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The Personal/Group Discrimination Discrepancy: Responses to Experimentally Induced Personal and Group Discrimination

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ABSTRACT. Participants in research on discrimination consistently perceived a higher level of discrimination directed at their group as a whole than at themselves as individual members of that group. Explanations for this personal/group discrimination discrepancy are all based on the assumption that some form of perceptual distortion is operating. However, research has not allowed for any measure of the objective reality of people's experiences with discrimination, and thus there has been no objective standard against which researchers can test for perceptual distortion. This study involved the experimental inducement of personal and group discrimination, alone and in combination, among female students. The results indicated that subjects responded to objective reality and that personal experiences with discrimination affected their perceptions at the group level more than the reverse.

IN THE AREA OF PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION, a robust phenomenon has surfaced that has been labeled the personal/group discrimination discrepancy (Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990). When participating in studies of discrimination, members of groups who are potential targets of discrimination consistently perceive a higher

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level of discrimination directed at their group as a whole than at themselves personally as individual members of that group.

This finding has surfaced among a variety of groups, including working women in America (Crosby, 1982, 1984), women in both French Canada and France (Dubé & Abbondanza, 1985), Francophones in the province of Quebec (Guimond & Dubé-Simard, 1983), Anglophone Quebecers (Taylor, Wong-Rieger, McKirnan, & Bercusson, 1982), and most recently, South Asian and Haitian immigrant women (Taylor et al., 1990). The pervasive nature of this phenomenon has both practical and theoretical implications. At the practical level, it calls into question survey studies designed to assess the intergroup climate in any context. Clearly the conclusions may vary considerably depending on the form of the question, personal or group. Theoretically the challenge is to understand the bases of people's perceptions of personal and collective discrimination, as they are logically incompatible. After all, if no group member experiences personal discrimination, how is it possible to have any appreciable amount of "group" discrimination?

There have been various explanations for the personal/group discrimination discrepancy, and these can usefully be classified into three categories, two of which are motivational and the third cognitive (Taylor et al., 1990). The first involves a motivational account centering on the denial, or minimization of, personal discrimination. For example, denial may arise because an admission of personal discrimination requires the naming of a villain with its attendant fear of retaliation (Crosby, 1982, 1984). It also allows a person to avoid the dissonance of not having taken any specific personal action to counteract the experience (Taylor & Dubé, 1986). The underlying assumption for all denial explanations is that perceptions at the group level reflect objective reality and that distortions occur at the personal level.

The second category of explanation involves the exaggeration of group discrimination, another motivational possibility but one lacking the attention it may deserve. It would be highly unpopular to suggest that members of minority groups exaggerate claims of discrimination. Nevertheless, in certain political conditions, they may well make claims of discrimination as a basis for promoting social change designed to improve the status of their group. In terms of reality-based perceptions, the distortions would be associated with perceptions at the group level.

The third category of explanation is more cognitive and focuses on an information-processing account of the personal/group discrimination discrepancy. A variety of such processes may be operating, but all imply that some cognitive structuring of information is what accounts for the personal/group discrimination discrepancy. For example, a simplistic, information-processing explanation might be one in which the individual uses an ad-

ditive strategy. When asked about group discrimination, subjects may add other group members' personal experiences of discrimination to their own. Logically, this total would be higher than for individual personal experience with discrimination, and hence the discrepancy would arise.

A subtler explanation of information processing could involve proportionality. A proportion of the behavior directed at groups that are targets of discrimination will be negative. When exactly the same amount of negative behavior is directed at an individual member of a targeted group, the proportion is much less. The negative behavior directed at an individual is proportional not only to that individual's group membership but also to the entire array of personal and group characteristics that form the individual's identity. Thus, a given amount of negative behavior leads to proportionally higher perceptions for group discrimination than for personal discrimination.

Despite the robust nature of the personal/group discrimination discrepancy and the three categories of possible explanations that have been generated, thus far none of the explanations have been tested empirically. Because all are feasible, each must be addressed in turn. However, before a set of programmatic experiments is undertaken, there is one feature of all the studies conducted to date that must be noted: the administration of a questionnaire that was completed in an emotionally neutral research context. Moreover, participants were always asked about their perceptions in a retrospective manner. At no time was it possible to determine the extent to which these perceptions of discrimination were reality based. The researchers did not have access to objective information about the actual levels of personal or group discrimination experienced by participants in the various studies. Here is a critical limitation, as all of the explanations hypothesized to date focus on some systematic perceptual distortion of objective reality.

It would be essential, then, to examine people's perceptions of personal- and group-directed discrimination in a situation in which specific instances of discrimination are introduced before the assessment of their perceptions. Only then would it be possible to determine the role of objective reality on perceptions of discrimination. Responses to objective instances of discrimination must be determined before a systematic series of experiments is undertaken to examine the wide variety of motivational and cognitive processes that have been alluded to as possible explanations for the personal/group discrimination discrepancy.

The challenge is to introduce experimentally incidents of discrimination at the personal and group level, separately and in combination. The most difficult condition to engineer would be one in which the group is not discriminated against, but the subject is nevertheless personally discriminated against because of group membership.

The aim of this study was to create these conditions so that the personal/group discrimination discrepancy could be assessed in a context in which the overriding question about the extent to which perceptions are reality based could be assessed. We tested four specific hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that, in a context in which no discrimination manipulations are introduced, as in previously examined retrospective contexts, the usual personal/group discrimination discrepancy would arise. Because there would be a total absence of discrimination in this context, we expected ratings of discrimination to be low. Nevertheless, we hypothesized that whatever modest levels would be perceived, those for discrimination directed at the group would be higher than those for perceived discrimination directed at the person as a member of the group.

Hypothesis 2 was concerned with situations in which group discrimination is introduced but discrimination against a particular group member does not occur. We predicted that, because the experimental manipulation reinforces a subject's tendency to rate group discrimination higher, there would be a marked difference in discrimination ratings in favor of the group.

Hypothesis 3 specified that when personal discrimination was introduced but was not accompanied by any group discrimination, the usual discrepancy in favor of the group would disappear. Finally, the focus of Hypothesis 4 was on conditions in which both personal and group discrimination are introduced: Our expectation was that, although ratings for both personal and group discrimination would increase, the usual discrepancy in favor of the group would be maintained.

In addition to these specific hypotheses, separate experimental manipulations of personal and group discrimination permit the exploration of the effect of group experiences on the individual, and conversely, the effect of personal experiences on group perceptions. Two contrasting expectations arise in the context of the impact of group discrimination on the individual. On one hand, any discrimination directed at the group might have only a modest impact on most individual members. The logic would be that, aside from those individual group members who are the specific targets of a particular act of discrimination, the discrimination would be diffused among group members such that each individual would internalize only a small proportion of the group-directed discrimination.

On the other hand, group-directed discrimination might be felt completely by each group member. The logic here would be that, to the extent that individual group members identify with the group, any group-directed discrimination would be reproduced in its entirety for each individual group member.

Prediction of the impact of personally directed discrimination is equally problematic. Again, logically, discrimination directed at the individual

might have a strong effect on that individual but would represent only a very modest increase in discrimination attributed at the group level. In large societal groups, any group member's experiences alone would have a negligible impact on the totality of the group, but if group members define themselves as individually symbolic of the group as a whole, then it is possible that any personally directed discrimination could have a corresponding impact on the group perception of discrimination.

The mutual impacts of personal- and group-directed discrimination were explored in this research. By experimentally separating personal- and group-directed discrimination, we sought to gain some insight into the relationship between the two.

Method

Subjects and Procedure

The participants were 60 female undergraduate university students. The women represented a variety of faculties, including arts (51%), science (27%), management (20%), and education (2%), and ranged in age from 18 to 32 years with a mean age of 21 years.

The subjects participated individually in a laboratory session conducted by either a male ($n = 20$) or a female ($n = 40$) experimenter. The experimenter first requested that the subject complete a brief demographic questionnaire. The subject was then seated at a desk where she was presented with four problem-solving tasks: the Tower of Hanoi Puzzle, the Nine-Dot Problem, the Mental Paper-Folding Problem, and the Colored Hats Problem. Actual performance on these tasks was irrelevant to this experiment; they were chosen because they are interesting and they conform to the supposed aim of the experiment, the assessment of problem-solving strategies.

The subject was told that she, like all of the men and women participating in the experiment, would have to solve two of the four problems assigned by the experimenter on the basis of a computer-generated random search list. The subject was told that the experimenter would be observing her while she worked at the two tasks.

Experimental manipulations. Four separate scripted scenarios, in the form of explanations of the two particular tasks chosen for the subject to perform, were used to create four experimental conditions. For the group discrimination/personal discrimination condition, the experimenter explained that he or she was working for a senior professor and was convinced, from both reading the literature and conducting the experiment, that two of the

four problems discriminated against women. The subject was told that she was one of the last to be tested, and unfortunately, according to the random search list, she would have to attempt the two problems that discriminated against women.

Subjects in the group discrimination/no personal discrimination condition were given an identical scenario with one change: The subject was told that, from the randomly generated list, she fortunately was chosen to attempt the two problems that did not discriminate against women.

Subjects who were randomly assigned to the no group discrimination/personal discrimination condition were told that the experimenter firmly believed that two of the tests discriminated against women. The experimenter told the subject that she was among the last to be tested and that until now he or she had avoided discriminating against women by deviating from a random assignment of tasks and always choosing the nondiscriminatory tasks for female subjects. However, the experimenter explained, to avoid the supervising professor's suspicion, the subject must attempt the two discriminatory problems.

Finally, those who were assigned to the no group discrimination/no personal discrimination condition were simply told that they would be asked to solve two randomly chosen problems. No reference to any relation of the tasks to sex was mentioned.

Posttask measures. After the subject attempted to solve the two assigned tasks, she was asked to complete a questionnaire. The questions focused on her perceptions and observations of the problem-solving process and all required answers on 11-point Likert-type scales. Embedded among these incidental questions were the two questions of interest. Both asked subjects to rate the extent to which they felt that the tasks discriminated against women, one at the personal and one at the group level. The precise wording of the first question was, "To what extent were you personally discriminated against because you are a woman in the context of the present experiment?" The second question asked, "To what extent were women as a group discriminated against in the context of the present experiment?" Subjects' rated their answers on an 11-point scale ranging from *not at all* (0) to *very much* (10).

The final two questions, which were posed after the questionnaire had been completed, also focused on discrimination, not in the context of the experiment but in life generally: Specifically, the questions were, "To what extent are you personally discriminated against because you are a woman?" and "To what extent are women as a group discriminated against?" Responses were again made on an 11-point Likert-type rating scale.

Results and Discussion

This study was designed so that an analysis of variance (ANOVA) model would be the most appropriate statistical treatment of the data. Specifically, we envisaged a four-way ANOVA involving two levels each for sex of experimenter (female, male), personal treatment (discrimination, no discrimination), group treatment (discrimination, no discrimination), and the repeated measure of perceived target of discrimination (personal, group). However, despite a substantial cell size ($n = 15$), the mean rating, and thus the variance, was zero for one of the experimental conditions.

Although not predicted, this uniformity in rating is nevertheless meaningful in the present context but made it impossible to apply the planned statistical analysis. Thus, we dropped the level involving the no-variance cell (no group discrimination/no personal discrimination) from the analysis and performed a $2 \times 3 \times 2$ ANOVA. The independent variables included sex of experimenter (female, male), experimental treatment (group discrimination/personal discrimination, no group discrimination/personal discrimination), and the repeated measure of target of discrimination (personal, group). The dependent variable was subject's discrimination ratings, for which a high rating indicates greater perceived discrimination.

The analysis yielded a highly significant two-way interaction, $F(2, 40) = 28.28, p < .001$, involving experimental treatment and target of discrimination; the details are presented in Figure 1, along with the appropriate means for the no-variance cells, to make interpretations more meaningful.

There was no main effect or interaction involving sex of experimenter; thus, this variable was ignored in all subsequent post hoc analyses. Subjects found the discrimination manipulations far more salient than any subtleties that were involved with who might be instigating the discrimination.

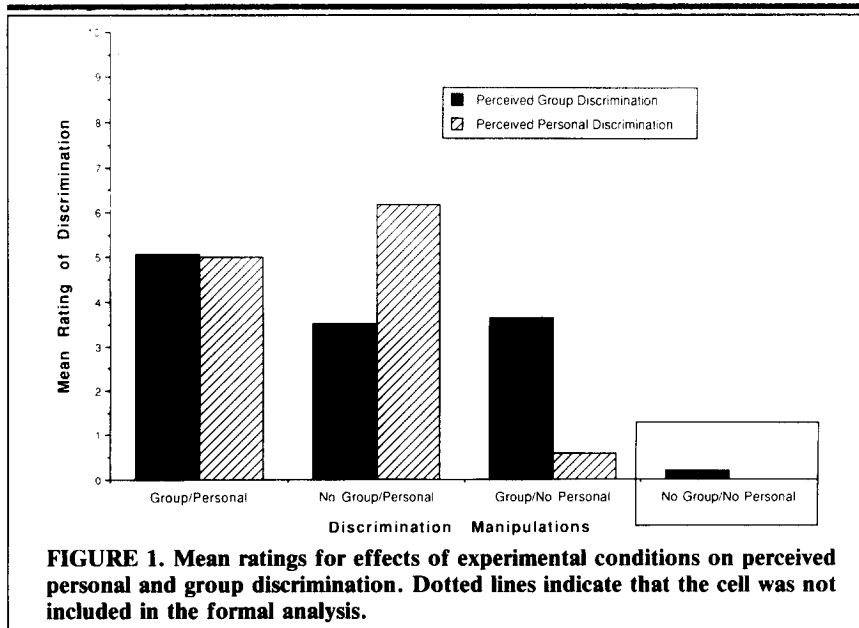
Perceived Discrimination in the Experiment

Because there were separate and specific hypotheses for each of the four experimental conditions, the post hoc Tukey tests were an important focus for testing the hypotheses.

For the emotionally neutral no group discrimination/no personal discrimination condition, the normal discrimination discrepancy was hypothesized. Contrary to the hypothesis, perceived group discrimination ($M = .20$) and personal discrimination ($M = .00$) did not differ; not only did the ratings for group (compared with personal) discrimination not differ, they were so low as to be at or near 0 on the 11-point scale. Clearly, subjects were responding to the objective reality of the experimental situation; no discrimination was involved, and none was perceived.

What makes this finding so striking is that it counters those of every previous retrospective study, in which perceived discrimination was assessed in an emotionally neutral context; actual experiences of discrimination could not be assessed this way. The crucial difference is that for the emotionally neutral condition in this study, subjects were asked about discrimination specifically in the context of the experiment. In these circumstances, they clearly responded to the objective reality of their situation. What this finding suggests about the personal/group discrimination discrepancy, as it has arisen in previous studies, is that subjects were not responding to something other than discrimination. They were responding to some real experience with discrimination, although it may have been direct or indirect and may have been colored by motivational and cognitive processes.

For the group discrimination/no personal discrimination condition, we hypothesized that because the experimental manipulations reinforced subjects' tendency to rate group discrimination higher, there would be a marked difference in discrimination ratings in favor of the group. This predicted difference emerged, as indicated by ratings for perceived group discrimination ($M = 3.67$) that were significantly higher than those for perceived personal discrimination ($M = .60$), $p < .01$. We hypothesized that the manipulations in this condition would enhance subjects' already existing response set. The fact that subjects were not predisposed to perceive the usual personal/group discrimination discrepancy in the context of this



study suggests that results in this condition may be interpreted simply as subjects' response to the reality of the experiment; group discrimination was introduced, but this did not affect perceptions of personally directed discrimination.

The hypothesis for the no group discrimination/personal discrimination, that the usual discrepancy in favor of the group would be eliminated, was not confirmed, but the underlying rationale was completely supported: Subjects' ratings of personal discrimination ($M = 6.20$) were not only equal to but significantly higher than those for group discrimination ($M = 3.53$), $p < .01$. Again, subjects clearly responded to the objective reality created by the experimental manipulations. However, the results here represent an instance in which the personal/group discrepancy surfaced in the opposite direction. That it is possible to create such a condition is important because, in previous research using a wide variety of societal groups and a diverse format of questions, ratings of personal discrimination have never equaled, let alone surpassed, those for group discrimination.

For the group discrimination/personal discrimination condition, we hypothesized that, because personal and group discrimination were made equally salient, both would be elevated but the usual discrepancy in favor of the group would be maintained. This hypothesis was not confirmed; no significant difference emerged for ratings of group discrimination ($M = 5.07$), compared with personal ($M = 5.00$) discrimination. What emerges then is the finding that when personal or group discrimination was explicitly introduced and when group members were asked about discrimination in the limited confines of that particular context, they responded to the objective reality of the situation.

Perceived Discrimination in Life Generally

To examine the extent to which perceptions of discrimination were restricted to the experimental conditions and to test for possible generalization effects, at the end of the experiment, we asked subjects about their perceptions of personal and group discrimination and we explicitly asked them to focus on personal and group discrimination in the context of life in general. Ratings were analyzed by means of a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA in which the independent variables included group treatment (discrimination, no discrimination), personal treatment (discrimination, no discrimination), and the repeated measure of target of discrimination (personal, group). The analysis yielded no significant main effects or interactions involving the experimental manipulations. The only significant comparison that emerged was a main effect for target of discrimination, $F(1, 56) = 158.37$, $p < .001$. Subjects perceived more discrimination directed at their group ($M = 6.93$) than at themselves personally as members of the group ($M = 4.14$).

Thus, the reality-based perceptions of subjects in the experimental context did not generalize to questions of discrimination in general. Not only were subjects' perceptions not affected by the experimental conditions, but when subjects were asked about life in general, the usual personal/group discrimination discrepancy emerged. Subjects responded to objective reality, and could easily differentiate their perceptions depending on the context of the question, yet almost universally rated group discrimination higher than personal discrimination when asked about life in general. This finding suggests that the personal/group discrimination discrepancy was based on motivational and cognitive processes that may have had their roots in real experiences with discrimination but clearly went beyond those experiences. In terms of life in general, it is logically impossible for every group member not to be discriminated against personally, for indeed if every group member was questioned, perceptions of personal and group discrimination should be identical.

Reciprocal Impact of Personal- and Group-Directed Discrimination

We explored the relative role of personal- and group-directed discrimination by examining the two experimental conditions that pitted personal and group discrimination against each other: the group discrimination/no personal discrimination and the no group discrimination/personal discrimination conditions (see Figure 1).

What appears to emerge from Figure 1 is, first, that subjects responded to the objective reality of the discrimination conditions. Beyond this, however, it seems that personally directed discrimination is the important frame of reference that subjects used to define both personal and group discrimination.

There are two separate comparisons involving different combinations of experimental conditions that support this view. The first involves the no group discrimination/personal discrimination and group discrimination/no personal discrimination conditions. The change in ratings for perceived discrimination from no personal discrimination to the introduction of personal discrimination is a full 6 scale points. The corresponding change at the group level is negligible (see Figure 1).

The self as a frame of reference might explain such a pattern. When the subject was not personally discriminated against, the introduction of group discrimination led to only modest ratings of group discrimination. Conversely, when the subject was discriminated against, even in the explicit absence of group-level discrimination, a marked level of group-level discrimination was nevertheless perceived (see Figure 1). Discrimination that directly affected the individual, then, tended to generalize to the group, but

discrimination at the group level did not necessarily affect perceptions of personal discrimination.

The second comparison involves the group discrimination/personal discrimination and group discrimination/no personal discrimination conditions. Both experimental conditions involved explicit group discrimination, yet perceived group discrimination was lower ($M = 3.67$) when there was no personally directed discrimination than when discrimination directed at the subject was present ($M = 5.07$). Again, personal experiences affected perception of discrimination at the group level, even when the objective evidence did not support such a connection.

A form of false consensus (Mullen, Atkins, Champion, Edwards, Hardy, Story, & Vanderklok, 1985) may operate when the individual group member who is targeted for discrimination assumes that other group members share similar experiences. This process might explain the mechanism underlying the personal/group discrimination discrepancy: Group members may share a stereotype about group-based discrimination derived from inescapable information from all forms of media and hearsay, but will also have some personal experience with discrimination, ranging from ambiguous minor encounters to confrontations with blatant discrimination of the most threatening kind. If through false consensus effects individuals project their experiences to other group members, and if these are layered on top of a baseline stereotype about group-directed discrimination, then group-level discrimination would always be rated higher than personal discrimination.

This interpretation leans heavily on the finding that the experimental introduction of personal discrimination had a far greater impact than that for group discrimination. One methodological explanation for such a pattern could be that the personal manipulation was more powerful than the one for group discrimination. However, because ratings for personal and group discrimination were almost identical for the personal discrimination/group discrimination (5.07 and 5.00, respectively), and for the no personal discrimination/no group discrimination (0.20 and 0.00, respectively) conditions, the personal and group discrimination manipulations may have been equally powerful (see Figure 1).

Conclusions

All of the explanations for the personal/group discrimination discrepancy that have been proposed are based on the assumption that reality has been distorted in some manner; yet research to date has not premitted any assessment of objective reality so that distortion processes might be pinned down. The results of this study indicate that, at least in the simplified and im-

mediate context of the laboratory, group members perceived both personal and group discrimination in a manner that was, for the most part, consistent with objective reality. Interestingly, however, when asked about life in general, members of a number of groups, with various objective realities, all provided evidence for the personal/group discrepancy. Those who rate group discrimination higher than personal discrimination include the women in this study, a number of well-established groups with some social status (working women, Anglophones, and Francophones in Quebec), and groups of visible minority immigrant women, whose objective reality with respect to discrimination is both frequent and salient.

A very basic process seems to be at work for the discrimination discrepancy to arise among such heterogeneous groups. According to the results of the exploratory analyses in this study, it seems that personal experiences with discrimination affect perceptions at the group level. In this sense, a fundamental false consensus effect seems to operate whereby the negative experience of personal discrimination is generalized to all group members. If this is true, then group discrimination is certain to be rated higher than personally directed discrimination, especially when minority groups who have been widely exposed in the media already have well-established ideas about group-based discrimination.

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