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Motivated Offense: The Role of Group Membership and Status Competition on Attributions of Offense and the Desire for Punitive Action

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by

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ABSTRACT

Motivated Offense: The Role of Group Membership and Status Competition on Attributions of Offense and the Desire for Punitive Action

by

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Norms of political correctness dictate that people should avoid making "offensive" comments (particularly about marginalized groups), and that some offenders ought to be punished. While there is research on judgments of offense, it involves comparing sensitivity to criticisms delivered by ingroup versus outgroup members. Researchers have not yet addressed why individual differences in offense judgments exist, and little attention has been directed at offense judgments that are generated by political correctness concerns. What is more, there is little research on the relationship between offense and the desire to punish offenders. In an experiment testing the influence of the group membership and status of a speaker, this thesis found that women were more offended and more in favor of punishing the speaker than men, and both men and women were more offended when the comment came from a man. Additionally, individual differences that predict offense and endorsement of punishment were identified. Specifically, the more individuals valued status, the more likely they were to desire punitive action against a high status speaker. Finally, latent class analysis revealed a class of people who endorsed punitive action but were not offended, suggesting that for some, punishing political incorrectness stems from opportunity rather than offense.

The findings indicate that taking offense and punishing perceived offenders is motivated by more than just objective rules of acceptable speech.

Motivated Offense: The Role of Group Membership and Status Competition on Attributions of Offense and the Desire for Punitive Action

A statement deemed offensive by one person may be considered insightful by another. But is offense merely in the eye of the beholder? Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that several variables affect judgments of offense. Anecdotally, it appears that offense is particularly likely to be taken when comments are generated by high profile individuals. For example, it is common for athletes, CEOs, musicians, and politicians to receive public criticism for comments judged to be offensive, and for reparations to be exacted in the form of public apologies, fines, and even the loss of contracts or jobs. These incidents typically do not involve personal insults, but rather comments that can be interpreted as offense because of social sensitivities (i.e., politically incorrect comments). Though research suggests that offense is most likely to be taken when criticisms are delivered by outgroup members (Hornsey & Imani, 2004; Hornsey, Oppes, & Svensson, 2002; Hornsey, Trembath, & Gunthorpe, 2004), little is known about why some comments are interpreted as offensive and not others, and why some offenders are judged more harshly than others.

For example, in the spring of 2013 President Obama remarked that Kamala Harris was "the best-looking attorney general," in the country; controversy ensued. While some regarded Obama's comment as innocuous (or even a compliment), others considered his comment evidence for patriarchy in the White House, and called for him to attend gender sensitivity training (Kim, 2013). A similar incident occurred at Harvard in 2005, when university President Lawrence Summers was asked to address a conference hosted by the National Bureau of Economic Research regarding challenges women face in careers in math

and science. Summers considered the possibility that innate sex differences in "ability at the top end" (i.e., greater variance in intelligence among men than women) might explain why there are more men than women in the highest positions in mathematics and science (Wilson, Fang, Fogg, & Selingo, 2006). Though defended by some for his willingness to discuss a controversial subject, Summers was criticized by many Harvard faculty, and he was eventually compelled to resign.

What remains unclear is why some criticized Obama and Summers for their comments while others interpreted their motivations as a good-intentioned. Was it something about their interpretation of the content of the comments that lead to offense? Was it the high profile role of the source of the comments that made it offensive? Was it merely the partisanship of the receiver? Or might there be personality traits that make some individuals more likely to take offense and speak out in the face of a perceived offense? The fact that some people found Obama's and Summers' remarks to be offensive while other did not suggests that offense is a motivated response generated by receivers, rather than a reaction to objective standards of offensiveness. The purpose of this thesis is to address these questions.

In what follows, research on offense is reviewed, and hypotheses addressing the motivation to take offense and punish offenders are generated using social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and evolutionary research on status hierarchy navigation (Cummins, 1999; Cummins, 2005). The factors that influence and motivate attributions of offense and the desire for retribution against perceived offenders have been under studied. I propose that both the attribution of offense, as well the decision to punish offenders, are motivated by group membership and individuals' motivations to pursue status.

Intergroup Relations and Offense

Social identity and intergroup status conflicts. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), people define a large part of their self-concepts with regard to group memberships, and when they do so, they search for ways to perceive their ingroup as different from and yet better than rival outgroups. This enhancement process is governed by one of three strategies: Social mobility, a strategy in which people focus on their own personal status rather than that of the group; social creativity, a strategy in which people try to change the status of their ingroup while eschewing comparison with dominant outgroups; and social competition, a strategy in which people compete directly with rival outgroups for ascendance. Social competition is particularly likely when group memberships cannot be changed. For example, gender is a static social identity that cannot be changed easily. Therefore, women who believe that their success has been stifled due to the low status of their ingroup (i.e., supporters of feminist ideology) should be most likely to engage in social competition with men, and may be more likely than other women to blame sexism for any misfortunes. Finding offense in an outgroup member's comments and suggesting punishment may be the result of a socially competitive strategy. SIT predicts that women who support feminist ideology would be most likely to interpret comments about women to be offensive, particularly when the source is a man. Women may be likely to engage in social competition by finding offense and punishing men. Men, on the other hand, do not need to increase the status of their group, but they are motivated to maintain the group's current status. Due to the differing status positions of men and women, they will likely engage in different hierarchy maintenance/climbing strategies.

Group membership and offense. Research on the Intergroup Sensitivity Effect (ISE) demonstrates that people are more sensitive to criticism expressed by outgroup than

ingroup members (e.g., Hornsey & Imani, 2004; Hornsey, et al., 2002; Hornsey, et al., 2004). Two mediational mechanisms have been identified. First, group membership affects sensitivity to criticism because ingroup critics are judged to have more constructive motivations than outgroup critics (Hornsey, et al., 2002). Second, group membership affects sensitivity because ingroup members are judged as having greater legitimacy to criticize than outgroup members (Hornsey & Imani, 2004). Importantly, however, research does not explain why group membership has these effects on judgments of constructiveness and legitimacy. Further still, research on the ISE has yet to address potential intragroup relations and individual differences in the attribution of offense. It is not yet known why two members of the same group might have different reactions to criticism, nor why a person might be offended by criticism that does not target their ingroup. Further still, the ISE is focused on criticism, and yet it is clear that many cases where offense is taken, the target of the offense has not issued a criticism, but rather a "biased" or "stereotype-laden" comment. For example, remarking that Asians are good at math is praise, but it may be considered offensive by some.

Evolution and Status Competition. Most social psychological theories that have been designed to explain prejudice and intergroup competition rely on group competition without intragroup hierarchies as an explanatory mechanism. While this has and continues to be useful, it remains that these social psychological approaches have not considered the deeper evolutionary reasons why humans vary in their concern for social status. A further shortcoming of these theories is that they provide no means to explain why two group members who hold a similar position within a group may differ in their offense judgments and the desires to punish. An evolutionary perspective can shed more light on what might drive an individual to take offense and endorse sanctions for perceived offenders.

Personal status refers to an individual's rank within a group's social hierarchy (for a review, see Cummins, 2005). Both gaining and maintaining status are driving factors behind much of human and animal behavior as high status individuals have more access to fitness enhancing resources (Cummins, 1999; Cummins, 2005; Dijke & Poppe, 2007; Griskevicius, Tybur, Gangestad et al, 2009). Status positions can be unstable, thus higher status individuals will typically reinforce their position by controlling (e.g. discriminating against) those lower down in the hierarchy (Cummins, 2005; Dijke & Poppe, 2007). Thus it appears that one function of group norms is to provide high status group members a means to monitor the behavior of lower status group members who might pose threats to their position.

In order to gain and maintain status within a group, one must know the group norms, follow them, and punish violators (Cummins 1999; Cummins, 2005; Horne, 2001). Punishing violators, however, involves risk and is potentially costly. While punishments can have status benefits for the enforcer, they can also backfire and the enforcer can incur costs (Horne, 2001; Horne & Cutlip, 2002). In general, high status group members often follow different norms than low status members, and it is much more likely to for a high status individual to punish a low status norm violator than it is for a low status group member to punish a higher status group member (Cummins, 1999; Cummins, 2005). If there is a norm of political correctness, then comments should be most likely to be interpreted as having violated the norm (i.e., interpreted as offensive) when it is useful for policing status hierarchies.

Social Dominance. According to social dominance theory, individuals vary in the extent to which they value status and in the tactics they use to climb hierarchies (Pratto & Sidanius, 1994). For some people, personal status is gained best by helping their ingroup gain status and power. This can be achieved in two main ways. On the one hand, for those groups

that already have a high status position, it is beneficial to support inequality between groups. These hierarchy enhancers favor group based inequality, and policies that preserve the status quo, and this orientation is captured in an individual difference measure, Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) (e.g., Pratto & Sidanius, 1994). Alternatively, individuals can gain status for their groups, and therefore themselves, through gaining respect by showing desirable traits (e.g., leadership skills) and making decisions that benefit the group, oftentimes characterized as "status aspiration" (Cassidy & Lynn, 1989) or "prestige" (Maner & Mead, 2010). For individuals in a high status group might benefit from supporting group inequality (i.e., being high in SDO), whereas those in a lower status group would benefit more from trying to gain status for their whole group (i.e., having status aspiration or prestige). Because political correctness mainly protects members of disadvantaged groups, those high in SDO should be un-phased by social inequality and will be unlikely to be bothered by politically incorrect comments. Alternatively, those who are motivated by status aspiration should be offended by political incorrectness when the comment comes from a source from a threatening group.

Though some people are inclined to hierarchy climb by ensuring their ingroup is powerful, other, dominant individuals, try to climb *intra*group hierarchies (Cummins, 1999; Cummins, 2005; Maner & Mead, 2010). Whereas status aspiration is characterized by gaining status by befitting the group, dominance as a personality trait is characterized by using force and manipulation in order to attain resources from the group (Maner & Mead, 2010). These highly dominant people should punish political incorrectness when they feel there is personal status to be gained, and this can be either within their ingroup or in opposition to outgroups.

Hypotheses

In what follows I deduce predictions from social identity theory and evolutionary reasoning about individual differences in status hierarchy navigation. Social identity theory predicts that group membership and partisanship influence attributions of offense, while evolutionary considerations suggest that individual differences (e.g., in dominance motivation and status aspiration) should operate independently of group membership.

In accordance with research on the intergroup sensitivity effect (ISE) and social identity theory, comments made by outgroup members should be judged as more offensive than those made by ingroup members. However, if the content of comments is normatively directed at women (i.e., comments that can potentially be judged as sexist), we should find that women are more likely to be offended than men, and more so if the comments are made by a man than a woman.

Further still, social identity theory suggests that the status of the commenter matters. A comment made by an outgroup member should be more threatening when the source is high status, because high status outgroup members are influential, and successfully sanctioning the behavior of a high status outgroup member would be perceived as a greater 'win' than sanctions on a low status outgroup member. Therefore:

> H1: Women will judge comments as more offensive when made by men than women, particularly comments made by high rather than low status men. For men, comments directed at women are not a threat to male identity (and are arguably a boon to male identity), so men should not be offended by potentially sexist comments, and the neither the group membership nor status of the commenter should affect judgments of offense.

Further still, social identity theory predicts that under the conditions of group threat, some group members will engage in social competitiveness. For women who endorse feminist ideology, a socially competitive strategy, they should be particularly offended and likely to endorse punishment when the speaker poses threat to the group (i.e., when the speaker is a man).

Therefore:

H2: Feminist ideology will moderate the relationship between sex of the source and sex of the participant such that the more a woman endorses feminist ideology, the more she will be both offended and endorse punishment when the speaker is a man.

Evolutionary considerations suggest that people will be most motivated to interpret a comment as offensive when doing so aids in maintaining or pursuing status for either themselves or allies. If a comment about women is made, both men and women should rely on the status of the speaker when determining the offensiveness of that comment. However, offense is private; sanctioning offensive speech is not. Thus, the motivations to attribute offense and punish offenders may be different. Status can be gained by helping one's ingroup gain status, meaning sanctioning the speech of high status outgroups can be an effective method of gaining status. Additionally, one can also gain/maintain personal status by sanctioning the behavior of lower status ingroup members.

H3a: Female participants will be more likely to endorse the punishment of high than low status men, but more likely to endorse punishment of low than high status women.

H3b: Male participants will be more likely to endorse punishment for low than high status men, but have little interest in endorsing punishment for women, independent of their social status.

Finally, offense may be a mediational link between group membership concerns and the desire to punish. People do not always punish the source of a comment they have deemed to be offensive. However, finding offense in private is not in and itself advantageous to an individual or group: taking offense is beneficial to the extent that it allows for the public punishment of offenders. In order to punish the source of a comment, one must first claim offense:

H4: For both sexes, the relationship between group membership/status of the speaker and endorsement of punishment will be mediated by offense.

Individual Differences in Offense and the Motivation to Punish

The social identity literature can perhaps explain why people might find comments to be more offensive when they are made by an outgroup member than an ingroup member. However, social identity theories do not explain why some members of the same group might be more sensitive to such comments, nor do these theories help predict which group members are most likely to take action against offenders and which are most likely to keep silent about being offended. Evolutionary theory can provide insight into the individual difference that might account for this variation. According to the theory, one gains status through attaining precious resources (e.g., food, mates, a prestigious job, etc.). If an individual has already attained a high status position, he or she should aim to maintain that position by policing the norm violations of lower status group members (Cummins, 1999). On the other hand, if an individual is already in a low status position, they might derive a strategy to increase

resources/status either for themselves within the group or for their group as a whole. SDO is often associated with policing hierarchies, but because the political correctness movement is focused on reducing social inequality, other individual difference measures, such as trait dominance and aspiration for personal status (Cassidy & Lynn, 1989; Maner & Mead, 2010), may be better predictors of variation in the desire to police violations of PC norms. This leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: What individual differences or combination of individual differences influence a person's willingness to take offense?

RQ2: What individual differences or combination of individual differences influence a person's willingness to endorse punishment for an offender?

Method

Participants and Design

The study used a between-subjects factorial design: 2(Source Sex: Male/Female) by 2 (Source Status: High/Low) by 2 (Participant Sex: Male/Female). A sample of $N = 534$ was obtained from the Department of Communication undergraduate participation pool at the University of California Santa Barbara. Participants were compensated with course credit. After removing international students, those who did not disclose their sex, and those who incorrectly answered the manipulation check, a sample of $N = 411$ remained for analyses. The sample was 23.6% males ($n = 97$) and 76.4% females ($n = 314$), and the average age $M = 19.35$. Politically, most participants identified as endorsing Democrats (39.9%) or did not align with a political party (41.4%). Minorities identified as endorsing Republicans (13.6%) and alternative parties (4.1%). Ideologically, participants were more liberal than conservative.

Participation took place in a large classroom in a campus building. Upon entry, participants were given a packet, which included a fictional story about a controversy involving comments made about biological sex and intelligence. After reading the article, participants responded to questions in the rest of the packet, and were instructed not to refer back to the article.

Procedures and Materials

Participants read an article that was written for the purpose of this experiment, but was attributed to a campus newspaper. The article was a faked report on a presentation made on campus, where a student had presented research on innate sex differences in intelligence, and had claimed that these innate differences account for sex differences in achievement. For example, in the article, the researcher claimed that:

> The male brain has about 15% more neurons than the female brain, and we know that brain size and intelligence are very strongly correlated. This explains why men have higher intelligence than women… Basically, larger brains are associated with higher IQ scores, and on average, men have larger brains than women, thus the IQ difference.

Group membership induction. The sex of the source was manipulated in a faked newspaper article. In the male condition, the source was named Anthony Miller, and in the female condition, the source was named Allison Miller.

Status induction. Status distance relative to college students was kept equal in both the low and high status conditions. In the low status manipulation, the speaker was described as a high school student who had participated in a summer acceleration program. In the high status condition the speaker was a graduate student who had participated in a summer

research fellowship. Results from pilot testing indicated that undergraduates did in fact view graduate students as higher status than themselves and they viewed high school students as lower status.

Dependent measures.

Offense. There is no existing scale that measures offense, so the construct was measured using four items from the intergroup sensitivity scale (*offensive, insulting, disappointing, judgmental*) while leaving out three items which are not related to attributions of offense (*hypocritical, arrogant, the person had good intentions*) (Hornsey et al, 2002). Three items were added (in poor taste, over the line, inappropriate for a public presentation). Items were measured on a 7-point Likert type scale (1 *not at all*, 7 *very much*; $M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.55$) ($\alpha = .92$).

Punishment. Participants evaluated how appropriate they considered five forms of punishment for Miller (the person who made the comment) (1 *not at all*, 7 *very much*). Potential punishments varied along two levels of severity. Four items measured endorsement of mild punishments (*Miller deserves to be disciplined*; *Miller should be required to make a public apology*; *Miller should be required to take a gender sensitivity training course*; *Miller should be required to volunteer for a math and science program for girls*) ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.37$) ($\alpha = .86$). Three items measured desire for severe punishments (*Miller should be banned from participating in future public presentations*; *Miller should be suspended*; *Miller should be expelled*) ($M = 1.59$, $SD = .92$) ($\alpha = .81$).

Personal Confrontation. Three items measured the extent to which participants would confront the speaker: *I would engage Miller in debate* ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.89$); *I would criticize Miller* ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.93$); *I would suggest that Miller leave the meeting* ($M =$

2.13, *SD* = 1.51). These three items had marginal reliability (α = .59), and so they were analyzed as individual items.

Covariates. Political Correctness if often associated with liberalism. Thus, in order to rule out political ideology as an explanation for attributions of offense and desire to punish, it was used as a covariate. Participants were asked the following item, answered on a 7-point semantic differential scale of *Very liberal* to *Very conservative*: *How liberal/conservative are your political views?* (*M* = 3.29, *SD* = 1.30).

Individual differences. After the dependent measures were completed, participants filled out supplementary measures to measure several individual difference constructs (all were measured on 7-point Likert-type scales).

Feminist ideology. Support for Feminist ideology was measured using 10 items. For example, "*Using 'man' to mean both men and women is one of the many ways sexist language destroys women's existence,"* and*, "Capitalism forces most women to wear feminine clothes to keep a job."* (*M* = 3.34, *SD* = 1.24, α = .89) (Henley, Meng, Brien, et al, 1998).

Trait dominance. The extent to which participants have dominant personalities was measured using seven items from the dominance sub-scale from Cassidy and Lynn's (1989) motivation achievement scale. For example, "*I like to give orders and get things done,"* and*, "I am usually the leader of my group,"* (*M* = 5.15, *SD* = 1.05, α = .88).

Status seeking. The extent to which participants value personal status was measured using six items from the status aspiration sub-scale of the from Cassidy and Lynn's (1989) motivation achievement scale. For example, items included, *"I would like an important job*

where people look up to me," and*, "I like to be admired for my achievements,"* (*M* = 5.65, *SD* = 0.81, α = .77).

Social Dominance Orientation. SDO was measured using Sidanius and Pratto's (1994) 14-item SDO scale. For example, items included *"Some people are just more worthy than others,"* and reverse coded items, "*Increased equality would be a positive thing for our society,"* (*M* = 2.61, *SD* = 0.98, α = .86).

Manipulation checks. After the dependent variables had been completed, participants answered two multiple-choice items to assess participants' memory of the speakers sex and social status (i.e., Miller's sex is: male, female; Miller is: a high school student, a college undergraduate, a graduate student, a college professor, none of the above). Participants who answered these questions incorrectly were excluded from analyses. Additionally, in order to evaluate any social desirability effects, participants were asked to respond to the following question: "What do you think is the purpose of this study?" Though 4.1% of participants correctly identified the study as examining reactions to the article, none stated that the study examined responses to the sex or status of the source, so no participants were dropped.

Results

Hypotheses and research questions were evaluated using SPSS General Linear Model (GLM), and post hoc analyses were performed using GLM and multiple regression analysis as well as MPlus 7.11(Muthen & Muthen, 1998-2013).

Manipulation Checks

After the first 236 subjects had participated, it was discovered that the status manipulation check was missing "graduate student" as a correct answer option. Therefore,

participants in the high status (graduate student) condition who responded "none of the above" were deemed to have correctly answered the manipulation check and their data were retained for analyses. The error was corrected before collecting the rest of the sample. Data for participants who incorrectly identified the sex of the speaker (n = 8) and/or the status manipulation (n = 89) were not included in analyses. Additionally, in order to only include students who are native English speakers, those who do not hold U.S. citizenship (n = 30) were also removed from analyses. Those removed due to inaccurate identification of the status of the speaker were concentrated in the high status conditions before the manipulation check was corrected (n = 83). However, only a small number of incorrect responses occurred after the mistake was fixed (n = 6), and those removed due incorrect identification of the sex of the speaker or due to being foreign were evenly distributed among the four experimental conditions. Fixing the error in the manipulation check fixed issues of differential drop-out rates, so it was not problematic. In total, 123 participants were excluded from analyses. This left a final sample of N = 411.

Data Screening

After removing manipulation check failures and foreign participants, data were screened for missing values, normality, linearity, and univariate and multivariate outliers. For all variables, there were less than 5% missing data. No univariate outliers were found in the dependent variables. Each cell of the design was tested for multivariate outliers by entering all the dependent variables into a multiple regression and examining Mahalanobis distance. Using a chi square cut off value of p = .001 (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007), three multivariate outliers were identified in one cell: female participants in the female source/high status condition. Analyses for hypothesis testing both with and without the outliers produced

similar results, likely due to the large sample in the cell (n = 101). Therefore the multivariate outliers were retained. Items measuring offense, desire for personal confrontation, and all scales measuring individual differences were normally distributed.

Mild punishment. Items measuring endorsement of mild punishment were positively skewed. All analyses were conducted using both the skewed and transformed items[1], both producing similar results. For the sake of interpretability, analyses using the untransformed items are reported here.

Severe punishment. Examination of the composite measure for severe punishment (M =1.59, SD = .92) showed that 57% of participants did not endorse any of the severe punishment measures (i.e., responded "not at all" for all three items). Due to this floor effect, endorsement of severe punishment was not included in analyses.[2]

Personal confrontation. Items measuring willingness to engage the speaker in debate and criticize the speaker were normally distributed. However, the third item in the measure (*I would suggest Miller leave the meeting*) was highly skewed and not amenable to transformation. This item was not included in analyses.

Tests of Focal Hypotheses

Offense. H1 predicted that women would be more offended if the source of a comment was male than female, independent of the male's status, but that women would be more offended if the comment was made by a low than high status woman (see Figure 1). H1

[1] All items measuring endorsement of mild punishment were highly skewed. Attempts at normalization improved but did not cure skew. Two items (*Miller should be required to make a public apology*, and, *Miller should be required to take a gender sensitivity training course*) were logarithmically transformed. The other two items (i.e., *Miller deserves to be disciplined*, and *Miller should be required to volunteer for a math and science program for girls*) were transformed using inverse scores. Each transformed item was standardized, and the items created a reliable scale of mild punishment (α = .87) (M = -.037, SD = 3.36).

[2] Data transformations were used in an attempt to normalize the distribution. However, the data could not be normalized.

also predicted that males would not be offended when the source of the comment was female, independent of that female's status, and that males would be more offended if the comment came from a low than high status male (see Figure 2). H1 was tested using a 2(Sex of Source: Male/Female) by 2(Status of Source: Low/high) by 2(Sex of participant: Male/Female) between-subjects GLM controlling for political ideology with offense as the dependent measure.

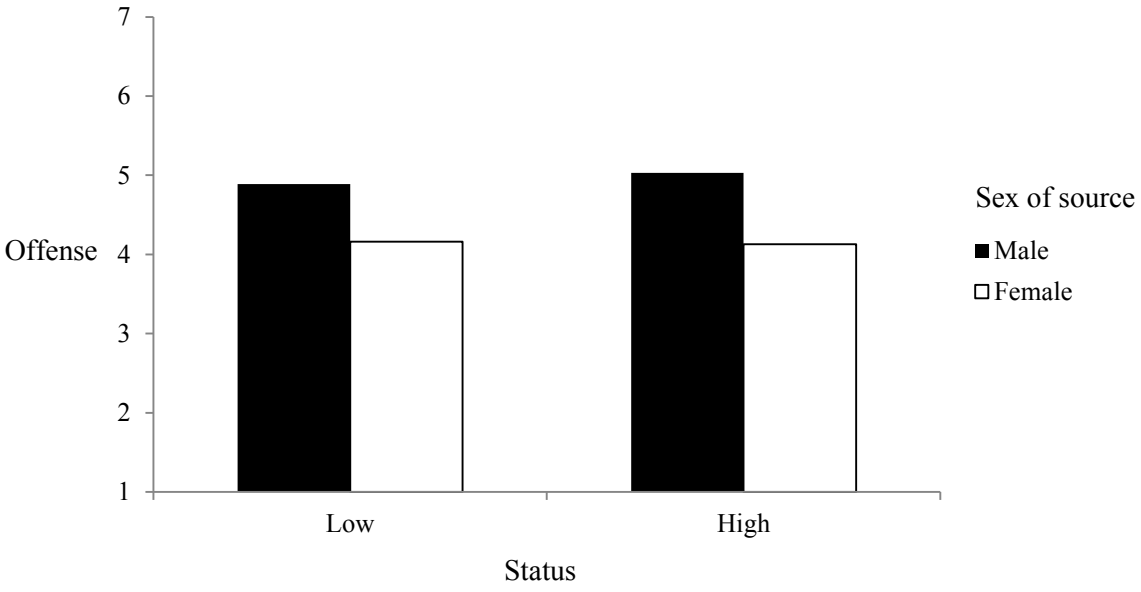

Figure 1. Significant main effect for sex of source, and a non-significant interaction between sex of source and status for females.

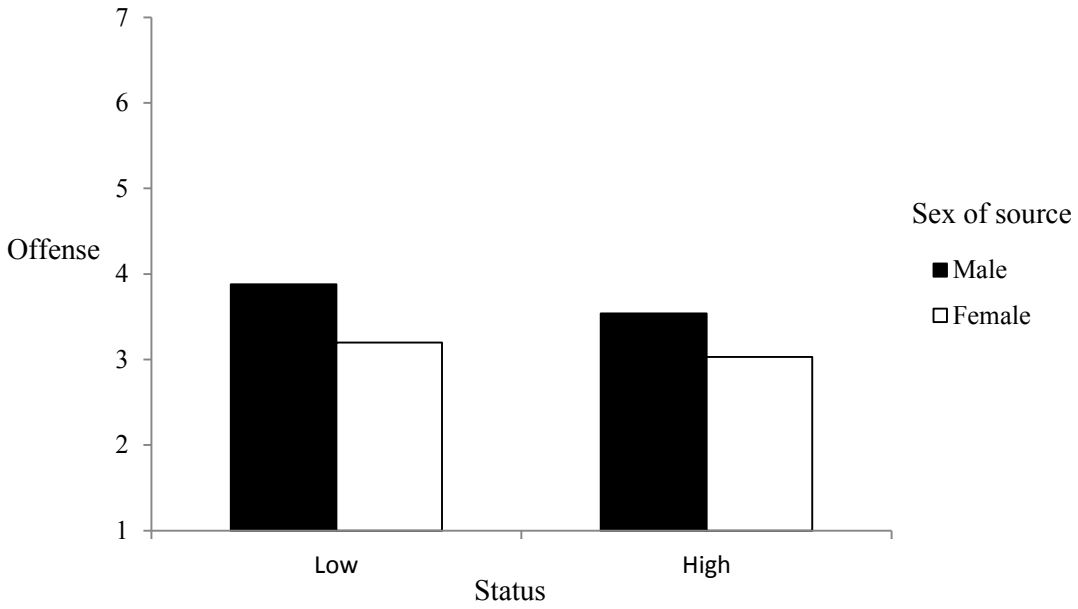

Figure 2. Significant main effect for sex of source, and a non-significant interaction between sex of source and status for males.

There was a large and significant main effect for sex of participant, $F(1, 393) = 38.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .90$; women ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.8$) were more offended than men ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.40$). There was a smaller main effect for sex of source, $F(1, 393) = 12.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$; participants were more offended when the source was male ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.47$) than female ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.52$). There was also a small main effect for political ideology, $F(1, 393) = 6.00$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$; more liberal participants were more offended. However, the interactions predicted under H1 were not significant. There was no evidence that status interacted with sex of the source for females, as predicted under H1 $F(1, 384) = .80$, $p = .37$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$, and there was no evidence of an interaction between status and sex of the source for males, $F(1, 384) = .37$, $p = .54$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$. There was no evidence in support of H1.

Feminist Ideology as Moderator. The second hypothesis predicted that the more women endorse feminist ideology, the more likely they were to be offended and endorse

punishment for a male speaker. H2 was tested using 2(Sex of Source: Male/Female) by 2(Status of Source: Low/high) by 2(Sex of participant: Male/Female) between-subjects multivariate GLM with feminism as a continuous moderator. Offense, endorsement of mild punishment, desire to engage the speaker in debate, and desire to criticize the speaker were dependent variables. There was a strong multivariate main effect for endorsement of feminist ideology, $F(4, 390) = 9.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. The more a person (male or female) endorsed feminist ideology, the more likely they were to be offended and endorse punitive action. However, the three-way interaction between sex of participant, sex of the source, and endorsement of feminist ideology was non-significant, $F(4, 390) = 1.60$, $p = .17$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, indicating that feminism does not moderate the interaction of sex of participant and sex of the source. H2 was not supported.

Endorsement of punishment. H3a predicted that women would be more likely to endorse punishing a low than high status female offender, but more likely to endorse punishing high than low status male offender. H3b predicted that men would be more likely to endorse punishing a low than high status male offender, and that men would not endorse punishing a female offender, independent of her status. Both H3a and H3b were tested using a 2(Sex of Source: Male/Female) by 2(Status of Source: Low/high) by 2(Sex of participant: Male/Female) multivariate GLM controlling for political ideology with endorsement of mild punishment, desire to engage the speaker in debate, and desire to criticize the speaker as dependent measures.

Box's Test of Equality indicates a violation of the assumption of equality of variance/covariance matrices, but this is common in large sample sizes (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007). In order to compensate for the assumption violation, Pillai's Trace, a conservative test

criterion, was assessed. Multivariate test results indicate a main effect for sex of the participant, $F(3, 392) = 8.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, and for political ideology, $F(3, 392) = 5.71$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. There was also a significant interaction between sex of the participant and sex of the source, $F(3, 392) = 3.18$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. However, there was no evidence for H3a: there was no significant interaction between status and sex of source for women, $F(3, 308) = .35$, $p = .79$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$. Failing to confirm H3b, there was also no significant interaction between sex and status of source for men, $F(3, 91) = .24$, $p = .87$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$.

Univariate tests for mild punishment (see Figure 3 for the interaction between sex of participant and sex of source), and desire to criticize were consistent with multivariate results, but univariate results were non-significant for the desire to engage the speaker in debate. There is no evidence to support H3a and H3b.

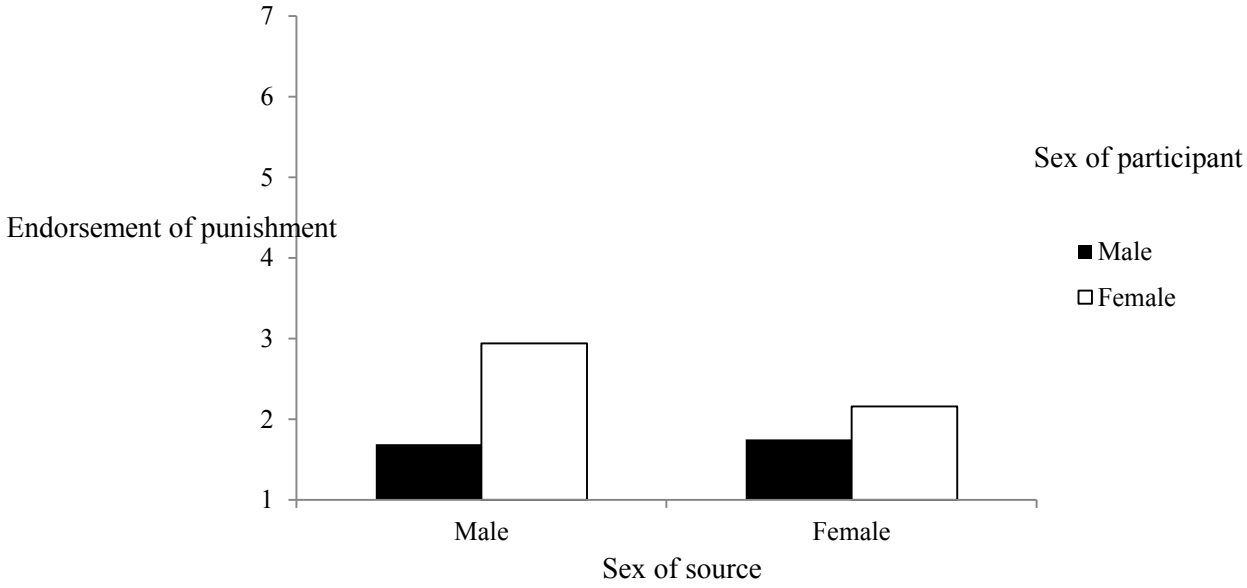

Figure 3. The interaction between sex of source and sex of participant on mild punishment.

Mediational analysis. H4 predicted that main effects of the independent variables (sex of participant, sex of source, and status) and endorsement of sanctioning behavior would be mediated by offense. Analyses were ran using the Preacher and Hayes' (2008) INDIRECT macro. For each of the three dependent variables (mild punishment, desire to debate, and desire to criticize), mediation analyses were ran one at a time for each potential main effect and interaction effect of the independent variables (sex, sex of source, status of source). Each independent variable, as well as all possible two-way and three-way interactions, were tested, while controlling for the others. Offense was the mediator for each analysis.

Endorsement of mild punishment. The main effect for the sex of participants was significant on mild punishment ($t = 5.23$, $p < .001$), and on offense ($t = 6.65$, $p < .001$). The path from offense to mild punishment was also significant ($t = 13.09$, $p < .001$). The bootstrap results indicated that offense mediates the relationship between sex of participant and punishment with a biased corrected 95% confidence interval of (.20, .38).

Sex of the source had significant direct effects on both endorsement of mild punishment, ($t = -2.32$, $p = .02$) and offense, ($t = -4.17$, $p < .001$), and offense was a significant predictor of endorsement of mild punishment ($t = 13.09$, $p < .001$). The biased corrected 95% CI (-.26, -.09) confirmed that offense mediates the relationship between sex of the source and endorsement of mild punishment.

Desire to engage the speaker in debate. Neither sex of the participant nor sex of the source were significant predictors of a desire to engage the speaker in debate, even when mediated through offense.

Desire to criticize the speaker. Sex of the participant had a significant main effect on desire to criticize the speaker ($t = 3.44$, $p < .001$) and offense ($t = 6.65$, $p < .001$), and offense

was a significant predictor of the dependent variable ($t = 13.90$, $p < .001$). The biased corrected 95% CI (.29, .56) indicated that the relationship between sex of the participant and desire to criticize the speaker was mediated by offense.

Sex of the source has a significant direct effect on desire to criticize the speaker ($t = -2.90$, $p = .004$) and offense ($t = -.41$, $p < .001$). This relationship was mediated by offense, ($t = 13.90$, $p < .001$); biased corrected 95% CI (-.41, -.14). The relationship between sex of the source and desire to criticize the speaker was mediated by offense.

Offense did mediate the relationship between sex of the source/participant and the endorsement of mild punishment as well as the desire to criticize the speaker. However, offense did not mediate the relationship between the independent variables and the desire to engage the speaker in debate. Thus, H4 is partially supported.

Research Questions and Follow up Tests

As one might expect based on the intergroup sensitivity effect, group membership is a strong motivator of both offense and the desire to punish those deemed to have offended. However, group membership did not explain all variation in attributions of offense and endorsement for punishment, which suggests that individual differences might account for further variance. Two research questions were posed in order to examine whether individual differences might affect attributions of offense (RQ1) and the willingness to endorse punitive action against offenders (RQ2). The influence of each individual difference measure was tested using the same model: 2(Sex of Source: Male/Female) by 2 Status of source: Low/high) by 2(Sex of participant: Male/Female)), and substituting in Dominance, Status seeking, and Social Dominance Orientation as a continuous covariate. RQ1 was tested using a univariate GLM with offense as the dependent variable. RQ2 was tested using a

multivariate GLM with endorsement of mild punishment, desire to engage the speaker in debate, and desire to criticize the speaker as dependent measures. A total of three individual differences were tested, and were added to each model as a covariate.

Trait dominance. Dominance as a personality trait was predictive of desire to engage the speaker in debate, but only for female participants, $F(1, 306) = 13.927$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Trait dominance was not a significant predictor of the other dependent variables.

Status seeking.

Offense. Using a 2(Sex of Source: Male/Female) by 2 Status of source: Low/high) by 2(Sex of participant: Male/Female) by Status seeking model, a significant two-way interaction was found for status seeking and status of the speaker on offense, $F(1, 401) = 4.91$, $p = .027$, $\eta_p^2 = .012$. Simple slopes analysis showed that the effect of status seeking on offense directed at high status speakers was significant ($\beta = .13$, $p = .02$), but was non-significant when the speaker was of low status ($\beta = -.04$, $p = .63$). As can be seen in Figure 4, participants low in status seeking were not particularly offended by high status speakers, but the more an individual aspired to be in a high status position, the more they were offended by a high- but not low-status speaker's remarks.

Endorsement of punishment. Effects on participants' desire to sanction the actions of the speaker were also tested through a 2(Sex of Source: Male/Female) by 2 Status of source: Low/high) by 2(Sex of participant: Male/Female) by Status seeking model. Univariate test results indicate that the interaction between status of the source and status seeking is specific to willingness to criticize the speaker, $F(1, 403) = 12.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$ (see Figure 5). The more a participant aspired to have a high status position, the more they desired to criticize the high status speaker. The less a participant aspired to a high status position, the

more they desired to criticize a low status speaker. The interaction between sex of the participant and status seeking is specific to one dependent variable: desire to engage the speaker in debate, $F(1, 403) = 7.50$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. As can be seen in Figure 6, the less a female values status, the more likely she is to desire engaging the speaker in debate. Conversely, the more a male values status, the more likely he is to desire engaging the speaker in debate.

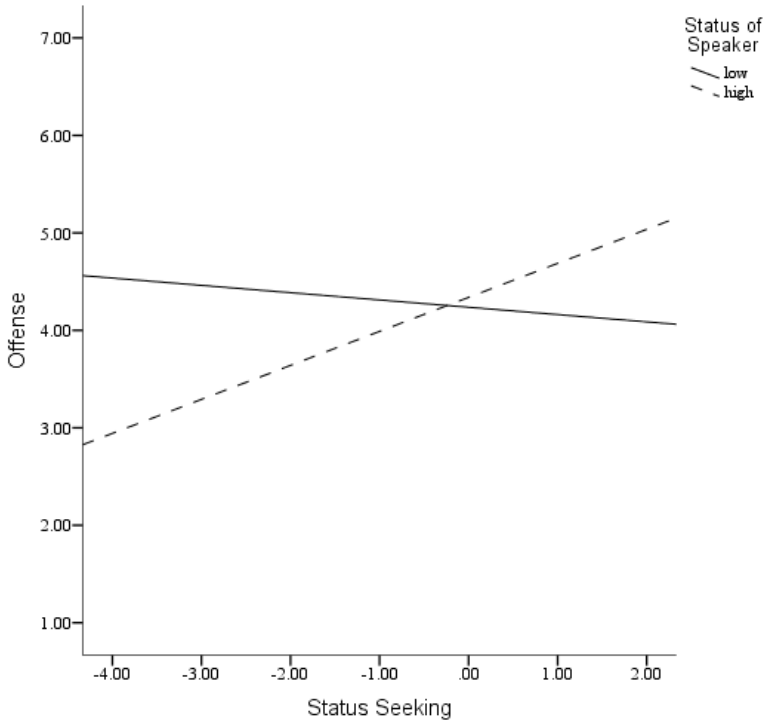

Figure 4. Interaction between status seeking and status of the speaker on offense.

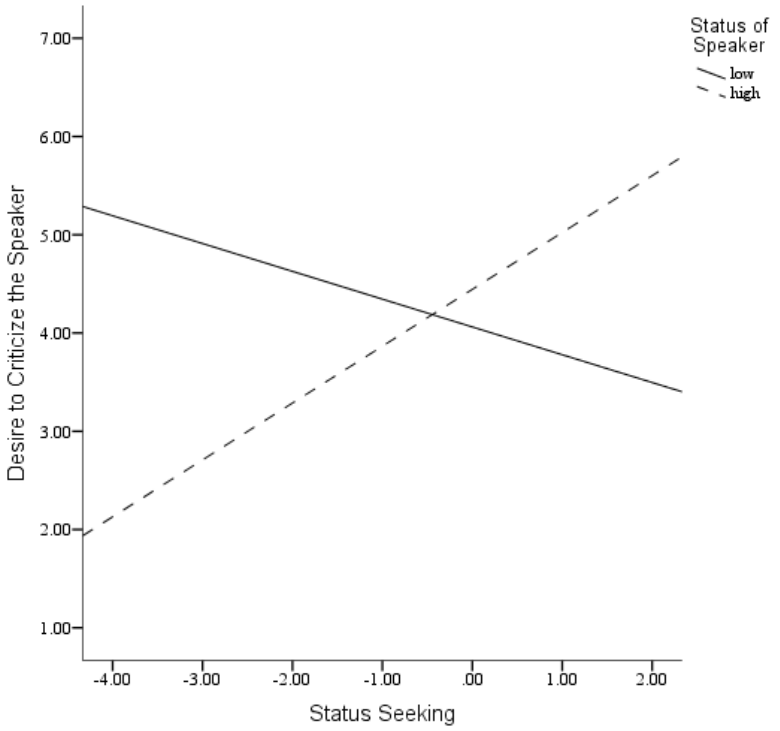

Figure 5. Interaction between status of the speaker and status seeking on desire to criticize the speaker.

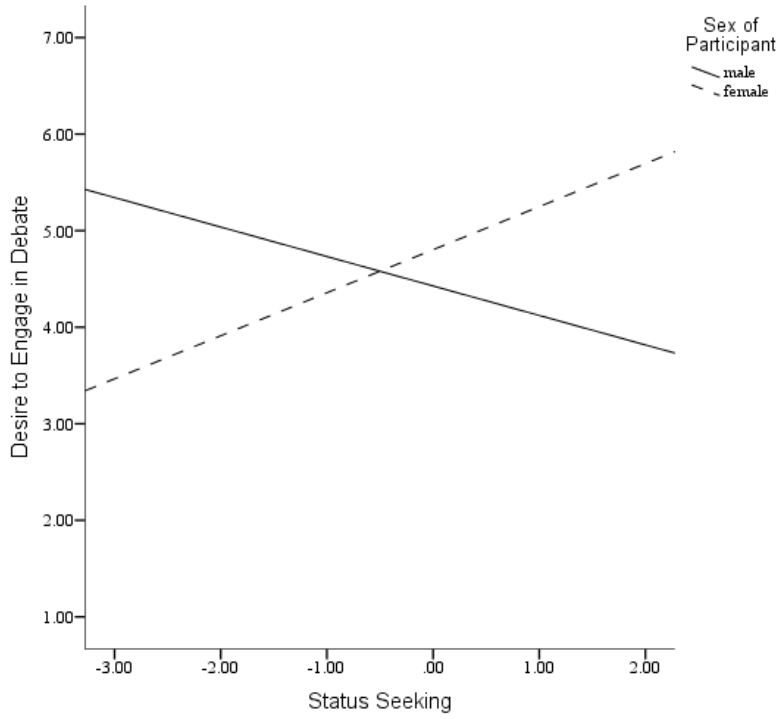

Figure 6. Interaction between status seeking and sex of participant on the desire to engage the speaker in debate.

Social Dominance Orientation.

Offense. Using a 2(Sex of Source: Male/Female) by 2 Status of source: Low/high) by 2(Sex of participant: Male/Female) by SDO model, there is no significant main effect for SDO on offense. However, there is a significant interaction between SDO and sex of the subject, $F(1, 400) = 6.65$, $p = .010$, $\eta_p^2 = .016$. Examination of the scatter plot (see Figure 7), indicates that for women, being lower in SDO is predictive of being more offended, whereas for males, those low in SDO are slightly less offended that those males who are high in SDO.

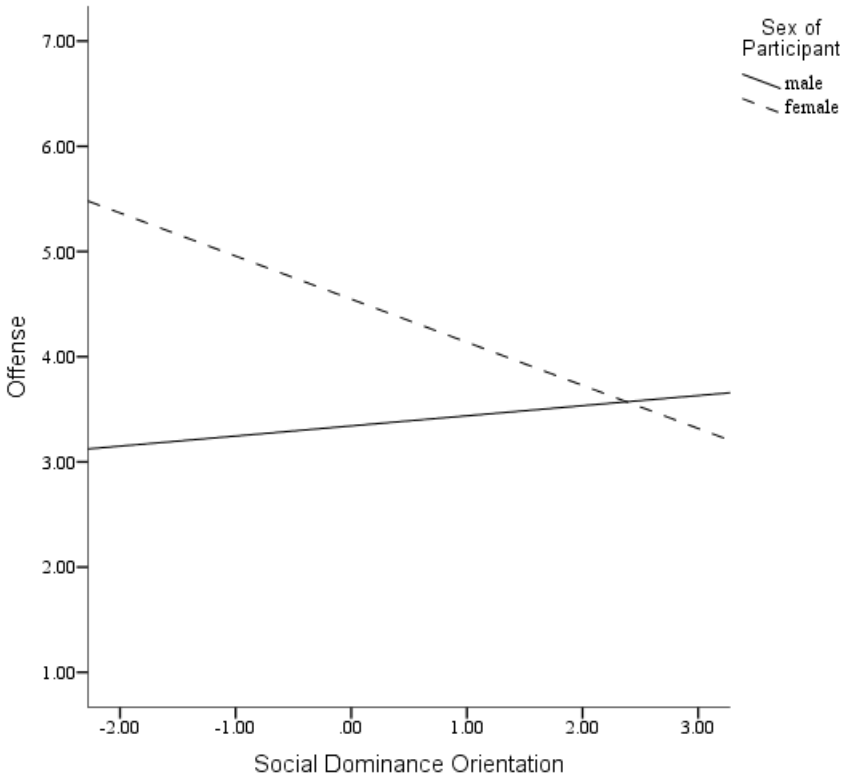

Figure 8. Interaction between SDO and sex of the participant on offense.

Endorsement of punishment. Univariate tests indicate that the main effect for SDO was non-significant for endorsement of mild punishment but was significant for both measures of desire to engage in personal confrontation: desire to criticize the speaker, $F(1,$

403) = 7.43, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, and desire to engage the speaker in debate, $F(1, 403) = 18.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. As can be seen in Figure 9, the lower participants were in SDO, the more they reporting wanting to engage the speaker in debate.

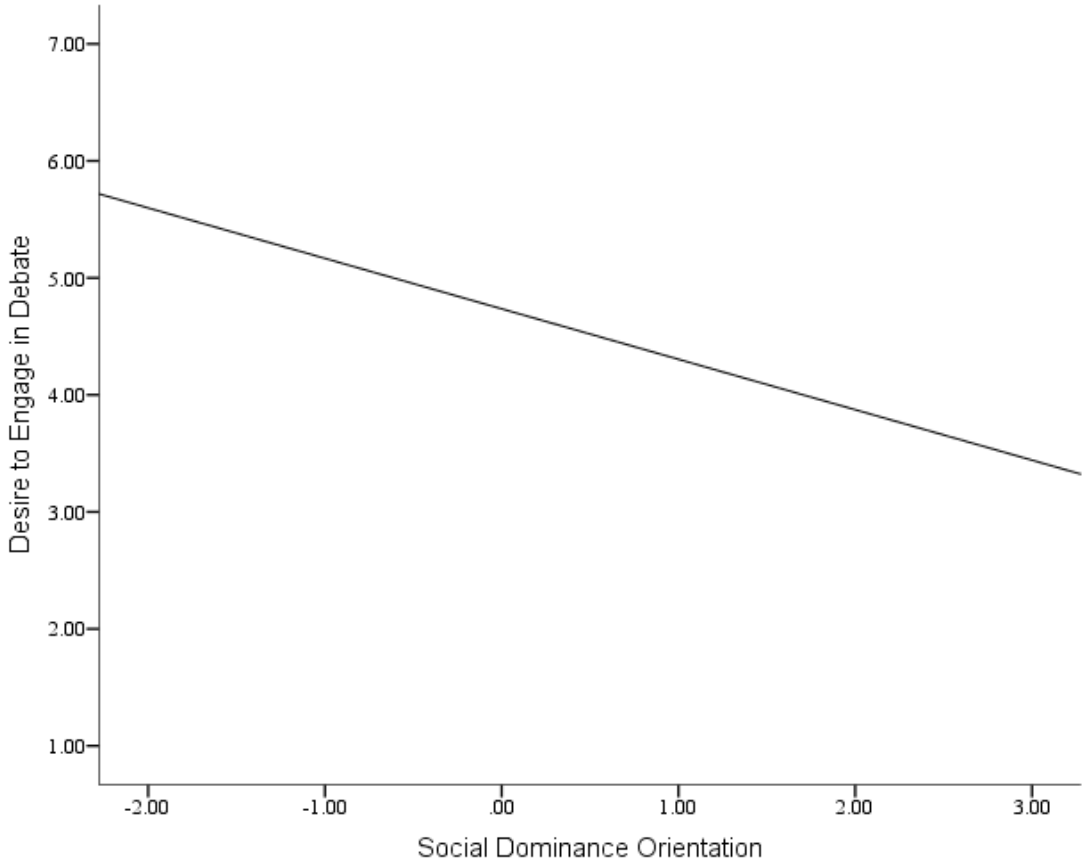

Figure 9. The significant main effect for SDO on desire to engage the speaker in debate.

Latent profile analysis. Another method for answering both RQ1and RQ2 is to try to classify participants into groups based on their levels of offense, reactions to offense, and individual personality traits. Using an exploratory approach, a latent class analysis (LCA) using continuous outcome variables, or a latent profile analysis (LPA), was conducted using MPlus 7.11(Muthen & Muthen, 1998-2013). A LPA is similar to discriminant function analysis in that it is a way of using variables to determine group membership. Unlike

discriminant function analysis, though, in LCA and LPA not only is group membership unknown, but the categories themselves are latent, meaning that LCA and LPA are both exploratory procedures. In an LPA, a log-likelihood function is used in order to find the appropriate number of classes, and the solution with the smallest log-likelihood value is one indicator of the best solution (Nylund-Gibson, Grimm, Quirk, & Furlong, 2013).

Class enumeration. Originally, seven outcome variables were used, however, after running the LPA for one through seven classes, it was determined that two outcome variables, desire to punish the speaker (Punish) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), had floor effects, and were not helpful in distinguishing between classes. Thus, these indicators were removed, and the final measurement model included five continuous outcome variables to be predicted by class membership: offense taken to the comments in the article (Offense), desire to publicly engage the speaker in debate (Debate), desire to publicly criticize the speaker (Criticize), dominance as a personality trait (Dominance), the extent to which participants valued a high status position in life (Status Seeking). LPA models were tested ranging from one class through seven classes, at which point a non-positive definite matrix occurred, and the number of classes was determined by evaluating the stability of log-likelihood values, and the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) and the adjusted BIC (ABIC), relative to other models, where the smallest values indicated the best model. Particular weight was given to BIC values, as those have been shown to be the most reliable in models with latent classes with continuous outcomes (Nylund, Asparouhov, & Muthen, 2007). BIC, ABIC, and log-likelihood values did not reach a minimum, despite testing from one class all the way to seven classes, thus information criteria alone were not enough to determine the appropriate number of classes, so profile plots, accuracy in class classification,

number of participants classified into each class, and theoretical importance were also considered. The four, five, and six class models were considered for the final model (each described in more detail below). With all information criteria, profile plots, and theoretical implications in mind, the five class model was chosen. Additionally, three covariates were tested for influence on class membership: sex of the participants (Sex), sex of the source (Sex of Source), and status of the source (Status).

The five class model. In comparison to the four class model, the five class model had lower BIC and log-likelihood values. However, the log-likelihood values were unstable, replicating fewer times than in the four class model. Thus, the analysis was run again with 1000 starts, and then again with 2000 starts. For all three analyses, the same log-likelihood value was found, indicating that it was likely to be the true global maximum. Furthermore, the classification system ranged from 91% - 84% accuracy in both models, indicating the addition of another class did not make the classification less accurate. In the five class model the smallest group was 8.8% of the sample (n = 36), which is more than double the smallest group from the four class model. Overall entropy for the five class model was .79. Though this is somewhat low, classes were still predicted with acceptable accuracy. Furthermore, the profile plot, to be described in detail later, indicated a more nuanced and theoretically interesting explanation of class membership.

Descriptions of classes. Three classes split along traditional lines (high on most variables, moderate on most variables, and low on most variables), with two other classes showing less expected patterns. Each class is described below. See Figure 10 for profile plots of the five classes.

Low. The *Low* class was composed of 15.1% of the sample (n = 62; 91.2% correct classification). In this profile, individuals were low on Offense, Debate, and Criticize, and moderate on Dominance and Status Seeking. The *Low* class was used as the reference class for determining the effects of the covariates for the rest of the classes.

High. The *High* class was the largest class, accounting for 40.3% of individuals in the sample (n = 165; 89.7% correct classification). Membership in this class was predictive of high scores on all five outcome variables. In comparison to the *Low* class, members of the *High* class were significantly more likely to be women than men. But, sex of the source and status of the source were not significant predictors of class membership.

Moderate. The *Moderate* class was comprised of 14.6% of the sample (n = 60; 79.7% correct classification), and was predictive of scores between the *High* and *Low* classes for Offense, Debate, and Criticize, but lower scores than both groups on Dominance and Status Seeking. Somewhat intuitively, none of the three covariates was predictive of membership in the middle-of-the-road group.

Criticize without Debate. A fourth class, accounting for 8.80% of participants, was classified as *Criticize without Debate* (n = 36; 85.8% correct classification). Members of this class were high on offense and desire to criticize the speaker, but were relatively low on desire to engage the speaker in debate. In reference to the *Low* profile, members of this fourth profile were more likely to be females, although with marginal significance (p = .06) and were more likely to have been in the condition where the speaker was male, although the influence of this covariate was also marginally significant (p = .06).

Debate without Offense. The last class, *Debate without Offense* included 21.0% of participants (n = 86; 84.0% correct classification). Members of this class were more likely to

engage the speaker in debate than they were to find offense in the comments. Members of this class were also relatively high on dominance and status seeking. In comparison to the *Low* class, none of the covariates were significant predictors of membership in this profile.

Debate without Offense vs. Criticize without Debate. The *Low* class was a logical reference group for comparing all five classes. However, two of the classes that emerged were unexpected: *Debate without Offense* and *Criticize without Debate.* Furthermore, these two classes had profiles that were almost opposite reflections of each other (see Figure 2). Therefore, they were compared to each other to examine differences in predictors of membership in each class (See Table 2). In comparison to the class *Debate without Offense*, those in the class *Criticize without Debate* were marginally more likely to be women and significantly more likely to have been in the condition where the source of the potentially offensive comment was a man. Status of the speaker was not an indicator of membership in either class.

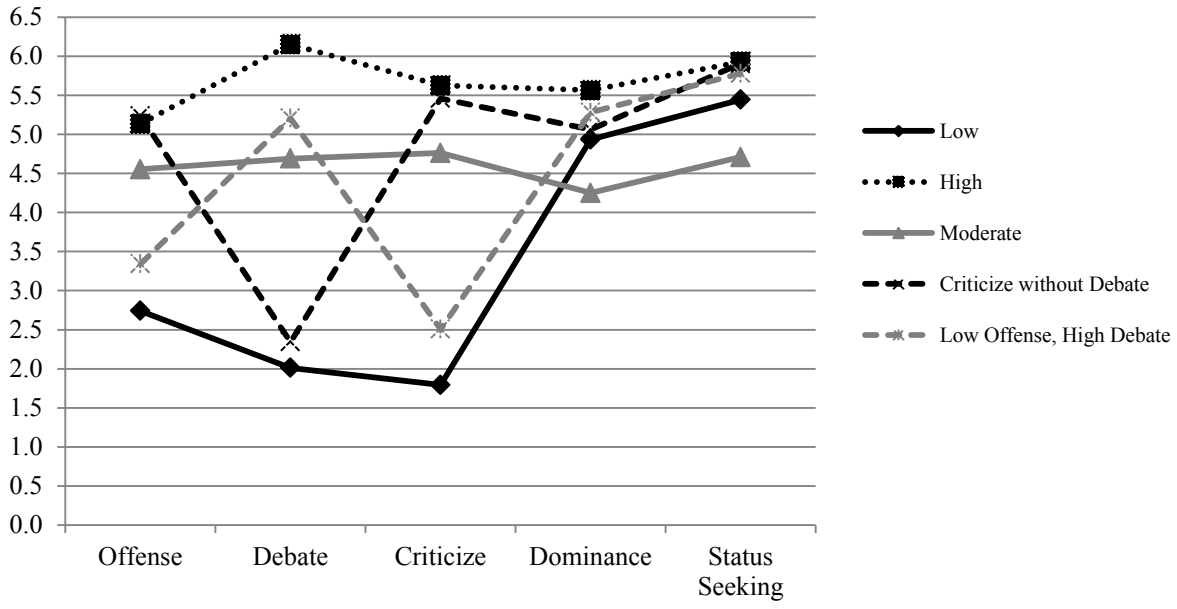

Figure 10. Profile plots from LPA.

Discussion

So why was Larry Summers ousted from his job? Why were some people calling Obama's comments sexist while others were not bothered by them? The results of this study indicate that though these individuals may convince themselves that they are motivated purely by a moral compass, the picture is more complicated than that.

Group Membership

Though the first two hypotheses in this study were not supported, one thing is clear: Group membership matters. Overall, women were more likely than men to interpret the comments in the stimulus as offensive and endorse some form of punitive action for the speaker. Furthermore both men and women were more likely to be offended by a male speaker. In the case of punishment, female participants were more enthusiastic about endorsing mild punishment for male speakers than they were for a female speaker. These findings are consistent with research on the intergroup sensitivity effect (Hornsey & Imani, 2004) and more generally with social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory predicts that people are more critical of outgroup than ingroup members, particularly when their ingroup is under threat or the outgroup is a direct rival. Women who were under threat based on a stimulus about sex differences in intelligence, were more likely to interpret the stimulus as being offensive, and they were more likely to endorse punishment when the comment was made by an outgroup member (men).

Status

Group membership of both the sender and receiver is undoubtedly an important component in attributions of offense and the decision to punish violators. However, this is only part of the story. Not all females were equally offended, and not all people who were

offended endorsed punishment equally. Individual differences can account for some of this variation. If there are norms of communication that dictate that people should not make comments that can be seen as derogatory towards marginalized groups (i.e., individuals should avoid politically incorrect communication), then violations of this norm can be sanctioned (e.g., publicly criticizing the norm violator), and punishment is often motivated by hierarchy maintenance/climbing (Cummins, 1999; Cummins, 2005). However, because punishing norm violations is costly, individuals have varying levels of motivations to do so (Horne, 2001; Horne & Cutlip, 2002).

Motivation to climb hierarchies and maintain a high status for one's ingroup is often measured using Social Dominance Orientation (Pratto, et al., 1994). But, as the scale's creators mention, those high in SDO tend to be male, socially conservative, and value unequal hierarchies (Pratto, et al., 1994), which is not true of those who are easily offended by politically incorrect communication. Women were more offended than men and more likely to endorse punishment, and this was independent of political ideology. Furthermore, particularly for females, those high in SDO were actually less offended than those low in SDO, and independent of sex, the lower participants were in SDO, the more they expressed a desire to publicly engage the speaker in debate. In this case, women, who are generally seen as having less power than men, and also tend to be lower in SDO, were more likely to endorse punishment, especially when the violation was made by males. These findings suggest that SDO may not always be the best measure of an individual's desire to dominate over outgroups: individuals from low status groups may also be oriented towards the dominance over outgroups, but they will still be low in SDO. Future research should aim to identify methods for measuring one's desire to dominate over outgroups that do not

necessitate favoring traditional social inequality and conservatism.

This is not to say that individuals in the study were only motivated by *intergroup* hierarchy maintenance. Individuals can also be motivated by *personal* status. Results here indicate that the more a female reported aspiring status, the more she wished to publicly engage the speaker in debate. The results for males were the opposite; the more they aspired to a high status position, the less they desired to engage in debate. Because status seeking women, but not males, had an increased desire to criticize the speaker, females may have been motivated by gaining personal status through improving the status of their group. SDO alone, then, cannot predict the extent to which individuals are driven by intergroup dominance.

Independent of group membership (sex), the more participants valued status, the less likely they were to desire criticizing a low status speaker. Conversely, the more individuals valued status, the more likely they were to desire criticizing a high status speaker. Publicly criticizing a norm violation is costly. The data indicate that those who seek to be in a high status position are less interested in criticizing a low status speaker (where there is likely no status-gaining benefit), but very interested in criticizing a high status speaker, for which the potential risks, but also potential benefits, are greater. For those who do not place a high value on status, the costs of criticizing a high status speaker seem to override the benefits. This suggests the desire to criticize politically incorrect communication is not solely a matter of morality; individuals have strategic motivations as well. Whether motivated by protection of their ingroup or gaining personal status, those most likely to endorse punishment seem to do so because of potential status benefits.

Mediation and Profiles

The results of the mediation analysis indicate that much of the effect of group membership of both the sender and receiver on endorsement of punitive action is mediated through offense. Based on logic, this makes sense: in order to justify punishment, one must first claim offense. However, the results of the latent profile analysis tell a different story. For most participants in the sample, it does seem that attribution of offense came first, and then the desire to punish. For participants classified as *Criticize without Debate*, they did report being offended and a desire to criticize the speaker, but they reported a low desire to engage the speaker in debate. For another class of participants, classified as *Low Offense, High Debate*, their desire to publicly sanction the politically incorrect comment was greater than their offense. These people were above average in their desire to engage the speaker in debate, but below average in their level of offense. This is all to say that there may be a certain "type" of person who gets offended, another "type" who prefers to engage in debate, and yet another who prefers to jump straight to public criticism. Because both of these unique classes were fairly high on dominance and status seeking, these data do not provide an answer as to what personality traits might account for this difference. More research is needed to get a full understanding of the personality traits that might predict offense and endorsement of punitive action.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There were several limitations to the current study that should be improved upon in future research. First, though interaction effects were found between status and status seeking, the predicted interaction between sex of source and status of source was non-significant for both females and males. The status positions used in this study were created to

be *relative* to college students: high school students are one step below and graduate students are one step above. While this is useful in terms of consistency, both offense and endorsement of punishment may have been more influenced by the status manipulation had there been a condition involving a speaker who was higher status still (e.g., University president, like Larry Summers). Perhaps because high profile individuals are held to a higher standard, or perhaps because they are in the spotlight and are thus strategic targets, high status individuals who make comments that can be interpreted as having violated norms of political correctness are oftentimes asked for public apologies, reprimanded, and even fired. Future research should examine high status and its effects on interpretations of offense and endorsement of punishment.

A second limitation is the inconsistency of effects across the measures of endorsement of punishment (mild punishment, debate, and criticism). There was very little support for severe punishment, and though slightly higher, in general, participants had low levels of support for mild punishment. On average, however, participants were much more in favor of engaging the speaker in debate or criticizing the speaker. Based on the hypotheses, these results were unexpected, but they should not have been. If individuals, particularly those who value status, are reprimanding norm violators as a way of maintaining or gaining status, then it follows that personally being involved would be a more attractive route than passively endorsing a punishment that someone else will enforce. Engaging someone in debate or criticizing them are public actions. Though this is riskier, an individual can also gain more by having others view their enforcement of group norms. It is easy to imagine conditions under which passively endorsing a punishment that someone else will enforce may be more desirable, such as when the norm violator has enough power to punish those

who speak against him. Additionally, the results of the LPA indicate that there may be something qualitatively different about those who would prefer to engage in debate and those whose first form of action would be public criticism. More research is needed to understand the conditions under which endorsing different kinds of punitive action are desirable, and how private and public sanctioning might differ.

Lastly, in this study, the group membership manipulation also included the target group, as females were the target of the comment, a source of the comment, and a social identity for the comment interpreters. It is not surprising, then, that because the article participants read was about female intelligence, that females were more offended. Part of the political correctness norm involves individuals being offended by comments that are not about their target group (e.g., the males in this study). The norm was originally meant to protect marginalized minorities, and historically and currently (according to the results of this study), liberals tend to endorse PC norms more than conservatives, even though many of these liberals are not members of the groups that the norm aims to protect (e.g., white liberals being offended over derogatory comments about racial minorities). It seems that offense and retribution in these cases is more based the strategy of criticizing outgroup members than it is about being offended by communication about one's own ingroup. More research is needed to examine the role of group membership independent of being the target in offense and the punishment of norm violations.

Conclusion

There is speech that is objectively offensive towards a target group, but most speech falls into a less clear-cut category. Prior to this study, it was unclear how individuals decided to interpret a comment as offensive, and how the decision to punish offenders was made.

This study provided evidence that members of a target group are more likely to interpret ambiguous comments as offensive when they are made by an outgroup member. The decision to punish offenders is similarly based in group membership, and more interestingly, for those who value status, the status of the source matters. Furthermore, there may be certain types of people that are more likely to engage in the policing of political incorrectness than others. This is all to say that attributions of offense are more subjective than many would like to believe.

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