of .05. From the final sample, fifty-three percent identified as female, and participants identified as White (80%), Asian (6%), Black (6%), Native American (1%), Latino/Latinx/Hispanic (5%), multiracial (1%), or identity not listed (1%). They were told the study was about workplace attitudes and were paid \$0.65 for their participation.

Procedure & Measures. This study was a 2 (target sexual orientation: bisexual vs. lesbian) by 2 (competitor sexual orientation: sexual minority vs. heterosexual) between-subjects factorial design. The procedure was exactly the same as in Study 2, except that a condition in which the sexual minority target lost to a heterosexual competitor was added. In addition to all of the main dependent variables from the previous study, two additional exploratory measures were collected, described below (as well as those reported in supplementary materials).

Perceptions of target disadvantage. Perceptions of disadvantage was measured with 4 items adapted from Sanchez & Chavez (2010). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with each of the following statements on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): “[Target] does not seem disadvantaged enough by [his/her] sexual orientation to be discriminated against (R),” “[Target] does not strike me as disadvantaged enough by [his/her] sexual orientation to claim discrimination (R),” “[Target] faces a lot of prejudice because of [his/her]sexual orientation,” and “[Target] is disadvantaged because of

[his/her] sexual orientation.” Items were averaged to create a composite score ($\alpha = .887$). Higher scores indicated the target was more disadvantaged by their sexual identity.

Bisexual target partner gender. After answering all dependent variables, participants in the bisexual target conditions were told, “Imagine you later find out that [Target] now has a romantic partner. What gender do you think her partner is?” They were asked to select either male or female.

Results

Since our interest was in the interaction of target sexual orientation and competitor sexual orientation, we report main effects only when significant (see supplementary materials for full analyses).

Discrimination judgements. To test whether participants were less likely to make attributions of discrimination when a target lost to a lower status competitor, a between-subjects factorial ANOVA was conducted. As predicted, there was a significant interaction of target sexual orientation and competitor sexual orientation, $F(1, 296) = 5.00, p = .026, \eta_p^2 = 0.02$. Participants were similarly likely to say that the lesbian target had been discriminated against regardless of whether she lost to a bisexual ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.86$) or a heterosexual competitor ($M = 4.04, SD = 1.68$), $M_{diff} = 0.12 (SE = 0.29)$, 95% CI [-0.46, 0.70], $p = .683, d = 0.07$. However, participants were more likely to say that the bisexual target had faced discrimination when she lost to a heterosexual competitor ($M = 4.17, SD = 1.71$) compared to when she lost to a lesbian competitor ($M = 3.36, SD = 1.91$), $M_{diff} = -0.81 (SE = 0.29)$, 95% CI [-1.39, -0.23], $p = .006, d = 0.45$.

Similarly, the interaction of target and competitor sexual orientation was significant for how likely people were to report that discrimination hindered the target getting the

funding, $F(1, 296) = 4.58, p = .033, \eta_p^2 = 0.02$. Participants were similarly likely to say that the lesbian target had lost out on the funding due to discrimination regardless of whether she lost to a bisexual ($M = 4.21, SD = 1.78$) or a heterosexual competitor ($M = 4.12, SD = 1.70$), $M_{diff} = 0.09 (SE = 0.28), 95\% CI [-0.47, 0.65], p = .755, d = 0.05$. However, participants were more likely to say that the bisexual target had lost out on the funding due to discrimination when she lost to a heterosexual competitor ($M = 4.26, SD = 1.66$) compared to when she lost to a lesbian competitor ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.81$), $M_{diff} = 0.77 (SE = 0.29), 95\% CI [0.21, 1.33], p = .007, d = 0.44$.

Internal attributions. There was no significant interaction of target and competitor sexual orientation on how likely people were to report that internal factors hindered the target getting the funding, $F(1, 296) = 2.54, p = .112, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$.

Lawsuit judgements. Unlike on the discrimination measures, there was no significant interaction on the legitimacy of the target's lawsuit, $F(1, 296) = 1.18, p = .279, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$, but there was a marginally significant main effect of target sexual orientation. Participants rated the lesbian target's lawsuit ($M = 4.24, SD = 1.72$) as marginally more legitimate than the bisexual target's lawsuit ($M = 3.86, SD = 1.98$), $F(1, 296) = 3.31, p = .070, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$. There was also a marginally significant main effect of the competitor's sexual orientation, such that participants rated the target's lawsuits as marginally more legitimate when she lost to the heterosexual competitor ($M = 4.25, SD = 1.86$) compared to when she lost to the sexual minority competitor ($M = 3.54, SD = 1.86$), $F(1, 296) = 3.37, p = .067, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$. Again, participants seemed to focus more on the target's sexual orientation when deciding who they and a real judge would rule in favor of ($\alpha = .828$): Participants stated that they and a judge would be marginally more likely to rule in favor of the lesbian target ($M =$

4.15, $SD = 1.54$) compared to the bisexual target ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.75$), $F(1, 296) = 3.16$, $p = .077$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$, and there was no significant interaction between the target's sexual orientation and the sexual orientation of the competitor, $F(1, 296) = 0.40$, $p = .528$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$.

Perceptions of target disadvantage. There was a significant main effect of target sexual orientation, such that participants thought that the lesbian target ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.47$) was more disadvantaged by her sexual orientation than the bisexual target ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.56$), $F(1, 296) = 4.92$, $p = .027$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. The interaction with competitor sexual orientation was not significant, $F(1, 296) = 0.91$, $p = .341$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$.

Bisexual target partner gender. The majority of participants in the bisexual target conditions (62%) believed that the female target's romantic partner would be male. A binomial probability test indicated that the proportion of participants who expected the bisexual target's romantic partner to be male was higher than 50%, $p = .003$.

Study 3b

Study 3b was identical to Study 3a except that the target was male. We had two possible predictions for our bisexual male targets. First, like in Study 3a, we might find that the sexual orientation of the competitor (heterosexual versus gay) uniquely impacts whether participants perceive discrimination against a bisexual man, such that people would view a gay man losing to a bisexual man as discrimination, but not the other way around. Alternatively, since bisexual men are often believed to be gay (Matsick & Rubin, 2018), people might see bisexual men and gay men as similarly low status and therefore make similar attributions to discrimination for them. In other words, they might perceive both bisexual and gay men as being prototypical victims of discrimination.

Method

Participants. We recruited 300 heterosexual participants via Prolific (www.prolific.co) using the sexual orientation preselection function to account for the male conditions previously excluded in Study 3a. Four participants who identified as something other than heterosexual on the survey were excluded, resulting in a total sample size of 296 ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.52$, $SD = 14.42$). A sensitivity power analysis indicated 80% power to detect an effect size of $f = 0.18$ or larger, with an alpha of .05. Fifty-eight percent identified as female, and participants identified as White (77%), Asian (5%), Black (8%), Native American (1%), Latino/Latinx/Hispanic (6%), and multiracial (3%). They were told the study was about workplace attitudes and were paid \$0.65 for their participants.

Procedure & Measures. This study was a 2 (target sexual orientation: bisexual vs. gay) by 2 (competitor sexual orientation: opposite sexual minority vs. heterosexual) between-subjects factorial design. The procedure and measures were exactly the same as in Study 3a, except that the targets were all men.

Results

No significant interactions of target sexual orientation and competitor sexual orientation were observed on any of the dependent variables, so only the significant main effects of competitor sexual orientation are reported in the main text (see supplementary materials for full analyses).

Discrimination judgements. Unlike in Study 2 and 3a, participants attended primarily to just the sexual orientation of the competitor. Participants were more likely to say that the target, regardless of whether the target was bisexual or gay, had faced sexual orientation discrimination when he lost to a heterosexual competitor ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.73$)

compared to when he lost to a competitor of the other sexual minority ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.89$), $F(1, 292) = 18.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$. A similar pattern was seen for discrimination attributions: Participants were more likely to make discrimination attributions when the target lost to the heterosexual competitor ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.59$) compared to the other sexual minority competitor ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.72$), $F(1, 292) = 21.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$. For both variables, the interaction of target sexual orientation and competitor sexual orientation was not significant ($F(1, 292) = 0.84$, $p = .360$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$; $F(1, 292) = 2.07$, $p = .152$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$).

Internal attributions. There was a significant main effect of competitor sexual orientation on beliefs that the target didn't get the funding due to internal factors, $F(1, 292) = 5.74$, $p = .017$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. Participants were more likely to report that the target who lost to the other sexual minority competitor ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.52$) had not gotten the funding due to internal factors compared to when either target lost to the heterosexual competitor ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.35$).

Lawsuit Judgements. There was a significant effect of competitor sexual orientation on lawsuit legitimacy judgements, $F(1, 292) = 8.93$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$. Participants reported that they felt the lawsuit was more legitimate when the bisexual or gay target lost to the heterosexual competitor ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.77$) compared to the other sexual minority competitor ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.89$). There was also a significant effect of competitor sexual orientation, $F(1, 292) = 7.83$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$. Participants were more likely to rule in favor of the target when he lost to the heterosexual competitor ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.46$) compared to the sexual minority competitor ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.56$). For both variables, the

interaction of target sexual orientation and competitor sexual orientation was not significant ($F(1, 292) = 0.08, p = .779, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$; $F(1, 292) = 2.78, p = .097, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$).

Perceptions of target disadvantage. There was a significant effect of competitor sexual orientation, $F(1, 292) = 8.76, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = 0.08$, such that participants believed the target who lost to the heterosexual competitor ($M = 4.15, SD = 1.54$) was more disadvantaged by their sexual orientation compared to the target who lost to the other sexual minority ($M = 3.61, SD = 1.59$). Thus, we did not find differences between the bisexual and gay male targets in perceived disadvantage. We again did not find a significant interaction of target and competitor sexual orientation, $F(1, 292) = 0.79, p = .374, \eta_p^2 = 0.003$

Bisexual target partner gender. The majority of participants (63%) believed that the male bisexual target's romantic partner would be male. A binomial probability test indicated that the proportion of participants who expected the bisexual target's romantic partner to be male was higher than 50%, $p = .003$.

Discussion

Results of Study 3 demonstrate that people make more attributions to discrimination when a more prototypical target of discrimination (lower-status) is passed over compared to when a less prototypical target of discrimination (higher-status) is passed over (Hypothesis 3). When evaluating female targets, lesbian women who lost to bisexual or heterosexual competitors were both seen as potential target of discrimination (since the lesbian woman is the lowest status). On the other hand, bisexual women were seen as likely victims of discrimination only when they lost to a higher status competitor (a female heterosexual coworker), but not when they lost to a lower status competitor (a lesbian coworker). Such differences were mirrored in ratings of disadvantage: participants perceived the female

bisexual target to be less disadvantaged by her sexual orientation relative to the lesbian target (regardless of the competitor's sexual orientation). Therefore, heterosexual people perceive status asymmetry between bisexual and lesbian women, and thus find it less plausible for a bisexual woman applicant to face discrimination if she lost out to a lesbian applicant.

Interestingly, participants viewed lesbian women's lawsuits as more valid than bisexual women's lawsuits, regardless of the sexual orientation of the competitor. It may be that heterosexual people's discrimination attributions regarding bisexual targets are not strong enough to inform their inferences about lawsuits, or that our study was underpowered to reliably detect an interaction on these measures.

For male targets, participants perceived gay men and bisexual men as equally likely to be disadvantaged (i.e., as equally low status). Correspondingly, they made similar attributions to discrimination for bisexual and gay men: participants said that each target was likely to have faced discrimination as long as he lost to a higher-status (heterosexual) competitor. Similarly, participants rated both bisexual men's and gay men's lawsuits as legitimate as long as they had lost out to a high-status competitor. The lack of difference in participants' expectations about bisexual men and gay men is consistent with past research showing that people tend to believe that bisexual men *are* gay (Matsick & Rubin, 2018). Indeed, participants believed that the male target was most likely to have a same-gender partner (but that the female bisexual target was most likely to have an opposite-gender partner). Therefore, future work is needed to more fully understand when (if ever) bisexual men may be seen as having higher status than gay men.

General Discussion

Extending prior research on status asymmetry and the prototype model of attributions to discrimination, the current set of studies examined when people would attribute negative outcomes to discrimination for people with intermediate identities. Using bisexual people as our initial test case, this research makes the following contributions. First, consistent with past research, we demonstrate that when a group is perceived as higher status then they are less likely to be seen as a victim of discrimination. Second, for those people with intermediate identities, the status they are ascribed may vary based on different contextual cues (e.g., the comparison group of a competitor, their gender, etc.). Therefore, this research expands our understanding of the prototype model of attributions of discrimination beyond the most conventionally considered advantaged and disadvantaged groups (e.g., heterosexual and gay/lesbian people), and adds clarification about how people may interpret acts of discrimination against those who share qualities with each of these groups.

We found that heterosexual participants perceived a status asymmetry between bisexual and lesbian women, rating lesbian women as more disadvantaged by their sexual orientation (Studies 1 and 3a). Correspondingly, we found that participants viewed a bisexual woman receiving funding over a lesbian woman as potentially discriminatory but did not view it as discriminatory when the reverse was true (a lesbian woman received funding over a bisexual woman). Given people's propensity to view bisexual women as heterosexual (see Matsick & Rubin, 2018 and our exploratory findings suggesting participants believed the female bisexual targets had opposite-gender partners), they may have seen the bisexual woman as having at least some "heterosexual privilege" (Israel & Mohr, 2004). Alternatively, we found that bisexual men and gay men were seen as equally

disadvantaged, and correspondingly were viewed as equally likely to have faced discrimination. This is consistent with past research demonstrating that people tend to view bisexual men as gay (Matsick & Rubin, 2018).

Heterosexual participants also viewed lesbian plaintiffs' lawsuits more favorably than bisexual women's lawsuits (though these findings did not reach statistical significance in Study 3a). This result suggests that attributions of discrimination may have real-world implications in cases where people compare bisexual women to more prototypical victims and could possibly explain why some bisexual individuals' lawsuits have been unsuccessful. That is, if judges and juries compare a bisexual woman, consciously or unconsciously, to a more prototypical victim of discrimination, they may find the bisexual person's case less valid. Although this situation could seem unrealistic, alleged bisexual victims are often assessed on whether or not they are "gay enough" to have experienced discrimination by judges and juries (Rehaag, 2008; 2009; Sin, 2015). This very statement suggests that people are using gay/lesbian people as a standard with which to compare bisexual people and their experiences with prejudice.

More broadly, this research opens the door to further examine how other intermediate identities (e.g., biracial, bicultural, etc.) fit (or do not fit) into the current prototype model. Although there are notable differences between these social groups, each group shares some characteristics of their identity with a more advantaged group and other characteristics of their identity with a more disadvantaged group. Also, like bisexual people, many of these groups face prejudice from their end-point identity groups. For example, biracial people are at times excluded from each of their racial communities (King, 2011), are often pressured to pick a single racial identity (Kich, 1992), and can even be seen as holding

some “White privilege” (Wilton et al., 2013). Therefore, it is possible that acts of potential discrimination against biracial people, like those against bisexual people, may be viewed differently depending on contextual cues that convey a biracial person’s relative status. For example, a Black-White biracial person may be seen as less likely to have faced discrimination if s/he loses an opportunity to a Black individual (lower-status) than if s/he loses an opportunity to a White individual (higher-status). Experimental evidence also supports this hypothesis: research shows that biracial individuals are perceived as less deserving of racial minority scholarships compared to monoracial minority individuals (Sanchez & Bonam, 2009).

Our research also highlights the need to further understand how different contextual cues can lead people to perceive someone with an intermediate identity as higher/lower status. In Studies 2 and 3, we showed that the addition of a “competitor” influenced how likely a bisexual person was to be seen as a prototypical victim of discrimination. We also demonstrated how a bisexual person’s gender impacted these perceptions. However, these are only two aspects of the environment in which a person may experience discrimination. These findings suggest that future social psychological research must move beyond examining just the “*perpetrated by*” and “*against whom*” facets of discrimination and should consider additional contextual cues that may impact how likely someone is to be seen as a victim of discrimination. We discuss some of these potential cues in the section below.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the current set of studies reveals the importance of relative status in participants’ attributions of discrimination towards people with intermediate identities, there are many important open questions to consider. For example, how does the identity of the

perpetrator influence attributions of discrimination? We did not explicitly state the sexual orientation of the boss who made the funding decision in any of the studies, but the majority of participants in Study 3 presumed that the boss was heterosexual (see supplemental materials). Attributions of discrimination are higher if the perpetrator is high-status (heterosexual in this case; Major et al., 2002). Therefore, participants may be less likely to say that a bisexual target faced discrimination if the boss in the scenario was clearly a sexual minority (e.g., lesbian and/or bisexual). Additionally, our initial investigation focused on a common context of discrimination: the workplace. Although workplace discrimination has important societal and financial consequences (Goldman et al., 2006), sexual orientation discrimination can, and does, occur in other contexts (e.g., housing, health care, religious organizations; Mahowald et al., 2020). Therefore, future work should examine whether similar findings manifest in other contexts, and whether there are some contexts in which status is less linked to attributions of discrimination.

Conclusion

The number of people identifying with intermediate identities in the U.S. continues to increase. For example, bisexual make up the largest portion of the LGBTQ community (Murez, 2021) and the number of biracial and bicultural people are increasing at three times the rate of the general population (U.S. Census, 2020; Pew Research, 2015). Yet, social psychological theories do not account for how these groups do or do not fit into current models. Our work highlights the importance of status asymmetry when determining whether a person with an intermediate identity has faced discrimination: attributions of discrimination are more likely if the target is seen as (relatively) low status.

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