Making Sense of Misfortune: Cultural Schemas, Victim Redefinition, and the Perpetuation of Stereotypes

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Abstract

One of the most striking features of stereotypes is their extreme durability. This study focuses on the role played by cultural schemas and perceptions of low-status others’ adversities in stereotype perpetuation. Social psychological theories of legitimacy and justice point to the role of stereotypes as one means through which individuals make sense of others’ undeserved misfortunes by redefining the victim. This study connects this work with insights from cognitive cultural sociology to propose that stereotypes act as cultural schemas used to justify others’ experiences of adversity. Consistent with this hypothesis, findings from a cultural transmission experiment show that participants include more negative stereotype-consistent content when retelling narratives with undeserved negative outcomes than with positive outcomes. Cognitive cultural sociology and the cultural transmission methodology offer tools for understanding victim redefinition processes, with important implications for the reproduction of stereotype bias and social inequalities.

Keywords

stereotypes, cultural schemas, cultural transmission

One of the most striking features of stereotypes is their extreme durability. Research has found that negative stereotypes are particularly insidious because of their ability to reproduce the inequalities they reflect (Ridgeway and Balkwell 1997; Kashima and Yeung 2010; Ridgeway 2011). This study focuses on the role played by cultural schemas (DiMaggio 1997) and third-person perceptions of adversity in the reproduction of negative stereotypes. Specifically, I examine whether individuals, in an effort to deal with the cognitive dissonance produced by observations of undeserved misfortune (Lerner and Miller 1978), use negative cultural stereotypes to cognitively justify adversities by redefining the victim.

Research in social psychology on legitimacy and justice has found that individuals often equate what is with what is right (Cook 1975; Ridgeway and Berger 1986; Ridgeway 2000; Johnson, Dowd, and Ridgeway 2006). This literature suggests...
that negative attributions and stereotypes act as one tool that individuals use to make sense of others’ undeserved misfortunes, in order to maintain a belief in the justness and legitimacy of the current social order (Hegtvedt and Johnson 2000; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004; Hafer and Bègue 2005).

Insufficient attention has been paid, however, to the cultural and cognitive processes involved in these justifications (Cook and Hegtvedt 1983; Hegtvedt, Clay-Warner, and Johnson 2003). I propose that these issues can be elaborated with insights from cognitive cultural sociology’s work on schemas (DiMaggio 1997; Lizardo and Strand 2010). Schemas—defined as mental “representations of knowledge and information processing mechanisms . . . which entail images of objects and the relations among them” (DiMaggio 1997:269)—govern the automatic cognitive and affective judgments that facilitate everyday actions and decision making (Bargh and Williams 2006; Vaisey 2009). Stereotypes can be seen as a type of schema, grounded in associations learned through experience (Strauss and Quinn 1997).

Here, I connect these insights from work on legitimacy and justice in social psychology and work on schemas in cognitive cultural sociology to examine one mechanism through which social inequalities may be inadvertently reproduced. Specifically, I propose that negative stereotype–based schemas provide a readily available resource to justify low-status others’ adversities in the victim redefinition process. Concretely, in the context of communication, this leads to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes.

I test this proposition using a cultural transmission experiment, in which short narratives are shared along communication chains (similar to a children’s game of “telephone”). Consistent with this reasoning, I find that individuals use more negative stereotype-consistent content when retelling narratives with undeserved negative outcomes than they do when retelling narratives with positive outcomes. I conclude with a discussion of the role played by cultural schemas and perceptions of misfortune in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes.

THEORY AND BACKGROUND

Victim Redefinition Processes: Understanding Responses to Others’ Adversity

In traditional distributive justice theory, individuals judge an outcome’s justness by comparing relative inputs contributed to outputs or outcomes received by those involved. When inputs are disproportionate to outcomes, the theory predicts that actors are driven by a sense of cognitive dissonance to act to restore a sense of justice (Adams 1962, 1963; Homans 1974; Hegtvedt 2006; Hegtvedt and Scheuerman 2010). Pervasive social inequalities, however, suggest that individuals rarely react with the sort of actions that the theory predicts. This is perhaps because third parties are both least motivated and least able to take action (Walster, Walster, and Berscheid 1978). Observers may be more likely to use cognitive rather than behavioral responses when confronted with others’ adversity. In what follows, I briefly describe three literatures that have examined victim redefinition processes, one form of cognitive response to others’ misfortunes.

Research within the distributive justice tradition by Hegtvedt and Johnson (2000; Hegtvedt et al. 2003) draws connections between work on legitimation processes (e.g., Ridgeway and Berger 1986; Berger et al. 1998), Fiske and Taylor’s (1991) work on social perceptions, and Adams’s (1963, 1965) hypotheses regarding the role of psychological distortion in justice judgments. The authors propose that to justify observed injustice, individuals may apply attributions about
an actor’s social status to redefine the value of the actor’s contributions or the proximate causes of his or her unwarranted outcome. Hegtvedt and Johnson contended that this is most likely when inequitable distributions of outcomes are socially legitimized, making a behavioral response socially impossible or undesirable (Hegtvedt and Johnson 2000; Hegtvedt et al. 2003; Hegtvedt 2005). Empirical work in this vein, however, has focused primarily on the role of collective processes (legitimation, shared group identity, affective group ties) in shaping reactions to observed injustice (Hegtvedt, Johnson, and Ganem 2008; Hegtvedt and Johnson 2009; Hegtvedt et al. 2009). This leaves the roles played by cognitive cultural processes relatively unexplored.

Although Hegtvedt and Johnson’s work explores the victim redefinition process in the context of justice judgments, evidence from two theories outside the distributive justice paradigm indicates that victim redefinition can also be a response to more general perceptions of inequality and adversity. Both system justification theory (Jost and Banaji 1994; Jost et al. 2004) and belief in a just world theory (Lerner and Miller 1978; Hafer and Bègue 2005) emphasize that individuals are motivated to justify observed misfortunes to maintain a belief in the legitimacy of their social system. In each case, this is done to avoid the mental distress associated with the threat of uncertainty posed by an illegitimate, unjust system (Lerner and Miller 1978; Jost and Hunyady 2002). This research suggests that stereotypes may allow individuals to rationalize seemingly inescapable group-level inequalities by providing an explanation for “the poverty and powerlessness of some groups and the success of others in ways that make these differences seem legitimate and even natural” (Jost and Banaji 1994:10; Kay and Jost 2003; Jost et al. 2004).

Although this work, and that of Hegtvedt and Johnson, has established that individuals participate in victim redefinition, less work has been undertaken to understand how victim redefinition processes are linked to the use and perpetuation of stereotypes. With this study, I address this question, drawing on insights from cognitive cultural sociology to better understand the role of victim redefinition in the perpetuation of stereotypes.

**Legitimation and Victim Redefinition: Insights from Cultural Sociology**

The above work points to legitimation processes as key to understanding victim redefinition, both as inhibitors of behavioral response to injustices (Hegtvedt and Johnson 2000) and as motivators of cognitive responses (Lerner and Miller 1978; Jost and Banaji 1994). At the basis of these legitimation processes is widely shared cultural knowledge (Berger, Conner, and Fisek 1974; Ridgeway and Berger 1986; Berger et al. 1998). From this shared knowledge, individuals derive status-based expectations about what sort of behavior they can anticipate from others and what sort of treatment those others should receive. The above literature suggests that this may serve as fodder for the victim redefinition process.

To better understand how such shared cultural knowledge facilitates victim redefinition and perpetuates legitimating stereotypes, I turn to recent insights from cognitive cultural sociology regarding schemas (Vaisey 2009, 2010; Vaisey and Lizardo 2010; Lizardo and Strand 2010). Drawing on cognitive anthropology’s connectionist models of schemas (D’Andrade 1992, 1995; Strauss and Quinn 1997) in concert with Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of habitus, this field defines schemas as the “unconscious networks of neural associations that facilitate perception, interpretation, and action” (Vaisey
Although schemas may be idiosyncratic to individuals, frequently they are shared by members of a social system because of common experiences and thus may be thought of as an important form of shared cultural knowledge.

Schemas are composed of networks of conceptual units connected by weighted associations. These weights are developed and adjusted as a result of experience and provide a probabilistic guide to interpret experience, shape expectations, and improve appropriate action in response to situational demands (Strauss and Quinn 1997; Lizardo and Strand 2010). This occurs as perceiving one component of a schematic network leads to the activation of those components that most closely surround it within the network (Bargh and Chartrand 1999; Bargh and Williams 2006). For example, perceiving a person as a member of a social group—such as the poor—activates other information associated with that group (stereotypes, traits, characteristics, attitudes, behaviors), which influences the perceiver’s behavior and judgments—for instance, the perceiver’s judgment of whether the perceived individual should be blamed for his or her misfortune (Ferguson and Bargh 2004).

Schemas are efficient in that they free up immense amounts of cognitive space by automatizing recurrent perceptual and evaluative processes and facilitating behavioral responses. Efficiency, however, should not be confused with accuracy. Schematic associations, once established, tend to be resistant to change (Strauss and Quinn 1997). The dual role of schemas in facilitating both perception of and response to stimuli becomes problematic when an actor encounters information that is ambiguous, incomplete, or incongruent with internalized expectations and associations drawn from past experiences (Ferguson and Bargh 2004; Martin 2009; Lizardo and Strand 2010). In such situations, the actor is likely to continue to draw interpretive inferences from outmoded or otherwise objectively ill-suited schemas, resulting in misjudgments.

I argue that these schema-based misjudgments are the lens through which victim redefinition occurs. Research in the legitimacy and justice tradition has shown that individuals are (1) averse to the dissonance produced by observed misfortune (Hafer and Bégue 2005), (2) likely to use the least costly means possible to restore a sense of justice and reduce dissonance (Adams 1965; Hegtvedt, Thompson, and Cook 1993), and (3) prone to use stereotypes as one such means to rationalize inequalities and injustices (Kay and Jost 2003). Given these conditions, I hypothesize that negative stereotype–based schemas, as internalized habits of interpretation, allow individuals to efficiently justify others’ experience of adversity. I propose that this occurs as individuals unconsciously rely on negative stereotype–based schemas to make sense of missing or ambiguous information in such a way that justifies others’ misfortunes, particularly when the other is a member of a low-status group.

**THE CURRENT RESEARCH**

**Overview and Hypotheses**

To test the proposed link between victim redefinition, schemas, and stereotype perpetuation, I use a cultural transmission experiment. In these studies, short narratives are passed through chains of four or five individuals who are asked to read and then to reproduce the narratives (similar to a children’s game of “telephone”). Generally, these narratives detail the actions of a protagonist who is described as a member of a stereotyped group, using a mixture of stereotype-consistent and stereotype-inconsistent information. By studying patterns in the information transmitted in these serially reproduced narratives, researchers have gained...
better understanding of the conditions under which stereotype-consistent information is perpetuated (Lyons and Kashima 2003; Clark and Kashima 2007; Kashima and Yeung 2010). The cultural transmission literature, however, has yet to examine the connection between stereotype-bias and victim redefinition processes.

In the current study, I use an experimental design consistent with the traditional cultural transmission paradigm and add a manipulation of the need to redefine the victim through the presence or absence of undeserved misfortune. The study narrative centers on a protagonist who is initially described as a member of a stereotyped group, in order to evoke relevant stereotypes. I expect that, as with previous studies, ambiguity will be introduced into participants’ reproduced narratives as material is lost between each link. In turn, this ambiguity should provide subsequent participants with ample opportunity to “fill in” the missing material.

Given findings from cultural transmission research (Kashima 2000; Mesoudi and Whiten 2008), I expect to find that this “filling in” will lead individuals in both conditions to include more stereotype-consistent than stereotype-inconsistent information in their retold narratives. If, however—as is hypothesized here—individuals are using stereotype-consistent information to justify the experience of adversity by low-status others, then I expect that individuals who are asked to read and reproduce a narrative in which the protagonist is a victim of misfortune will include relatively more stereotype-consistent information in their reproduced accounts.

**Participants and Setting**

Although studies in the cultural transmission tradition have been conducted primarily within a lab setting, Kashima and Yeung (2010:59) argued that the methodology should be applicable in any case in which narratives “can be reproduced in interpersonally transmissible form,” including electronic text. I conducted this study using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a crowd-sourcing Web site that has been increasingly adopted by social scientists as a venue for recruiting participants. The site allows researchers to connect with individuals who are interested in completing short research tasks and tends to capture more demographically diverse samples compared with the traditional university-based lab setting (Paolacci, Chandler, and Ipeirotis 2010; Horton, Rand, and Zeckhauser 2011). MTurk does not provide a representative sample of any population, however.

**Study Narrative Description and Experimental Conditions**

The protagonist of this study’s narrative is Eric, a 28-year-old textile mill worker faced with losing his job. He is described as a blue-collar, lower class worker, evoking relevant stereotypes and schematic associations. Each condition’s narrative included 10 stereotype-consistent and 10 stereotype-inconsistent statements, spread throughout its 47 original statements.1 (The

1I constructed the narrative using the framework of the six component parts used traditionally in cultural transmission narratives (Kashima and Yeung 2010). These include (1) an introduction (used to initially describe the narrative’s subject and introduce the stereotype of interest), (2) an initiating event (the appearance of a problem that requires resolution by the narrative’s subject, here Eric’s job loss), (3) an initial or internal response (the subject’s first reaction to this), (4) an attempt (the subject’s efforts to resolve the problem), (5) some consequences (some ensuing consequences of the attempt), and (6) a conclusion (a final resolution and some concluding statements). I balanced stereotype-consistent and stereotype-inconsistent statements throughout the final five of these component parts. I pretested the narratives’ content with the members of one undergraduate and three graduate seminars.
Appendix contains the study narrative, with stereotype-consistent and stereotype-inconsistent statements and statements that differ by condition annotated.

I randomly assigned each participant to a transmission chain in one of two experimental conditions. In one condition, participants read and retold a narrative in which Eric experiences financial adversity following the loss of his job (the negative outcome condition); participants in the second condition did the same for a narrative in which Eric experiences no financial adversity (the positive outcome condition). Because the conditions share a core narrative, in each case Eric performs the same actions in response to his job loss. He considers either applying for job retraining or applying for unemployment until he can find another job that will not require retraining. He applies for both and is eventually accepted into a job certification program. The only differences between the conditions are (1) whether Eric is offered retraining funds and is thus (2) able (or not able) to attend the retraining program and obtain employment. In both cases, Eric is expending the same amount of effort but is experiencing different outcomes, either becoming a victim of adversity or not.

Procedure

Participants were told that they would be given 10 minutes to read though the story twice and would be expected to reproduce it later in the experiment to be read by the next participant in their chain. They were prompted to imagine how they might retell the story to a friend or acquaintance in conversation. Once the 10 minutes had elapsed, participants were redirected to a distracter task in which they were given 5 minutes to use a pool of 10 letters to create as many word combinations as possible. I included this distracter task to remove the narrative from the participants’ working memories and prevent simple memorization.

Following the distracter task, participants were asked to reproduce the stories they read. Participants were reminded that these reproductions would be used for the next participant in the chain and were again encouraged to consider how they might retell the story to a friend or acquaintance. Fifteen minutes were allotted for the retelling task. Following the retelling step, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire and a short debriefing interview (including a manipulation check). I repeated this procedure for each of the four participants in each chain; individuals were unaware of their relative position in the chain.2

Key Outcome Variables and Narrative Coding Process

The primary outcome variables in this study are counts of total, stereotype-consistent, and stereotype-inconsistent statements maintained, added, and transmitted (number maintained + number added) in participants’ reproduced narratives. I consider these changes in context of the chain, to assess the cumulative effects of victim redefinition on stereotype perpetuation, as information is lost and ambiguity increased at each link of the chain. To measure these changes, each statement of each participant’s reproduced narrative was coded into one of five categories: maintained, lost, added

2Throughout the experiment, I required participants to complete a number of active participation checks. I include only participants who successfully completed these in the final analysis. These checks included multiple-choice questions that required the participant to read the question fully to answer correctly, minimum times for reading and retelling the narrative, and minimum narrative lengths on the basis of pretesting. The data from 37 participants were excluded in this way.
stereotype-consistent, added stereotype-inconsistent, or added-stereotype-neutral.

Coding proceeded in two stages. In the first, two independent coders identified each statement of each participant’s narrative as maintained, lost or added. Coders were blind to the study’s research question and hypotheses. They coded statements as maintained if the main idea or gist conveyed by the original statement was present. When no content of an original statement was present, they coded the statement as lost. They coded novel information included in the narratives as added. After independently coding, coders discussed and resolved any discrepancies and disagreements. Prior to discussion, the coders were able to achieve an acceptable level of intercoder reliability, with a Cronbach’s $\alpha$ of .89 and Cohen’s $\kappa$ of .81.3

In the second stage of assessment, coders designated statements initially identified as added as being either stereotype-consistent, stereotype-inconsistent, or neither. In this stage, coders assigned a statement to a category only when they both could agree on a code. For this round of coding, I necessarily informed the coders of the study’s focus on blue-collar, lower- or working-class stereotypes. They were still blind, however, to the study’s specific hypotheses regarding expected differences between conditions.

**Analytical Strategy**

I analyzed data using multilevel Poisson models with individuals (level 1) nested within chains (level 2) with random effects at the chain level. I selected this model given the present study’s multilevel unit of analysis, which violates the single-level Poisson model’s independence of observations assumption. The multilevel Poisson model relaxes this assumption, allowing a more accurate estimation of standard errors (Luke 2004).

The primary analyses proceed in two steps. I estimated models for the number of statements maintained by type: stereotype-consistent, stereotype-inconsistent, and total. After this, I estimated additional models for statements transmitted (number maintained + number added) by type. This procedure resulted in six separate models, with one for each outcome variable.4 In all models, the outcome variables of interest are counts of statements, and the key predictor is experimental condition. Additionally, I include a set of dummy variables for link position (with link 1 omitted as a reference category) to account for relative position within the transmission chain. I also include controls for gender, race, education, political party, unemployment status, and income, and check for interactions with the experimental manipulation.

**RESULTS**

**Participant Description**

The final study uses 35 transmission chains of 4 individuals each ($n = 140$). I randomly assigned participants to a transmission chain within one of two experimental conditions, resulting in 15 chains in the positive outcome condition ($n = 60$) and 20 chains in the negative outcome condition ($n = 80$). Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics by condition. All participants were current U.S. residents (indicated by a U.S. mailing address on record with Amazon Mechanical Turk [MTurk]), although 6 were born outside

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3I used a Cohen’s $\kappa$ score as a more conservative measure of reliability, as it accounts for agreement by chance between coders and only “gives credit” for agreement beyond this (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002).

4I present analyses separately for statements maintained and statements transmitted because the added statements were coded in a separate step from maintained statements.
Table 1. Description of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Positive Outcome Condition</th>
<th>Negative Outcome Condition</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income &lt; $20,000</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign born</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (years)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Manipulation Check Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Positive Outcome Condition</th>
<th>Negative Outcome Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Just</td>
<td>Just 55 (91.67%)</td>
<td>Just 29 (36.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unjust</td>
<td>Unjust 1 (1.67%)</td>
<td>Unjust 31 (38.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>Neither 4 (6.67%)</td>
<td>Neither 20 (25.00%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the United States. Demographically, the final sample was 65 percent female, 78 percent white, and 51 percent college educated. One fifth of respondents reported household incomes below $20,000, and 13 percent reported being unemployed. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 66 years, with an average age of 38. With regard to political affiliation, the sample on the whole tended to lean Democratic (49 percent vs. 17 percent Republican). Distributions of demographic characteristics are largely similar for each condition.

**Manipulation Check**

Table 2 presents results from the postexperimental manipulation check. I asked participants, “Would you describe the outcome of the story for the main character as just or unjust? Why?” to determine whether they identified Eric as victimized by undeserved adversity. For the purposes of analysis, I quantitatively coded the participants’ open-ended responses. Only when a participant specifically stated the outcome was exclusively just or unjust did I code his or her response into either of the respective categories. I coded participants who called the story neither just nor unjust, called the story both just and unjust, or answered in an otherwise ambiguous manner into the third “neither just nor unjust” category.

Although most participants in the positive outcome condition identified their story’s outcome as just, participants in the negative outcome condition were divided between the three possible categories. Many participants in the negative outcome condition even stated that it was Eric’s own fault that he was unable to be retrained and obtain employment, because he was lazy or lacked motivation. This sort of justification, however, is not unexpected given the hypothesized process of victim redefinition. Supplementary sensitivity analyses as well as participant responses from the debriefing interview, both of which are presented below, further illustrate this redefinition process and its ramifications for participants’ perceptions of the protagonist.

**Statements Maintained from the Original Narratives**

Descriptive statistics for the proportion of stereotype-consistent and stereotype-inconsistent statements maintained are displayed in Figure 1 as average proportions of statements maintained by link
Consistent with the hypothesis of this study, participants in the negative outcome condition maintained more stereotype-consistent statements on average than those in the positive outcome condition. Participants did not significantly differ by condition on the proportion of stereotype-inconsistent statements maintained.

Table 3 presents results from Poisson regressions for total number of statements maintained, stereotype-consistent statements maintained, and stereotype-inconsistent statements maintained, controlling for relative position within the transmission chain. Results from the models for total number of statements maintained and number of stereotype-inconsistent statements maintained show no significant difference by experimental condition, indicating that these are not influenced by the sort of outcome experienced by the protagonist.

In contrast, the number of stereotype-consistent statements maintained is significantly affected by experimental condition. By exponentiating the coefficient for negative outcome condition from the models, we can estimate the relative probability of maintaining stereotype-consistent statements in the negative outcome condition compared to the positive outcome condition.
model predicting the number of stereotype-consistent statements maintained, we see, consistent with my hypothesis, that individuals in the negative outcome condition maintained 1.5 times as many stereotype-consistent statements as those in the positive outcome condition.

**Total Statements Transmitted**

Figure 2 presents descriptive statistics for the average proportion of stereotype-consistent and stereotype-inconsistent statements transmitted by link position and condition. (Recall that statements transmitted includes maintained plus added statements.) As with statements maintained, individuals in the negative outcome condition included more stereotype-consistent statements on average compared with individuals in the positive outcome condition.

Although participants in both conditions maintained similar proportions of stereotype-inconsistent statements, participants in the positive outcome condition on average transmitted more stereotype-inconsistent statements compared with individuals in the negative outcome condition. Analyses not shown here found that this was driven by positive outcome condition participants’ propensity to add significantly more stereotype-inconsistent statements (1.6 times as many). This would seem to indicate that individuals add stereotype-inconsistent material to make sense of positive outcomes, much in the same way that they use stereotype-consistent information to make sense of negative outcomes. As shown below, however, participants in each condition did not significantly differ in the total amount of stereotype-inconsistent statements transmitted.

Table 4 presents results from models for total number of statements transmitted, stereotype-consistent statements transmitted, and stereotype-inconsistent statements transmitted, controlling for relative position within the transmission chain.

Results for statements transmitted are generally similar to those for total number of statements maintained. Consistent with my hypothesis, I find that participants in

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5 In a separate analysis of added statements, I found (as expected) that participants in the negative outcome condition add significantly more stereotype-consistent statements than those in the positive outcome condition (1.5 times as many).
the negative outcome condition tend to include significantly more stereotype-consistent statements than those in the positive outcome condition. By exponentiating the coefficient for negative outcome condition in the model predicting stereotype-consistent statements transmitted, we see that participants who were asked to read and reproduce a narrative in which a low-status protagonist is disadvantaged by adversity included 1.5 times as many stereotype-consistent statements in their reproduced narratives as those asked to do the same for a narrative in which the same protagonist experienced a positive outcome.

To illustrate what this difference might mean in practice, Figure 3 presents predicted counts for stereotype-consistent statements transmitted by condition and link. The graph shows that the absolute number of stereotype-consistent statements likely to be included in either condition decreases over the course of the transmission chain, as information is lost between each link. Even as this

**Table 4. Poisson Regressions for Statements Transmitted by Type**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Stereotype Inconsistent</th>
<th>Stereotype Consistent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative outcome condition</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>–0.173</td>
<td>0.414***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.075)</td>
<td>(0.109)</td>
<td>(0.119)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link 2</td>
<td>–0.328***</td>
<td>–0.303**</td>
<td>–0.398***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.049)</td>
<td>(0.117)</td>
<td>(0.110)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link 3</td>
<td>–0.586***</td>
<td>–0.705***</td>
<td>–0.764***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.054)</td>
<td>(0.133)</td>
<td>(0.124)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link 4</td>
<td>–0.810***</td>
<td>–0.899***</td>
<td>–0.936***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.058)</td>
<td>(0.142)</td>
<td>(0.132)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.283***</td>
<td>1.687***</td>
<td>1.506***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.062)</td>
<td>(0.100)</td>
<td>(0.109)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*n* = 140

**Note**: Standard errors are presented in parentheses. *p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001

**Figure 3. Predicted Counts of Stereotype-Consistent Statements Transmitted**
information is being lost, however, participants in the negative outcome condition are consistently likely to include more stereotype-consistent statements than those in the positive outcome condition.

I estimated a number of additional models to test for interaction of the main effect with various social characteristics of the participants for each of the outcome variables. Results from these regressions also showed no significant interactions with condition for the maintenance or transmission of stereotype-consistent statements, stereotype-inconsistent statements, or total narrative length. The lack of interaction effects with experimental condition in these models, combined with the stability of the experimental effect between models, provides strong evidence that participants are including higher levels of stereotype-consistent information in response to the low-status protagonists’ observed misfortune, in line with the hypothesized process of victim redefinition. It also shows that the effects observed are quite general, over very different types of participants.

**ADDITIONAL ANALYSES: UNPACKING VICTIM REDEFINITION PROCESSES**

**Variation in Manipulation Check in the Negative Outcome Condition**

I conducted a number of additional sensitivity analyses to explore variation in the manipulation check variable within the negative outcome condition. Results from these analyses shed light on potential mechanisms involved in the proposed victim redefinition process, while pointing to areas ripe for further research.7

In the first set of analyses, I explored the relationship between the number of stereotype-consistent statements added and participants’ narrative outcome assessments, using a multilevel logit model.8 I found that for each stereotype-consistent statement added, participants in the negative outcome condition had 1.5 times greater the odds (β = 0.419, p < .05) of stating that the narrative’s outcome was just (rather than unjust or neither just nor unjust). The causal direction of this relationship is unclear: individuals could be adding stereotype-consistent statements to justify Eric’s outcome or could believe the outcome is just because they have added more stereotype-consistent statements. Either case, however, would indicate that individuals are (successfully) using stereotype consistent information to redefine Eric as deserving his misfortune.

A second set of analyses examined the relationship between the participants’ outcome assessments and the use of justificatory “victim-blame” and “that’s life” explanations in participants’

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7Because of space constraints, I do not present the analyses described in this section here. They are available from the author on request.

8Additional analyses found no effects for stereotype-consistent or stereotype-inconsistent statements maintained or stereotype-inconsistent statements added on participants’ outcome assessments. I also found no significant effects for the link 1 participants’ manipulation check response on any of these measures or the manipulation check responses of subsequent participants. This, however, should not be taken as absolute evidence against the operation of endorsement effects (Hegtvedt and Johnson 2000). Although these analyses assume that link 1 participants’ assessments of the outcome would be implicitly conveyed in narrative content transmitted, an explicit statement of the previous participant’s assessment to the subsequent participant may have been more influential.
I conducted these analyses using multilevel logit models regressing explanation type on outcome assessment. Consistent with research on belief in a just world theory (Hafer and Bègue 2005), participants who stated that the outcome experienced by Eric was just were more likely to use victim-blaming justifications ($\beta = 2.48$, $p < .01$). Participants who were conflicted about the outcome (those who said that Eric’s outcome was neither just nor unjust or both just and unjust) instead tended to favor “that’s just life” or “life is unfair” justifications ($\beta = 1.93$, $p < .05$).

I conducted a final set of analyses related to variation in the manipulation check to discover the demographic features characteristic of participants who did not justify Eric’s negative outcome: those who were willing to call the narrative’s outcome unjust. Individuals who shared characteristics with the narratives’ subject—men, younger participants, and participants without a college education—were significantly more likely to state that the narrative’s outcome was “unjust.” This indicates that shared group identity could be an important moderator of victim redefinition processes. Future research is needed to unpack this relationship.

Postexperimental Descriptions

Descriptions of the main character provided by the participants further illustrate the trend for increased stereotype bias in the negative outcome condition and its role in victim redefinition processes. As a part of the debriefing process, participants were asked to provide a short description of the story’s main character. Although the only differences between the narratives used for each condition were (1) whether Eric received funds that (2) allowed him to attend the retraining program and obtain employment, participants in each condition seemed to be describing two qualitatively different individuals. Participants in the negative outcome condition described Eric as being “lazy,” “irresponsible,” and generally “unmotivated”; in contrast, those assigned to the positive outcome condition used descriptors such as “responsible,” “hardworking,” and “persistent.” Examples of these descriptions are shown in Table 5.

From these examples, we see that even though Eric performed the same actions in each of the original narratives prior to their conclusions, through the process of victim redefinition, he becomes someone who is on one hand “lazy, complacent, and not very intelligent” and on the other “resilient, astute, and goes after what he wants despite personal obstacles” (participant responses from debriefing interviews). In either case, participants selectively emphasize certain actions and attributes to redefine Eric (a low-status individual) as someone who deserves the outcome he received. As hypothesized, stereotype-consistent information facilitates this process, providing a readily available justification for the outcome experienced by the main character.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study is to better understand the role played by cultural schemas in shaping perceptions of low-status others’ misfortunes and perpetuat-

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9I coded explanations into the victim-blame category if the participant described Eric’s job loss or unemployment as being Eric’s own fault (due either to a character flaw or to a failure to take advantage of opportunities) and into the that’s-life category if the participant used explanations for Eric’s outcome such as “that’s life,” “life’s like that,” “life’s unfair,” or “things happen.”

10The exact question wording was “How would you describe the main character of the story you were asked to read and retell?”
ing negative stereotypes. Combining insights from work on legitimacy, justice, and cognitive cultural sociology, I hypothesized that negative stereotypes act as a readily available cultural resource, used by individuals to justify low-status others’ experience of adversity.

By examining the cultural and cognitive processes involved in the translation of observations of misfortune into attributions of character flaw and ineptitude, this study extends the current literature on victim redefinition processes as well as that related to schema use in cognitive cultural sociology. First, results indicate that individuals often do participate in victim redefinition in response to observations of low-status others’ adversities. This process involves the use of negative stereotypes associated with that low status. Additionally, by exploring victim redefinition as a response to observation of low-status others’ undeserved misfortune—rather than within the confines of response to injustice which carries a narrower definition (Hegtvedt 2006)—the current research shows that victim redefinition is likely a more general social psychological phenomenon, as suggested by research related to the system justification (Jost et al. 2004) and belief in a just world (Hafer and Bègue 2005) theories.

Second, findings from this study regarding the role played by stereotype-consistent information in the process of victim redefinition contribute to our understanding of the durability of negative stereotypes and their associated cultural schemas. The findings here suggest that at least part of negative stereotypes’ durability can be explained by their ability to facilitate victim redefinition through their relation to internalized habits of interpretation (e.g., cultural schemas). This sort of schema-based misjudgment allows individuals to efficiently avoid the experience of dissonance associated with observations of adversity (Adams 1965; Walster et al. 1978; Lerner and Miller 1978); in turn, this alleviates the impetus for behavioral responses. Beyond this, the present study finds that in the context of communication, this

Table 5. Examples of Descriptions of Main Character by Condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Participant Descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive outcome</td>
<td>He was a young guy. He was a hard worker, and he was actually smarter than he thought he was.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hard working and reliable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Determined. He was tempted to give up a number of times, but he didn’t.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He is resilient, astute, and goes after what he wants despite personal obstacles…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He has doubts at times, but had enough faith in himself to at least try to better his position. He cares for his family, and is a hard worker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative outcome</td>
<td>I don’t think he had alot [sic] of motivation and was not very responsible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[K]ind of lazy, irresponsible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[L]azy, complacent, not very intelligent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flippant and unwilling to do what he had to do at the time, to regain work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He was a person that didn’t give thought to his or his family’s future until he lost his job.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ensures the perpetuation of justificatory stereotypes and their motivating schemas.

Still, much remains to be understood regarding the perpetuation of negative cultural stereotypes, as well as the role played by victim redefinition and cultural schemas in this process. Although this study is primarily concerned with examining schema-based victim redefinition as a general social process that disadvantages low-status individuals, the next steps in this line of study should continue to elaborate this general process. To do this, future research should expand beyond the limitations of the present work in a number of ways.

First, although this study focuses primarily on class-based stereotypes (specifically, those associated with blue-collar, lower class workers), future research could expand to examine the generalizability of this study’s findings to other social group stereotypes (such as those associated with race and ethnicity, gender, or religion). Future research should also examine whether and how the victim redefinition process functions in the case of observations of high-status individuals’ misfortunes. Although it is possible that an individual’s high status may provide protection from the victim redefinition processes, high-status individuals are not immune to negative stereotypes (Kay and Jost 2003) and therefore could conceivably be subject to schema-based victim redefinition as well.

Second, future research is needed to disentangle the effects of observing procedural injustice from the effects of observing a positive or negative outcome. The narratives used in this study differ in two aspects: (1) whether the protagonist received retraining funds after being laid off (potentially a procedural injustice) and thus (2) is able to attend a retraining program and obtain employment (the actual positive or negative outcome).

Because both were manipulated simultaneously in this study’s two-condition design, it is unclear how each individual element contributes to the study’s outcome. Future research crossing these elements in a $2 \times 2$ study design is needed to answer this question.

Another fruitful avenue for future research is to examine the impact of the group memberships of the participants themselves. Research has found that cultural meanings and values associated with identities and behaviors are often influenced by individuals’ own social group memberships (Jost, Burgess, and Mosso 2001; Heise 2006; Martin and Desmond 2010). For instance, system justification theory research finds that low-status individuals participate in ingroup derogation and outgroup elevation to justify their subordinate position (Jost and Burgess 2000; Jost et al. 2004). Although the present study does not find evidence of this phenomenon (in fact, participants in the negative outcome condition who shared characteristics with the narrative’s main character were least likely to identify the narrative’s outcome as just), this may be due to the mixed-group nature of the transmission chains used in the present study. Because of this, using transmission chains that are uniform by social group would allow for improved estimation of system justifying tendencies, victim redefinition, and associated stereotype-consistency bias.

Finally, future research in this field could expand to consider a wider range of forms of cultural transmission, including nonlinear transmission chains or even naturally occurring forms of transmission such as that of viral images or video clips online.

Much work remains to elaborate victim redefinition processes. But the results of this study clearly demonstrate the influential role played by negative stereotypes in shaping reactions to low-status others’
adversities. Because individual reactions are crucial to spur the sort of social change needed to overcome persistent inequalities, future research should continue to work toward better understanding the apparent apathy of many toward existing social inequalities.

APPENDIX: STUDY NARRATIVE

For statements that differ by condition, positive outcome condition statements are [bracketed and italicized] below negative outcome condition statements.

Stereotype-consistent statements are denoted by (SC) and stereotype-inconsistent statements by (SI).

1. Introduction
Eric is a Manufacturing Technician
Who works at a small town textile mill.
He is 28 years old,
And has worked for the mill since he was in high school.

2. Initiating Event
While taking his afternoon cigarette break, (SC)
Eric heard rumors from other workers about company layoffs.
He had heard similar rumors before, however
And returned to reading his business magazine for the rest of the break (SI)
Later that day Eric was called into his supervisor’s office
The supervisor told him he was being laid off,
Because the mill could no longer afford his wages.
On his way out, the supervisor handed him information about local job retraining programs.
[However, the supervisor told him he would receive funds for job training as a part of his severance]
Eric had considered going to college to become an engineer in the past (SI)
But since he had not done very well in high school, the mill seemed to be his only option (SC)

3. Internal Response
Faced with losing his job of over 10 years,
Eric began to worry about how his family would make ends meet.
He was already behind on his rent (SC)
And his daughter’s private preschool was expensive (SI)
He thought about applying to another mill in the neighboring county (SC)
But decided a new career would provide better opportunities for himself and his family. (SI)

4. Attempt
The next day he went to the county Social Services office to ask about job training opportunities (SI)
And also to apply for government assistance while he was between jobs (SC)
He waited in the long line to sign up for a meeting with a social worker,
And then sat down to fill out the eligibility forms while he waited.
He tried to be as accurate as possible in his income and assets estimates (SI)
After an hour, the receptionist called his name.
The social worker looked over his forms and told him about a program for people in his situation
Which would allow him to be certified in a trade in six months through the local community college
The application form was long and intimidating
Eric was tempted to forego his plan and draw unemployment until he could find a job that didn’t require training. (SC)
However shortly before the deadline he decided to mail in his application.

5. Consequence
One month later he heard back from the training program at the community college.
He learned that he had been accepted
But that he had received no financial assistance, since all available funds has been distributed.
He needed $2,000 to pay for the tuition before classes began
And his credit score was too poor to request a loan (SC)
He was sad because he had begun to look forward to going back to school (SI)
But knew that he could not raise the money in time.
He decided that he would try to apply again for the next cycle (SI)
[He was already beginning to consider trying to apply again for the next cycle (SI)]
But continue to draw his unemployment benefits while he looked for another job (SC).
[And just continuing to draw his unemployment benefits while he looked for another job (SC)]
His family was disappointed when they found out.
[But remembered the retraining funds offered by his former employer at the mill.]
6. Conclusion

Eric searched for the next few months without much luck. [The retraining fund from the mill covered the full cost of tuition.]

Although working made little sense when it seemed that he could earn as much on unemployment (SC)
[Although the hard work made little sense at first when it seemed that he could earn as much on unemployment (SC)]

He continued to fill out applications each day. (SI)
[Eric soon came to love his new classes on Information Technology and excelled in most, (SI)]

He hopes to have the chance to go back to school soon (SI)
[He even had a job offer in the field even before he completed his certification (SI)]

But the longer he waits, the less appealing this seems (SC).
[Still, he sometimes misses his old job at the mill from time to time (SC).]

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

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REFERENCES


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M. B. Fallin Hunzaker is a PhD student at Duke University. Her research investigates the relationship between cultural schema–based cognition and information transmission, as well as the impact of this relationship on cultural stability and change. She explores these issues using a variety of research methods, including experimental methods and natural language processing.