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Public Reactions to Instances of Workplace Gender Discrimination

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The number of people witnessing or experiencing gender discrimination at work is still high around the globe. While the existing literature has investigated potential mechanisms underlying gender discrimination and the consequences of experiencing gender discrimination at work, it remains unclear how third-party observers—as opposed to employees or coworkers—react to specific instances of workplace gender discrimination. The results of six experiments demonstrate that (a) people in general judge organizational decisions that discriminate against individual male (vs. female) workers as more legitimate and (b) this difference in legitimacy judgments is significantly greater among women than men. This discrepancy in legitimacy judgments occurs because women (more than men) consider the collective situation of female and male workers when judging the legitimacy of organizational decisions that discriminate against individual workers based on gender. These findings document how group-level concerns shape people's legitimacy judgments of organizational decisions discriminating against individuals and equip organizations and policymakers with a better understanding of people's polarized opinions regarding gender discrimination at the workplace.

Public Significance Statement

This study suggests that people judge organizational decisions that discriminate against individual male workers as more legitimate than comparable decisions discriminating against individual female workers and that, because women consider the collective situation of female and male workers more than men, this discrepancy in legitimacy judgments is greater among women than among men. By demonstrating how group-level concerns shape people's legitimacy judgments of organizational decisions discriminating against individuals, these findings provide organizations and policymakers with a better understanding of people's polarized opinions regarding workplace gender discrimination, thus enabling them to better anticipate the outcome of potential interventions.

Keywords: gender discrimination, gender inequality, public reactions, legitimacy, justice

Supplemental materials: <https://doi.org/10.1037/xap0000433.supp>

Consider the following thought experiment: An organization has short-listed two job candidates, Candidate A and Candidate B. While both candidates are well-qualified for the position, Candidate A is slightly better qualified than Candidate B. However, the organization decides to give the job to Candidate B. How would you, as a third-party observer, react to this decision? Would you consider this to be a legitimate decision? Next, consider the same situation except now Candidate A is named Carl and Candidate B is named Carla. How legitimate would you consider this decision to be?

The number of people witnessing or experiencing unequal treatment of workers based on gender remains high around the globe

(England et al., 2020). Across the U.K., U.S., France, and Germany, 33% of workers have experienced or witnessed gender discrimination at work (Glassdoor, 2019). In the U.K., 62% of women (and 42% of men) witnessed gender bias in organizations' recruitment or promotion decisions in 2016 (Chartered Management Institute, 2017). In the U.S., 42% of women and 22% of men experienced gender discrimination at work in 2017 (Parker & Funk, 2017). The media frequently documents organizations' discriminatory practices against workers, such as Twitter's promotion policies favoring men (Pepitone, 2015) or Nike's willful discrimination against female workers concerning hiring, promotions, and pay (Golden, 2018).

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While workplace gender discrimination can take many forms, it is generally understood as the unequal treatment of employees or job applicants because of gender (Bayer, 1986; Heilman & Manzi, 2016). This unequal treatment manifests in many ways; it could be different standards for promotion, denial of equal pay, or jobs awarded to less qualified candidates because of their gender (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011; Kim et al., 2020; Parker & Funk, 2017).

Both the popular and economic press extensively discuss the unequal treatment of women and men in the labor market. At the foreground of this debate are consequences of and remedies for gender discrimination in the workplace (Agarwal, 2020; Barone, 2019; Madsen, 2020; Norgard, 2017; Vedder, 2018). Academic research has contributed to the intense and often polarizing debate by studying potential mechanisms underlying gender discrimination (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011; Coffman et al., 2021; Manzi, 2019), consequences of experiencing gender discrimination at work (Jetten et al., 2013; Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1997; Schmitt, Branscombe, et al., 2014; Schmitt, Ellemers, et al., 2014), and employee reactions to witnessing gender discrimination against coworkers (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019; Miner & Cortina, 2016; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2004, 2007). In particular, the latter stream of research focuses on gender discrimination against women at work and how it affects coworkers' occupational well-being. However, to our knowledge, extant research has not paid attention to (a) how third-party observers—as opposed to employees or coworkers, who are directly affected by corporate decisions—react to organizational decisions that discriminate against individual workers based on their gender and (b) whether those reactions differ depending on the individual workers' gender, that is, whether the organizational decision discriminates against an individual male worker or against an individual female worker.

We believe that investigating third-party observers' reactions to organizational decisions that discriminate against individual female and male workers is important for several reasons. First, survey data indicate that also male workers—though arguably to a lesser extent than female workers—experience gender discrimination at work (Parker & Funk, 2017). Second, the media frequently reports organizations' discriminatory practices against their workers. Moving scholarly research on workplace gender discrimination beyond examining self-experienced or vicarious workplace gender discrimination against female workers thus expands our current knowledge of the potential ramifications of workplace gender discrimination. Third, organizational actions that violate social norms can have serious consequences for organizations (Greve et al., 2010; Vardi & Wiener, 1996). Companies and policymakers alike thus need to know how the public reacts to discriminatory business practices (see, e.g., recent public protests against workplace gender discrimination in France, Holman, 2016; Switzerland, Rodriguez, 2020; and Australia, Gorman, 2021). Finally, as people's opinions regarding gender discrimination at the workplace are polarized (Jenichen, 2018; Pew Research, 2020), policymakers need insights on people's potential objections to discriminatory organizational practices to better align their interventions.

Important related work has investigated people's attitudes toward various types of affirmative action plans aimed at promoting the inclusion of underrepresented groups of workers in the labor market (Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Ip et al., 2020; Kravitz & Klineberg, 2000; Lowery et al., 2006; Ritov & Zamir, 2014; Zdaniuk & Bobocel, 2011). This stream of research examines people's attitudes

toward corporate policies favoring workers from minority groups (e.g., Blacks, Hispanics, women) versus majority groups (Whites, men). In contrast to examining people's approval of organizational *policies* which, when implemented, favor members of a disadvantaged social group, the present research focuses on organizational *decisions* (such as hiring and promotion) that discriminate against individual workers based on their group membership. Specifically, we examine how people judge the legitimacy—the perception that actions are consistent with socially accepted norms, values, and principles (Zelditch, 2001)—of specific organizational decisions involving gender discrimination at the individual level: How do third-party observers react, for example, when an organization decides to hire a less qualified male job candidate over a more qualified female candidate? And what if a less qualified female job candidate is hired over a more qualified male candidate? How legitimate do people think such decisions are?

Notably, we neither aim at investigating people's reactions to gender biases regarding employee qualifications (e.g., disqualifying female workers because of their gender) nor people's beliefs about organizations' motivations behind discriminating against workers based on their gender. Instead, we investigate the legitimacy people ascribe to organizational decisions that discriminate against individual female or male workers based on gender. We believe that knowing how (il)legitimate third-party observers judge such organizational decisions is important because perceptions of legitimacy are essential for cooperation and social change (Jost & Major, 2001; Tyler & Jackson, 2014), strongly predict how willing people are to act against social inequalities (Harth et al., 2008; Reese et al., 2012), and impact support for and survival of organizations (Human & Provan, 2000; Weatherford, 1992).

In a series of six experiments, we examine (a) whether third-party observers' legitimacy judgments of the same discriminatory organizational decision differ depending on whether the decision discriminates against an individual male worker or against an individual female worker and (b) whether said legitimacy judgments differ between female and male observers. The findings from our studies extend existing research on workplace gender discrimination by elucidating third-party reactions to workplace gender discrimination targeting both individual female and male workers and contribute to the justice literature by documenting how group-level concerns shape people's legitimacy judgments of organizational decisions discriminating against individuals.

Conceptual Background

Third-Party Observers' Reactions to Discrimination Against Female Versus Male Workers

According to the universal principle of equality, people should *not* be treated differently simply because they belong to a certain social group, such as being male or female (Burri, 2014; International Labour Office, 2000). Thus, from a purely normative perspective, people should judge any instance of workplace gender discrimination as equally illegitimate—irrespective of whether a female or male worker is being discriminated against. From a theoretical perspective, however, how observing men and women react to organizational decisions discriminating workers based on gender seems not straightforward. Considering the well-documented finding that people are prone to ingroup biases

(Tajfel & Turner, 1979), existing work on ingroup favoritism (Balliet et al., 2014; Crocker & Schwartz, 1985; Dasgupta, 2004; Hewstone et al., 2002) would predict that women judge organizational decisions discriminating against individual male (vs. female) workers as more legitimate and that men judge organizational decisions discriminating against individual female (vs. male) workers as more legitimate. At the same time, however, justice is a basic human need (Lerner & Clayton, 2011; Taylor, 2006) and “part of the fabric of human society” (Costa-Lopes et al., 2013, p. 229). Thus, given the disadvantaged position of women in the labor market (England et al., 2020), men might also be inclined to judge organizational decisions discriminating against individual male (vs. female) workers as more legitimate. Indeed, experimental evidence suggests that people from majority groups may reward members of minority groups even at their own cost (Dawes et al., 2007).

In addition, social theorists argue that unfavorable treatment of members of a historically advantaged group in favor of members of a historically disadvantaged group may be justified under certain circumstances (Goldman, 1975; Pincus, 2003; Sher, 1979), such as when it seeks to rectify a social group’s existing disadvantage (Noon, 2010). Historically, women have consistently been a disadvantaged and underrepresented minority group in the labor market (and still are in many professions; Cassells & Duncan, 2020; England et al., 2020; International Labour Organization, 2019). Organizational decisions discriminating against male workers—even those made at the individual level—might therefore be perceived as compensating women for being a disadvantaged and underrepresented group. People may thus judge an organizational decision discriminating against an individual male worker as more legitimate than a similar decision that discriminates against an individual female worker.

The Influence of Third-Party Observers’ Gender

The extent to which people judge an organizational decision discriminating against an individual worker as legitimate may depend on the justice principle they apply when forming these judgments. Brickman et al. (1981) seminal work on fair allocation (distribution) of resources (rewards) among groups suggests that people may use different perspectives or principles when assessing the distribution of resources or rewards among groups (varying in size; see also Jost & Azzi, 1996; Wenzel, 2004). The first principle, the individual (or micro) justice principle, holds that valuable resources such as power, jobs, or education possibilities should be allocated between groups based on the idea of “equality between individuals.” Under this principle, every individual in each group should be treated equally (based on his/her merit) and should count equally. Accordingly, at the aggregate level, resources should be allocated based on the individual number of group members and their abilities. From an individual justice perspective, majority groups should therefore receive more resources and minority groups should receive less thereof because they are smaller. The second principle, referred to as a collective (or macro) justice principle, holds that valuable resources should be allocated based on the idea of “equality between groups” (Jost & Azzi, 1996; Wenzel, 2004). Under this principle, every group should be treated equally irrespective of the individual number of group members and their abilities. From a collective justice perspective, minority groups

should receive the same amount of power as majority groups, independent of their size. These principles may lead to conflicting beliefs regarding what is fair at the interpersonal level with what is fair at the group level because “treating individuals fairly may produce what seems to be an unfair distribution of rewards among groups” (Brickman et al., 1981, p. 173). Yet, people can apply both principles and be viewed as a continuum (Clayton & Opatow, 2003).

Existing literature holds that people applying collective justice principles—the idea of equality between groups—perceive truth commissions as fairer (Lillie & Janoff-Bulman, 2007), oppose less to affirmative action policies (Zdaniuk & Bobocel, 2011), and have more favorable attitudes toward minority groups such as asylum seekers (Anderson et al., 2015). In a scenario-based experiment that examined preferences regarding the allocation of power (resources) between groups, Azzi (1992) asked participants to take the perspective of either an ethnic minority group or that of a majority group. When participants were asked to take the perspective of the minority (vs. the majority) group, they were more likely to divide power equally between groups that differ in size (3:1 ratio) and less likely to divide power based on the proportion of the focal group sizes (3:1). Gale and Staerklé (2019) show that people from cultural minorities with high individualistic beliefs support multicultural policy—which seeks equality between subgroups in society—more than people from cultural majorities with high individualistic beliefs. Taken together, these findings suggest that people from minority (vs. majority) groups are more likely to prefer an equal distribution of resources between subgroups.

We propose that this notion—that the extent to which people apply collective (relative to individual) justice principles depends on their social group membership—does not only refer to decisions regarding the distribution of resources between groups but also between individuals. In contrast to the existing research, which has examined people’s preferences for the distribution of resources between groups, our research (a) is concerned with people’s legitimacy judgments regarding the distribution of resources between individuals, (b) specifies and directly measures fairness perceptions in terms of legitimacy judgments (and does not rely on preferences for distribution; see critique by Tyler & Smith, 1995), and (c) provides empirical evidence for how the extent to which people apply collective (vs. individual) justice principles affects those judgments. Precisely, we close the existing gap in the justice literature by examining how legitimate people judge organizational decisions that discriminate against individuals merely based on the individuals’ social group membership. We argue that collective considerations—whether an individual is a member of a specific social group—can affect legitimacy judgments about decisions concerning individuals.

In sum, we argue that the discrepancy of people’s legitimacy judgments between organizational decisions discriminating against individual female versus male workers is more pronounced among female observers than among male observers. We posit that an organizational decision discriminating against an individual female (vs. male) worker has a greater effect on women’s (vs. men’s) legitimacy judgments of that decision. Because women themselves belong to a disadvantaged social group, the collective situation of female versus male workers in the labor market should be more salient among female observers and therefore have a stronger effect on their legitimacy judgments. In other words, compared to men,

women should factor in the *collective* subjugation of female (relative to male) workers more robustly when judging the legitimacy of organizational decisions involving gender discrimination—even when these decisions discriminate against an *individual* female or male worker.

The Present Research

In six experiments, conducted online using American, European, and other culturally diverse samples, we expose participants to organizational decisions involving gender discrimination against either an individual female worker (female discrimination) or an individual male worker (male discrimination) and ask them to rate the decisions' legitimacy. The results show that female and male participants' legitimacy judgments of organizational decisions involving gender discrimination differ depending on whether the worker in question is female or male (Studies 1A and 1B). This difference in legitimacy judgments between female and male participants occurs because female participants take the collective situation of women and men in the labor market into greater account than male participants when judging gender discrimination against individual workers (Study 2). Finally, the observed differences in legitimacy judgments depend on the representation of female workers in a particular industry (Study 3A) and participants' general beliefs about the prevalence of gender discrimination in the labor market (Study 3B).

Transparency and Openness

In all studies, we obtained informed consent from participants who participated voluntarily and could leave at any time. Across studies, we report all measures as well as exclusions (we used the same exclusion criterion in all studies). All analyses were conducted with SPSS 26. The complete study materials as well as all data and analysis codes can be found on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at <https://osf.io/7cg5a/> (Schnurr, 2022).

Study 1A

Study 1A aims to examine whether women's and men's legitimacy judgments of organizational decisions that discriminate against an individual worker depend on whether the discriminated worker is female or male. To test this, Study 1A assesses participants' legitimacy judgments of a hiring decision discriminating against either an individual female or male job applicant.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of $n = 1,708$ participants was collected by students of a major European University, who were blind to the study's hypotheses. In return for partial course credit, course participants ($n = 166$) were provided with a link to the experiment and were asked to collect answers from at least 10 participants. Students could recruit participants in person or by sharing a link to the experiment on social media.

We removed 267 participants who failed at least one of two attention checks, which led to a final sample of $n = 1,441$ participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 27$ years, $SD = 8.01$, 798 females).¹ The majority of

participants were students (53.7%), held a bachelor's degree (55.5%), and came from Europe (60.9%). A detailed description of the sample is provided in the Supplemental Material.

Design and Procedure

The experiment employed a 2 (discrimination: female vs. male) \times 2 (participant gender: female vs. male) between-subjects design. We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions in which we manipulated the gender of the discriminated worker. Specifically, participants read that a company with an open management position has to choose between a female and male job applicant. To alleviate potential perceptions of gender biases regarding employee qualifications, participants either read that the female job applicant is slightly better qualified for the position, but the company decides to hire the male applicant (female discrimination), or that the male job applicant is slightly better qualified for the position, but the company decides to hire the female applicant (male discrimination). All other information was identical across conditions. The gender of the participants was the second between-subjects factor.

After reading this information, participants rated the legitimacy of this hiring decision on five randomly presented 7-point items adapted from existing research (Costarelli, 2007; Falomir-Pichastor et al., 2005): "To what extent do you think the company's hiring decision is . . .": "justified?," "fair?," "understandable?," "acceptable?," "legitimate?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; $\alpha = .91$). Finally, participants completed attention checks and indicated their gender, age, current employment status, highest degree of education, and nationality.

Results

A 2 (discrimination) \times 2 (participant gender) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on legitimacy judgments produced a significant main effect of discrimination, $F(1, 1,437) = 247.09, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$, revealing that participants in general perceived the hiring decision discriminating against the male (vs. female) applicant as more legitimate (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).² This main effect was qualified by a significant Discrimination \times Participant gender interaction, $F(1, 1,437) = 38.33, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$ (see Figure 1). While both male and female participants judged the hiring decision discriminating against the male (vs. female) applicant as more legitimate, this effect was significantly greater among female participants, female participants: $F(1, 1,437) = 269.55, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .16$; male participants: $F(1, 1,437) = 40.91, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. In comparison to male participants, female participants judged the hiring decision discriminating against the female applicant as less legitimate, $F(1, 1,437) = 36.39, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$, and the hiring decision discriminating against the

¹ A post hoc sensitivity analysis for an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with main and interaction effects (.05 α level) using G*Power (Version 3.1) suggested that our sample size ($n = 1,441$, four groups) provided at least 80% power for effect sizes of $f = .07$ and larger.

² We acknowledge that in this and all other studies, mean legitimacy judgments are below (or around) the scale midpoint, suggesting that participants—both male and female—rather condemn than condone organizational decisions that discriminate workers based on their gender.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Test Results of the Effect of Discrimination and Participant Gender on Legitimacy Judgments

Study and condition	Discrimination		Female versus male discrimination		
	Female	Male	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	Partial η^2
Study 1A (<i>n</i> = 1,441)	2.53 (1.30)	3.70 (1.43)	247.09**	1,437	.15
Female participants	2.26 (1.18)	3.82 (1.43)	269.55**	1,437	.16
Male participants	2.86 (1.38)	3.54 (1.41)	40.91**	1,437	.03
Study 1B (<i>n</i> = 440)	1.85 (1.18)	3.64 (1.72)	163.97**	436	.27
Female participants	1.66 (1.10)	3.91 (1.65)	134.58**	436	.24
Male participants	2.06 (1.23)	3.37 (1.74)	43.13**	436	.09
Study 2 (<i>n</i> = 450)	2.39 (1.31)	4.26 (1.47)	197.28**	446	.31
Female participants	2.09 (1.23)	4.48 (1.45)	189.11**	446	.30
Male participants	2.69 (1.32)	3.94 (1.44)	42.30**	446	.09
Study 3A (<i>n</i> = 418)	3.02 (1.63)	3.91 (1.71)	27.97**	410	.06
Female workers underrepresented	2.70 (1.62)	4.13 (1.73)	32.04**	410	.07
Female participants	2.34 (1.45)	4.24 (1.56)	39.61**	410	.09
Male participants	3.21 (1.73)	3.97 (1.97)	4.45*	410	.01
Female workers overrepresented	3.31 (1.58)	3.69 (1.66)	2.98 [†]	410	.01
Female participants	3.32 (1.50)	3.72 (1.88)	1.74	410	.004
Male participants	3.30 (1.70)	3.66 (1.45)	1.27	410	.003
Study 3B (<i>n</i> = 446)	1.87 (1.18)	3.60 (1.46)	194.36**	442	.31
Female participants	1.68 (1.06)	3.84 (1.56)	150.09**	422	.25
Male participants	2.05 (1.27)	3.35 (1.31)	55.43**	422	.11

Note. Raw means and standard deviations (in parentheses).

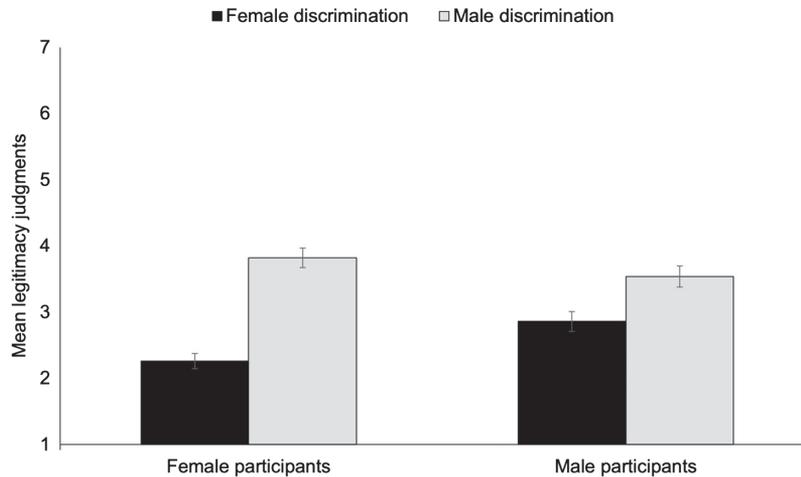
[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

male applicant as more legitimate, $F(1, 1,437) = 7.78, p = .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. The main effect of participant gender was also significant, $F(1, 1,437) = 4.70, p = .030$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$, indicating that female participants judged the discriminating decision—irrespective of the worker’s gender—as less legitimate than male participants ($M = 3.02, SD = 1.52$ vs. $M = 3.18, SD = 1.43$). Of note, the Discrimination \times Participant gender interaction is not moderated by any of the captured demographic characteristics (highest degree of education, employment, nationality; see Supplemental Material for detailed analyses). The documented effects are thus robust across different sample populations.

Discussion

Study 1A produces two main findings: First, participants judge a hiring decision that discriminates against a male worker as more legitimate than a comparable decision discriminating against a female worker. Second, this difference in legitimacy ratings is significantly greater among female participants than among male participants. These results, which we replicate among a different sample of participants accounting for socially desirable response behavior (see Supplemental Material), suggest that, compared to male participants, female participants are more affected by the

Figure 1
Study 1: Female and Male Participants’ Legitimacy Judgments of Female and Male Discrimination



Note. Error bars indicate ± 1 SEM (standard errors of the mean).

gender of the discriminated applicant in judging the legitimacy of discriminating organizational decisions.

Posttest

We conducted a posttest to address the possibility that the observed effects are driven by differences in beliefs between male and female participants as to whether the respective job candidates were actually hired because of their gender; that is, whether participants perceived the hiring decisions as an act of gender discrimination against the individual applicants. Participants ($n_{\text{final}} = 478$; $M_{\text{age}} = 39$ years, $SD = 11.85$, 218 females) were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and randomly assigned to one of the two discrimination conditions (female vs. male) that were used in the main study.³

After reading the hiring scenario, participants judged on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) the extent to which they believe that the respective candidates were hired because of their gender: "The [female vs. male] candidate was hired because of [his vs. her] gender." An independent samples *t* tests revealed that participants believed that both the male candidate (female discrimination) as well as the female candidate (male discrimination) were hired because of their gender ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.33$ vs. $M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.34$), $t(476) = 0.84$, $p = .402$, $d = .08$. Importantly, a 2 (discrimination) \times 2 (participant gender) ANOVA produced a nonsignificant interaction effect, $F(1, 474) = 2.29$, $p = .131$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Thus, the extent to which participants believed that the respective candidates were hired because of their gender did not differ between female and male participants (see Supplemental Material for detailed analyses). Therefore, it is unlikely that different perceptions of the gender bias involved in the hiring decision can explain the observed differences between female and male participants' legitimacy judgments.

Study 1B

The aim of Study 1B is to examine whether the documented discrepancy between female and male participants' legitimacy judgments holds when participants are not given any information about the relative qualifications of the two job applicants, but instead simply learn that the hiring decision was based on the applicants' gender. A potential concern with the results of Study 1A is that the decision to hire a less qualified female (male) candidate over a more qualified male (female) candidate may have been motivated by other factors than the candidates' gender. Although the posttest of Study 1A suggests that participants believed the candidates' gender to have affected the organization's decision, it may be that other factors—in addition to the candidates' gender—might have been perceived to play a role as well. Study 1B thus assesses participants' legitimacy judgments of a hiring decision that merely states that the respective decision was based on the applicant's gender. This study, including its design, hypotheses, and analytic plan, was preregistered at https://aspredicted.org/M24_YMS.

Method

Participants

We recruited 503 U.S. participants from Prolific Academic, requesting a gender-balanced sample. We removed 63 participants

who failed at least one of two attention checks, which led to a final sample of $n = 440$ participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 35$ years, $SD = 13.26$, 225 females).⁴ The majority of participants were paid employees (62.5%) and 54.0% of participants reported an annual net income of less than \$50,000. A detailed description of the sample is provided in the Supplemental Material.

Design and Procedure

The experiment employed a 2 (discrimination: female vs. male) \times 2 (participant gender: female vs. male) between-subjects design. We randomly assigned participants to one of two discrimination conditions. As in Study 1A, participants read that a company with an open management position has to choose between a female and male job applicant. However, compared to Study 1A, participants in the female discrimination condition now read that "the company decides to base the decision on the applicant's gender and hires the male applicant." Participants in the male discrimination condition now read that "the company decides to base the decision on the applicant's gender and hires the female applicant."

After reading this information, participants rated the legitimacy of this hiring decision on the same scales as in Study 1A ($\alpha = .96$). In addition, participants responded to Paulhus' (1984) eight-item social desirability scale (exemplary item: "I sometimes tell lies, if I have to"; $\alpha = .76$) and completed an adapted version of Rubin (2016) four-item Perceived Awareness of the Research Hypothesis (PARH) scale (exemplary item: "I knew what the researchers were investigating in this research"; $\alpha = .96$). The PARH scale has been recognized by experimental psychologists as a valid measure to assess the potential influence of demand characteristics (e.g., Poon & Chen, 2014; Stavrova et al., 2020). Finally, participants completed attention checks and indicated their gender, age, current employment status, and annual income.

Results

A 2 (discrimination) \times 2 (participant gender) ANOVA on legitimacy judgments produced a significant main effect of discrimination, $F(1, 436) = 163.97$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .27$, indicating that participants judged the hiring decision discriminating against the male (vs. female) applicant as more legitimate (see Table 1). Replicating the results of Study 1A, this main effect was qualified by a significant Discrimination \times Participant gender interaction, $F(1, 436) = 11.36$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. The higher legitimacy judgments of the hiring decision discriminating against the male (vs. female) applicant were more pronounced among female participants, $F(1, 436) = 134.58$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .24$, than among male participants, $F(1, 436) = 43.13$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$. Compared to male participants, female participants judged the hiring decision discriminating against the female applicant as less legitimate, $F(1, 436) = 4.19$, $p = .041$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, and the hiring

³ A post hoc sensitivity analysis for an ANOVA with main and interaction effects (.05 α level) using G*Power (Version 3.1) suggested that our sample size ($n = 478$, four groups) provided at least 80% power for effect sizes of $f = .13$ or larger.

⁴ A post hoc sensitivity analysis for an ANOVA with main and interaction effects (.05 α level) using G*Power (Version 3.1) suggested that our sample size ($n = 440$, four groups) provided at least 80% power for effect sizes of $f = .13$ or larger.

decision discriminating against the male applicant as more legitimate, $F(1, 436) = 7.71, p = .006$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. The main effect of participant gender was not significant, $F(1, 436) = 0.26, p = .614$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$.

Importantly, the Discrimination \times Participant gender interaction is not moderated by participants' social desirability (see Supplemental Material). In addition, participants' perceived hypothesis awareness (PARH) is not correlated with participants' legitimacy judgments, $r = .02, p = .708$, and the Discrimination \times Participant gender interaction is not moderated by PARH, indicating that the documented Discrimination \times Participant gender interaction on legitimacy judgments does not depend on the extent to which participants believed to be aware of the research hypothesis (see Supplemental Material). It is thus unlikely that the documented effects are driven by mere demand effects. Finally, the Discrimination \times Participant gender interaction is unaffected by participants' employment status and income (see Supplemental Material).

Discussion

The results of Study 1B replicate the findings of Study 1A in a setting that does not provide participants with information about the job applicants' relative qualifications. As in Study 1A, participants judged the hiring decision discriminating against the male applicant as more legitimate and this difference in legitimacy judgments was more pronounced among female participants. In addition, the results suggest that these results are not driven by experimental demand and are robust across different sample populations.

Study 2

The aim of Study 2 is to test whether the discrepancy between female and male participants' legitimacy judgments of organizational decisions discriminating against individual female (vs. male) workers can be explained by female participants' greater consideration of the collective treatment of women and men in the labor market when judging such decisions. In addition to assessing participants' legitimacy judgments, Study 2 thus assesses the extent to which participants were thinking about the general treatment of women and men in the labor market when making these judgments and the specific treatment of the individual worker.

Method

Participants

We recruited 503 U.S. participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. We removed 53 participants who failed at least one of two attention checks, which led to a final sample of $n = 450$ participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 34$ years, $SD = 12.59$, 246 females).⁵

Design and Procedure

The experiment employed a 2 (discrimination: female vs. male) \times 2 (participant gender: female vs. male) between-subjects design. We used the same stimuli as in Study 1A, assigning participants randomly to either the female or the male discrimination condition. After judging the decision's legitimacy ($\alpha = .91$), participants indicated on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *a great deal*) to what extent they were thinking about the collective situation of

women and men in the labor market when rating the legitimacy of this hiring decision (i.e., the salience of the collective situation): "When rating this hiring decision between the female and male applicants, to what extent were you thinking about the general treatment of women and men in the labor market?." Participants also indicated on the same scale the extent to which they were thinking about the specific situation of the individual applicant when rating the legitimacy of this hiring decision (i.e., the salience of the individual situation): "When rating this hiring decision between the female and male applicants, to what extent were you thinking about the specific treatment of the individual applicant?." Finally, participants completed attention checks and indicated their gender and age.

Results

Legitimacy Judgments

A 2 (discrimination) \times 2 (participant gender) ANOVA produced a significant main effect of discrimination, $F(1, 446) = 197.28, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .31$, indicating that participants judged the hiring decision discriminating against the male (vs. female) applicant as more legitimate (see Table 1). Replicating the results of the previous studies, this main effect was qualified by a significant Discrimination \times Participant gender interaction, $F(1, 446) = 19.31, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. The higher legitimacy judgments of the hiring decision discriminating against the male (vs. female) applicant were more pronounced among female participants, $F(1, 446) = 189.11, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .30$, than among male participants, $F(1, 446) = 42.30, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$. Compared to male participants, female participants judged the hiring decision discriminating against the female applicant as less legitimate, $F(1, 446) = 11.61, p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$, and the hiring decision discriminating against the male applicant as more legitimate, $F(1, 446) = 7.99, p = .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. The main effect of participant gender was not significant, $F(1, 446) = 0.08, p = .773$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$.

Salience of Collective Versus Individual Situation

Independent samples t tests revealed that when judging the legitimacy of the hiring decisions, the collective situation of women and men in the labor market was more salient among female than male participants ($M = 5.71, SD = 1.53$ vs. $M = 4.99, SD = 1.81$), $t(448) = 4.61, p < .001, d = 0.44$, while the specific situation of the individual applicant was equally salient among female and male participants ($M = 5.33, SD = 1.55$ vs. $M = 5.14, SD = 1.56$), $t(448) = 1.30, p = .194, d = 0.12$. Among female participants, the collective situation of the gender groups was more salient than the individual situation of the applicant ($M = 5.71, SD = 1.53$ vs. $M = 5.33, SD = 1.55$), $t(245) = 3.31, p = .001, d = 0.21$. In contrast, this was not the case among male participants ($M = 4.99, SD = 1.81$ vs. $M = 5.14, SD = 1.56$), $t(203) = -0.98, p = .330, d = 0.07$. In sum, female participants thus not only considered the general, collective situation of women and men in the labor market more than male participants did; female participants also gave greater consideration to the general

⁵ A post hoc sensitivity analysis for an ANOVA with main and interaction effects (.05 α level) using G*Power (Version 3.1) suggested that our sample size ($n = 450$, four groups) provided at least 80% power for effect sizes of $f = .13$ or larger.

circumstances of women and men in the labor market than to the specific situation of the individual applicant.

Mediation

To test whether the differences in the salience of the collective situation of female and male workers can explain the observed differences in legitimacy judgments, we conducted a 5,000-sample bootstrap moderated mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 14 (Hayes, 2012). We included participant gender (0 = male, 1 = female) as independent variable, salience of the collective as mediator, discrimination (0 = female, 1 = male) as moderator, and legitimacy judgments as dependent variable.⁶

The first model revealed that participant gender is positively related to salience of the collective, $b = 0.73$, $SE = .16$, $p < .001$. The second model revealed that the extent to which the salience of the collective predicts legitimacy judgments depends on the gender of the discriminated applicant, $b = 0.53$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$. The effect of salience of the collective situation on legitimacy judgments was positive when the hiring decision discriminated against the male applicant, $b = 0.27$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$, and negative when the hiring decision discriminated against the female applicant, $b = -0.26$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$. Thus, the more salient the collective situation, the more (less) legitimate participants judged the hiring decision discriminating against the male (female) applicant to be. In total, the analysis produced a significant index of moderated mediation, $b = 0.39$, $SE = .12$, 95% CI [.19, .65]: female (vs. male) participants' higher salience of the collective led them to judge the hiring decision discriminating against the male applicant as more legitimate, indirect effect: $b = 0.20$, $SE = .08$, 95% CI [.08, .37], and the hiring decision discriminating against the female applicant as less legitimate, indirect effect: $b = -0.19$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [-.33, -.08].

Discussion

The results of Study 2 suggest that the documented differences in legitimacy judgments between female and male participants can be attributed to female participants' greater consideration of the overall issue of gender in the labor market. Specifically, female (vs. male) participants devoted more attention to the collective situation of women and men in the labor market, which led female (vs. male) participants to judge the hiring decision discriminating against the male applicant as more legitimate and the decision against the female applicant as less legitimate. We acknowledge that the mediation analyses do not allow conclusions about the causal relationship between our mediator (salience of the collective) and our dependent variable (legitimacy judgments). In the following studies, we thus aim to provide process evidence through moderation.

Study 3A

Study 3A tests whether the observed differences between female and male participants' legitimacy judgments of organizational decisions discriminating against individual female (vs. male) workers depend on the gender distribution of workers in an industry. If the observed differences in legitimacy judgments can be explained by female participants' greater consideration of the overall situation of female and male workers, it seems conceivable that differences in

legitimacy judgments depend on the gender distribution of workers in the industry in which the organization is operating. Accordingly, we predict that the discrepancy between female and male participants' legitimacy judgments attenuates when the discriminating organizational decision is made in an industry in which female workers are overrepresented (vs. underrepresented). After all, differences in considering the general disadvantaged situation of female workers in the labor market should have less impact on participants' legitimacy judgments of female (vs. male) discrimination when women are overrepresented in an industry. Study 3A tests this prediction by exposing participants to the same hiring decision as in the previous studies but also reveals that this decision has been made in an industry where women are underrepresented (software development; Statista, 2021) or overrepresented (nursing; Statista, 2018).

Method

Participants

We recruited 504 U.S. participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and removed 86 participants who failed at least one of three checks, resulting in a final sample of $n = 418$ participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 41$ years, $SD = 12.68$, 232 females).⁷

Design and Procedure

The experiment employed a 2 (discrimination: female vs. male) \times 2 (participant gender: female vs. male) \times 2 (industry: female workers underrepresented vs. female workers overrepresented) between-subjects design. We randomly assigned participants to one of four conditions, in which they either read that a tech company seeking to hire a new software developer has to choose between a female and male job applicant (female workers underrepresented) or that a hospital seeking to hire a new nurse has to choose between a female and male job applicant (female workers overrepresented).⁸ A pretest revealed that participants indeed perceived female workers to be underrepresented in the software development industry and overrepresented in the nursing industry (see Supplemental Material for details).

Next, half of the participants read that the female job applicant is slightly better qualified for the position, but the company decides to hire the male applicant (female discrimination). The other half read that the male job applicant is slightly better qualified for the position, but the company decides to hire the female applicant (male discrimination). All other information was identical across conditions. The gender of the participants was the third between-subjects factor.

⁶ Because the extent to which participants considered the specific treatment of the individual candidate (i.e., salience of the individual) did not differ between female and male participants, salience of the individual cannot explain differences in female and male participants' legitimacy judgments of female and male discrimination. We thus did not include this measure as a second, parallel mediator. For completeness, we present the results of a moderated mediation using both mediators in the Supplemental Material.

⁷ A post hoc sensitivity analysis for an ANOVA with main and interaction effects (.05 α level) using G*Power (Version 3.1) suggested that our sample size ($n = 418$, six groups) provided at least 80% power for effect sizes of $f = .14$ or larger.

⁸ Software developers and nurses are ranked among the top three best jobs of 2021 and have comparable median salaries (software developers: \$107,510; nurses: \$109,820; U.S. News, 2021).

After reading one of the four scenarios, participants rated the legitimacy of the company’s hiring decision as in the previous studies ($\alpha = .96$), completed attention checks, and indicated their gender and age.

Results

A 2 (discrimination) \times 2 (participant gender) \times 2 (industry) ANOVA on legitimacy judgments produced a three-way interaction that did not reach the conventional level of significance, $F(1, 410) = 2.85, p = .092, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .01$ (see Figure 2; see Supplemental Material for detailed results). Nevertheless, given its conceptual importance, we compare female versus male participants’ legitimacy judgments across the discrimination and industry conditions.

In the industry, where female workers are underrepresented (software development), the previously documented differences between female and male participants’ legitimacy judgments emerged. While male participants judged the hiring decision discriminating against the male (vs. female) applicant as more legitimate, $F(1, 410) = 4.45, p = .035, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .01$, this effect was greater among female participants, $F(1, 410) = 39.61, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .09$ (see Table 1 for descriptives). Conversely, in the industry where female workers are overrepresented (nursing), the previously documented differences between female and male participants’ legitimacy judgments vanished. Both female and male participants judged the hiring decision discriminating against the male (vs. female) applicant as equally illegitimate, female participants: $F(1, 410) = 1.74, p = .188, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .004$; male participants: $F(1, 410) = 1.27, p = .260, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .003$.

Discussion

The results of Study 3A show that female and male participants’ legitimacy judgments diverge in an industry where female workers are underrepresented and converge in an industry where female

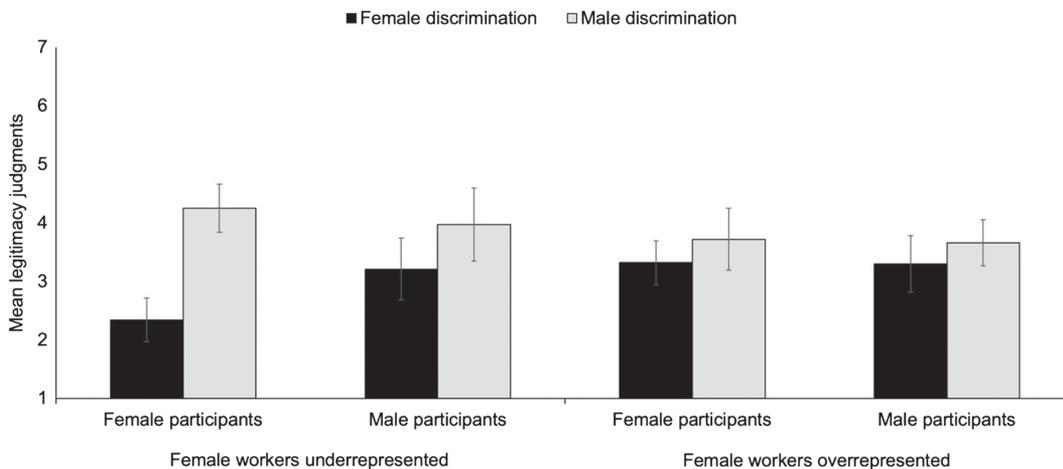
workers are overrepresented. We believe that this finding provides evidence for the process established in Study 2: When judging the legitimacy of organizational decisions discriminating against individual workers based on gender, female participants take the general situation of women and men in the labor market more into account than do male participants.

However, while a separate posttest revealed that participants believe women to face more gender discrimination in the software development (vs. nursing) industry ($p < .001, d = 0.58$; see Supplemental Material for details), a potential concern with Study 3A is that the results do not indicate how much participants actually took the gender distribution of the workforce—and the associated disadvantaged situation of women—within the industry into account when judging the decision’s legitimacy. Study 3B aims to alleviate this concern by directly assessing the impact that participants’ perceptions of women’s disadvantaged situation in the labor market have on their legitimacy judgments.

Study 3B

Study 3B aims to complement the findings of Study 3A by testing whether participants’ legitimacy judgments of organizational decisions discriminating against individual workers depend on participants’ general perceived prevalence of gender discrimination against women in the labor market—that is, the extent of gender discrimination which people believe women are subject to. We predict that the discrepancy between female and male participants’ legitimacy judgments is attenuated when participants believe that gender discrimination against women is less (vs. more) prevalent. Differences in considering the general disadvantaged situation of female workers in the labor market should have less impact on participants’ legitimacy judgments of female (vs. male) discrimination when participants believe women to be less subject to gender discrimination in the workplace. In addition to assessing legitimacy judgments, Study 3B thus measures participants’ beliefs about the

Figure 2
Study 3A: Female and Male Participants’ Legitimacy Judgments of Female and Male Discrimination in Industries in Which Female Workers Are Overrepresented and Underrepresented



Note. Error bars indicate ± 1 SEM (standard errors of the mean).

prevalence of gender discrimination against women in the labor market. Furthermore, Study 3B tests the effect in the context of a different organizational decision: a promotion instead of a hiring decision.

Method

Participants

To generalize our findings beyond U.S. participants, we recruited 501 participants from the U.K. through Prolific Academic. We removed 55 participants who failed at least one of two attention checks, resulting in a final sample of $n = 446$ participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 34$ years, $SD = 12.00$, 221 females).⁹

Design and Procedure

The experiment employed a 2 (discrimination: female vs. male) \times 2 (participant gender: female vs. male) between-subjects design. We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions in which they read that a company seeking to promote an employee must choose between a female and a male employee. Half of the participants read that the female employee is slightly better qualified for the position, but the company decides to promote the male employee (female discrimination). The other half read that the male employee is slightly better qualified, but the company decides to promote the female employee (male discrimination). All other information was identical across conditions. The gender of the participants was the second between-subjects factor.

After reading one of these two scenarios, participants judged the legitimacy of the promotion decision ($\alpha = .95$). Next, on always one 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), participants indicated their beliefs about both the *past* and *present* prevalence of female gender discrimination: "In the past [present], women have faced [face] gender discrimination in the labor market." Finally, participants completed attention checks and indicated their gender and age.

Results

We conceptually replicated the effects documented in the previous studies (see Table 1 and Supplemental Material for complete results). We then tested whether our findings were affected by participants' beliefs about the prevalence of gender discrimination against women in the *past*. We, therefore, conducted a 5,000-sample bootstrap moderated analysis using PROCESS Model 3 (Hayes, 2012) with legitimacy judgments as dependent variable and discrimination (0 = female, 1 = male), participant gender (0 = female, 1 = male), beliefs about the past prevalence of gender discrimination against women (mean-centered), and the respective interactions as independent variables. The analysis revealed that the strength of participants' belief that women were discriminated against in the *past* did not affect the observed differences in female and male participants' legitimacy judgments of the promotion decision, as indicated by a nonsignificant three-way interaction, $b = -0.45$, $SE = .31$, $p = .144$ (see Supplemental Material for detailed results).

We next analyzed whether the observed differences in legitimacy judgments between female and male participants depended on participants' beliefs about the prevalence of gender discrimination

in the *present*. The same moderation analysis with beliefs about the current (instead of past) prevalence of gender discrimination against women produced a significant three-way interaction, $b = -0.37$, $SE = .19$, $p = .049$ (see Supplemental Material for complete results), indicating that beliefs about present discrimination against women in today's labor market did affect the observed differences in female and male participants' legitimacy judgments. Figure 3 (upper panel) depicts the conditional Discrimination \times Participant gender interaction across different levels of participants' beliefs about the current prevalence of gender discrimination against women. As evidenced, differences between female and male participants' legitimacy judgments increase proportionally with their belief that women currently face gender discrimination in the labor market.

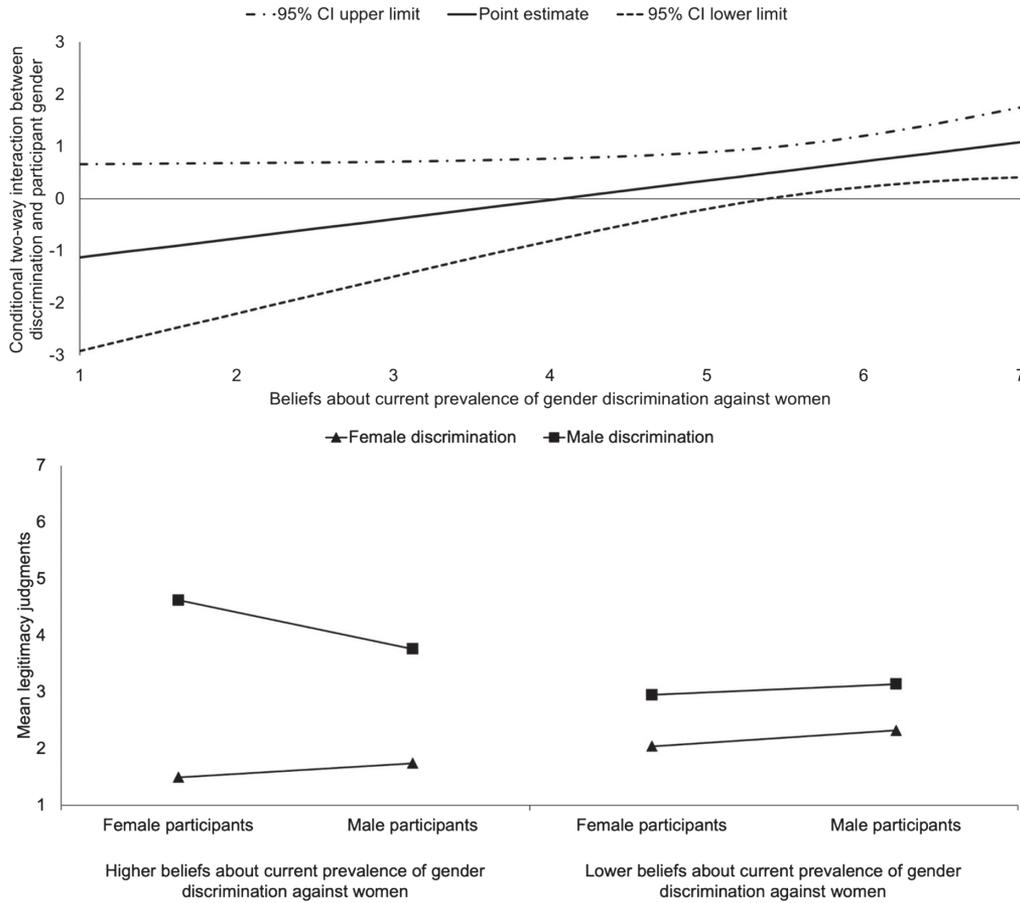
To better illustrate this three-way interaction, we performed simple slopes analyses (Preacher et al., 2006). As displayed in Figure 3 (lower panel), the previously documented differences between female and male participants' legitimacy judgments replicate among participants with higher (1 *SD* above the mean) beliefs about the current prevalence of gender discrimination against women. Among those participants, also male participants judged the promotion decision discriminating against the male (vs. female) employee as more legitimate, $b = 2.04$, $SE = .25$, $p < .001$. However, as in the previous studies, this effect was greater among female participants, $b = 3.12$, $SE = .24$, $p < .001$. More precisely, female and male participants' legitimacy judgments of the promotion decision differed when the decision discriminated against the male employee, $b = -.85$, $SE = .25$, $p < .001$, but not when the decision discriminated against the female employee, $b = 0.22$, $SE = .23$, $p = .312$. Among participants with lower (1 *SD* below the mean) beliefs about the current prevalence of gender discrimination against women, in contrast, both female and male participants judged the promotion decision discriminating against the male (vs. female) employee as almost equally more legitimate (female participants: $b = 0.90$, $SE = .29$, $p = .002$; male participants: $b = 0.81$, $SE = .21$, $p < .001$). Crucially, female and male participants' legitimacy judgments of the promotion decision did not differ—irrespective of whether the decision discriminated against the male employee, $b = 0.19$, $SE = .24$, $p = .437$, or the female employee, $b = 0.28$, $SE = .26$, $p = .297$.

Discussion

The results of Study 3B provide direct evidence for the process explanation established in Study 2: When judging the legitimacy of organizational decisions involving gender discrimination, female participants give more consideration than male participants to the general treatment of women (relative to men) in the labor market. Consequently, female and male participants' legitimacy judgments diverge when they believe gender discrimination against women is currently more prevalent in the labor market and converge when they believe gender discrimination against women is currently less prevalent.

⁹ A post hoc sensitivity analysis for an ANOVA with main and interaction effects (.05 α level) using G*Power (Version 3.1) suggested that our sample size ($n = 446$, six groups) provided at least 80% power for effect sizes of $f = .13$ or larger.

Figure 3
Study 3B: Female and Male Participants' Legitimacy Judgments of Female and Male Discrimination as a Function of Current Female Discrimination Beliefs



Note. Upper panel: Conditional two-way interaction between discrimination and participant gender as a function of beliefs about the current prevalence of gender discrimination against women. Lower panel: Female and male participants' legitimacy ratings of female and male discrimination for participants with higher (1 *SD* above the mean) and lower (1 *SD* below the mean) beliefs about the current prevalence of gender discrimination against women.

General Discussion

Across six experiments, we examined people's legitimacy judgments of organizational decisions discriminating against individual workers based on gender. The results suggest that (a) both women and men judge organizational decisions that discriminate against individual male workers as more legitimate than comparable decisions discriminating against individual female workers and that (b) women (vs. men) have a stronger reaction regarding the gender of the individual worker who is discriminated against. Each of these findings provides several implications.

Legitimacy Judgments of Organizational Decisions Involving Gender Discrimination

We document that third-party observers judge organizational decisions that discriminate against individual male workers as more legitimate than comparable decisions discriminating against individual female workers. This finding provides empirical support

for the theoretical argument that unfavorable treatment of members of an advantaged group, in this case, male workers, can be justified when it is practiced on behalf of a disadvantaged social group (Goldman, 2015; Noon, 2010), in this case, female workers (Cassells & Duncan, 2020; England et al., 2020; International Labour Organization, 2019). Therefore, people may perceive organizational decisions favoring individual female workers to compensate women in general for being collectively disadvantaged and underrepresented in the labor market.

Our work thus offers a more nuanced understanding of people's justice beliefs. Research in social psychology suggests that justice for individuals can be achieved by either compensating the individual victim of injustice or punishing the individual perpetrator of injustice (Darley & Pittman, 2003; Mullen & Okimoto, 2015; van Prooijen, 2010). In our studies, individual female and male workers act as surrogates for a collectively disadvantaged (women) and advantaged (men) social group. Our results thus suggest that collective justice concerns—concerned with equality between social groups (Brickman et al., 1981; Jost & Azzi, 1996; Wenzel, 2004)—affect peoples'

legitimacy judgments of decisions about individuals: To the extent that people believe that one social group is collectively disadvantaged to the advantage of another social group, they will legitimize instances of discrimination which compensate an individual who acts as a surrogate for the collectively disadvantaged social group. Concurrently, people legitimize the punishment of an individual who stands in as a surrogate for the advantaged social group. Our work thus advances the justice literature by demonstrating that people tend to legitimize injustice when it occurs on an *individual* level due to their beliefs regarding injustice on the *collective* level.

These findings should inform the current debate about affirmative action programs (such as legal quotas), which seek to increase the representation of women in the upper echelons of business and politics (Balafoutas & Sutter, 2012; Crosby et al., 2006; Sojo et al., 2016). Such programs are often criticized for promoting reverse discrimination (Hurtado & Yaffee-Bellany, 2020; Lynch, 1989; Mulvaney, 2020), and aversion toward their implementation continues to be strong among organizations (Wiersema & Mors, 2016). Our research advances theoretical knowledge that may help to elucidate both resistance against and support for affirmative action programs. The finding that men also judge organizational decisions discriminating against individual male (vs. female) workers as more legitimate appears pertinent in this regard, especially considering existing research indicating that members of a majority group tend to perceive affirmative action policies as unfair (Haley & Sidanius, 2006; Shteynberg et al., 2011).

Notably, this finding also contributes to the ample body of research on ingroup favoritism, demonstrating that people have a natural tendency to favor ingroup individuals over outgroup individuals (Balliet et al., 2014; Crocker & Schwartz, 1985; Dasgupta, 2004; Hewstone et al., 2002; Turner et al., 1983). The results reported herein suggest that in the context of workplace gender discrimination, people belonging to advantaged social groups (men) can be mindful of a disadvantaged social group's (women's) situation and even favor outgroup individuals (female workers) over ingroup individuals (male workers).

Discrepancy Between Women's and Men's Legitimacy Judgments

We find that, compared to men, women judge organizational decisions discriminating against an individual male worker as more legitimate and decisions that discriminate against an individual female worker as less so. We demonstrate that this discrepancy between women's and men's legitimacy judgments occurs because women, more than men, consider the overall treatment of women and men in the labor market when judging the legitimacy of organizational decisions which display gender discrimination against individual workers. Thus, people's legitimacy judgments of such decisions depend on how heavily they weigh the collective treatment of the individuals in question. While existing empirical research suggests that people from minority (vs. majority) groups are more likely to prefer an equal distribution of resources between subgroups in a society (Azzi, 1992; Gale & Staerklé, 2019), our work thus demonstrates that people's group membership also affects their fairness judgments regarding the distribution of resources between individuals.

These novel findings contribute to the literature on motivated reasoning by imparting a deeper understanding of intergroup

relations (Jetten et al., 2000; Spears et al., 2001; Tajfel, 1970). The findings suggest that women justify their predominant legitimacy judgments of organizational decisions discriminating against male (vs. female) workers by considering the general adverse treatment of women in the labor market rather than the specific treatment of individuals. In other words, when judging the legitimacy of organizational decisions discriminating against individuals, members of the disadvantaged social group (women) tend to justify favoring the ingroup member (female worker) over the outgroup member (male worker) by considering how the ingroup is collectively treated. Existing work in economics on motivated reasoning suggests people adopt judgments that best serve their individual interests (Babcock et al., 1995; Rodriguez-Lara & Moreno-Garrido, 2012); in contrast, our findings suggest that people also adopt judgments that best serve their ingroup as a whole.

These insights could potentially equip policymakers and organizations with a better understanding of people's polarized opinions regarding gender discrimination at the workplace (Jenichen, 2018; Pew Research, 2020), thus enabling them to better anticipate the outcome of their interventions. If the goal is to assimilate women's and men's legitimacy judgments, interventions may nudge men to more strongly consider the collective situation of female and male workers in the labor market. If the goal is to make people judge any instance of workplace gender discrimination as more illegitimate than documented in our results, interventions should nudge both women and men to more strongly consider the individual situation of the worker who is discriminated against.

Relatedly, our findings resonate with recent research demonstrating that reminding people about past discrimination against women decreases support for employment equity policies among men by making current discrimination against women less salient (Hideg & Wilson, 2020). We find that the differences in people's legitimacy judgments of organizational decisions discriminating against female (vs. male) workers depend on the amount of credence they give to the belief that women are currently discriminated against in the labor market. We do not find evidence that the observed differences in legitimacy judgments are affected by people's beliefs about the extent of the discrimination which women have been subjected to in the *past*. In point of fact, without appropriate interventions, these judgments may only assimilate when people believe that women and men are indeed currently treated equally in the labor market.

Limitations and Future Research

This study documents how third-party observers react to organizational decisions that discriminate against individual workers based on their gender. Specifically, we focused our research on investigating how (il)legitimate people judge specific organizational decisions that disadvantage (advantage) individual workers from a majority (minority) group based on their group membership (i.e., their gender). Our experiments focused on providing participants with situations in which individual workers are discriminated against based on their gender without informing participants about the organization's motivation behind this decision. Future research may explore whether giving participants a reason for the gender-biased organizational decision affects their legitimacy judgments of said decision. For example, explicitly informing participants that an organization chooses to hire a female applicant over a male applicant to compensate the individual female applicant for the currently

disadvantaged situation of women in the labor market might lead both male and female observers to judge this decision as more legitimate. Alternatively, explicitly informing participants that an organization chooses to hire a female applicant over a male applicant to punish the individual male applicant for the currently disadvantaged situation of women in the labor market might lead both male and female observers to judge this decision as less legitimate.

Relatedly, we have investigated two moderators that modulate the discrepancy between women's and men's legitimacy judgments of organizational decisions that discriminate female (vs. male) workers: the representation of female workers in an industry (Study 3A) and people's general beliefs about the prevalence of gender discrimination against female workers (Study 3B). While we believe that the results of Studies 3A and 3B provide converging evidence for our argument that female participants give more consideration than male participants to the general treatment of women (relative to men) in the labor market when judging the legitimacy of organizational decisions involving gender discrimination, future research may investigate additional moderators. For example, women's and men's legitimacy judgments should assimilate when men are instructed to think about the current situation of women in the labor market before judging the legitimacy of organizational decisions involving gender discrimination. The respective results may yield additional insights for policymakers on how to narrow the prevailing gap between women's and men's conceptions of workplace gender discrimination.

Conclusion

According to the universal principle of equality, people should not be treated differently just because they belong to a certain social group, such as being male or female. Yet, the number of people witnessing or experiencing unequal treatment of workers based on gender remains high around the globe. Policymakers, corporate leaders, and scientists intensively discuss the economic and societal causes and consequences of workplace gender discrimination. Our research contributes to this often-polarized discourse by investigating how third-party observers react to organizational decisions that discriminate against individual workers based on gender. We document that people's legitimacy judgments of organizational decisions involving gender discrimination against individual workers are affected by the gender of the individual worker being discriminated against and the gender of the person judging the legitimacy of the discriminating decision. In sum, our findings suggest that people legitimize injustice on the individual level through beliefs of injustice on the collective level.

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