

## Dismantling Bias Conference Series

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### When confronting helps (and when it hurts): Disadvantaged group members' perceptions of prejudice confrontations

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## **WHEN CONFRONTING HELPS (AND WHEN IT HURTS): DISADVANTAGED GROUP MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ALLYSHIP CONFRONTATIONS**

Increased societal pressure has heightened the importance of reducing prejudice in organizations. One strategy for doing so seems to stand out as being relatively effective; simply confronting prejudice when it arises (see Mallet & Monteith, 2019 for a review). Confronting prejudice occurs when the confronter directly communicates disapproval to the perpetrator about their prejudice display (e.g., Brown, Craig, & Apfelbaum, 2021), and has been shown to reduce the perpetrator's subsequent prejudice displays both immediately after the confrontation and days later (e.g., Chaney & Sanchez, 2018; Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010).

A persistent finding in this literature is that advantaged group members' (i.e., people with "privilege" such as White people or men) confrontations are more likely to reduce the perpetrator's prejudice than disadvantaged group members' (i.e., people of color or women). Much of this work has investigated the phenomenon of confronting from the perspective of the perpetrator (centering around questions such as "When do confrontations reduce prejudice in the perpetrator?", e.g., Czopp et al., 2006) or the confronter (centering around questions such as "Why would someone confront?", e.g., Brown et al., 2021). While these insights are important, they characterize a poignantly invisible perspective in the extant research: The perspective of disadvantaged group members who witness the confrontation. Considering the disadvantaged group member's perspective allows us to probe an assumption implicit in much of the work on confrontation and allyship; that disadvantaged group members universally approve of advantaged group members confronting for them (Kutlaca, Radke, & Iyer, 2020). Indeed, this is a reasonable assumption. Work on morality suggests that behaviors intended to benefit the group (e.g., performed to advance the group's interests or protect the group) are perceived as moral,

and a downstream consequence of being perceived as moral is attaining status (Bai, 2017). Consequently, we predict that disadvantaged group members perceive advantaged group confronters as acting morally, and thus confer them status.

To examine this prediction, we focus on an important element of the confrontation: the composition of the audience witnessing the confrontation. We develop a signaling theory, wherein we argue that confrontations in front of certain audiences send stronger (vs. weaker) signals of morality. We begin to test our hypotheses in two studies. First, we find that confrontations performed in front of an audience (i.e., public confrontations) send stronger signals of morality than confrontations performed without an audience (i.e., private confrontations). However, in our second study, we show that audience composition influences the strength of the public confrontation's morality signal. Namely, public confrontations that appear to be risky (i.e., they are in front of a hostile audience) are perceived as more moral and therefore conferred more status than confrontations that do not appear to be risky (i.e., they are in front of a favorable audience).

Yet, if there are social rewards for acting morally, people may engage in moral behaviors that are motivated by a desire to attain those rewards. For instance, as organizations promote diversity, inclusion, and allyship, they may explicitly (or implicitly) grant social rewards for confronting prejudice. However, research on morality perceptions reveals that rewarding moral behaviors lead moral actors to appear motivated by self-interest, thus leading them to gain less status compared to when there are no rewards (Bai, Ho, & Liu, 2020; Hahl & Zuckerman, 2014). As a result, when there are social rewards for confronting, confronting prejudice may signal self-interest. We argue that audience characteristics could send such a signal: Confronting in front of an audience that can grant social rewards may seem more self-interested (and thus, less moral)

than confronting in front of an audience that cannot grant social rewards. We are currently preparing to launch another study that not only tests this prediction, but also draws a connection between seemingly self-interested confrontations and social punishment (e.g., exclusion) conferred by the disadvantaged group witness. We intend for this study to highlight the consequential nature of appearing to confront for the wrong reasons.

Together, this work draws a connection between confronting and receiving social benefits (i.e., morality perceptions and status) from disadvantaged group members who witness the confrontation. Through this lens, we theorize that confrontations which appear to be in the pursuit of rewards (and thus, signal self-interest) can backfire for confronters. As a result, we can demonstrate that disadvantaged group members do not always welcome confrontations by advantaged group confronters, challenging assumptions inherent to much of the prejudice confrontation work.

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