Attributions to Discrimination
Antecedents and Consequences

Brenda Major and Pamela J. Sawyer
University of California, Santa Barbara

Mary Bates had been employed at Alliance Sterling for 14 years. When her boss, Harold Pinker, retired, she applied for his job. Ms. Bates had an excellent performance record and had been a loyal and reliable employee. She believed she deserved the promotion. Instead of choosing Ms. Bates as his replacement, however, Mr. Pinker chose her coworker, Mark Fitzsimmons. Mr. Fitzsimmons not only was younger than Ms. Bates, but also had worked for the firm fewer years than she. When Ms. Bates demanded to know why she was passed over for the promotion, Mr. Pinker told her that Mr. Fitzsimmons had better managerial skills than she and that he thought the other workers would respond better to Mr. Fitzsimmons than to her. Was Ms. Bates a victim of sex (or age or race) discrimination? Or was she in fact not as well qualified or talented as Mr. Fitzsimmons?

This example illustrates the predicament faced by individuals who are targets of discrimination. Discrimination is often ambiguous and difficult to establish with certainty. Considered in isolation, actions usually have a number of potential causes. Objective standards by which to establish discrimination are rarely available. Thus, judgments of discrimination are often subjective, subject to human error, and prone to dispute. Furthermore, the consequences of this judgment are substantial. Failing to see discrimination when it is present can be psychologically and physically costly. If Mary decides that her managerial skills are indeed deficient, for example, she may reevaluate her skills and abilities downward and reduce her aspirations. Seeing discrimination that does not exist, however, is also costly. It can engender hostility, suspicion, and conflict. How do people resolve predicaments like this? What are the consequences of perceiving oneself as a victim of discrimination?

The last two decades have seen a surge of research devoted to these questions. Research focuses on three main issues: (a) the extent to which targets recognize when they have been victims of discrimination (e.g., Crosby, 1982); (b) factors that influence the likelihood of attributing events (directed either at the self or others) to discrimination (e.g., Inman & Baron, 1996; Major, Quinton & Schmader, 2003); and (c) the psychological, interpersonal, and physical consequences of perceiving oneself as a victim of discrimination (e.g., Crocker, Voelkl, Testa & Major, 1991; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). In this chapter we review research examining each of these issues.

Understanding antecedents and consequences of perceived discrimination is important for both theoretical and practical reasons. Attribution processes play a central role in theories concerned with how people respond to social disadvantage (e.g., Allport, 1954/1979; Crocker & Major, 1989; Crosby, 1976, 1982). Yet we still know relatively little about the nature of these attributions and their consequences. Theories differ, for example, in their predictions regarding people’s readiness to attribute their outcomes to discrimination, as well as in their predictions regarding the consequences of these attributions, especially for self-esteem. At a practical level, despite concerted efforts at remediation, discrimination continues to pose significant problems for society. In the decade following passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1991, the number of lawsuits claiming employment discrimination grew more than 20 percent annually (Sharf & Jones, 1999). Discrimination is increasingly viewed as a significant stressor with damaging health consequences (Krieger, 1990).
There is a pressing need to identify factors that lead people to regard themselves or others as victims of discrimination and the consequences of these judgments.

We focus in this chapter primarily on perceptions and attributions of personal rather than group discrimination. In addition, we focus primarily, although not exclusively, on the perceptions, attributions, and responses of individuals who are targets rather than observers or perpetrators of discrimination. Given page restrictions, our review of this literature is of necessity brief (see Major & Kaiser, 2005; Major, McCoy, Kaiser, & Quinton, 2003; Major & O’Brien, 2005; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Stangor et al., 2003, for more extensive reviews). Before beginning our review, it is useful to clarify our terminology.

When people say that they have been a victim of discrimination (or that someone else has been), what do they mean? In our view, an attribution to discrimination has two essential components: (a) a judgment that treatment was based on social identity or group membership, and (b) a judgment that treatment was unjust or undeserved (Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). Both of these judgments underlie the perception that discrimination is responsible for an outcome. That is, at a phenomenological level, when a person believes that he or she was discriminated against, that person believes he or she was unfairly treated on the basis of a social category or group membership. Targets (or observers or perpetrators) of negative treatment can believe that treatment was based on aspects of personal identity and was deserved (e.g., “I (he or she) did not get the job because I am (he or she was) not the most qualified”) or was based on personal identity and was undeserved (e.g., “I (he or she) did not get the job because I am (he or she is) not well-connected”). Neither of these explanations for negative treatment is an attribution to discrimination because both lack the judgment that the person’s social category was responsible for his or her treatment. Importantly, individuals can also recognize that their own, or someone else’s, social identity was responsible for negative treatment but not see this as unjust. For example, several airlines now charge heavyweight flyers that “overflow” their seat more money for their tickets than they charge average weight flyers. The airlines consider this to be justifiable differential treatment, rather than discrimination. In our view, individuals who do not judge treatment on the basis of category membership as undeserved are unlikely to judge that discrimination has occurred. Only treatment judged as both undeserved and as based on social identity is likely to be perceived as discrimination.

Scholars often use the terms attributions to discrimination and perceptions of discrimination interchangeably. Sometimes these terms are used to refer to the same judgment, as when someone who does not get a job “perceives herself to be a victim of discrimination” or “attributes his rejection to discrimination.” Sometimes, however, these terms refer to different judgments. For example, perceived discrimination often is used to refer to the level or frequency of discriminatory incidents to which people perceive they (or members of their group) have been exposed. Attributions to discrimination, in contrast, typically refer to how specific events are explained. Thus it is possible for a person to perceive that she frequently has been or will be a victim of discrimination, yet not attribute a specific event to discrimination. It is also possible for a person to attribute a specific event to discrimination even though he does not perceive himself to have been a victim of discrimination in the past or expect to be one in the future.

Researchers examining perceptions of and attributions to discrimination employ several different methodological approaches. Researchers studying perceived discrimination often ask participants the extent to which they or members of their group have experienced instances of discrimination (e.g., Crosby, 1982). Their resulting response reflects both their perceived exposure to negative events and their attributions of those events to discrimination. Researchers studying attributions to discrimination typically experimentally control for exposure to a negative event across participants, manipulate the plausibility that prejudice could have caused the event (or measure individual difference variables that might predict this attribution), and measure the extent to which participants attribute the negative event to discrimination (e.g., Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991). In yet a third approach, participants are asked to indicate the likelihood that hypothetical events or scenarios are
attributions to discrimination (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Marti, Bobier, & Baron, 2000).

The distinction between perceptions of and attributions to discrimination becomes blurred when discussing factors that predict people’s likelihood of perceiving themselves (or others) as a victim of discrimination or attributing their own (or others’) outcomes to discrimination, as these factors are often the same. In contrast, attention to how perceptions of and attributions to discrimination are conceptualized and measured becomes important when considering the psychological or physical consequences of these different judgments. When people are asked how often they experience discrimination, their resulting response confounds perceived exposure to negative events with attributions for those events. This confounding makes it difficult to disentangle the effects of exposure from the effects of attributions when examining the relation between perceived discrimination and other outcome variables. In contrast, experimental studies in which the negative event to which people were exposed—a rejection, poor evaluation, or bad test grade—occurs independently of the perception of prejudice are better able to separate the consequences of being exposed to a negative event from the psychological implications of attributing that event to prejudice. We return to this issue later (see Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002).

In the following sections we review research examining the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as victims of discrimination, attribute outcomes to discrimination, or both, and factors that predict these perceptions and attributions. We then review research examining the implications of these perceptions and attributions for self-esteem, emotion, and interpersonal interactions.

PERCEIVING AND ATTRIBUTING OUTCOMES TO DISCRIMINATION: VIGILANCE OR MINIMIZATION?

How accurate are people at recognizing when they are targets of discrimination? If they err, do they tend to err on the side of overestimating or underestimating the extent to which they are victims of discrimination? A considerable amount of attention has focused on this issue.

MINIMIZATION

The prevailing view among scholars is that members of disadvantaged groups typically fail to recognize, underestimate, or even deny the extent to which they are personally targets of prejudice. This view is reflected in many social scientists’ observations that social systems of inequality persist in large part because members of low-status groups fail to recognize the illegitimacy of the status system and of their own disadvantaged position within it (e.g., Jost, 1995; Major, 1994; Marx & Engels, 1846/1970; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Crosby (1982, 1984) perhaps best articulated this view. In her study of job satisfaction among working women, Crosby found that even though women were objectively being discriminated against in the workplace in terms of pay, they nonetheless denied personally being a victim of sex discrimination. Furthermore, they denied being a victim of personal discrimination even though they recognized that women as a group were discriminated against in the workplace. This reduced perception of personal relative to group discrimination has since been observed among a wide variety of groups in society, both advantaged and disadvantaged (e.g., Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990). Evidence of minimization also emerges from studies showing that women and ethnic minorities often have difficulty recalling times when they were targets of prejudice (Stangor et al., 2003), and avoid labeling negative treatment that they have received as discrimination, even when the treatment objectively qualifies as such (Magley, Hulin, Fitzgerald, & DeNardo, 1999; Vorauer & Kumhyr, 2001).

What might motivate an individual to minimize or deny the extent to which he or she is a victim of discrimination? Crosby (1982, 1984) suggested that people may deny personal discrimination because they do not wish to label themselves as victims or others as villains. Individuals also
may be reluctant to report discrimination out of self-presentational concerns. Specifically, because individuals who claim discrimination are often viewed as troublemakers or whiners (e.g., Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003), people may avoid reporting discrimination out of a desire to avoid creating a negative impression on others. Indeed, situations that make self-presentational concerns salient lead targets to minimize discrimination as a cause of their outcomes (e.g., Shelton & Stewart, 2004; Swim & Hyers, 1999). For example, women and African Americans were less likely to attribute rejection to discrimination when they made their attributions publicly in the presence of a member of the opposite, higher status social category, than privately or in the presence of a member of their own group (Stangor, Swim, Van Allen, & Sechrist, 2002). These findings illustrate that willingness to make an attribution to discrimination varies as a function of the perceived social costs of doing so. In a subsequent study, Sechrist, Swim, and Stangor (2004) showed that under public reporting conditions, women (targets) were less likely to attribute a negative evaluation from a blatantly sexist male evaluator to discrimination than were female observers of the same incident. Under private conditions, however, targets were just as likely to attribute their evaluation to discrimination as were observers. This finding is important, in that it illustrates that in private, targets neither underestimated nor exaggerated discrimination as a cause of their outcomes compared to observers of the same event.

Because of the social costs and risks of rejection involved with claiming one is a victim of discrimination, Carvallo and Pelham (2006) posited that acknowledging discrimination threatens an even more fundamental motive—the need to belong. Hence, they believed that the drive to bond and feel connected with others causes people to minimize personal discrimination. Consistent with this hypothesis, Carvallo and Pelham (2006) found that male and female participants dispositionally high in need to belong were less likely to report that they had personally been a target of gender discrimination than participants lower in need to belong. In a second study they manipulated the need to belong with a priming task intended to create feelings of acceptance. When the need to belong was satiated by the acceptance prime, men and women were more willing to acknowledge that they personally had experienced gender discrimination than when they had not been primed. A third study showed that women who were motivated to be accepted by a bogus male partner (because he was attractive and single) were less likely to attribute his negative evaluations of their work to prejudice than were women who were less motivated to be accepted (because the partner was married).

Interestingly, Carvallo and Pelham (2006) found the opposite results for perceptions of group discrimination. That is, men and women high in need to belong or who were not primed with acceptance were more likely to report that their gender group was the target of chronic prejudice than men and women low in need to belong or who were primed with acceptance. Carvallo and Pelham (2006) speculate that making group-level attributions might contribute to a sense of belongingness with the ingroup because it validates an important belief of many ingroup members (but see Garcia, Reser, Amo, Redersdorff, & Branscombe, 2005).

Adams, Tormala, and O’Brien (2006) examined minimization of prejudice from a different perspective. They hypothesized that self-esteem motives among dominant groups, in particular their desire to see themselves as unprejudiced, lead them to minimize or underestimate the extent to which minority groups are targets of discrimination. Hence, they predicted that satiating the self-esteem motive should increase the extent to which dominant groups (Whites) perceive discrimination against minorities, but should not have a similar effect on minorities. To test this prediction, Whites and Latinos completed a questionnaire manipulation of self-affirmation (Steele, 1988) prior to completing a survey measuring the extent to which they attributed a series of events to racism. In general, Latinos were more likely to attribute the events to racism than were Whites. However, the self-affirmation manipulation attenuated (Study 1) or eliminated (Study 2) this gap. Being self-affirmed significantly increased Whites’ perceptions of racism against minorities. Interestingly, it tended to decrease Latinos’ perceptions of racism against minorities, although this trend was not significant.
Vigilance

Although most scholars assert that targets minimize discrimination, others observe that people who are chronic targets of discrimination also can become vigilant for cues in their environment that signal that they are targets of prejudice, discrimination, or negative stereotypes (e.g., Barrett & Swim, 1998; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). Allport (1954/1979) reflected this view, remarking that members of minority groups become “on guard” to signs of prejudice in others and “hypersensitive” to even the smallest of cues indicating prejudice to defend their egos against anticipated or experienced rejection (p. 144). This view is also implicit in Crocker and Major’s (1989) observation that members of stigmatized groups are aware of their possibility of being a victim of prejudice, and hence may experience attributional ambiguity in their interactions with nonstigmatized others. That is, they may be unsure whether treatment they receive is based on their personal deservingness or on prejudice against their social identity.

Research confirms that members of chronically oppressed groups are more likely to say that they have been victims of discrimination than are members of dominant groups. This does not necessarily demonstrate vigilance, however, as the former are objectively more likely to be targets of prejudice and discrimination than the latter. Research also shows that members of chronically oppressed groups are more likely than members of dominant groups to label negative actions committed by a high-status perpetrator against a low-status victim as discrimination (Rodin, Price, Bryson, & Sanchez, 1990) and to attribute attributionally ambiguous events to discrimination (Adams et al., 2006; Marti, Bobier, & Baron, 2000). However, when members of high- and low-status groups experience the same circumstances (e.g., when they are personally rejected by a member of the other group), they are equally likely to attribute their rejection to discrimination (e.g., Major, Gramzow, et al., 2002; O’Brien, Kinias, & Major, 2008).

What might motivate individuals to be vigilant for or overestimate the extent to which they are a target of discrimination? One possibility is self-preservation. Vigilance is likely to be highly adaptive in social environments that are hostile or life threatening. Under such circumstances, a “false alarm” (seeing discrimination where none exists) is less dangerous than a “miss” (failing to see discrimination when it is present). Hence, people may be motivated to look for evidence that they are at risk of being discriminated against, so as to protect themselves from harm (Barrett & Swim, 1998). The motive to protect self-esteem from threat (ego defense) also may motivate vigilance for discrimination (Allport, 1954/1979). Blaming negative outcomes on the prejudice of others, rather than on internal causes such as one’s own lack of ability, can help to buffer self-esteem from negative events and disadvantage (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, and Major, 1991; Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003). The finding of Adams et al. (2006) that a self-affirmation manipulation tended to decrease Latinos’ attributions to racism is suggestive that self-esteem motives may influence perceptions of racism among minority groups.

Summary

In sum, there are compelling reasons why members of devalued groups may minimize as well as be vigilant for discrimination directed against them. We believe that rather than debating which one of these perspectives is correct, more can be learned by addressing who is more likely to make attributions to discrimination, or perceive themselves as victims of discrimination, and under what conditions attributions to discrimination occur. Research focusing on these questions can clarify when and why targets sometimes are vigilant for discrimination and at other times minimize or deny its presence. We review research on these issues in the following section.
MODERATORS OF PERCEPTIONS AND ATTRIBUTIONS TO DISCRIMINATION

As noted earlier, an attribution to discrimination reflects the judgment that treatment is based on group membership and is undeserved. Hence, factors that heighten either the accessibility of group membership or the accessibility of injustice as a cause of behavior are likely to increase attributions to discrimination (Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). Characteristics of the event, the situation, and the person can do so.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EVENT

People appear to have prototypes (or expectancies) about what types of events constitute discrimination (Baron, Burgess, & Kao, 1991; Rodin et al., 1990). People compare events against their prototype for discrimination and the more closely the event in question fits the prototype, the more likely it is to be labeled discrimination. Thus, certain events are more easily recognized as discrimination than others. Discrimination is prototypically viewed as an intergroup phenomenon, that is, as occurring between members of different groups rather than within the same group (Inman & Baron, 1996; Rodin et al., 1990). For example, targets are more likely to report that they have been discriminated against when they are treated negatively by an outgroup member than by an ingroup member (Dion, 1975; Major, Gramzow, et al., 2002).

Certain targets and bases of discrimination are also more prototypical than others. Observers in the United States more readily attribute differential treatment on the basis of race and gender to discrimination than they do differential treatment on the basis of age or weight (Marti et al., 2000). In general, people judge differential treatment on the basis of social identities over which people have no personal control as discriminatory more than differential treatment on the basis of social identities over which people are perceived to have control (over onset, maintenance, or elimination). People see it as more justifiable to discriminate against people with controllable stigmas (Rodin et al., 1990), and judge them as more responsible and blameworthy than people whose stigmas are perceived as less controllable (Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988). Because these beliefs are shared even by those who are themselves stigmatized (Crandall, 1994), people who believe they have been treated negatively on the basis of a controllable attribute (e.g., obesity) are relatively unlikely to say they are victims of discrimination. For example, compared to average weight women, overweight women who were rejected by a male partner were significantly more likely to attribute their rejection to their weight, but were not more likely to attribute their rejection to their partner’s concern with appearance or his personality (Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993). Crocker and Major (1994) argued that because weight is viewed as controllable, overweight women regarded rejection on the basis of their weight as justified differential treatment rather than discrimination.

Discrimination prototypes also reflect status-asymmetry (Rodin et al., 1990). That is, observers are more likely to attribute an action to discrimination when the perpetrator is from a higher status group (e.g., Whites, men) than the victim (Blacks, women) as compared to when the perpetrator is from a lower status group than the victim (Inman & Baron, 1996; Rodin et al., 1990). Baron et al. (1991), for example, asked participants to read vignettes depicting possible acts of anti-female sexism and then list the two or three traits they felt were displayed by the perpetrator. Male perpetrators were far more likely than female perpetrators to be labeled as prejudiced given the same behavior. Other studies have found similar effects (Flournoy, Prentice-Dunn, & Klinger, 2002; Harris, Lievens, & Van Hoye, 2004; Inman & Baron, 1996; Inman, Huerta, & Oh, 1998; Morera, Dupont, Leyens, & Desert, 2004).

O’Brien et al. (2008) demonstrated that the discrimination prototype also reflects stereotype-asymmetry. That is, people expect that victims of discrimination are negatively stereotyped relative to perpetrators of discrimination. This expectation leads to greater judgments of discrimination in contexts in which the victim is negatively stereotyped relative to the perpetrator than in contexts in which the victim is positively stereotyped relative to the perpetrator. O’Brien et al. (2008, Study
1) asked participants to read a vignette about a job interview in which a man or woman rejected an opposite-sex applicant for a job. The job required skills that were either stereotypically feminine, masculine, or irrelevant to gender stereotypes. As predicted, when the job required stereotypically masculine skills, participants (observers) made more attributions to discrimination when the male manager rejected the female applicant than when the female manager rejected the male applicant. The reverse was true when the job required stereotypically feminine skills.

In a second study, male and female participants experienced a personal rejection by a member of the other sex on a task that required either stereotypically masculine or feminine skills (O'Brien et al., 2008, Study 2). When targets were rejected on the masculine task, women made more attributions to discrimination than men. However, when targets were rejected on the feminine task, men made more attributions to discrimination than women. There were no differences between women's and men's attributions to discrimination when they were rejected on a task in which the other gender was stereotyped as more competent. These studies are important for several reasons. First, they demonstrate that discrimination prototypes affect observers and targets similarly. Second, they illustrate that contextual stereotypes about the competence of the perpetrator relative to the victim are more influential determinants of attributions to discrimination than are the chronic statuses of the perpetrator and the victim. Finally, they show that when rejection occurs in contexts in which the higher status group is negatively stereotyped relative to the lower status group, (e.g., when a man is rejected by a woman in a feminine domain) observers and members of high-status groups are just as willing to say that the rejection was due to discrimination as when low-status groups are rejected by a higher status group.

The prototype of discrimination also is that it is intentional and harmful to the victim (Swim, Scott, Sechrist, Campbell, & Stangor, 2003). Thus, actions, events, or evaluations that cause harm to the target are more likely than those that lead to positive outcomes to be attributed to discrimination (Crocker et al., 1991). Swim et al. (2003) found that people who read about, observed, or experienced a potentially discriminatory action committed by a man toward a woman were more likely to judge the actor as prejudiced and the actor's behavior as discriminatory when the actor intended the action than when it was unintentional, and when the action caused harm to a target, especially when information about the intent of the actor was limited or absent. They also found that harm was a more influential determinant of targets' attributions than observers' attributions.

**Characteristics of the Situation**

Besides prototypicality of the event, situational factors that increase the accessibility of discrimination as a construct or cause increase the likelihood that discrimination will be perceived and events will be attributed to discrimination. The more explicit or clear prejudice cues are in a situation, the more likely people are to report that they have been a target of discrimination (e.g., Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003). For example, women were more likely to blame a negative evaluation on discrimination if they learned the evaluator held very traditional (sexist) rather than liberal attitudes toward women's roles (Crocker et al., 1991), and ethnic minorities were more likely to attribute negative treatment from a White partner to discrimination if they had learned that their partner held antiversity rather than prodiversity views (Operario & Fiske, 2001, Study 2). Women led to believe that a male partner had traditional attitudes toward women also allocated more of their attention toward subliminally presented sexism-related words relative to women led to believe their partner held liberal attitudes toward women (Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2006). This latter study suggests that making prejudice accessible can increase vigilance at a preconscious level.

Similarly, alerting people to the possibility of discrimination in a situation increases their likelihood of attributing negative outcomes (either their own or others') to discrimination. For example, observers evaluating a series of hiring decisions in which a less qualified applicant was hired over a more qualified applicant were more likely to attribute the hiring decision to prejudice when primed to look for discrimination than when not primed (Marti et al., 2000). Women (targets) who were led
to expect that their work would be evaluated by a panel of male judges in which 50% were known
to discriminate against women were more likely to blame a subsequent negative evaluation on
discrimination than women who were told that none of the men discriminated, and just as likely
to blame the evaluation on discrimination as women who were told that all of the judges discriminated
against women (Inman, 2001; Kaiser & Miller, 2001).

Because an attribution to discrimination involves the judgment that treatment is linked to group
membership, situational cues that make group membership salient as a possible cause of outcomes
also increase the likelihood that individuals will make attributions to discrimination. Thus, observ-
ers find discrimination easier to detect when data are aggregated across a number of individuals,
thereby making the link between treatment and group membership salient, than when it is encoun-
tered on a case-by-case basis (Crosby, Clayton, Alksnis, & Hemker, 1986). Targets are also more
likely to claim that they were discriminated against when they know that their group membership is
known rather than unknown to an outgroup evaluator (Crocker et al., 1991; Dion & Earn, 1975).

Social comparison information also can influence attributions to discrimination. Perceptions of
discrimination require comparing an individual’s or group’s contributions and outcomes with the
contributions and outcomes of others who belong to different groups. Social comparison biases
may work against detecting discrimination by reducing people’s likelihood of realizing that their
outcomes are linked to their group membership. People tend to affiliate and work with others like
themselves and to compare their own situations with similar others. Hence, people who belong to
disadvantaged groups are likely to compare with others who are similarly disadvantaged, and thus
be unaware of the extent to which they and others like them are unfairly treated (Major, 1994).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PERSON

Affect

Targets’ chronic or temporary affective state or mood can affect their likelihood of seeing them-
selves as victims of prejudice or attributing rejection to discrimination, perhaps by serving as an
informational source that helps to interpret ambiguous situations. For example, compared to women
in whom a positive mood was induced, women in whom a negative mood was induced perceived
more discrimination against themselves and against other women, but only when they had not been
provided with an external attribution for their mood (Sechrist, Swim, & Mark, 2003). In another
study, women were primed to feel either sadness or anger in advance of being exposed to a gender-
based rejection. After the rejection they were told to express or suppress their emotional reactions.
Women primed to feel angry and told to express themselves were most likely to say that they had
been discriminated against in an experiment. Women primed to feel sad and told to suppress their
emotions reported the least discrimination (Gill & Matheson, 2006).

Chronic affective tendencies also can shape attributions to and perceptions of discrimination
(Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). Individuals chronically high in hostility and neuroticism are
more likely to perceive themselves as victims of discrimination than are those who score lower on
these measures (Huebner, Nemeroff, & Davis, 2005), as are individuals high in interpersonal rejec-
tion sensitivity (Major & Eccleston, 2002).

Prejudice Expectations

People also differ in the extent to which they are chronically aware of or sensitive to the possibility
of being a target of negative stereotypes and discrimination because of their group membership. For
example, individuals high in “stigma consciousness” (Pinel, 1999) expect that their behavior will be
interpreted in light of their group membership. Among African Americans, Latino(a) Americans,
Asian Americans, and women, stigma consciousness is strongly and positively correlated with per-
ceived personal and group discrimination and negatively correlated with trust of others in general
(Pinel, 1999). Women who are high in stigma consciousness allocate more of their attention toward
Attributions to Discrimination

subliminally presented sexism-related words relative to women who are low in stigma consciousness (Kaiser, Vick, et al., 2006), suggesting that they may be more vigilant for discrimination cues at a preconscious level.

A related construct is race-based rejection sensitivity, defined as a personal dynamic whereby individuals anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to rejection that has a possibility of being due to race (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzac, 2002). Race-based rejection sensitivity is assessed by asking people to read attributionally ambiguous scenarios and to indicate, for each scenario, how concerned they are that a negative outcome would be due to their race and the likelihood that a negative outcome would be due to their race. In a longitudinal diary study, race-based rejection sensitivity assessed among African American students before they entered a predominately White university predicted the frequency with which they reported a negative race-related experience (e.g., feeling excluded, insulted, or receiving poor service because of one’s race) during their first 3 weeks at university (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002). Race-based rejection sensitivity also predicted their tendency to feel less belonging at the university and greater negativity toward both peers and professors.

**Group Identification**

The extent to which individuals chronically identify themselves in terms of their group memberships also influences their likelihood of perceiving and attributing outcomes to discrimination. Group identification is typically conceptualized as how important the group is to self-definition (centrality) and how strong feelings of attachment to the group are (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Among socially devalued groups, group identification is positively correlated with perceptions of personal, as well as group discrimination (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999; Crosby, Pufall, Snyder, O’Connell, & Whalen, 1989; Dion, 1975; Eccleston & Major, 2006; Gurin & Townsend, 1986). Cross-sectional, correlational studies, however, cannot determine whether higher group identification is an antecedent or consequent of perceived discrimination. Several experimental studies have shown that group identification assessed at a prior time predicted attributions of rejection to discrimination within an experimental context, particularly in attributionally ambiguous situations (Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003; Operario & Fiske, 2001). Furthermore, in a longitudinal study, Sellers and Shelton (2003) showed that group identification (centrality of racial group to the self) assessed among African American freshmen shortly after arrival at college (Time 1) predicted an increase in perceived frequency of exposure to racial discrimination several months later (Time 2), controlling for perceived discrimination at Time 1. This suggests that when a group membership is highly central to one’s identity, it may lead one to interpret ambiguous events through a group lens (see Eccleston & Major, 2006). Another study showed that women high in group consciousness (feminism) perceived more discrimination directed against themselves and their group in general over the course of several weeks (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Group consciousness incorporates aspects of group identification as well as elements of perceived injustice directed against the group (Gurin, Miller, & Gurin, 1980).

**Status-Related Beliefs**

Individuals’ beliefs about why status differences exist in society also influence their likelihood of seeing their own or others’ outcomes as deserved or undeserved. Some beliefs encourage the perception that people deserve their outcomes, such as the belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980), the belief that status is based on merit (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), the belief that status is permeable (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and the belief that success is based on hard work (Mirels & Garrett, 1971). Although these are distinct beliefs, each locates causality within the individual and holds people personally responsible for their outcomes. Collectively, they contribute to a worldview in which unequal status relations among individuals and groups in society are perceived as just, fair, deserved, and based on individual merit. Hence, they have been called status-justifying beliefs (SJBs; Jost, 1995; O’Brien & Major, 2005).
High endorsement of SJBs can lead members of disadvantaged groups to minimize discrimination as a cause of their outcomes. Working women who strongly endorse the belief in a just world, for example, report less discontent with the employment situation of working women than do women who endorse this belief less strongly (Hafer & Olson, 1993). The more members of disadvantaged groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, women) believe that status systems are permeable and allow for individual mobility, the less they perceive themselves or their group as victims of discrimination. Furthermore, in a laboratory-based study, Major, Gramzow, et al. (2002) found that the more ethnic minority students believed in individual mobility, the less likely they were to say that an interpersonal rejection by a same-sex European American student was due to discrimination. Likewise, the more women believed in individual mobility, the less likely they were to say they were discriminated against when rejected by a same-race man.

In contrast, high endorsement of SJBs is associated with increased attributions to discrimination among members of advantaged groups. Endorsement of SJBs by members of advantaged groups is associated with feelings of relative superiority and entitlement (O’Brien & Major, in press). When these individuals are passed over in favor of members of lower status groups, they are likely to view it as a violation of equity, and hence as unjust. In the preceding experiments by Major, Gramzow, et al. (2002), the more European American students endorsed the belief in individual mobility, the more they attributed rejection by a Latino/a student (who chose, instead, another Latino/a) to racial discrimination. Likewise, the more men endorsed the belief in individual mobility, the more they attributed rejection by a woman (who chose another woman) to discrimination (Major, Gramzow, et al., 2002, Study 3). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that individual differences in endorsement of status justifying beliefs are an important determinant of how potentially discriminatory situations are construed and explained.

**Summary**

In summary, characteristics of the event, the situation, and the person shape the likelihood that events are perceived as or attributed to discrimination. People have a prototype of what constitutes discrimination. An event or action is more likely to be attributed to discrimination when it is intergroup (i.e., the perpetrator and target are from different social categories) than intragroup, when the target’s category membership is perceived as uncontrollable than controllable, when the perpetrator is higher status than the target, when the event or action is intentional and causes harm to the target, and when it occurs in a domain in which the target is negatively stereotyped relative to the perpetrator. Because an attribution to discrimination is based on the judgment that treatment is group based and unjust, situational cues that increase the accessibility of group membership or injustice as a cause of an event also increase perceptions of and attributions to discrimination. Finally, chronic individual differences in group identification, status beliefs, and prejudice expectations influence individuals’ likelihood of perceiving themselves and their group as victims of discrimination in general, and attributing specific events to discrimination.

The foregoing implies that events and actions that are objectively discriminatory might not be perceived as such if they do not match our discrimination prototype. Thus, when an ethnic minority boss objectively discriminates against another ethnic minority employee (violating the intergroup rule), an institutional policy unintentionally but unfairly disadvantages members of one social category relative to others (violating the intentionality rule), or a qualified overweight woman is passed over for promotion (violating the uncontrollability rule), the action may not be seen as discrimination. Discrimination that violates our prototype may not only be harder to detect, but also may be held to a higher standard of evidence to prove. Even in the face of objective evidence of distributive injustice, situations that make it difficult to see links between group membership and outcomes, such as when income is not coded by race or gender, can decrease detection of discrimination, as can situational cues that foster perceived procedural fairness (e.g., giving a person “voice”; Major & Schmader, 2001). Individual beliefs and predispositions held by targets, observers, and perpetrators
can blind them from seeing discrimination directed at themselves or others. In the next section, we consider the social and psychological consequences of perceiving prejudice and discrimination directed against oneself or one’s group.

CONSEQUENCES OF PERCEPTIONS OF AND ATTRIBUTIONS TO DISCRIMINATION

Consider the scenario with which we began this chapter. Will Mary Bates be more upset if she decides she was passed over for promotion because of her lack of qualifications or ability or will she feel worse if she thinks it was due to discrimination? Will attributing her rejection to discrimination buffer or protect her self-esteem? Will she experience more stress if she believes she is not qualified or if she believes she was discriminated against? Questions such as these inspired a considerable amount of research over the last two decades. Researchers examined the impact of perceived discrimination and attributions to discrimination on outcomes such as motivation, task performance, self-stereotyping, social interactions, emotions, self-esteem, mental health, and physical health, among others. A full review of this extensive literature is beyond the scope of this chapter (see Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Major, McCoy, et al., 2003; Major & O’Brien, 2005; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). Here, we focus our attention on the impact of attributions to discrimination on self-esteem, emotional well-being, and interpersonal relationships.

IMPACT OF PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION ON SELF-ESTEEM AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Many studies have examined the implications of perceived discrimination for targets’ self-esteem and emotional well-being. A variety of theoretical perspectives lead to the prediction that perceiving one’s group to be devalued in society will result in negative self-evaluations and low self-esteem (e.g., Cartwright, 1950; Cooley, 1956; Mead, 1934). Studies comparing the self-esteem of members of stigmatized groups (i.e., targets of prejudice and discrimination) to the self-esteem of members of nonstigmatized groups, however, often reveal little support for this prediction (see Crocker & Major, 1989; Porter & Washington, 1979; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Simpson & Yinger, 1985, for reviews). Indeed, some groups who perceive themselves as targets of pervasive and severe discrimination, such as African Americans, have higher self-esteem on average than groups who are rarely targets of prejudice, such as European Americans (Twenge & Crocker, 2002).

To explain this paradox, Crocker and Major (1989) theorized that members of stigmatized groups employ several cognitive strategies linked to their stigma that may protect their self-esteem from rejection and negative outcomes. In particular, members of stigmatized groups may attribute negative outcomes and rejection to prejudice based on their social identity rather than to internal, stable qualities of themselves. That is, awareness that prejudice is a plausible cause of their outcomes may enable them to discount the diagnosticity of negative feedback (Kelley, 1973). Drawing on theories of emotion (e.g., Weiner, 1995), Crocker and Major (1989) hypothesized that attributing negative events to others’ prejudice (a cause external to the self) would protect affect and self-esteem relative to attributing negative events to causes internal to the self (such as a lack of ability or skill).

Major, Quinton, and McCoy (2002) subsequently refined and elaborated this theory. First, they defined an attribution to prejudice or discrimination as an attribution of blame because it involves attributing responsibility to another person whose actions are unjustified. This definitional clarification is important because attributions to justifiable differential treatment lack the self-protective properties sometimes associated with attributions to discrimination (e.g., Crocker at al., 1993). Second, because attributing outcomes to prejudice implicates an individual’s social identity, such attributions have a strong internal component. Thus, they observed that attributing negative outcomes to discrimination protects self-esteem relative to blaming internal, stable aspects of the personal self, but not relative to blaming other purely external or random causes (Major, Kaiser, &
McCoy, 2003; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). Third, they acknowledged that discounting does not always occur; that is, perceiving that another person is prejudiced does not preclude attributing an outcome to one’s own lack of deservingness, or vice versa (McClure, 1998). Thus, it is important to examine discrimination-blame relative to self-blame when considering the link between perceptions of or attributions to discrimination and self-esteem (e.g., Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003). This is particularly true when discrimination is ambiguous (Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003). For example, women and ethnic minorities who report experiencing more negative events because of their gender or race also report experiencing more negative events because of their personality (Major, Henry, & Kaiser, 2006). Fourth, they emphasized the importance of differentiating emotional responses to perceived discrimination.Attributing outcomes to discrimination may protect against negative self-directed emotions such as depression, shame, and loss of self-esteem, but is unlikely to protect from negative other-directed emotions such as anger and hostility (Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002).

A number of studies demonstrate that attributing negative outcomes to discrimination rather than to internal aspects of the self can buffer self-esteem. For example, Crocker et al. (1991) found that women who were negatively evaluated by a man with traditional attitudes toward women were more likely to attribute the evaluation to sexism, and reported significantly less depressed affect and marginally higher self-esteem than women who received negative feedback from an evaluator with more liberal attitudes toward women. Similarly, African Americans who received a negative evaluation from a White evaluator who they thought was aware of their race discounted the feedback by attributing it to discrimination and reported marginally higher self-esteem than African American participants who thought the evaluator was unaware of their race. Major, Kaiser, and McCoy (2003) found that the more women discounted rejection (i.e., blamed it on discrimination rather than on themselves), the higher their self-esteem. The buffering effects of attributing negative feedback to prejudice on self-esteem have been observed in several other studies (e.g., Dion, 1975; Dion & Earn, 1975; Hoyt, Agular, Kaiser, Blascovich, & Lee, 2007; Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003; McCoy & Major, 2003).

The idea that perceiving oneself to be a target of discrimination could buffer self-esteem proved to be highly controversial. Branscombe and colleagues (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001), for example, argued that because prejudice signals rejection and exclusion on the part of the dominant group, “attributions to prejudice . . . are detrimental to the psychological well-being of the disadvantaged” (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001 p. 193). This claim is supported by correlational studies, many of which show that the more members of disadvantaged groups perceive themselves (or their group) as a target of discrimination, the lower their self-esteem, the more negative their emotions, and the poorer their psychological well-being (see Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003; McCoy & Major, 2003).

How can we reconcile these seemingly disparate findings? Methodological differences contribute in part. As discussed at the outset of this chapter, researchers and reviewers of the literature frequently do not distinguish between perceptions of pervasive discrimination and attributions of specific negative events to discrimination. When perceived discrimination is assessed retrospectively on questionnaires, self-reports of experiences with discrimination (e.g., “I am a victim of society because of my gender”) confound attributional processes with frequency and severity of exposure to discrimination. This makes it difficult to isolate the consequences for well-being of exposure to negative events from the consequences of attributing those events to discrimination. Studies correlating perceived discrimination with self-esteem and well-being also rarely control for important dispositional variables (e.g., hostility, rejection sensitivity) that might influence both perceptions of discrimination and self-esteem or psychological well-being. When they do, the relationship between discrimination and psychological well-being may be attenuated or even reversed. For example, Huebner et al. (2005) found that the relationship between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms among gay and bisexual men was attenuated when they controlled for hostility and neuroticism. Major et al. (2006) found that the relationship between ethnic minority students’
perceptions of having experienced negative events due to discrimination and their self-esteem was negative when they did not control for the extent to which these students also perceived themselves to have experienced negative events due to their personality, but was positively correlated with self-esteem when they did. Such findings underscore the point that because emotional well-being may influence perceptions of discrimination as well as the reverse (e.g., Sechrist et al., 2003), it is inappropriate to draw causal inferences from correlations among self-report measures collected at the same point in time.

Longitudinal studies examining the relationship between perceptions of discrimination and emotional well-being, self-esteem, or both are rare. One study that did so (Sellers & Shelton, 2003) followed African American students from three U.S. schools over two semesters to assess the impact of perceived racial discrimination and racial identity on psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and perceived stress). Controlling for distress and perceived discrimination at Time 1, the more racial discrimination students reported experiencing, the higher their psychological distress at Time 2. This relationship was moderated, however, by students’ racial ideology and beliefs about how African Americans are viewed in society. Specifically, the relationship between perceived discrimination and psychological distress was weaker among African Americans who held a nationalist racial ideology and believed others regard African Americans negatively than it was among those who did not hold these views. The authors suggest that this may be because those participants who are highest in nationalistic ideology are also most likely to see the world as an unfair place for African Americans. Thus, experiencing discrimination may come as less of a shock to the worldview of those people than those that are low in this ideology. We return to this issue later.

Most experiments showing the buffering effects of attributions to discrimination on self-esteem or emotion have been conducted within laboratory environments. In these settings, exposure to a negative event is controlled across participants and the plausibility that prejudice could have caused the event is manipulated. Because the negative event to which people are exposed occurs independently of the attribution to prejudice, these studies are better able to separate the psychological implications of being exposed to a negative event from the psychological implications of attributing that event to prejudice.

Within a stress and coping framework, perceptions of pervasive discrimination and attributions of specific events to discrimination may be tapping different processes (Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). The perception that one or one’s group is a victim of pervasive prejudice can be conceptualized as a threat appraisal, in that individuals who report that they are frequent or severe victims of discrimination are describing their environment as hostile, dangerous, and potentially harmful to self. In contrast, attributing a specific negative event to discrimination can be viewed as a cognitive reappraisal coping strategy. That is, blaming an event on discrimination mitigates the threat to personal self-esteem that might arise from blaming the event on internal, stable aspects of the self. A stress and coping framework further predicts that all individuals will not respond in the same way to perceptions of discrimination. Rather, responses vary as a function of appraisals and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Consistent with this framework, researchers have begun to identify personal, situational, and structural factors that moderate the implications of perceiving and making attributions to discrimination for psychological well-being. Following, we discuss several important moderators (see Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Major, McCoy, et al., 2003, for reviews).

**Threat to Personal Identity**

One important moderator is whether or not the person has experienced a threat to his or her personal identity. Personal identity refers to a person’s sense of his or her unique self; that is, the self based in an individual’s unique characteristics and traits. Personal identity can be distinguished from social identity (i.e., the self derived from membership in social categories or groups), which is shared to some extent with others. People may experience threat (e.g., rejection; a poor evaluation) based on aspects of their personal identity (e.g., their personality or ability) or social identity (e.g., their gender or ethnic group membership), or may experience both types of identity threat. For example,
people who are told that their group is lazy (a threat to social identity) may also be told that they are personally incompetent (a threat to personal identity). Attributing outcomes to discrimination is likely to buffer self-esteem primarily when an individual experiences a threat to an internal, stable aspect of the personal self (Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003), and is unlikely to do so in the absence of such a personal threat.

Clarity of Discrimination

A second factor that moderates the relationship between attributions to prejudice and self-esteem is the clarity, or intensity, of prejudice cues in the environment. Blatant prejudice leaves no uncertainty about who is to blame for a negative event, whereas ambiguous prejudice does. Crocker and Major (1989) speculated that blatant prejudice protects self-esteem from threat more than does prejudice that is hidden or disguised. Evidence of this was found in a study in which women received negative feedback from a male evaluator who was described as blatantly sexist, ambiguously sexist, or in no manner regarding sexism (Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003). Women reported significantly higher self-esteem when the negative feedback came from a clearly sexist man than when his sexism was ambiguous or no cues to his sexism were mentioned. As well, women in the blatant sexism condition discounted the negative feedback more (i.e., attributed the feedback more to discrimination than to their lack of ability) than did women in the ambiguous cues condition or the no cues condition, and discounting was positively associated with self-esteem.

Group Identification

A third variable that moderates the impact of perceived and attributed discrimination on personal self-esteem is the extent to which the target individual is identified with the group that is the basis for discrimination. When individuals are highly identified with their group, negative group-related events are more likely to be appraised as self-relevant. Negative events that are more self-relevant are more threatening (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, McCoy and Major (2003) hypothesized that the more central and important a social identity is to an individual, the more threatening it is for that individual to perceive discrimination against that social identity. In their first experiment, women, all of whom had previously completed a measure of gender identification (gender centrality), received negative feedback from a male evaluator who they believed had clearly sexist or nonsexist attitudes. Women low in gender identification reported less depressed emotion and higher self-esteem in the sexist than nonsexist condition following receipt of the feedback. In contrast, among highly gender-identified women, self-esteem and depressed emotions did not differ between the sexist and nonsexist conditions. This interaction suggests that attributing negative outcomes to prejudice against one’s social identity protects personal self-esteem only when that social identity is not a core aspect of self.

In a second experiment, greater ethnic group identification (centrality) was positively associated with depressed affect among Latino/a American students who read an article describing pervasive prejudice against Latino/as, but was negatively associated with depressed affect among Latino/a students who read a control article describing prejudice against a non-self-relevant group. This interaction is consistent with the claim that when social identity is a core aspect of the self, encountering prejudice against that social identity is more personally threatening than when social identity is less central to the self.

Although group identification may make an individual temporarily vulnerable to threats to that group, it may also serve as a resource that an individual can draw on later to cope with discrimination. A number of cross-sectional, correlational studies show a positive association between group identification and self-esteem among disadvantaged groups (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999; Eccleston & Major, 2006). There are a variety of reasons why one might expect to observe a positive relationship: groups can provide emotional, informational, and instrumental support, social validation for one’s perceptions, and social consensus for one’s attributions.
Perceived discrimination against the ingroup also can increase identification with the ingroup, especially among those who are highly identified with the group (Allport, 1954/1979). By increasing ingroup identification, perceived discrimination may have an indirect, positive effect on self-esteem (Branascombe et al., 1999). A study by Spencer-Rodgers and Collins (2006) illustrated that perceived group disadvantage can be both negatively and positively related to self-esteem, through different pathways. Using structural equation modeling, they showed that perceived group disadvantage among Latino Americans was negatively associated with personal self-esteem via the mediator of perceived negative public regard (the belief that others look down on Latinos), a concept closely related to perceived discrimination. Perceived group disadvantage also was positively associated with personal self-esteem via the mediator of increased group identification (increased group centrality, increased attachment to the group, and increased liking for the group). Taken together, the total effect of perceived group disadvantage on self-esteem was nonsignificant, suggesting that the positive benefits of increased ingroup identification completely alleviated the detrimental effects of perceived group discrimination.

Beliefs

Stable beliefs and characteristics of persons also moderate the relationship between perceived prejudice and self-esteem. These beliefs are likely to moderate reactions to prejudice and discrimination by influencing people’s threat appraisals. For example, Kaiser, Major, & McCoy (2009) showed that dispositional optimism moderated the impact of perceived prejudice on self-esteem. Among men and women who read about pervasive sexism directed toward their own gender group, an optimistic outlook on life was associated with significantly higher self-esteem and less depression. Among participants who read control information, optimism was unrelated to depressed emotions and still significantly, but more weakly, positively related to self-esteem. These effects were mediated by perceived threat such that optimists were less threatened by prejudice than were pessimists.

The impact of perceived discrimination on self-esteem also depends on the target’s assumptions and beliefs about the way the world works, his or her worldview (Major, Kaiser, O’Brien, & McCoy, 2007; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). People’s beliefs about and explanation for the unequal distribution of social and material goods in society, or their status ideology, is a core component of their worldview. Like other aspects of people’s worldview, status ideologies provide a meaningful description of and explanation for reality and describe standards necessary to be a person of social and material value (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). Because worldviews serve to reduce uncertainty and allow individuals to function more effectively (Bowlby, 1969; Hogg, 2001; van den Bos & Lind, 2002), people are highly motivated to confirm and to defend their worldview from threat. Self-relevant information that confirms one’s worldview should increase feelings of security, certainty, and self-esteem, whereas self-relevant information that threatens one’s worldview should increase feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty and decrease self-esteem (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2004; Lerner, 1980).

Based on this reasoning, Major et al. (2007) recently proposed worldview verification theory (WVT) to explain responses to discrimination among disadvantaged groups. According to WVT, perceiving discrimination directed against the ingroup (or self) threatens the worldview of individuals who endorse SJBs, such as the belief that the status hierarchy is permeable and based on merit. Because perceiving discrimination directed against themselves or their group threatens their worldview, and hence their sense of meaning and value, it leads to decreased self-esteem. In contrast, perceiving discrimination directed against the ingroup (or self) confirms the worldview of individuals who reject SJBs such as the belief that the status hierarchy is permeable and based on merit. Perceived discrimination both corroborates their status ideology and provides an alternative explanation for their ingroup’s (or their own) disadvantage. Consequently, WVT predicts that for individuals who reject a meritocracy worldview, perceiving discrimination against the ingroup or (self) will buffer or bolster their self-esteem.
Across three studies, Major et al. (2007) found support for these predictions. Overall, perceived discrimination against the ingroup, whether measured as an individual difference variable or manipulated experimentally, was unrelated to personal self-esteem among women and Latino/a Americans (see also Foster, Sloto, & Ruby, 2006; Kaiser, Major, & McCoy, 2004; Major, Kaiser et al., 2003; McCoy & Major, 2003, for similar findings). Perceived discrimination interacted with SJBs (worldview) to shape self-esteem. Consistent with WVT, among women and ethnic minorities who strongly embraced a meritocracy worldview, perceiving discrimination against their ethnic or gender group led to lowered self-esteem. This pattern is consistent with the idea that perceived devaluation of one’s social identity will result in lower personal self-esteem (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999). In contrast, for Latino/a American and female participants who rejected a meritocracy worldview, perceived discrimination against their ethnic or gender group led to higher self-esteem. This pattern is consistent with theories that predict that perceiving others to be prejudiced against one’s social identity can serve a self-esteem protective function to the extent that it provides a more external attribution for one’s own or one’s groups’ social disadvantage (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989). Support for WVT predictions also emerge from several other studies (Foster et al., 2006; Foster & Tsarfati, 2005; Sellers & Shelton, 2003).

Summary

Personal, situational, and structural factors moderate the impact of perceptions of and attributions to discrimination on personal self-esteem and emotions. In the context of a personally threatening negative event, attributions to and perceptions of discrimination based on one’s social identity may protect against a loss of personal self-esteem or an increase in depressed emotion by providing a less threatening explanation for the event. Attributions to discrimination also protect self-esteem when the contextual cues to prejudice are clear, thereby facilitating discounting of self-blame. Personal resources, such as dispositional optimism and endorsing a worldview that challenges the legitimacy of the status hierarchy, can buffer personal self-esteem from perceived prejudice against the group by reducing the extent to which prejudice is appraised as a personal threat. In contrast, a pessimistic outlook on life, high identification with the targeted group, and endorsing a worldview that justifies status differences in society can make an individual more vulnerable to perceived prejudice against themselves or their ingroup.

Implications for Interpersonal Relationships

Although the vast majority of research on the psychological implications of perceived discrimination focuses on self-esteem, emotions, and mental health, researchers have begun to examine other potential outcomes. One emerging area of research centers on the interpersonal consequences of attributing one’s outcomes to discrimination. This research indicates that claiming that outcomes are due to discrimination may have detrimental social costs for the person who does so. Because Western cultures tend to devalue individuals who fail to take responsibility for their outcomes (Jellison & Green, 1981), individuals who claim that their treatment is the result of discrimination (an external cause) are often perceived more negatively than those who make internal attributions for their poor performance and may be subject to retaliation from their peers (Feagin & Sikes, 1994). Whites view African Americans who blame unfavorable test results on discrimination more negatively than African Americans who blame themselves (e.g., lack of ability) or an external factor unrelated to discrimination (e.g., difficulty of the test; Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003). They see the former as complainers, hypersensitive, emotional, argumentative, irritating, and trouble-making compared to the latter, regardless of the validity of the claim. That is, even when racism was overt, observers rated targets who blamed discrimination more negatively than those who blamed other factors.

People are more likely to label targets who blame unfavorable outcomes on discrimination as complainers than they are to so label those blaming other causes, and they are particularly likely to dislike members of their own group who blame discrimination. Garcia et al. (2005) found that men
and women disliked ingroup members (members of their own gender) who blamed a failure on discrimination more than they disliked members of the other gender who made an identical claim, and more than ingroup members who blamed the failure on themselves. In addition, the greater disliking of ingroup members who blamed discrimination was mediated by perceptions that ingroup targets who blamed discrimination were avoiding personal responsibility for their outcomes. The authors explain this in terms of a *black-sheep effect*, whereby people are more critical of ingroup members who claim discrimination because they are seen as disregarding the socially desirable norm of taking responsibility for their own failures.

This finding can be contrasted with the finding discussed earlier, that a higher need to belong was associated with greater perceptions of discrimination against the ingroup among both men and women (Carvallo & Pelham, 2006). Carvallo and Pelham (2006) speculated this occurred because perceiving discrimination against the ingroup validates an important belief of many ingroup members. We believe that whether or not ingroup members who claim discrimination are likely to be more derogated than outgroup members who do so depends on the observer's worldview.

Several studies indicate that the interpersonal costs of blaming negative outcomes on discrimination (vs. on other factors) are most severe when targets are evaluated by persons who strongly endorse a meritocratic worldview. Jost and Burgess (2000, Study 2) asked men and women to read about a young woman who sued her university after failing to be accepted to the honors program, which was known to differentially accept males. Results indicated that the more participants endorsed the belief in a just world, the more likely they were to discount and disfavor the woman in question. Kaiser, Dyrenforth, and Hagiwara (2006, Study 1) also demonstrated that endorsement of SJBs predicted negative appraisals of others who blame negative outcomes on discrimination. White participants who strongly endorsed SJBs were more likely to derogate a Black individual who blamed a poor evaluation on discrimination than a Black individual who blamed his poor evaluation on either his poor answers or test difficulty. The same pattern did not emerge among participants low in SJB endorsement. They did not differ in their evaluation of the participant based on his attributions for his performance. A second study found similar results and identified process variables by which SJBs lead to target evaluations. The relationship between SJBs and negative appraisals was mediated by perceived similarity of values between the perceiver and the target, as well as the belief that the participant had taken personal responsibility for his outcomes (Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006).

In summary, blaming one's outcomes on discrimination, at least in public, is costly. Those who claim discrimination are labeled as complainers and troublemakers, and likely to be ostracized by others, including members of their own group. Hence, it is not surprising that members of devalued groups often minimize the extent to which they are targets of discrimination. To do otherwise is just too costly.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Because discrimination is frequently ambiguous and difficult to prove with certainty, making an attribution to discrimination is often a highly subjective judgment. Personal, situational, and structural factors can increase or decrease the likelihood than people will judge that an event is due to discrimination, and can lead to overestimation or underestimation of prejudice. Similar factors appear to influence observers’ and targets’ attributions to discrimination. Increasingly, scholars have come to recognize that perceptions of discrimination can be as important as exposure to discrimination in predicting interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, and psychological well-being. Attributing personally threatening events to discrimination rather than to internal qualities of the self can protect against depressed affect and losses in self-esteem. It can also be an important anticipatory defense strategy for those who are chronically exposed to prejudice (Major et al., 2006; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Nevertheless, attributing one’s outcomes to discrimination can be costly. It can lead to social rejection both from members of one’s own group as well as members of other...
groups. Chronically expecting to be a target of prejudice can lead to more negative interpersonal interactions with members of outgroups and avoidance of domains in which prejudice is expected (cf. Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Pinel, 1999). Perceiving pervasive discrimination against oneself or one’s group can lead to increased psychological distress. Thus, like Mary Bates in the scenario with which we began this chapter, members of devalued groups who suspect they are targets of discrimination face a dilemma. When they are unsure, they must weigh the costs of falsely seeing discrimination that does not exist against the costs of missing discrimination when it does. When they are sure, they must weigh the costs of claiming discrimination against the costs of silence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Preparation of this chapter was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Heart, Lung and Blood (#ROI HL079383) to Brenda Major.

REFERENCES


