

Perceived authenticity as a vicarious justification for prejudice

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Abstract

When is the expression of prejudice seen as authentic? Perceived authenticity refers to how much one judges another's behavior to reflect the beliefs, attitudes, goals, and desires of that person. We investigate whether perceived authenticity can operate as a vicarious justification for prejudice—a way for prejudiced people to defend the prejudiced statements of others. In six studies, prejudice was positively related to perceived authenticity of similarly prejudiced statements: People are more likely to label prejudiced statements they agree with as authentic. We develop a vicarious justification account of “authentic prejudice.” People need not justify what is socially acceptable; if authenticity serves as a justification for prejudice, it will be reported only when the prejudice is nonnormative. Three studies demonstrate that the positive relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity is heightened when the expressed prejudice is seen as unacceptable. People call “authentic” what they agree with but feel they cannot express.

Keywords

authenticity, norms, justification–suppression model, prejudice

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Authenticity is prized in individualistic cultures (Gjersoe et al., 2014). We praise those who resist social pressures, remain honest to their convictions, and live in accordance with their inner core selves (Becker & Marecek, 2008). Can we prize the consistency of the authentic bigot?

The Donald Trump presidency provides an example. Trump expressed prejudice from the start of his campaign to the end of his term. He openly insulted: Mexicans, immigrants, Muslims, Haitians, Africans, Black Americans, Puerto Ricans, Korean Americans, women, and fat people, among others (Lee & Quealy, 2018; Leonhardt & Philbrick, 2018). Many 2016

Republican primary voters thought Trump was “authentic” (Sargent, 2015), and people across the political spectrum called Trump “the authentic” candidate during the 2016 cycle (Estepa, 2017; J. Johnson, 2017; Merelli, 2017). Trump's flouting of norms against explicitly expressing prejudice has been one of the oft-mentioned

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reasons for labeling him “authentic” (Basavaraju, 2016; Bebout & Garcia, 2016; Gallagher, 2016; A. Johnson, 2016). Trump qualifies offensive statements by saying that he is just being “honest” or “frank” (Reston, 2015). Many others deploy this tactic: journalists claiming society prevents an “honest” conversation about prejudice (Abernathy, 2017; Dickerson, 2004), reality television contestants expressing racial stereotypes (Fallon et al., 2017), and White nationalists discussing their racial ideology (Taylor & Molyneux, 2016)—all under the protective banner of authenticity.

Why do people perceive another’s expression of prejudice to be authentic? We propose people will do so as an attempt to vicariously excuse another’s expression of prejudice. We first discuss the vague concept of authenticity, then situate it within modern theories of prejudice expression. We review two psychological theories that may explain why people might variously justify another’s expression of prejudice by labeling it “authentic.”

Perceived Authenticity

Perceived authenticity depends on the person and the context. Perceptions of authenticity are a “socially constructed interpretation . . . of what is observed rather than properties inherent in the object” (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010, p. 839; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). A judgment of authenticity is the perception that a person is acting in accordance with what an observer perceives to be the target’s actual beliefs, attitudes, goals, and desires (see also Liu & Perrewé, 2006).

People see political candidates they support as authentic, and authenticity elicits support. Speaking candidly leads to perceiving a political candidate as authentic when people like the candidate, but less so when they do not (Pillow et al., 2017). Public figures are perceived as less authentic when they hire someone to write their social media posts for them (Cohen & Tyler, 2016).

People can even perceive a lying demagogue—as a flagrant violator of established norms—as an authentic champion of their interests when “their

side of a social divide regards the political system as flawed or illegitimate” (Hahl et al., 2018, p. 1). When a candidate seems unfiltered and not “politically correct,” people think a candidate rejects external influences, which in turn leads to perceiving the candidate as authentic (Pillow et al., 2017).

When speakers adjust their speech to be politically correct (e.g., using euphemistic vs. offensive language), they are seen as warm but inauthentic (subject to external influence; Rosenblum et al., 2020). This was true only when subjects were unlikely to feel sympathetic with the target of the prejudicial statements; it suggests that people who are prejudiced toward a group tend to see people who express prejudices toward that group as authentic.

We investigate how authenticity is perceived when a prejudice is expressed. We test this suggestion explicitly. We focus on the broad label of “authentic,” as it is a vague, positive label—making it conducive to being strategically deployed as a justification for prejudice.

Justifying Prejudice: The Justification–Suppression Model

We suggest that perceiving authenticity when prejudice is expressed becomes a way to justify that prejudice. Prejudice is a negative evaluation of a social group or of an individual primarily based on their presumed group membership (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). People feel and want to express prejudice, yet it is usually socially unacceptable to do so. The justification-suppression model (JSM; Crandall & Eshleman, 2003) describes this tension, synthesizing the commonalities between various modern theories of prejudice into a process with four components: genuine prejudice, suppression, justification, and expression.

Genuine prejudice is the unmanaged, unalloyed underlying negative affect one feels toward a social group or member of a social group. It is the motivational state (Brehm, 1999) that drives justification and expression.

Suppression is an externally or internally motivated (Plant & Devine, 1998) attempt to inhibit the expression of one's prejudice. The primary external motivators are social norms and institutional rules that proscribe the expression of prejudice. Suppressive forces do not typically eliminate the underlying genuine prejudice—they merely keep it from being expressed. Suppressing prejudice requires cognitive effort; people are motivated to relax this effort and free the expression of genuine prejudice. To do so, people seek out justifications.

Justifications are any social or psychological process that allows one to feel as if they can express prejudice without suffering negative external (e.g., reprimand from others; workplace punishment) or internal (e.g., guilt, shame) consequences. These justifications release the expression of prejudice. For example, when people have already demonstrated that they can be non-prejudiced, they can feel justified to act in discriminatory ways (Choi et al., 2014; Miller & Effron, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001).

Authenticity as Justification for Prejudice

We propose that prejudiced people are more likely to perceive an expression of prejudice as “authentic” because perceived authenticity can be a justification for prejudice. In everyday parlance, “authenticity” is quite vague, which affords flexibility in its use; it can be appropriated by a prejudiced person to defend expressions of prejudice. We focus on authenticity as a justification for prejudice by looking at how it can be used to vicariously justify prejudice.

Vicarious justification. A series of experiments by White and Crandall (2017) compared “news” stories of a man fired for expressing (a) anti-Black prejudice or (b) control statements, such as negative statements about police or coworkers. Participants were then asked how much they agreed that firing the employee violated his freedom of speech (e.g., “[The employee’s] bosses disrespected his right to free speech”). Various measures of prejudice predicted relevance of freedom

of speech in the anti-Black prejudice conditions (meta-analytic $r = .43$) but not in the control conditions (meta-analytic $r = .09$). Participants were not principled in marshaling freedom of speech; instead, they defended others’ prejudiced expressions as a function of their own and backed away from defending free speech when it represented attitudes they did not share. White and Crandall found that this relationship was partly because the firing of a prejudiced employee threatens the expressive autonomy (“I feel free to express my ideas and opinions”) of prejudiced participants. People engage in vicarious justification: They personally feel the suppression placed on similarly prejudiced others and strategically deploy values to protect these others.

Possible Accounts

There are a number of psychological phenomena, beyond mere consonant attitudes, that could explain how people come to see the expression of prejudice as authentic. We examine two possible accounts: social projection and prescriptive norms.

Social projection. People believe others are similar to them—a heuristic called social projection (Krueger, 2007). The more prejudiced somebody is, the more common they think it is in society. People high in prejudice estimated 71% of people in their country would also be prejudiced; lowly prejudiced participants estimated this to be 51% (Watt & Larkin, 2010; see also Pedersen et al., 2008). If prejudiced people think that prejudice is common in society, then they should be more likely to think that any given member of this society is prejudiced. Expressing prejudice is thus perceived as more authentic. In contrast to the JSM, this social projection explanation for the positive relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity is an unmotivated, cognitive one—it is a perceptual bias toward perceiving others as similar to oneself. The social projection account implies two hypotheses: First, participants’ own prejudice should positively predict perceived descriptive normativity in society (i.e.,

Table 1. Hypotheses, theoretical perspectives, and associated studies.

Number	Theoretical perspective	Concrete hypothesis	Studies
1	Vicarious justification	Self-reported prejudice should positively predict authenticity of similarly prejudiced statements.	1–3, 5
2	Vicarious justification	Self-reported prejudice should uniquely predict prejudice statements against the same target group; conversely, there should be no relationship between prejudice and the authenticity of control statements.	1–2
3	Social projection	Self-reported prejudice should positively predict perceived descriptive normativity, which will in turn cause people to perceive prejudice statements as authentic.	3–4
4	Prescriptive norms; vicarious justification	The positive relationship between prejudice and authenticity should only be present when the prejudice is prescriptively nonnormative.	3, 5

how many people actually feel prejudice); second, perceived descriptive normativity should then increase perceived authenticity of prejudiced statements.

Prescriptive norms. Social norms are likely the primary suppressive forces acting on the expression of prejudice (Allport, 1954; Crandall et al., 2002, 2013). Following from the JSM, prescriptive norms (i.e., norms describing what people should do) may influence the relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity.

People do not need to justify their prejudices when suppression is absent; one needs no justification in declaring they hate rapists, for example. Prescriptive norms that suppress the expression of prejudice should motivate justifications for prejudice, because these prescriptive norms are threatening to those who hold the unacceptable prejudices. If labelling the expression of prejudice as authentic is a justification, then the positive relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity should only be present when the prejudice is portrayed as prescriptively nonnormative (i.e., suppression is present). This account argues that perceived authenticity is a mixture of “I agree with that” and “I feel like I cannot express it myself.”

The Present Studies

We test four hypotheses across six studies. These hypotheses—and their associated theoretical perspectives—are presented in Table 1. The first two hypotheses describe the general phenomenon that perceived authenticity may justify prejudice; we predict that sharing a prejudice is a specific predictor of perceiving authenticity in prejudice. The latter two hypotheses examine how normative processes underlie the proposed positive relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity. We refer to these hypotheses as H1 through H4 throughout the paper.

Study 1

We tested H1 and H2 in this first study. We measured prejudice toward two target groups (Muslims and politicians) and the perceived authenticity of prejudiced statements against them. Self-reported prejudice should correlate with perceived authenticity, but only within the same target group (e.g., prejudice against Muslims should not predict perceived authenticity of antipolitician remarks). We also offered the opportunity to rate the authenticity of people expressing negative attitudes toward typically positive things (the beach, cookies, and pizza), as well as how respondents feel toward these targets. These negative statements were

“controls”: They were negative, descriptively nonnormative statements, but they lack the moral implications of prejudices. We expect no relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity for these targets.

Method

We recruited 125 people from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to participate in a “survey on perceiving others’ attitudes” for \$0.75 (median length of interview [Mdn_{LOI}] was 6.3 minutes). This sample size allows 80% power to detect an effect of $r = .25$, and 90% power to detect an effect of $r = .30$ (the lower bound of relevant past research; White & Crandall, 2017). A total of 126 people participated. Participants’ ages ranged from 19 to 69 ($M = 34.9$, $SD = 10.95$); 61% identified as male, 69% identified as White, and no participants indicated that they were Muslim.

Participants first read nine statements that were ostensibly taken from social media, comment sections, and elsewhere on the internet. Three were negative statements about Muslims (e.g., “With all that’s going on, I think it is OK for people to be suspicious of Muslims”), and three were negative statements about politicians (e.g., “All politicians really care about is themselves. They’ll do anything to get more and more power”). The final three were about people disliking cookies, the beach, and pizza (e.g., “What’s the big deal about pizza? I’ve never tasted a slice of pizza that tasted good”).

In response to each of these statements, participants indicated on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) how much they thought that, in saying the statement, that person was being “true to themselves,” “honest,” “authentic,” and “genuine.” For each group of statements (Muslims, politicians, cookies, beach, and pizza), these items were averaged together to measure perceived authenticity ($\alpha > .95$). Participants then completed a demographic questionnaire. At the end of this page, we measured prejudice against Muslims and politicians, as well as dislike

of cookies, the beach, and pizza. Anti-Muslim prejudice was measured using seven items ($\alpha = .90$) adapted from measures of modern prejudice (Biernat & Crandall, 1999) that tapped into beliefs about Muslims (e.g., “Muslims living here should not push themselves where they are not wanted”) as well as feelings toward them (e.g., “How much do you like or dislike Muslims?”).

Antipolitician prejudice was measured using seven items ($\alpha = .89$), some adapted from a standard social distance questionnaire (Biernat & Crandall, 1999; “I would like a politician to be a close personal friend”) and others tapping into feelings toward politicians (e.g., “I admire politicians” [reversed]). Lastly, participants were asked how much they liked cookies, the beach, and pizza on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*).

Analysis details. We measured prejudice toward two target groups (Muslims and politicians) as well as perceived authenticity of negative statements about five targets (Muslims, politicians, pizza, the beach, and cookies). This presents 10 prejudice–authenticity combinations; each of the 126 respondents thus yielded an observation for each of these combinations.

Our theoretical perspective predicts that the correlation between prejudice and perceived authenticity of negative statements about that target should be positive only when the targets of each are the same. Thus, we predict a significant three-way interaction and two significant simple slopes: Prejudice toward Muslims should only positively predict perceived authenticity of negative statements about Muslims, and prejudice toward politicians should only predict perceived authenticity of negative statements about politicians. We predict no relationship when the targets do not match.

We analyzed these data using a multilevel model. We regressed authenticity on prejudice, the prejudice target group, and the authenticity target. We specified all main effects, two-way interactions, and the three-way interaction. We allowed intercepts to vary by respondent. We also

Table 2. Simple slopes of perceived authenticity regressed on prejudice: Study 1.

Prejudice target	Authenticity target	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Muslims	Muslims	0.45	0.08	5.45	< .001
Muslims	Politicians	0.07	0.08	0.82	.411
Muslims	Pizza	-0.24	0.08	-2.89	.004
Muslims	Beach	-0.06	0.08	-0.73	.465
Muslims	Cookies	-0.24	0.08	-2.89	.004
Politicians	Muslims	-0.09	0.09	-0.96	.336
Politicians	Politicians	0.16	0.09	1.86	.063
Politicians	Pizza	-0.03	0.09	-0.35	.727
Politicians	Beach	0.03	0.09	0.36	.719
Politicians	Cookies	-0.08	0.09	-0.90	.370

Note. Bolded rows represent hypothesized significant simple slopes.

tested models that allowed the main effects and interactions to vary by respondent—but these had zero variance about the coefficients. We dropped this partial pooling from the model. Regardless of “random effects” model specification, the theoretical three-way interaction predicted was always significant. We used Satterthwaite’s approximation for degrees of freedom for all statistical significance tests (Kuznetsova et al., 2017; Lenth, 2021).

Results

An omnibus analysis of variance test for the three-way interaction was significant, $F(4, 1115.3) = 7.54, p < .001$. We examine the simple slopes of prejudice at each of the 10 prejudice–authenticity target combinations to probe this interaction. The marginal trends and significance tests can be found in Table 2, and the boldfaced rows indicate where we predict a significant positive relationship. The predicted relationship was strong in the Muslim prejudice case, $b = 0.45, p < .001$ (see Figure 1), but much weaker in the politician prejudice case, $b = 0.16, p = .063$. These were the two largest positive relationships between prejudice and perceived authenticity. Prejudice against Muslims was a significant negative predictor of perceived authenticity of negative statements about pizza and cookies; this neither supports nor refutes our hypotheses, so we do not consider it further.

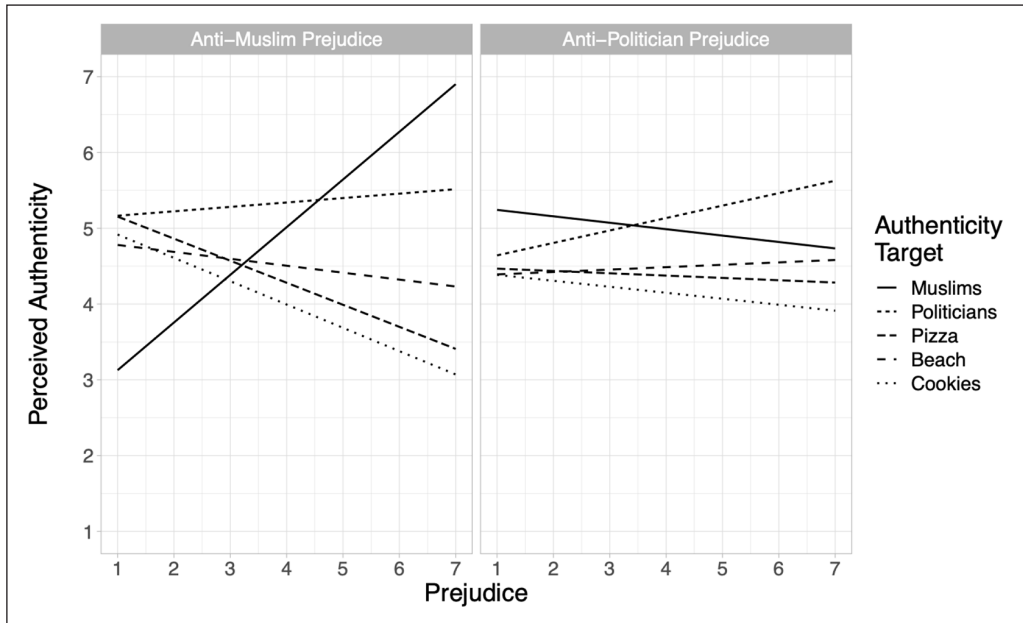
Discussion

Prejudice against Muslims positively predicted only perceived authenticity of anti-Muslim statements; the same was mostly true for the equivalent items about politicians. These results support H1 and H2: Prejudice positively predicts only the perceived authenticity of similarly prejudiced statements. The hypotheses were supported more for the case of prejudice against Muslims than prejudice against politicians. This could be because the normative suppression is higher against anti-Muslim prejudice than for politicians. We return to this idea by investigating H4 in Studies 3–5. This difference may also be explained by the different operationalizations of prejudice (modern racism vs. social distance), which we chose to be different because we felt they were the most appropriate for these different target groups.

Study 2

In Study 2, we sought to generalize Study 1’s effect by sampling a different population (campus pedestrians), measuring attitudes toward different target groups (students at a rival school, illegal immigrants), and employing a different design (between-subject instead of within-subject). We predicted that self-reported prejudice would positively predict the perceived authenticity of prejudiced statements (H1)—but that this

Figure 1. Prejudice against Muslims and politicians correlates positively with perceived authenticity of prejudiced statements toward the same groups: Study 1.



effect would be specific to attitudes within a target group (H2).

Method

Participants were recruited walking around the University of Kansas campus. Research assistants approached passers-by and asked if they would like to fill out a one-page survey in exchange for a piece of candy. Sample size was determined by how many people could be recruited by the end of the semester. A total of 221 people participated; seven participants were excluded for providing incomplete responses.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: An illegal immigrant condition or a Kansas State University condition. In the former, participants read two negative statements about illegal immigrants (e.g., “With all that’s going on, I think it is OK for people to be suspicious of illegal immigrants”); in the latter, participants read two negative statements about Kansas State students—a rival school of the University

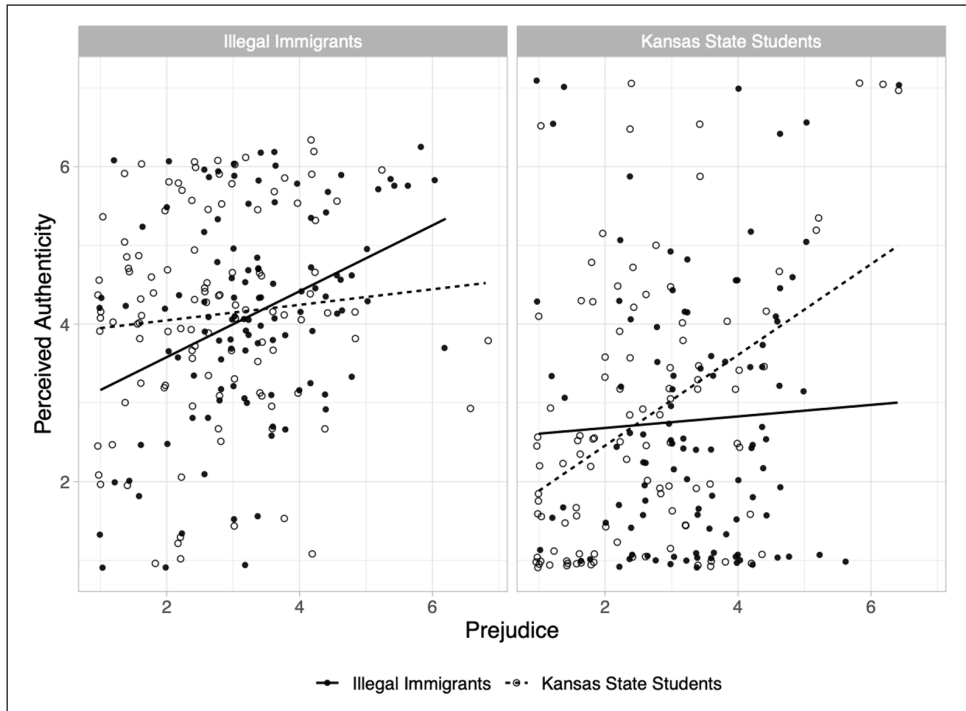
of Kansas—(e.g., “Students that go to Kansas State smell weird”). The same measure of perceived authenticity was used in this study as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .94$), and participants were again told that these statements came from social media websites and comment sections on the internet. Participants then reported how they felt about illegal immigrants and Kansas State students.

Five of the items ($\alpha = .76$) used in Study 1 for Muslims were adapted to illegal immigrants (e.g., “Illegal immigrants here teach their children values and skills different from those required to be successful in the United States”); five of the items ($\alpha = .87$) used in Study 1 for politicians were adapted to Kansas State students (e.g., “Kansas State students or graduates are similar to me”). In order to keep the survey one page, demographic questions were not asked.

Results

We predicted that prejudice against illegal immigrants would predict perceived authenticity, but

Figure 2. Negative statements about illegal immigrants are positively predicted by illegal immigrant prejudice; the same is true for Kansas State students: Study 2.



Note. Unlike the regression equation that tested the hypothesis, these slopes are for presentational purposes and are not controlling for the influence of the other prejudice.

only in the illegal immigrant condition, while anti-Kansas State prejudice would only predict perceived authenticity in the Kansas State condition. We tested these predictions across two separate regression equations, each using a different type of prejudice (illegal immigrant or Kansas State) as the focal predictor. These two prejudices were positively correlated, $r = .28, p < .001$, so we use the irrelevant prejudice as a control in all analyses. First, we regressed perceived authenticity on anti-Kansas State prejudice, anti-illegal immigrant prejudice, condition, and an interaction between the latter two predictors. The condition by anti-illegal immigrant prejudice was significant, $b = -0.44, SE = 0.18, t(209) = -2.46, p = .015$. Prejudice against illegal immigrants was positively related to perceived authenticity in the illegal immigrant condition, $b = 0.36, SE = 0.12, t(209) = 2.98, p = .003$; however, it was not related to perceived authenticity in the

Kansas State condition, $b = -0.07, SE = 0.13, t(209) = -0.56, p = .575$.

We also regressed perceived authenticity on anti-illegal immigrant prejudice, Kansas State prejudice, condition, and the interaction between the latter two predictors. The condition by anti-Kansas State prejudice interaction was significant, $b = 0.45, SE = 0.16, t(209) = 2.75, p = .007$. Prejudice against Kansas State students was positively related to perceived authenticity in the Kansas State condition, $b = 0.53, SE = 0.12, t(209) = 4.44, p < .001$; however, it was not related to perceived authenticity in the illegal immigrant condition, $b = 0.08, SE = 0.12, t(209) = 0.66, p = .513$ (Figure 2).

Discussion

The more someone held a prejudice against a group, the more they perceived negative

statements about that group to be authentic. Perceived authenticity of anti-illegal immigrant sentiments was only predicted by prejudice against illegal immigrants; perceived authenticity of prejudice against Kansas State students was only predicted by negative feelings toward Kansas State students. Studies 1 and 2 provide support for H1 and H2, suggesting that prejudice leads people to see others expressing prejudices they share to be authentic. Studies 3–5 continue to test this relationship but focus on potential contributing mechanisms for why the relationship exists.

Study 3

If people think that they have a prejudice that is common (perceived descriptive normativity), then people expressing this very common prejudice must also be authentically presenting their attitudes. In H3, this is due to a perceptual bias: Belief in an attitude leads one to believe it is common, so expressing it publicly is more likely to be seen as an authentic expression. By contrast, H4 supposed that the relationship is more motivational—the relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity emerges because the attitude is socially unpopular. Because the attitude is expressed, it reveals the “true-but-unpopular” genuine attitudes of the speaker and is therefore more authentic. The proscription of prejudice creates motivation for justification.

Method

We recruited 200 people from MTurk to participate in a “survey on perceiving other peoples’ attitudes” for \$0.75 ($Mdn_{LOI} = 7.4$ minutes). Throughout this paper, participants who completed one of these studies on MTurk were barred from participating in a subsequent one (Litman et al., 2017). The analyses for this study involve multilevel modeling, and we were unsure of proper a priori expected population parameters to choose for a power analysis, so sample size was determined subjectively. We recruited 200 participants and each participant contributed 10 data points; this generates a Level 1 ($n = 2,000$) and a Level 2 ($n = 200$). Participants’ ages ranged

from 19 to 70 ($M = 34.15$, $SD = 11.56$); 54% identified as male, and 76% identified as White.

Questions about norms, authenticity, and prejudice were asked once for each target group. These target groups were: Black people, transgender people, fat people, police officers, lawyers, business people, prostitutes, drug dealers, blind people, and deaf people.

Perceived descriptive normativity. Participants were asked to think about Americans in general and indicate on a sliding 0 to 100 scale, “What percentage of Americans, if they were being truly and totally honest with themselves, would admit they feel negatively toward [each of the target groups].”

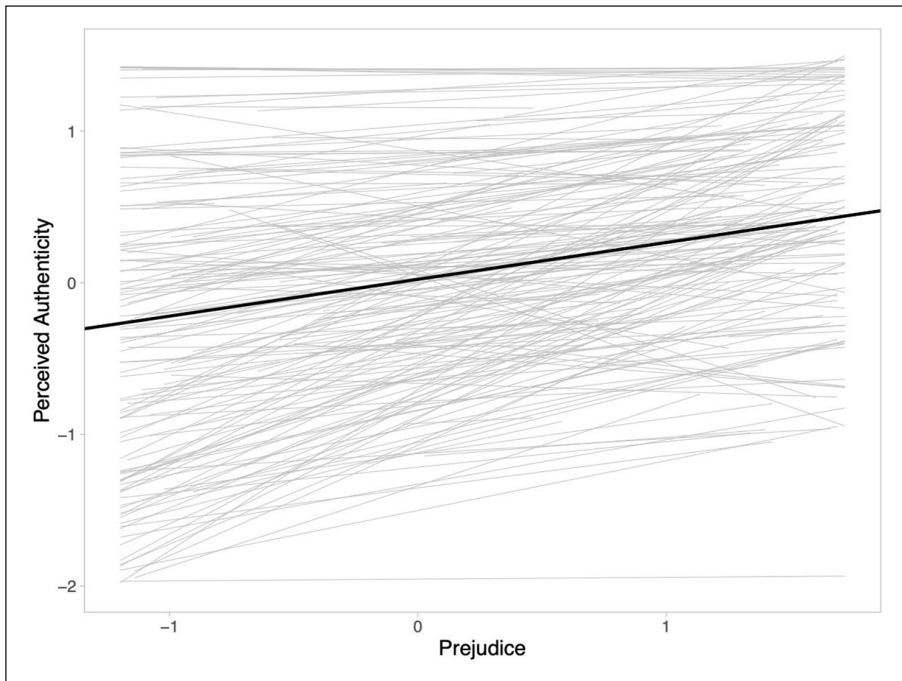
Perceived prescriptive normativity. Participants were then asked to pivot from thinking about what “Americans actually feel” to think about “how Americans think people should feel.” They were asked to indicate on the same 0 to 100 scale what percentage of Americans “think it is OK to feel negatively toward these groups.”

Perceived authenticity. Ten quotations, ostensibly “taken from social media posts or comments on the internet,” were presented to participants. Each target group had one corresponding negative statement about them (e.g., “Blacks are the people causing the racial tension in America today,” “Business people don’t care about anyone but themselves and making lots of money”); the same four authenticity items employed in Studies 1 and 2 were asked for each statement.

Prejudice. Participants were asked how they feel about each of the target groups on a scale from 0 (*very negatively*) to 100 (*very positively*). These items were reverse-scored such that higher scores indicated more prejudice toward the group.

Demographics. Lastly, participants indicated their age, gender identity, race, political outlook (1 = *very liberal*, 7 = *very conservative*), and political affiliation (1 = *strongly Republican*, 7 = *strongly Democrat*).

Figure 3. Prejudice positively predicts perceived authenticity across 10 target groups: Study 3.



Note. The thick, black line represents the average slope; the thin, grey lines represent slopes for each individual.

Analysis details. As constructs were measured on very different scales (i.e., 7- vs. 101-point), all measures were standardized (across individuals) before analyses. Ten measurements—one for each target group—were nested within each individual. Thus, perceived descriptive and prescriptive normativity, perceived authenticity, and prejudice were modeled at the “first” level, with participants being the “second” level. All regression coefficients, as well as the intercept, were allowed to differ by individual; that is, “random” intercepts and “random” slopes for all Level 1 coefficients were defined. For example, every participant had their own intercept and slope estimated for the relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity. We again used Satterthwaite’s approximation for degrees of freedom for all t tests of regression coefficients.

Results

Supporting H1, prejudice again correlated positively with perceived authenticity of negative

statements, $b = 0.24$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(181.53) = 8.31$, $p < .001$. This was the average coefficient across participants (i.e., the “fixed” effect). There was significant variance among participants about this coefficient (Figure 3).

Social projection. The more prejudice participants reported, the more they thought others shared the prejudice (i.e., descriptive normativity), $b = 0.49$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(182.74) = 13.55$, $p < .001$. In turn, both prejudice, $b = 0.21$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(181.70) = 7.01$, $p < .001$, and descriptive normativity, $b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.02$, $t(145.39) = 3.28$, $p = .001$, were significant predictors of perceived authenticity when considered in a regression equation simultaneously. This chain of relationships supports H3: Prejudice positively predicts descriptive normativity, which in turn positively predicts authenticity.

Prescriptive norms. We tested if the relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity was moderated by perceived prescriptive normativity.

We regressed perceived authenticity on prejudice, prescriptive normativity, and the interaction between the two. All coefficients were again allowed to vary by individual (i.e., each was estimated with random effects).

The prejudice by prescriptive normativity interaction on authenticity was significant, $b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, $t(156.39) = -2.82$, $p = .005$. Probing this interaction showed that, when participants reported low perceived prescriptive normativity (i.e., a standard deviation below the mean), the relationship between prejudice and authenticity was significant, $b = 0.28$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(157) = 6.13$, $p < .001$. When the group was high in perceived prescriptive normativity (i.e., a standard deviation above the mean), the relationship was about half as strong, $b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(112) = 4.96$, $p < .001$. This pattern of simple slopes supports H4: Perceptions of authenticity are strongest when the expression of prejudice goes against what people should be doing.¹

Discussion

Prejudice predicted seeing more authenticity in people expressing that same prejudice, again supporting H1. The social projection account (H3) received suggestive support as well: The more participants reported a prejudice, the more they perceived others to share that same prejudice; in turn, this perception of descriptive normativity predicted participants viewing the expression of prejudice as more authentic. A notable shortcoming of this cross-sectional approach, however, is that no compelling causal claims can be made between descriptive normativity and perceived authenticity (e.g., Bullock et al., 2010; Holland, 1988; Imai et al., 2010; Ten Have & Joffe, 2012). In Study 4, we directly manipulate descriptive normativity.

Study 3's data support the prescriptive norms (H4) account. The less prescriptively normative one perceived the prejudice to be, the greater the relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity. Studies 5a and 5b aim to experimentally test this account by manipulating prescriptive normativity directly.

Study 4

We experimentally tested H3 by manipulating perceived descriptive norms and measuring their effect on perceived authenticity of prejudiced statements. Using a cognitive processing account, we predicted that participants would find the prejudiced statements to be more authentic when the prejudice was portrayed as descriptively normative than when it was portrayed as descriptively nonnormative.

Method

We recruited 210 participants from MTurk to participate in a "survey on perceiving other peoples' attitudes" for \$0.20 ($Mdn_{LOI} = 2.2$ minutes). The specific prejudice considered in this study is against transgender people; to determine the needed sample size, we calculated the zero-order correlation in Study 3 between perceived descriptive normativity of prejudice against transgender people and perceived authenticity of a prejudiced statement toward transgender people, $r = .22$. The equivalent Cohen's d is equal to .45, and we recruited enough participants to achieve 90% power at this effect size. A total of 211 people participated. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 71 ($M = 34.41$, $SD = 11.21$); 38% identified as male, and 73% identified as White.

Participants were randomly assigned to either a high prejudice norm or low prejudice norm condition. They read a brief description of "some previous studies we have done on MTurk":

Our lab mainly studies prejudice, and we have done many surveys on MTurk about prejudices against various social groups. One of the groups that people generally express the [highest/lowest] prejudice toward in these studies is transgender people. We have seen that MTurkers tend to express pretty [negative/positive] attitudes toward transgender people. Out of the many prejudices that we study, prejudice against transgender people is the one that is expressed [most/least] by people.

After reading this, participants were asked: “If you had to guess, what percentage of MTurkers do you think are prejudiced against transgender people?” They responded on a sliding scale ranging from 0% to 100%. We chose “MTurkers” to be the referent group as people might easily self-categorize (Hornsey, 2008; Turner et al., 1987) as an “MTurker” while participating in research on the website. The norm is from a group that is relevant to them in the experimental setting. Participants were then told: “We asked previous MTurkers that took our surveys to explain some of their feelings toward transgender people. We randomly selected one of those quotes.” This quote was: “It’s not a good idea to let transgender people around kids . . . It may not be safe, and kids will be confused.” Participants indicated perceived authenticity on the same scale as in Studies 1–3 ($\alpha = .92$) and answered a demographics questionnaire.

Results

Participants in the high descriptive norm condition ($M = 54.65$, $SD = 20.50$) believed a larger percentage of MTurkers to be prejudiced against transgender people than those in the low norm condition ($M = 27.38$, $SD = 21.31$), $t(209) = 9.47$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.30$ 95% CI [1.01, 1.60]. However, participants in the high descriptive norm condition ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.39$) did not perceive the person expressing antitransgender sentiment to be more authentic than participants in the low norm condition did ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.46$), $t(209) = 1.23$, $p = .221$, $d = 0.17$ 95% CI [-0.10, 0.44]. The measure of perceived descriptive normativity (the manipulation check) did not correlate with perceived authenticity, $r = .08$, $p = .227$.

Discussion

Descriptive norms were insufficient to affect perceived authenticity. While correlational evidence supporting H3 was found in Study 3, this hypothesis was not supported in an experimental setting in Study 4. Although prejudiced people see more

prejudice in the world, this cognitive bias may not be a compelling explanation for the current phenomenon. Despite adequate power and a strong manipulation, H3 did not receive causal support in the experiment. We now turn to the influence of prescriptive norms in the final two studies.

Study 5

In Studies 5a and 5b, we experimentally tested the prescriptive norms account (H4) for the relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity by manipulating whether or not it was acceptable to express a specific prejudice. In line with H4, we predicted that there would only be a relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity when the prejudice was portrayed as prescriptively nonnormative. Telling participants that it is okay to express a prejudice eliminates the feeling of vicarious suppression and should thus minimize the relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity. Study 5b was a close replication of Study 5a. We present both studies separately and then discuss them together.

Study 5a Method

We recruited 200 participants from MTurk to participate in a “study on person perception” for \$0.50 ($Mdn_{LOI} = 7.1$ minutes). As this study aimed to eliminate the correlation between prejudice and perceived authenticity with an experimental manipulation, sample size was determined by simulating data where the correlation between two variables was $r = .40$ for half of the participants and $r = .00$ for the other half, then choosing the sample size that led to 80% power. Two participants failed to complete the writing task (described in what follows); they were excluded from all analyses, leaving a final sample size of 198. Participants’ ages ranged from 19 to 77 ($M = 36.39$, $SD = 11.80$); 52% identified as male, and 76% identified as White.

Participants were told that the study was aimed at the question, “Why do we think that others are the way they are?” They were told that they would answer a few questions and then comment on previous participants’ responses to

those same questions. Participants were then randomly assigned to an expression condition or a suppression condition.

In both conditions, participants were told that they were in the version of the survey about “fat people,” and they were asked to give a number of reasons why people might be fat. They were given 10 blank lines below the instructions to do so. In the expression condition, they were told that it was “important that you feel free to write whatever reasons” that they think of, whether they agree with them, whether they think the reasons are nice or mean. In the suppression condition, they were told that it was important that their reasons “are not focused on blaming fat people for their bodies,” because “quite a lot of research shows that blaming people for their weight is a sign of prejudice.” In this latter condition, an additional question asked them to look over their answers again, making sure that nothing they said blamed fat people for their weight. After double-checking, they were instructed to select a button that read, “Yes, I followed the directions.”

On the next page, participants were told: “Some people already answered the *exact same* question that you just answered. Here is one of the reasons that they gave for people having obesity . . .” This was repeated four times, each with a new statement. Two were negative statements, blaming fat people for their weight (i.e., “they have no willpower” and “they’re too lazy to exercise”). The other two—neutral statements—did not (i.e., “their genes make them overweight” and “environmental things like poverty or bad parenting”).

The same four questions used in Studies 1–4 were used to measure the perceived authenticity of the speaker. The eight items ($\alpha = .95$) for the negative statements were averaged together, and the eight items ($\alpha = .92$) for the neutral statements were also averaged together to measure perceived authenticity. Participants were also asked how much they agreed with the statement, “This answer follows the rules of the task,” on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The items for the positive ($r = .91$) and neutral ($r = .47$) statements were again averaged together separately. Participants then answered a demographics questionnaire, followed by the

Dislike Subscale of the Antifat Attitudes Questionnaire (Crandall, 1994; e.g., “I really don’t like fat people much”). Participants indicated how much they agreed with these statements on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .91$).

Study 5a Results

The two negative statements were seen as following the rules less in the suppression condition ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 1.27$) than in the expression condition ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 0.85$), $t(158.31) = 27.12$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.86$ 95% CI [3.39, 4.43]. There was no difference between the two conditions for the neutral statements, $t(170.52) = 1.08$, $p = .281$, $d = 0.15$ 95% CI [−0.13, 0.43]. Due to unequal variances across conditions, we calculated Welch’s t test (Delacret et al., 2017).

Results can be found in the first section of Table 3. We tested H4 by regressing perceived authenticity of the negative statements on antifat prejudice, condition, with an interaction term as the proper test of H4. The interaction was significant, $b = 0.36$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(194) = 3.16$, $p = .002$. Probing the interaction with simple slopes analyses showed that prejudice was positively correlated with perceived authenticity in the suppression condition, $b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(194) = 4.41$, $p < .001$. There was no relationship between the two in the expression condition, $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(194) = -0.23$, $p = .815$. Prejudice was only a predictor of perceived authenticity when it was prescriptively nonnormative—when the expression of prejudice broke the rules.

We regressed the perceived authenticity of the neutral statements on antifat prejudice, condition, and the interaction between the two. As predicted, the interaction between the two was not significant, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(194) = 1.05$, $p = .293$.

Study 5b Method

We recruited 200 people from MTurk to participate in a “study on person perception” ($Mdn_{LOI} = 5.7$ minutes). A total of 202 people

Table 3. Results from Studies 5a and 5b, and the two synthesized.

Analysis	Term	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Study 5a	Intercept	5.76	0.26	21.84	< .001
	Condition	-1.70	0.35	-4.91	< .001
	Prejudice	-0.02	0.08	-0.23	.815
	Condition x Prejudice	0.36	0.12	3.16	.002
Study 5b	Intercept	5.24	0.24	21.44	< .001
	Condition	-0.60	0.34	-1.74	.083
	Prejudice	0.14	0.08	1.73	.085
	Condition x Prejudice	0.14	0.12	1.14	.255
Synthesized	Intercept	5.76	0.27	21.43	< .001
	Condition	-1.70	0.35	-4.82	< .001
	Prejudice	-0.02	0.09	-0.23	.819
	Study	-0.51	0.36	-1.43	.155
	Condition x Prejudice	0.36	0.12	3.10	.002
	Condition x Study	1.10	0.49	2.26	.024
	Prejudice x Study	0.16	0.12	1.35	.176
	Condition x Prejudice x Study	-0.23	0.17	-1.38	.170

participated, but one was dropped from analyses for incomplete response. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 70 ($M = 36.71$, $SD = 11.70$); 42% identified as male, and 77% identified as White. The procedure was identical to Study 5a, and demographics and prejudice ($\alpha = .92$) were measured the same way as in Study 5a. Only the measures after reading both negative and both neutral statements changed. After reading each statement, participants indicated on a 7-point scale how "authentic and genuine" and "true and honest to themselves" they believed the person was. These two items were averaged together to measure perceived authenticity ($\alpha_s > .87$). Only two items were used, to streamline the survey, as we also measured perceptions of political correctness using two additional items ("politically correct" and "overly careful and too polite"; $\alpha_s > .67$). We included these items to assess construct overlap with perceived authenticity. Perceived authenticity of the negative statements did not correlate with their political correctness, $r = -.02$, $p = .818$, so we do not consider political correctness further. We did not include a manipulation check, given the large effect of the manipulation in Study 5a and to further streamline the survey.

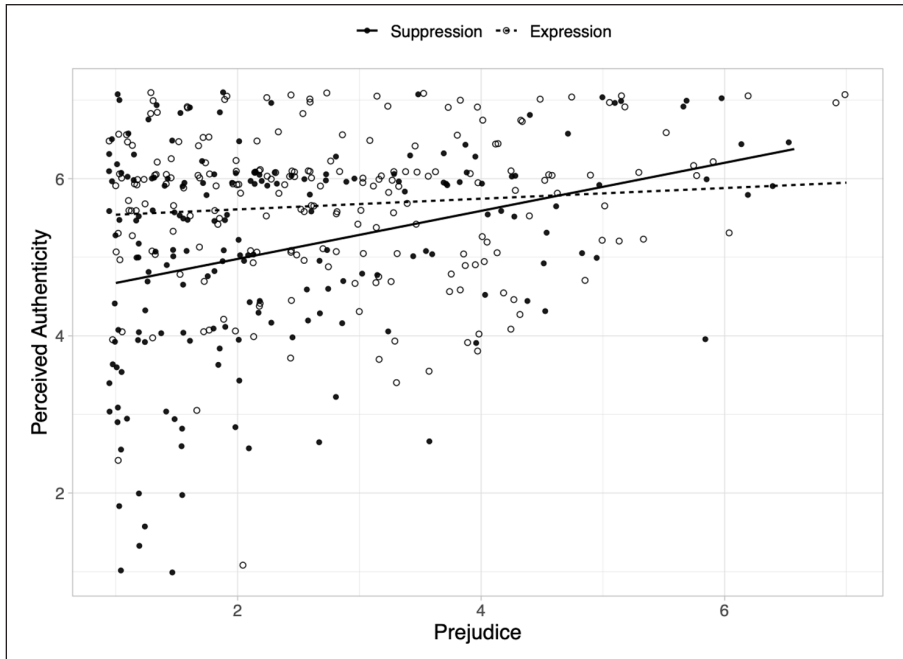
Study 5b Results

Results can be found in the second section of Table 3. The primary hypothesis (H4) that the relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity would only hold when the prejudice was presented as prescriptively nonnormative was again tested by regressing perceived authenticity of the negative statements on antifat prejudice, condition, and the interaction between the two. The interaction was not significant, $b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(197) = 1.14$, $p = .255$. However, the simple slopes followed the same pattern as in Study 5a: Prejudice predicted perceived authenticity in the suppression condition, $b = 0.27$, $SE = 0.09$, $t(197) = 3.11$, $p = .002$, but not in the expression condition, $b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(197) = 1.73$, $p = .085$. As predicted, regressing perceived authenticity of the neutral statements on prejudice, condition, and their interaction again yielded a nonsignificant interaction, $b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(197) = 0.24$, $p = .808$.

Study 5 Synthesis

In Study 5a, framing the expression of a prejudiced statement as acceptable, statistically significantly diminished the established relationship

Figure 4. Prejudice positively predicts perceived authenticity in the suppression condition but not in the expression condition: Study 5.



Note. The data plotted here represent the synthesized datasets.

between prejudice and perceived authenticity, supporting H4. The pattern replicated in Study 5b, but the interaction was not statistically significant. This could be due to not asking the manipulation check (which may strengthen the manipulation), measuring the dependent variable with two items instead of four, sampling error, or other explanations. We examine the cumulative evidence (Braver et al., 2014; Schmidt, 1996) for H4 using integrative data analysis (Curran & Hussong, 2009).

Given the similarity with which the studies were conducted and the difficulties in meta-analyzing regression coefficients (Becker & Wu, 2007), we simply combined the data from Studies 5a and 5b. We created a dummy variable to indicate whether or not the observation came from Study 5a or Study 5b. We fit an ordinary least squares model, as two studies do not provide us with enough observations at the study level to estimate random effects. Results can be

found in the third section of Table 3. We take this approach instead of comparing confidence intervals or p -values because the results of two studies could differ due to power, sampling error, or measurement error—even when both studies capture the exact same population effect size (Maxwell et al., 2015; Stanley & Spence, 2014).

We regressed perceived authenticity on condition, self-reported prejudice, and the interaction between the two. This interaction was significant, $b = 0.24$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(395) = 2.87$, $p = .004$ (Figure 4). Probing this interaction revealed that prejudice predicted perceived authenticity in the suppression condition, $b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(395) = 5.12$, $p < .001$, but not in the expression condition, $b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(395) = 1.16$, $p = .245$. The effect is present yet smaller in magnitude than was planned for.

We ran two more regression analyses to examine the role of study. Controlling for study by

adding it as a covariate to the model left the two-way interaction virtually unchanged, $b = 0.24$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(394) = 2.87$, $p = .004$. We also regressed perceived authenticity on condition, prejudice, and which study the data came from (i.e., Study 5a or Study 5b), as well as all possible two- and three-way interactions. The condition by prejudice interaction was not qualified by a three-way interaction with study, $b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.17$, $t(386) = -1.14$, $p = .254$.

Study 5 Discussion

Framing the expression of a prejudiced statement as acceptable eliminated the established relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity. This suggests that labelling expressed prejudice as authentic is motivated by prescriptive norms and vicarious justification—people high in prejudice push back against the prescriptive norms, even when it concerns someone else's speech act (H4). Lastly, perceptions of political correctness were unrelated to perceived authenticity, suggesting authenticity is a distinct construct in these studies.

General Discussion

The perception of authenticity in another's prejudice is occasioned by one's own prejudice; the more prejudice participants reported, the more they saw an expression of prejudice as authentic. We demonstrated this across multiple samples, a variety of target groups, and several measures of prejudice. Prejudiced people do not find all negative statements authentic: The positive relationship between prejudice and authenticity occurred only when the target groups for both measures were the same. Negative, descriptively nonnormative statements about trivial targets (the beach, cookies, pizza) were not predicted by how much one disliked those same targets. The phenomenon was particular to prejudice in these studies.

Why is this relationship present for prejudice but not for other attitudes? Why do people label others' expressions of shared prejudices as

authentic? Only the prescriptive norms account yielded reliable empirical support.

Prescriptive Norms

The JSM posits that many prejudices face suppressive forces that prevent people from expressing them. Suppression does not eliminate prejudice or its motivation to be expressed. The prejudice continues to exist and continues to motivate expression—people find justifications for these negative attitudes in an attempt to release them without facing punishment or feelings of guilt.

If a prejudice is socially unacceptable (i.e., prescriptively nonnormative) to express, then people seek out justifications. If a prejudice is socially acceptable, justifications are not necessary—people can directly express their prejudice (Crandall et al., 2013). The positive relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity was only present when prescriptive norms against expressing that prejudice were present. In Study 3, the more participants perceived the prejudice to be prescriptively suppressed, the stronger the relationship was between prejudice and perceived authenticity. In Study 5, when we told participants that it was acceptable to blame overweight people for their own weight problems, authenticity no longer correlated with self-reported prejudice. However, when we told participants that it was not acceptable—that, in fact, it was prejudiced—to blame overweight people for their weight, then prejudice predicted perceived authenticity. Perceptions of authenticity behave like justifications for prejudice, suggesting that people might claim an expression of prejudice as “authentic” as a way to justify someone else's prejudice (vicarious justification).

Social Projection

Social projection (Krueger, 2007) occurs when people presume others are like themselves. For example, prejudiced people are more likely than those less prejudiced to think that people in general are prejudiced. The social projection hypothesis argues that the more prejudiced one perceives

people to be in general, the more likely they believe it is that any one person is prejudiced. This argues prejudiced people see authenticity due to a cognitive bias—they think prejudice is more common, so any expression of prejudice is more likely to be authentic or real.

Study 3's results provided suggestive evidence for the social projection account. The more prejudice participants reported, the more common they thought the prejudice was in society (i.e., descriptive normativity; this evidence supports social projection). Perceived descriptive normativity, in turn, predicted greater perceived authenticity of prejudiced statements. However, when we successfully manipulated the normativity of prejudice in Study 4, it did not have a detectable effect on perceived authenticity. This cognitive account does not seem to explain the positive relationship between prejudice and perceived authenticity in these data.

Vicarious Justifications

White and Crandall (2017) argued that people may justify someone else's prejudice as a function of their own. In those studies, when an employee was fired for saying something offensive on social media, anti-Black prejudice predicted more agreement that this firing went against the employee's right to freedom of speech—but only when the offensive remark was also anti-Black. This could, in part, be explained by prejudiced people feeling a threat to their expressive autonomy. Reading about a person fired for expressing prejudice led similarly prejudiced people to feel as if they could not express themselves, which in turn predicted people suggesting the firing violated free speech rights.

We consider seeing another's expression of prejudice as authentic to be a justification for another's prejudice, serving the same purpose as freedom of speech claims. White and Crandall (2017) presented participants with a punishment for the prejudiced speaker, making freedom of speech a relevant justification in that circumstance. In the present studies, the only information participants could rely on was the statement itself—and their own notion of what it meant to

be authentic. In both sets of studies, however, the forces of prescriptive norms were present: Telling participants that someone was fired for saying anti-Black statements (White & Crandall, 2017) and telling participants that it is against the rules—and prejudiced—to blame overweight people for being overweight (Study 5) both communicate a prescriptive norm that it is unacceptable to express prejudice. Anti-Black prejudice and antifat prejudice only predicted freedom of speech and perceived authenticity, respectively, when prescriptive norms against expressing those prejudices were made salient.

These studies and White and Crandall's (2017) provide converging evidence that people can feel the suppressive forces placed on someone else expressing a shared prejudice. In accordance with the JSM, people are still motivated to express their prejudices, and seek out justifications to circumvent suppression. The content of the justification will change with context. Freedom of speech is especially relevant in the case of one being fired for expressing prejudice; perceived authenticity might be especially relevant in the case of politicians, who are often labelled as inauthentic, insincere, and Machiavellian (Enli, 2017; Hahl et al., 2018; Manning et al., 2017; Serazio, 2017). A ripe area for future research is examining how the content of justifications changes with the context in which prejudice is expressed.

Establishing the underlying cause. If perceived authenticity, like freedom of speech, is a vicarious justification for another's expressed prejudice, then suppressive forces—particularly prescriptive norms against prejudice—are the underlying cause for the relationship between self-reported prejudice and these justifications.

In Study 3, prejudice was a stronger predictor of authenticity among those who believed the prejudices to be prescriptively nonnormative; in Studies 5a and 5b, the relationship between prejudice and authenticity was eliminated when prescriptive nonnormativity was absent. White and Crandall (2017, Study 3) also demonstrated this with freedom of speech as a justification, and they demonstrated (in their Study 8) that it is partially

due to prejudiced people being vicariously suppressed (i.e., feeling as if their autonomy is threatened). Authenticity and “free speech” appeals are both vicarious justifications for allowing another’s speech, which in turn protect a person’s freedom to have and to hold their prejudices, and to protect the right of future expression.

Limits of interpretation and generalization. First, Study 3 measures rather than manipulates prescriptive normativity; this limits our ability to make strong causal claims. Second, Studies 5a and 5b operate on a causal logic that does not follow from a strict, deductive logic: Prejudice and perceived authenticity correlate when prescriptive nonnormativity is present, but they do not when prescriptive nonnormativity is absent; therefore, prescriptive nonnormativity is the underlying cause for that relationship (see Pearl & Mackenzie, 2018). But observing a phenomenon with a condition met, and then observing a lack of (or weaker) phenomenon after removing that condition, does not necessarily mean that the condition causes the phenomenon. However, we argue that the present studies are nonetheless consistent with—and support—a vicarious justification account for why perceived authenticity is positively predicted by self-reported prejudice. Finally, these studies were developed in a particular context and setting where many prejudices are suppressed, and justifications are socially and culturally expected. We do not know the limits of generalizability across groups, contexts, and cultures; we anticipate but cannot demonstrate this generalizability. These studies shape a converging, cumulative body of evidence for the proposed account. Future research should continue to conceptually replicate the present phenomena.

Conclusion

Authenticity has been a nebulous concept. Boyle (2003) claimed that trying to “pin down” what authenticity means is “fiendishly paradoxical” (p. xviii), which inspired him to spend nearly 300 pages exploring what authenticity means in

modern society. The present studies showed that one of the many uses of authenticity is to express agreement with—and justify the expression of—prejudice. In these studies, the more prejudiced someone was, the more they perceived an expression of that same prejudice as authentic, but only when the prejudice was socially unacceptable or prescriptively counter-normative. Authenticity can carry prejudiced implications; the concept can be deployed strategically to defend the socially unacceptable attitudes people have and share.

Data availability

All data, code, and materials can be found at the Open Science Framework (osf.io/jyb84).

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. An anonymous reviewer suggested reporting the correlation between prescriptive normativity and descriptive normativity; we report these in the supplemental analyses (*r*s range between .25 and .57, depending on the target group).

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