

# The Subjective Group Dynamics of Inter- and Intragroup Criminality in the News: The Role of Prior Television News Viewing as a Moderator

Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly  
90(3) 540–558  
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1077699013493786  
jmcq.sagepub.com  


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## Abstract

Participants read a crime news story featuring two perpetrators. Building on subjective group dynamics, we predicted that a perpetrator would be evaluated differently depending on the partner's ethnicity and participants' prior media use. Results show that heavy news consumers were more likely to (a) give a harsher sentence to a white perpetrator acting with a white (vs. Latino) partner, and (b) develop more negative attitudes toward Latinos when members of that group were portrayed in *intergroup* criminal partnerships. The implications of intergroup portrayals for perceptions of the *ingroup*, as well as the outgroup, and the moderating effects of news viewing on such effects, are discussed.

## Keywords

minority media portrayals, media effects, subjective group dynamics, television news

Our behaviors and cognitions are often driven by a desire to protect the groups to which we belong (ingroups), to maintain a positive image of those ingroups, and to reject or denigrate groups to which we do not belong (outgroups).<sup>1</sup> Our interpretations of media messages can be understood from this intergroup perspective: We selectively

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seek messages about ingroups, avoid messages about outgroups, and process messages in ways that favor the ingroup or render the outgroup in stereotypical terms.<sup>2</sup>

Research on the role of racial/ethnic group membership in judgments derived from television news viewing shows that viewers of news stories featuring black or Latino criminality process the story and subsequent information in stereotype-consistent ways.<sup>3</sup> News viewers who are white evaluate black or Latino perpetrators more harshly than white perpetrators because criminality is seen as typical of blacks and Latinos.<sup>4</sup>

However, recent theoretical developments propose an alternative to how news consumers might evaluate perpetrators in the news along racial/ethnic group lines. The subjective group dynamics model<sup>5</sup> suggests that we judge *ingroup* members *more harshly* than *outgroup* members when ingroup members violate a valued group norm. This occurs because when they behave counter-normatively, they threaten the integrity and positive valence of the ingroup, often in ways that are more significant than the same negative behavior by an outgroup member. Applied to a crime news story, white viewers will evaluate a white perpetrator more harshly than a black or Latino perpetrator because criminality is seen as non-normative of the ingroup and hence threatening to ingroup identity.

In this article, we reconcile the subjective group dynamics model prediction that an *ingroup* perpetrator will be evaluated more harshly, with the prior research (discussed above) showing that an *outgroup* perpetrator is evaluated more harshly. We propose that evaluations of deviant ingroup members vary depending on the context, the context being critically important in determining stereotype activation.<sup>6</sup> We believe that a deviant ingroup member will be judged less negatively in settings that allow the negative behavior to be easily viewed as situationally bound or justified as an aberration (e.g., when they are working with an outgroup accomplice who can be blamed). However, in situations in which the ingroup member's behavior cannot be situationally discounted (e.g., working with an *ingroup* accomplice), we predict harsher judgments of ingroup than outgroup perpetrators. Below we review work on media and social identity as well as on subjective group dynamics, and argue that messages involving two perpetrators provide interesting new theoretical angles in this area. We discuss the role played by prior news exposure and consider the ways in which portrayals in messages involving two perpetrators might generalize to attitudes toward the outgroup as a whole.

## Social Identity and Media Messages

Social identity theory<sup>7</sup> holds that social group membership is an important component of self-concept and that identification with social groups results in a desire to draw positive group distinctiveness. Communication scholars have applied social identity theory to mass communication<sup>8</sup> and illustrated that social identity affects media choices: Individuals favor media content that features ingroup members<sup>9</sup> and avoid media content that portrays the ingroup in a negative light.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, media consumers incorporate group portrayals into the social comparison process. Consumers observe how their ingroup is portrayed in relation to outgroup portrayals and may

achieve a positive social identity (if the ingroup is portrayed in a favorable manner) or may fail to achieve a positive social identity (if their mediated counterparts are of low status).<sup>11</sup> This can be seen in judgments of crime news. For example, Peffley, Shields, and Williams' white participants believed that a black suspect (outgroup member) in a crime news story deserved more years in prison than a white suspect (ingroup member).<sup>12</sup> These findings gain significance when considering that television news overrepresents black perpetrators and underrepresents white perpetrators.<sup>13</sup>

## Subjective Group Dynamics and Group Norms

According to the subjective group dynamics model, group-based differentiation also occurs at the *intragroup* level when we evaluate others based on whether they uphold (or fail to uphold) the values and norms of the ingroup.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, individuals may draw negative evaluations of ingroup members who deviate from group norms and threaten the positive distinctiveness of the ingroup.<sup>15</sup> Negative evaluation of ingroup deviants is known as the black sheep effect,<sup>16</sup> reflecting individuals' motivation to maintain a positive social identity by distancing deviant ingroup members from the rest of the ingroup. For instance, crimes committed by ingroup members create uncertainty regarding the ingroup's positive social identity<sup>17</sup> and in most contexts violate group norms. Based on subjective group dynamics, the deviant ingroup member who committed the crime should be downgraded and, if the norm is important, may be evaluated more negatively even than an *outgroup* member who behaved similarly. This is because the ingroup member's behavior has more bearing on an individual's social identity than an outgroup member's behavior;<sup>18</sup> indeed, outgroup members' negative behavior actually legitimates the ingroup's perceived superiority.<sup>19</sup>

The subjective group dynamics model focuses on group norms, which can be conceived as group prototypes:<sup>20</sup> cognitive representations of how the group should behave and what attitudes to hold in relation to relevant outgroups.<sup>21</sup> Researchers have established the role that television viewing plays in the development of real-world prototypes for Latinos in terms of criminality.<sup>22</sup> They showed that televised images of Latino criminality are incorporated into the prototype held for Latinos in real life, such that criminality is seen as characteristic of the ethnic group; the origins of these perceptions are outlined next.

## Latinos and Criminality

Primetime television entertainment programming often portrays Latinos as aggressive and associated with crime either as law enforcement figures or criminals,<sup>23</sup> as villains,<sup>24</sup> and as frequently discussing crime-related topics.<sup>25</sup> For non-Latino viewers, portrayals of Latino criminality provide grounds for positive group distinctiveness while also establishing a comparison standard of what the ingroup is *not*. Non-Latinos mentally construe their ingroup in such a way that differences between the ingroup and the Latino outgroup are maximized (see self-categorization theory<sup>26</sup>). In this process, the attribute of criminality is perceived as normative of Latinos and a dimension

on which the ingroup compares itself to the outgroup. For example, in a free-recall task of attributes associated with Latinos, Mastro found that criminality and its related concepts were the most common attribute listed by white participants.<sup>27</sup>

## Television News Exposure as a Moderator

Overall television exposure affects the degree to which individuals' perceptions of Latinos are influenced by televised content. From a cultivation theory perspective, frequent television exposure leads viewers to hold perceptions about the world that are similar to the televised world.<sup>28</sup> Specifically, the more time people spend watching television, the more their beliefs about society (including about groups of people) become congruent with television's version of reality.<sup>29</sup> This influence can be understood in terms of construct accessibility.<sup>30</sup> Frequent exposure to portrayals of Latinos as criminals makes the stereotype of Latino criminality easily accessible, which facilitates the stereotype's influence on future judgments of Latinos.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, in addition to criminality being seen as normative for Latinos among heavy television viewers, these viewers will also be more likely to draw inferences from media content that fits their frequently activated stereotypes.

The effect of exposure to a specific news story is not the same for everyone. As Dixon<sup>32</sup> demonstrated, heavy television news consumers should be more affected by a message regarding criminality. Dixon and Maddox, for example, found that heavy TV news viewers exposed to a news story featuring a dark-skinned perpetrator experienced more emotional discomfort than did those exposed to a white perpetrator, an effect not observed for light viewers.<sup>33</sup> Dixon and Maddox explained this as a consequence of the pairing of criminality with certain racial groups on TV news, which develops and strengthens race-based, crime-related stereotypes (e.g., black criminal stereotype). For heavy viewers, the stereotype of black criminality is so frequently activated that it becomes chronically accessible, making it more likely to be activated when they are exposed to a crime news story. The same process is likely at play with Latino criminality, as crime is a topic frequently associated with the group. For example, in an examination of national major network news coverage, crime was the second most common topic of news stories featuring Latinos.<sup>34</sup> In most of these crime news stories, Latinos were portrayed as the perpetrators of the crime.

## Multiple Perpetrators and Counter-Normative Behavior

The subjective group dynamics model predicts that white participants will evaluate a white perpetrator more extremely (and negatively) than they will a Latino perpetrator. However, experimental research indicates that negative behaviors committed by an ingroup member are excused or justified. For instance, Gorham<sup>35</sup> exposed participants to a news story about a crime committed by either a white or black suspect. When asked to summarize the story, white participants were more likely to select an abstract descriptor to describe a black suspect's actions, making the behavior seem more generalizable and dispositional ("he is violent"). Conversely, concrete descriptors were

selected to describe the same behavior by a white suspect, making the behavior seem more isolated and situational (“he hit the man”; see *linguistic intergroup bias*<sup>36</sup>). Similarly, Van Prooijen showed that when suspects’ guilt was uncertain, participants felt more anger and hostility toward outgroup than ingroup suspects.<sup>37</sup> Thus, we have evidence that people discount and justify counter-normative behaviors by ingroup members when possible.

However, we predict that ingroup members will be treated as black sheep in situations where discounting is not sensible. In line with this reasoning, in the same study mentioned in the previous paragraph, Van Prooijen’s study also found that when a suspect’s guilt was certain, participants felt more anger and hostility toward *ingroup* suspects than outgroup suspects.<sup>38</sup> We investigate this idea by examining crime news stories that feature multiple perpetrators. Multiple perpetrators present significant challenges to situational interpretations and discounting of counter-normative behavior. Two individuals acting together appears organized, coordinated, and premeditated in ways inconsistent with perceptions that the behavior is situationally bound or an aberration. In such circumstances, the criminal act itself violates a group norm and is perceived as a threat to the ingroup (whites comprise the ingroup in this study). Hence, we predict that in such situations, subjective group dynamics processes will come into play more focally. Specifically,

**H1:** Among heavy television news viewers, a white perpetrator will be evaluated more negatively than a Latino perpetrator when each is paired with a same-ethnicity partner.

The argument above is additionally informed by examining dyads featuring an ingroup and an outgroup perpetrator. In such dyads, the white perpetrator is isolated, and hence his (we only look at male suspects) behavior can be viewed as situationally bound. Indeed, his behavior can be excused as being, in part, driven by the Latino perpetrator. Given the strong perceived association between criminality and the Latino ethnic group,<sup>39</sup> the presence of a Latino criminal makes salient the norm of Latino criminality, which also activates the norm of noncriminality for whites.<sup>40</sup> The normative association of criminality with Latino ethnicity makes discounting of the white criminal’s behavior particularly easy.

This argument is further informed by research on the subjective evaluation of past violence,<sup>41</sup> which describes how past acts of violence committed by the ingroup against the outgroup are justified by placing blame on the outgroup itself. Even though the concept was developed focusing on violent acts directed *toward* the outgroup, we propose that individuals should also be motivated to protect the ingroup by justifying violent acts as provoked by the outgroup. By placing the blame for ingroup violence on the outgroup, the ingroup’s status is maintained. Hence, intergroup dyads should yield *less* negative evaluations of the white perpetrator than intragroup dyads. The Latino perpetrator in intergroup dyads, however, now constitutes a direct *threat* to ingroup norms, by actively encouraging ingroup members to violate norms. Hence, we predict:

**H2:** Among heavy television news viewers, evaluations of a Latino perpetrator will be more negative than evaluations of a white perpetrator when each is acting in an intergroup dyad.

## Generalizing to Latinos

Research has examined the circumstances under which viewers generalize from media portrayals of specific group members to perceptions of their groups. For instance, Gilliam and Iyengar showed generalization from exposure to a crime news story featuring a black suspect led to increased levels of modern racism.<sup>42</sup> Generalization can also occur from observing positive intergroup interactions.<sup>43</sup> In our study, we examine whether an all-outgroup (i.e., intragroup) or an intergroup dyad will yield more attitude change concerning Latinos. Diverging from previous mediated intergroup contact research, our intergroup condition features portrayals of cooperative intergroup contact, but with negative intent. The majority of research on portrayals of intergroup contact has examined positive contact.

The intergroup dyad portrayal may particularly influence white participants' attitudes about Latinos for two reasons. First, Latinos are seen as detrimental to the *ingroup's* positive social identity in the intergroup dyad condition: The Latino perpetrator is not only doing a bad thing, but he is encouraging ingroup members to do bad things. Second, intergroup dyads draw attention to group memberships more strongly than intragroup dyads,<sup>44</sup> and as groups gain in salience, generalization to Latinos as a whole becomes more likely.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, we predict,

**H3:** Among heavy television news viewers, prejudice against Latinos will be strongest in the two intergroup partnership conditions, followed by the Latino intragroup partnership, and least negative in the white intragroup partnership condition.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants ( $N = 154$ , 74.7% women,  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.61$ ,  $SD = 3.62$ ) were recruited from undergraduate communication courses and received extra credit for their participation. Because this study was concerned with perceptions of white and Latino criminals, only white participants were retained for analysis (final sample  $N = 116$ , 74.1% women,  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.46$ ,  $SD = 3.25$ ). Insufficient Latino participants were present for analysis.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Target Ethnicity: white vs. Latino)  $\times$  2 (Type of Partnership: intragroup vs. intergroup) design. They read an online news story—edited to look like it was taken directly from the local newspaper's website—about how two suspects broke into a woman's house

**Table 1.** Illustration of the 2 × 2 Between-Subjects Experimental Design Including Names of the Perpetrators.

Target ethnicity	Type of partnership	
	Intragroup	Intergroup
White	Ethan John Miller (white target) Joshua William Davis (white partner)	Ethan John Miller (white target) Luis Carlos García (Latino partner)
Latino	Juan José Rodríguez (Latino target) Luis Carlos García (Latino partner)	Juan José Rodríguez (Latino target) Joshua William Davis (white partner)

and assaulted her (the victim's ethnic background is not mentioned). The story described how officers apprehended the men who matched a caller's description of the suspects. This description included the ethnicity of the suspects and the victim's identification of her attackers. All measures were administered after participants read the news story.

### Experimental Manipulation

The stories were identical, except they varied the ethnic combination of the suspects. Type of partnership was manipulated through the suspects' names, as well as through the suspects' description, which explicitly referenced their ethnic background. Table 1 provides the experimental design, including the suspects' names in each condition. The target evaluated by participants was Ethan John Miller (white condition) or Juan José Rodríguez (Latino condition). The target's name was always listed first in the news story. Joshua William Davis or Luis Carlos García was always the partner's name and was listed second in the news story (e.g., ". . . police arrested Ethan John Miller and Luis Carlos García . . ."). Names were selected based on their popularity in the state where data were collected: José, Luis, Ethan, and Joshua ranked, respectively, third, seventh, eighth, and eleventh most popular names for newborns that year.<sup>46</sup> In a pilot test ( $N = 18$ ), the names "Ethan John Miller" and "Joshua William Davis" were identified as typically white by 94.4% and 88.9% of participants, respectively. "Juan José Rodríguez" and "Luis Carlos García" were both identified as characteristically Latino by 94.4% of participants.

### Measurement

**Television news exposure.** Participants indicated how many hours of television news they watched on an average weekday and weekend during four time blocks: 6:00 a.m. to noon, noon to 6:00 p.m., 6:00 p.m. to midnight, and midnight to 6:00 a.m. Responses to these questions were used to create a summative index of average weekly television news exposure.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for All Measures by Condition.

Variable	White target		Latino target	
	White partner ( <i>n</i> = 25)	Latino partner ( <i>n</i> = 29)	White partner ( <i>n</i> = 27)	Latino partner ( <i>n</i> = 35)
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
TV news exposure	18.36 (13.10)	17.24 (15.95)	13.33 (12.51)	14.71 (15.81)
Years in prison	10.24 (7.52)	7.38 (7.38)	6.22 (5.22)	7.17 (5.90)
Linguistic intergroup bias	2.27 (0.67)	2.20 (0.62)	2.29 (0.59)	2.28 (0.72)
Prejudice against Latinos	2.03 (0.56)	2.16 (0.56)	2.37 (0.70)	2.20 (0.74)

*Years in prison.* Participants were asked how many years in prison they believed the target suspect featured in the story deserved as punishment.

*Linguistic intergroup bias (LIB).* Based on the news story that participants read, six items asked participants to describe the behavior of the target suspect. The response options for all items represent one of four linguistic categories varying in abstraction. For example, one item<sup>47</sup> asked participants to indicate which statement best describes the perpetrator from four options ranging from very concrete (“he hit the woman”) to very abstract (“he is aggressive”). Responses from the six items were averaged (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .70$ ), such that higher numbers indicate greater use of abstract language and lower numbers indicate greater use of concrete language. Concrete descriptors tie the event to a specific context, whereas abstract descriptors generalize the behavior to any context, thus reflecting the target’s violent nature. Consequently, more abstract descriptions indicate more negative evaluations of the suspect and of the group.

*Prejudice against Latinos.* This measure was adapted from Pettigrew and Meertens’ Prejudice Scale.<sup>48</sup> Four items were from the Subtle Prejudice subscale (i.e., defense of traditional values), and three from the Blatant Prejudice subscale (i.e., threat and rejection). Respondents indicated their level of agreement with seven statements (e.g., Hispanics living in the United States should not push themselves where they are not wanted: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Responses were averaged to create an overall measure of prejudice against Latinos ( $\alpha = .77$ ), with higher values indicating more prejudiced attitudes toward Latinos in society. Descriptive statistics for all the measures are provided in Table 2.

## Results

**H1** predicted that heavy TV news viewers will evaluate the white suspect more negatively than the Latino suspect when each is in an intragroup dyad, and **H2** predicted that heavy TV news viewers will evaluate the Latino suspect more negatively than the white suspect when each is acting in an intergroup dyad. These hypotheses were tested



**Table 3.** Interaction Analysis between Target Ethnicity, Type of Partnership, and TV News Exposure on Perceptions of Deserved Punishment (DV = Years in Prison).

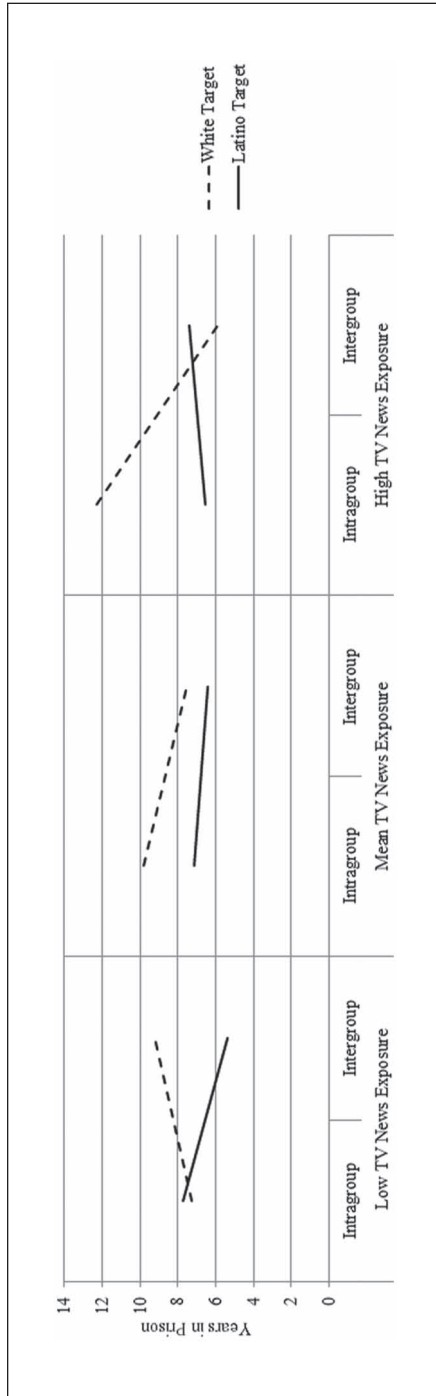
	Coefficient	SE	t	p
Regression model				
Predictor				
Ethnicity of target	-.96	.61	-1.56	.12
Type of partnership	-.75	.61	-1.22	.23
TV news exposure	.02	.04	0.48	.63
Target ethnicity × TV news	-.01	.04	-0.17	.87
Type of partnership × TV news	-.05	.04	-1.01	.31
Target ethnicity × Type of partnership	.38	.61	0.62	.54
Target ethnicity × Partnership × TV news	.10	.04	2.24	.03
Conditional effects of Target ethnicity × Type of partnership at values of TV news exposure				
TV news exposure value				
-1 SD	-1.06	.89	-1.19	.24
M	0.38	.61	0.62	.54
+1 SD	1.82	.88	2.06	.04

Note. Full model:  $R^2 = .09$ ,  $F(7, 108) = 1.64$ ,  $p > .05$ ; three-way interaction:  $\Delta R^2 = .04$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 108) = 5.02$ ,  $p < .05$ .

using Hayes' PROCESS macro<sup>49</sup> treating ethnicity of the target (-1 = white, 1 = Latino) and type of partnership (-1 = intragroup, 1 = intergroup) as effect-coded variables. The macro tests the three-way interaction between Target Ethnicity, Partner Ethnicity, and TV News Exposure, and provides the effects of the focal predictor variable (i.e., Target Ethnicity) on the criterion at conditional values of the moderating variables.

The three-way interaction was significant for deserved punishment (see top portion of Table 3 for results), but not for use of the LIB:  $b = .00$ ,  $SE = .00$ ,  $t = .50$ ,  $p > .05$ . The bottom portion of Table 3 shows that the interaction between Target Ethnicity and Type of Partnership on deserved punishment was not significant at low (-1 SD) or mean levels of TV news exposure, but was significant at high levels of TV news exposure (+1 SD). In support of **H1**, at high levels of TV news exposure, the white target is given more years in prison than the Latino target in *intragroup* partnerships,  $b = -2.88$ ,  $SE = 1.18$ ,  $t = -2.45$ ,  $p < .05$ . Ethnicity of target did not have an effect on *intergroup* partnerships,  $b = .76$ ,  $SE = 1.32$ ,  $t = .57$ ,  $p > .05$ ; therefore, **H2** was not supported (see Figure 1 for graphical illustration).

**H3** predicted that prejudice toward Latinos will be highest in the two intergroup partnership conditions, followed by the Latino intragroup condition, and lowest in the white intragroup condition, and that this would be moderated by TV news viewing. This hypothesis was tested using planned contrasts comparing (a) the two combined intergroup criminality conditions with the white intragroup criminality condition, (b) the white intragroup criminality condition with the Latino intragroup criminality condition, and (c) the two combined intergroup criminality conditions with the Latino



**Figure 1.** Graphical illustration of Target Ethnicity  $\times$  Type of Partnership  $\times$  TV News Exposure interaction using estimated values of perceived deserved punishment.

**Table 4.** Interaction Analysis between TV News Exposure and Planned Contrasts on Attitudes toward Latinos.

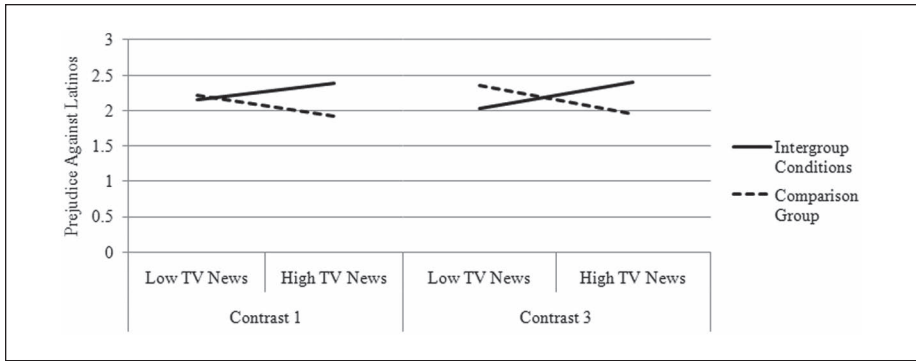
	Contrast 1			Contrast 2			Contrast 3		
	B	SE	t	B	SE	t	B	SE	t
Regression model									
Predictor									
Contrast	.02	.09	0.27	-.23	.13	-1.72	.12	.06	1.79
TV news exposure	.00	.00	0.39	.00	.00	0.87	.00	.00	0.93
Contrast × TV news	-.01	.00	-1.49	.01	.01	1.49	-.01	.00	-2.89*
Conditional effects of target ethnicity at values of TV news exposure									
TV news exposure value									
-1 SD	.02	.08	0.19	-.21	.13	-1.71	.10	.06	1.69
M	-.07	.05	-1.31	-.08	.09	-1.00	-.02	.05	-0.51
+1 SD	-.15	.07	-2.12*	.04	.12	0.37	-.15	.07	-2.31*

Note. Contrast 1 compares the two combined intergroup criminality conditions with the white intragroup criminality condition,  $R^2 = .04$ ,  $F(3, 112) = 1.56$ ,  $p > .05$ . Contrast 2 compares the white intragroup criminality condition with the Latino intragroup criminality condition,  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(3, 112) = 1.08$ ,  $p > .05$ . Contrast 3 compares the two combined intergroup criminality conditions with the Latino intragroup criminality condition,  $R^2 = .07$ ,  $F(3, 112) = 2.90$ ,  $p < .05$ .

\* $p < .05$ .

intragroup criminality condition. The first two contrasts would reveal whether exposure to an outgroup criminal leads to more negative attitudes toward Latinos. The third contrast would reveal whether exposure to *intergroup* criminality leads to more negative attitudes toward Latinos compared with exposure to solely outgroup criminality. The moderating effect of TV news viewing on the planned contrasts was tested by running separate regression analyses for each planned contrast. The contrast-coded vector was the predictor variable and TV news exposure was the moderating variable.

The regression results for the first contrast reveal that this part of the hypothesis was partially supported (see top portion, left panel of Table 4). Even though the interaction between the contrast and TV news exposure was not significant, the contrast was significant at high levels of TV news exposure (+1 *SD*, bottom portion, left panel, of Table 4). Attitudes toward Latinos are more negative in the intergroup conditions than in the white intragroup condition, but only among those who are heavy TV news viewers (see Figure 2, Contrast 1 for illustration). The second contrast tested whether attitudes toward Latinos differed between the white intragroup condition and the Latino intragroup condition. A significant interaction effect would indicate that this is moderated by TV news exposure. This part of the hypothesis was not supported (see Table 4 for results). The interaction between the contrast and TV news exposure was nonsignificant, as was the effect of the contrast at all levels of TV news exposure (Table 4, bottom portion). The third contrast tested whether attitudes toward Latinos differed between the two combined intergroup conditions and the Latino intragroup



**Figure 2.** Graphical illustration of planned contrasts at high levels of TV news exposure using estimated values of prejudice against Latinos.

Note. Contrast 1 compares the two combined intergroup criminality conditions with the white intragroup criminality condition. Contrast 3 compares the two combined intergroup criminality conditions with the Latino intragroup criminality condition. Contrast 2 is omitted from this figure (see Table 4).

condition. Results show that this contrast effect is moderated by TV news exposure (Table 4, right panel). Specifically, prejudice against Latinos was higher in the two combined intergroup conditions than in the Latino intragroup condition, but only among heavy TV news viewers (Table 4, bottom portion, right panel; illustration in Figure 2, Contrast 3). The effects reported in this “Results” section were replicated when statistically controlling for prejudice against Latinos (H1) and quality of intergroup contact (H3).

## Discussion

Our results indicate that evaluations of a perpetrator are affected by his partner’s ethnicity, but only among those who watch high amounts of TV news. At high levels of TV news exposure, a white perpetrator receives harsher punishment than a Latino perpetrator in a same-ethnicity partnership: two white perpetrators receive a harsher punishment than two Latino perpetrators for the same crime. The partner’s ethnicity also influenced prejudice toward Latinos at high levels of TV news exposure: attitudes toward Latinos became more negative following exposure to an intergroup criminal partnership compared with exposure to either a white or Latino *intragroup* partnership.

Intergroup research on media influence has largely focused on attitudes and beliefs concerning outgroup members.<sup>50</sup> In this study, we demonstrate that media can also negatively affect perceptions of *ingroup* members when the ingroup member is portrayed engaging in negative and counter-normative behaviors. Such effects occur most among heavy news consumers, a phenomenon that we interpret in terms of the chronic influence of heavy media consumption on endorsement of group norms. Below we discuss the implications of this for subjective group dynamics, effects on perceptions

of the outgroup stemming from intergroup contact theory, and future research on related issues.

### *Subjective Group Dynamics and Television News*

Among heavy television news viewers, a white suspect with a white partner was given a harsher punishment than a Latino suspect with a Latino partner, supporting a subjective group dynamics perspective on media effects. This suggests that television news solidifies group norms. It also offers an alternate interpretation of past research that has interpreted the role of television news consumption as leading to chronic accessibility of ethnic minority criminality stereotypes.<sup>51</sup> Our findings are more sensibly explained by norm-reinforcement than stereotype accessibility. When exposed to a white criminal partnership, heavy news viewers who are white judge the behavior of the suspects on the basis of ingroup norms. Because the suspects are seen as violating an ingroup norm, they are judged harshly relative to outgroup suspects who are behaving in stereotypically norm-appropriate ways for their group.

Circumstances under which ingroup versus outgroup perpetrators receive harsher judgments as a result of media messages deserve more attention, and we suggest at least three parameters worth examining. *First*, we suspect that the ingroup is judged more harshly than the outgroup when the behavior cannot be attributed to situational features. In our study, the presence of *two* ingroup perpetrators is critical in this regard. When only one ingroup perpetrator is present, readers can interpret the behavior in ingroup-serving ways (e.g., the Latino perpetrator influenced the white perpetrator to get involved); the presence of a second ingroup perpetrator makes this more difficult. Other manipulations might similarly constrain attributions for negative ingroup behaviors (e.g., the presence of prior criminal record). *Second*, ingroup judgment may be harsher when norms *against* the behavior are made salient. For instance, news stories about crime's negative effects on society (even when neutral with regard to ethnicity) should activate norms that "we don't do that" and should precipitate more severe judgment of ingroup criminals. *Third*, these effects should be stronger when relevant social categorizations are more salient. Although ethnicity is chronically associated with criminality, its salience can vary in specific criminal portrayals. A woman committing a violent crime, for instance, violates expectations sufficiently that gender might become a more salient categorical dimension, suppressing ethnicity-related responses.<sup>52</sup> Hence, predictions about the impact of group norms in judging criminal media portrayals will be aided by knowing the categorical bases of the normative judgments. Self-categorization theory is a useful framework for examining such processes, as it describes situational dimensions under which particular categories are found relevant to situations.<sup>53</sup>

### *Intergroup Contact Theory*

Attitudes toward Latinos became more negative when people were exposed to a white and Latino criminal partnership than when they were exposed to either intraethnic dyad (again, among heavy news viewers). Previous research on *positive* models found

that portrayals of *intergroup contact* may be particularly powerful as providing models for real-world intergroup contact.<sup>54</sup> Our work similarly finds that portrayals of intergroup contact are particularly powerful, albeit now in a negative direction.

We suggest that the sole white ingroup member working with a Latino partner may be viewed as a victim of circumstance, potentially having been “dragged into” the negative behavior by the outgroup partner. This condition, therefore, presents the outgroup in a most negative manner, not only representing the stereotype of minority criminal activity, but also as threatening the ingroup by involving ingroup members in that activity. Work within contact theory has looked at the valence of contact,<sup>55</sup> but we are not aware of work looking at cooperative intergroup contact in an antisocial context. This may represent a worst-case scenario for intergroup contact theory, emphasizing the antisocial tendencies of the outgroup and the possibility for such tendencies to have a negative influence on the ingroup. This finding illustrates the importance of attending to relational and situational *contexts* of intergroup contact; examining such issues seems likely to yield theoretical advances.<sup>56</sup> Again, this effect only occurs among heavy television news viewers, suggesting that media use provides a framework that facilitates these kinds of effects.

An alternate interpretation to our findings is rooted in ethnic blame discourse: ethnocentric discourse focusing on the societal problems that ethnic minority groups create.<sup>57</sup> Such discourse becomes part of everyday language and influences the thoughts and actions of those exposed to it.<sup>58</sup> News media contribute to ethnic blame discourse by overreporting crimes committed by non-white perpetrators on white victims, framing such stories as intergroup conflict.<sup>59</sup> Viewers heavily exposed to these messages develop thoughts consistent with the blame discourse.<sup>60</sup> In the present research, the presence of an intergroup criminal partnership may exacerbate the belief that the Latino ethnic group is to blame for societal problems—whites are not only the victims of crimes; they are also being influenced to commit similar crimes themselves.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

Future research should examine whether the subjective group dynamics uncovered here are also at play among minority group participants. For many such groups, the news presents criminality as the ingroup norm.<sup>61</sup> Minority group members can endorse or reject such norms. If endorsed, ingroup suspects will not be evaluated more harshly because they are not delegitimizing the ingroup’s status. However, if the norm is rejected by minority participants, they might display even more extreme judgments because ingroup suspects are not only violating ingroup norms, but also validating outgroup prejudices. The present study provides a foundation for future work examining how frequent news exposure may lead to negative evaluations of minority ingroup members.

We measured prejudice toward Latinos with an overt self-report measure. Overt measures are criticized for their susceptibility to social desirability and therefore not indicating participants’ true attitudes.<sup>62</sup> Despite this critique, measures of explicit attitudes are considered good predictors of responses and behaviors that are under

conscious control,<sup>63</sup> such as race-based policy preferences.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, we believe that our findings, despite using explicit measures, point to meaningful implications of crime news coverage.

The target group of interest in the current study was Latinos. However, the association between blacks and criminality may be even stronger than between Latinos and criminality,<sup>65</sup> and so research should test the present effects with black and white suspects. We also used only one message in our manipulation, and hence the results should be tested for generalization to other crimes (e.g., murder, larceny). We believe the effects will persist given that our stimuli were modeled after actual newspaper crime stories. Relatedly, examination of variation in the reported race of the victim would provide further insight into the persistence of subjective group dynamics effects.

Research should directly measure endorsement of group criminality norms. Norm endorsement should *mediate* the effects of chronic television news exposure described here, and should therefore serve as a more proximal *moderator* of the effects we observed. Finally, and in the broadest sense, we advocate more work examining interpersonal phenomena in the media, such as the criminal dyad we featured. By looking at media portrayals of social interaction, rather than just portrayals of individuals, we will get a better idea of how media affect our social relationships. We hope this work initiates theoretical discussion of the relational dimension present in intergroup portrayals.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

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