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To cite this article: Fan Lu & Bradford Jones (2019) Effects of belief versus experiential discrimination on race-based linked fate, Politics, Groups, and Identities, 7:3, 615-624, DOI: 10.1080/21565503.2019.1638804

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1638804
Effects of belief versus experiential discrimination on race-based linked fate

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ABSTRACT
Since Michael Dawson first put forward the theory that being targets of racial discrimination increases perceptions of linked fate amongst African Americans, applications of his theory to non-Black and contemporary African Americans have arrived at mixed findings. These inconsistencies may be attributed to different conceptualizations of discrimination and a partiality for personal experiences rather than beliefs about discrimination. Using the 2016 Collaborative Multiracial Post-election Survey, we test the argument both beliefs and experiences with discrimination can affect racial attitudes by comparing how the relationship between beliefs/experiential discrimination and race-based linked fate differs across Black, Latino, Asian, and White Americans. The findings suggest even if non-Whites do not personally experience discrimination, they have beliefs about discrimination towards their racial group, and these beliefs are equally important predictors of their sense of race-based linked fate.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 February 2019
Accepted 28 June 2019

KEYWORDS
Linked fate; discrimination; stigmatized outgroups; commonality

Introduction

In the 25 years since Michael Dawson’s seminal work on the relationship between racial discrimination and African American linked fate (Dawson 1994), scholars have extended his theory to explain the political choices of a wide range of social groups based on race, religion, and gender (Masuoka 2006; Sanchez and Masuoka 2010; Gay, Hochschild, and White 2016). As such, questions on linked fate and discrimination are included in both general population surveys as well as nationally representative surveys of Latinos, Asians and Muslim Americans. The research agenda Dawson started remains as relevant as ever today, in a political climate filled with vitriol against women, LGBT communities, and people of color; because the extent to which discrimination and marginalization shape their political choices influences the trajectory of US politics for the decades to come.

We build on Dawson’s insights by situating it within social psychological theories of discrimination, leading us to make the argument that both beliefs about group
Discrimination as well as experiences with racial discrimination are positively related to the endorsement of linked fate for racial groups. The concept of linked fate connects well to the kind of “coping strategies”. Crocker and Major (1989) discuss regarding stigmatized outgroups. Early research suggested that when faced with stigmatization, outgroup members internalized this information and inevitably suffered from low self-esteem. More recent research on stigmatized groups found this simple “one-to-one relationship between exposure to a stressor and stress response” (Major and Townsend 2010, 413) is more nuanced. There is substantial variation within stigmatized groups on the extent to which discrimination is observed and on the deleterious consequences discrimination has on cognitive processes, identity, and attitudes (c.f. Crocker and Major 1989; Schmitt and Branscombe 2002).

Linked fate not only can be thought of as politicized shared identity (McClain et al. 2009), but also as a protective mechanism whereby members of stigmatized outgroups believe collective group progress is materially related to personal success. This heightened sense of racial identification may spur on a greater willingness to set aside ethnic differences in order to support candidates/policies benefitting all co-ethnics (Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004; Barreto 2010). Using data from 2016 Collaborative Multiracial Post-election Survey (CMPS), we demonstrate both measures of discrimination are associated with greater endorsement of linked fate amongst Latino, Asian and African Americans.

**Discrimination and linked fate**

The notion that being targets of discrimination increases marginalized groups’ sense of linked fate with one another stems from studies in Black political behavior. Africans who came to the United States as slaves did not think of themselves as “Blacks” or even “Africans” (Blauner 1972; Cornell 1990). They came as Ghanans, Gambians, Kenyans, Nigerians, Senegalese, etc. It was the subjugation of these disparate groups to slavery that fostered the development of a “Negro race,” “pan-Africanism” and linked fate as a “Black utility heuristic” (Tate 1993; Dawson 1994). However, extensions of this theory to non-Blacks have produced mixed results.

Masuoka (2006) finds support for the hypothesis that experienced discrimination increases linked fate among Asian Americans, but neither Masuoka (2006) nor Sanchez and Masuoka (2010) find support for the same hypothesis among Latino Americans. Lien, Conway, and Wong (2004) also focus on experiential discrimination, and they find it only increases the likelihood of adopting pan-Asian identities among US born Asian Americans. When discrimination is conceptualized as a general awareness of racial prejudice rather than personal experiences, Masuoka (2006) finds Asian Americans who think racial discrimination is a major problem report stronger perceptions of pan-Asian linked fate. However, Gay, Hochschild, and White (2016) find discrimination does not affect Black/Latino/Asian linked fate anymore than it increases their sense of linked fate with nonracial marginalized groups. The election of Donald Trump and rise of the Tea Party movement spurred a growing interest in White racial identity (Parker and Barreto 2013; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018; Jardina 2019), which opens up questions on the extent to which Whites perceive a sense of linked fate with one another as well. To what extent – if at all – does a theory that was developed in response to White
discrimination apply to Whites themselves, who fifty years later find their dominant status threatened?

Herein, we are concerned with unpacking the notion of “discrimination,” thinking about it as a dual process Schmitt et al. (2014) refer to as objective v. subjective discrimination. Experienced discrimination (objective) implies individuals have been, or believe to have been, victims of discrimination due to their race. Beliefs about discrimination (subjective) imply individuals are aware of and believe discrimination toward their group is problematic, even if they do not report being victims of discrimination. Much of the work in political science on the implications of discrimination has focused on experienced discrimination—that is, being a victim of discriminatory practices (c.f. Sanchez and Masuoka 2010). While this is understandable, it is critical to note either form of discrimination has the potential for deleterious outcomes and as such, distinguishing the two forms is important and consistent with the work of Crocker and Major (1989); Schmitt et al. (2014); see also (Jones, Flores-Victor, and Vannette (forthcoming)).

Crocker and Major (1989) noted, “It may be relatively uncommon for … some stigmatized or oppressed groups to believe that they personally have been victimized by discrimination” (621; emphasis added). Indeed Crosby’s (1984) research on gender showed few women reported being overtly discriminated against yet many still exhibited negative consequences of knowing women faced workplace discrimination. And since Crosby, there has been substantial work demonstrating the negative effects of “subjective” discrimination. For example, many White Americans perceive a sense of threat from the growing non-White population (Jardina 2019).

Importantly, the psychological literature on stigmatization also points to how beliefs about the prevalence of stereotyping and discrimination can lead to a sense of linked fate, the central issue considered here. While beliefs about discrimination may lead stigmatized group members to disassociate from threatened domains, a strategy Crocker and Garcia (2010) refer to as “egosystem” maintenance – the desire to self-protect – awareness of discriminatory threat can also lead to “ecosystem motivation.” Ecosystem motivation is the perspective stigmatized outgroup members take “in which people see themselves as part of a larger whole, a system of individuals … whose actions have consequences for others, with repercussions for the entire system” (Crocker and Garcia 2010, 401). In other words, one way a stigmatized individual may cope with discriminatory environments (perceived or experienced) is to “draw closer” to other groups who also may be victimized by discriminatory environments.

In this sense, if a stigmatized group member believes discrimination and stereotyping toward the group is rampant, a natural coping strategy is to associate oneself with one’s group, and associate positive outcomes of one’s group as being fundamentally related to one’s personal outcomes. In the context of linked fate, if stigmatized group members perceive discrimination as being problematic, adopting stronger beliefs about the importance of linked fate is a natural protective strategy.

The larger point is this: both direct experience with discrimination as well as perceptions of discrimination aimed at one’s group even if one is not directly a victim of discriminatory behavior, can have implications for beliefs about the importance of linked fate. The primary focus of past research on experienced discrimination, however, is limiting, particularly in light of the social psychology work on subject discrimination just considered. We test this argument with the following hypotheses:
**H1:** Individuals who believe their racial group is a target of discrimination are more likely to perceive stronger feelings of linked fate than individuals who do not believe their racial group is a target of discrimination.

**H2:** Individuals who report personal experiences with racial discrimination are more likely to perceive stronger feelings of linked fate than individuals who do not report personal experiences with racial discrimination.

### Data and research design

We test these hypotheses using data from the 2016 CMPS (Barreto et al. 2018). To measure beliefs about discrimination, we rely on a survey item asking respondents to evaluate “How much discrimination is there in the United States today against” both their own racial group and other racial/minority groups. Response options ranged from 0 (none) to 4 (a lot), with “don’t know” coded as a non-directional middle category. The top four panels in Figure 1 show the distribution of responses for beliefs about discrimination against Latinos, Blacks, Whites, and Asian Americans. Perhaps not surprisingly, respondents tend to perceive more discrimination against their own group than compared to the beliefs other racial groups have about their group. In general, the consensus is that Blacks encounter the most discrimination, followed by Latinos, Asians, and then Whites.

![Figure 1](image-url). Distribution of responses to experiential/beliefs about discrimination and linked fate.
To measure experiences with discrimination, we use a survey item asking respondents “Have you ever been treated unfairly or personally experienced discrimination because of your race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, being an immigrant, religious heritage or having an accent?” If respondents answered yes, they were asked to specify the reasons why they were targeted and whether the incident occurred in their home country, the US or both. The bottom left panel in Figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents in each racial group who report experiences with racial discrimination in the United States. Blacks are most likely to report experiences with racial discrimination, followed by Latinos, Asians, and Whites.

To assess perceptions of linked fate, we rely on the following item: “Do you think what happens generally to (respondent’s reported race) people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life? If yes, will it affect you a little, some or a lot?” The bottom right panel in Figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents in each racial group who selected into each level of linked fate. Overall, most respondents indicate at least “some” sense of race-based linked fate. Blacks are most likely to report “a lot” of linked fate, followed by Latinos, Whites, and Asians.

The co-opt nature of the CMPS means that certain questions were not asked to respondents. To maximize comparability in the relationship between discrimination and linked fate across racial groups, we select control variables based on survey questions common across all racial groups. These include markers of sociopolitical integration: incorporation into American society (“social belonging”), interest in politics (“political interest”), participation in social, cultural, civic, and/or political groups (“group activities”), and vote registration (“registered”). Except for “social belonging,” we expect all these variables to be positively related to race-based linked fate. Individuals’ political and ideological beliefs, socioeconomic status, and skin tones are also included in the analysis. With respect to social belonging, we expect if a group member feels incorporated into mainstream society, beliefs about the importance of linked fate should decrease. We also include a measure of self-assessed phenotype. In light of work on the impact of skin tone on racial discrimination against Latinos and Blacks (c.f. Wilkinson and Earle 2012), we expect minority group members with darker skin tones to perceive stronger linked fate with their co-ethnics. The online appendix provides summary statistics for these covariates.

**Analysis and results**

To assess the relationship between beliefs about linked fate and the two forms of discrimination, we estimated a proportional odds model treating linked fate as a function of beliefs about discrimination and experiences with racial discrimination (as well as the covariates reported in the online appendix). We estimated separate models for Asian, Black, Latina/o, and White respondents. The regression estimates (log-odds) are reported in Table 1. With respect to our main hypotheses, we find strong support both forms of discrimination are related to one’s sense of linked fate. The top row in Table 1 gives the log-odds estimate for the experienced discrimination item. The estimate suggests that reported experiences with racial discrimination are strongly and positively related to the probability of believing one’s fate is dependent in part on the group’s plight.

In terms of the odds (i.e., $\exp(\beta)$) of scoring in higher versus lower categories on the linked fate measure, Asian and Black respondents are about two times more likely to
endorse the importance of linked fate if they have reported experiences with racial discrimination compared to Asian and Blacks who do not report experienced discrimination. For Latinos, the odds of scoring in higher categories on the linked fate measure are about 2.3 times greater if one has reported experienced discrimination compared to a Latina/o who has not reported discrimination experiences. Finally, White respondents are about 1.7 times more likely to report higher scores on the linked fate measure if they have reported experiences with discrimination compared to Whites who have not.

However, we also demonstrate beliefs about group-wise discrimination are strongly related to beliefs about linked fate for all groups except Whites. Specifically, the estimates suggest that when group members believe discrimination is a problem for their group, beliefs about how one’s personal fate is connected to the group’s fate increases. The coefficients highlighted in boldface show the log-odds estimates for assessed beliefs on perceptions of linked fate for each group. For Asian and Latina/o respondents, the odds of responding in higher as versus lower categories on the linked fate measure are about 1.82 and 1.75, respectively. For Black respondents, the effect size is much larger, giving an odds ratio of 3.06.

Substantively, these odds imply that when one believes there is “a lot” of discrimination aimed at their group, Asian and Latino respondents are nearly twice as likely to endorse linked fate beliefs compared to a respondent who believes there is no problem with discrimination against their group. For Black respondents, they are about three times more likely to endorse linked fate beliefs. For White respondents, the estimated coefficient is no different from zero. Noteworthy, it is clear that beliefs about how other groups are impacted by
discrimination have no discernible relationship to one’s sense of linked fate. Given these results, the importance of discrimination beliefs is squarely tied to one’s own group.

To visualize the relationship between the two forms of discrimination and linked fate, consider Figure 2, which gives the probability of respondents indicating linked fate does not matter at all compared to respondents indicating linked fate matters “a lot.” The left column plots the relationship between experienced discrimination and the right column plots the relationship between beliefs about discrimination. Each row corresponds to a specific racial group (Asian, Black, Latina/o, and White).

There are three takeaway points from the plot. First, the estimates are in the predicted direction: both experienced discrimination and beliefs about discrimination lower the probability of saying linked fate does not matter and increases the probability of endorsing the belief linked fate matters “a lot.” Second, while the effect size is similar for both measures of discrimination, there is more uncertainty around the probability estimates for the beliefs item (although for all groups except Whites, the estimates are statistically significant). Third, there is variation in the effect sizes for different groups. Predictably, the probability differences shown for Whites are far smaller than for other groups, primarily because White respondents report experiences with and

**Figure 2.** Predicted probabilities.
beliefs about discrimination at much lower rates than minority groups (hence increasing the uncertainty in the probability estimates). Whites are also the only group for whom experiences with discrimination matter but belief does not. We suspect White linked fate taps into a different concept than linked fate amongst historically marginalized groups (Dawson 2009). Therefore, while beliefs about discrimination may strengthen Whites’ sense of racial identity, it is not until they personally experience discrimination that White linked fate is activated.

Before turning to a discussion of the results, it is useful to consider some of the other results reported in Table 1. With respect to other measures of sociopolitical integration, socioeconomic status, and individual attributes, respondents – regardless of their race – who have more interest in politics are more likely to perceive race-based linked fate. For Latinos, Blacks, and Asians, participating in social, cultural, civic, political groups, or unions are all related to higher levels of race-based linked fate. Although the measure here is not specific to ethnic-based group activities, it is possible that becoming more involved in their racial groups fosters higher levels of race-based linked fate. Older Latinos, Blacks, and Asians are less likely to perceive race-based linked fate; and amongst Latinos and Blacks, self-reported Republicans and those who feel better incorporated in American society are less likely to do so. Finally, Blacks with darker skin tones are more likely to perceive linked fate with other Blacks. Although there is variation in skin tone amongst Latinos and Asian Americans as well, it is unrelated to their perceptions of linked fate. This null finding may be explained by the fact that most Latinos and Asians in the CMPS described their skin color as a 3 out of 10, where 10 is the darkest.

**Discussion**

The connection between discrimination and feelings about linked fate, this paper shows, is a function of two forms: experiences with and beliefs about discrimination. As argued earlier, much of the work on the impacts of discrimination have squarely focused on experiences with discrimination. While this focus is clearly important – believing one has been discriminated against based on one’s race has demonstrable implications – solely focusing on experienced discrimination denies the importance of the awareness about how one’s group is affected by discrimination. Drawing on insights from Crocker and Major’s (1989) work on stigmatization, we derived a theoretical basis for why beliefs about discrimination can lead to the higher endorsement of linked fate. The results herein are consistent with those expectations.

To conclude, 25 years since Michael Dawson conceptualized the notion of “linked fate,” it remains a key marker of race-based group identity. In this paper, we focus on linked fate as a dependent variable and argue that both beliefs and experiences with racial discrimination can strengthen race-based linked fate. Therefore, as researchers continue to expand upon Dawson’s theory of discrimination in the coming years – possibly to linked fate between groups that are not defined by race, or to political commonalities between racial groups – it is important to understand that discrimination does not have to be personally experienced in order to have an impact on political attitudes and behavior. As we have shown in this paper, many individuals in the US may never personally be victims of hate crimes, police violence, and racial slurs; but that
does not stop them from feeling like “minorities” just the same. Discrimination “in the air”, perpetrated quite literally through the air waves and presidential tweets, can have just as much of an impact on linked fate.

**Notes**

1. As shown in Figure 1, about 10% of respondents replied “don’t know.” Findings presented below are robust to dropping these responses.

2. We do however, make an exception for English language interview. A negligible number of Whites and Blacks (1 and 2, respectively) took the interview in a non-English language, so we omitted this variable from the analysis for Whites and Blacks. Although there is obvious ethnic heterogeneity amongst pan-ethnic groups such as Latinos and Asian Americans, we do not control for ethnicity in the primary analysis. In models not reported, most indicator variables for different ethnic groups were not strongly related to the outcome measures. Inclusion or exclusion of them do not change substantive findings reported below.

3. In all models survey weights were applied.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**References**


