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The dark side of subtle discrimination : how targets respond to different forms of discrimination

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Chapter 1

General Introduction

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character".

Martin Luther King Jr., August 28, 1963

Soon after the civil rights movement in the United States of the late 60's, many believed that one of the dreams of Martin Luther King Jr. which is mentioned in the quote above was in the process of becoming true. Mainly because of the changed social norms toward racism and because of the Civil Rights Act as well as other legislative interventions, overt discrimination of African-Americans in the United States was in a decline. Unfortunately, this decrease in the manifestation of blatant discrimination does not imply that members of minority groups encounter discrimination less often. On the contrary, discrimination continues to exist and affects the lives of minority group members in significant ways. Nowadays, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., perpetrators of prejudice and discrimination act as if they are judging minority group members by the content of their character while it still is all about context-irrelevant characteristics such as their skin color, gender, religion or sexual orientation. As John Dovidio said on CNN (December, 2006), racism is like a virus and it is mutating all the time. With other words, only the way prejudice and discriminatory behavior is expressed is changing – not whether or not they exist. This thesis investigates how victims react to these new and more subtle forms of discrimination compared to old and more blatant forms of discrimination.

Effects of exposure to discrimination

There is no doubt that explicit exposure to discrimination, such as during racial segregation in the United States until up to the end of the 1960's, is harmful for the victims in many ways. Poor access to resources such as housing, health,

employment, schooling, and occupational advancement are some very concrete negative outcomes for disadvantaged group members. Research shows that systematic exclusion of minority groups from these resources can in itself lead to psychological and physical health problems (see Major, McCoy, Kaiser, & Quinton, 2003 for a review). At a more subjective level, research suggests that perceiving oneself or one's group as a target of discrimination can be associated with a number of psychological and physiological responses indicative of stress reactions (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Major et al., 2002), as well as with negative emotions, low self-esteem, and even psychiatric symptoms (e.g., Barreto, Ellemers & Palacios, 2004; Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Dion & Earn, 1975; Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1997; Landrine & Klonoff, 1997; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; see Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002a for a review).

Researchers investigating the effects of prejudice and discrimination on its victims have argued that these negative psychological consequences might result from the implications of perceived discrimination for one's group based identity (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). The reasoning is that perceiving discrimination against one's group implies the acknowledgement of belonging to a devalued social group (Branscombe et al., 1999). This awareness that one's social group is devalued by others is thought to pose a threat to the social self because the identity that one derives from this group membership is not valued. Indeed, discrimination perceptions have been shown to harm collective self-esteem (Branscombe et al., 1999; Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001; Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003), as well as to induce negative expectations about future interactions, not only with the particular source of prejudice but with the outgroup as a whole (e.g., Tropp, 2003). At the same time, threats to feelings of inclusion enhance the need to see oneself as respected and accepted by others, which can elicit defensive responses that reduce the extent to which people are willing to see themselves as targets of discrimination (Carvallo & Pelham, 2006). Indeed, perceptions of discrimination inherently imply awareness of exclusion by dominant groups (Branscombe et al., 1999; see also Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002).

However, it has been argued that attributing the cause of a negative feedback to discriminatory treatment by others can also have a self-protective

function. This is because such attributions shift the blame for the negative outcome away from the self (Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Major et al., 2003 for reviews). While it has been argued that attributions to discrimination have an internal component (see also Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002), they also have an external component- the prejudice of the perpetrator. In this way, attributions to discrimination may still be internal but they are more external than attributions to lack of ability or effort. Thus, when a negative outcome is attributed to discrimination the blame is shifted away from the self to the perpetrator (Major et al., 2003). In concordance with this view, research has shown that when confronted with negative feedback, individuals who were able to attribute their failure to discrimination reported higher levels of psychological well-being compared to individuals who were not able to make attributions to discrimination and therefore can only make attributions to purely internal factors (see Major et al., 2002 and 2003 for reviews). Thus attributions to discrimination can reduce the personal responsibility of the victims for a negative outcome by providing an alternative explanation for the failure other than lack of individual merit (effort or ability).

Reconciling Previous Findings

Although the latter view seems to contradict claims that perceiving oneself as a victim of discrimination should be harmful for psychological well-being, there are good reasons why attributions to discrimination can sometimes seem hurtful and at other times protective for the well-being of its victims. For instance, the consequences of subtle discrimination may seem different, depending on the comparison that is made. When subtle discrimination is compared to blatant discrimination, the psychological consequences for victims might be quite different than when it is compared to a rejection condition where no discriminatory cues are present (i.e., a control condition).

More specifically, in a standard (non-discriminatory) rejection where individual merit seems to be the only cause of the negative outcome, victims do not have the option to attribute their rejection to the prejudiced view of the other (i.e., perpetrator), or to another external factor (e.g., bad luck). In such situations, one's personal responsibility is the most likely reason for the negative outcome. In

a blatantly discriminatory situation however, it is more clear that the prejudiced view of the other (i.e., perpetrator) is the cause of the negative outcome, thus in such cases, the individual responsibility can be viewed as a less likely explanation for failure. In contrast to these clear rejection situations, subtly discriminatory rejection is more ambiguous and thus multi-interpretable. Victims of subtle discrimination have the possibility to attribute their rejection to discrimination next to the possibility of making attributions to personal responsibility.

Thus, when the psychological consequences of subtle discrimination are compared to a control rejection – where negative outcome is not caused by discrimination or by other external factors such as bad luck –, subtly discriminatory rejection may alleviate the individual responsibility for the negative outcome because it offers an alternative explanation next to the explanation of individual responsibility, namely the prejudiced view of the other. However, when the psychological consequences of subtle discrimination are contrasted with the effects of more blatant forms of discrimination, it may be easier to discount individual responsibility in blatant situations than when discrimination is subtle. In other words, subtle discrimination offers the possibility for its victims to attribute the negative outcome either to discrimination (as would be the case in blatant discrimination) or to individual responsibility (as would be the case when rejection is caused by individual responsibility). In turn, blatant discrimination can be more self-protective than subtle discrimination because it allows the individual to discount self-blame compared to subtle discrimination (where the lack of individual merit is relatively more likely to be a cause of failure).

Previous studies mainly compared subtle (or ambiguous) discrimination to a control rejection where individual responsibility was a more likely explanation of the negative outcome. Hence the observation that subtle discrimination can be self-protective (see Major et al., 2003 for a review). This previous research however rarely compared the psychological consequences of subtle discrimination to the effects of blatant discrimination. The few studies that did compare reactions to blatant versus subtle discrimination reveal that these types of discrimination are experienced in quite different ways (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Major et al., 2003). While victims of blatant discrimination are more likely to acknowledge that their rejection is due to discrimination, victims of subtle

discrimination are less likely to recognize group based-unfair treatment as the cause of their negative outcome.

This differentiated experience of subtle and blatant discrimination is likely to lead to divergent responses of victims. Indeed, research shows that when discrimination is blatant, victims tend to direct their reactions toward the source of the negative treatment (e.g., hostility and protest). However, when discrimination is subtle (or ambiguous), people report self-directed negative emotions such as anxiety and self-anger (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). As mentioned earlier, subtle discrimination is by definition more ambiguous and it should lead to more uncertainty about individual ability and merit than when discrimination is blatant or than when the cause of the negative outcome can be attributed to external factors such as bad luck or to the perpetrator being a jerk (e.g., Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003; Major et al., 2003; see Major et al., 2002 for a review). In sum, when discrimination is blatant, it is clear that the cause of the negative outcome is the prejudiced view of the other while when discrimination is subtle individual qualities will become more the focus of concern (see also Crocker & Major, 1989). The present thesis focuses on the comparison between subtle and blatant discrimination in order to come to a more comprehensive understanding of why being a victim of discrimination can be in some cases hurtful and in others not.

Another reason why the literature has revealed different reactions to the discrimination experience is the fact that individual as well as situational characteristics and the characteristics of the discriminatory event itself can moderate the effects it has on the psychological well-being of its targets (Feldmann-Barret & Swim, 1998; see also Major et al., 2003). In fact, previous research has already started to investigate the moderating role of *individual* as well as *situational characteristics* on reactions to discrimination. For instance, research has shown that characteristics of *the self* moderate people's perceptions of discrimination and determine the consequences of such perceptions for individual well-being (e.g., in terms of emotions and self-esteem; Eccleston & Major, 2006; Kaiser, Major, & McCoy, 2004; Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002). Furthermore, having a pessimistic outlook on life or being high in rejection sensitivity can be seen as a source of vulnerability for prejudice and discrimination which makes victims experience more discomfort and stress, and reduces their coping resources. Similarly, identification with the

stigmatized ingroup also increases vulnerability to discrimination such that high identifiers experience decreased self-esteem after exposure to group-based treatment compared to low identifiers (McCoy & Major, 2003). The present thesis extends previous research by investigating another important individual characteristic i.e., *personal self-esteem* as a potential moderator of responses to discrimination which has not been considered before (Chapter 2).

Previous research has also demonstrated that situational factors, such as certain characteristics of the discriminatory event, can also determine the consequences of discrimination for well-being of those exposed to discriminatory treatment (see Major et al., 2003, and Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002 for reviews). For instance, when discrimination is perceived as an isolated, unstable or rare event, victims are less likely to suffer from the negative outcome compared to when discrimination is perceived as stable and repeatedly permeating one's life experiences (Schmitt, Branscombe, & Postmes, 2003). Indeed, attributions to discrimination seemed to be more harmful for individuals for whom this is a pervasive event than for those who only seldomly experience discrimination (Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002; Schmitt, Branscombe & Postmes, 2003; see also Barreto et al., 2004; Eccleston & Major, 2006; Platow, Byrne, & Ryan, 2005). In this thesis, I address two further situational cues that can moderate reactions to discrimination but were not investigated so far: *how social norms with regard to erroneous attributions* (Chapter 3), and *how opinion of others about the rejection the victim receives* (Chapter 4) affect and moderate reactions to subtle versus blatant discrimination. The present thesis extends the above reviewed previous work by making these investigations, as they will further clarify why discrimination sometimes has negative consequences and why it sometimes does not.

In the present thesis, I experimentally distinguish blatant and subtle discrimination in the same studies in order to be able to compare their consequences for victims' well-being in a more direct way. Because the clarity of the cues makes other moderating factors less relevant, throughout the present thesis there is no moderation expected when discrimination is blatant (see also Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). However, and consistent with previous work on ambiguous discrimination, when discrimination is subtle, victims are more likely to be dependent on other factors in their reactions to discrimination (e.g., Major et

al., 2003). Individual differences such as personal self-esteem (Chapter 2) can help victims to form their responses as well as situational cues such as social norms regarding erroneous attributions victims can make (Chapter 3) and opinions of others regarding the treatment victims receive (Chapter 4) will shape to an important degree how victims react to subtle discrimination.

The contribution of the present thesis to the understanding of reactions to discrimination

The central idea of the current thesis is that blatant and subtle discrimination can both threaten the self but in different ways. For this reason, I argue that the comparison between blatant and subtle discrimination is of crucial importance in order to come to a comprehensive understanding of the psychological consequences of exposure to discriminatory treatment in general. Such a comparison will allow us to investigate in which ways reactions to discrimination can be protective or harmful for the well-being of its victims. For instance, while hostility related emotional reactions in the context of blatant discrimination at first sight seem to be negative, they may have positive consequences because they might mobilize the individual to protest: a behavior that can be aimed at changing the social situation for the self or even for the group. Such other-directed reactions are less likely to occur when discrimination is subtle. Instead, reactions in subtly discriminatory cases will mainly be directed at the self in terms of self-directed negative emotions (anxiety and self-anger; Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). This is likely to be the case because, as outlined above, when discrimination is subtle, individual shortcomings also constitute an alternative explanation for the negative outcome. As I show throughout the thesis, these negative experiences that affect mainly the personal self, prevent victims of subtle discrimination from behaving in ways that may lead to an improvement of the individual's position in the future. The situation is quite different than when people are able to connect the negative feedback to group-based treatment as is the case when discrimination is blatant.

Thus, in order to understand how exactly victims react to different forms of discrimination and to assess the different possible consequences of discriminatory treatment for the victims, we need to be more specific about which

type of discrimination victims encounter. For this purpose, in this thesis I focus on directly comparing reactions to blatant versus subtle discrimination and examine a broad range of self-directed responses to investigate how *individual* (personal self-esteem) and *situational* (what others say about erroneous attributions or about the treatment the targets receive) *cues* can moderate these reactions. In the following, I will first discuss the three factors that are investigated in the present thesis and then describe the outcome variables I focused on throughout the research reported in this dissertation. After a brief summary of each chapter, I discuss the broader implications of the current findings for the understanding of responses to discrimination.

Personal Self-esteem

As reviewed above, prior research shows that reactions to discrimination are determined by multiple factors and some studies (e.g., Kaiser et al., 2004; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002) have already investigated the role of individual characteristics in reactions to discrimination. In a similar vein, in chapter 2 of this thesis, I examine how personal self-esteem moderates reactions to discrimination. In this context, personal self-esteem has so far mainly been investigated as an outcome variable such that research has examined temporal loss of self-esteem as a possible consequence of exposure to discrimination. However, personal self-esteem has not systematically been addressed as a determinant of reactions to discrimination. This despite the fact that research on the effects of self-esteem in the absence of discriminatory treatment suggests that this factor is relevant in the context of negative outcomes and it moderates reactions to negative feedback more generally (Baumeister & Tice, 1985; Kernis, Brockner, & Frankel, 1989).

Self-esteem research shows that when faced with negative feedback, individuals low and high in self-esteem generally differ in their cognitive and emotional reactions (e.g., Brown & Dutton, 1995; Brown & Marchall, 2001; McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981). At the cognitive level, individuals low and high in self-esteem differ in the extent to which they attribute a negative outcome to internal factors: compared to individuals with high self-esteem, individuals with

low self-esteem are more likely to accept negative feedback as indicative of their lack of abilities and are more likely to attribute failure internally.

At an emotional level, people with low self-esteem tend to suffer more from negative feedback compared to people with high self-esteem (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Brown & Dutton, 1995). One of the reasons why this is so is that people with high self-esteem have a wider range of positive beliefs about themselves, which make them more resourceful and less vulnerable to particular drawbacks. Thus, prior research on the effects of self-esteem shows that low self-esteem individuals are more emotionally affected by information that may reflect negatively on them and appear to be mostly concerned with avoidance of situations that might reveal negative information about the self (Bernichon, Cook, & Brown, 2003). By contrast, negative feedback appears to be less harmful for people with high self-esteem, as they are more focused on learning and self-improvement.

Thus, because group based-rejection per definition involves negative feedback, self-esteem should be an important determinant of reactions to discrimination especially when situational cues are limited to inform the individual about the personal responsibility for the negative feedback. More specifically, the general hypothesis regarding the effects of self-esteem in the context of subtle discrimination versus blatant discrimination is that this factor will modify the effects of exposure to subtle but not the effects of exposure to blatant discrimination. When prejudice is blatant, it is clear that the other, not the self, is the cause of negative treatment. When, however, situational cues are ambiguous, as in the case of subtle discrimination, people will be more sensitive to any aspects of the self that may be relevant to interpret their unfavorable outcomes. This is why I predict that when they are subjected to subtle discrimination, people's self-directed responses are more likely to depend on their level of self-esteem. This is examined in Chapter 2.

Social Norms: Others attitudes regarding erroneous attributions to discrimination

Discrimination is a social event and it often occurs within a social context where others are present. This is why, besides individual characteristics (e.g.,

self-esteem), reactions to discrimination are also likely to be affected by social (or situational) cues such as a) what others (i.e., audience) think of erroneous attributions that can be made by the victims of discrimination or b) what others think of the treatment the target received. Prior research examined several situational cues and found that claims of discriminatory treatment are negatively evaluated by others (Kaiser & Miller, 2001) and that targets of discrimination are concerned with how their discrimination claims will be seen by others (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; 2004; Swim, Hyers, 1999). These concerns tend to limit the extent to which targets report the discrimination they encounter (Sechrist, Swim, & Stangor, 2004; Stangor, Swim, van Allen, & Sechrist 2002; Swim & Hyers, 1999).

Furthermore, victims are even concerned about reactions of others when their claims of discriminatory treatment appear correct and justified (Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006). Many studies on prejudice and discrimination indeed show that people are generally reluctant to challenge discrimination by responding to or reporting it even when there are clear cues indicating that the treatment is discriminatory (e.g., Kaiser & Miller, 2001; 2004; Swim & Hyers, 1999; Sechrist, Swim, & Stangor, 2004). This prior research however did not examine *how social norms regarding potential errors the targets of discrimination can make, and how the opinion of others regarding the treatment victim received can affect victims' responses to discrimination.*

Chapter 3 investigates how *social norms regarding erroneous attributions victims can make* affect responses to discriminatory treatment. As noted above, victims of subtle discrimination face uncertainty regarding the cause of their negative outcome. In subtly discriminatory situations where situational cues are limited to indicate the discriminatory character of the negative treatment, social norms can guide and shape victims reactions. In Chapter 3, I investigate how social norms regarding erroneous attributions can influence responses to discrimination. More precisely, if social norms allow victims to make erroneous attributions (e.g., victims are allowed to make discrimination claims even when they are not quite sure about their judgment) they are more likely to acknowledge group-based treatment to be the cause of their negative outcome, including in cases where situational cues to indicate discrimination are lacking. This investigation in Chapter 3 extends past research by showing that in(tolerant)

social norms can have a direct effect on the discrimination perceptions of the victims, and responses of victims are influenced by these norms.

Social Influence: What others say about the discriminatory treatment

Chapter 4 only focuses on subtle discrimination and continues to examine situational cues that can moderate victims' reactions. More specifically, this chapter investigates how targets of subtle discrimination adapt their opinion about their own discriminatory treatment to *the opinion of an audience that has witnessed their treatment*. As already mentioned, discrimination is a social event and victims of discrimination are often confronted with group-based mistreatment in the presence of other people. These other people are likely to have their own interpretation of the situation, which they may share with each other and with the target of discrimination. Even when other people are not actually present during the discriminatory event, they may be available so that victims of discrimination may resort to their opinion to help interpret the situation. This chapter investigates how opinions of these others can shape victims' responses to subtle discrimination.

Past research has already examined how others react to one's claims of discriminatory treatment (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; 2004). Some other research also examined how perceived social support from others affected the extent to which people were willing to report discriminatory treatment (Stangor, Swim, van Allen, & Sechrist, 2002; Swim Cohen & Hyers, 1998; Swim & Hyers, 1999). However, this prior research did not examine how the opinion of others (i.e., an audience) can affect and shape the opinion of the target about his or her discriminatory treatment.

Chapter 4 also extends prior research by investigating the role of group membership of others in these social influence processes. Prior research focused mainly on how claims of discrimination made by ingroup members affect self-views of other fellow group members. Thus, how people react and how they are affected when another ingroup member claims to be discriminated against. The opinion of outgroup members however has not been considered before. In addition, it is important to note that the mechanism investigated in Chapter 4 is a different mechanism than processes that are responsible for the *black-sheep*

effect. The black-sheep effect demonstrates that claims of discrimination made by victims are evaluated negatively by fellow ingroup members. The studies reported in Chapter 4 however show that victims of discrimination are negatively affected when their fellow ingroup members indicate the discriminatory treatment the victim received. Furthermore, previous studies only investigated how others (i.e., audience) evaluated claims of discrimination made by the target of discrimination. The studies reported in Chapter 4 however show the positive consequences of acknowledging (or denying) the discriminatory treatment targets face when these indications of discrimination are made by outgroup members.

In sum, in this chapter, participants are exposed to the opinions of other outgroup members or ingroup members, and investigates the emotional and behavioral consequences of subtle discrimination for the targets after they received the opinion of these ingroup or outgroup members that either indicate or deny the possibility of discriminatory treatment the target received.

Measures

The present thesis investigates responses to blatant and subtle discrimination in terms of self-directed negative emotions, self-presentation (self-stereotyping and self-handicapping) and behavior (task performance and protest). In general terms, this work shows that subtle discrimination can have different psychological and behavioral consequences in comparison to blatant discrimination.

The psychological consequences are measured with several self-report measures on emotions, self-views, prevention orientation, self-handicapping. Behavioral measures intend to show that the detrimental consequences of perceiving discrimination go further than self-reports and can even affect behavior which shows the concrete consequences of discrimination and how targets can behave in ways that deepen their disadvantage.

Emotional responses are measured mainly in terms of self-directed negative emotions. In line with our general expectation, self-directed negative emotions are not expected to be moderated when discrimination is blatant. Prior work showing that blatant discrimination is accompanied by other-directed emotions such as anger and hostility supports this idea. In contrast to blatant

discrimination, subtle discrimination elicits more self-directed emotions such as self-anger and insecurity (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Hansen & Sassenberg, 2006) and due to the ambiguous character of these disguised forms of discrimination, additional (individual as well as situational) cues are expected to moderate self-directed emotional reactions to subtle discrimination.

Self-views are examined (Chapter 2 and 4) on two different dimensions: the extent to which individuals *self-stereotype* and the extent to which people tend to *self-handicap*. Self-stereotyping indicates the degree to which people tend to describe themselves in terms of group stereotypes. Defining oneself in these stereotypical ways when confronted with subtle discrimination is disadvantageous to the self because those stereotypes are the cause of the received negative treatment. The use of these stereotypes to describe the self can thus justify the received unfair group-based treatment. Self-handicapping refers to the tendency for individuals to claim or even create performance undermining circumstances in order to cope with anticipated failure. Although it is argued that the use of self-handicapping strategies can help to psychologically protect the self from the consequences of an anticipated negative outcome (Tice, 1991), they nevertheless reveal negative self-views because endorsement of these strategies reflects a negative expectation about one's future performance.

At the behavioral level, I assessed participants' behavioral responses to subtle discrimination to the extent to which they actually tried to improve their current and future outcomes. In Chapter 2, participants were given the opportunity to show their actual performance in order to disconfirm appropriateness of their negative outcome. In Chapter 4, people were given the opportunity to protest against their unfair treatment which could give them the opportunity to improve their own future position.

Summary of the empirical chapters

Chapter 2: The dark side of subtle discrimination: The moderating role of self-esteem in responses to subtle and blatant discrimination.

In the first empirical chapter (Chapter 2), I conducted a Pilot Study to test the main paradigm that is used throughout the thesis. In order to create a situation where people could receive subtle versus blatant rejection, participants

were placed in a job interview context where gender-biased interview questions were used (e.g., are you prepared to dress attractively in order to influence other people). Such a context makes it possible to give female participants feedback in a broad range of ways about the reason of the interviews' outcome. In this Pilot Study, female participants received three different types of feedback. In order to manipulate *blatant discrimination*, participants received a *rejection feedback* which explicitly referred to the gender group membership of the participant as being the cause of rejection. Second, the feedback participants received when discrimination was subtle did not contain any references to gender as the reason for rejection. However, the association of rejection with gender-biased interview questions was expected to form a ground for feelings of subtle discrimination. Finally, in the control condition, participants received interview questions which were not gender biased and their rejection feedback was similar to that in subtle condition.

This methodology was necessary in order to test whether subtle discrimination was perceived in different ways compared to blatant discrimination, and compared to a control rejection (which did not contain gender-biased information). The Pilot Study established that our paradigm successfully creates a situation of subtle discrimination that is indeed perceived as less discriminatory than blatant discrimination. Importantly, and as intended, subtle discrimination was perceived as more discriminatory than a control rejection.

Once I established that subtle and blatant discrimination are perceived in the intended ways in this paradigm, in three studies I investigated the moderating role of personal self-esteem in reactions to these two forms of discrimination. All three studies manipulated self-esteem and followed a Type of discrimination (which consisted of blatantly and subtly discriminatory rejection) and Personal self-esteem (low vs. high) between participants 2 factorial design. The first study examined how self-esteem moderates people's emotional reactions to blatant and subtle discrimination and showed that exposure to subtle discrimination elicits more negative self-directed emotions in participants with low compared to high self-esteem. Study 2 replicated and extended these findings by revealing that self-esteem also moderated behaviors that can disconfirm stereotypical views namely, when discrimination is subtle, victims showed suboptimal task performance and were unable to distance themselves from the stereotypes

associated with their (devalued) group. Study 3 again replicated the emotional and behavioral consequences of subtle discrimination. In this study we also extended the previous studies by showing that when faced with subtle discrimination, individuals low in self-esteem were most self-focused. In addition, they also tended to self-stereotype more than individuals high in self-esteem. In all these studies, self-esteem was not found to moderate responses to blatant discrimination, as predicted.

To conclude, this chapter provides insights into how personal self-esteem moderates reactions to subtle discrimination but not reactions to blatant discrimination. This is in line with the reasoning of the current thesis that when discriminatory cues are disguised, individual characteristics play a role in reactions of victims to their group-based rejection such that some individuals are less harmed than others.

Chapter 3: *Better be sorry than safe: How social norms about erroneous attributions can induce self-defeating responses to discrimination*

In this chapter, the main focus was on how broader social norms can shape peoples' experiences of and reactions to subtle versus blatant discrimination. More specifically, two studies (Study 4 and Study 5) examined how social norms that either tolerate or discourage erroneous attributions affect the way people respond to different forms of discrimination. This chapter showed that social norms that tolerate or discourage erroneous attributions moderate the effects of subtly discriminatory rejection but not the effects of blatant discrimination. More precisely, when discrimination was subtle and erroneous attributions were discouraged, participants attributed their rejection more to their individual performance, reported more self-directed negative emotions, and showed more self-defeating behavior (in terms of a focus on prevention of negative events, and stereotypical self-presentation) compared to when erroneous attributions to discrimination were tolerated. In line with predictions, these studies again showed that responses to blatant discrimination did not depend on social norms.

Thus, this chapter shows that while reactions to blatant discrimination remained unaffected by situational cues that are (in)tolerant of erroneous attributions victims can make, reactions to subtle discrimination were moderated

by these cues. These results are complementary to the findings of the previous chapter and show that in addition to individual characteristics, situational cues can also moderate reactions to subtle discrimination.

Chapter 4. *When “they” help more than “us”: The impact of ingroup and outgroup opinions on self-views, performance, and protest within a subtle discrimination context.*

The main focus of this chapter was on how targets of subtle discrimination are influenced by the opinion of ingroup or outgroup members who are supposedly subjected to the same sexist procedure. This chapter provides us with important information about how social influence processes can play a role in determining the effects of subtle discrimination on its victims. In two studies (Study 6 and Study 7) I investigated how others' opinions about the treatment the target received affect targets' perceptions of discrimination. To establish this, I compared a situation in which others indicate discriminatory treatment to a situation where others likewise consider the possibility of sexist treatment, but deny the occurrence of it. Two studies showed that when the situation is ambiguous, information from others who indicate discrimination increased perception of discrimination irrespective of whether these others belonged to the ingroup or to the outgroup. More importantly, the results of two studies indicate that the source of influence affected the self-views of targets, such that when outgroup members indicated discrimination this led to less negative self-views (less self-stereotyping and less self-handicapping) than when ingroup members pointed this out. Study 7 additionally revealed that outgroup members indicating discrimination have the most beneficial consequences for participants' task performance, as well as for protest behavior.

In line with the results of the previous two chapters, the findings of this chapter again show that reactions to blatant discrimination remain unaffected by situational cues such as the opinion of an audience while reactions to subtle discrimination are moderated by additional cues.

Conclusions

The basic idea of the present thesis is that subtle discrimination will be perceived differently than blatant forms of discrimination by the victims. Furthermore, in the present thesis, it is argued that while reaction to subtle discrimination will depend on individual and situational characteristics, this is less likely to be the case when discrimination is blatant.

I argued that these two types of group-based unfair treatment would elicit different reactions from the individuals who are subjected to it. When discrimination is blatant there are clear cues that rejection is caused by group-based treatment. Therefore, negative responses are argued to be directed at the other, namely the source of the negative treatment. In such cases, victims are motivated to challenge the unfairness and illegitimacy of their blatantly discriminatory rejection. Indeed, in line with previous studies (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Hansen & Sassenberg, 2006) findings of the present thesis across three chapters and seven studies show that the victims' responses are not directed at the self when discrimination is blatant. However, because of its ambiguous nature, subtle discrimination directs reactions of its victims relatively more at the self on outcome variables that are indicative of self-defeat.

Importantly, the results of the present thesis show that individual characteristics (personal self-esteem) and situational cues (social norms and social influence) moderate reactions to subtle discrimination (but not reactions to blatant discrimination) on the outcome variables that are relevant for the self. While the results revealed that reactions to subtle discrimination were moderated by personal self-esteem (on outcome variables as self-directed negative emotions, task performance and stereotype confirmatory behavior), reactions to blatant discrimination remained unaffected by degree of self-esteem (Chapter 2). Reactions to subtle discrimination are also shown to be moderated by social norms regarding erroneous attributions participants can make. Chapter 3 showed that when discrimination is subtle, social norms moderated the consequences of discriminatory treatment such that when erroneous attributions were discouraged, the rejection was attributed more to lack of individual performance and this resulted in more self-directed negative emotions than when social norms were tolerant of erroneous attributions. As a consequence, in subtly discriminatory contexts, people who face social norms that discourage erroneous attributions

were also more likely to self-present in ways that set them up for a further cycle of rejection and self-blame in the future, namely by showing increased self-stereotyping and exhibiting a focus on prevention. Complementary to the chapter on social norms concerning erroneous attributions to discrimination, Chapter 4 investigated how the opinion of an audience can help people form and shape their own opinion about whether or not they were discriminated against. The results revealed that the opinions of others who indicated discrimination were taken as legitimate and this occurred irrespective of the group membership of the audience. Likely because the opinion of outgroup members who indicated discriminatory treatment toward the victim is taken (by the victim) as legitimate and this resulted in more positive self-views and more motivation to engage in protest behavior. By contrast, the motivations of ingroup members who indicated discrimination are probably perceived to be dubious, and may include self-interest and avoidance of responsibility. For this reason, when ingroup members indicated discriminatory treatment, this led to a negative impact on self-relevant outcome variables. Such investigations can shed more light on motivational mechanisms that can lead to (coping) behavior responsible for self-protective or self-defeating reactions to discrimination.

In sum, across three chapters, the seven studies reported in this thesis consistently show that blatant discrimination is more easily perceived as group-based unfair treatment compared to subtle discrimination. The present thesis also clarifies the distinctive responses to blatant versus subtle discrimination such that while responses to blatant discrimination remained unaffected by further personal and situational differences, responses to subtle discrimination are moderated by individual and situational characteristics. These findings enrich the literature on responses to discrimination because previous research rarely contrasted the effects of these two types of group-based treatment, and it has so far been unclear whether the factors that affect one type of discrimination also affect the other. Furthermore, by making this comparison in a systematic way, the present thesis demonstrates that while responses to blatant discrimination are not affected by individual and situational characteristics, responses to subtle discrimination are moderated by the same factors only on self-relevant outcomes (e.g., self-directed negative emotions and self-stereotyping).

Limitations and future directions:

In the present thesis, I mainly examined the moderators of subtle discrimination and investigated whether the same moderators affect reactions to blatant discrimination as well. Although this is a strong point of the present thesis, it still does not clarify which factors can moderate reactions to blatant discrimination. Future research should thus clarify a) which factors affect reactions to blatant discrimination and b) whether these factors also moderate reactions to subtle discrimination. One potential factor that can be investigated is preexisting collective self-esteem. Does this factor moderate the effects of blatant discrimination? It is quite likely that individuals who have high collective self-esteem are more likely to take up for their group when they or their group members are blatantly discriminated against compared to individuals with low collective self-esteem or when discrimination is subtle.

The present thesis examined reactions to subtle versus blatant discrimination on both self-report and behavioral measures. The task performance in Chapter 2 and the behavioral protest measure in Chapter 4 are of additional value to self-report measures. However, perceived discrimination has only been measured with self-report measures and it can be interesting to develop more implicit measures to assess perceptions of discrimination. This can be of importance because previous research argued and showed that victims of discrimination are often reluctant to make attributions to discrimination. More implicit measures of perceived discrimination could give more insight in perception processes when discrimination is subtle.

Future research can also measure more online indices of well-being such as physiological measures. Previous research showed that victims of ambiguous discrimination show threat-related reactions (Mendes, Blascovich, Lickel, & Hunter, 2002). Indeed, both subtle and blatant forms of discrimination may be threatening for victims and this might be clear from their primary physiological reactions. However, in the paradigm used in the studies of the current thesis, physiological reactions during the performance tasks might be moderated by the factors investigated. For instance, when discrimination is subtle, high self-esteem individuals might be more motivated to challenge the illegitimacy of their discriminatory treatment and thus engage in behaviors that potentially can improve their outcomes. This challenge related reactions are then likely to be

reflected in physiological reactions that are typical for a challenge response. Low self-esteem individuals however are unlikely to engage in similar challenge related behavior. This lack of challenging their discriminatory treatment might be visible from their physiological reactions. Similarly, when social norms allow victims making erroneous attributions, or when others agree on discriminatory treatment victims received, they might be more motivated to challenge the illegitimacy of their negative outcome which again can be detected by their physiological reactions.

Another limitation of the present studies is that I solely focused on gender discrimination and its effects on (white) female participants. Future research should examine whether similar effects are obtained in other intergroup contexts, or when focusing on other discriminated groups (e.g., ethnic minorities), or even as a result of other types of discrimination (e.g., benevolent vs. hostile sexism). It is quite possible to expect that victims of hostile sexism exhibit similar reactions to their victimization as victims of blatant discrimination because both are clearly directed at the individuals' group membership. Similarly, because benevolent sexism is more directed at the individuals' abilities as it is the case with subtle discrimination, victims might react in the same way to these different types of sexism. Such investigations would increase the generalizability of these results.

Findings of Chapter 4 indicated that people are in particular ready to protest against their unfair treatment when their discriminatory treatment is indicated by outgroup members. These findings show that it is important for women to receive assistance in dealing with their disadvantaged positions from the outgroup: *men*. Future research can also investigate whether devalued minority groups can assist and support each other in dealing with their disadvantaged societal position. It might be easier to receive and accept assistance or support from another devalued minority group than from the dominant outgroup because of the sense of being in the same boat.

Now that I have established how subtle discrimination affects behavior, future research might go one step further by investigating how these self-defeating behaviors influence subsequent interactions of victims with the perpetrators of discriminatory treatment. Victims of discrimination are not only receivers of their unfair treatment but they also are actors who take place in social interactions. Their dysfunctional behaviors resulting from their unfair treatment are

likely to influence their future interactions with potential perpetrators. When victims' behavior in a discriminatory setting ends up confirming existing negative stereotypes (poor self-presentation and poor performance), this may be seen to confirm the negative stereotypes held about the group to which the individual belongs, and thereby feeding the prejudiced beliefs held by potential perpetrators. Consequently, the unfair, illegitimate behavior of the perpetrator is then justified, leading to an undermined position of the victim in future interactions leading to the maintenance of social inequalities that result from discriminatory treatment (Barreto, Ellemers, Cihangir, & Stroebe, 2007).

Societal consequences of present findings:

The present thesis has several societal implications. Results of Chapter 2, for instance show the powerful detrimental consequences of subtle discrimination for its victims. These results indicate that individuals who are the weakest in the society are most vulnerable for subtle discrimination. People who already are low in self-esteem or individuals who always had to face negative consequences of their low societal position are likely to internalize the reasons of negative treatments they receive even if the cause of the negative outcome is not the individuals' quality. Similarly, Chapter 3 investigated mechanisms accounting for how social norms can affect reactions to and harmful consequences of discrimination. These results clearly show how important the socio-political climate can be for potential victims of discrimination. In this sense, tolerant social norms with respect to erroneous indications of discrimination when victims are not quite sure about the occurrence of group-based unfair treatment appeared to have beneficial consequences for victims. Thus, it is important for minority group members to be able to indicate their discriminatory treatment when they suspect this to be the case in order to protect their well-being.

The results of chapter 4 illustrate how important it is that outgroup members indicate the discriminatory character of the treatment. This chapter shows that members of devalued groups are in particular motivated to perceive discrimination and undertake action when members of dominant groups indicate the discriminatory character of the treatment. These results suggest that, for instance, in order to complete emancipation of women, it is important that men in

particular indicate the sexist character of many societal norms and governmental policies.

To conclude, the fact that subtle discrimination is difficult to detect, makes it unlikely to elicit reactions that are directed towards addressing social inequalities. For this reason, it is important to find ways that can help victims of subtle discrimination to detect their unfair and illegitimate treatment in order to establish a society that is equal and fair for all of its members.

Because the chapters are a product of my collaboration with my supervisors, Manuela Barreto and Naomi Ellemers, I will from now on continue in “we” form.

