

Competitive Victimhood as a Response to Accusations of Ingroup Harm Doing

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Accusations of unjust harm doing by the ingroup threaten the group's moral identity. One strategy for restoring ingroup moral identity after such a threat is competitive victimhood: claiming the ingroup has suffered compared with the harmed outgroup. Men accused of harming women were more likely to claim that men are discriminated against compared with women (Study 1), and women showed the same effect when accused of discriminating against men (Study 3). Undergraduates engaged in competitive victimhood with university staff after their group was accused of harming staff (Study 2). Study 4 showed that the effect of accusations on competitive victimhood among high-status group members is mediated by perceived stigma reversal: the expectation that one should feel guilty for being in a high-status group. Exposure to a competitive victimhood claim on behalf of one's ingroup reduced stigma reversal and collective guilt after an accusation of ingroup harm doing (Study 5).

Keywords: competitive victimhood, collective victimization, intergroup relations, gender, race

They began by reciting past injuries . . . as if competing to see who had suffered more.

—Vamik Volkan (1997, p. 32)

In 1993, a White male college student participating in a focus group on issues of racism said of racial minorities, “But it's not like they're discriminated anymore, it's like the majority is now the minority because we [Whites] are the ones being discriminated against” (Gallagher, 2003, p. 309). Although victim status would superficially appear to be undesirable, and White males do not objectively suffer as much discrimination in the United States as women or racial minorities (Rosigno, 2007), such claims to relative victim status from members of high-status groups (such as White men) have become increasingly common in the public sphere (e.g., Lynch, 1989). Of course, such claims are not made exclusively by high-status groups; some authors have argued that the United States has in recent years become a *nation of victims*, with members of all groups seeking the title of victimhood (see Cole, 2007). Why would groups compete with each other for the right to claim victimhood?

One answer to this question comes from social identity theory and an analysis of modern conceptions of morality. Individuals are

motivated to maintain a positive moral evaluation of their social group. The possibility that one's group has perpetrated illegitimate harm can pose a threat to the ingroup's moral identity (Branscombe, 1998; Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). We argue that when confronted with accusations of ingroup harm doing—such as claims of discrimination against another group—individuals will defensively attempt to bolster the ingroup's moral status in order to defuse the threat.

In the modern era, one way of obtaining greater moral credentials for the ingroup is through claims to relative victim status. As in Volkan's (1997) discussion of negotiations between Arab and Israeli leaders (from which the opening quote derives), claims of comparative victimhood suggest that one's group deserves retribution and can even serve to legitimate actions (such as the use of military force) that might otherwise seem unjustified. We hypothesize, therefore, that the threat posed by an accusation of ingroup harm doing can be compensated for through *competitive victimhood*: claiming that one's ingroup also has victim status relative to the harmed outgroup. The present research examines this hypothesis from the perspective of social identity theory.

Ingroup Moral Status as a Target for Social Identity Threat

According to social identity theory, individuals define themselves largely in terms of the social groups with which they identify, and they are motivated to maintain a positive conception of these groups (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Morality is perhaps the most important dimension on which individuals evaluate their ingroup or ingroups. Supporting this idea, Leach, Ellemers, and Barreto (2007) obtained evidence that a group's perceived moral status is more important for identification processes (e.g., taking pride in group membership) than a group's competence or sociability. In addition, studies show that people are more motivated to improve the status of their group when they perceive higher status

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as reflective of higher moral standing as opposed to higher competence (Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008).

Given that individuals are motivated to see the groups to which they belong as moral, it is psychologically threatening when the moral standing of one's group (relative to other groups) is called into question (Branscombe et al., 1999; Leach et al., 2007). Prior work has shown that people are motivated to reduce or defend against such threats. For example, a growing body of research (e.g., Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998; Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006) suggests that experiencing collective guilt in connection with illegitimate, harmful actions taken by the ingroup motivates individuals to either legitimize the harm or take reparative action to compensate the outgroup. We propose that competitive victimhood is an understudied but increasingly common response to accusations of ingroup harm doing.

Claims to Victimhood as Competition for Moral Credentials

Given its implications of relative disadvantage, weakness, and low status, group victim status might appear—at least at first glance—to be undesirable. Historically, victim status has had primarily negative connotations (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). Nevertheless, in the current cultural climate, status as an undeserving victim of illegitimate harm might be somewhat desirable insofar as it confers moral credentials (Strassel, 2001).

If a group or individual has suffered victimization, in our current society this often implies that this party has a right to expect reparations, either symbolic or material (Moscovici & Pérez, 2009). Furthermore, victim status appears to afford a certain amount of moral license (Sommer & Baumeister, 1998). Indeed, perceiving the self as victimized decreases the likelihood of performing subsequent possible moral actions, an outcome mediated by feelings of entitlement resulting from victim status (Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010). At the group level, perceptions of collective victimization are positively correlated with feelings of ingroup moral entitlement (Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009). Victim status can actually give groups moral license to commit acts that would normally be condemned. Wohl and Branscombe (2008) found that, for U.S. participants, reminders of ingroup victimization—whether historical (the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack) or recent (the 9/11 terrorist attacks)—reduced feelings of collective guilt over current U.S. military actions in Iraq. Similarly, reminders of past and current ingroup victimization increased endorsement of collective forgiveness for harmful acts committed by the ingroup (Wohl & Branscombe, 2009).

In the modern cultural sphere, belonging to a group that perpetrates negative acts against a victim group can induce a distressing moral identity threat, whereas belonging to a victimized group may induce a sense of high moral status. In partial support of this idea, Branscombe (1998) found that reminding men of unfair advantages they possessed relative to women decreased their sense of ingroup well-being, whereas reminding men of ingroup victimization boosted their self-esteem.

Because of the moral credentials that can be implied by victimhood, social groups of both objectively high and low status sometimes compete for acknowledgment of greater relative victim status, a phenomenon that Noor, Brown, and Prentice (2008) referred to as *competitive victimhood*. Because morality is a relatively

ambiguous dimension (Nucci, 1996) that is subject to considerable influence from social comparison processes (Monin, 2007), people sometimes seek to resolve apparent discrepancies between the moral standing of the ingroup and that of an outgroup through claims to relative victimhood. For example, some Catholics and Protestants compete in Northern Ireland to present the definitive version of local history, through art, political addresses, and other media, in such a way that their group emerges as the true victim in a saga of mutual violence (Noor et al., 2008). Similarly, the ongoing debate regarding comparative moral justification for the use of military force among Israelis and Palestinians largely boils down to an argument over which group has greater claim to victim status (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008).

The existing theoretical and correlational work on competitive victimhood suggests that it primarily occurs as a response to the moral social identity threat implied by accusations that one's group has committed illegitimate harm against an outgroup. Such accusations create an apparent *moral gap* between the ingroup and the outgroup, whereby the accused ingroup appears morally inferior in comparison with the victimized outgroup. By claiming that the ingroup also suffers victimization relative to the outgroup, this gap can be psychologically reduced.

Interestingly, this conception of competitive victimhood as providing moral credentials for the ingroup suggests that members of both objectively high- and low-status groups will engage in this strategy when their group's moral identity is at stake. Some sociological work (Todorov, 2003) suggests that members of minority groups will occasionally engage in competitive victimhood with other minorities. Furthermore, we would expect low-status group members to respond to accusations of harm doing against higher status groups with competitive victimhood because of the former's relatively more frequent experiences with actual victimization. From our perspective, however, high-status group members may have the greatest motivation to strategically engage in competitive victimhood. Although conceptions of the ingroup as collectively victimized are not typical for members of such groups, they may be particularly motivated to make competitive victimhood claims when they encounter information suggesting that they should feel responsible for the relative deprivation of lower status groups in society.

Because of the counterintuitive nature of the idea that members of high-status groups might sometimes make claims to relative victim status, in the present research we were especially interested in exploring the use of this defensive strategy among high-status group members. Understanding why not only low-status but also high-status groups engage in competitive victimhood (in spite of the obvious reality constraints on such claims for high-status group members) requires further consideration of how ideas about victimhood have changed over time in Western culture.

Stigma Reversal and Modern Understandings of Victimhood

Friedrich Nietzsche (1887/1967) addressed the phenomenon of ascribing higher moral status to victimized groups, concluding that it is the end result of a somewhat recent historical trend. Nietzsche argued that, while concepts of *good* and *moral* were once associated with power and might, with the rise of Judeo-Christian reli-

gious thinking, humility, suffering, and martyrdom became more closely associated with the possession of high moral status.

Moscovici and Pérez (2009) similarly contended that the emergence of modern liberalism and the concept of crimes against humanity over the past 300 years have led to a reversal of moral judgments of the powerful and powerless in society. These authors observed that, although minority groups were once commonly labeled deviant and morally inferior, many minority groups now reject such labels to embrace new identities as morally entitled victims. For example, lower status groups as diverse as African Americans and Hindu Dalits (untouchables) have, in recent history, reinterpreted traditional theological narratives to equate their lower social status with higher moral standing (Mahalingam, 2007). At the same time, dominant groups once seen as normative are now often considered guilt-worthy and immoral by virtue of their privileged status (see also Williams, 1993).

Sociologist Lewis Killian (1985) proposed that this process of redefining the mainstream cultural understanding of group morality—whereby high-status groups begin to appear morally culpable, and historically victimized groups seem to gain the moral high ground—can generate what he terms *stigma reversal*. Stigma reversal refers to the idea that when previously stigmatized (low-status) groups are culturally exonerated, members of the high-status group responsible for their oppression may themselves be (or feel) stigmatized because of their association with a group now seen as culpable. Among high-status group members, stigma reversal is experienced as the perception that others believe one should feel a sense of guilt (for wrongs done to low-status groups) simply by virtue of one's group membership. Because this expectation implies illegitimate harm doing by the ingroup, it is a potential moral social identity threat.

Killian (1985) noted that one outcome of feelings of stigma reversal is that high-status group members may begin to respond to accusations of their group with competitive victimhood. Public claims to relative victim status from high-status group members are indeed increasingly common, as in instances where White males claim to be the last true victims in a society that (at least partially) supports reparative policies like affirmative action and diversity quotas (D'Souza, 1991; Gates, 1993; Lynch, 1989).

What this indicates is that the historical process whereby victimhood was reevaluated as morally positive also instilled in high-status group members the potential to perceive stigma reversal. In turn, because claims to relative victim status can now provide moral exoneration, high-status group members may respond to the identity threat posed by perceived stigma reversal with competitive victimhood.

The Present Research

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, we hypothesize that people exposed to a portrayal of an outgroup as undeservedly victimized by their ingroup will engage in more competitive victimhood than those who are not exposed to such a portrayal. Furthermore, because such portrayals imply a *moral gap* between the ingroup and the outgroup that is comparative in nature, we hypothesize that exposure to such portrayals will elicit uniquely competitive victimhood claims in an attempt to reduce the moral gap. In other words, we do not expect portrayals of an outgroup as victimized by the ingroup to alter ratings of the overall level of

victimization experienced by either the ingroup or the outgroup in a noncomparative context. We further hypothesize that the effect of an accusation of ingroup harm doing on competitive victimhood among high-status group members will be mediated by perceptions of stigma reversal. Finally, because we assert that competitive victimhood claims protect or restore the ingroup's moral identity, we hypothesize that exposure to a competitive victimhood claim for the ingroup will reduce experientially negative reactions (such as perceptions of stigma reversal and feelings of collective guilt) that would otherwise occur when the ingroup is accused of illegitimate harm doing.

In five studies, we examined the phenomenon of competitive victimhood across four socially important contexts. In Study 1, we confronted men (a high-status group) with a portrayal of women as undeservedly victimized and then gave them the opportunity to claim ingroup victim status relative to the outgroup. In Study 2, we confronted university undergraduates with a portrayal of university staff as undeservedly stigmatized by either undergraduates or administrators. This allowed us to test whether competitive victimhood claims are uniquely elevated in response to the moral identity threat posed by accusations of ingroup harm doing and not in response to any portrayal of an outgroup as illegitimately suffering. The theoretical perspective presented earlier suggests that low-status groups will also engage in competitive victimhood under moral social identity threat. Therefore, in Study 3, we manipulated whether or not women (a low-status group) were presented with information suggesting that their group discriminates against men. We then assessed competitive victimhood as well as perceptions that the ingroup (women) and the outgroup (men) are victimized independent of comparison with the other group. This allowed us to test our hypothesis that exposure to accusations of ingroup harm doing will influence competitive victimhood in ways that are distinct from possible effects on noncomparative perceptions of the total victimization experienced by the ingroup and the outgroup, respectively.

Our last two studies focused again on the use of competitive victimhood by high-status group members and examined stigma reversal—the perception that society at large holds one's group accountable for immoral harm doing—as both a mediator and an outcome of competitive victimhood. In Study 4, we tested our proposed process in the context of racial discrimination. We first exposed White students to a portrayal of Black students as denied equal admission to universities and then measured perceived stigma reversal and competitive victimhood. In Study 5, we manipulated competitive victimhood by accusing young adults of discriminating against older adults but varying whether they were also exposed to a claim that young adults do or do not suffer compared with older adults. We then assessed perceived stigma reversal and feelings of collective guilt for the ingroup's harm to older adults. Throughout the studies, we took efforts to assess the alternate possibility that competitive victimhood is driven by concerns with the ingroup's entitlement to material resources and societal status, rather than concerns with the ingroup's moral social identity as we claim.

Study 1

To the present day, women suffer various forms of social (Ellemers & Barreto, 2009) and economic (Gittell, 2009) discrim-

ination in the United States and around the world (United Nations, 2007), and they remain a lower status group compared with men (e.g., Cudd, 2006). Nevertheless, perhaps as a paradoxical result of growing awareness of the reality of gender inequality, some men—despite their objectively higher status—have come to perceive themselves as victims of gender-based discrimination stemming from policies and attitudes intended to counteract discrimination against women (Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1997).

From the present perspective, male perceptions of gender-based discrimination may be partly due to competitive victimhood processes. Specifically, we hypothesize that men engage in competitive victimhood with women when their ingroup is accused of doing harm to the outgroup. To test this hypothesis, we had male participants read an article that portrayed the outgroup as either nonvictimized (i.e., discrimination against women no longer occurs), deservedly victimized (i.e., discrimination against women is the result of women's characteristics and choices), or victimized by the ingroup (i.e., men are responsible for present discrimination against women). Participants were then presented with an opportunity to claim relative victim status for their group in comparison with the target outgroup.

We predicted that men confronted with information suggesting that they are responsible for discrimination against women would engage in greater competitive victimhood than men who were not confronted with such information. We anticipated this effect despite the fact that men comprise an objectively higher status group than women and despite the superficially negative connotations of victim status. On the basis of our theoretical claim that competitive victimhood is a defensive response to accusations of illegitimate ingroup harm doing, we did not expect competitive victimhood to occur when victimization of women was framed as deserved and self-caused or when women were described as nonvictimized.

Given that victim status is often seen as entitling the injured party to certain material resources, such as financial reparations (Cole, 2007), it was possible that our outgroup portrayal manipulation could increase perceptions that victims are entitled to material benefits, which might in turn lead participants to claim relative victim status for the ingroup. Contrary to this proposition, our analysis led us to expect competitive victimhood to occur as a response to a moral threat and not as a function of perceived material benefits. However, to assess this alternate possibility, we included a measure of perceived victim entitlement to material resources.

Method

Forty-nine male undergraduates at the University of Kansas (KU) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (portrayal of outgroup: nonvictimized vs. self-victimized [deserved victimhood] vs. victimized by the ingroup) in a between-subjects design, with competitive victimhood as our dependent measure of interest.

In an ostensible study of perspectives on gender issues, participants completed an online survey. Participants first completed a few filler measures (designed to distract participants from the central purpose of the study) and a five-item measure of identification as a man ("I often think of myself in terms of being a man," "Being a man is an important reflection of who I am," "In general, being a man is an important part of my self-image," "I identify with other men," "I feel strong ties with other men"; 1 = *strongly*

disagree, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .94$). This measure was included to prime participants' gender group membership. It was also included as a potential moderator of the effect of the outgroup portrayal manipulation on competitive victimhood, given that high (vs. low) group identifiers are sometimes more defensive in response to threats to their group (e.g., Doosje et al., 1998). However, because Doosje et al. (1998) found that group identification moderated the effect of a reminder of ingroup harm doing only when the harm doing was ambiguous in nature (which was not the case with our outgroup portrayal manipulation), we did not expect such moderation.

Outgroup portrayal manipulation. Participants then read a fabricated news article reporting on the status of women in modern society. This article served as the independent variable and was based on a prior manipulation of perceptions of outgroup discrimination (Schmitt, Branscombe, & Postmes, 2003). Specifically, participants were randomly assigned to read one of three news articles (with the author's gender unspecified).

In the *nonvictimized* condition, the article argued that women and men have equal opportunities for success in modern society, and no mention was made of any group victimization.

In the *self-victimized* (deserved victimhood) condition, the article argued that women are discriminated against in modern society, but this discrimination stems from aspects of their own biology and life choices. This article contained passages like,

As a result of biological differences and choices made by women based on those differences, women are victims of widespread discrimination in the workplace and other areas to this day. Due to certain inherent characteristics, women experience discrimination despite the fact that men are not responsible for its occurrence.

The nonvictimized portrayal and the self-victimized portrayal served as comparison conditions designed to imply no threat to the ingroup.

In the *victimized-by-the-ingroup* condition, the article argued that women are victims of discrimination intentionally perpetrated by men. This article contained passages like,

The discrimination most modern women face is the direct result of sexism on the part of men. . . . As a result of the behaviors and prejudices of men at all levels of society, women are victims of widespread discrimination in the workplace and other areas to this day.

This portrayal of the ingroup as responsible for the outgroup's suffering was designed to represent a moral social identity threat to the ingroup.

Importantly, the total amount of discrimination that women experience was described as identical in both the self-victimized and victimized-by-the-ingroup conditions; only the alleged source of the discrimination varied. This helps rule out the possibility that any differences observed between these conditions might be due to differential perceptions of the total amount of suffering endured by the outgroup (which could affect, e.g., feelings of empathy for the outgroup).

Manipulation checks. Participants then completed three manipulation check items to assess the effectiveness of the outgroup portrayal manipulation. Specifically, participants rated their level of agreement (on a 7-point scale) with the following statements: "In the article you read, women were described as victims of

discrimination,” “In the article you read, women were described as being responsible for the discrimination they experience,” and “In the article you read, the discrimination women experience was described as being the result of men’s actions.”

Competitive victimhood. Participants then completed a single-item measure of competitive victimhood claims: “In society, compared with women, men experience ____ discrimination” (1 = *less overall*, 4 = *as much*, 7 = *more overall*).

Perceptions of victim material entitlement. At the end of the survey, we included two items assessing perceptions of victim material entitlement to test for any effect of the manipulation on these perceptions. Specifically, participants rated their level of agreement (on a 7-point scale) with the following statements: “In our society, victims of discrimination are generally entitled to certain resources, such as financial reparations or increased political power” and “Our society is generally willing to give compensation to groups perceived as having suffered discrimination.” These two items correlated significantly ($p < .001$) at $r = .63$ and were combined to form a single measure of perceptions of victim material entitlement.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. To test the effectiveness of the manipulation, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs; portrayal of outgroup: nonvictimized vs. self-victimized vs. victimized by the ingroup) were conducted on each of the manipulation check items. A significant effect was obtained for the item, “In the article you read, women were described as victims of discrimination,” $F(2, 46) = 11.42, p < .001$. As expected, pairwise comparisons revealed that participants in the self-victimized and victimized-by-the-ingroup conditions agreed more strongly with this statement compared with participants in the nonvictimized condition, $t_s > 4.0, p_s < .01$, whereas participants in the victimized conditions did not differ significantly in their level of agreement, $p = .87$ ($M_{\text{Nonvictimized}} = 2.50; M_{\text{Self-victimized}} = 5.33; M_{\text{Victimized by the ingroup}} = 5.22$). For the item, “In the article you read, women were described as being responsible for the discrimination they experience,” we also obtained a significant effect, $F(2, 46) = 8.71, p < .01$, such that participants in the self-victimized condition agreed more strongly with this statement compared with participants in the nonvictimized and victimized-by-the-ingroup conditions, $t_s > 3.36, p_s < .01$, whereas participants in the latter two conditions did not differ in their level of agreement, $p = .53$ ($M_{\text{Self-victimized}} = 4.13; M_{\text{Nonvictimized}} = 2.00; M_{\text{Victimized by the ingroup}} = 2.33$). Finally, for the item, “In the article you read, the discrimination women experience was described as being the result of men’s actions,” we also obtained a significant result, $F(2, 46) = 6.19, p < .01$. Participants in the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition agreed more strongly with this statement compared with participants in the nonvictimized and self-victimized conditions, $t_s > 2.65, p_s < .02$, whereas participants in the latter two conditions did not differ significantly in their level of agreement, $p = .51$ ($M_{\text{Victimized by the ingroup}} = 4.89; M_{\text{Nonvictimized}} = 3.13; M_{\text{Self-victimized}} = 2.67$).

Competitive victimhood. An initial inspection of our data suggested that there might be heterogeneity of variance across conditions on our competitive victimhood measure, and this was confirmed by a significant result on a Levene’s test for heteroge-

neity of variance, $F(2, 46) = 7.11, p < .01$. Because of our violation of the assumption of homogeneity of variance, we performed a one-way ANOVA on the single-item measure of competitive victimhood using the Welch–Satterthwaite procedure.¹ Although the omnibus effect was not significant, $F''(2, 29.66) = 2.27, p = .12$, we did not expect the two conditions that did not imply a moral threat to the ingroup—the nonvictimized and self-victimized portrayals of the outgroup—to differ. Thus, our primary test of interest was a contrast (also performed using the Welch–Satterthwaite procedure) in which we compared the two nonthreatening conditions to the threatening condition (nonvictimized = 1; self-victimized = 1; victimized by the ingroup = -2). As predicted, this test revealed that participants in the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition engaged in significantly more competitive victimhood ($M = 2.61, SD = 1.61$) compared with participants in the two nonthreat conditions, $t'(20.97) = -2.08, p = .05$. A second contrast that compared the nonthreat conditions (nonvictimized = 1; self-victimized = -1; victimized by the ingroup = 0) revealed that, as expected, participants in the nonvictimized ($M = 1.69, SD = 0.79$) and self-victimized conditions ($M = 1.87, SD = 0.64$) did not differ in their level of competitive victimhood, $t'(28.39) = -0.69, p = .49$.

Perceptions of victim material entitlement. Performing a standard ANOVA on the dual-item composite of perceptions of victim entitlement to material resources did not yield a significant result, $F(2, 46) < 1, p = .58$ ($M_{\text{Nonvictimized}} = 3.88; M_{\text{Self-victimized}} = 4.12; M_{\text{Victimized by the ingroup}} = 3.67$). Interestingly, perceptions that victims are materially entitled correlated negatively (but nonsignificantly) with competitive victimhood, $r = -.13, p = .37$.

Male participants exposed to a portrayal of women as undeservedly victimized by the ingroup were more likely to engage in competitive victimhood compared with participants in the nonvictimized and self-victimized portrayal conditions. Participants exposed to a portrayal of women as deservedly self-victimized, however, were not more likely to engage in competitive victimhood compared with men in the nonvictimized control condition. Furthermore, evidence was found that claims to group victimhood are not related to perceptions of mere material entitlement, suggesting that competitive victimhood can serve to defend against moral threat independent of desire for power or financial gain.

This study has social relevance given its focus on gender, a category that has important social status implications. However,

¹ We also conducted a regression analysis to determine whether the effect of outgroup portrayal might be moderated by the extent to which participants identified with their gender group (note that the distribution was negatively skewed, $M_{\text{Grand}} = 5.67$ on a 7-point scale). Specifically, competitive victimhood scores were regressed onto outgroup portrayal (contrast coded: victimized by the ingroup = 1, nonvictimized = -.5, self-victimized = -.5), identification as male (centered and continuous), and their interaction. This analysis revealed a main effect only for outgroup portrayal, $\beta = .32, t(45) = 2.29, p = .03$ (all other $t_s < 1, ns$). Because of the heterogeneity of variance observed in our dependent variable, nonparametric regression approaches may have had more power. However, because we did not observe any hint of moderation by identification using a parametric approach and because this hypothesis was not crucial to the present perspective, we did not pursue this analysis further (for parallel null results on data that do not violate the homogeneity assumption, see Study 4, footnote 3).

one potential limitation of this design stems from the zero-sum nature of a (relatively) dichotomous grouping variable like gender. According to our analysis, competitive victimhood is a strategy for restoring the ingroup's moral identity when the ingroup is accused of causing the undeserved victimization of an outgroup. This perspective suggests that if an outgroup is undeservedly victimized by another group (i.e., not by the ingroup), no special motivation to engage in competitive victimhood will be aroused (because no ingroup harm doing is implied). However, because victimization in dichotomous groups is necessarily either the ingroup's fault or is in some sense deserved by the outgroup, it is difficult to examine the unique importance of ingroup responsibility for the outgroup's undeserved victimization in this context. If women are undeservedly victimized (meaning they are not to blame for their victimization), then almost by necessity their victimization is the fault of men. This means that, in the gender context, we are unable to fully distinguish between ingroup responsibility and illegitimacy of victimization—when the ingroup is not responsible, the outgroup's self-victimization may also be perceived as more legitimate.

In the case of nondichotomous social categories—like nationality or social class—responsibility for undeserved victimization may lie in a number of places. This aspect of nondichotomous groups suggests a possibility we were unable to test in Study 1, namely, that implied ingroup responsibility for an outgroup's undeserved victimization might not be necessary to elicit competitive victimhood. If status as an undeserving victim does, in fact, confer desirable moral credentials on the ingroup, then it is possible that individuals will engage in competitive victimhood after exposure to a portrayal of an outgroup as illegitimately victimized by any group, and not only by the ingroup. This might also be the case if competitive victimhood is somehow driven by a feeling of empathy for an outgroup's undeserved suffering. However, if competitive victimhood claims are uniquely motivated by moral social identity threats—as our analysis suggests—then they should follow only from perceptions that the ingroup is being held responsible for outgroup victimization. In Study 2, then, we attempted to replicate and extend our initial investigation by examining competitive victimhood processes in a context involving multiple groups: the class/status hierarchy within a university setting.

Study 2

In a field study at the State University of New York at Albany, Tompkins, Fisher, Infante, and Tompkins (1975) found evidence that a perceived hierarchy exists within the university system. Specifically, these researchers asserted that administrators (including directors and college deans) form a high-status group on campus, civil service workers or staff (administrative assistants and maintenance workers) form a relative low-status group, and students fall somewhere in between (see Bess & Dee, 2008, for an extended discussion of power relationships within a university setting). In Study 2, we used this naturally occurring multigroup status hierarchy to further test competitive victimhood processes. Specifically, we hypothesized that a higher status group (undergraduate students) would be motivated to engage in competitive victimhood after being accused of illegitimately harming an outgroup (university staff, a lower status group) but not when another

group (administrators) was accused of illegitimately harming the outgroup.

Beyond testing the motivation for competitive victimhood in a different intergroup context, Study 2 also expands on Study 1 in multiple ways. First, because Study 2 examines motivation for competitive victimhood in a nondichotomous groups context, we were able to better test whether our effect is uniquely driven by accusations of ingroup responsibility for the victimization of an outgroup. Having established in Study 1 that competitive victimhood does not follow from information suggesting that the outgroup is deservedly victimized, in Study 2 we tested whether competitive victimhood follows from a portrayal of the outgroup as undeservedly victimized by any group (and not only by the ingroup). Specifically, we hypothesized that undergraduate students would engage in competitive victimhood when their ingroup had been accused of victimizing the outgroup (university staff) but not when another group (university administrators) had been accused of victimizing the outgroup. In this way, advancing beyond Study 2, we were able to hold the illegitimacy of the outgroup's suffering constant, varying only whether or not the ingroup was accused. Although the amount and type of suffering experienced by the outgroup is the same in either case, no moral identity threat to the ingroup is implied when another group is the perpetrator of harm.

Second, in Study 2, we controlled for a possible alternative explanation of the Study 1 finding. It is possible that contemplating ways in which the ingroup has victimized an outgroup simply increases the overall salience of the ingroup's experiences with victimhood. In other words, rather than competitive victimhood being a motivated process whereby individuals attempt to reduce the apparent moral gap between ingroup and outgroup—as we claim—competitive victimhood might simply be the byproduct of a nonmotivated increase in the overall salience of victimhood.

There is reason to doubt that this is an adequate explanation of competitive victimhood as observed in Study 1. The concept of victimhood was made equally salient in both the self-victimized and victimized-by-the-ingroup conditions: the amount of discrimination experienced by the outgroup was described as the same in each induction, and only the alleged source (and, possibly, perceived legitimacy) of the discrimination varied. Nevertheless, more competitive victimhood was observed in the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition compared with the self-victimized and no victimization conditions. This pattern of results would be unlikely if our competitive victimhood measure was simply assessing overall salience of victimhood.

Nevertheless, it is important to directly address the salience interpretation. According to our guiding analysis, competitive claims to victimhood are motivated by a moral identity threat, which group members resolve by establishing the moral credentials of the ingroup relative to the relevant outgroup. In short, from our perspective, the competitive aspect of competitive victimhood is essential; claims to group victimhood that do not establish the ingroup's victimhood by comparison to the victimhood of another group cannot fulfill the moral comparative function posited to lie at the heart of the process.

To provide a stronger test of the moral comparative aspect of competitive victimhood and to control for the possibility that salience of ingroup harm doing simply increases salience of victimhood, in Study 2 we differentiated between noncompetitive and

competitive claims to ingroup victimhood. Specifically, we asked participants separately about their perceptions of the ingroup—KU undergraduates—as victimized without reference to any other group (noncompetitive victimhood) and in reference to the target outgroup of university staff (competitive victimhood). Because perceptions of the ingroup as victimized without reference to the relevant outgroup do not serve a direct moral comparative function, we did not expect accusations of ingroup harm doing to increase noncompetitive victimhood. However, because competitive claims to ingroup victim status do comparatively boost the ingroup's moral credentials relative to the relevant outgroup, we expected accusations of ingroup harm doing to increase uniquely competitive victimhood.

Finally, we argue that competitive victimhood (as assessed in the current studies) is a group-based phenomenon, driven by concerns with ingroup (rather than personal) moral identity. However, it is possible that our outgroup portrayal manipulation will focus participants on times when they personally mistreated campus staff and that resulting concerns with their personal behavior might drive competitive victimhood (rather than concerns connected to the group's collective behavior, as we claim). To assess this possibility, we asked participants whether they called to mind any personal responsibility for past mistreatment of staff while reading about the treatment of staff members.

Method

Thirty-six KU undergraduates (25 female) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (portrayal of outgroup: victimized by another group vs. victimized by the ingroup) in a between-subjects design, with competitive victimhood as our dependent measure of interest. Two participants for whom English was a second language expressed difficulty with understanding the materials, and their data were removed prior to data analysis. In addition, two other participants suspected the authenticity of our manipulation; their data were also excluded, leaving a final total of 32 (22 female) participants.

Outgroup portrayal manipulation. Participants entered a laboratory to take part in an ostensible study on perceptions of campus life. They first answered some demographic questions, including an item about their status as an undergraduate student at KU that was intended to make the relevant social category salient. Participants then read an article, ostensibly published in the KU student newspaper, which focused on the treatment of staff on campus. The article was designed to appear as if it had been downloaded from the website of the KU newspaper to bolster its perceived authenticity.

In reality, the fabricated article constituted our outgroup portrayal manipulation. In both versions of the article, it was reported that, as part of an annual internal review process, KU (nonstudent) staff members from multiple different departments had written a letter to the chancellor about the treatment they receive on campus. In both versions, it was reported that, in the letter, staff at KU claimed to be badly mistreated. However, the alleged source of their mistreatment varied by condition.

In the *victimized-by-another-group* condition, it was alleged that KU staff members claimed they received especially harsh treatment from KU administrators. The article contained the following quote from the staff's letter: "The administrators are disrespectful

and even hostile toward us. We have seen our fellow workers insulted, ridiculed, and shouted at by administrators. We believe a staff member is discriminated against at least once every day on this campus."

In the *victimized-by-the-ingroup* condition, it was alternately asserted that KU staff members accused KU undergraduates of mistreatment. The article contained the following quote from the staff's letter: "The undergraduate students are disrespectful and even hostile toward us. We have seen our fellow workers insulted, ridiculed, and shouted at by students. We believe a staff member is discriminated against at least once every day on this campus."

Manipulation checks. After reading the article, participants completed four items testing the effectiveness of the manipulation. Specifically, participants indicated their level of agreement with three statements concerning the content of the article: "In the article, KU staff report being victims of mistreatment," "In the article, KU staff report being mistreated primarily by KU undergraduates," and "In the article, KU staff report being mistreated primarily by KU administrators" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). In addition, we tested whether the manipulation effectively induced the hypothesized moral gap between the ingroup and the outgroup by asking participants to rate their level of agreement with the statement: "The article gives the impression that KU staff members are morally superior to KU undergraduates."

Noncompetitive and competitive victimhood. Participants then completed three items measuring noncompetitive victimhood claims on behalf of the ingroup: "At times, I feel negatively discriminated against because of my status as an undergraduate student," "KU undergraduates are discriminated against on campus because of their status as students," and "KU undergraduates are discriminated against off campus, in other areas of Lawrence [the university's home city], because of their status as students" (1 = *never*, 4 = *sometimes*, 7 = *frequently*).

These items were followed by a single item measuring competitive victimhood claims: "Compared with KU staff, KU undergraduates experience ____ discrimination" (1 = *less overall*, 4 = *as much*, 7 = *more overall*).

Personal responsibility. Next, to determine the extent to which feelings of personal (rather than collective) responsibility for the mistreatment of staff may have contributed to any observed effects of our manipulation, we asked participants, "As you were reading the article about treatment of staff members, did you think about a specific incident (or incidents) when you personally mistreated campus staff?" Participants simply responded *yes* or *no*.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. To test the effectiveness of our manipulation, we performed *t* tests or nonparametric median tests (outgroup portrayal: victimized by another group vs. victimized by the ingroup) on each of our manipulation check items. As expected, we found no difference in level of agreement with the statement, "In the article, KU staff report being victims of mistreatment" between participants in the *victimized-by-another-group* ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 1.92$) and *victimized-by-the-ingroup* conditions ($M = 6.47$, $SD = 1.28$), $t(30) = 1.06$, $p = .30$. A Levene's test revealed that responses to our second item, "In the article, KU staff report being mistreated primarily by KU under-

graduates," violated the homogeneity of variance assumption, $F(1, 30) = 21.09, p < .001$. Accordingly, we submitted responses to this item to a t test using the Welch-Satterthwaite procedure and obtained a significant result, $t'(19.04) = 8.37, p < .001$. Participants in the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition agreed more strongly ($M = 5.59, SD = 2.03$) with the statement compared with participants in the other condition ($M = 1.27, SD = 0.59$). A Levene's test also showed heterogeneity of variance in responses to our third item, "In the article, KU staff report being mistreated primarily by KU administrators," $F(1, 30) = 4.70, p = .04$. A modified t test revealed that participants in the victimized-by-another-group condition agreed more strongly ($M = 6.40, SD = 1.60$) with the statement compared with participants in the other condition ($M = 1.18, SD = 0.39$), $t'(15.50) = 12.36, p < .001$. Finally, a Levene's test also revealed heterogeneity of variance in responses to our measure of a perceived moral gap between groups: "The article gives the impression that KU staff members are morally superior to KU undergraduates," $F(1, 30) = 17.54, p < .001$. A modified t test indicated that participants in the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition agreed more strongly ($M = 3.06, SD = 1.89$) with this statement compared with participants in the other condition ($M = 1.60, SD = 0.99$), $t'(24.72) = 2.79, p = .01$.

Noncompetitive victimhood. Performing t tests on each of our three items assessing noncompetitive victimhood yielded no significant results, $t_s < 1, p_s > .60$.² This suggests that our manipulation was not simply increasing overall salience of ingroup (or personal) victimhood.

Competitive victimhood. As predicted, a similar analysis on our competitive victimhood measure showed that participants in the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition engaged in significantly more competitive victimhood ($M = 2.88, SD = 1.17$) compared with participants in the victimized-by-another-group condition ($M = 2.07, SD = 1.03$), $t(30) = 2.08, p = .046, d = .73$.

Personal responsibility. Only one participant in the data set indicated that, while reading the induction, they had thought about a time when they personally had discriminated against university staff. This person had a score of only 1 on our 7-point competitive victimhood measure. This strongly suggests that our effects were due to group-level concerns rather than personal-level concerns.

KU undergraduates who were exposed to a portrayal of KU staff as victimized by the ingroup engaged in more competitive victimhood than undergraduates exposed to a portrayal of KU staff as victimized by another group. Portrayal of the outgroup affected competitive victimhood specifically and not noncompetitive perceptions of the ingroup as victimized without reference to the outgroup's victimization.

While providing a conceptual replication of the competitive victimhood effect from Study 1 in a different intergroup context, these results also make several advances. First, the fact that competitive victimhood did not occur when the outgroup was portrayed as undeservedly victimized by another group supports the claim that competitive victimhood is a unique response to the moral identity threat posed by accusations of ingroup harm doing. Second, distinguishing competitive from noncompetitive victimhood claims provides direct evidence for the importance of the hypothesized moral comparative aspect of competitive victimhood. Third, the fact that our manipulation did not prompt participants to recall instances when they personally victimized the

outgroup provides support for the contention that group-based competitive victimhood occurs in response to a threat to people's social (rather than personal) moral identities.

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that, across two different intergroup contexts (gender and social class/status), members of high-status groups engage in competitive victimhood when their ingroup is accused of illegitimate harm doing. In Study 3, we returned to the gender context to further investigate the nature of competitive victimhood as a defensive response. In this study, we sought to determine whether a low-status group (women) might also engage in competitive victimhood and to distinguish competitive victimhood not only from noncompetitive victimhood, but also from outgroup harm minimization.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 investigated claims of competitive victimhood among high-status groups. These studies provide strong tests of the hypothesis that group members will claim greater relative victimization for their ingroup when they are accused of illegitimate harm doing, because high-status group members do not typically think of themselves as victimized (Nealon, 2000). In Studies 1 and 2, the means across all conditions on our competitive victimhood scale were below the midpoint, suggesting that there may be reality constraints limiting the extent to which high-status groups can claim victimhood. In other words, although high-status group members who have been accused of harm doing make more competitive victimhood claims than those who have not, they nevertheless do not claim that they suffer as much discrimination as a low-status group. Because high-status group members do not have many objective claims to collective victimization, it is a particularly interesting and counterintuitive finding that they do nevertheless respond to accusations of harm doing with competitive victimhood.

In Study 3 we wanted to examine competitive victimhood among members of a low-status group, to test whether they would also use this strategy in response to an accusation of harm doing against another group. On the basis of the theorizing of Nietzsche (1887/1967) and others who have argued that, in the modern cultural climate, accusations of ingroup harm doing lower and claims to ingroup victim status bolster a group's moral credentials, we have no reason to expect that low-status groups would not also engage in competitive victimhood. Indeed, because low-status groups have more objective claims to victimization than high-status groups, members of such groups might be expected to use this strategy to an even greater extent. We tested this possibility in Study 3 by returning to the gender context but this time presenting women with one of two portrayals of men as victims of discrimination in modern society. In one portrayal, men were described as responsible for their own victimization, whereas in our critical condition, women were accused of perpetrating discrimination against men.

² For Studies 2, 4, and 5, we also analyzed our primary dependent measures with participant gender entered as an additional between-subjects factor. In no study did we observe main effects or interactions involving participant gender; therefore, we omitted this factor from our main discussion of the results to streamline presentation.

A second important goal of Study 3 was to further demonstrate the uniquely comparative nature of competitive victimhood as a response to accusations of harm doing. In Study 2, we found an increase in competitive but not noncompetitive victimhood claims among university students accused of discriminating against university staff. This suggests that our competitive victimhood effects are not simply the result of increases in the perception that one's ingroup is victimized, independent of comparison with the relevant outgroup (although competitive and noncompetitive victimhood may be somewhat related). However, it remains possible that yet another process is driving our effects. Specifically, competitive victimhood may be the result of changes in perceptions or acknowledgment of the outgroup's overall victimhood. In other words, it may be the case that when the ingroup is accused of harm doing, ingroup members defensively minimize the amount of victimization the outgroup actually experiences (Branscombe & Miron, 2004). This defensive decrease in acknowledgment of outgroup victimization may subsequently lead to an inflated sense of the ingroup's relative victimhood. Thus, increased competitive victimhood might simply result from the defensive strategy of minimizing outgroup suffering.

From our perspective, accusations of ingroup harm doing create an apparent moral gap between one's ingroup and the relevant outgroup. The most effective way to psychologically close this gap is to engage in competitive victimhood, which simultaneously elevates the ingroup's moral standing and lowers the outgroup's apparent moral standing, all within a directly comparative context. If these assumptions are correct, two hypotheses follow. First, we would expect accusations of ingroup harm doing to affect competitive victimhood claims but not noncompetitive claims to ingroup victimhood or noncomparative perceptions of outgroup victimhood. Second, we would expect competitive victimhood scores to be positively correlated with perceptions of the ingroup's victimhood and negatively correlated with perceptions of the outgroup's victimhood. We tested these hypotheses in Study 3 by including (after the manipulation of our independent variable) our standard competitive victimhood measure as well as single-item measures of noncompetitive ingroup and outgroup victimhood.

A final goal of Study 3 was to account for the potential role of political orientation in the use of competitive victimhood as a strategy. Cole (2007) and others have stressed the political nature of claims to group victimhood, proposing that although political conservatives use this strategy, it is more associated with liberals in the popular consciousness. Because of system justification and status quo maintenance processes (e.g., Jost & Kay, 2005), it may especially be the case that competitive victimhood among members of a low-status group is influenced by political orientation. Political conservatism is positively correlated with endorsement of modern sexist beliefs (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), and the presence of this correlation among women may result from hesitation on the part of low-status group members who endorse traditional values to see themselves as discriminated against (Swim, Becker, Lee, & Pruitt, 2010). In Study 3, we were interested in demonstrating that accusations of ingroup harm doing can increase competitive victimhood independent of differences in political orientation. Accordingly, we assessed political orientation and controlled for this construct in our primary analyses.

Method

We recruited 142 female participants through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants were paid \$0.30 for completion of a short online study. Of these, eight participants expressed suspicion regarding the authenticity of our prefabricated study materials. Their data were excluded, leaving a final total of 134 participants who were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (portrayal of outgroup: self-victimized vs. victimized by the ingroup) in a between-subjects design, with competitive victimhood and noncompetitive ingroup and noncompetitive outgroup victimhood ratings as our dependent measures of interest.

Outgroup portrayal manipulation. The study was described as being focused on gender-related issues. Participants first answered some demographic questions, including an item about their gender, which made the relevant social category salient. Participants also completed a measure of political orientation: "How would you describe your political beliefs?" (1 = *very conservative*, 9 = *very liberal*; $M_{Grand} = 5.9$). Participants then read an article, ostensibly published in a reputable online news magazine, which highlighted the issue of gender-based discrimination against men in modern society.

In reality, the fabricated article constituted our outgroup portrayal manipulation. In both versions of the article, it was argued that men increasingly suffer various forms of discrimination in the workplace. In the self-victimized condition, the article argued that men discriminate against other men in modern society. This article contained passages like,

Close to 95% of male employers report that they would rather hire a woman than another man in order to improve their company's image. Furthermore, 65% of men believe that women are more capable of performing most jobs than men.

The self-victimized portrayal was designed to imply no moral identity threat to the ingroup.

In the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition, the article argued that men are victims of discrimination intentionally perpetrated by women. This article contained passages like,

Close to 95% of women endorse some sexist attitudes (for instance, they agree with the idea that men are not as thoughtful or considerate of others as women), and 65% claim they would discriminate against a man if given the chance.

The victimized-by-the-ingroup portrayal was designed to present a moral social identity threat to the ingroup. Neither article claimed (or overtly denied) that women are discriminated against in modern society.

Manipulation checks. After reading the article, participants completed three items testing the effectiveness of the manipulation. Specifically, participants indicated their level of agreement with three statements concerning the content of the article: "According to the article, men suffer discrimination in modern society," "According to the article, women are responsible for the discrimination men experience," and "According to the article, men are responsible for the discrimination experienced by other men" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Outcome measures. Participants then completed the following: one item measuring competitive victimhood claims ("Compared to men, women experience ____ discrimination"; 1 = *less*

overall, 4 = *as much*, 7 = *more overall*); one item measuring noncompetitive ingroup victimhood (“In modern society, women are often discriminated against because of their gender”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*); and one item measuring noncompetitive outgroup victimhood (“In modern society, men are often discriminated against because of their gender”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The order of these measures was counterbalanced.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. To test the effectiveness of our manipulation, we performed *t* tests (outgroup portrayal: self-victimized vs. victimized by the ingroup) on each of our manipulation check items. As expected, we found no significant difference in agreement with the statement, “According to the article, men suffer discrimination in modern society,” between participants in the self-victimized ($M = 6.20$, $SD = 1.30$) and victimized-by-the-ingroup conditions ($M = 6.48$, $SD = 0.99$), $t(128) = 1.40$, $p = .17$. Also as expected, on the item, “According to the article, women are responsible for the discrimination men experience,” participants in the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition agreed more strongly ($M = 6.22$, $SD = 1.19$) compared with participants in the other condition ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 1.49$), $t(128) = 18.51$, $p < .001$. Conversely, for the statement, “According to the article, men are responsible for the discrimination experienced by other men,” participants in the self-victimized condition agreed more strongly ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 1.58$) compared with participants in the other condition ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.49$), $t(128) = 15.05$, $p < .001$.

Competitive victimhood. We submitted our competitive victimhood measure to a 2 (outgroup portrayal: self-victimized vs. victimized by the ingroup) \times 3 (order of completion: competitive victimhood first vs. noncompetitive ingroup victimhood first vs. noncompetitive outgroup victimhood first) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), with political orientation entered as the covariate. Political orientation was positively correlated with competitive victimhood; more liberal participants scored higher on the measure, $r = .34$, $p < .001$. Critically, a significant effect of outgroup portrayal was obtained, $F(1, 123) = 4.61$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .04$. As predicted, participants in the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition engaged in significantly more competitive victimhood ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.39$) compared with participants in the self-victimized condition ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.31$). No other significant effects or interactions emerged.

Noncompetitive ingroup victimhood. Submitting our rating of noncompetitive ingroup victimhood to a similar analysis yielded no significant results, $F_s < 1.6$, $p_s > .20$. Similar to competitive victimhood ratings, noncompetitive claims to ingroup victimhood were positively correlated with political orientation, $r = .30$, $p < .001$.

Noncompetitive outgroup victimhood. Submitting our rating of noncompetitive outgroup victimhood to a similar analysis yielded no significant results, $F_s < 1.5$, $p_s > .23$. Noncompetitive ratings of outgroup victimhood were not correlated with political orientation, $r = -.11$, $p = .20$.

Importantly, and also as predicted, competitive victimhood scores were positively associated with noncompetitive ingroup victimhood ratings, $r = .45$, $p < .001$, and negatively associated

with noncompetitive outgroup victimhood ratings, $r = -.32$, $p < .001$.

Women who were exposed to a portrayal of men as victimized by the ingroup engaged in more competitive victimhood than women exposed to a portrayal of men as victimized by other men. This effect emerged even while controlling for political orientation. This finding suggests that low-status groups will also engage in competitive victimhood; indeed, unlike in Studies 1 and 2, means on our competitive victimhood scale were above the midpoint in both conditions, suggesting that low-status group members are not under the same reality constraints in adopting this defensive strategy as are high-status group members. Furthermore, portrayal of the outgroup affected competitive victimhood specifically and not noncompetitive perceptions of the ingroup or outgroup as victimized. However, as expected and consistent with the notion that competitive victimhood involves an attempt to reduce the perceived moral gap between the ingroup and the outgroup, competitive victimhood claims were positively associated with claims to ingroup victimhood and negatively associated with acknowledgment of outgroup victimhood. These results strongly suggest that competitive victimhood is not simply the result of minimizing outgroup suffering.

Studies 1 through 3 demonstrated that members of both low-status and high-status groups engage in uniquely competitive victimhood when their ingroup is accused of illegitimate harm doing. In Study 4, we attempted to replicate the competitive victimhood effect in a third intergroup context: that of race-based discrimination. In addition, we sought to provide evidence for the proposed role of perceived stigma reversal in mediating this effect among high-status group members.

Study 4

How university admission decisions are made in the United States is one domain in which competing claims to victimhood have become increasingly prominent over the past 4 decades. Since the landmark Supreme Court decision in 1978 in the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case—in which the Court essentially upheld that a White male had been a victim of reverse discrimination when he was denied admission to the University of California, Davis, Medical School—numerous members of traditionally high-status groups have publically claimed to be victims of race-based discrimination in the university admissions process (Lynch, 1989; Perry, 2007). Such claims are interesting from the standpoint of the present analysis insofar as they may be reactions to affirmative action policies that recognize minorities’ historically victimized status (and, consequently, the past harm doing of high-status groups). Because admission to universities is one domain in which high-status group members may see a precedent for claiming that they are victimized relative to lower status group members, it would appear to be an important intergroup context for examining competitive victimhood.

Frequent attributions to reverse discrimination notwithstanding, Blacks have historically been and continue to be underrepresented at many U.S. universities compared with Whites (Epenshade & Radford, 2009; Krueger, Rothstein, & Turner, 2006), a disparity which can sometimes be traced to discriminatory policies (in recent years, policies that disfavor Black applicants in university admissions presumably do so unintentionally; see Ladewski,

2010). Focusing Whites on the idea that their group is in some way responsible for the disparity in college admissions between Whites and Blacks should induce a moral social identity threat, to which Whites will respond with competitive victimhood if given the opportunity. However, on the basis of our guiding analysis and the results of Study 2, if Whites encounter information suggesting that some third group is responsible for Blacks' lower rate of admission, then there should be no threat to their group's moral identity, and they should not be motivated to engage in competitive victimhood. We assessed this hypothesis in Study 4 by testing whether White university students would be more likely to engage in competitive victimhood with Black students when Whites (as opposed to another group, Asians) were accused of denying Blacks equal admission to universities.

An additional goal of Study 4 was to test our proposed mediational process. We have argued that high-status group members engage in competitive victimhood in response to accusations of ingroup harm doing because such accusations trigger a feeling of stigma reversal: the sense that one is assumed guilty for the suffering of low-status groups simply by virtue of one's group membership (Killian, 1985). On the basis of this analysis, we predicted that Whites confronted with the accusation that their group is not treating Blacks fairly in the area of university admissions would experience a heightened sense that others hold them accountable for Blacks' (and other low-status groups') suffering simply because they are White. We further predicted that this increased feeling of stigma reversal would be associated with higher levels of competitive victimhood in the area of university admissions.

We wanted to further assess the alternative possibility (also addressed in Study 1) that competitive victimhood is driven by concerns about material resources or power, rather than about moral identity. More specifically, it is possible that by confronting high-status group members with an accusation of illegitimate harm doing to an outgroup, we are inducing not a moral but a status threat. Participants may interpret such accusations as implying that the power dynamic in society is shifting and that the previously victimized outgroup is gaining recognition and status at the expense of the ingroup. Participants may then compete for victim status not in pursuit of moral exoneration but rather as a strategic attempt to maintain their group's high status. To control for this possibility, we assessed concerns about the ingroup's status after our manipulation to determine if such concerns—rather than feelings of stigma reversal—mediate the effect of outgroup portrayal on competitive victimhood.

It is also possible that the effects in Studies 1 through 3 were due to differential collective emotions aroused by our manipulations. In other words, exposure to a portrayal of an outgroup as undeservedly victimized by the ingroup (relative to other portrayals) might elevate negative emotions felt on the basis of one's group membership, and these negative collective emotions might elicit competitive victimhood as a defensive response. Our analysis holds that competitive victimhood among high-status group members results from the cognitive process of perceiving stigma reversal when the ingroup is accused of harming an outgroup, rather than from an emotional reaction to such an accusation. Nevertheless, to assess the possibility that our effects might be driven by group-based general negative affect, we included a measure of

collective emotions experienced in connection with our manipulation.

Finally, on the basis of the results of Study 3 and because we believe discrimination in university admissions might be a politically relevant topic, we controlled for political orientation in our analyses.

Method

Fifty-one White KU undergraduates (27 female) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (portrayal of outgroup: victimized by another group vs. victimized by the ingroup) in a between-subjects design, with competitive victimhood as our dependent measure of interest. Five participants suspected the authenticity of our manipulation; their data were excluded, leaving a final total of 46 (27 female) participants.

Participants entered a laboratory to take part in an ostensible study on perceptions of the university admissions process. Participants first completed a few filler measures and a five-item measure of White identification (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Schiffhauer, 2007): "I am comfortable being White," "Being White just feels natural to me," "I believe that White people have a lot to be proud of," "I feel good about being White," and "I am not embarrassed to admit that I am White" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .89$). This measure was included to make participants' social category salient and to test for possible moderation of any observed effects (in light of the null effects for male identification in Study 1 [see footnote 1] we expected no such moderation effects in this study).

Participants also responded to the prompt, "What is your political orientation?" (1 = *very liberal*, 9 = *very conservative*; $M_{Grand} = 5.8$).

Outgroup portrayal manipulation. Participants were then asked to read an article about university admissions in the United States, ostensibly published in an online news magazine. The article was graphically designed to appear as if it had been downloaded from the Internet. In reality, the fabricated article constituted our outgroup portrayal manipulation. In both versions of the article, it was reported that Black student applicants suffer serious discrimination in university admissions. However, the outgroup to which Black students were being compared, and which also was the alleged source of their discrimination, varied by condition.

In the *victimized-by-another-group* condition, the article asserted that Blacks are discriminated against in the university system by and relative to Asians (Whites were not mentioned in the article). In the *victimized-by-the-ingroup* condition, the extent of alleged discrimination against Black applicants was the same, but the reference group and alleged source of the discrimination was Whites (Asians were not mentioned in this article). The articles contained statements such as the following:

For example, the acceptance rate for Black Americans at UCLA is only 10%, compared to a 50% acceptance rate for Asian Americans [White Americans]. . . . Asian American [White American] admissions officers at universities across the United States are significantly less likely to accept an application from a Black American student compared to an application from an Asian American [White American] student, even when the two applicants have almost identical grades and test scores.

Manipulation checks. After reading the article, participants completed three items testing the effectiveness of the manipulation. Specifically, participants indicated their level of agreement (on 7-point scales) with three statements concerning the content of the article: “According to the article, Black Americans experience discrimination in the university admissions process,” “According to the article, White Americans are responsible for any discrimination faced by Black Americans in the university admissions process,” and “According to the article, Asian Americans are responsible for any discrimination faced by Black Americans in the university admissions process.”

Collective emotions measure. Participants then completed a measure assessing collective emotions experienced during exposure to the outgroup portrayal manipulation. Specifically, participants were instructed, “Think back on the article you read about the university admissions process. As a *White American*, when you read the article, how did it make you feel?” Participants then indicated (on a 5-point scale) the extent to which they felt each of seven negative emotions (angry, upset, nervous, anxious, hostile, sad, afraid; $\alpha = .76$; $M_{Grand} = 2.03$) and seven positive emotions (interested, excited, inspired, strong, satisfied, enthusiastic, proud; $\alpha = .77$; $M_{Grand} = 1.70$) in connection with their group membership.

Stigma reversal. Participants then rated their level of agreement (on 7-point scales) with three statements representing our proposed mediating construct of perceived stigma reversal: “Many people seem to think that, because I’m a White American, I should feel guilty for the suffering of Black Americans,” “Many people seem to think that, because I’m a White American, I’m somehow less moral than members of other groups,” and “Many people seem to think that, because I’m a White American, I should feel a sense of responsibility for bad outcomes experienced by other groups.” Responses to these items (which were constructed on the basis of Killian’s, 1985, analysis) showed good reliability ($\alpha = .89$) and were therefore averaged to form a single composite measure of stigma reversal.

Status concerns. To test whether the outgroup portrayal manipulation induced a perceived threat to the ingroup’s status, we asked participants to rate their level of agreement (on a 7-point scale) with the statement, “I’m concerned that, in the near future, the status of White Americans in society is going to decrease.”

Competitive victimhood. Finally, participants completed a single item measuring competitive victimhood claims: “Compared to Black Americans, White Americans experience ___ discrimination in the university admissions process” (1 = *less overall*, 4 = *as much*, 7 = *more overall*).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. To test the effectiveness of our manipulation, we performed *t* tests (outgroup portrayal: victimized by another group vs. victimized by the ingroup) on each of our manipulation check items. We found no difference in level of agreement with the statement, “According to the article, Black Americans experience discrimination in the university admissions process” between participants in the victimized-by-another-group ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 1.10$) and victimized-by-the-ingroup conditions ($M = 6.30$, $SD = 0.82$), $t < 1$, $p = .55$. However, on the item, “According to the article, White Americans are responsible for any

discrimination faced by Black Americans in the university admissions process,” participants in the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition agreed more strongly ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.64$) than participants in the other condition ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 1.24$), $t(44) = 6.78$, $p < .001$. A Levene’s test revealed that responses to our third item, “According to the article, Asian Americans are responsible for any discrimination faced by Black Americans in the university admissions process,” violated the homogeneity of variance assumption, $F(1, 44) = 10.25$, $p < .01$. Accordingly, we submitted our responses to this item to a *t* test using the Welch–Satterthwaite procedure and obtained a significant result, $t'(37.39) = 5.14$, $p < .001$. Participants in the victimized-by-another-group condition agreed more strongly ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 2.19$) with the statement compared with participants in the other condition ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.40$).

Collective emotions. Similar *t* tests on our composite measures of negative and positive collective emotion did not yield significant results, $t_s < 1$, $p_s > .50$, suggesting that any effect of our manipulation on competitive victimhood was not driven by differences in general group-based affect.

Status concerns. We submitted our single-item measure of concerns with the ingroup’s future status to a single-variable (outgroup portrayal: victimized-by-another-group vs. victimized-by-the-ingroup) ANCOVA with political orientation entered as the covariate. Our analysis revealed that participants in the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.88$) expressed marginally greater status concerns than participants in the victimized-by-another-group condition ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.70$), $F(1, 42) = 3.67$, $p = .06$, $\eta^2 = .08$.

Stigma reversal. Submitting stigma reversal scores to the same analysis yielded a significant result, $F(1, 42) = 4.94$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .11$. As predicted, participants in the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.59$) reported higher levels of perceived stigma reversal compared with participants in the victimized-by-another-group condition ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.73$).

Competitive victimhood. As predicted, participants in the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.28$) engaged in more competitive victimhood compared with participants in the victimized-by-another-group condition ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.16$), $F(1, 42) = 4.56$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .10$.³ Unlike in Study 3, political orientation was not significantly associated with competitive victimhood, $r = .23$, $p = .14$.

Mediation analysis. Using Preacher and Hayes’s (2008) procedure and SPSS macro for testing indirect effects, we tested our hypothesis that the effect of condition on competitive victimhood would be mediated by perceived stigma reversal but not by status concerns. Specifically, we regressed competitive victimhood scores onto outgroup portrayal (dummy coded: victimized by the ingroup = 1, victimized by another group = 0), with stigma

³ A regression analysis was also conducted to determine whether the condition effect was moderated by White identification (this distribution was very negatively skewed, $M_{Grand} = 6.40$ on a 7-point scale). Competitive victimhood scores were regressed onto outgroup portrayal (dummy coded: victimized by the ingroup = 1, victimized by another group = 0), White identification (centered and continuous), and their interaction. The analysis revealed the main effect only for outgroup portrayal, $\beta = .31$, $t(45) = 2.15$, $p = .04$ (all other $t_s < 1$, n_s).

reversal and status concerns simultaneously entered as candidate mediators. Five-thousand bootstrapping resamples were performed. The 95% confidence interval obtained for the indirect effect of outgroup portrayal on competitive victimhood through the mediator of perceived stigma reversal did not contain zero (.03, .68). The direct effect of outgroup portrayal on competitive victimhood, $\beta = .31$, $SE = .36$, $t(44) = 2.17$, $p = .04$, became nonsignificant when controlling for stigma reversal, $\beta = .20$, $SE = .36$, $t(43) = 1.40$, $p = .17$. However, the 95% confidence interval obtained for the indirect effect of outgroup portrayal on competitive victimhood through the mediator of status concerns did contain zero (-.01, .62). Although the direct effect of outgroup portrayal on competitive victimhood also became nonsignificant when we controlled for status, $\beta = .23$, $SE = .36$, $t(43) = 1.60$, $p = .12$, the decrease in significance was not as marked as when controlling for stigma reversal. Therefore, we are confident at $\alpha = .05$ that the higher level of competitive victimhood displayed by participants in the victimized-by-the-ingroup condition is best explained by a corresponding increase in perceived stigma reversal and not by an increase in status concerns.

Study 4 replicated the effect of an accusation of ingroup harm doing on competitive victimhood in a new, socially important context. Again, the effect of an accusation of ingroup harm doing on competitive victimhood emerged when controlling for political orientation. As important, evidence was obtained for our hypothesis that competitive victimhood among high-status group members is driven by increased perceptions of stigma reversal resulting from an accusation of illegitimate ingroup harm doing. At the same time, Study 4 helps rule out the possibility that our effects are due to concerns that the ingroup's social status is diminishing or to negative group-based affect.

Studies 1 through 4 show that groups confronted with accusations of illegitimate ingroup harm doing respond by engaging in competitive victimhood. In Study 5, we were interested in exploring the consequences of adopting this strategy. If competitive victimhood claims are motivated by a desire to relieve members of the ingroup of expectations that they should feel guilty (stigma reversal) and by any actual guilt they feel for their group's illegitimate harm doing, then exposure to a competitive victimhood claim made on behalf of one's group should reduce perceived stigma reversal and feelings of collective guilt after an accusation of harm doing. Although Study 4 showed that competitive victimhood is not driven by general group-based negative affect, we would expect a competitive victimhood claim to relieve group members of the specific emotion of group-based guilt, given competitive victimhood's theorized role in protecting group moral identity. We tested this possibility in Study 5 in yet another intergroup context, namely that of age-based discrimination.

Study 5

Adults in the United States typically think of themselves as belonging to one of three age groups: young adults (often defined as between 17 and 25 years of age), middle-aged adults (ages 35–50), and older adults (65 years of age and older; Garstka, Schmitt, Branscombe, & Hummert, 2004). Of these groups, older adults experience a considerable amount of—if not the most—differential treatment based on their age group. Among other forms of age-differentiated behavior, older adults (at least in the United

States) often experience an absence of representation in mainstream culture and the media, lower rates of access to housing and jobs, and socially isolating or demeaning treatment from others (such as being spoken to in simplified language; Pasupathi & Löckenhoff, 2002).

However, older adults are not the only social group that experiences discrimination based on age. Young adults also report being victims of age-based discrimination (Garstka, Hummert, & Branscombe, 2005) and generally see themselves as being a low-status group in society, similar to older adults (Garstka et al., 2004). Nevertheless, the status of young adults is somewhat ambiguous, given that they will one day become middle-aged adults (a comparatively high-status group) and that modern popular culture contains numerous popular images of (and increasingly markets toward) younger adults but disparages or neglects older adults (e.g., Featherstone & Hepworth, 2005).

In Study 5, we drew on the ambiguity associated with the relative status of younger adults to manipulate whether people whose group was accused of harm doing would see themselves as also victimized or not victimized. Specifically, we presented young adults with an accusation that their group discriminates against older adults, but we simultaneously varied whether a competitive victimhood claim was made on behalf of their ingroup. We then assessed feelings of stigma reversal and collective guilt connected to the treatment of older adults by young adults. Past research has suggested that if people are feeling a sense of group moral entitlement, they do not show as much collective guilt in connection with illegitimate ingroup actions (Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). We would expect a similar process to occur in the case of stigma reversal, which involves the perception that society at large assigns collective guilt to one's ingroup. Because we assert that competitive victimhood buffers the group's moral social identity against threats, we expected that young adults who were accused of harming older adults but were also exposed to a competitive victimhood claim on their behalf would express lower perceived stigma reversal and less collective guilt than those who were not exposed to such a claim.

Method

Fifty-two KU undergraduates (29 female) between the ages of 18 and 25 were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (competitive victimhood: yes vs. no) in a between-subjects design, with stigma reversal and collective guilt as our dependent measures of interest.

Participants entered a laboratory to take part in an ostensible study on attitudes concerning the role of age in social life. All participants were verbally primed by the experimenter to think about themselves as young adults. Participants then completed some basic demographic questionnaires (including a measure of age; $M_{Grand} = 19.3$). They also responded to the prompt, "What is your political orientation?" (1 = *very liberal*, 9 = *very conservative*; $M_{Grand} = 4.90$). Because political orientation was unrelated to stigma reversal and competitive victimhood in Study 4 and because we saw no particular reason why it would affect attitudes toward older adults, we did not expect this variable to play a role in our effects. However, because political orientation was strongly correlated with competitive victimhood in Study 3, we measured it

to ensure that our effects would hold even when controlling for political orientation.

Competitive victimhood manipulation. Participants then read an article, ostensibly published on a website dedicated to the scientific study of aging, about some ways in which one's age group affects one's life. This fabricated article constituted our competitive victimhood manipulation. In both versions of the article, it was reported that older adults suffer various forms of discrimination at the hands of young adults (the range of ages constituting each group were also defined in the article). Young adults were accused of being rude and hostile toward older adults and of discriminating against them in the workplace. However, the portrayal of the treatment young adults receive in society relative to older adults varied by condition.

In the competitive victimhood condition, the article claimed that, although young adults discriminate against older adults, young adults themselves experience a comparable amount of age-based discrimination. This version of the article contained passages like, "Compared to older adults, young adults tend to have much lower incomes, and they also have less social power. Young adults are less likely than older adults to be in positions of authority." In the no competitive victimhood condition, the article did not allude to any victimization experienced by young adults as a result of their age group. Instead, following past collective guilt research (see Miron, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2006), the article highlighted the privileges that young adults experience relative to older adults. This version of the article contained passages like, "Youth is valued in the United States, and the media, popular culture, and most workplaces are all built around the needs and interests of younger adults." It should be stressed that the amount and type of discrimination perpetrated by young adults against older adults was the same across conditions.

Manipulation checks. After reading the article, participants completed three items testing the effectiveness of the manipulation. Specifically, participants indicated their level of agreement (on 7-point scales) with three statements concerning the content of the article: "According to the article, older adults experience discrimination in this country," "According to the article, young adults are a high-status age group," and "According to the article, older adults are a high-status age group." The last two items were intended to determine whether we effectively induced a sense of competitive victimhood in participants; those participants exposed to a competitive victimhood claim should believe that young adults are a relatively low-status group and that older adults are a relatively high-status group.

Stigma reversal. Participants then completed a slightly modified version of the stigma reversal scale used in Study 4, consisting of three items: "Many people seem to think that, because I'm a young adult, I should feel guilty for the suffering of older adults who are discriminated against," "Many people seem to think that, because I'm a young adult, I'm somehow less moral than older adults," and "Many people seem to think that, because I'm a young adult, I should feel a sense of responsibility for bad outcomes experienced by older adults." Responses to these items were averaged to form a single composite measure of stigma reversal ($\alpha = .63$).

Collective guilt. Finally, participants completed a four-item collective guilt measure similar to that used in prior research (Branscombe, Slugoski, & Kappen, 2004). Participants indicated

their agreement with statements such as, "I feel guilty about young adults' harmful actions toward older adults" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Collective guilt scores were calculated as the mean response across all items ($\alpha = .93$), with higher scores indicating greater collective guilt.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. To test the effectiveness of our manipulation, we performed *t* tests (competitive victimhood: yes vs. no) on each of our manipulation check items. As expected, there was no difference in agreement with the statement, "According to the article, older adults experience discrimination in this country," between participants in the competitive victimhood ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.22$) and no competitive victimhood conditions ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 0.98$), $t < 1$, $p = .90$. On the item, "According to the article, young adults are a high-status age group," participants in the competitive victimhood condition agreed much less strongly ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 1.32$) compared with participants in the other condition ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 1.50$), $t(50) = 10.43$, $p < .001$. Conversely, for the statement, "According to the article, older adults are a high-status age group," participants exposed to a competitive victimhood claim agreed more strongly ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.96$) than participants in the other condition ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.48$), $t(50) = 4.63$, $p < .001$. This pattern of results strongly suggests that our competitive victimhood induction effectively created a sense of relative deprivation in our participants compared with older adults.

Stigma reversal. Performing a *t* test on our stigma reversal measure revealed that participants in the competitive victimhood condition perceived less stigma reversal ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.13$) compared with participants in the no competitive victimhood condition ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.16$), $t(50) = 3.51$, $p < .01$, $d = .97$.

Collective guilt. Also supporting predictions, participants in the competitive victimhood condition experienced less collective guilt ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.84$) compared with participants in the no competitive victimhood condition ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.87$), $t(50) = 2.19$, $p = .03$, $d = .60$.

We also conducted our primary analyses as ANCOVAs with political orientation entered as the covariate. In these analyses the effects of condition on both stigma reversal and collective guilt remained significant, $ps < .04$.

The results of Study 5 support our guiding hypothesis that competitive victimhood claims made on behalf of one's ingroup protect the group's moral social identity and buffer the individual against experiences of collective guilt. Young adults who were accused of discriminating against older adults in the absence of any information about the suffering of their group scored higher on measures of stigma reversal and collective guilt compared with young adults who were accused of the same harm doing but who were also told that their age group suffers compared with older adults. These results complement Study 4, which showed that individuals are motivated to engage in competitive victimhood as a function of perceived stigma reversal, by reversing this causal direction and demonstrating that competitive victimhood claims alleviate stigma reversal. More generally, the results complement Studies 1 through 4—which showed that competitive victimhood claims can be a response to accusations of harm doing—by showing that competitive victimhood claims can also moderate experientially negative reactions to such accusations.

General Discussion

Five studies examining four different intergroup contexts demonstrated that, in response to accusations of ingroup harm doing, members of high- and low-status groups compete for ingroup victim status relative to the group they have been accused of harming and that exposure to a competitive victimhood claim made on behalf of one's group reduces negative reactions to such accusations. In Study 1, men exposed to a portrayal of women as undeservedly victimized by men were more likely (than men exposed to portrayals of women as nonvictimized or self-victimized) to claim that men are discriminated against compared with women. In Study 2, undergraduates accused of discriminating against university staff were more likely (than undergraduates exposed to portrayals of staff as victimized by administrators) to claim that their group is discriminated against compared with staff. In Study 3, women accused of discriminating against men were more likely (than women exposed to a portrayal of men as self-victimized) to claim that women are discriminated against compared with men. In Study 4, Whites accused of victimizing Blacks in the area of university admissions were more likely (than Whites exposed to a portrayal of Asians as responsible for Blacks' mistreatment) to claim that Whites are discriminated against in the admissions process compared with Blacks. This effect was driven by increased perceptions of stigma reversal among participants exposed to a portrayal of Blacks as undeservedly victimized by Whites. Finally, in Study 5, young adults who were accused of discriminating against older adults but who were also told that they have victim status relative to older adults showed lower perceptions of stigma reversal and reduced collective guilt compared with young adults who were accused without also being accorded victim status.

Taken together, these studies suggest that competitive victimhood is contingent on the threat implied by ingroup responsibility for outgroup victimization and does not follow from information suggesting that the outgroup itself or a third group is responsible for the outgroup's victimization. Furthermore, these studies showed competitive victimhood to be independent of perceived material benefits to be gained from making claims to victimization, status concerns, group-based general negative affect, and noncompetitive perceptions of the ingroup or outgroup as generally victimized.

Correlational research has already shown that groups involved in open, intractable conflict engage in competition for greater relative victim status. The present studies, however, are the first experimental demonstrations that people will engage in more competitive victimhood as a response to evidence that their group has committed illegitimate harm, in contexts that do not involve explicit intergroup violence (indeed, in Study 2 competitive victimhood occurred in a context almost completely devoid of any real historical backdrop of intergroup conflict). These studies point to interesting avenues for future study and possess broader implications for intergroup relations and social justice.

Directions for Future Research

The present findings point to several potential avenues for future research. For instance, in the present studies, we focused primarily (in four out of five studies) on competitive victimhood processes

among high-status group members. We did this for two reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, high-status groups provide a particularly strong and counterintuitive test of the competitive victimhood hypothesis. Members of these groups do not typically think of themselves as victimized and experience reality constraints when making claims to relative victimhood that low-status group members do not experience. This latter point is reinforced by the fact that in Studies 1, 2, and 4—which measured competitive victimhood among high-status group members—mean levels of competitive victimhood across conditions were all below the scale midpoint, whereas in Study 3 members of a relatively low-status group (women) scored, on average, above the scale midpoint across conditions. It is interesting that, despite a general reluctance on the part of high-status group members to claim that they are victimized as much as a low-status group, they nevertheless elevate their claims to relative victim status under threat. Our second reason for focusing on high-status groups is that the adoption of competitive victimhood as a defensive strategy by members of such groups may have a particularly corrosive effect in the social-political arena, a possibility we discuss in more detail later.

Despite our general focus on this process among high-status groups, Study 3 demonstrated that members of a low-status group will also engage in competitive victimhood under threat, and Study 5 examined the outcomes of competitive victimhood among a group with somewhat ambiguous social status (young adults). Future research should consider in more detail the present phenomenon from the perspective of marginalized groups. For instance, while Study 4 demonstrates that, for high-status group members, stigma reversal mediates the effect of an accusation on competitive victimhood, the psychological process behind competitive victimhood among lower status groups would likely differ. Marginalized group members are less likely to actually encounter information accusing them of causing the suffering of high-status groups, and when they do encounter such information, they are probably less likely to see it as indicative of a general expectation on the part of society that they feel guilty for the suffering of high-status group members. It is possible that low-status group members may instead engage in competitive victimhood as a function of a sense of injustice they feel when accused of harming a high-status group. Future studies in this area would need to take into account the different motivational processes that might underpin competitive victimhood in high- and low-status groups.

Future studies should also examine situational moderators of the use of competitive victimhood as a defense against moral identity threat. Although competitive victimhood is one means of responding to an accusation of illegitimate harm doing, it might not always be the preferred strategy for coping with such threats. In this regard, it is important to recognize that despite the relative rise in the positive moral status of victimhood, modern attitudes toward this concept remain quite complex. Even in modern society, victimhood is often accompanied by stigmatization, and making attributions to group victimization for personal outcomes is often criticized as *playing the victim card* (Cole, 2007) and results in negative evaluations of the claimant even by other ingroup members (Garcia, Horstman Reser, Amo, Redersdorff, & Branscombe, 2005). It remains to be determined whether members of high-status groups making claims to relative victim status suffer the same forms of stigmatization experienced by low-status groups attempting to claim victimhood. Because of occasionally ambivalent at-

titudes toward victimhood, people may hesitate to use this strategy if they feel that their claim to relative victim status might be subjected to scrutiny, meaning they would be called on to produce specific evidence of their group's victimhood, or if they feel that they might be stigmatized as a result of this claim.

Another interesting moderator of competitive victimhood processes might be the source of the accusation of ingroup harm doing. The fact that Study 4 shows that competitive victimhood among high-status group members is mediated by perceived stigma reversal suggests this possibility. Specifically, it may be the case that competitive victimhood is most likely to occur when group members perceive that society as a whole—rather than only the victimized outgroup in question—is accusing their group of immoral actions. In the majority of the present studies (Studies 1 and 3–5), our outgroup portrayal manipulations came in the form of articles designed to represent an objective third-party perspective that could be considered representative of the opinion of society as a whole. Study 2 shows that competitive victimhood can also occur in response to a complaint lodged directly by the victimized outgroup (in this case, university staff writing a letter to the chancellor). However, in no study did we directly manipulate the alleged source of the accusation, an interesting possibility for future research.

It may also be informative to further examine the relationship between political orientation and competitive victimhood. We assessed both political orientation and competitive victimhood in two of the present studies and found that it was significantly related to competitive victimhood in Study 3 ($r = .34$) and nonsignificantly related in Study 4 ($r = .23$). Interestingly, because the meaning of the scale anchors was reversed in the two studies, these correlations imply that in Study 3—in the context of women making claims to relative discrimination—greater competitive victimhood was associated with greater political liberalism, whereas in Study 4—in the context of reverse discrimination claims in university admissions—greater competitive victimhood was associated (nonsignificantly) with greater political conservatism. In the present research, we were primarily interested in demonstrating that the effects of moral identity threats on competitive victimhood hold even when controlling for political orientation. However, future studies might investigate in more detail how political orientation influences the defensive use of competitive victimhood and how this influence might differ depending on the broader context. In general, the present findings suggest that competitive victimhood is not uniquely used by people from only one side of the political spectrum.

Broader Implications

Conceptions of the ingroup as collectively victimized have not historically formed an important aspect of the social identity of high-status group members (Nealon, 2000). We should point out that our findings do not suggest that accusations of ingroup harm doing increase the extent to which high-status group members ascribe a global victim identity to their group. Study 2, in particular, showed that a moral social identity threat increased competitive but not general, noncompetitive claims to ingroup victim status among members of a high-status group. This suggests that competitive victimhood (as investigated in the present research) is a strategy adopted by group members to deal with a situationally

induced threat to the group's moral identity and not a pure indicator of the extent to which they see their group as a victim group (although it should be noted that we did find a positive association between competitive victimhood and noncompetitive ratings of ingroup victimization in Study 3).

This does not imply, however, that the strategic use of competitive victimhood does not have important social consequences. Competition for relative victim status on the part of high-status groups may present a serious impediment to improving the situation of lower status groups in society (Killian, 1985; Nealon, 2000). As the aforementioned research by Zitek et al. (2010) and Wohl and Branscombe (2008, 2009) shows, perceiving the ingroup as relatively victimized can elicit feelings of entitlement as well as forgiveness for ingroup transgressions and reduce empathic reactions to the suffering of others. Indeed, in Study 5, exposure to a competitive victimhood claim on behalf of one's group reduced perceptions of stigma reversal and feelings of collective guilt associated with ingroup harm doing. If dominant group members are indeed experiencing a heightened sense of ingroup righteousness as a result of competitive victimhood processes, this should decrease their motivation to take action to aid more objectively victimized groups in society.

The present work also has important implications for members of victimized groups and their (public) relationship to their victimhood. Given that high-status group members may respond to lower status groups' grievances with competitive victimhood, the question for minority groups is whether presenting the ingroup's image as victimized is an effective means of achieving positive social change.

To take the oppression of women as an example, feminist thinkers have debated this very issue extensively (for a review, see Stringer, 2000). Some critics (e.g., Roiphe, 1993; Wolf, 1993) of mainstream feminism have argued that modern women's search for greater equality has been publicly framed and understood too much in terms of a nonproductive identity politics of collective victimhood. On the other hand, scholars like Brown (1995) have questioned whether or not the project of acknowledging and eliminating the oppression of women is possible without women as a group making claims to victimhood and establishing an identity that is at least partially founded in an awareness of their victimization. Although establishing a positive, legitimate victim identity may be a critical step in the advancement of victimized groups, it is important to recognize that claims to such an identity may be countered by competitive victimhood from the dominant outgroup. New means of conceptualizing victimhood and breaking cycles of competition for victim status should be developed to improve relations between groups and the lives of society's true victims.

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