

The negative impact of perceiving discrimination on collective well-being: the mediating role of perceived ingroup status

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Abstract

Previous research has found that, among stigmatized group members, perceiving discrimination against the ingroup simultaneously yields a positive indirect effect on self-worth (mediated by ingroup identification) and a negative direct effect (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). This study not only replicated these effects with a sample of women, but also revealed that the negative direct effect was mediated by perceived status of the ingroup: as perceived discrimination increased, perceived ingroup status decreased, which in turn lowered collective self-worth. Perceiving discrimination also increased the accessibility of the stigmatized group's devalued status. A new direction for future research may be to consider when stigmatized group members might affirm the ingroup rather than protect self-worth. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

When stigmatized group members experience unfavorable outcomes on certain tasks (e.g. poor test performance), attributing those outcomes to discrimination can protect self-worth (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Dion, 1975; Dion & Earn, 1975). In one demonstration, Dion and Earn (1975) presented Jewish participants with negative feedback from several evaluators, which could or could not be attributed to religious discrimination. When participants could attribute negative feedback to discrimination, they rated themselves more favorably on positive dimensions of the Jewish stereotype. Also, an internal analysis later revealed that individuals who perceived discrimination in this study reported higher self-esteem than those who were less likely to do so (Dion, 1985). Thus, some evidence supports the hypothesis that perceiving discrimination can protect self-worth.

Although perceiving discrimination provides self-esteem benefits under some conditions, there appear to be important limitations (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002; Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Postmes, in press; Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, in press). Branscombe et al. (1999), for example, examined African-Americans' perceptions that they have been the target of discrimination as a result of their

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group membership. First, they found that perceiving discrimination had a positive effect on self-esteem that was mediated by ingroup identification. Second, perceived discrimination also had direct negative consequences for self-esteem, perhaps caused by individuals' over-reliance on the mechanism over time and across contexts. Since then, Schmitt et al. (2002) replicated this model with women as respondents. The evidence suggests that a general willingness to identify prejudice or discrimination against one's group can have positive and negative consequences for the self-worth of members of stigmatized groups.

Although identifying prejudice and discrimination against one's group can have deleterious consequences for the self-worth of stigmatized group members, it is unclear why this effect occurs. Schmitt and Branscombe (2002) argued that the negative effect of perceived discrimination on self-esteem may result from feelings of social rejection and exclusion. Nevertheless, the notion that feelings of social rejection might mediate the negative impact of perceived discrimination on self-worth has yet to be empirically tested. The present research was designed to directly address this issue. We examined the possibility that as stigmatized group members become increasingly willing to perceive discrimination against their ingroup, they must acknowledge that others devalue their group, and this reduces perceived ingroup status. It would seem that by acknowledging prejudice against one's group, one highlights the socially devalued nature of that group. Thus, following the reasoning of Branscombe and colleagues, we empirically tested whether perceiving discrimination can increase group members' perceptions of the stigmatized nature of their ingroup (i.e. reduce the ingroup's perceived status), and if so, whether this effect reduces self-worth.

A second goal, related to the first, was to explore whether perceiving discrimination would affect the accessibility of a stigmatized group member's perceptions of their group's status. To our knowledge, no research has explored the kind of content made accessible by perceptions of discrimination. However, it seemed plausible that as perceived discrimination increases, the accessibility of the stigmatized group's devalued status would also increase. This hypothesis was also tested in the present study.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT RESEARCH

In this research, we examined the effects of general willingness to perceive discrimination on *collective self-esteem*. Collective self-esteem is a relatively new concept in social psychology. In 1992, Luhtanen and Crocker developed a questionnaire that measures four evaluative and identity-driven components relating to social identities. Of these, two are particularly relevant to the present concerns. *Private collective esteem*, arguably the most representative of collective self-esteem overall (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998), indicates whether individuals evaluate their group positively or negatively. By contrast, *public esteem* indicates whether individuals think *other people* view their group positively or negatively. In the current research, public esteem represents our measure of perceived ingroup status, and private collective esteem represents our measure of self-worth.

When Crocker and Major (1989) first introduced mechanisms designed to protect self-worth (e.g. perceiving discrimination against the ingroup), they argued that these mechanisms protected *global personal* self-esteem. However, there seems to be good reason to focus on collective self-worth. First, self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) predict that seeing oneself as a group member leads to actions that serve the collective self. In addition, according to social identity theory, subjective well-being is largely determined by one's group memberships, in particular the extent to which one's own groups compare favorably or unfavorably with other groups. This suggestion is supported elsewhere (for a review, see

Rubin & Hewstone, 1998; Crandall, Tsang, Harvey, & Britt, 2001). Furthermore, Branscombe and colleagues (1999) found that the effects of perceived discrimination on collective well-being paralleled the effects on personal well-being. Thus, we thought it was appropriate to focus on collective rather than personal self-worth.

To summarize, the present analysis explores the associations among perceived discrimination, perceived ingroup status, and private collective esteem among stigmatized group members. As described earlier, previous research has established that perceiving discrimination over time leads to simultaneous positive and negative effects on self-esteem among stigmatized group members (e.g. Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt et al., 2002). In the present study, we tested the notion that perceived ingroup status *mediates* the negative association between perceiving discrimination and private collective self-esteem. That is, consistent with the reasoning of Branscombe, Schmitt, and colleagues, we predicted that perceiving discrimination would reduce perceived ingroup status, and that this reduction would reduce private collective esteem.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

In all, 132 female undergraduates from Ohio State University participated in exchange for credit in their introductory psychology class. On computers in a laboratory, participants completed a measure of perceived discrimination (i.e. a scale adapted from Branscombe et al., 1999) and the collective self-esteem scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). These measures were counterbalanced. Because order did not affect scores on any measure, $ts < |1.25|$, $ps > 0.20$, we do not discuss the counterbalancing further. At the close of the session, all participants were debriefed.

Questionnaires

Perceived Discrimination

Previous research (Branscombe et al., 1999) has used two separate measures to assess an individual's general tendency to perceive discrimination. In this study, we adapted one of these scales, which assessed individuals' perceptions of the extent to which they had been the targets of prejudice and discrimination in the past. This 3-item scale was adapted from Branscombe et al. (1999): 'I feel like I am personally a victim of society because of my gender'; 'I consider myself a person who has been deprived of the opportunities that are available to others because of my gender'; and 'I feel that I have been the target of prejudice because of my gender' (this third item was added to Branscombe et al.'s two-item measure to strengthen the reliability of this scale). Participants responded to these items using a 7-point scale (from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*). Responses to these items were averaged together. Scores ranged from 1 to 5.33 ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.36$), with higher scores indicating greater perceptions of past discrimination. The scale displayed adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Collective Self-esteem

The private esteem, public esteem, and identity subscales of the collective self-esteem scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) were used as our measures of collective self-esteem, perceived ingroup status, and

ingroup identification, respectively. For this study, all the items were reframed to focus on female gender (e.g. ingroup status: 'The female gender is considered good by others'; identification: 'Belonging to the female gender is an important part of my self-image'). All subscales on the collective self-esteem scale are four-item scales; however, to supplement the private esteem items and create a more reliable measure, four items that assess ingroup satisfaction (adapted from Leonardelli & Brewer, 2001, Experiments 2 and 3) were added to the end of the collective self-esteem scale: 'I am pleased to be a member of the female gender'; 'The female gender is not satisfying to me (reverse scored)'; 'I am unhappy with the female gender (reverse scored)'; and 'I am satisfied with the female gender'. An exploratory factor analysis, with maximum likelihood estimation and oblique rotation, was conducted in order to determine the original scale's fit with the four additional items. This analysis indicated that the four additional statements loaded onto the same factor as the private esteem items, and only on that factor.

Participants rated their level of agreement with each item on the same 7-point scale used for the perceived discrimination measure. After reverse scored items were recoded, responses were averaged together for each subscale. Private collective esteem scores ranged from 3.63 to 7 ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 0.73$). Ingroup status scores ranged from 2.75 to 7 ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 0.87$) and for identification, scores ranged from 2 to 7 ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.03$). Higher numbers indicated more positive evaluations, greater perceived ingroup status, and greater ingroup identification, respectively. Inter-item consistency was adequate for private collective self-esteem ($\alpha = 0.85$) and for ingroup identification ($\alpha = 0.72$). Inter-item consistency for the ingroup status measure was lower than the other scales ($\alpha = 0.62$).

It's interesting to note that one might question whether the perceived discrimination and ingroup status items represent the same construct. However, an exploratory factor analysis completed with maximum likelihood estimation and oblique rotation revealed that the items loaded on separate factors, although, as expected, these factors were (negatively) correlated.

RESULTS

Prior to conducting the necessary mediational analyses, bivariate correlations were computed among the four indices. Analysis revealed that perceived discrimination scores tended to be positively correlated with ingroup identification ($r = 0.15$, $p = 0.08$). In addition, perceived discrimination also tended to be negatively correlated with private collective self-esteem ($r = -0.15$, $p = 0.09$). Of interest, perceived discrimination scores were negatively correlated with perceived ingroup status ($r = -0.48$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, as perceived discrimination increased, perceived ingroup status decreased. These correlations were consistent with the current predictions, as well as the logic of Branscombe et al. (1999). In addition, perceived ingroup status and identity scores were uncorrelated ($r = 0.10$, $p = 0.26$).

Ingroup Identification as a Mediator

In order to determine if we had replicated the effects reported by Branscombe et al. (1999) and by Schmitt et al. (2002), we tested for mediation using a series of regression analyses. To begin with, perceived discrimination tended to have a direct negative relationship with private collective esteem ($r = -0.15$, $p < 0.10$) and a positive relationship with ingroup identification ($r = 0.15$, $p < 0.10$). Moreover, ingroup identification and private collective esteem were positively related ($r = 0.49$,

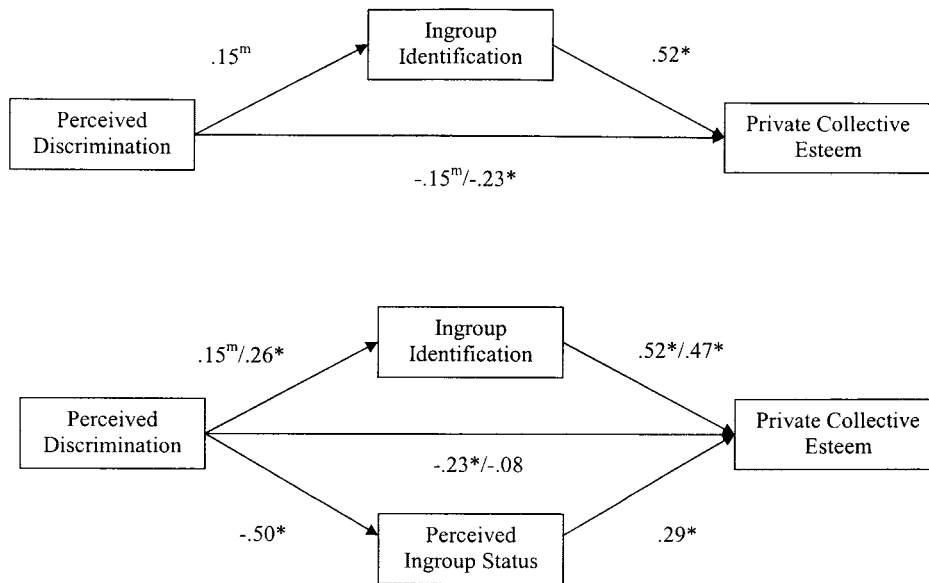


Figure 1. Mediators of perceived prejudice on private collective esteem. Top panel: Identification as a mediator of perceived prejudice and collective self-worth. Bottom panel: Perceived ingroup status as a mediator of perceived prejudice and collective self-worth

Note. In the top panel, the number to the left (right) of the slash indicates the association before (after) ingroup identification was entered into the analysis. In the bottom panel, numbers to the left (right) of the slash indicate associations from the original mediational model before (after) ingroup perceived status was entered into the regression analyses. ^m $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$

$p < 0.001$). When both perceived discrimination and ingroup identification were included as predictors of private collective esteem, ingroup identification remained a significant positive predictor ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$), and perceived discrimination scores now significantly predicted private collective esteem in the negative direction ($\beta = -0.23$, $p = 0.003$). Thus, our data were consistent with the notion that perceived discrimination exerts both a direct negative effect on private collective esteem and a positive indirect effect through ingroup identification. The statistical mediation test recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) indicated that the change in the association between perceived discrimination and private collective esteem approached significance, $z = 1.66$, $p = 0.10$. A diagram demonstrating the mediated process is presented in the top panel of Figure 1.

Perceived Ingroup Status as a Mediator

A second set of analyses was conducted to determine whether perceived ingroup status (i.e. public esteem) mediated the direct negative association between perceived discrimination and private collective self-esteem. To successfully meet the conditions for mediation, it was important to show first that perceived discrimination predicted perceived ingroup status even after controlling for ingroup identification. Thus, perceived ingroup status scores were submitted to a simultaneous regression analysis with perceived discrimination and ingroup identification as predictors. Analysis revealed that ingroup identification ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = 0.02$) and perceived discrimination ($\beta = -0.50$, $p < 0.001$) both significantly predicted perceived ingroup status. Next, we tested whether (controlling for the effect of

ingroup identification) perceived ingroup status significantly mediated the negative effect of perceived discrimination on private collective esteem. Private collective esteem scores were submitted to a simultaneous regression analysis with ingroup identification, perceived discrimination, and perceived ingroup status scores as predictors. Analysis revealed that although ingroup identification ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived ingroup status ($\beta = 0.29$, $p = 0.001$) remained significant predictors of private collective esteem, the direct negative effect of perceived discrimination on private collective esteem was no longer significant ($\beta = -0.08$, $p = 0.34$). The statistical test recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) revealed that perceived ingroup status significantly mediated the association between perceived discrimination and collective self-esteem, $z = -3.08$, $p = 0.002$. A diagram presenting both mediated effects is presented in the bottom panel of Figure 1.

Accessibility of Perceived Ingroup Status

Because the data were collected on computer, we were also able to record how long participants took to complete the measure of perceived ingroup status (i.e. the public esteem subscale). These response latencies could indicate the accessibility of perceived ingroup status: the faster they respond to these items (i.e. the lower the response time), the more accessible their perceived ingroup status is. We expected that for individuals high in perceived discrimination, the negative status of their ingroup might be highly accessible; that is, we predicted a negative association between perceived discrimination scores and completion times. Response latency values for perceived ingroup status (averaged across public esteem items) were submitted to a regression analysis with perceived discrimination, ingroup identification, and public esteem scores as simultaneous predictors. Analysis revealed a marginally significant negative relation between perceived discrimination scores and perceived ingroup status response latency ($\beta = -0.18$, $p = 0.09$); consistent with predictions, as perceived discrimination increased, individuals tended to be faster to report their public esteem. In addition, there was a significant negative relation between perceived ingroup status scores and completion time ($\beta = -0.22$, $p = 0.03$). It appears as well that the more individuals believe that others view their group favorably, the faster they will respond to these items. Apparently, these two effects mutually suppressed each other; bivariate correlations between perceived discrimination scores and completion time ($r = -0.06$) and between perceived ingroup status scores and completion time ($r = -0.12$) were not significant ($ps > 0.16$). Identification scores did not significantly predict perceived ingroup status completion time ($\beta = 0.07$, $p = 0.44$). These data thus support the idea that as perceived discrimination increases, accessibility of the ingroup's low status also increases.

DISCUSSION

We began by replicating Branscombe et al.'s (1999) finding that perceived discrimination over time can have deleterious consequences for private collective self-esteem. As expected, these perceptions of discrimination appear to reduce perceptions of ingroup status, thus having an *indirect* negative effect on private collective self-esteem. In other words, as the tendency to report being a victim of prejudice increases, people become more likely to believe that others devalue their group, and this ultimately damages their own private assessments of their group's value. The evidence supports the hypothesis that perceived discrimination increases feelings that the group has been socially rejected, which ultimately reduce collective self-worth. Importantly, although this process was suggested by Branscombe, Schmitt, and colleagues (e.g. Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt et al., 2002), the current

study is the first to empirically establish this mediation. Thus, these findings provide a potentially important extension of the findings of prior research. As a caveat, it is important to note that these data are correlational, which raises the possibility that other mechanisms might also explain the findings. Future research would benefit from additional evidence collected in an experimental context.

One important contribution of this research is that it addressed the effects of perceived discrimination on perceived ingroup status (e.g. public esteem). Perceived ingroup status was positively correlated with private collective esteem, suggesting that individuals internalized others' opinions of their ingroup, even when those opinions were negative. We argue that perceived discrimination can be beneficial to the collective self-worth of stigmatized group members in a given situation but at the same time it can have a negative long term effect that is mediated by increases in the negative perceptions of the ingroup's status. Our findings are consistent with this notion. Given that perceived discrimination appears to have simultaneous positive and negative indirect effects on private collective self-worth, one intriguing direction for future research might be to identify conditions that make one or the other mechanism more likely or powerful. One possible moderator might be whether or not individuals are focused on the ingroup or outgroup. For instance, perhaps the positive indirect effect (through identification) plays a larger role when individuals are more focused on the ingroup. Here, perceiving discrimination may be an opportunity for members of stigmatized groups to bond with each other and rally around the ingroup, thereby strengthening the collective identity and yielding more positive evaluations of the ingroup. By contrast, perceiving discrimination's negative indirect effect (through perceived ingroup status) may play a larger role when individuals are focused on the outgroup. In contexts where stigmatized group members are surrounded by outgroup members (such as members hired as token representatives of their stigmatized group), members might be particularly sensitive to feelings of social rejection that may result from perceiving discrimination and those who do engage in such discrimination may be particularly likely to feel rejected. We suggest this as a direction for future research.

One potential implication of the present findings is that perceiving discrimination is self-perpetuating—that is, perceiving discrimination in others highlights stigmatized group members' perception that others devalue the ingroup, thus creating unfavorable thoughts and feelings about the ingroup. Unfavorable perceptions might, in turn, be viewed as more legitimate by outgroup members, thereby accentuating prejudice. Another intriguing issue to examine in future research might be the degree to which perceived discrimination provides positive situational effects, but negative long-term effects as such perceptions accumulate over time and are internalized. Indeed, a more dynamic model along these lines might eventually provide a more complete understanding of these outcomes and processes.

In combination with the findings of Branscombe, Schmitt and colleagues (Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt et al., 2002), we have shown that mechanisms that were originally thought to have benefits for stigmatized group members can have some drawbacks as well. In light of this, it could be useful to explore mechanisms that do not have such insidious drawbacks. For example, there might exist mechanisms that build a basis for positive collective self-worth. One could engage in what Tajfel and Turner (1986) called *social creativity*, or the process of 'redefining or altering the elements of the comparative situation' (pp. 19–20). Here, ingroup members could change the social comparison dimension or the comparison group in an effort to evaluate the ingroup more favorably. In addition, individuals might engage in non-comparative mechanisms, such as generating positive thoughts and beliefs about the ingroup. In this case, differences in the quantity or the quality of such content, or the extent to which the content is easily generated, may act as mechanisms that build positive esteem. More generally, then, the study of the extent to which stigmatized group members use such enhancement mechanisms (i.e. mechanisms that not only protect self-worth, but also build a basis for positive collective or personal self-esteem) may help explain why it is that stigmatized group

members have been shown to evaluate their ingroup equally or more favorably relative to non-stigmatized group members (Crocker et al., 1994).

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