



## Framing advantageous inequity with a focus on others: A catalyst for equity restoration



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### ABSTRACT

Prior research has found that framing inequity as an ingroup advantage, but not as an outgroup disadvantage, can lead the advantaged to be more supportive of redistributive policies towards disadvantaged groups. However, it is unclear whether these framing effects would occur in the same manner when inequity occurs between individuals. In two experiments, we test whether different inequity frames (self-focused vs. other-focused) can elicit different responses to advantageous inequity based on the level of inequity (individual-level vs. group-level) that is activated. In Study 1, we found that inequity frame and inequity level interactively predicted redistribution decisions, such that advantaged individuals engaged in more redistributive behaviors when the inequity was framed as another individual's disadvantage than when the inequity was framed as another group's disadvantage. These divergent effects occurred because individual-level inequity elicited less negative evaluation of others than group-level inequity in an other-focused frame (Study 2). These findings establish a boundary condition of previous research on inequity frame and highlight inequity level as an important moderator that affects advantaged individuals' willingness to engage in restorative behavior.

### 1. Introduction

Framing inequity as an ingroup advantage, but not as an outgroup disadvantage, has been shown to lead advantaged individuals to be more supportive of redistributive policies towards disadvantaged groups (e.g., Chow & Galak, 2012; Lowery, Chow, & Crosby, 2009; Lowery, Chow, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2012; Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007). Generally regarded as a response to perceived threat (Lowery et al., 2012), such framing effects have been shown in the context of racial relations (Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003; Lowery et al., 2007; Lowery et al., 2012; Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005), gender (Branscombe, 1998), and income levels (Chow & Galak, 2012). That is, framing inequity as an ingroup advantage rather than outgroup disadvantage has been shown to elicit threat to the self-concept, and the response to this threat is to temper the advantage by redistributing resources to disadvantaged groups, such as Blacks (Lowery et al., 2007, 2012) and groups with low socioeconomic status (Chow & Galak, 2012). Yet, the self can be identified at different levels of abstraction (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gaertner, Sedikides, & Gaetz, 1999) and emphasizing different levels of the self activates distinct psychological processes (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Crosby, Pufall, Snyder, O'Connell, & Whalen, 1989; Gaertner et al., 1999; Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, &

Lalonde, 1990). Hence, the consideration of distinct levels of the self raises the question: Would advantaged individuals respond to inequity frames in the same way when the inequity is between two individuals emphasizing the individual self, rather than between two groups which emphasizes the collective self?

In this paper, we examine whether different inequity frames (self-focused vs. other-focused) elicit different responses to advantageous inequity based on the level of inequity (individual-level vs. group-level). We base our investigation on the abundance of research that demonstrates that individuals react to inequity in vastly different ways depending on the level of self that is activated. For example, research on people's reaction to unfair treatment has found an asymmetry between how individuals feel about their own disadvantage versus how they feel about their collective disadvantage (Crosby et al., 1989; Taylor et al., 1990). Similarly, previous research has found that individuals' reaction to stereotype threat is largely dependent on whether the stereotype is tied to the individual self or the group self (Wout, Danso, Jackson, & Spencer, 2008). We test whether (a) in a self-focused frame, a focus on the *collective* self's advantage rather than the *individual* self's advantage will lead to more or less support for resource redistribution, and (b) in an other-focused frame, a focus on the *individual* other's disadvantage rather than the *collective* other's disadvantage will

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lead to more or less support for resource redistribution. By empirically investigating this phenomenon, we hope to examine a boundary condition of previous research on inequity frame and highlight inequity level as a potential moderator that affects advantaged individuals' willingness to engage in restorative behavior.

## 2. Responses to inequity

Previous research has found that framing inequity as an in-group advantage (often referred to as privilege) rather than an out-group disadvantage is an aversive experience that elicits threat to the collective self (Branscombe, 1998; Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002; Lowery et al., 2007; Lowery et al., 2012; Phillips & Lowery, 2015; Powell et al., 2005; Rosette & Tost, 2013). The recognition of an ingroup advantage highlights the uncomfortable idea that at least some of the group's status, power, and material resources are not earned through abilities and effort but rather granted to their group by a social system that unfairly favors one group over another. As such, this realization is threatening to one's collective self-concept. One way to attenuate these negative group-related feelings and to reduce such threat to the collective self is through increased support for a reallocation of resources (e.g., Chow & Galak, 2012; Lowery et al., 2007; Lowery et al., 2009; Lowery et al., 2012). For example, exposure to advantageous inequity framed as White privilege lowered Whites' collective self-esteem towards their racial group, thus increasing their support for redistributive social policies (Lowery et al., 2012).

However, reactions to perceived threat may differ when it occurs at the individual level rather than at the group level. For example, while women readily acknowledge that there is discrimination against women as a collective social group, they are less likely to perceive that they have experienced the threat of personal discrimination because of their gender (Crosby et al., 1989; Taylor et al., 1990). In the domain of racial inequity, Phillips and Lowery (2015) found that while Whites acknowledge that there is group level inequity between Blacks and Whites in the United States, they are more likely to claim hardship in their own lives when confronted with the potential threat that ensues from White privilege, thus allowing them to deny that they have personally benefited from privilege. These findings suggest that the experience of threat—whether it's being the target of prejudice or the recipient of privilege—differs depending on which level of the self is activated.

One reason this discrepancy exists is that there is a change in one's self-perception when the individual self rather than the collective self is considered, such that an individual shifts *towards* seeing himself/herself as a specific person with unique attributes and *away* from seeing himself/herself as a member of some social category with shared attributes (Sedikides, Gaertner, & O'Mara, 2011). Moreover, individuals are more likely to focus on their discrete, specific consequences as opposed to those outcomes that are more abstractly or conceptually associated with their social group (Crosby et al., 1989; Taylor et al., 1990; Wout et al., 2008). In reconciling inequity at the collective level, the focus is on the inequity between two groups; hence, threats to collective esteem and the illegitimacy of the standing of the group is what prompts the response—increased support of redistribution of resources—to the perceived inequity (Lowery et al., 2012). In contrast, individual level inequity should draw attention of the individual with advantageous inequity towards themselves and their individual efforts and merit. Thus, as the focus of the self changes from that of the collective self to the individual self, it follows that the response to the inequity may also change.

Equally as important, a shift in inequity levels may change the way individuals think about the disadvantaged other. While past research has primarily focused on unpacking the psychological view of the *self* in the face of privilege (Lowery et al., 2007, 2012), we suggest that attention to perceptions of the other is just as important when different inequity levels are concerned. At group-level inequity, an other-focused frame brings advantaged individuals' attention to the disadvantage

faced by a collective social group. In contrast, at the individual level of inequity, an other-focused frame could direct advantaged individuals to think about the disadvantage faced by a specific, identifiable other. Given that an abundance of research has demonstrated that people respond to identifiable individuals versus collective social groups differently (e.g., pro-social and resource allocation situations; Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997; Small & Loewenstein, 2003), we expect that a focus on the disadvantage of a specific individual versus an abstract social group would lead to different redistribution decisions. As we will discuss next, the shift in focus from collective advantage to individual level advantage may influence the manner in which inequity frames affect views of the self (e.g., self-attribution), views of others (e.g., other attribution), and most importantly, redistributive decisions.

## 3. Two types of justification: positive attributions about the self and negative attributions about the other

Equity theory suggests that a prevalent response to the perceived threat experienced by the beneficiaries of advantageous inequity is justification (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). When justification occurs, those who are advantaged rationalize their standing in their favor through a strategic distortion of the attributions made for each party's input and output (Walster et al., 1978). One weakness of equity theory is that it does not specify the conditions under which the various types of justifications, such as positive attributions about the self (e.g., my good outcome is the result of my competence and hard work) or negative attributions about the other (e.g., his bad outcome is the result of his incompetence and laziness), takes place. These two types of justifications—positive attribution about the self and negative attributions about the other—may represent two possible explanations for distinctions in redistribution decisions at the individual and group levels.

### 3.1. Self-focused inequity frame

When advantageous inequity is framed with a self-focus, threat to the self-concept occurs at both the individual level and the group level; however, we predict that positive attributions about the self, also known as self-serving biases (a frequent response to perceived threat), are more likely to occur at the individual level than at the group level. When the individual self is the point of convergence, individual contributions and accomplishments are proximal and easily accessible (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). When confronted with the uncomfortable idea that one's accomplishment might be the result of privilege as opposed to one's own hard work, the threat to the self-image may be particularly intensified as one's unique attributions and distinctions become questionable. In dealing with this self-image threat, individuals are likely to engage in the self-serving bias and attribute positive outcomes to their own ability or merit (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998; Zuckerman, 1979). For example, self-serving biases are likely to occur when individuals are reminded of their head start in life (Chen & Tyler, 2003) and when their outcome is manipulated as advantaged (Smith & Spears, 1996) – conditions that are akin to advantageous inequity.

In contrast, when the collective self is at the forefront, individual responsibility is lessened and specific contributions of the individual muted (Darley & Latane, 1968). Accordingly, the threat response shifts from one that is focused on the independent self to one that is focused on the collective and the self-serving bias will be less likely to occur. Our theorizing is consistent with research examining the influence of individual identity versus group identity salience on the evaluation of outcomes in inequitable situations (Smith & Spears, 1996). In their research, Smith and Spears (1996) found that participants who received unfavorable outcomes during a laboratory task engaged in less self-serving attributions to justify their outcomes when their group membership was made salient than when their personal identity was made

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