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# Benefit-Finding Improves Well-Being among Women Who Have Experienced Gender Discrimination

Ariel J. Mosley<sup>1</sup> · Nyla R. Branscombe<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Women experience gender discrimination in numerous important life domains, which can harm psychological well-being. Benefit-finding—identifying the positive implications of having overcome a negative experience—has been theorized as a coping strategy to improve well-being. We experimentally tested whether prompting women, recruited online, to consider the implications of their past experiences of discrimination for themselves in the present—and the benefit-finding that follows—can improve well-being. U.S. women ( $n = 409$ ) were asked to consider a past experience of sexism in three data collections (Studies 1a, 1b, 1c). In each collection, participants were randomly assigned to a benefit-finding condition or a control condition. Those participants in the benefit-finding condition were asked to write about the implications or lessons of their experience for the present whereas those women randomly assigned to the control condition did not. A meta-analysis based on the three data collections revealed that participants in the benefit-finding condition reported greater well-being than those in the control, which was a moderately strong effect. In a third collection (Study 1c), we included an additional control condition in which participants wrote about known facts of gender discrimination. We also included measures of sexism perceptions and willingness to engage in collective action. Participants who reflected upon the implications of their past experiences of sexism reported the highest intentions to engage in collective action to confront future sexism (relative to both control conditions). For women coping with discrimination, this intervention can help alleviate the harmful consequences of discrimination and motivate support to fight gender inequality.

**Keywords** Benefit-finding · Well-being · Posttraumatic growth · Coping · Sexism · Discrimination · Stigma · Collective action

Women are exposed to prejudiced attitudes and sexist treatment in a wide variety of contexts (Barreto et al. 2008; Swim et al. 2001). The mistreatment and poor life outcomes that result from discrimination can threaten psychological health and subjective well-being (Klonoff et al. 2000; Schmitt et al. 2014). Because of the prevalence of gender discrimination, it is important to identify strategies in which women can engage to aid in coping with these negative events. One potential means of promoting well-being among targets of discrimination may be to

encourage them to consider how they have benefitted from having overcome past experiences of discrimination. With benefit-finding, targets can perceive themselves as having acquired something valuable from their past discrimination experiences, such as a greater appreciation of life, strengthened character, and feelings that their lives improved as a result of having overcome negative experiences (Bower et al. 2009). Although some research has examined how interpersonal coping processes—seeking social support or confronting perpetrators of discrimination—might buffer the negative impact of sexism experiences on well-being (Foster 2000; Kaiser and Miller 2004), there is a lack of research concerning the role that benefit-finding might play in coping with discrimination-related distress. The aim of the current research is to experimentally examine how engaging in *benefit-finding* (i.e., prompting women to reflect on the overall lessons or implications of past sexism experiences) might improve women's subjective well-being.

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## Benefit-Finding Following Traumatic Events

In Western society there is a commonly held belief that experiencing injustice will lead to redemption, whereby targets overcome their traumatic experiences and become stronger, better, more fulfilled people as a result (McAdams 2006; Taylor 1983; Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). Indeed, following negative life experiences, some people do perceive themselves as having acquired improved character as a result of their suffering (Affleck and Tennen 1996; Davis et al. 1998) and report deriving benefits such as acquiring personal strengths and becoming a kinder, more understanding person (Affleck et al. 1987; Bower et al. 2009; Davis et al. 1998; Tallman et al. 2007).

In the literature, benefit-finding has been conceptualized similarly to posttraumatic growth—the experience of positive change as a result of struggling with a highly challenging crisis such that an individual's life is improved rather than just returned to baseline (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). Although other terms have been applied, including positive reinterpretation (Scheier et al. 1986), discovery of meaning (Bower et al. 1998), and transformational coping (Aldwin 1994; Pargament 1996), we use the term benefit-finding because it specifically captures the phenomenon of interest whereby individuals identify positive implications from having come through a negative experience. In contrast, positive reinterpretation refers to changing the construal of the actual event rather than changes in construal of the self. Similarly, transformational coping refers to a qualitative change in a person's everyday functioning as part of recovery following trauma, whereas benefit-finding is a broader process that can occur following events that are stressful, but not necessarily traumatic.

## Restoring Belief in a Just World

Benefit-finding can restore a sense of justice and allow observers to make meaning of another's tragedy (Branscombe et al. 2015; Lerner 1980). Evidence suggests that perceivers engage in benefit-finding on behalf of targets of tragedy; targets are then expected to become better, more helpful people as a result of having overcome prior suffering (Warner and Branscombe 2011). For example, in a vignette paradigm examining how threats to perceived justice influence benefit-finding, observers who experienced a high (versus low) justice threat were more likely to report that a victim of a tragedy developed an improved character and gained a more meaningful and enjoyable life than a non-victim (Anderson et al. 2010; Warner and Branscombe 2012). Other work shows that people expect that a victim of childhood sexual abuse should grow up to become a more ethical and kinder person than a non-victim (Warner et al. 2011).

These findings are consistent with the assertion of just world theory that perceiving bad being redeemed with good is one strategy for observers to make meaning of injustice (Lerner 1980). Yet this is not the only way of making meaning from a negative event; individuals can engage in causal attribution (Kelley 1973), where a target emphasizes the cause and assigns blame for a past experience. In contrast, benefit-finding permits individuals to make meaning of a past event by focusing on what follows from having overcome that negative experience and emphasizing who they are today. This forward-thinking or future-construal emphasis (versus a past-construal emphasis that occurs in a causal attributional analysis) may be particularly effective for buffering individuals from the negative consequences to well-being of discrimination experiences.

## Benefit-Finding and Well-Being

Well-being has been conceptualized as a subjectively positive global assessment of aspects of a person's life (Diener 1984). Exposure to different forms of trauma can be a major detriment to well-being. However, past work has shown that believing that one has learned what is important in life, such as becoming a more understanding person, can help people adjust psychologically following traumatic events (Affleck et al. 1987; Bower et al. 2009; Davis et al. 1998; Tallman et al. 2007). Thus, when targets perceive that they have “grown from” the negative experiences they have been through, it can give purpose to their past suffering. Telling one's life story in redemptive terms—where trauma is viewed as a turning point for greater things to come—is positively associated with mental health (McAdams 1993; McAdams et al. 2001).

A meta-analysis examining the relationship between benefit-finding and psychological health from 87 cross-sectional studies showed that benefit-finding was associated with less depression and more positive well-being (Helgeson et al. 2006). However, this meta-analysis also revealed that benefit-finding can result in more intrusive and avoidant thoughts. The authors theorized that although this finding may seem inconsistent with the positive effects of benefit-finding, experiencing intrusive thoughts about a stressful event may be a sign that the individual is working through the implications of the event and that reflecting on those implications could lead to greater post-traumatic growth. A period of contemplation and consideration is often necessary for growth, and intrusive thoughts suggest that there is an ongoing cognitive process occurring (Helgeson et al. 2006).

The effects of benefit-finding can manifest in a variety of ways, including having a greater appreciation for life, an increased sense of personal strength, or gaining a richer existential and spiritual life (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). Correlational studies indicate there is a positive relationship between benefit-finding and optimism (Tedeschi and Calhoun

1996), suggesting that benefit-finding may play a role in coping as a result of an increased focus on matters that are considered most important and less emphasis on uncontrollable or unsolvable problems (Aspinwall et al. 2001). Longitudinal research with cancer patients has shown that benefit-finding, by deriving a new life perspective, predicts positive changes in the self and improved relationships with others, lower levels of depression, and better physical functioning over a 3-year period (Tallman et al. 2007). Collectively, this prior research suggests that benefit-finding may be a helpful means of alleviating the negative effects of traumatic events.

### Benefit-Finding and Discrimination

The majority of scholarly work finding a positive relationship between benefit-finding and well-being has been with people facing difficult personal circumstances, including chronic illness (Bower et al. 2005; Danoff-Burg and Revenson 2005; Milam 2004; Tallman et al. 2007), bereavement (Cadell et al. 2003; Davis et al. 1998; Polatinsky and Esprey 2000), and sexual assault (Frazier et al. 2001). However, to our knowledge, only one study has examined the role of benefit-finding among stigmatized group members. Warner et al. (2014) found that marginalized group members (i.e., women—74% White American—and members of the Jewish community) who were prompted to reflect on the meaning of past group-based marginalization concluded that they had grown from those negative experiences by becoming kinder, more moral, and more alert to injustices that occur elsewhere.

Although prior work has found that benefit-finding is associated with well-being among people experiencing a wide variety of negative outcomes, an experimental design would improve our ability to understand whether benefit-finding is causally implicated in improving well-being among stigmatized group members. Discrimination can be a highly threatening experience, particularly when the event is seen as reflecting pervasive conditions that occur across a broad range of social contexts (Schmitt et al. 2014). Relative to other types of stressors, discrimination is particularly harmful when that stigma is linked to an individual's stable social identity (Schmitt et al. 2014). Given that for members of stigmatized groups discrimination experiences are likely to differ from the types of trauma examined in prior work assessing benefit-finding (e.g., bereavement, illness), in the current work we test whether benefit-finding is an effective strategy to improve well-being among women who have experienced sexist discrimination. Therefore, we extend existing research on benefit-finding and coping with negative life events, which has primarily considered personal life stressors, to assess the psychological implications of benefit-finding as a means of alleviating the distress of past experiences of discrimination.

### Possible Drawbacks of Benefit-Finding

Although previous studies suggest that benefit-finding may promote well-being among women who have experienced gender discrimination, it is conceivable that it might also encourage women to be more accepting of sexism. A target of discrimination who believes that they have gained something positive from their past experience might also believe that what happened to them was therefore justified. If so, benefit-finding might serve to rationalize past experiences of gender discrimination and persuade some women that the gender hierarchy is fair and legitimate. According to system justification theory (Jost and Banaji 1994), people are motivated to defend existing social systems, even if it disadvantages them, and to view the status quo as good, legitimate, and desirable. From this perspective, women, who are already a disadvantaged group in society, may be further marginalized if they believe gender differences in institutional power systems are justified and legitimate (Kay et al. 2005).

Accordingly, benefit-finding following acts of discrimination could inadvertently serve to maintain the status quo and motivate women to become complicit in the subordination of their gender group (Jackman 1994; Sidanius and Pratto 1999). To the extent that benefit-finding reaffirms belief in a just world, women could be persuaded to justify existing gender inequality and become less motivated to engage in collective action. Therefore, by encouraging women to “focus on the positives,” their discrimination experiences might seem justified, convincing women that they are responsible for “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” and minimize the extent to which sexism continues to be a problem. To determine whether benefit-finding instead of serving to justify existing inequality might actually empower targets to engage in collective action, we assess women's perceptions of sexism and their motivation to engage in collective action to confront future sexist experiences following benefit-finding.

### The Present Research

The central purpose of the current research is to determine whether inducing women to engage in benefit-finding for a past experience of gender discrimination improves their well-being. We operationalize well-being in terms of scores on a series of dependent measures including self-esteem, post-traumatic growth, optimism, hope, and happiness. To test this proposition, we had three data collections (Studies 1a, 1b, and 1c). In each collection, we experimentally manipulated benefit-finding by asking women to reflect on the implications of a past experience of gender discrimination for themselves today (versus no such reflection in the control condition). There were three primary commonalities across these studies, which allowed us to conduct a meta-analysis: First, all three

studies used nationally representative samples of U.S. women who have reported experiencing gender discrimination in the past. Second, all three studies induced the same benefit-finding manipulation task (reflecting on the implication condition versus a control condition). Third, in each study, participants completed the same five indicators of well-being (self-esteem, post-traumatic growth, optimism, hope, and happiness) as outcome measures.

However, there are also variations across studies. In Study 1a, we manipulated benefit-finding, and only measured the five well-being measures. In Study 1b, we manipulated benefit-finding, measured the five well-being measures, and newly included a manipulation check of benefit-finding and an outcome measure of negative affect (which was used as a covariate on well-being measures). In Study 1c, we manipulated benefit-finding, measured responses on two manipulation checks (one quantitative and one qualitative measure), assessed the same five well-being measures, negative and positive affect (which were both used as covariates on well-being measures). Study 1c also includes an additional control condition where participants were asked to reflect on the facts of gender discrimination, but not a personal experience of gender discrimination. The purpose of this additional control condition was to determine whether benefit-finding is specific to considering the implications of a personal experience rather than making the general existence of gender discrimination salient. Finally, in Study 1c, we also newly added measures that assessed the extent to which participants perceived sexism to be prevalent in society as well as the extent to which they are motivated to engage in collective action to fight sexism in the future.

Meta-analyses are becoming more common in practice because they allow researchers to examine cumulative information across studies to gain a more accurate effect size than examining the effect sizes within each study (Cumming 2014). With the aim of obtaining a precise estimated effect size of benefit-finding on the manipulation checks (Experiments 1b, 1c) and on well-being (Experiments 1a, 1b, 1c) across our three data collections, we conducted a series of meta-analyses combining the data from the three collections. Across all three data collections, the meta-analysis allowed us to assess the strength of the benefit-finding effect on the manipulation check and the five well-being measures (self-esteem, post-traumatic growth, optimism, hope, and happiness). The affect measures in Studies 1b (negative affect) and 1c (negative and positive affect) were not included in the meta-analysis due to the lack of consistency across studies and because they were used as covariates in the analysis. We also did not include collective action and perceptions of sexism in the meta-analysis because they were only assessed in Study 1c. Furthermore, because Study 1c included an additional control condition, we did not include the participants from this condition in the meta-analysis.

Finally, the third data collection (Study 1c) was unique from the prior two in that it allowed us to examine the extent to which benefit-finding may have potential negative consequences in terms of acceptance of ongoing gender inequality. Specifically, we were interested in the effects of benefit-finding on women's perceptions of ongoing sexism and their willingness to engage in collective action to confront sexism in the future.

In the current research, we had three levels of examination. First, we conducted a meta-analysis to examine the strength of the effect of benefit-finding on the manipulation check (Studies 1b and 1c). We conducted a second meta-analysis to examine the strength of the effect of benefit-finding on the five measures of well-being. Finally, we examined the effect of benefit-finding on perceptions of sexism and willingness to engage in collective action (Study 1c).

Overall then, as a manipulation check, we expected that across Studies 1b and 1c, participants exposed to a benefit-finding condition (versus a control condition) would report significantly greater scores on the benefit-finding manipulation check. Turning to our study's main hypotheses, we predicted that (a) when combining data across our three data collections (Studies 1a, 1b, 1c), participants exposed to a benefit-finding condition (versus a control condition) would report greater well-being (self-esteem, post-traumatic growth, optimism, hope, and happiness) and (b) when looking at our third data collection (Study 1c), participants exposed to a benefit-finding condition (versus two control conditions) would report significantly greater collective action willingness, but not perceptions of sexism.

## Method

### Study 1a

#### Participants

All participants were adult women living in the United States who were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk ([Mturk.com](http://Mturk.com)), an internet-based platform that permits members of the general public to complete tasks anonymously in exchange for monetary compensation. Participants recruited for Study 1a included 153 adult women. The sample size for the present study was determined a priori based on a power analysis conducted using G\*Power software. Assuming a large effect size ( $\Delta R^2 = .06$ ), alpha equal to .05, and 80% power in a two-condition multivariate analysis of variance model, a desired sample size of 72 was estimated. We excluded 17 participants from analyses due to missing data (failure to complete

the study) or failure to follow instructions. Participants' missing data were not sufficiently minimal to impute scores (Parent 2013).

Thus our final sample consisted of 136 participants ( $M_{age} = 35.74$ ,  $SD = 12.14$ , range = 16–32). Of these 136 participants, 100 (74%) were White American, 12 (9%) were African American, 4 (3%) were Asian American, 9 (7%) were Latina American, 1 (1%) was Native American, and 10 (7%) were multiracial. Each participant was paid \$1.00 upon completion of the study. Sixty-three (46%) participants were randomly assigned to a benefit-finding condition, and 73 (54%) participants were randomly assigned to a discrimination-control condition. A Chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether participants' exclusion rate (excluded vs. included) was equal across conditions. For Study 1a, participant numbers were equivalent in the two conditions,  $\chi^2(1, n = 136) = .026, p = .61$ .

### Procedure, Materials, and Measures

All materials and procedures described here were approved by the University of Kansas' Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. (All measures and manipulations are detailed in the [online supplemental materials](#).) After giving consent, participants read that the purpose of the research was to investigate how people imagine past experiences as an observer might. Participants read that in the first task they would read a passage and that they would be asked to complete a writing task later. All participants were then asked to read the following excerpt:

According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2014), "sex discrimination refers to treating someone unfavorably because of that person's sex." This definition can include sexual harassment, language or behaviors reflecting traditional gender role prejudice, demeaning and derogatory comments, and sexually objectifying remarks.

All participants were then asked to think about a recent time during which they were discriminated against or treated in a sexist manner due to their gender and that they considered important. Participants were then randomly assigned to a benefit-finding condition or a control condition.

**Benefit-Finding Manipulation** Participants who were in the benefit-finding condition received the following writing prompt: "We are interested in the implications or lessons you see in retrospect for the discrimination event that you described. Write a few sentences about the meaning or the lessons that this experience has had for you today." Participants in the no-benefits control condition also wrote about their discrimination experience, but they were

not asked to consider the implications or lessons that they perceived for themselves in the present. After the writing task, all participants completed the dependent measures in the order listed in the following. After participants completed these dependent measures, they responded to demographic questions. Finally, we fully debriefed participants, probed them for any suspicions, and thanked them for their participation.

**Self-Esteem** To assess confidence in one's self-worth, we asked participants to respond to a single item of "I have high self-esteem," rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*) (Robins et al. 2001). Higher scores indicate greater confidence in one's self-worth.

**Post-Traumatic Growth** To assess perceived strength of the self and construction of positive meaning and appreciation of life, we asked participants to respond to seven items from the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996;  $\alpha = .90$ ), such as: "I have a feeling of self-reliance" and "I have an appreciation for the value of my own life," rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Responses were averaged to form a composite ( $\alpha = .83$ ). Higher scores indicate greater perceived personal growth following a traumatic or stressful event.

**Optimism** To assess generalized optimism, we asked participants to respond to eight items of the Life Orientation Test (Scheier and Carver 1985;  $\alpha = .76$ ), such as: "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best" and "I always look on the bright side of things," rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Responses were averaged to form a composite ( $\alpha = .90$ ). Higher scores indicate greater generalized optimism.

**Hope** To assess a positive motivational state that is based on a sense of successful agency and ability to plan and meet goals, we asked participants to respond to 12 items of the Adult Hope Scale (Snyder et al. 1991;  $\alpha = .84$ ) such as: "I can think of many ways to get out of a jam" and "I energetically pursue my goals," rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Responses were averaged to form a composite ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Higher scores indicate greater hope and agency.

**Happiness** To assess subjective well-being and quality of life, we asked participants to respond to eight items from the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al. 2015;  $\alpha = .91$ ), such as: "I've been feeling good about myself" and "I've been dealing with problems well," rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Responses were averaged to form a composite ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Higher scores indicate greater happiness.



## Study 1b

### Participants

Participants recruited for Study 1b included 106 adult women. Based on the effect size obtained in Study 1a ( $\Delta R^2 = .083$ ), alpha equal to .05, and 80% power in a two-condition multivariate analysis of variance model, a desired sample size of 98 was estimated. We excluded 14 participants from analyses due to missing data (failure to complete the study) or failure to follow instructions, which was not sufficiently minimal to permit imputation (Parent 2013). The final sample was 92 women ( $M_{age} = 35.77$ ,  $SD = 11.04$ , range = 18–70). Most of the 92 participants were White American ( $n = 66$ ; 72%), 9 (10%) were African American, 6 (7%) were Asian American, 2 (2%) were Latina American, 1 (1%) was Native American, 5 (5%) were Biracial, and 3 (3%) preferred not to respond. We randomly assigned 48 (52%) participants to a benefit-finding condition, and 44 (48%) participants to a discrimination-control condition. A Chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether the participant exclusion (exclusion vs. inclusion) rate in the overall analyses was equally distributed across conditions. For our study, differential exclusion did not occur; equivalent numbers of participants were assigned to the two conditions,  $\chi^2(1, n = 92) = .024, p = .88$ .

To provide further evidence for the validity of our manipulation, in Study 1b we include a manipulation check that directly asked participants the extent to which they derived personal benefits from their past experience of discrimination, which is important because they were not explicitly asked to do so in Study 1a. Additionally, Study 1b sought to test whether writing about the benefits following from a discrimination experience reduced current negative mood compared to only writing about the discrimination experience itself.

### Procedure, Materials, and Measures

Participants received the same instructions as in Study 1a. All were asked to think about a recent time that they were discriminated against or treated in a sexist manner due to their gender and that they considered important. The benefit-finding manipulation was the same as in Study 1a. In the present study, we included a manipulation check assessing self-perceived benefit-finding.

**Manipulation Check of Perceived Benefits** As a manipulation check for benefit-finding, participants completed 10 items (Warner and Branscombe 2012;  $\alpha = .78$ ) on a 7-point scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Participants responded to items such as: “I have learned something important because of this experience”; “Because of this experience, I have learned to appreciate life more”; and “I feel I am a better

person because of what happened to me.” In the current study, responses were averaged to form a composite ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Higher scores indicated greater personal benefits had been derived from the experience.

**Dependent Measures** We used the same dependent measures as in Study 1: the single item of self-esteem, post-traumatic growth ( $\alpha = .90$ ), optimism ( $\alpha = .92$ ), hope ( $\alpha = .91$ ), and happiness ( $\alpha = .91$ ). In the present study, we also included a measure of current negative affect in which we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they felt the following emotions right now “in the moment.” Four items were chosen from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al. 1988): sad, depressed, discouraged, and unhappy, rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). These responses were summed to create a negative affect score ( $\alpha = .96$ ). Higher scores indicate greater current negative affect.

## Study 1c

### Participants

Participants recruited for Study 1c included 266 adult women. Based on the effect size obtained in Study 1 ( $\Delta R^2 = .083$ ), alpha equal to .05, and 80% power in a three-condition multivariate analysis of variance model, a desired sample size of 215 was estimated. Due to the nature of previous exclusions, we oversampled to ensure power to assess predicted effects. We excluded 85 participants from analyses: One participant was removed for having incomplete data, nine were removed for reporting that they were male, 49 participants were removed for not following the manipulation instructions, and six participants were removed for reporting that they completed the benefit-finding manipulation, although they were assigned to another condition. Twenty participants were removed for having a duplicate IP address, indicating that they attempted the study more than once.

As a result of these exclusions, the final analytic sample consisted of 181 women ( $M_{age} = 34.19$ ,  $SD = 10.33$ , range = 18–70). Most of the participants were White American ( $n = 121$ , 67%), 21 (12%) were African American, 6 (3%) were Asian American, 7 (4%) were Latina American, 5 (3%) were Native American, 13 (7%) were Biracial, and 8 (4%) preferred not to respond. Forty (22.1%) participants were randomly assigned to a benefit-finding condition, 65 (42%) participants were randomly assigned to a discrimination-control condition, and 76 (65%) participants were randomly assigned to a facts-control condition. A Chi-square test was performed to determine whether the frequency of participants was equally distributed across conditions. For Study 1c, participant frequencies were overall equally distributed across conditions,  $\chi^2(2, n = 181) = 6.54, p = .054$ .

## Procedure, Materials, and Measures

In Study 1c, in addition to the hypothesized positive consequences for well-being, we assess whether benefit-finding may have unintended negative consequences for women in their understanding of sexism and their motivation to confront sexism. Therefore, in Study 1c, we include a measure of perceptions of sexism to assess whether reflecting on the benefits derived from experiencing gender discrimination also encourages them to be more accepting of the status quo. In addition, we include a measure of collective action to assess whether reflecting on the benefits of past discrimination facilitates women's feelings of empowerment and emboldens them to confront future gender discrimination.

Finally, we expanded the design of our third experiment to include a second control condition. In this condition we ask participants to state the facts that they have previously heard regarding discrimination, without any reference to their personal experiences. We adapted prior methods of a study examining benefit-finding with breast cancer survivors (Stanton et al. 2002). Although in this condition participants are not asked to write about personal experiences of discrimination, we expect those in this facts-control condition, relative to the benefit-finding condition, to report reduced subjective well-being. Specifically, we predicted that the benefit-finding condition will differ from the other two conditions on measures of well-being, with scores on the well-being measures being (a) lower in the facts-control condition than the benefit-finding condition and (b) lower in the discrimination-control condition than the benefit-finding condition. We also predicted that perceptions of sexism would not be affected by the benefit-finding manipulation because sexism was equally salient in all three conditions, but that collective action would be highest in the benefit-finding condition relative to the two control conditions.

Participants received the same instructions as in Studies 1a and 1b. In the present experiment, we included a third condition where participants were not asked to write about a personal discrimination event or to reflect on the implications of such an experience of gender discrimination, but instead they were asked to write facts that they have previously heard about gender discrimination. Thus, participants were randomly assigned to (a) a benefit-finding condition, (b) a no-benefits/discrimination control condition, or (c) a facts-control condition.

**Benefit-Finding Manipulation** Participants in the benefit-finding condition received the same writing prompt as previously which asked them to write a few sentences about the discrimination event that they experienced in addition to the meaning or the lessons that this experience has had for them today. As an example, one participant said:

I was discriminated against in the past because of my gender when I tried to get into the boxing gym I am at. It is predominantly male, and they all were professional fighters.... It taught me to be stronger and more confident in myself as a woman. I vowed to call out sexism whenever and wherever I saw it, to not be silent about it. I learned that it is up to me as a woman to combat discrimination and not wait for someone else to do it.

Participants in the no-benefits/discrimination condition only wrote about the discriminatory event that they experienced, but they were not asked to write about the implications of their experience for themselves today. As an example, one participant said:

I was discriminated against when I was interviewing for a job. The employer implied that this job was not suitable for a woman and he tried to steer me towards other employment opportunities within his company. Unfortunately, those other opportunities did not pay very well and there was no reason for him to not consider me for this position as I was very well qualified. I felt discriminated against because this employer apparently thought that a woman would not be a good fit for this position as she would leave the company when she has children or she would put her family first ahead of work and be an unreliable employee. I felt it was just unfair and it did not seem like a good company to work for.

In the facts control condition, participants were not asked to write about a personal experience of discrimination, but instead were asked to write about some facts that they know or have heard about regarding gender discrimination. This condition was directly adapted from prior research (Stanton et al. 2002). As an example, one participant said: "People are overlooked for certain jobs because of their gender. People are treated differently in the workplace or schools because of their gender."

Participants then completed the benefit-finding manipulation check used in Study 1b. After participants completed the dependent measures in the order listed in the following, they responded to the same manipulation check in Study 1b as well as demographic questions. Afterwards, we fully debriefed participants, probed them for any suspicions, and thanked them for their participation.

**Manipulation Checks of Perceived Benefits** As a first manipulation check, participants completed the same 10 items from Study 1b (Warner and Branscombe 2011) assessing perceived benefits derived on a 7-point scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*)

to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Example items are: “I have learned something important because of this experience” and “I feel I am a better person because of what happened to me.” Responses were averaged to form a composite ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

As a second manipulation check, we assessed the qualitative content of participants' responses to the manipulation, analyzing whether benefits were discussed or not. Specifically, for this measure of benefits derived, we searched whether any of the words/phrases, “strong, grow, power, assertive, tough, aware, fight back, worth, stand up for/stick up for, capable,” were either present or absent within each participant's written responses (0 = *absent*; 1 = *present*). These codes were summed so that possible scores ranged from 0 to 1 with higher scores indicating that more benefits were reported by participants.

**Dependent Measures** We used the same dependent measures as in Studies 1a and 1b: our single-item measure of self-esteem, post-traumatic growth ( $\alpha = .91$ ), optimism ( $\alpha = .90$ ), hope ( $\alpha = .87$ ), and happiness ( $\alpha = .93$ ). In the present study, we also included a measure of state negative affect, in which we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they feel the following emotions right now “in the moment.” Four items were chosen from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al. 1988;  $\alpha = .91$ ): “sad, depressed, discouraged, and unhappy,” rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). These responses were averaged to create a negative affect score ( $\alpha = .92$ ). We also included four new positive items chosen from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al. 1988;  $\alpha = .85$ ): “happy, joyful, encouraged, and upbeat,” rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). These responses were averaged to create a state positive affect score ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Higher scores indicate greater positive affect.

We also included two new dependent measures in Study 1c. To assess collective action, or motivation to engage in future action to benefit women, we asked participants to respond to five items (adapted from Van Zomeren et al. 2004;  $\alpha = .88$ ): “I am motivated to confront future gender discrimination,” “I would do something together with other women to call attention to sexism,” “I feel obligated to engage in collective action to fight gender discrimination,” “I would participate in a protest with other women to stop gender discrimination,” and “I would support policies that advocate for women's rights”—rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Responses were averaged to form a composite ( $\alpha = .90$ ). Higher scores indicate greater intention to engage in collective action to improve conditions for women.

To assess perceptions of sexism, we asked participants to respond to five items (adapted from Schmitt et al. 2002;  $\alpha = .81$ ): “Women as a group have been unjustly marginalized by society,” “Women as a group have been unfairly victimized because of their gender,” “It is unfair that women

experience gender discrimination,” “Women should work towards fighting gender discrimination,” and “Women often miss out on important opportunities because of their gender”—rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Responses were averaged to form a composite ( $\alpha = .83$ ). Higher scores indicate greater perceptions of ongoing sexism in society.

## Results

We had three strategies for data analyses. The first strategy was a meta-analysis to examine the strength of the effect of benefit-finding on the manipulation checks (Studies 1b and 1c). The second strategy was a meta-analysis to examine the strength of the effect of benefit-finding on the five measures of well-being (Studies 1a, 1b, and 1c). The third strategy focused on the outcome of benefit-finding on measures of perceptions of sexism and willingness to engage in collective action (Study 1c). Descriptive statistics by experimental conditions and univariate main effect comparisons for each data collection are presented in the [online supplement](#).

### Manipulation Checks

#### Study 1b Manipulation Check

A univariate analysis revealed a main effect for benefit-finding condition,  $F(1, 90) = 10.43$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $d = .67$ . Women who were prompted to reflect on the lessons or implications of their discrimination experience reported deriving greater benefits ( $M = 5.33$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) compared to those who also wrote about their discrimination experience, but did not reflect on its meaning for them in the present ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ). Writing about the implications of one's experience of discrimination increased the perceived benefits gained from that experience relative to only writing about the experience itself.

#### Study 1c Manipulation Checks

We conducted a multivariate analysis of covariance, with benefit-finding as the independent variable, and the two manipulation checks as dependent variables, Pillai's Trace  $F(4, 356) = 22.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .20$ . A follow up univariate analysis of variance revealed a main effect of condition on the benefit-finding manipulation check ( $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ). Participants in the benefit-finding condition reported deriving more positive benefits than those in the discrimination-control condition ( $p = .01$ ,  $d = .25$ ), although unexpectedly there was no difference between the benefit-finding condition and the facts-control condition ( $p = .13$ ). There was also no difference

between the facts/no discrimination condition and the discrimination control condition ( $p = .19$ ).

Next, we assessed the qualitative content of participants' responses to the manipulation, analyzing the dichotomous measure of benefits discussed or not. We submitted scores to a univariate analysis of variance to compare across conditions. This analysis revealed a main effect of condition ( $\eta_p^2 = .40$ ). Participants in the benefit-finding condition more frequently reported deriving positive benefits in their written response to the manipulation (e.g., stronger, assertive) than those in the discrimination control condition ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.39$ ) and more than participants in the facts-control condition ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.25$ ). There was no difference between the facts/no discrimination condition and the discrimination control condition ( $p = .58$ ).

### Meta-Analysis of Benefit-Finding on Well-Being

We investigated the size of the benefit-finding effect on measures of well-being as a function of condition. More specifically, we conducted a meta-analysis to assess the robustness of the support for our benefit-finding predictions across the three experiments, in line with current recommendations (Cumming 2014; Giner-Sorolla 2012; Goh et al. 2016). We assessed effects on the dependent measures by comparing the benefit-finding condition to the control condition ( $n = 333$ ). Because the additional "consider the facts" control condition was only in Experiment 3, this condition was not included in the meta-analysis ( $n = 76$ ). We calculated Cohen's  $d$  based on pooled sample sizes, means, and standard deviations for all three studies, with a positive  $d$  value indicating greater well-being in the benefit-finding condition compared to the control. We examined the effect size of condition using a random-effects model, as there was no a priori reason to assume that the true effect size is exactly the same across all studies (Hedges and Vevea 1998).

We examine whether the benefit-finding condition influenced participants' responses on our five measures of well-being (self-esteem, post-traumatic growth, optimism, hope, and happiness). The random effects meta-analysis produced a medium effect size of benefit-finding on self-esteem,  $t(327) = 4.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .49$ , 95% CI [.269, .706]. Likewise, the random effects meta-analysis produced a medium effect size of benefit-finding on post-traumatic growth,  $t(327) = 5.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .60$ , 95% CI [.377, .818]. The random effects meta-analysis produced a medium effect size of benefit-finding on optimism,  $t(327) = 4.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .51$ , 95% CI [.292, .731]. The random effects meta-analysis also produced a medium effect size of benefit-finding on hope,  $t(327) = 4.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .52$ , 95% CI [.304, .743]. The random effects meta-analysis produced a medium effect size of benefit-finding on happiness,  $t(327) = 4.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .50$ , 95% CI [.276, .714]. To conclude, the meta-analysis revealed

that the benefit-finding effect on five different indicators of well-being produces consistent, medium effect sizes.

### Collective Action and Perceptions of Sexism, Study 1c

We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance, with benefit-finding as the independent variable, collective action and perceptions of discrimination as dependent variables, and positive and negative affect as covariates, Pillai's Trace  $F(4, 352) = 3.56$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .038$ . A follow up univariate analysis of variance revealed that there was a significant main effect of condition on collective action. Participants in the benefit-finding condition reported greater willingness to take collective action than those in the discrimination control condition ( $p = .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .086$ ) and the facts-control condition ( $p = .017$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ ). There was no difference between the discrimination-control condition and the facts-control condition ( $p = .73$ ). A follow up univariate analysis also revealed that there was no main effect of condition on perceptions of sexism ( $p = .763$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .003$ ).

### Discussion

A meta-analysis across three data collections demonstrated that our relatively simple intervention of having women think about the lessons they learned from having experienced a sexist discrimination event strongly increased perceptions of personal benefits. The present meta-analysis showed a robust effect size of the benefit manipulation, demonstrating medium effects across five measures of well-being (i.e., self-esteem, post-traumatic growth, optimism, hope, and happiness). Furthermore, results from Study 1c show that women in the benefit-finding condition reported greater willingness to take collective action for women than women in either the discrimination or facts control conditions, despite no differences among these groups in their perceptions of sexism.

Women experience gender discrimination in a variety of life domains, which has the potential to create significant psychological distress and devaluation, undermining well-being (Schmitt et al. 2014). Yet, the current research found that benefit-finding regarding past experiences of gender discrimination improved participants' well-being. The current work is the first known to empirically demonstrate that prompting women to reflect on the lessons or implications of past experiences of discrimination for their present selves can improve subjective well-being, while also motivating action for positive change. Such findings will assist future research examining the role of benefit-finding on appraisals of the self, particularly after experiencing identity-based discrimination. Such research contributes to a legacy of theoretical work on benefit-finding and post-traumatic growth. Furthermore, our research builds on the meta-analysis of Helgeson et al., (2006), which

demonstrated a small effect size found among a series of cross-sectional studies reported in 77 articles for optimism ( $d = .27$ ) and for positive reappraisal ( $d = .38$ ). Our work, which experimentally manipulated, rather than measured, benefit-finding, revealed even larger effects (ranging from  $d_s = .49-.60$ ).

Despite the robust effect of benefit-finding that we observed, it is important to underscore that this intervention to improve the well-being of women who have experienced discrimination is not intended to minimize perceptions of the prevalence of sexism, and we found no evidence that it did so. Although past research makes clear that people take sexism less seriously than other forms of intergroup bias (Gulker et al. 2013; King 2003; Major and Sawyer 2009; Woodzicka et al. 2015), our research indicates that although women can individually combat the pernicious effects of sexism, it does not eliminate the need to work collectively toward eradicating gender inequality. The current research documents one means by which the negative emotional impact that discrimination has on women can be attenuated. Women who engaged in benefit-finding reported not only improved well-being, but also greater motivation to engage in collective action to fight future gender discrimination. This is particularly notable because confronting discrimination can have positive effects for the confronter and the confronted (Gervais et al. 2010; Mallett and Wagner 2011). Furthermore, confronting discrimination is one of the most effective tools in fighting intergroup inequality (Czopp et al. 2006), is associated with empowerment and closure (Gervais et al. 2010; Haslett and Lipman 1997), and disrupts discriminatory social norms (Blanchard et al. 1994). Thus, it is important to identify ways that benefit-finding may effectively promote such actions.

Although benefit-finding has been tied to maintaining belief in a just world among observers (Anderson et al. 2010; Branscombe et al. 2015; Warner and Branscombe 2012), the current research illustrates how benefit-finding can have positive consequences for the self. We contend that women can be empowered through benefit-finding without excusing the actions of the perpetrators of discrimination, as long as this empowerment is viewed against the backdrop of historical sexism and cultural restraints directed at women (Bay-Cheng 2015; Lamb 2015). Although gender discrimination directed toward women is an obvious means of maintaining the unequal status quo, ideologies and justification processes can further stigmatize and victimize women by encouraging them to engage in self-blame and legitimization of the status quo. By identifying the positive effects of benefit-finding we are not suggesting that women are responsible for the discrimination event should they fail to derive benefits (Bay-Cheng 2015). Instead, our research aims to provide women with a practical means of improving their well-being under existing conditions of gender inequality. Furthermore, we strongly advise against the notion that discrimination experiences are

somehow “good” or “beneficial” for women in the long-term. The goal of our work is not to minimize women’s victimization experiences, justify actions of perpetrators of gender discrimination, or suggest that women are responsible for “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” and solving problems of sexism on their own. The current research instead emphasizes that focusing on how the self has grown from and learned from past discrimination experiences can positively equip women to navigate future societal spaces where they may be vulnerable to intergroup bias.

Our findings provide strong evidence of a successful intervention aimed at improving well-being for women and, at the same time, motivating them to act against perpetrators of future discrimination. The present research outlines theoretically derived recommendations concerning effective strategies that allow women to reject and confront sexism. By combining theoretical insights from the discrimination and coping literatures, we show that benefit-finding can help mitigate the negative effects of past experiences of discrimination and promote psychological well-being among targets of discrimination. This approach need not take attention away from the injustice committed by the perpetrators, and certainly it does not place responsibility upon the target. Rather, benefit-finding allows targets to emphasize who they are today and who they may be in the future, which is different than only focusing on the discriminatory event that happened in the past and assigning blame for it.

The current research shows that benefit-finding does not come at the expense of reduced perceptions of sexism or deterred motivation to engage in collective action. Benefit-finding did *not* reduce perceptions of sexism or lead women to be more comfortable with the status quo; rather it may empower women to engage in collective action against discrimination that may be encountered in the future. Benefit-finding allows targets of past discrimination to develop new coping skills (e.g., perceiving themselves as becoming stronger, more optimistic, and empowered to engage in collective action), which may make them better prepared to successfully deal with future discrimination. Increased psychological preparedness may ultimately lead to greater willingness to make structural changes aimed at reducing gender inequality (Van Zomeren et al. 2004). Focusing on the broader lessons and implications of gender discrimination sheds light on the importance of fighting to eradicate gender inequality in the future.

One strength of our work is that we included a variety of measures of well-being (i.e., self-esteem, post traumatic growth, optimism, hope, and happiness), showing that benefit-finding has broad effects on psychological health. Another strength is the open-ended nature of our manipulation, which asks the participant to reflect on her own experiences of discrimination rather than projecting a uniform, temporary, or manipulated experience of discrimination contrived

in the laboratory. Instead, participants were able to construct a narrative about their own discrimination experience in a way that facilitated a sense of meaning, growth, and efficacy for confronting future injustice. What is perhaps most novel about these studies is that we provide a method for reducing the harm sustained by discrimination that has not been previously tested and show that engaging in benefit-finding is a successful coping strategy for improving well-being among women who have experienced gender discrimination.

We provide empirical support for previous theorizing concerning benefit-finding (Helgeson et al. 2006) and its associated concepts by experimentally manipulating the derivation of personal benefits from past experiences of discrimination by prompting participants to reflect on the overall lessons or implications of their past experiences of sexism. Indeed, although we did not specifically ask participants to report positive implications, they nevertheless did so—by reflecting on lessons learned that were seemingly positive in nature (e.g., feeling stronger, more confident). It is interesting to see women spontaneously derive constructive lessons from negative experiences of discrimination without being directly prompted to do so. McAdams (2006) has also reported that positive redemption narratives are a common means whereby bad experiences are redeemed by a positive turn of events.

Our work goes beyond past research on benefit-finding, which has often been correlational in nature, by employing a meta-analysis across three experiments that compare the benefit-finding condition to a control condition. The findings are consistent with cognitive adaptation theory (Taylor 1983), which suggests people construe benefits from trauma and doing so helps overcome the negative psychological consequences of the experienced situation. Our work also extends research in the cognitive adaptation theory tradition to show that this strategy is effective for targets of group-based discrimination and can empower targets of discrimination to support collective action. Our work empirically tests aspects of McAdams' (2006) work on redemptive narratives by showing that engaging in a redemptive narrative for one's own experience of gender discrimination can facilitate improvements in self views, where targets can overcome their negative experiences and perceive themselves as becoming better, more fulfilled people as a result. Our studies provide empirical support for this speculation by demonstrating how engaging in personal redemptive narratives can act as a vehicle for women to ultimately achieve positive self-changes from overcoming such negative experiences.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although benefit-finding can have positive outcomes for the self, the scope of our study does not assess whether benefit-finding may also result in negative consequences. For example, past work (Branscombe et al. 2015; Warner and

Branscombe 2011) has found evidence that when observers focus on the meaning of past victimization for the victim compared to the perpetrator, observers are more likely to hold victims to higher standards to help other victims. Warner et al. (2014) also found that this was the case among historically victimized group members, such that focusing on past lessons increased victims' own perceived moral obligations to help other non-adversarial victim groups. Future research should examine the potential consequences of benefit-finding among women who have experienced discrimination and whether it leads to greater perceived moral obligations to help other groups that may be experiencing discrimination. Although we demonstrated that benefit-finding did not influence perceptions of ongoing sexism in society, the current study did not directly assess broader just world beliefs. Based on past theorizing (Branscombe et al. 2015; Lerner 1980), we would predict that benefit-finding would protect just world beliefs, but would not induce rationalization of the discrimination event itself, because the focus in benefit-finding is on the present self and the lessons learned in hindsight.

Future research that assesses benefit-finding in a longitudinal design would be valuable. The critical question of whether participants are experiencing enduring change, as well as whether such change facilitates a long-lasting sense of resiliency among targets (i.e., a stable trajectory of healthy functioning across time), should be addressed (Bonanno 2005). Past work has shown that resilience is linked to the continued fulfillment of personal and social responsibilities, as well as the capacity for positive emotions and experiences (Bonanno and Keltner 1997). It is possible that participants' reports of benefit-finding are linked to other observable changes. Such changes may include behavioral responses in the face of future discrimination, improved emotion regulation (Kross et al. 2005), or improved physical health. However, it is also possible that report of benefit-finding may not reflect actual lasting changes (McFarland and Alvaro 2000), and instead the benefits derived are mostly perceptual in nature, although they may nonetheless serve as coping strategies that help deal with threatening life events. Future empirical work should assess potential long-term effects, particularly among individuals who experience frequent discrimination in their daily lives.

### Practice Implications

The role of benefit-finding in improving well-being is a promising area of inquiry that allows for an increased understanding of the human capacity for growth following experiences of discrimination. Engaging in benefit-finding may facilitate a sense of critical consciousness regarding gender discrimination or reflection on oppressive social, economic, and political conditions that contribute to social injustice (Diemer et al. 2015). Benefit-finding may increase women's critical

consciousness and allow them to reflect on the lessons they have learned and how they have grown from their past experiences. Furthermore, empowerment to engage in collective action may render individuals more effective for enacting structural change as well as individual change. These results may be helpful to educators and activists for promoting involvement in collective action. According to research on coping, collective action is a form of problem-focused coping that allows the individual to mobilize to act for the purpose of changing the status quo (Van Zomeren et al. 2004). Our research may help to explain how deriving benefits from past discrimination can motivate people to join social movements to improve their group's standing. Furthermore, past research shows that collective action can buffer sexual minority Women of Color from the psychological distress that results from discrimination experiences (DeBlaere et al. 2014). Future research is needed to fully examine how these findings may translate into mitigating different forms of group-based stigma (e.g., racial/ethnic, sexuality, religious).

The findings of the current study also provide insight for clinical practice. First, our research demonstrates an important connection between benefit-finding for past experiences of gender discrimination and increased well-being. This relationship suggests that counselors working with stigmatized populations who experience a diverse array of negative discrimination events may be assisted with their coping efforts by encouraging the forward-looking outlook entailed in benefit-finding. Thinking about discrimination experiences as a form of stress that can be alleviated with benefit-finding can further our understanding of the ways that marginalized group members cope with stigmatizing experiences. It may be the case that people who engage in benefit-finding are more likely to receive social support from others. Because past work shows that third-party observers perceive greater morality among victims who have benefitted from their past experience (Branscombe et al. 2015), it may be that observers attribute other positive traits to discrimination targets as well. As a result, women who have engaged in benefit-finding may be more likely to attract social support. Our research also has practical implications for educators, practitioners, and policymakers aimed at reducing gender discrimination because it suggests that educational campaigns that focus on overcoming past injustices by deriving personal strength may assist in motivating women to confront sexism. Benefit-finding can help individuals to become more motivated to respond to acts of discrimination and engage in behaviors that will help to eradicate group-based inequality.

## Conclusion

The present work documents the powerful role that benefit-finding can have in facilitating resiliency, improved psychological health, and a new sense of meaning for targets of

discrimination. Women continue to experience pervasive sexist treatment in many aspects of life, which can lead to long-term psychological distress and harm women's well-being (Schmitt et al. 2014). Therefore, it is crucial that society continues to make structural changes to reduce discrimination against women. We have highlighted one possible coping strategy that may help women feel they have overcome past discrimination experiences and thereby gain a sense of optimism, hope, and motivation for future action. As society continues to make important strides to reduce gender inequality, benefit-finding can serve as an effective self-empowerment strategy among women.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

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**Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals** This research involved human participants. This research did not involve animals.

**Informed Consent** See next page.

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