How We Explain Depends on Whom We Explain: The Impact of Social Category on the Selection of Causal Comparisons and Causal Explanations

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Prior research indicates that people’s causal explanations depend on the comparison case against which the event is considered. The present research examined the hypothesis that the causal comparison depends on the typicality of the target actor’s social category. Participants in two studies placed greater relative emphasis on across-group comparisons than within-group comparisons for atypical actors compared to typical actors. Perceived typicality was manipulated indirectly through prior beliefs about the type of person most likely to be involved in an activity (Experiment 1) and directly through explicit information about social group typicality relative to an event (Experiment 2). Participants’ causal explanations also differed by social category, providing more category-related explanations for atypical actors than typical actors. The contribution of findings toward understanding the influence of a target actor’s group membership on causal explanations is discussed. Findings are also related to prior research on social identity and stereotypes, which has addressed the impact of social category on causal explanations.

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People’s explanations for events and behavior constitute important social judgments, influencing attitudes, beliefs, and actions (e.g., Harvey & Weary,

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Prior research suggests that causal explanations may vary as a function of the comparison case against which the event is considered (Einhorn & Hogarth, 1986; Hilton & Slugoski, 1986; Kahneman & Miller, 1986; McGill, 1989, 1991; see also Hesslow, 1983; and Mackie, 1974). The comparison case reflects instances in which the event did not occur. For example, in trying to determine why Joe smokes, one comparison case might be other people who do not smoke, while another comparison might be different times in Joe’s life when he too did not smoke. According to prior research, people base their causal explanations on distinctive features between the event and the comparison. For example, a comparison of Joe to his nonsmoking friends might bring distinctive traits of Joe to the fore and so produce explanations such as, “Joe likes to do things that make him seem like a rebel.” By contrast, comparison of Joe’s present smoking to an earlier time in his life when he did not smoke might bring situational factors to the fore and so produce explanations such as, “Everyone smokes at Joe’s new job.”

In addition to establishing the importance of the comparison case to judgments of causation, prior research has also begun to examine factors that determine the type of comparison adopted. For example, prior research has suggested that the comparison adopted may be influenced by role (i.e., actor versus observer; Kahneman & Miller, 1986; McGill, 1989), culture (McGill, 1995), gender of the actor (Miller, Taylor, & Buck, 1991), and self-interest (McGill & Tenbrunsel, 1997). The present research is intended to extend this research on factors that influence the selection of particular comparison cases. This research focuses on a specific type of comparison, the comparison of a target actor to members of the same social group (within-group comparison) or to members of another social group (across-group comparison). For example, imagine that Joe in the preceding example were African American. The present research focuses on choice of comparison of Joe to other African Americans (a within-group comparison) versus comparison of Joe to, say, Anglo Americans (an across-group comparison).

We selected this specific distinction in comparison because the adoption of within-group versus across-group comparisons may influence whether social group is used as an explanation for an individual’s behavior. For example, social group is common in the comparison of Joe to other African Americans (e.g., Why does Joe smoke when other members of his immediate family do not smoke?) and so would not be perceived as an explanation for the event. Instead, this within-group comparison suggests some individuating trait of Joe as an explanation for the event. By contrast, the across-group comparison of Joe to Anglo Americans (e.g., Why does Joe smoke when his college roommates who are

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1 The alternative to which an event may be compared has been given various names in the literature including causal comparison (Grier, 1995), causal background (McGill, 1989), and counterfactual contrast case (Hilton & Slugoski, 1986). We refer to the contrasting instance as the causal comparison case or, simply, the comparison case.
Anglo American do not smoke?) renders social group a distinctive feature and hence a possible explanation for the event; for example, “African Americans are less health-conscious.”

Prior research suggests that ambiguity regarding causation is often at the heart of disputes about public policies, responsibility, blame, and punishment (Grier, 1995; Messick & Bazerman, 1996). Hence, understanding why people may in some cases attribute behavior to social group membership but in other cases cite individual characteristics appears an important avenue for research. The present research focuses specifically on whether social category membership influences the selection of within-group versus across-group comparisons. Our key thesis is that the typicality of an actor’s social category relative to the event determines the type of comparison that will be adopted and the type of causal explanation that will be developed.

Our approach to the examination of social group membership on causal judgment therefore takes a decision-theoretic approach, focusing on the process by which people select comparison cases and the effect of comparisons on causal explanations. A long tradition of research has explored the general idea of comparisons, especially the literature on social comparison theory (e.g., Festinger, 1954). The focus of this prior work, however, has typically been on judgments of the self compared to others. By contrast, we are concerned with the types of comparisons that social perceivers use to explain the behavior of other people. Other research in social psychology has also been interested in determining when social category will be used as an explanation for behavior. In particular, research on social categorization and social identity (Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1981, 1982, 1985) and on stereotype effects on attributions research (e.g., Jackson, Sullivan, & Hodge, 1993; see also Deaux & Emswiller, 1974) is relevant to the present work. We discuss the relationship between findings for the present research and these other lines of study in the conclusion, noting in particular areas of overlap and extension.

SOCIAL GROUP MEMBERSHIP AND TYPE OF COMPARISON

Prior research suggests that people construct comparison cases from features of the event (Kahneman & Miller, 1986; McGill, 1993). That is, people do not appear to use established norms or expectations as the basis for comparison but instead appear to develop the comparison case “on-line” by modifying elements of the event (cf. Hesslow, 1983). In this regard, construction of the causal comparison case appears to follow the tenets of Kahneman and Miller’s norm theory (1986), which asserts that a person’s mental representation of a state of affairs can be modified in many ways but that some attributes are particularly resistant to change (called “immutable” features), whereas other modifications are seen as more natural (called “mutable” features). Thus, each event is viewed as evoking a comparison case that shares some, but not all, its features and the
rules that govern mutability appear to govern the construction of this alternative (McGill, 1993).

A critical implication of this constructive view of the causal comparison case is that the comparison adopted may vary with features of the target actor. Features of the actor that are perceived as immutable will be incorporated into the comparison case, whereas features that are perceived as mutable will be different in the comparison case and the event. Returning to the example of Joe’s smoking, this view implies that the comparison case will be constructed within-group if Joe’s social group is perceived as immutable. By contrast, the comparison will be constructed across-group if Joe’s social group is perceived as mutable. The proposition that the comparison adopted may vary with the features of the actor is consistent with work on standard setting, which suggests that people may shift their standards of comparison when thinking about members of different groups (Biernat & Manis, 1994; Biernat, Manis & Nelson, 1991). Other research findings indicate that target-specific information influences policy explanations, attitudes, and preferences, leading to different judgments depending on characteristics of the target actor or group (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Lord, Desforges, Fein, Pugh, & Leper, 1994).

In addition, research on causal judgments suggests that the perceived mutability of an actor’s group membership may depend on the context of the causal question. For example, Miller et al. (1991) examined people’s explanations for differences in the behavior of men and women. This work therefore presumed across-group (i.e., across-gender) comparisons and focused instead on direction of comparison. These authors hypothesized that the behavior of women would be perceived as unusual, whereas the behavior of men would be perceived as the immutable norm. Consistent with these ideas, participants were more likely to explain why the behavior of women differed from that of men than to explain why the behavior of men differed from that of women.

Results of Miller et al.’s (1991) study suggests, however, that perceived mutability may depend on the situation. In particular, these authors found that people were more likely to focus their explanations on the behavior of men when the presence of men was unusual in the relevant population. For example, people were more likely to explain why the behavior of men differed from that of women than vice versa when the causal question involved the female-dominated category of elementary school teachers. These findings are consistent with Kahneman and Miller’s (1986) contention that factors that are exceptional are more likely to be modified in people’s mental representation of events than factors that are typical or routine. Hence, participants in Miller et al.’s study appeared to treat the behavior of the atypical category member as requiring explanation but not the typical category member.

Building on Miller et al.’s (1991) research, which examined effects of social group membership on direction of comparison, McGill (1993) examined peoples’ preferences for type of comparison. Specifically, McGill (1993) asked participants to rate the relevance of within-group and across-group comparisons
in explaining the performance of male and female actors. Actors were described as having failed or succeeded on tasks that were perceived as typically accomplished by men (e.g., driving an obstacle course and shooting pool) or typically accomplished by women (e.g., typing and sewing). Participants in these studies adopted different comparisons for male and female actors; a finding that supports the hypothesis that comparison selection may depend on the actor’s social group. Findings also suggest that comparison selection may depend on the actor’s typicality relative to the task, but support for this effect was obtained only for female actors who failed. In McGill’s studies, male actors were always compared to other men, regardless of their performance and regardless of the gender orientation of the task, a result that is consistent with prior work indicating that the male gender is generally perceived to be immutable (Gilligan, 1982; Hall, 1987; McClelland, 1975; Tannen, 1990). By contrast, female actors who failed were compared to male actors who succeeded on male-oriented tasks and to female actors who succeeded on female-oriented tasks, a finding that supports the role of actor typicality in comparison selection. Female actors who succeeded, however, were compared to female actors who failed on both male-oriented and female-oriented tasks. Although the selection of comparison for female actors who succeeded was not sensitive to the gender orientation of the task, this finding may still reflect the role of typicality in comparison selection because, as was argued in the original work, the person who typically fails may be perceived as female for both male-oriented and female-oriented tasks.

Findings in the literature therefore support the hypothesis that an actor’s social category may affect the comparison adopted. Prior research also provides some support for the role of typicality in comparison selection but these findings are indirect and inconclusive. Miller et al.’s (1991) research found an effect for typicality but addressed peoples’ judgments about direction and not type of comparison. Miller et al.’s findings therefore do not provide direct evidence regarding the effect of actor typicality on the selection of within-group or across-group comparisons. McGill’s (1993) research considered type of comparison but the purpose of that research was to contrast the role of feature mutability with prior expectation and so utilized stimuli involving a social group (males) that was perceived as generally immutable regardless of the situation. As a consequence, the effect of typicality was not symmetric for male and female actors.²

The present research is intended to fill this gap in the literature and to examine the hypothesis that perceived mutability of an actor’s group membership (and, ² It should be noted that the purpose of the experiments conducted by McGill (1993) was not to demonstrate persistent perceived immutability of the male gender nor was it to test conditions in which this feature would be perceived as mutable or immutable. This feature and the situations described in the stimuli were chosen to create conditions in which the effects of perceived mutability and expectations could be contrasted. The male gender may be perceived as mutable in situations outside those described in the scenarios of McGill (1993).
hence, people’s propensity to adopt within- versus across-group comparisons) is a function of the perceived “typicality” of the actor’s social group relative to the norm for the situation. If the actor’s group membership is seen as typical and, hence, immutable, a within-group comparison is more likely to be adopted. By contrast, if group membership is perceived as atypical, and hence, mutable, an across-group comparison is more likely to be adopted. This hypothesis is also consistent with work by Kunda and Oleson (1997), which found that perceivers subtype group members who violate group stereotypes, thereby forcing these atypical members outside of the group category. The implication of this contention regarding comparison case selection is that membership in groups that are exceptional may commonly be considered an explanation for behavior but rarely will group membership be considered an explanation for the behavior of actors from the “normal” group.

We note, however, that the effect of typicality may be moderated in part by the commonly held belief that within-category comparisons may be more useful than across-category comparisons. This idea is reflected in the prescription to compare “apples with apples and oranges with oranges” (Brown, 1953; Stapel & Koomen, 1998). Hence, predictions for the present studies, which are based on mutability effects, reflect differences in relative preference for across-group and within-group comparisons. Specifically, we expected participants to place greater relative emphasis on across-group comparisons for atypical actors compared to typical actors. We evaluated these hypotheses in two studies, which manipulated typicality of an actor’s social category through the norm suggested by the situation (Experiment 1) and through explicit information about the social group that is typically involved in the target event or activity (Experiment 2).

Perceiver Characteristics

Experiments 1 and 2 also examined the effects of perceiver characteristics on the comparison case adopted. We were interested, specifically, in a possible interaction of the participant’s own social category and the social category of the actor. Prior research indicates differences in people’s judgments about members of their own social group (i.e., in-group members) and members of other social groups (i.e., out-group members; e.g., Goodwin & Fiske, 1994; Messick & Mackie, 1989; Quatronne, 1986; Wilder, 1981, 1986). Hence, selection of within-group versus across-group comparisons may also depend on whether the actor’s social group is the same or different from that of the participants.

One possible outcome that is suggested by prior research is that people may be more likely to use within-group comparisons for members of their own social group (i.e., in-group members) and across-group comparisons for members of other social groups (i.e., out-group members). This prediction is consistent with findings that people adopt a less individuated view of out-group members than in-group members (Wilder, 1981) and perceive less variability among out-group members (Quatronne, 1986). Additional support for this prediction is provided by the metacontrast principle (e.g., Haslam & Turner, 1992) and other catego-
rization-related research which demonstrates that perceivers may emphasize between group differences for out-group targets to heighten the in-group/out-group distinction.

Other research suggests, however, that perceiver characteristics might not affect comparison selection in these experiments. For example, McGill (1993) found no differences in comparisons adopted for male and female actors depending on the gender of the participant (see also Jackson et al., 1993; Oakes et al. 1991; and Wong, Derlega, & Colson, 1988). Absence of an effect for perceiver characteristics may occur if typicality of the actor determines comparison selection and not social group of the actor per se, and perceptions of typicality do not differ depending on the social group of the participant. A similar finding may therefore be obtained in the present experiments if participants from different racial groups share beliefs about the race of the actor who is typically involved in the event. In this light and in consideration of prior research on the effects of in-group/out-group membership, we examined the effects of perceiver race on comparison selection but did not make specific predictions.

EXPERIMENT 1

Typicality of the actor’s social group was operationalized in Experiment 1 through participants’ prior beliefs about the type of person most likely to be involved in an event or activity. Specifically, we created some situations in which White actors would be seen as typical and Black actors as atypical and other situations in which White actors would be perceived as atypical and Black actors as typical. For example, events involving a business manager might be perceived as typically involving White actors while those involving a custodian might be perceived at typically involving Black actors. These expectations were examined in a pilot study, which is described below.

It should be noted that our manipulation of typicality differs from a manipulation of stereotypes as the term is traditionally used in the literature. Stereotypes are category-based structures that contain a perceiver’s knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about a group (see Hamilton & Sherman, 1994 for a review), organize related information (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981; Fiske, Neuberg, Beattie, & Milberg, 1988), and serve as a normative expectation (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hamilton & Sherman, 1994). Hence, stereotypes are beliefs conditioned on group membership. For example, stereotypes may be used to answer questions of the form, “Given that the person is a member the group White people, what do we expect about this person?” Typicality as operationalized in the present study, by contrast, reflects beliefs conditioned on the situation. For example, typicality judgments may be used to answer questions of the form, “Given that the event involves a hockey match, what sort of people do we expect the actors to be?”

Method

Participants, stimuli, and procedure. Participants were 239 university students in the Western Cape area of South Africa. Participants were distributed across the
major racial categories of South Africa: White (46%), Black (33%), Colored (14%), and Asian (3%). While not reflective of population concentrations, the racial demographics of the sample were representative of racial group participation in higher education in the area. Further, within these broad racial categories are reflected various ethnic tribes and language groups.

Three written scenarios, which were designed to tap a variety of possible behavioral situations of relevance in a South African context, comprised the stimuli. Each scenario involved a focal actor whose behavior was to be explained. The scenarios were based on widely shared beliefs about the kinds of people typically involved in specific pastimes or occupations. For example, the “sports scenario” concerned a student’s athletic performance in either rugby (a typically White sport) or soccer (a typically Black sport); the “time-off scenario” concerned a man taking leave from work either to go on holiday (a typically White activity) or to attend a political rally (a typically Black activity); and the “promotion scenario” concerned the promotion decision of a man either to senior manager (a typically White occupation) or to senior janitor (a typically Black occupation). Actors in all scenarios were described as male.

Positively and negatively valanced versions were created for each scenario. For example, in the sports scenario, the actor was described as being either an extremely good player (positive valence) or extremely bad player (negative valence); in the time-off scenario, the actor took time off either with permission (positive valence) or without permission (negative valence); and in the promotion scenario, the actor was either promoted ahead of his unit (positive valence) or held back (negative valence) as shown below for the Black actor version of the typically White occupation (positive elements in brackets and negative elements in parentheses):

The Tigrex company just announced promotions and Mr. Maponya was [promoted ahead of the rest of his unit] (held behind and not promoted) to a Senior Manager position. Although he is one of several Black South Africans who have worked at the company for over ten years, he is the first in his unit to be [promoted to] (held back from) this position.

Valence was included in the experimental design because prior research has reported that outcome valence, particularly success or failure at a task, may affect the type of comparison adopted, although this effect occurred for female but not male actors (McGill, 1993). In addition, research suggests that task outcome valence may affect the locus and stability of an explanation (e.g., Jackson, Sullivan, & Hodge, 1993). Our scenarios addressed a broader class of events, however, than task performance (e.g., going on holiday or to a political rally). In addition, findings indicate that stereotypes of White and Black actors may be either positive or negative (Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 1997), suggesting that valence and typicality are not necessarily correlated for race. We therefore did not develop specific hypotheses regarding the effect of valence on type of comparison adopted.
Participants completed the questionnaire anonymously and were randomly assigned to conditions. After reading each scenario, participants provided an open-ended explanation for the event. For example, for the Black actor, positive valence version of the promotion scenario, participants were asked to “please provide an explanation for why Mr. Maponya was promoted.” Participants were then instructed to “imagine you are trying to understand why Mr. Maponya was promoted” and asked to rate comparison informativeness on a 1 (not very informative) to 7 (very informative) scale. Participants rated either a within-group comparison, for example, “How informative do you think it would be to compare Mr. Maponya to the Black employees who were not promoted?” or an across-group comparison, for example, “How informative do you think it would be to compare Mr. Maponya to the White employees who were not promoted?” Finally, participants were asked to provide demographic information. After completing the questionnaire, all participants received a comprehensive debriefing.

Pilot study. A pilot study was conducted to assess participants’ perceptions of typically White events and typically Black events. Forty-six university students for the Western Cape area of South Africa were recruited and asked to indicate the gender, race, and age that they perceived to be most commonly associated with a person involved in the occupations and activities that were described for the main study. For example, participants were asked to indicate the gender, race, and age of a person most likely to play rugby. Gender and age questions were included to mask our specific interest in actor race. The race question was always presented second.

Pilot participants rated each of the three events on a 7-point scale for likelihood of the person being male or female (1 = likely to be male; 7 = likely to be female), Black or White (1 = likely to be Black; 7 = likely to be White), and young or old (1 = likely to be young; 7 = likely to be old). A between-subjects design was employed such that pilot participants, who included both Black and White students, were presented either the typically White version of events in the promotion, sports, and time-off scenarios or the typically Black version of events. As expected, this analysis revealed significant differences in perceptions of the race of person most likely to be involved in the events: for the promotion scenario $M_{janitor} = 2.55$ and $M_{manager} = 5.67$, $F(1, 44) = 75.94, p < .001$; for the sports scenario $M_{soccer} = 3.05$ and $M_{rugby} = 5.79$, $F(1, 44) = 52.24, p < .001$; and for the time-off scenario $M_{rally} = 3.18$ and $M_{holiday} = 4.85$, $F(1, 44) = 13.71, p < .001$. These results support our manipulation of typicality, indicating that Black actors were perceived as more commonly associated with typically Black events and that White actors were perceived as more commonly associated with the typically White events.

Design. The experiment involved four between-subjects factors, actor race (Black or White), event type (typically Black actor or typically White actor), event valence (positive or negative), and comparison type rated (within-group or across-group), which were crossed in a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design to create
16 versions of each scenario. The experiment was designed so that a participant saw the same version of each scenario. That is, race of the actor, typical actor for the event, valence of the event, and type of comparison rated were the same in all three scenarios. All factors were counterbalanced across participants, and scenario order was constant.

It should be noted that this experimental design allowed us to test the effect of typicality in two different racial groups. That is, actor race per se has no theoretical interest. It is instead the interaction of race and event type that creates the variable of theoretical interest, that is, actor typicality. In this design, typical actors were those involved in events that were common for their group; that is, they were White actors involved in typically White events and Black actors involved in typically Black events. Atypical actors were involved in events that were not common for their group; that is, they were White actors in typically Black events and Black actors in typically White events. Support for the main hypothesis of study would therefore be indicated by a two-way interaction of actor typicality and comparison case such that participants provided relatively higher ratings of across-group comparisons for atypical actors compared to typical actors.

Results

Rating task. Participants’ ratings of informativeness were analyzed by a 2 × 2 × 2 × 2 × 3 mixed-factorial ANOVA on actor race (Black or White), actor typicality (typical or atypical), event valence (positive or negative), and comparison type (within-group or across-group) which were between-subjects factors, and scenario (promotion, sports, and time-off), which was a within-subjects factor. Analysis indicated no significant two-way nor higher order interactions of scenario with actor race, actor typicality, nor comparison type, indicating that scenario did not alter the effects of any of the variables of theoretical interest (ps > .10). We therefore combined participants’ informativeness ratings across scenario for subsequent analyses.

Participants’ ratings of the informativeness of within-group and across-group comparisons were then analyzed as a 2 × 2 × 2 × 2 between-subjects factorial design on actor race (Black or White), actor typicality (typical or atypical), event valence (positive or negative), and comparison type (within-group or across-group). As predicted, this analysis revealed a significant, two-way actor typicality × comparison type interaction, $F(1, 223) = 22.30, p < .001$, indicating

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3 Analysis revealed a significant main effect for scenario [$F(1, 223) = 13.2, p < .01$]. Participants provided higher ratings of informativeness for the promotion scenario ($M = 4.23$) than for the sports ($M = 3.39$) and time-off ($M = 3.53$) scenarios. Analysis also revealed a marginally significant scenario × valence interaction [$F(1, 223) = 2.67, p = .072$]. Participants provided roughly equal ratings of informativeness for the positive and negative outcome conditions in the promotion scenario ($M_{negative} = 4.17$ and $M_{positive} = 4.28$) but slightly higher ratings in the negative outcome conditions for the time-off ($M_{negative} = 3.66$ and $M_{positive} = 3.13$) and sports scenarios ($M_{negative} = 3.84$ and $M_{positive} = 3.23$).
differences in the use of within-group and across-group comparisons depending on actor typicality. See Table 1, which displays the mean ratings of informativeness by actor race and typicality. The three-way actor race × actor typicality × comparison interaction was not significant $F(1, 223) = 1.60, p > .10$, indicating that the effect of typicality on comparison ratings did not differ for White and Black actors. Neither was the four-way interaction of valence, actor race, actor typicality, and comparison case significant ($F < 1$).

Findings revealed, however, a significant interaction of valence and comparison type $F(1, 223) = 15.72, p < .01$, whereby across-group comparisons were seen as more informative in negative conditions ($M_{across} = 4.27$ and $M_{within} = 3.53$) and within-group comparisons were seen as more informative in positive conditions ($M_{across} = 3.32$ and $M_{within} = 3.74$). The analysis indicated no other significant two-way nor higher order interactions involving valence and actor race, typicality, or comparison case ($p$’s > .10), indicating that the predicted effect of actor typicality on the ratings of comparison type did not depend on whether the event was positive or negative.

**Explanation task results.** Participants’ open-ended responses for each scenario were transcribed and coded into race-related and non-race-related attributions. Race-related explanations referred explicitly to the actor’s race (e.g., “Soccer is a Black sport, so even the Whites who do play it do not bother to play it well”) or to racial factors influencing the event (e.g., “There tend to be more political rallies that would interest Blacks”). Non-race-related explanations referred to individual traits, beliefs, or feelings of the actor (e.g., “Mr. Maponya does not have the relevant experience for the job”) or situational factors influencing the event (e.g., “Maybe he had to attend to family business”). A response was coded as race-related if it contained explicit mention of “race,” “color,” or race-specific label such as “Black,” “White,” “Caucasian,” or “Negro.” Because the coding criterion was objective, being based on explicit use of words, only one person,
who was not one of the authors, coded the data. This coding scheme in which responses were divided into race-related and non-race-related was intended to capture the difference between across-group and within-group comparisons, specifically, that across-group comparisons produce an opportunity for category-based explanations, whereas within-group comparisons do not.

Consistent with predictions, we found a greater proportion of race-related explanations for atypical actors compared to typical actors for all three scenarios, although this effect was only marginally significant for the promotion and sports scenarios: for the promotion scenario, 42 of 132 (32%) compared to 24 of 107 (23%), \( \chi^2(1) = 2.60; p < .10 \); for the sports scenario 42 of 131 (32%) compared to 23 of 106 (22%), \( \chi^2(1) = 3.16, p < .10 \); and for the time-off scenario 14 of 131 (11%) compared to 4 of 105 (4%), \( \chi^2(1) = 3.91, p < .05 \). This pattern of results did not differ by race of actor for any of the three scenarios, \( ps > .20 \).

As an additional test of our theory, we also examined the correlation between participants’ informativeness ratings and the type of explanation that they provided. Our theory was based on the assertion that people would base their causal explanations on distinctive features between the target episode and the comparison case. If this assertion is correct, there should be a positive correlation between ratings of across-group comparisons and use of race-related explanations and a negative correlation between these explanations and ratings of within-group comparisons. Consistent with this assertion, analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between the type of explanation provided in the open-ended measures (race-related vs non-race-related) and ratings of across-group comparisons for all three scenarios (for the promotion scenario, \( R = .23, p < .05 \); for the sports scenario, \( r = .23, p < .05 \); and for the time-off scenario, \( r = .27, p < .01 \)). Further, use of race-related explanations was negatively correlated with ratings of within-group comparisons, although the correlation was significant for only one scenario (for the promotion scenario, \( r = -.19, p < .05 \); for the sports scenario, \( r = -.03, p > .50 \); and for the time-off scenario, \( r = -.07, p > .25 \)).

Perceiver characteristics. The first experiment was also designed to explore the idea that characteristics of the perceiver may influence comparison selection. Participants’ ratings of within-group and across-group comparisons were analyzed including participant race as a factor in the analysis. Because scenarios concerned only White and Black actors, only White and Black participants (\( n = 189 \)) were included in the analysis of the effects of perceiver race. Analysis indicated no significant effects of participant race on ratings of within-group and across-group comparisons (\( ps > .10 \)). Neither was there an effect of participant on the use of race-related or non-race-related explanations (\( ps > .25 \)).

Discussion

Results of Experiment 1 support the hypothesis that use of a within-group or an across-group comparison to explain an event depends on the typicality of the actor’s social category. Participants rated within-group comparisons more infor-
mative for actors engaged in events that were typical for their social category; i.e., White actors engaged in typically White activities and Black actors engaged in typically Black activities. By contrast, participants rated across-group comparisons higher for actors engaged in events that were atypical for their social category; i.e., White actors engaged in typically Black activities and Black actors engaged in typically White activities. Additional analysis indicated that ratings of within-group and across-group comparisons did not depend on the racial category of the participant, a finding that we address further under General Discussion.

Analysis of participants’ open-ended responses also supported the typicality thesis, finding greater use of race-based explanations in situations that are unusual for the target actor. Further analysis of the open-ended responses provided additional support for our underlying theoretical framework. Specifically, findings indicated a significant positive correlation between ratings of across-group comparisons and the use of race-related explanations for all three scenarios and a negative correlation between ratings of within-group comparisons and the use of these race-based explanations, although the negative correlation was significant for only one of three scenarios. These findings are consistent with the contention that people base their explanations on factors that are distinctive for the comparisons adopted.

An additional finding for Experiment 1 suggests an avenue for future research. Specifically, participants provided higher ratings of across-group comparisons for negative events and within-group comparisons for positive events, suggesting that people may be more likely to explain success with reference to individual effort or traits but failure with reference to social group. This intriguing finding is, however, outside the domain of the present research, which is focused on the effect of actor typicality on comparison selection. We therefore do not examine the effect of valence on comparison selection further in the present studies but highlight the importance of this area for future research.

Although results of Experiment 1 are consistent with the hypothesis that comparison case selection is a function of perceived typicality, the design of the study contains a failing that limits support for this hypothesis. Specifically, typicality was manipulated through participants’ beliefs about the type of person most likely to be involved in an activity. It is possible, however, that the typically White activities (playing rugby, being a manager, and going on holiday) and the typically Black activities (playing soccer, being a custodian, and going to a political rally) differ on other dimensions such as desirability or social status. The effect of event type may therefore reflect the influence of one of these other characteristics of the event and not typicality per se. We therefore conducted a second study in which we manipulated typicality directly. Participants were presented scenarios and were told the race of the typical actor. This procedure, allowed us to manipulate typicality of the actor while holding constant the nature of the event.
EXPERIMENT 2

Method

Participants. Participants were 154 students recruited from public areas around the University of Chicago. Of these participants, 62% reported their race as White, 20% as Asian, 6% as Black, 8% as Hispanic, 3% as “other,” and 1% did not respond to the race question. While not reflective of population concentrations in the city of Chicago, demographics of the sample were representative of the racial groups in the public areas around the university during the summer when the experiment was conducted. The study administrator approached individuals and offered them $2 for their participation in a brief study. All participants completed the questionnaire individually and were randomly assigned to conditions.

Stimuli and procedure. Participants in Experiment 2 were presented two scenarios. The “business scenario” concerned a man who opened a coffee shop that was doing well. The “drinking scenario” described a high school student who solicited help in curbing his heavy drinking. The actor in the scenario was described as either Black or White and participants were told that the sort of person who engaged in similar activities was either typically Black or typically White. For example, the business scenario was constructed as follows for a Black actor in a typically Black event, with changes for the typically White event condition shown in parentheses:

Pat Crane is writing an article on new business in the Chicago area. One interesting story for the article concerns Paul Miller, a middle-aged, Black (White) entrepreneur, who recently opened a small restaurant that is doing exceptionally well for its location. Pat’s prior research for this article indicates that the typical small restaurant entrepreneur, that is, the sort of person who opens a small business of this sort, is Black (White). Pat is trying to identify the reasons for Mr. Miller’s success.

After reading the scenario, participants were asked to rate the informativeness of a within-group or an across-group comparison. For example, for the Black actor version of the business scenario, participants were asked, “Given this background, please rate the following in terms of how informative you think it might be in identifying reasons for Mr. Miller’s success.” Participants then rated either a within-group comparison, “Comparison of Mr. Miller and his successful restaurant to other small restaurants in the area that have not been successful and which are owned by Black entrepreneurs,” or an across-group comparison. “Comparison of Mr. Miller and his successful restaurant to other small restaurants in the area that have not been successful and which are owned by White entrepreneurs,” on a 1 (not very informative) to 7 (very informative) scale. Order of presentation of the scenarios was counterbalanced across conditions.

Design. The experiment involved three between-subjects factors, actor race (Black or White), actor typicality (typical or atypical), and type of comparison rated (within-group or across-group), which were crossed factorially to yield 8
conditions. The result of this design was that participants were assigned to conditions such that the race of the actor, typicality, and type of comparisons were the same in both scenarios.

**Results**

*Rating task.* Participants’ informativeness ratings were analyzed by a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ mixed-factorial ANOVA on actor race (Black or White), typicality (typical or atypical), and comparison type (within-group or across-group), which were between-subjects factors, and scenario (business and drinking), which was a within-subjects factor. As in Experiment 1, analysis indicated no significant scenario $\times$ actor race $\times$ typicality $\times$ comparison interaction, $F < 1$, indicating that the predicted effect of actor typicality on ratings of comparison case did not depend on scenario. Participants’ informativeness ratings were therefore combined across scenario for subsequent analyses.

As predicted, findings indicated a significant two-way interaction of typicality and comparison case, $F(1, 146) = 23.06, p < .05$, indicating that participants’ ratings of informativeness of within-group and across-group comparisons depended on whether the actor was typical or atypical for the event. Specifically, within-group comparisons were rated as more informative for typical actors and across-group comparisons rated more informative for atypical actors. See Table 2, which displays the mean ratings of informativeness by actor race and actor typicality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison type</th>
<th>Typical</th>
<th>Atypical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black actor</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within group</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Across group</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>4.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White actor</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within group</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>3.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Across group</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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4 Analysis indicated a significant main effect of scenario [$F(1, 146) = 5.072, p < .05$]. Participants provided higher ratings of informativeness for the business ($M = 4.02$) than the drinking scenario ($M = 3.70$). Analysis also revealed a significant scenario $\times$ actor race $\times$ comparison interaction [$F(1, 146) = 4.152, p < .05$]. In the drinking scenario, smaller differences were observed in across-group versus within-group ratings of the comparisons for Black actors ($M_{\text{within}} = 3.76$ and $M_{\text{across}} = 3.67$) than for White actors ($M_{\text{within}} = 4.08$ and $M_{\text{across}} = 3.30$). These differences were not observed in the business scenario (Black targets $M_{\text{within}} = 4.34$ and $M_{\text{across}} = 3.56$; White targets $M_{\text{within}} = 4.24$ and $M_{\text{across}} = 3.95$).
typicality. Findings also identified a marginally significant main effect of comparison case, $F(1, 146) = 3.48, p < .10$, indicating that participants rated within-group comparisons more informative than across-group comparisons ($M_{\text{within}} = 4.11$ and $M_{\text{across}} = 3.62$). Findings revealed no other significant main effects or nor interactions of actor race, typicality, and comparison ($ps > .10$).

Perceiver characteristics. Participants’ ratings of the informativeness of within-group and across-group comparisons were analyzed as a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects factorial design on actor race (Black or White), actor typicality (positive or negative), type of comparison rated (within-group or across-group), and participant race (Black or White). Again, because scenarios concerned only White and Black actors, only White and Black participants ($n = 105$) were included in the analysis. This analysis revealed an additional two-way interaction of comparison type and participant race, $F(1, 92) = 5.20, p < .05$. Examination of means revealed that White participants rated within-group comparisons ($M = 4.34$) higher than across-group comparisons ($M = 3.61$) but that Black participants rated across-group comparisons ($M = 4.66$) higher than within-group comparisons ($M = 4.00$). Participant race did not, however, interact with either actor race or actor typicality, indicating no differences in the theorized effects depending on characteristics of the participant, $Fs < 1$. Findings for participant race must be interpreted with caution for Experiment 2, however, because the number of Black participants was small, with no more than four or five Black participants per cell.

Discussion

Results of Experiment 2 support the contention that use of within-group or across-group comparisons to explain an event depends on the typicality of the actor’s social category relative to the event. Participants rated within-group comparisons more informative for typical actors but across-group comparisons more informative for atypical actors. These effects did not differ by race of the actor, further supporting the assertion that it is typicality of the actor, and not race per se, that influences comparison selection. We also observed no difference in the effect of actor typicality on comparison ratings depending on participant race, although Black and White participants differed in their ratings of across-group and within-group comparisons. Finally, analysis revealed a marginal main effect of comparison in Experiment 2, in which participants rated within-group comparisons as more informative than across-group comparisons. This finding is consistent with the idea that people may prefer to compare “apples with apples and oranges with oranges” (Brown, 1953; Stapel & Koomen, 1998). Nonetheless, findings reflected hypothesized differences in relative preference for across-group and within-group comparisons depending on actor typicality.

Results of Experiment 2 therefore replicate findings of Experiments 1 regarding the effect of actor typicality on type of comparison adopted. In addition, typicality was manipulated in Experiment 2 by providing participants with explicit information about the type of actor most commonly associated with the
event. That is, participants were told that the typical actor was either White or Black, holding constant the type of event. By contrast, actor typicality was manipulated in Experiment 1 through participants’ prior beliefs about the type of person who was most likely to participate in an event, a procedure that produced a potential confound of actor typicality and event characteristics. Results of Experiment 2 therefore rule out a possible alternative explanation based on characteristics of the event for the findings in Experiment 1.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Results of Experiments 1 and 2 support the hypothesis that people may adopt different comparisons depending on whether the actor is perceived to be typical or atypical. Findings for these two studies also underscore how group characteristics loom as potential explanations for events involving minorities, who may more commonly be perceived as atypical than majority actors, and how causal judges may explain identical behavior very differently depending on who is the target. This effect of typicality might explain why smoking among minority consumers is often attributed to group-based factors (e.g., health attitudes and targeted marketing efforts), whereas use of these products by members of the majority population is attributed to individual factors (e.g., personal preference and habit; cf. Grier, 1995). It should be noted that differential attention to group characteristics can be stigmatizing for actors considered atypical by suggesting that their behavior is the result of factors that are common to the group and not the result of individual choice (see also Miller et al., 1991). Relative inattention to group characteristics may also carry negative consequences for those people considered the norm. Specifically, when individuals are rarely considered in light of group characteristics, important information regarding their behavior may be obscured, leaving a biased understanding of their actions.

Experiments 1 and 2 also examined the effects of perceiver characteristics on comparison selection. In both studies, we observed no difference in the effect of typicality on the relative ratings of within-group and across-group comparisons. This result suggests that participants in our studies, who although drawn from different racial groups, nevertheless shared beliefs about what constitutes typical and atypical behavior. Future research may therefore examine the hypothesis that perceiver characteristics may affect comparison selection when participants’ backgrounds suggest different norms about the type of person most likely to be involved in an event.

In addition, participants from different racial groups in our studies did not adopt different comparisons depending on the race of the actor. Although not without precedence (e.g., Jackson, et al., 1993; McGill, 1993; Oakes et al., 1991; Wong, Derlega, & Colson, 1988), this lack of influence of perceiver characteristics on comparison selection is nevertheless surprising in light of research on in-group/out-group effects (e.g., Messick & Mackie, 1989). Again, we suggest that this finding reflects the importance of shared norms in comparison selection. That is, differences in explanations for actors from different racial categories may
derive from perceptions about who most commonly is involved in an activity, and not from differences in attitudes toward members of other social groups, nor feelings of solidarity with members of one group but not another. Our findings do not rule out, however, an effect for perceiver characteristics depending on race of the actor for events that may be more personally relevant and which make salient in-group/out-group distinctions.

We did observe an effect for perceiver characteristics for participants in Experiment 2 wherein White participants rated within-group comparisons higher than across-group comparisons while Black participants rated across-group comparisons higher. This effect is intriguing because it suggests that majority participants may not perceive racial differences to be particularly relevant nor salient and so tended to adopt within-group comparisons. As a consequence, majority participants appeared to favor the prescription to compare apples with apples and oranges with oranges. By contrast, minority participants, who may be more aware of differences in the experiences of people from different racial groups and with the importance of race as a possible explanatory variable, were inclined to compare across groups. Hence, variations in the perceived salience of race or its centrality to people’s model of the world may affect comparison selection. Interesting questions for future research, for example, may be to examine whether social groups differ in their beliefs about the importance of race, whether these differences depend on the nature of the event (e.g., actions versus outcomes), and whether these differences in beliefs affect comparison selection.

Findings for the present studies are consistent with previous research on the effects of social category membership on causal explanations. Research in this domain has focused primarily on determining when group membership becomes salient as a description and explanation for behavior (e.g., Oakes, 1987; Oakes et al., 1991; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998; see also Fiske & Taylor, 1991; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978; Taylor & Fiske, 1978; Taylor, Fiske, Etoff, & Ruderman, 1978). Particularly relevant for the present research is work by social identity theorists who have found that people are more likely to provide explanations based on group membership when across-group comparisons are made, such as when the target behavior is exhibited by three members of one group in contrast to three members of another group (Oakes et al., 1991). Studies have also supported the notion that group membership will be used when there is a “fit” between the behavior and the group membership, making it conceptually meaningful as an explanation (e.g., Oakes et al., 1991; see also McGuire, 1984; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978; Oakes, 1987; Taylor & Fiske, 1978; Stapel & Koomen, 1998; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998). The present research complements this work by suggesting typicality as a condition that promotes the appearance of fit—i.e., by influencing when across-group comparisons are likely to be perceived as more relevant.

Research on stereotypes has also examined the effects of group membership on attributions. This work, however, has focused on attributions for performance
outcomes (e.g., success vs failure) along the internal–external and stable–unstable dimensions (Weiner, 1985; Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest, & Rosenbaum, 1971). Findings have generally supported the view that stereotype-inconsistent performance is attributed to external causes (i.e., task characteristics and luck) or to internal unstable causes (i.e., effort), whereas stereotype-consistent performance is attributed to internal stable causes (i.e., ability) (e.g., Yarkin, Town, & Wallston, 1982; Weiner, 1985; cf. Jackson et al., 1993). The present research is not directly comparable to, but does complement this research, on stereotype effects on attributions.

In particular, adoption of a within-group or an across-group comparison does not imply a particular locus of causation (internal-external) or a particular level of stability. Individuals can be distinguished on the basis on internal or external and stable or unstable factors just as groups can be distinguished along these dimensions. For example, a within-group comparison could reveal the target actor to differ from other members of his/her social group in terms of internal factors (e.g., Joe’s greater need to show off relative to other members of his group) or external factors (e.g., a greater number of co-workers who smoke at Joe’s job compared to other members of his group). In a similar vein, an across-group comparison could also reveal internal factors that are distinctive for members of the target group (e.g., relative value placed on health by members of Joe’s social group compared to other social groups) or external factors that apply with greater force to the target group (e.g., marketing efforts by tobacco companies directed to Joe’s social group compared to other social groups). Hence, the present research offers insight into the selection of individuating versus group-based explanations for behavior, whereas research on stereotype effects provides insight into the type of individuating or group-based explanations (i.e., internal–external and stable–unstable). In sum, findings for the present study extend theoretical research regarding factors that influence the selection of a causal comparison case and it aligns with prior research on the effects of category membership on causal explanations.

REFERENCES


Role of perspective and culture in causal selection. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 61,* 1–12.


