

# **ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF ATTRIBUTIONS TO DISCRIMINATION: THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL ADVANCES**

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## **I. Introduction**

What are the psychological implications of being a target of prejudice and discrimination—of regularly facing discrimination because of one's race, religion, sexual preference, or appearance? This question is central to understanding the phenomenology of stigmatization. Stigma is the possession of, or belief that one possesses, some attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). The hallmark feature of stigmatization is the possibility that one will be the target of prejudice and discrimination (Crocker et al., 1998; Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 1984). Personal experiences with prejudice and discrimination can be frequent, severe, and pervasive across a wide range of situations. This describes the predicament of many chronically stigmatized groups, such as devalued ethnic, racial, and religious groups; the obese; the facially disfigured; the mentally and physically handicapped; and gays and lesbians. Some must confront insults, rejection, slights, and overt hostility on a daily basis. Because stigma is contextual, however, even members of high-status groups can feel like a target of prejudice or discrimination in some contexts. Claims of "reverse discrimination" reflect this experience. Encounters with discrimination among members of these groups, however, are likely to be relatively rare, mild, and confined to a restricted set of circumstances (Crocker et al., 1998). Thus, the perception and experience of being a target of prejudice and discrimination is apt to be quite different for members of high-status groups compared to low-status groups (see Schmitt & Branscombe, in press-a, for

a discussion). In this chapter we examine the cognitive and emotional implications of the predicament of being a potential target of prejudice.<sup>1</sup>

## II. Theoretical Perspectives on Exposure to Discrimination

There is substantial evidence that negative stereotypes, prejudicial attitudes, and discriminatory treatment are harmful to their targets on multiple levels (see Crocker & Major, 1989). Prejudice and discrimination create structural barriers to obtaining resources such as employment, occupational advancement, income, housing, education, and medical care (Braddock & McPartland, 1987; Cash, Gillen, & Burns, 1977; Neckerman & Kirshenman, 1991; Treiman & Hartmann, 1981; Yinger, 1994). Inability to obtain these resources may threaten or compromise the physical well-being of the stigmatized, especially if structural discrimination is repeated, pervasive, and severe (Allison, 1998; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). African Americans, for example, have more physical health problems than European Americans, including shorter life expectancies, higher infant mortality, and greater incidence of heart disease (Allison, 1998; Flack *et al.*, 1995). Prejudice and discrimination are one possible explanation for these outcomes (Clark *et al.*, 1999). Among African-Americans, perceptions of discrimination are associated with increased physiological stress responses (Anderson, McNeilly, & Myers, 1993) and higher incidences of hypertension (Krieger & Sidney, 1996).

In addition to structural barriers to resources, many forms of interpersonal threat can stem from prejudice, including being ignored, excluded, patronized, belittled, or the object of ridicule. These forms of behavior can have negative psychological implications for their targets. For example, research has shown that ostracism or exclusion by others results in lowered self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Williams, Shore, & Grahe, 1998). As well, psychological well-being is at least partly dependent on inclusion by others (Leary, 1990; Leary *et al.*, 1995; Williams, 1997; Williams *et al.*, 1998), the fulfillment of affiliation needs (Bowlby, 1969), and the perception that one is valued by others (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997). Prejudice can also lead to violence against its targets, which poses both psychological and physical threat (Herek, 2000). In short, there is little doubt but that being the target of prejudice and discrimination poses a significant threat on multiple levels.

Many classic theories of the effects of prejudice and discrimination assume that exposure to such attitudes and experiences would inevitably leave a "mark of oppression" on the personalities and self-esteem of their victims (see Crocker &

<sup>1</sup>In an effort to avoid excess words, when referring to how targets respond to being the target of prejudice and/or discrimination, we use the terms "prejudice" and "discrimination" interchangeably.

Major, 1989, for a discussion). For example, early theories emphasized the detrimental impact of racism on the self-concept and personality of African Americans (e.g., Erikson, 1956; Horowitz, 1939). In 1950, for example, Dorwin Cartwright argued, "The group to which a person belongs serves as primary determinants of his self-esteem. To a considerable extent, personal feelings of worth depend on the social evaluation of the group with which a person is identified. Self-hatred and feelings of worthlessness tend to arise from membership in underprivileged or outcast groups" (p. 440). Allport (1954/1979, p. 143) argued, "Since no one can be indifferent to the abuse and expectations of others we must anticipate that ego-defensiveness will frequently be found among members of groups that are set off for ridicule, disparagement, and discrimination. It could not be otherwise." Such conclusions follow logically from theories of the development of the self-concept that emphasize the importance of others' opinions, such as the theory of reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1956; Mead, 1934) and the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948). It is also commonly assumed that individuals and groups that are disadvantaged and frequent targets of prejudice and discrimination will feel angry, resentful, and dissatisfied with their situations.

Empirical research, however, often does not support these conclusions. Members of many chronically stigmatized groups often fail to exhibit the signs of poor mental health that these theories would predict. For example, the vast majority of individuals with disabilities, such as those who are blind, quadriplegic, or developmentally disabled, report positive levels of well-being (see Diener & Diener, 1996 for a review). Furthermore, members of chronically disadvantaged groups often do not report discontent with their situations (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Crosby, 1976). For example, even though women are typically paid less than men for comparable work and contribute a greater share of family work than do their husbands, they typically report no less satisfaction with their lives, jobs, or marriages than do men (see Crosby, 1982; Major, 1994, for reviews).

The finding that members of stigmatized groups do not report signs of poor mental health led to an alternative perspective on the effects of prejudice on its targets (e.g., Cross, 1991; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Simpson & Yinger, 1985). Rather than focusing on the vulnerability of targets of prejudice, this perspective emphasized targets' psychological resilience and hardiness and focused on their methods of adaptation and resistance. Theories adopting this perspective (e.g., Deaux & Major, 1987) observed that individuals are not passive victims of others' beliefs and attitudes, but active agents who construe and negotiate their social situations in the service of self-verification and self-esteem maintenance. Attention shifted to ways in which stigmatized groups protect their self-esteem from the threats that exposure to prejudice and discrimination imposes. An example of this perspective is Crocker and Major's (1989) analysis of stigma and self-esteem. On the basis of their review of more than 20 years of empirical research, they concluded that members of stigmatized groups often have levels of global self-esteem

as high or higher than members of nonstigmatized groups. In explaining this paradox, Crocker and Major made the counterintuitive argument that membership in a stigmatized group can help to protect self-esteem from prejudice and discrimination. Specifically, they proposed that three cognitive processes linked to group membership may buffer the self-esteem of the stigmatized: (1) attributing negative feedback to the prejudiced attitudes of others toward their group rather than to their own deservingness, (2) selectively comparing outcomes with members of their own group rather than with members of more advantaged groups, and (3) selectively devaluing those attributes on which their group fares poorly and valuing those attributes on which their group excels. Crocker and Major's article sparked a surge of empirical research on stereotyping and prejudice from the target's point of view.

Contemporary theory and research on targets' responses to prejudice and discrimination emphasizes variability in response and focuses on factors that can explain this variability (e.g., Crocker, 1999; Friedman & Brownell, 1995; Major & Schmader, 2001; Miller & Downey, 1999; Miller & Major, 2000). These perspectives note that members of stigmatized groups can demonstrate either vulnerability or resilience. Differential responses are observed between targeted groups, within stigmatized groups, and even within the same individual across contexts. For example, recent meta-analyses reveal that African Americans, on average, have higher self-esteem than European Americans (Twenge & Crocker, *in press*). But on average, overweight women have lower self-esteem than nonoverweight women (Miller & Downey, 1999), and European American women have lower self-esteem than European American men (Major, Barr, Zubek, & Babey, 1999). Within the same stigmatized groups, some individuals appear resilient to prejudice and display positive well-being, whereas other members of the same group do not (Friedman & Brownell, 1995). In addition, the same individual may show different responses to prejudice as the context changes, as research on stereotype threat demonstrates (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Thus, contemporary approaches acknowledge both vulnerability and resilience as common responses to negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination and seek to identify factors that differentiate these responses.

## A. STRESS AND COPING PERSPECTIVE

Our approach (e.g., Major, Quinton, McCoy, & Schmader, 2000; Major & Schmader, 2000; Miller & Major, 2000) conceptualizes responses of targets of prejudice and discrimination within a stress and coping framework (see also Allison, 1998; Clark *et al.*, 1999; Miller & Kaiser, 2001). As discussed earlier, people who are members of stigmatized, lower status groups are more likely than members of nonstigmatized, higher status groups to be exposed to a variety of

negative and potentially stressful life events, such as rejection, negative evaluations, and poor outcomes. According to psychological models of stress and coping, understanding how people adjust to stressful life events requires attention to two processes: *cognitive appraisals* and *coping* (Bandura, 1977; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, a stress and coping approach to understanding responses of targets of prejudice calls attention to the importance of examining how stigma-related stressors are cognitively appraised; the coping strategies targets use to deal with events that are appraised as stressful; and the personal, situational, and structural factors that affect cognitive appraisals and coping processes.

Beliefs about being the target of prejudice and/or discrimination can affect adaptation to stressful life events in two places: (1) at the level of cognitive appraisals and (2) at the level of coping processes. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two types of cognitive appraisals. "Primary appraisals" are individuals' evaluations of whether an event has the potential for harm, benefit, or loss. "Secondary appraisals" are individuals' evaluations of their existing coping resources and options to overcome or prevent harm or improve the prospects for benefit. We regard the perception that oneself or one's group is a victim of prejudice or discrimination as a primary appraisal of threat in one's environment, i.e., an appraisal that danger to the self (or group) does or could exist (see Feldman-Barrett & Swim, 1998, for a similar perspective). In general, one would expect that the more individuals perceive themselves or their group as a victim of prejudice (a threat appraisal), the more stress they will experience. By definition, however, the experience of stress occurs when demands are perceived as taxing or exceeding coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, it is theoretically possible for people to perceive themselves as victims of prejudice and discrimination and yet not experience this as stressful. This would occur if a person feels that he or she has the resources necessary to cope with the threat of being a target of prejudice. Being the target of prejudice is less likely to be stressful, for example, if the target feels he or she has control over important resources or can limit exposure to others who are prejudiced. This may be more typical of members of high-status groups who are temporarily the victims of prejudice and who have more coping resources at their disposal than of members of stigmatized groups who are chronically the victims of prejudice and who command fewer resources.

"Coping" is defined in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984, p. 141) model as a person's "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources." Thus, coping occurs in response to events that are appraised as stressful (or potentially stressful). Coping efforts are process-oriented and context-specific and can be distinguished from the outcomes of coping efforts (i.e., whether they are successful). A number of scholars have addressed how individuals cope with experiences related to being a member of a stigmatized or disadvantaged group (e.g., Allport, 1954/1979; Crocker & Major, 1989; Goffman, 1963; Jones et al.,

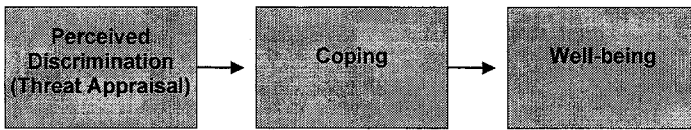


Fig. 1a. Coping with the threat of perceived discrimination.

1984). Coping efforts can also be aimed at dealing with the stress of believing that oneself or one's group is a victim of discrimination. This process is illustrated in Fig. 1a. Coping efforts also can be aimed at dealing with specific stigma-related life events that are appraised as stressful, such as negative evaluations, poor test grades, or a job rejection. Figure 1b illustrates this process.

Our own research focuses on the second process—cognitive coping strategies that are enacted in response to experiencing specific negative life events that could be due to prejudice. Cognitive coping strategies involve cognitively restructuring, or changing the meaning of, stressful life events. Cognitive restructuring strategies can include devaluing the importance of domains in which oneself or one's group are disadvantaged (Major & Schmader, 1998), comparing with members of one's in-group rather than with advantaged out-group members (Major, Schiacchitano, & Crocker, 1993), and attributing negative events to external factors instead of to oneself (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major & Crocker, 1993). In this chapter we address the extent to which members of stigmatized (and nonstigmatized) groups employ the coping strategy of blaming negative events on the prejudices of others, instead of on themselves, and the consequences of this for well-being, particularly self-esteem.

## B. OVERVIEW OF CHAPTER

We begin this chapter by defining an attribution to discrimination and distinguishing it from related concepts, including an attribution to justifiable differential treatment and the perception of pervasive victimization due to prejudice. We then discuss theoretical perspectives that imply that members of chronically stigmatized groups are vigilant to prejudice and those that imply that members of such groups minimize the extent to which they are targets of prejudice. Empirical evidence in support of both perspectives is then reviewed. We propose that the extent to

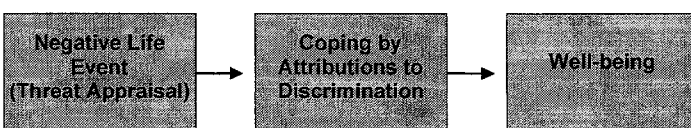


Fig. 1b. Coping with threatening events by attributing them to discrimination.

which targets perceive themselves as victims of prejudice and make attributions to prejudice is moderated by personal, situational, and structural factors that increase the extent to which events are perceived as linked to group membership and are perceived as unjust. In the next section of this chapter, we review theoretical perspectives and empirical research investigating the implications for psychological well-being of chronically perceiving oneself or one's group as a victim of discrimination and of attributing specific negative outcomes to discrimination. We discuss conceptual and methodological problems with research in this area and propose factors likely to moderate the impact of attributions to prejudice on well-being, including clarity of injustice, group identification, justice ideologies, and group status. We argue that perceiving oneself or one's group as a victim of chronic and pervasive prejudice typically is associated with low self-esteem and reduced well-being. In contrast, we propose that attributing negative outcomes to prejudice when situational cues clearly justify that attribution protects self-esteem among the stigmatized.

### **III. Attributions to Prejudice**

Attributions play a central role in a number of theories seeking to explain how members of stigmatized and disadvantaged groups react to their predicament (Cohen, 1986; Crocker & Major, 1989; Gurin, 1985; Major, 1994). For example, Allport (1954/1979) argued that a major dimension that organizes reactions of targets of prejudice and discrimination is whether they adopt an intropunitive or extropunative focus. He asserted that targets who adopt an intropunitive focus blame themselves for negative outcomes and are likely to react to prejudice with self-hate, passivity, and denial of membership in the stigmatized group. Targets who adopt an extropunative focus, on the other hand, blame others for their negative treatment and are more likely to respond to prejudice with suspicion, aggression, and increased identification with the stigmatized group (Allport, 1954/1979). Theories of relative deprivation assert that whether or not individuals deprived of valued outcomes feel anger and resentment depends, in part, on whether they blame themselves or others for not having those outcomes (e.g., Crosby, 1976; 1982; Olson & Hafer, 2001). And, as noted above, Crocker and Major proposed that the global self-esteem of members of stigmatized groups depends, in part, on whether they blame their negative outcomes on themselves or on prejudice of others toward their group.

Despite the acknowledged importance of attribution processes in understanding reactions to prejudice and discrimination, the nature of these attributions and their psychological consequences is poorly understood. Only recently have these issues become a focus of inquiry. Much of the current interest can be attributed to Crocker

and Major's (1989) controversial hypotheses that members of stigmatized groups suffer from attributional ambiguity and that this ambiguity can have psychological benefits.

### A. ATTRIBUTIONAL AMBIGUITY

Crocker and Major (1989) proposed that members of stigmatized groups frequently are aware of the negative connotations their social identity may carry in the eyes of others, the specific negative stereotypes that others hold about members of their social group, and the possibility that they will be a target of prejudice and/or discrimination. This awareness, they argued, can lead the stigmatized to experience *attributional ambiguity* in interpersonal encounters with the nonstigmatized. They defined attributional ambiguity as an uncertainty about whether the outcomes one receives are indicative of one's personal deservingness or of social prejudices that others have against one's social group. Attributional ambiguity can be experienced regarding both negative and positive outcomes (see Major & Crocker, 1993). In this chapter, we focus on attributional ambiguity surrounding negative outcomes.

There is, of course, any number of possible attributions that an individual might make for his or her outcomes. These attributions can include causes completely external to an individual (e.g., luck, God's will, or someone else's dispositions or mood states) as well as causes that are completely internal and unique to an individual (e.g., one's own disposition, abilities, or efforts). Crocker and Major (1989) focused on only one small subset of attributional possibilities—the distinction people might make between blaming their outcome on *themselves* (self-blame) as compared to blaming it on *other's reactions to their social identity* (other-blame). For example, a woman would experience attributional ambiguity if, when she is turned down for a job, she wonders whether it was her fault (e.g., due to her lack of qualifications or her poor interviewing skills) or was due to the interviewer's negative attitudes and beliefs about women.

Because we are not privy to the motivations of others, everyone is likely to experience a certain amount of attributional ambiguity in social interactions. Discrepancies between felt attitudes and expressed behavior often occur, making it difficult to discern the motives and intentions of others. Indeed, the true cause of our social outcomes is often hidden, disguised, or misrepresented (e.g., Kenny & DePaulo, 1993). Attributional ambiguity is especially likely to be experienced when one believes that others hold negative attitudes toward one's group and there are strong social norms against expressing those negative attitudes (i.e., a climate of political correctness) (Crocker *et al.*, 1998). In these circumstances, it is likely that a higher than average degree of uncertainty regarding the causes of one's outcomes will be experienced.



Although everyone may experience attributional ambiguity, Crocker and Major (1989; Major & Crocker, 1993) hypothesized that attributional ambiguity is more likely to be experienced by members of chronically stigmatized (lower status) groups than by nonstigmatized (higher status) groups. Negative stereotypes about and prejudicial attitudes toward members of chronically stigmatized groups are well known and widespread relative to negative stereotypes about and prejudicial attitudes toward high-status groups. The norm of "political correctness" often is not applied to the expression of negative attitudes toward members of higher status groups. Indeed, an identical negative act is less likely to be labeled as prejudice if the perpetrator is a member of a subordinate group and the target is a member of a dominant group member than if the roles are reversed (Inman & Baron, 1996). Although these social conditions set the stage for attributional ambiguity to be experienced to a greater degree by members of chronically stigmatized groups, awareness that others view one's social group negatively is not restricted to these groups. Research on metastereotypes indicates that members of higher status groups are aware that lower status groups sometimes hold negative stereotypes of them (Vorauer & Kumhyr, 2001), thus they too may experience attributional ambiguity. This will be more likely if metastereotypes are salient or the members of the lower status group have more power in the specific situation. Because members of stigmatized groups are less frequently in positions of power over members of nonstigmatized groups than vice versa, however, attributional ambiguity may be experienced relatively rarely by the nonstigmatized.

Uncertainty, the defining feature of attributional ambiguity, is not a benign psychological state. On the contrary, uncertainty is often highly distressing. Van den Bos and Lind (2002), for example, argue that individuals "have a fundamental need to feel certain about their world and their place within it and that too much uncertainty threatens the meaning of existence." Because uncertainty threatens fundamental beliefs about predictability and control (e.g., Langer, 1975; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), uncertainty is an aversive experience, especially when it is present in areas that are central to one's self-concept. The uncertainty inherent in attributionally ambiguous circumstances can make it difficult for the stigmatized to make accurate assessments of key aspects of self-worth (such as one's abilities); therefore determining appropriate goals can become a perplexing task (Crocker & Major, 1989). Attributional ambiguity also consumes cognitive resources. The stigmatized may allot a disproportionate amount of mental energy to impression management (e.g., Saenz, 1994), monitoring interactions with and the behavior of the nonstigmatized (e.g., Frable, Blackstone, & Scherbaum, 1990), and/or seeking diagnostic information from the nonstigmatized (e.g., Weary & Jacobson, 1997). Thus, attributional ambiguity poses a potential threat to psychological well-being in a variety of ways.

Despite its many costs for the stigmatized, Crocker and Major (1989) proposed the counterintuitive hypothesis that attributional ambiguity may also provide the

stigmatized with a means of self-esteem protection (see also Dion, 1975; Dion & Earn, 1975). Specifically, Crocker and Major (1989; Major & Crocker, 1993) hypothesized that when interacting with the nonstigmatized, the stigmatized have an extra attributional option to explain their outcomes—prejudice against their group. According to Kelley's (1972) discounting principle, the role of a given cause in producing a given effect is discounted if other plausible causes are present. Thus, the availability of prejudice as a plausible alternative cause of negative outcomes should allow the stigmatized to discount their own role in producing negative outcomes. Crocker and Major (1989) further hypothesized that because prejudice against one's group is an external attribution, attributing negative outcomes to prejudice should protect affect and self-esteem relative to making attributions to "internal, stable, and global causes such as lack of ability" (p. 613). This hypothesis is based on theoretical models of emotion that posit that attributing negative events to causes external to the self protects self-esteem, whereas attributing negative outcomes to causes internal to the self, such as one's lack of deservingness, leads to low self-esteem (e.g., Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Weiner, 1985).

Based on the above analysis, Crocker and Major (1989) ventured two ancillary hypotheses. First, they speculated, "People who believe that they personally are frequent victims of discrimination should be particularly likely to attribute negative outcomes or performance feedback to prejudice or discrimination against their group and hence, may have high self-esteem" (p. 621). Second, they speculated, "overt prejudice or discrimination should be less damaging to the self-esteem of its targets than is prejudice or discrimination that is disguised or hidden behind a cloak of fairness" (p. 621). Crocker and Major (1989) reasoned that when one is faced with blatant prejudice or discrimination, it is clear that the proper attribution for negative outcomes is prejudice. However, in cases of disguised or subtle prejudice, it may be unclear whether discrimination is the cause.

Since the early 1990s, researchers have tested, extended, refined, and challenged these hypotheses. The hypothesis that the stigmatized make attributions to prejudice or discrimination in attributionally ambiguous circumstances has proved controversial (Ruggiero & Taylor, 1995). So too has the hypothesis that attributions to prejudice can protect self-esteem (Schmitt & Branscombe, *in press-a*). Contradictory claims abound, and empirical evidence is inconsistent at best. Some of the confusion is due to misinterpretations of Crocker and Major's (1989) predictions. Contrary to the claims of some (e.g., Ruggiero & Taylor, 1995), Crocker and Major (1989) did not propose that individuals are eager to see themselves as victims of prejudice and discrimination. Contrary to the claims of others (e.g., Schmitt & Branscombe, *in press-a*), they did not claim that it feels good to be a target of prejudice or that attributing one's outcomes to prejudice and discrimination would come without costs. Nor did they claim that it would feel better to blame negative outcomes on discrimination than on other external causes (Schmitt & Branscombe, *in press-b*). Rather, they hypothesized that the psychological costs

of blaming negative outcomes on others' prejudice toward one group would be less than blaming those same outcomes on internal, stable, and global aspects of self (e.g., one's character, ability, personality, and other indicators of a lack of personal deservingness).

We<sup>2</sup> believe that some of the confusion is also due to a failure to differentiate among closely related but distinct constructs. In particular, researchers often do not distinguish adequately between the psychological implications of a target being *exposed* to prejudicial or discriminatory events, *perceiving* that he or she is a pervasive victim of prejudice or discrimination, and *attributing* specific negative events to discrimination. According to our stress and coping framework, exposure to prejudicial or discriminatory events is a stressor. Perceiving oneself as a victim of prejudice or discrimination is a primary appraisal of threat. And attributing specific negative events to discrimination is a coping strategy. The tendency of some scholars to equate retrospective self-reports of victimization due to discrimination against self or group with attributing specific negative events to discrimination has been particularly problematic (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999). We elaborate on these issues more under Psychological Consequences of Attributing Outcomes to Discrimination. In the following section, we focus on defining and clarifying the concept of attributions to discrimination.

## B. THEORETICAL REFINEMENTS

Surprisingly, despite the burgeoning research on attributions to discrimination, little work has attempted to define this concept precisely. Most researchers define attributions to discrimination operationally (e.g., "To what extent do you believe your rejection was due to discrimination?") but not theoretically. Crocker and Major's (1989; Crocker et al., 1991; Major & Crocker, 1993) hypothesis that attributions to prejudice could have self-esteem protective effects was based on two assumptions: (1) an attribution to discrimination has an *external* component because the source of discrimination is another's prejudicial attitudes and (2) the presence of a plausible external cause for an effect leads to discounting of internal causes for that effect (the discounting principle). Recent theory and research suggest that several refinements to these assumptions are warranted.

### *1. Attributions to Discrimination Are More Than Attributions to Social Identity*

In a refinement of their perspective, Crocker and Major (1994) observed that it is important to distinguish between attributing outcomes to *one's social identity* (e.g., one's weight) and attributing outcomes to *prejudice based on one's social*

<sup>2</sup> The first-person pronoun "we" is used here to refer to the authors of the current chapter.

*identity*. Attributing treatment to one's social identity does not necessarily carry with it the assumption of injustice, or moral wrongdoing, that attributing treatment to prejudice does. Indeed, some members of stigmatized groups may perceive that their treatment is due to others' reactions to their social identity but may perceive this treatment as legitimate. Consequently, they do not blame it on prejudice. This may occur, for example, if the target assumes that differential treatment reflects real group differences in abilities, qualifications, or other "inputs" or if the target perceives a stigma to be under their personal control (see Crocker & Major, 1994). For example, a woman in the military may perceive that she is excluded from combat duty because she is a woman, but believe that this is a legitimate reason for her exclusion. This pattern was observed in a study of overweight women who were rejected as a partner by a male who knew their weight (Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993). These overweight women attributed their rejection to their weight, but did not blame it on the male's prejudice. Crocker et al. (1993) hypothesized that this occurred because weight is perceived as controllable and hence a legitimate reason for rejection.

According to our framework, an attribution to discrimination is a judgment with two components: (1) the individual (or group) was treated unjustly and (2) the treatment was based on social identity/group membership. Should either component of this judgment be absent, discrimination will not be perceived to be responsible for the outcome. As shown in Table I, individuals who are negatively treated can feel that their treatment was based on aspects of their personal identity and was just (e.g., "I did not get the job because I was not the most qualified") or was based on their personal identity and was unjust (e.g., "I did not get the job because I am not well connected"). Neither of these explanations constitutes an attribution to

TABLE I  
ATTRIBUTIONS VARYING ALONG JUST-UNJUST AND PERSONAL  
IDENTITY-SOCIAL IDENTITY DIMENSIONS

	Personal identity	Social identity
	SELF-BLAME	GROUP-BLAME
Just	"I didn't get the job because I was not the most qualified."	"I didn't get the job because my group is not as qualified as other groups."
	OTHER-BLAME	DISCRIMINATION
Unjust	"I didn't get the job because I am not well-connected."	"I didn't get the job because of prejudice against my group."

discrimination according to our definition; both lack the judgment that one's membership in a social group was responsible for one's treatment. Individuals can also feel that their social identity was responsible for their negative treatment but that this was just (e.g., "I did not get the job because members of my group are not as qualified, smart, hardworking, etc., as members of other groups"). This is also not an attribution to discrimination according to our framework, but rather is a perception of *justifiable differential treatment*.

## *2. Attributions to Discrimination Involve Attributions of Blame*

Crocker and Major (1994) recognized that an attribution to discrimination involves the perception of injustice or moral wrongdoing on the part of another, but did not distinguish among the concepts of attributions to causality, responsibility, and blame. Although some scholars argue that most respondents use these terms interchangeably (Tennen & Affleck, 1990), others argue that these concepts should be differentiated theoretically (Fincham & Shultz, 1981; Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995).

For example, Weiner (1995) argued that judgments of causality and of responsibility should be differentiated. He assumed that individuals focus initially on causal understanding and then shift to a consideration of the responsibility of the person. Inferences of responsibility require the perception of personal causality (human involvement) as well as the perception of internal and controllable causality. Thus, holding a person *responsible* for an outcome is not the same as *attributing* the outcome to the person. According to Weiner's analysis, responsibility refers to a judgment made about a person—he or she "should" or "ought to have" done otherwise. Even if the cause of an adverse event is located within the person and that cause is controllable by the individual, it is still possible that a judgment of responsibility will not be rendered if there are mitigating circumstances that negate moral responsibility. Weiner argued that responsibility is the critical determinant of emotion. He asserted that blame is a blended concept—a cognition similar to responsibility, as well as an affect akin to anger. Weiner noted, however, that when making judgments about negative events, blame is often used interchangeably with responsibility (e.g., "He is responsible for our failure" and "He is to blame for our failure").

It may be important, however, to distinguish between the concepts of responsibility and blame. Shaver (1985), for example, argued for a stage model of blame attribution. After experiencing a negative outcome, a person first makes an attribution of causality (determines the antecedent(s) sufficient for the occurrence of the outcome). Under some specific circumstances, an attribution of responsibility to another person (or the self) is made. An attribution of responsibility involves the determination that the outcome was under the control of the other person (or the self) or was intended. Attributions of responsibility may give rise to an attribution of blame if the perceiver does not accept the validity of the offending

person's justification or excuse for their behavior. Thus, attributions of blame are made when someone is held responsible for unjustifiable behavior. Attributions of blame can be directed toward others or toward the self.

From the perspective of this literature, Crocker and Major's attributional ambiguity analysis is more appropriately described as a theory about the emotional consequences of attributions of blame than of attributions of causality. Crocker and Major were concerned less with whether an event was caused by something internal or external to the person than with the question *Who is responsible for this outcome, me or you?* Viewed in this way, an attribution to discrimination involves attributing *responsibility* to another whose actions are *unjustified*. Thus, an attribution to discrimination, particularly for negative events, is also an attribution of blame.

In sum, an attribution to prejudice is the judgment that *unjust attitudes toward a group (or category) are responsible for an outcome*. An attribution to discrimination is the judgment that *unjust treatment toward a group (or category) is responsible for an outcome*. Our conceptualization is similar to Aronson, Wilson, and Akert's (1999) definition of discrimination as "an unjustified negative or harmful action toward the members of a group, simply because of their membership in that group" (p. 506). We do not assume, however, that discrimination will *only* be invoked as an explanation for negative outcomes (see Moghaddam, 1998). Although we believe that most of the time discrimination is invoked to explain unjust negative outcomes based on category membership, it is possible that individuals might recognize that unjust discrimination acting in their favor may be to blame for a positive outcome.

### *3. Attributions to Discrimination Are Both Internal and External*

Although Crocker and Major (1989) focused on the external component of an attribution to prejudice or discrimination, attributions to prejudice and discrimination also have a strong internal component. One's group membership is an internal aspect of the self. Therefore, when an attribution to discrimination is made, a part of the self is implicated. Schmitt and Branscombe (in press-b) demonstrated this in two studies in which participants were asked to imagine that a professor refused their request to add a closed class. In the "Everyone Excluded" condition, participants learned that the professor honored no one's request to add the class. In the "Prejudice" condition, participants learned that the professor let in no members of their own gender, but let in about 10 members of the other gender. The extent to which participants saw the rejection as due to something about themselves (internal causes) and due to something about the professor (external causes) was assessed. Participants in both studies rated internal causes higher in the Prejudice condition than the Everyone Excluded condition. This corroborates Schmitt and Branscombe's claim that attributions to prejudice have an internal component. Consistent with Crocker and Major's (1989) claim that attributions to prejudice have an external component, however, participants in the first study rated external

causes just as high in the Prejudice condition as in the Everyone Excluded condition. In a second study, participants rated externality *even higher* in the Prejudice Condition than in the Everyone Excluded condition.

This study illustrates that attributions to prejudice contain both an internal and an external component. It is important to point out, however, that Crocker and Major (1989) did not argue that attributions to discrimination are exclusively external. Rather, they believed that they are more external than attributions to personal deservingness (i.e., ability, effort). Unfortunately, the above studies by Schmitt and Branscombe (in press-b) did not include a condition in which participants were asked to imagine that they were the only person excluded from the course or that they were excluded for personal reasons (e.g., their presumed lack of intelligence). To address this issue, Major, Kaiser, and McCoy (2001) conducted two studies that replicated Schmitt and Branscombe's (in press-b) procedures but added a third condition in which participants were asked to imagine that everyone who asked the professor for add codes received one except for themselves. Participants were again asked the extent to which the rejection was due to internal or external causes. In addition, they rated the extent to which the rejection was their own fault (e.g., "I am to blame for the professor's refusal to give me an add code"). Consistent with Crocker and Major's reasoning, in both studies, ratings of internality were higher in the Only You Excluded condition than in the Prejudice condition, although this difference reached statistical significance only in the second study. In both studies, rejection in the Everyone Excluded condition was seen as least due to internal causes. Furthermore, self-blame was significantly higher in the Only You Excluded condition than in the Prejudice condition in both studies. The Everyone Excluded condition fell in between. Because rejection in the presence of discrimination leads to less self-blame than does rejection in its absence, we believe there should be different emotional consequences associated with blaming negative outcomes on others' prejudice versus on one's own shortcomings. We address this issue later in this chapter.

#### *4. Discounting Does Not Always Occur*

Heider (1958) suggested that explanations of actions commonly involve a trade-off between causes internal and external to a person. Kelley (1973) elaborated this into the discounting principle—the idea that when two plausible causes for an effect are available, people discount one cause. In a recent theoretical review, McClure (1998) observed that contrary to the discounting principle, internal and external causes for events are not necessarily inversely related. Because effects can be multiply determined, both internal and external causes may be seen as producing a given behavior. Often, increased ratings of the person have no effect on ratings of the situation and vice versa. McClure (1998) observed that discounting will be greatest when causes are negatively related to each other, moderate when causes are independent, and low or absent when causes are positively related. One

implication of this analysis is that perceiving that another person is prejudiced against one's group does not preclude attributing a negative outcome to one's own lack of deservingness. Similarly, perceiving that one is poorly qualified for a position does not preclude attributing one's rejection to another's prejudice. Hence, the emotional consequences of attributing negative outcomes may be less straightforward than originally assumed.

#### **IV. Perceiving and Attributing Outcomes to Discrimination: Theoretical Perspectives**

To what extent do people who objectively are victims of prejudice and discrimination recognize this fact? Do people in attributionally ambiguous circumstances blame their negative outcomes on prejudice and discrimination? Although these questions have been the subject of considerable attention since the early 1990s, theory and research have yielded conflicting answers. Part of the difficulty in answering these questions definitively lies in the inherent subjectivity of judgments of discrimination. Feldman-Barrett and Swim (1998) observe that judgments that one is a victim of discrimination can be conceptualized within a signal detection framework—judgments of discrimination are subject to correct hits, correct rejections, misses, and false alarms. A correct hit occurs when discrimination that objectively exists in the environment is correctly perceived. A correct rejection occurs when discrimination that does not exist is not perceived. Misses occur when discrimination that does exist is not perceived to exist. In contrast, false alarms occur when discrimination that does not exist is perceived to exist. In contrast to many types of psychophysical judgments, however, there are few objective standards to indicate when discrimination has indeed occurred. Thus, it can be difficult to ascertain when failing to acknowledge discrimination is a correct rejection or a miss or when perceiving discrimination is a correct hit or a false alarm. According to some authors, individuals who are chronic targets of prejudice are highly sensitive to cues to prejudice in their environment. Thus, if they make a judgment error, it is likely to be on the side of false alarms. According to others, chronic victims of prejudice underestimate the extent to which they are targets of prejudice. Thus, if they make an error of judgment, it is likely to be on the side of misses. In the following sections we consider the theoretical rationale underlying both of these perspectives and the empirical evidence in support of each.

##### **A. VIGILANCE PERSPECTIVES**

In his landmark volume on prejudice, Gordon Allport (1954/1979, p. 144) proposed, "vigilance and hypersensitiveness are ego defenses of the minority group."



He argued that because of their frequent encounters with prejudice, members of minority groups can become "on guard" and "suspicious" 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. Other researchers suggest that among groups that live in a highly prejudicial environment, such as African Americans, a "healthy cultural paranoia" or adaptive "cultural mistrust" may develop (Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Terrell & Terrell, 1981). Others similarly argue that repeated exposure might engender an adaptive vigilance on the part of the stigmatized (Feldman-Barrett & Swim, 2000; Kleck & Strenta, 1980; Vorauer & Ross, 1993; Wright, 1960).

There are cognitive reasons why members of chronically stigmatized groups might be highly sensitive to cues to prejudice in their environment. According to signal detection theory, if the past base rate for experiencing prejudice has been high, the decision criteria for perceiving prejudice may be set low. Previous experience with prejudice or discrimination can set the stage for members of stigmatized groups to use a "zero miss" signal detection strategy wherein even subtle injustice cues in the environment trigger vigilance for discrimination and increased perceptions of discrimination (Feldman-Barrett & Swim, 1998). The stigmatized are frequently exposed to overt signs of prejudice and discrimination against their group and are well aware of the negative stereotypes that others hold of their group (Crocker et al., 1998). As a result, prejudice and discrimination are likely to be repeatedly primed and highly accessible constructs for members of these groups (Inman & Baron, 1996). Consequently, the possibility that one will be a target of prejudice and discrimination may be activated in attributionally ambiguous circumstances and shape interpretation of those circumstances (see Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991, for a review).

Motivational factors may also lead the stigmatized to be vigilant to prejudice. From a signal detection framework, people will be motivated to be vigilant to prejudice to the extent that the cost associated with a false alarm is less than the cost of a miss. When the social environment is very hostile and life threatening, the costs of not detecting prejudice may be great. Under these circumstances, people may be motivated to detect prejudice for self-preservation purposes. People also may be motivated to detect prejudice for psychological reasons. In general, people are highly motivated to protect and enhance their personal (individual) and social (collective) self-esteem (Baumeister, 1998; Pyszczynski et al., 1997). Furthermore, people engage in a wide variety of "self-serving" and "group-serving" strategies to do so (Crocker & Major, 1989; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). One mechanism of self-protection is the use of self-serving attributional biases—attributing negative outcomes to external causes and positive events to internal causes. This attributional pattern has been shown to protect self-esteem from negative outcomes (McFarland & Ross, 1982). To the extent that prejudice is an external attribution, and blaming negative outcomes on prejudice rather than

on the self allows for maintenance of self-esteem, members of chronically stigmatized groups may be motivated to attribute negative outcomes to prejudice. This motivational perspective is reflected in Allport's (1954/1979) claim that vigilance and hypersensitiveness are ego-defense strategies.

Broadly speaking, attributing negative outcomes to discrimination instead of to the self can be considered a form of excuse making. Excuses are defined as "self-serving explanations or accounts that aim to reduce personal responsibility for questionable events, thereby disengaging core components of the self from the incident" (Schlenker, Pontari, & Christopher, 2001, p. 15). It is important to note that classifying an attribution to discrimination as an excuse does *not* imply that such attributions are not justified or do not have a basis in reality. Although lay meanings of the term "excuse" often imply an explanation that is inaccurate or intentionally deceitful, theorists and researchers who study excuse making use the term to include self-serving explanations that are both true and untrue. Research has shown that excusing failures can have positive implications for well-being, especially if they are credible (e.g., if corroborative evidence is provided), do not result in negative social consequences, and maintain perceptions of control over future outcomes in the domain (Schlenker et al., 2001; Snyder & Higgins, 1988).

Members of stigmatized groups may also be motivated to make attributions to prejudice to the extent that they see this attribution as serving instrumental personal or group goals (Taylor, Wright, & Porter, 1994). Attributions to discrimination and recognizing disadvantage may act as a lever for change (Singer, 1981). Claims that one is or has been a target of discrimination may make it possible to negotiate for better treatment or more favorable outcomes on grounds of equity restoration. Individuals may seek compensation or redress for past discrimination through legal means.

## B. MINIMIZATION PERSPECTIVES

In contrast to vigilance perspectives, other theoretical perspectives suggest that members of stigmatized and oppressed groups engage in "positive illusions" and are likely to miss or minimize the extent to which they personally are victims of discrimination. In her seminal work on the "denial of disadvantage," for example, Crosby (1984) asserted that individuals often fail to perceive the personal relevance of facts they know to be true of society, and hence deny that they are personally victims of discrimination, even when they recognize that members of their group are discriminated against. Political sociologists, philosophers, and psychologists have long argued that social systems of inequality persist because members of low-status groups fall prey to "false consciousness"; that is, they fail to recognize the illegitimacy of the status system and of their own disadvantaged position within it (Jost, 1995; Lane, 1962; Marx & Engels, 1846/1970).

There are several cognitive reasons why people might fail to perceive that they personally are targets of discrimination or fail to attribute negative outcomes to prejudice even when it is plausible to do so. First, the judgment that one is personally a victim of discrimination typically involves comparing one's own inputs and outcomes with those of others. Because targets of comparison are often fellow in-group members, people who are systematically disadvantaged on the basis of group membership often are not aware of the extent to which they are unfairly treated (Major, 1994). Second, it is difficult to perceive discrimination on a case-by-case basis because there are many possible explanations for individual variation in outcomes. Discrimination on the basis of group membership typically becomes apparent only when data are aggregated across a number of individuals (Crosby, Clayton, Alksnis, & Hemker, 1986). Third, because many consider it to be socially inappropriate, prejudice and discrimination are often masked or disguised and hence difficult to detect.

Motivational factors may also lead the stigmatized to underestimate the extent to which they personally are victims of discrimination or to be reluctant to blame negative outcomes on discrimination. People are strongly motivated to believe that their outcomes are under their personal control (Pyszczynski et al., 1997; Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Langer, 1975; Rotter, 1966). Accepting personal responsibility for one's outcomes maintains the belief in control over future outcomes, whereas blaming others robs the individual of a sense of control over those outcomes. Blaming outcomes on discrimination further acknowledges that one's outcomes are under the control of bigoted and capricious others. Research examining processes of adaptation among individuals who have experienced traumatic life events (e.g., rape, paralysis, death of a child, or terminal illness) suggests that taking personal responsibility for such events is positively associated with well-being (Janoff-Bulman & Lang-Gunn, 1988), whereas blaming them on others is negatively associated with well-being (Tennen & Affleck, 1990). Accordingly, targets of prejudice may be motivated to avoid blaming their negative outcomes on the prejudice of others because of the potential loss of control such attributions entail.

Individuals are also motivated to perceive the world as a just place where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Lerner & Miller, 1978). Perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination or blaming outcomes on discrimination involves acknowledging that the world is unjust and that oneself or one's group is a victim of injustice. Because the belief in a just world is positively related to psychological well-being (Lerner & Miller, 1978; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994), people may be motivated to avoid appraisals and attributions that threaten that belief. People also show a pervasive tendency to justify existing status hierarchies and outcome distributions, even when those hierarchies and distributions are disadvantageous to themselves or their group (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994; Kleugel & Smith, 1986; Major, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Attributions to discrimination challenge the justice of the system (Major & Schmader, 2001).

Thus, members of disadvantaged groups may be motivated to avoid blaming their negative outcomes on prejudice and discrimination, even when such explanations are plausible accounts for their treatment (Crosby, 1984; Olson & Hafer, 2001). Instead, they may be motivated to blame themselves, thereby legitimizing their own disadvantage.

People may also be motivated to avoid perceiving themselves as victims of discrimination or blaming their outcomes on discrimination for interpersonal reasons (Crosby, 1984; Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998). Psychological well-being is dependent on inclusion and acceptance by others (Brewer, 1997; Leary, 1990; Williams, 1997). People devalue individuals who deny personal responsibility for their outcomes, especially in Western cultures (Jellison & Green, 1981). Hence, because blaming negative outcomes on discrimination can be viewed as denying responsibility for one's outcomes, this attributional strategy may be socially costly. It may lead one to be perceived as hypersensitive, emotional, and complaining (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Consequently, people may be motivated to minimize, deny, or ignore prejudice to avoid additional exclusion and devaluation by others.

## **V. Perceiving and Making Attributions to Discrimination: Empirical Evidence**

### **A. EVIDENCE OF SENSITIVITY TO PREJUDICE AMONG STIGMATIZED TARGETS**

Some empirical evidence suggests that members of chronically stigmatized groups are sensitive to cues of prejudice and discrimination in their environment. Members of chronically stigmatized groups are more likely than members of nonstigmatized groups to report on surveys that they are victims of discrimination. For example, African American and Latino American students are more likely than European American students to say that they personally, and members of their group, experienced prejudice on the basis of their ethnicity (Major *et al.*, in press; Operario & Fiske, 2001). Members of stigmatized groups (women) also are more likely than members of nonstigmatized groups (men) to label negative actions committed by a high-status perpetrator against a low-status victim as discrimination (Rodin, Price, Bryson, & Sanchez, 1990). These patterns suggest that members of stigmatized groups are more sensitive to signs of discrimination than members of nonstigmatized groups.

There is also evidence that members of chronically stigmatized groups blame negative outcomes on prejudice and discrimination when it is plausible to do so. Ken Dion conducted the first studies demonstrating this in the mid-1970s. In one

study (Dion & Earn, 1975), Jewish men received negative feedback from three male opponents. Specifically, in a competitive point allocation task, they received very few tickets from their opponents while they observed the opponents awarding many tickets to each other. Participants in one condition indicated their religion (Jewish) to their opponents and learned that all three opponents were Gentiles (Christian). In the other condition, no mention of religion was made. Just the mere identification of the male opponents as Christian was sufficient to arouse suspicion of religious discrimination among the Jewish participants. They rated their opponents as significantly more prejudiced when religious affiliation was exchanged than when religious affiliation was unknown. In addition, free-response measures indicated that the overwhelming majority of Jews who knew that they were interacting with Christian opponents ( $n = 17$  of 24) attributed their poor outcome to discrimination against Jews, whereas not one of the participants in the condition where religious affiliation was not mentioned did so. A similar attributional pattern was observed among women in a second study using the same point allocation task (Dion, 1975). Women who received few tickets from male opponents were more likely to suggest that prejudice was a factor than were those who received few tickets from female opponents. These two groundbreaking studies suggest that even subtle cues, such as awareness of disparate group memberships, can increase the likelihood that members of stigmatized groups will attribute negative feedback to discrimination.

Crocker, Major, and colleagues (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991) further explored the impact of situational cues to prejudice on attributions to discrimination. In their first experiment, women wrote an essay that they believed another (male) participant would evaluate. Prior to receiving their evaluation, women exchanged an attitude questionnaire with the other participant. In one condition, the male's responses indicated that he had liberal attitudes toward women's roles (i.e., he disagreed with statements such as "Women, who are less serious about their jobs, take jobs away from men with families to support"). In the other condition, his responses indicated that he held traditional attitudes toward women (i.e., he agreed with statements such as, "Women should avoid fields like engineering because they lack mathematical ability"). Women then heard the participant (via an intercom) evaluate their essay favorably or unfavorably. Women who received negative feedback were significantly more likely to blame it on discrimination if they thought the evaluator had traditional attitudes toward women's roles than if he had liberal attitudes. When feedback was positive, in contrast, women did not attribute their feedback to discrimination regardless of the evaluator's attitudes toward women.

In a conceptual replication of this experiment (Crocker et al., 1991, Experiment 2) African American and European American participants participated in a study of "friendship development" with a same-sex European American partner. Participants filled out a self-description form that was supposedly given to

their partner. For half of the participants, blinds on a one-way mirror were briefly raised so the partner could see them. For the other half of the participants, the blinds were down throughout the experiment. Thus, this study manipulated a very subtle cue—visibility—and thus knowledge of group membership. Participants then received either very favorable or very unfavorable interpersonal feedback from their partner. Among African Americans, attributions to discrimination were higher following negative feedback than positive feedback and higher if they thought the other student could see them (and hence knew their race) than if they thought he/she could not see them (and hence did not know their race). Not surprisingly (because their interactions were with a same-race partner), attributions to discrimination among European students were not affected by feedback or visibility.

Two recent studies provide additional support for the idea that targets of prejudice may be motivated to attribute negative outcomes to prejudice. In one study (Inman, *in press*), targets (men and women) received negative feedback under conditions in which discrimination was not mentioned, was ambiguous, or was certain and were asked to indicate the extent to which discrimination played a role in their feedback. Each target was paired with a same-sex or cross-sex observer who witnessed the feedback (and accompanying information) and also made attributions for the feedback. Targets were more likely than observers to attribute the feedback to discrimination, as would be expected if attributions to discrimination serve a self-protective function. This actor–observer difference was larger when the target and observer were of different genders than when they were of the same gender and was larger when discrimination was not mentioned than when discrimination was certain. In another study, Gomez and Trierweiler (2001) found that White women and African Americans reported more frequently being the target of negative events at work (such as being treated with disrespect by others) if they responded on a questionnaire labeled “Discrimination” than a questionnaire labeled “Everyday experiences.” This study suggests that members of chronically stigmatized groups are more likely to report being the target of negative treatment if that treatment is framed in terms of discrimination than if it is not. The above studies provide empirical support for the claim that members of chronically stigmatized groups are sensitive to cues to prejudice and will blame their negative outcomes on prejudice when it is plausible to do so.

## B. EVIDENCE OF MINIMIZATION OF PREJUDICE

Other empirical research, in contrast, suggests that members of low status and stigmatized groups minimize the extent to which they personally are victims of discrimination and often fail to blame their negative outcomes on discrimination even when it is highly plausible to do so. Researchers have operationalized the

construct of minimization in several different ways, leading to some conceptual confusion in this literature. We briefly review the empirical evidence relevant to several different types of minimization in the following sections.

### *1. Minimization of Discrimination Relative to Objective Probabilities*

Perhaps the most straightforward definition of minimization is underestimating the extent to which one is a target of discrimination relative to its true probability of occurrence. In signal detection terms, this type of minimization would be classified as a "miss." As noted previously, however, unlike other types of psychophysical signals, the judgment of discrimination often lacks a clear objective standard. Hence, it can be difficult to evaluate whether someone who does not see him- or herself as a victim of discrimination has made a correct rejection or a miss.

Ruggiero and Taylor (1995, 1997) created an experimental paradigm to address this issue. In their paradigm, participants were told explicitly the probability that members of their group would be discriminated against, and attributions were compared against these "base rates." Participants in their studies (women and ethnic minorities) took a test that they believed would be graded by one of eight judges, all of whom were members of a higher status out-group (e.g., men, in the case of women participants). After the participants had taken the test, the experimenter apologetically informed participants that all eight (100%), six (75%), four (50%), two (25%), or none (0%) of the judges discriminated against members of their group. All participants then received poor feedback on the test (a "D"), and their attributions to discrimination and the quality of answers were assessed. Ruggiero and Taylor (1995, 1997) report the same effect in four studies: participants did not attribute their failure to discrimination unless they were told that the probability was virtually certain (100%). There were no mean differences in attributions to discrimination among participants in the other conditions. For example, women, Asian, and Black participants who were told that there was a 75% probability that members of their group would be discriminated against were *just as unlikely* to blame their failure on discrimination as those told the probability was 25%. Thus, Ruggiero and Taylor's findings contradict Crocker and Major's (1989) hypothesis that members of stigmatized groups will blame negative outcomes on discrimination in circumstances where this attribution is plausible.

Ruggiero and Taylor's (1995, 1997) findings have been widely cited and highly influential. But there are reasons to interpret them with caution. First, studies using the same paradigm conducted outside Ruggiero's laboratory have been unable to replicate the minimization effect Ruggiero and Taylor reported (e.g., Bougie & Taylor, 2001; Inman, in press; Kaiser & Miller, 2001; McCoy & Major, 2000). Kaiser and Miller, 2001, for example, attempted to exactly replicate Ruggiero and Taylor's paradigm, using the 0, 50, and 100% probability of discrimination

conditions.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to findings reported by Ruggiero and Taylor, women informed that there was a 50% probability of discrimination were just as likely to blame their poor grade on discrimination as were women told there was a 100% probability of discrimination. Inman (in press) observed the same pattern in another attempt to replicate Ruggiero and Taylor's findings: participants' attributions to discrimination were just as high when they were told that the probability of discrimination was 50% as when they were told it was 100%. Both groups also attributed their feedback more to discrimination than did participants in a control condition, where discrimination was not mentioned. In addition to these failures to replicate, there is yet another reason for caution in interpreting findings reported by Ruggiero. Ruggiero recently retracted four of her papers from publication (Ruggiero & Major, 2002; Ruggiero & Marx, 2001; Ruggiero, Mitchell, Krieger, Marx, & Lorenzo, in press; Ruggiero, Steele, Hwang, & Marx, 2001), admitting that the data in those articles were invalid and that the responsibility for these invalid data lay solely with her. When the failures to replicate the minimization effect are considered in the context of her admission, it cannot help but raise questions about the reliability of that effect.

It is important to point out, however, that even in the event that the minimization effect reported by Ruggiero and Taylor is not reliable, it does not necessarily mean that people do not minimize the extent to which they are targets of prejudice relative to objective probabilities. It is extremely rare for prejudice cues to be as direct as they were in the Ruggiero and Taylor studies. In everyday life, prejudice tends to be more disguised and ambiguous, leading to more possibility for misinterpretation, minimization, and misses. Vorauer and Kumhyr (2001) demonstrated this in a study in which low-status Aboriginal participants interacted with White-Canadian partners classified as either high in prejudice or low in prejudice on the basis of their scores on a prejudice scale completed earlier. Social interaction with a highly prejudiced White partner was distressing for Aboriginal targets; they experienced more affective discomfort and were more self-critical compared to Aboriginal participants who interacted with a low-prejudice White partner. Importantly, however, Aboriginal participants who interacted with a highly prejudiced partner did not perceive that they were targets of prejudice. Participants did not view high-prejudiced White partners as being more prejudiced than low-prejudiced White partners, nor did they feel they had been stereotyped more by high-prejudice than low-prejudice White partners. This study illustrates that being the target of prejudice can be detrimental to well-being. Further, it suggests that lower status group members are inclined to personalize the implications of negative behaviors

<sup>3</sup>Kaiser and Miller (2001) found it necessary to change the wording of the manipulation from the judges "discriminate against women" to the judges "grade women harder than men" because they found the suspicion rate with Ruggiero and Taylor's exact manipulation to be unacceptably high. Bougie and Taylor (2000) and McCoy and Major (2000) also found the suspicion rate with Ruggiero and Taylor's manipulation to be extremely high.



exhibited by their higher status interaction partners rather than attribute them to prejudice.

Research on sexual harassment further demonstrates that targets of prejudice often minimize the extent to which they are discriminated against relative to objective probabilities. For example, Magley, Hulin, Fitzgerald, and DeNardo (1999) asked women how frequently within the past 24 months they had experienced a variety of unwanted sex-related behaviors on the job that objectively qualified as sexual harassment. The words "sexual harassment," however, did not appear until the last question, at which point respondents were asked directly if they had been sexually harassed. Across three separate samples, a minority of women (41% of utility employees, 12% of academics, 17% of staff at a university, and 30% of agribusiness employees) who reported that they had experienced behaviors that qualify as harassing recognized that they had been "sexually harassed." This study provides additional support for the idea that people may minimize the extent to which they have been a target of prejudice or discrimination relative to its objective probability of occurrence.

## *2. Minimization of Discrimination Relative to Internal Causes*

Minimization can also be conceptualized as a tendency to attribute negative outcomes more to internal causes than to discrimination (i.e., to engage in more self-blame than other-blame). Ruggiero and Taylor (1995) argued that if discrimination were minimized relative to internal factors as a cause of attributionally ambiguous negative feedback, it would contradict Crocker and Major's (1989) attributional ambiguity hypothesis. Crocker and Major, however, did not claim that members of stigmatized groups facing attributional ambiguity would cease to blame their outcomes on internal factors. Rather, they asserted that attributions to discrimination would allow individuals the possibility of discounting the influence of internal factors in producing poor outcomes. Members of stigmatized groups might still blame themselves, but perhaps not as much as if discrimination were not a possible attribution. A general tendency to attribute failure more to internal factors than discrimination can be viewed as an example of the "fundamental attribution error"—a tendency to insufficiently discount dispositional factors relative to situational factors (Ross, 1977).

In each of their four studies described above, Ruggiero and Taylor (1995, 1997) reported that participants blamed failure more on themselves than on discrimination unless the probability of discrimination was certain (100%). Even participants told there was a 50 or 75% probability that their judge discriminated against their group blamed a poor grade more on themselves than on discrimination. This finding too, however, has proved difficult to replicate. Bougie and Taylor (2001) asked women to take the same test as used by Ruggiero and Taylor and informed them that there was a 50% probability that a male grader discriminated against members

of their gender. Women who received negative feedback were *more* likely to blame it on discrimination than on the quality of their answers, regardless of whether they had discussed their feedback with other women. In another attempt at replication, McCoy and Major (2000) found that women who received a poor grade attributed it more to discrimination ( $M = 6.46$ , on a 10-point scale) than to internal factors (ability and quality of answers;  $M = 4.38$ ,  $p = .06$ ) when they were told that 50% of male judges were discriminatory. Crocker et al. (1991) also found that African American students who received poor interpersonal feedback from a White student who knew their race were more likely to attribute it to discrimination than to their personality.

In sum, available data provide little support for Ruggiero and Taylor's (1995, 1997) claim that attributions to discrimination exceed attributions to internal factors only when discrimination is virtually certain. We suspect, however, that the relative weighting of internal factors versus discrimination as a cause of outcomes is highly dependent on the type of evaluative task as well as other situational factors. Stangor, Swim, Van Allen, and Sechrist (2002), for example, found that White women and African Americans who made attributions for negative feedback in private or in the presence of an in-group member saw discrimination as a significantly better explanation for their feedback than ability and effort. This tendency was reversed, however, when they made attributions for feedback in the presence of a member of a higher status outgroup (men, Whites).

### *3. Minimization of Personal Relative to Group Discrimination*

Minimization also has been used to refer to the tendency to perceive less discrimination against oneself personally than against one's in-group (e.g., Crosby; 1982; Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990). When members of disadvantaged groups are asked about the extent of discrimination they or their group experience, they reliably report a higher amount of discrimination directed against members of their group than against themselves. Crosby (1982, 1984) first discovered this phenomenon in her investigation of working women in Massachusetts. She found that even though the women in her sample recognized that women as a group were discriminated against at work, they personally reported experiencing almost no discrimination on the basis of their gender. This pattern, subsequently dubbed the "personal/group discrimination discrepancy" by Taylor and his colleagues (Taylor et al., 1990) has since been found among men (Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1997) and Whites (Operario & Fiske, 2001), as well as various racial and economic groups (see Taylor et al., 1994 for a review).

The most widely accepted explanation for this discrepancy has been motivational—that individuals deny, or at least minimize, *personal* experiences with discrimination, even though they seem quite willing to acknowledge group experiences with discrimination (Crosby, 1984; see Olson & Hafer, 2001, for a

review of this literature). Recent evidence, however, indicates that the discrepancy is due in part to the failure of questions about personal and group levels of discrimination to specify a comparison referent. Assessments of personal discrimination are apt to be gauged against in-group targets, whereas assessments of group discrimination are apt to be gauged against salient out-groups (Major, 1994). A discrepancy would appear to the extent that between-group comparisons produce greater disparity than within-group comparisons. Several recent studies found that when comparison referents are specified, the personal-group discrepancy is greatly diminished, if not eliminated (Olson & Hafer, 2001; Postmes, Branscombe, Spears, & Young, 1999).

We concur with others (Postmes et al., 1999) that there is limited utility in examining the “minimization” of personal relative to group discrimination. Judgments of personal discrimination and group discrimination are not only based on different comparative referents, but also are apt to invoke different motives (Postmes et al., 1999). Our concern in the current chapter is with the extent to which people perceive themselves personally as victims of discrimination, the extent to which they attribute their outcomes to discrimination when it is plausible to do so, and the consequences of these perceptions and attributions for affect and personal self-esteem.

#### *4. Minimization of Public Relative to Private Attributions to Discrimination*

Yet another conceptualization of minimization is a tendency to minimize attributions to discrimination in public relative to private situations. In two studies, Stangor et al. (2002) found that attributions to discrimination among members of low-status groups varied significantly depending on the social context. As discussed above, African Americans and women who received negative feedback attributed it significantly less to discrimination when they publicly reported their attribution in the presence of a member of a high-status group than when they privately reported their attribution or reported it in the presence of an in-group member. These two latter conditions did not differ from one another. Attributions to discrimination by high-status group members, in contrast, were unaffected by social context.

These results are important for several reasons. First, they suggest that minimization of prejudice by the chronically stigmatized may be due less to a desire to protect perceptions of control than to avoid negative social consequences. Stangor et al. (2002) argue that an attribution to discrimination is equally threatening to perceptions of control “regardless of who knows.” Second, results suggest that minimization is due to a desire to avoid social consequences *from higher status group members*. Members of low-status groups may fear retaliation (Swim & Hyers, 1999) or being labeled a “complainer” (Kaiser & Miller, 2001) by members of high-status groups but may not have such fears with respect to members

of their own group. Third, these findings suggest that members of high-status groups are less troubled by the social consequences of claiming prejudice than are members of low-status groups. Finally, it appears that the presence of an in-group member does not facilitate attributions to discrimination among the stigmatized relative to reporting discrimination privately (in contrast to findings reported by Ruggiero, Taylor, & Lydon, 1997).

## **VI. A Moderator Approach: Who Makes Attributions to Discrimination and under What Conditions?**

As the above review indicates, there is evidence in support of both vigilance and minimization perspectives. Rather than arguing that only one of these is correct, we believe that the more appropriate issues to address are *who* is most likely to make attributions to discrimination *and under what conditions* do attributions to discrimination occur? From our perspective, personal and situational factors that increase *both* the likelihood that outcomes are perceived to be linked to group membership and believed to be unjust should increase the likelihood that people will perceive themselves as targets of prejudice and attribute specific negative outcomes to discrimination. Conversely, factors that inhibit seeing the linkage between outcomes and group membership or inhibit perceptions of injustice should decrease the likelihood that people will perceive themselves as victims of discrimination and/or attribute specific negative events to discrimination. In addition, because stigmatized versus nonstigmatized group status affects the frequency and severity of negative life events to which people are exposed (Crocker et al., 1998; Schmitt & Branscombe, in press-a), group status will also affect the extent to which people perceive themselves or their group as victims of discrimination. These issues are addressed in the following section.

### **A. LINKING OUTCOMES TO GROUP MEMBERSHIP**

Discrimination is a group-based phenomenon. Accordingly, the recognition that discrimination has factored into one's outcomes is fostered when targets expand their lens of causality beyond the individual to the group. Cues that increase the salience of group membership can arise in the social situation, such as when group membership is made salient by others (e.g., "Mary, can you give us the women's view on this?") or by being a token or solo. Individuals also differ in chronic beliefs systems related to group membership, such as group identification, group consciousness, and stigma sensitivity. In the following sections we consider research that has examined the link between these factors and perceptions of and attributions to discrimination.

### *1. Increasing the Salience of Group Identity in the Situation*

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and self-categorization theory (Turner, 1991; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) postulate that one's behavior at any given moment depends on whether one is thinking of oneself in personal or group terms. Both theories also hypothesize that increasing the salience of one's group membership will change the focus of interpretations of other's behavior from the individual to the group level. When group identity is salient and potentially unjust negative outcomes are received, discrimination should be a more accessible attribution. Several of the paradigms used to examine attributions to discrimination used manipulations designed to increase the salience of group membership. Examples include mentioning the religion of the participant and opponents (Dion, 1975), mentioning the gender of participant and opponents (Dion & Earn, 1975), or raising the blinds on a one-way mirror so that group membership is visible to an evaluator who is a member of a different group (Crocker et al., 1991, Experiment 2).

Quinton and Major (2001) manipulated identity salience by asking female participants to indicate how much each of six adjectives (e.g., aggressive, compassionate, and self-sufficient) described them individually (personal identity salience) or described women in general (group identity salience) (see Smith, Spears, & Oyen, 1994, for another study using this manipulation). Women subsequently took a test of problem-solving ability that they believed would be graded by a male graduate student. While waiting for feedback, half of the participants heard an ambiguous prejudice cue. Specifically, they overheard another female participant (a confederate) state, "You know, I have friends who were in this study, and they told me that the guy doing the evaluating totally grades guys and girls differently." The other half of the participants heard the confederate make a neutral comment. All participants then received negative test feedback and made attributions for that feedback. Attributions to sex discrimination tended to be higher among women whose group identity was salient ( $M = 2.30$  on a scale from 0 to 6) than among women whose personal identity was salient ( $M = 1.38$ ), although the main effect for identity salience did not reach statistical significance. Furthermore, as shown in Table II, attributions to sex discrimination were highest among women who heard an ambiguous prejudice cue while their group identity was salient and lowest among women who heard a neutral cue while their personal identity was salient. This pattern suggests that group identity salience may result in greater vigilance for prejudice especially when the specter of unfairness has been raised in the social context.

### *2. Individual Differences in Group Identification*

Unlike group identity salience, which is a situation-dependent phenomenon, group identification is a person-dependent phenomenon. Although many definitions

TABLE II  
 ATTRIBUTIONS TO SEX DISCRIMINATION AS A FUNCTION OF  
 SITUATIONAL CUES TO PREJUDICE AND IDENTITY SALIENCE  
 (QUINTON & MAJOR, 2001)

Cues to prejudice	Identity salience	
	Personal	Group
None	0.93	1.57
Ambiguous	2.11	2.94

*Note.* Ratings were made on a scale from 0 to 6.

of group identification abound, group identification generally refers to an individual's chronic awareness of her or his membership in a social group and her or his feelings of attachment to the group (Gurin & Townsend, 1986). Group identification has also been conceptualized, at least in part, as the centrality or importance of group membership to self-definition (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous; Tropp & Wright, 2001). Individuals differ considerably in their level group identification. Crocker and Major (1989) hypothesized that the more central a group is in an individual's self-concept, the greater the likelihood that he or she will interpret attributionally ambiguous situations in terms of group-based discrimination. In a similar vein, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) predicts that increased identification with the group changes the interpretation of behavior from the individual to the group level. Hence, in attributionally ambiguous circumstances, highly identified individuals may be more likely than those low in identification to interpret outcomes in terms of group membership. Other scholars argue that group identification strengthens the likelihood that intergroup rather than interpersonal comparisons will be made, which in turn increases the likelihood that group inequalities will be recognized (Gurin & Townsend, 1986; Major, 1994).

Consistent with these predictions, a number of studies report a positive correlation between group identification and perceptions of prejudice among members of devalued groups (e.g., Branscombe *et al.*, 1999; Crosby, Pufall, Snyder, O'Connell, & Whalen, 1989; Dion, 1975; Gurin & Townsend, 1986; Major *et al.*, 2001; Operario & Fiske, 2001, Study 1; Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobryniewicz, & Owen, 2002). For example, group identification is positively correlated with attributions to discrimination for hypothetical negative events among women (Schmitt *et al.*, 2002) and African Americans (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999); perceptions of personal and group discrimination among lesbian career women (Crosby *et al.*, 1989); feelings of collective discontent with women's social power and perceptions that women's status is illegitimate among a national sample of American women (Gurin & Townsend, 1986); and perceptions of personal discrimination ( $r = .43$ ), group discrimination ( $r = .55$ ), and attributions to

discrimination across a variety of hypothetical negative situations ( $r = .51$ ,  $ps < .01$ ) among Latino American students (Major, Eccleston, Quinton, & McCoy, 2001).

The correlational nature of all of the above studies, however, makes it impossible to discern the causal direction of this relationship. Branscombe and colleagues (Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt & Branscombe, in press-a) argue that increased group identification is an outcome, rather than an antecedent, of perceptions of prejudice (see also Dion & Earn, 1975; Gurin & Townsend, 1986). We address this issue in more detail under Psychological Consequences of Attributing Outcomes to Discrimination. Although we agree that group identification may increase in response to perceived discrimination against one's group, we also believe that the reverse direction occurs—group identification influences the way in which ambiguous circumstances are construed.

A recent study illustrates that individual differences in group identification interact with situational cues to affect attributions to discrimination (Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2001). According to Snyder and Ickes (1985), when situational cues are "strong," they are likely to overwhelm the influence of individual differences on behavior. In contrast, when situational cues are "weak," individual differences are more likely to influence cognition, affect, and behavior. On the basis of this reasoning, Major et al. (2001) predicted that women high in gender identification would be more likely than those low in gender identification to make attributions to gender-based discrimination in situations in which cues to prejudice were ambiguous (a "weak" situation), but would not be more likely to do so in situations where prejudice cues were either absent or overt ("strong" situations).

Major and colleagues (2001) also predicted that regardless of their level of group identification, women would be *unlikely* to attribute negative feedback to prejudice in the absence of situational cues justifying such an attribution. This prediction was based on the idea that people are motivated to perceive themselves as fairly treated (Jost & Major, 2001; Lerner, 1980; Tyler, 1990), to maintain a sense of personal control over their outcomes (Langer, 1975), and to avoid social costs associated with claiming that one is a victim of discrimination (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Major et al. also predicted that, regardless of their level of group identification, women would be highly *likely* to attribute negative feedback to prejudice when situational cues to prejudice were overt. This prediction was based on the idea that people are motivated to feel good about themselves and often make self-serving attributions. Thus, when the situation provides strong justification for making an external attribution to prejudice, people will take advantage of it, regardless of their level of group identification.

To test these predictions, women (pretested for gender identification) participated in an experiment in four-person groups that included two female participants, one female confederate, and one male confederate. They were told that they would be taking a creativity test and that a male graduate student would grade the tests

and select one of the participants to be the "team leader" on a second task. The prejudice cue manipulation was introduced while participants were waiting for their tests to be scored. While the experimenter was out of the room, participants heard another female participant (the confederate) make one of three statements. In the no prejudice cue condition, she stated, "I hope the experiment doesn't last long because I have an appointment across campus." In the ambiguous cue condition, she stated, "You know, I have friends who were in this study, and they told me that the guy doing the evaluating totally grades guys and girls differently." In the blatant cue condition, she stated: "You know, I have friends who were in this study and they told me that the guy doing the evaluating is totally prejudiced. He never picks a girl to be team leader—he always picks a guy." Women in all conditions then received a low score on the creativity test and were told that they were not selected to be team leader. In the blatant prejudice cue condition, they also heard the experimenter tell the male confederate that he was selected as the team leader. In the other two conditions, the identity (and gender) of the team leader was not revealed.

The extent to which women attributed negative feedback to sex discrimination depended on both characteristics of the situation and of the individual. Attributions to discrimination increased as situational cues made prejudice a more plausible explanation for negative feedback. Regardless of level of gender identification, women were unlikely to blame negative feedback on discrimination in the absence of prejudice cues and were significantly (more) likely to do so in the presence of blatant prejudice cues. There were no effects of gender identification in these two conditions, consistent with Snyder and Ickes' (1985) contention that "strong" situations overwhelm individual differences. In the attributionally ambiguous condition, however, women who were highly gender identified were significantly more likely to blame a negative evaluation on sex discrimination than were women who were not highly gender identified. Further, highly identified women were just as likely to attribute negative feedback to sex discrimination in the ambiguous cue condition as they were in the blatant cue condition. In contrast, for low identified women, attributions to sex discrimination increased in a stepwise fashion as situational cues became clearer. These findings are supportive of claims that higher group identification results in greater vigilance for discrimination (e.g., Gurin, 1985; Major, 1994). This study clarifies, however, that group identification does not result in greater vigilance in all situations, but only in attributionally ambiguous situations.

Women did not deny discrimination as a potential cause of their outcomes when cues to prejudice were ambiguous. Collapsing across gender identity, mean levels of attributions to discrimination in the ambiguous condition were centered at the midpoint of the scale and were significantly higher than attributions to ability. Attributions to ability were unaffected by situational cues. This null finding may be unique to the type of negative event students experienced in these studies (a poor



test grade). It may be difficult for students to discount the possibility that effort or ability could have affected their grade on a test even in the face of strong situational cues suggesting otherwise. This finding suggests that when people recognize that discrimination may have been a causal factor in their outcomes, they can also believe that their ability or effort was a causal factor, which is consistent with McClure's (1998) observation that insufficient discounting of internal causes is common.

Research by Operario and Fiske (2001, Study 2) also suggests that level of group identification affects attributions to discrimination, particularly when situational cues to prejudice are ambiguous. Operario and Fiske recruited ethnic minority participants (Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latino Americans) who were high or low in ethnic identification to participate in a study of "interpersonal interactions." Half of the participants learned that their partner (a White female confederate) had antidiversity attitudes (e.g., she was "uncomfortable around different types of people"), whereas the other half learned that their partner had seemingly prodiversity attitudes (e.g., she "enjoyed being around so many different types of people"). All participants then interacted briefly with a partner who behaved nonverbally in a very unfriendly way. For example, she moved her chair to sit farther away from the participant, turned away from the participant, did not establish eye contact or engage in conversation, and finally left the room after 30 seconds and never returned. Thus, for half of the participants the confederate's behavior meshed with her antidiversity attitudes; for the other half, her behavior was inconsistent with her tolerant attitudes and thus was attributionally ambiguous. Participants subsequently rated the extent to which they thought the partner was prejudiced and that her behavior was due to their race. Prejudice ratings and attributions to race were higher in the blatant cue condition than in the ambiguous cue condition. In addition, participants high in ethnic identification were more likely than those low in ethnic identification to rate the partner as prejudiced and blame her behavior on their race. This difference as a function of identification was strongest when cues to prejudice were ambiguous (i.e., when attitudes and behavior did not mesh). Thus, both this study and the study by Major et al. (2001) illustrate that group identification influences attributions to discrimination, particularly when the prejudice "signal" is ambiguous.

### *3. Group Consciousness*

Another individual difference factor likely to moderate perceptions of discrimination is group consciousness. Group consciousness is a "blended" concept that incorporates aspects of group identification as well as elements of perceived injustice directed against the group, collective discontent, and the belief in the efficacy of collective action for positive change (Gurin, 1985; Gurin & Townsend, 1986). Group consciousness is sometimes referred to as "politicized group identification"

(Gurin, Miller, & Gurin, 1980). For groups whose sense of group identification is strongly tied to a political consciousness (e.g., African Americans), the cognitions and emotions that encompass group identification are likely to overlap considerably with those that make up group consciousness. For other groups (e.g., women), however, a sense of group identification may be largely independent of a sense of group consciousness. For example, only 12% of the women in a large university sample who highly identified as "women" were also highly identified as "feminist"; in contrast, all who highly identified as "feminist" were also highly identified as "women" (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994).

Because group consciousness combines the elements of group identification with elements of injustice and collective efficacy, one would expect that the higher individuals are in group consciousness, the more likely they would be to perceive themselves as targets of both personal and group discrimination and to attribute attributionally ambiguous negative outcomes to discrimination. This prediction stems from the increased cognitive accessibility of potential discrimination that is likely to be present more among high- than low-group-conscious individuals. As well, those high in group consciousness may focus more on the benefits to the group of blaming outcomes on discrimination, such as the potential for social change, than on the individual social costs. We are aware of only two studies that have assessed the link between group consciousness and perceptions of discrimination. In a sample of 696 university women, Major *et al.* (2001) found significant positive correlations between feminist self-labeling (a measure of group consciousness among women) and perceptions of personal discrimination ( $r = .29$ ) and discrimination against women ( $r = .25$ ,  $ps < .001$ ). Swim, Hyers, Cohen, and Ferguson (2001) observed a positive correlation between feminist beliefs (e.g., "I believe this society is still completely patriarchal—it is deliberately designed to preserve men's privileged access to power and keep women subservient and oppressed") and the number of sexist events women reported experiencing over a 7-day period ( $r = .39$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Although studies investigating group consciousness and perceptions of discrimination are few, several studies report a link between group consciousness and endorsement of collective action on behalf of one's group. These studies are relevant to the current discussion because intention to engage in collective action is one consequent of perceiving discrimination against the group (Simon *et al.*, 1998). Feminist beliefs, for example, were positively related to women's rights activism both in samples of college-educated women at midlife ( $\beta = .41$ ) and female activists of varying age ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $ps < .05$ ) (Duncan, 1999). Among the older people, group consciousness (identification with the "Gray Panthers" activist group) and identification with "older people" in general positively related to willingness to participate in collective action on behalf of older people (Simon *et al.*, 1998). When both group identification and group consciousness were considered simultaneously as predictors of intended collective action, however, group consciousness

emerged as a significant predictor ( $\beta = .24, p < .05$ ), whereas identification with the group "older people" did not ( $\beta = .02, ns$ ). Likewise, among gay men, both identification with "gay people" and identification with the "gay movement" (a measure of group consciousness) were significant predictors of willingness to participate in collective action on behalf of gays. Only identification with the gay movement, however, emerged as an independent predictor of willingness to participate in collective action (Simon et al., 1998). All in all, the finding that group consciousness is a better predictor of intention to engage in collective action than group identification is not surprising, given that group consciousness incorporates elements of perceived injustice against the group, whereas group identification does not.

#### *4. Sensitivity to Stigmatization*

Recently, scholars have focused more specifically on individual differences in sensitivity to stigmatization or discrimination—the extent to which individuals expect that others will stereotype them and/or discriminate against them on the basis of their stigma (or group membership). Stigma sensitivity differs from group identification because it is not concerned with attachment to the group. Stigma sensitivity also differs from group consciousness because it is not concerned with respondents' political stance regarding the position of their group. An example of a measure of stigma sensitivity is the "stigma consciousness" scale developed by Pinel (1999). A sample item of the stigma consciousness scale for women is "When interacting with men I feel like they interpret all my behaviors in terms of the fact that I am a woman." Across a variety of stigmatized groups, including African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and women, stigma consciousness is strongly and positively correlated with perceived personal discrimination and perceived group discrimination ( $r$ s range from .28 to .77,  $p$ s  $< .05$ ). Stigma consciousness is also related to increased distrust of others in general ( $r$ s range from  $-.17$  to  $-.44$ ,  $p$ s  $< .05$ ; Pinel, 1999).

A related construct is "sensitivity to sexism" (Stangor, Sechrist, & Swim, 2001). Stangor et al. (2001) developed a sensitivity to sexism scale that assesses the extent to which a woman: (a) believes that she and other women frequently encounter discrimination (e.g., "How often do people discriminate against you/other women on the basis of your gender?") and (b) indicates concern about its incidence (e.g., "How much does the gender discrimination you/other women experience bother you?"). Stangor et al. demonstrated that individual differences on this measure shape perceptions of gender-related events. They asked women to view 24 newspaper headlines as part of a study on "reactions to the media." Participants subsequently were asked to estimate how many of the headlines dealt with sexism (in actuality, 6 of 24 dealt with sexism). Women who were high in sensitivity to sexism (assessed prior to the experiment) estimated that they had seen a significantly

greater number of headlines related to sexism ( $M = 8.36$ ) than did women who were low ( $M = 5.72$ ) or medium in sensitivity ( $M = 5.86$ ),  $ps < .05$ . Further, women who were high in sensitivity to sexism significantly overestimated the true incidence of sexist-related material that they were shown, whereas women who were low or medium in sensitivity correctly judged (did not over- or underestimate) the same information.

Drawing from theory and research on rejection sensitivity in close relationships (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996), Mendoza-Denton, Purdie, Downey, and Davis (2001) recently developed an individual difference measure of "race-based rejection sensitivity." They define race-based rejection sensitivity as a personal dynamic whereby individuals anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to rejection that has a possibility of being due to race. Participants read several imaginary scenarios (e.g., "Imagine that you have just finished shopping, and you are leaving the store carrying several bags. It's closing time, and several people are filing out of the store at once. Suddenly, the alarm begins to sound, and a security guard comes over to investigate."), are asked how much concern they have that a negative outcome in each scenario would be due to their race (e.g., "How concerned or anxious would you be that the guard might stop you because of your race/ethnicity?"), and indicate the likelihood that a negative outcome would be due to their race (e.g., "I would expect that the guard might stop me because of my race/ethnicity"). In a diary study following African American students for their first 3 weeks at a White university, Mendoza-Denton *et al.* found that race-based rejection sensitivity predicted the tendency to feel less belonging at the university and greater negativity toward both peers and professors ( $ps < .05$ ). In addition, race-based rejection sensitivity was positively related to the frequency of reporting a negative race-related experience (e.g., feeling excluded, insulted, or receiving poor service because of one's race). Taken together, research on the above three stigma sensitivity measures clearly indicates that people differ in their propensity to perceive discrimination and, we would argue, in their propensity to blame specific negative outcomes on discrimination, especially in ambiguous situations.

### 5. Summary

Targets of prejudice are more likely to perceive and make attributions to discrimination the stronger the link between negative outcomes and group membership. Situational cues may make group membership more or less accessible. Individuals also differ in their chronic accessibility of group membership. The likelihood of perceiving discrimination is enhanced the higher members of stigmatized groups are in group identification, group consciousness, and stigma sensitivity. Individual differences interact with situational ambiguity to influence perceptions of and attributions to discrimination.

## B. PERCEIVING OUTCOMES AS UNJUST

Recall that an attribution to discrimination is a judgment with two components: (1) treatment is linked to social identity/group membership and (2) treatment is unfair. Should either component of this judgment be absent, the outcome will not be blamed on discrimination. Thus, it is possible for individuals to recognize that their social identity was responsible for their negative treatment but not see this as unfair (e.g., "I did not get the job because members of my group are not as qualified, smart, hardworking, etc., as members of other groups"). This is a perception of justifiable differential treatment.

When making judgments of whether one has been treated fairly or unfairly, individuals assess whether their treatment conforms to salient and applicable norms of *distributive fairness* (e.g., equity, equality, and need) and *procedural fairness* (e.g., voice, lack of bias, and respect). According to the equity rule of justice, outcomes are seen as distributively unjust when one's own ratio of inputs to outcomes is not equal to the input/outcome ratio of comparable others (Adams, 1965). Thus, individuals may judge a negative outcome as fair if they believe their inputs were somehow inadequate (e.g., if they believe that they did not work hard enough or did not perform well at a task), but unfair if they believe that their inputs were satisfactory or superior (e.g., if they believe they worked hard or performed well). Procedural justice is called into question when the procedures utilized in allocating outcomes are seen as biased, prejudiced, applied inconsistently, or based on a limited amount of information (Leventhal, 1976; Lind & Tyler, 1988). People may believe that negative outcomes are fair, for example, if they are given an opportunity to voice their concerns, but unfair if they were treated with disrespect (e.g., Tyler & Lind, 1992). Situational, personal, and structural factors can increase perception of injustice associated with group membership and hence moderate the likelihood that an individual will attribute negative outcomes to discrimination.

### *1. Situational Cues to Injustice*

Situational factors that increase the perception that treatment associated with group membership is unfair should increase the extent to which individuals will attribute their outcomes to discrimination. Many of the experimental investigations of attributions to discrimination involve situational manipulations of cues to injustice. According to a signal detection framework (Feldman-Barrett & Swim, 1998), as the "intensity" or clarity of the injustice signal increases in the situation, sensitivity to detecting discrimination should likewise increase. Most studies provide support for this idea. For example, Crocker et al. (1991, Study 1) and Operario and Fiske (2001, Study 2) manipulated whether an evaluator or interaction partner held attitudes that were biased against one's group. Attributions to discrimination were more likely when the evaluator held biased rather than nonbiased attitudes.

Major *et al.* (2001) manipulated whether participants overheard rumors that the evaluator treated men and women differently or was prejudiced and found that attributions to discrimination increased as the situational cues became clearer. In contrast to findings of Ruggiero and Taylor (1995, 1997), these studies indicate that contextual cues are an important determinant of attributions to discrimination.

Situational cues that suggest that group boundaries are permeable are also likely to affect attributions to discrimination. Situational cues that introduce even a hint of permeability decrease the likelihood that people will endorse using collective action to improve their situation (Wright, 2001). Wright, Taylor, and Moghaddam (1990), for example, demonstrated that even when access to a higher status group is virtually impermeable (only 2% of low-status group members are allowed access), disadvantaged group members prefer individual mobility strategies over attempts at collective social change. Permeability of group boundaries serves as a legitimizing cue, hindering the likelihood that discrimination will be perceived (see Major & Schmader, 2001).

## *2. Individual Differences in Justice-Related Beliefs*

Individuals also differ in the extent to which they endorse belief systems that bias them to see the world as just or unjust and their outcomes as deserved or undeserved (e.g., Katz & Hass, 1988; Rubin & Peplau, 1975). Like contextual (il-)legitimacy cues, these individual differences are important determinants of perceptions of and attributions to discrimination. Scholars have long argued that one way members of high-status groups maintain the social order is by encouraging members of lower status groups to endorse "legitimizing ideologies" that foster "false consciousness" (e.g., Jost, 1995; Jost & Major, 2001; Lane, 1962; Marx & Engels, 1846/1970; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Legitimizing ideologies are consensually shared attitudes, beliefs, and values that justify hierarchical and unequal relationships among groups in society (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993). Examples include the belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980), personal causation (Nisbett & Ross, 1980), personal control (Langer, 1975), a meritocratic society (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), individual mobility (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and the Protestant work ethic (Mirels & Garrett, 1971). By centering causality within the individual or group, legitimizing ideologies encourage the perception that an individual's or group's status is deserved. They lead the disadvantaged to blame themselves, rather than others, for their situation, contribute to the failure of the disadvantaged to see their position as unfair, and preserve the status quo (Jost & Major, 2001).

A particularly important legitimizing ideology is the belief in personal control. The belief that people have control over their outcomes implies that they are responsible for them (Weiner, 1995). Some stigmatizing attributes, such as obesity and poverty, are seen as more controllable and changeable than other stigmatizing attributes, such as gender and ethnicity. People who possess controllable stigmas

are judged as more responsible and blameworthy and are more likely to be targets of anger than those who have less controllable stigmas (Weiner, 1995; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988). Discrimination against those who suffer from controllable stigmas (e.g., weight) is often viewed as justified (Rodin et al., 1989). This is true even among those who bear the stigma (Crandall, 1994). Crocker et al. (1993) found that compared to standard-weight women, overweight women were significantly more likely to attribute interpersonal rejection by a male partner to their weight, but were *not* more likely to attribute their rejection to their partner's concern with appearance or his personality. Crocker and Major (1994) argued that because weight is viewed as controllable, overweight women regarded their rejection on the basis of weight as justified differential treatment rather than discrimination. Individuals may be held responsible for their plight even when the stigma itself is uncontrollable (e.g., AIDS victims) if they were in control of the onset of their stigmatized status (e.g., intravenous drug use) (Weiner et al., 1988). Furthermore, even if the onset of the stigma itself is not perceived as controllable, beliefs about control encourage judgments of responsibility for overcoming problems created by the stigma (Brickman et al., 1982).

The belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980) also can lead victims to blame themselves, rather than others, for their victimization (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Olson & Hafer, 2001). Working women who endorse the belief in a just world, for example, report less discontent with the employment situation of working women than do those who endorse this belief less strongly (Hafer & Olson, 1993). Major et al. (2001) found that the more undergraduate women ( $N = 258$ ) endorse the belief in a just world, the less they perceive that they personally experience discrimination because of their gender ( $r = -.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the less they perceive that women are discriminated against ( $r = -.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the less likely they are to interpret hypothetical negative events (e.g. "Suppose you take your car for an oil change, the mechanic tells you that many costly repairs are needed and pressures you to get them done") as being due to sexism ( $r = -.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus, the desire to see the world as fair may lead members of low-status groups to accept the status quo and fail to recognize or report injustice.

The belief that status systems are permeable and allow for individual mobility (improvement of individual status) also influences perceptions of and attributions to discrimination. Tajfel (1982) described the belief that status hierarchies are permeable as a primary determinant of the behavior of disadvantaged groups. Individuals differ in their endorsement of this belief. Major et al. (in press, Study 1) found that the more ethnic minority students (Latino Americans and African Americans) endorsed the ideology of individual mobility, the less likely they were to report that they personally had been a target of discrimination because of their ethnicity ( $\beta = -.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Individual differences in endorsement of the ideology of individual mobility also influence attributions for specific negative events that occur under attributionally ambiguous circumstances. Major et al. (in press, Study 2)

led Latino American students (all of whom had earlier completed measures of individual mobility) to believe that they would be working as a team on a problem-solving task with two other students. On this team there would be two comanagers and one clerk. The desirable roles were on the management team, where participants had the opportunity to win \$100. Participants were told that one of other participants had already been randomly assigned to one of the comanager roles. This person would decide, based on a brief application, whether the participant or the "other student" would be the comanager or the clerk. Participants saw digital photographs of themselves and the other two (fictitious) participants. For half, the comanager was of the same ethnicity as the participant, whereas for the other half the comanager was of a different ethnicity (White). The "other student" was always of a different ethnicity. All were of the same gender.

The manager rejected the participants for the comanager position in favor of the other student. Participants were then asked, among other things, the extent to which they believed their role assignment was discriminatory and due to their race/ethnicity. As predicted, the more strongly Latino participants endorsed the legitimizing ideology of individual mobility, the less likely they were to attribute rejection by a White student (in favor of another White student) to discrimination ( $\beta = -.45, p < .10$ ). In contrast, the ideology of individual mobility did not moderate attributions to discrimination ( $\beta = .07, ns$ ) when Latino students were rejected by another Latino student. This same pattern was observed among women in a third study (Major *et al.*, in press, Study 3). The more women endorsed the ideology of individual mobility, the less likely they were to attribute rejection by a male manager, in favor of another male, to discrimination ( $\beta = -.38, p < .05$ ). McCoy and Major (2000) also replicated this pattern among women assigned to the "50% probability of discrimination" condition from the Ruggiero and Taylor (1995) paradigm (described earlier). The more women endorsed the legitimizing ideologies of individual mobility and Protestant work ethic, the less likely they were to attribute their poor grade to discrimination ( $\beta = -.34$ ). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that individual differences in legitimizing ideologies have an important influence on how potentially discriminatory situations are construed and explained.

### 3. Summary

Both contextual cues that signal injustice and chronic beliefs that influence perceptions of injustice influence targets' perceptions of and attributions to discrimination. Factors that justify existing status hierarchies, such as endorsement of system legitimizing ideologies and situational cues that promote the perception of individual mobility, encourage members of stigmatized groups to minimize, or miss, the extent to which they are victims of discrimination. In contrast, factors that delegitimize the system, such as rejecting system-legitimizing ideologies or contextual cues that highlight injustice, encourage members of stigmatized groups



to recognize discrimination and to attribute negative outcomes to discrimination in attributionally ambiguous situations.

### C. THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE: GROUP STATUS

Perceptions of and attributions to discrimination do not occur in a social vacuum. They occur within a larger social structure in which groups are differentially valued and rewarded. The status of one's group in society influences the likelihood of objectively experiencing prejudice and discrimination. Members of stigmatized groups are more often the targets of prejudice, experience more severe forms of prejudice, and encounter prejudice across a wider range of situations than do members of higher status groups (Crocker et al., 1998; Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1998). Members of stigmatized and lower status groups also are consistently more likely than members of nonstigmatized groups to report that they, as well as members of their group, are victims of discrimination (Major et al., in press; Operario & Fiske, 2001). These group differences in subjective perceptions of discrimination mirror the objective realities of the lives of the stigmatized and the nonstigmatized.

Schmitt and Branscombe (in press-a) argue that the individual costs of recognizing oneself as a victim of prejudice are greater for members of chronically stigmatized groups than for members of high-status groups. This reasoning implies that members of high-status groups will be more willing to claim that they or members of their group are targets of discrimination than will members of stigmatized groups. As noted earlier, survey studies provide no support for this hypothesis. A more intriguing question is whether members of higher status groups are more likely than members of chronically lower status groups to attribute the *same* event to discrimination. This does not appear to be the case.<sup>4</sup> McCoy and Major (2000) compared attributions to discrimination among men and women who were told that 50% of judges (all of whom were members of the other sex) discriminated against members of their gender. Women ( $M = 6.46$ ) were more likely than men ( $M = 3.00$ ) to blame their poor grade on discrimination [ $t(24) = -2.89$ ,  $p < .01$ ]. Stangor et al. (2002) likewise found that when attributions for a negative evaluation were made privately, women and African Americans were more likely to attribute a negative evaluation from an out-group member to discrimination and less likely to attribute the evaluation to ability and effort than were men and European Americans who received a negative evaluation from an out-group member. Four additional studies comparing attributions of women and

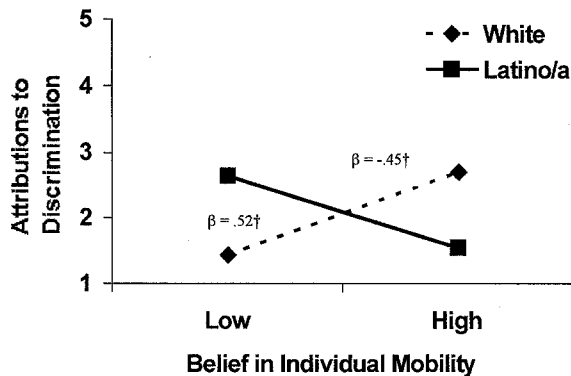
<sup>4</sup>An article published by Ruggiero and Major (*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 1998, Vol. 24, pp. 821–837) suggested that the answer was yes. This article was subsequently retracted from publication by the first author, who stated, "The retraction is requested because serious questions exist concerning the validity of the data which relate solely to my own work and which do not implicate my co-author in any way." (2002, Retraction of Ruggiero & Major, 1998, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 284.)

men (Inman, in press; Major et al., in press; Schmitt & Branscombe, in press-b) and attributions of Latino Americans and European Americans (Major et al., in press) found no main effects of group status. Thus, members of high-status groups do not appear to be more willing than members of low-status groups to blame the same outcomes on discrimination.

Although members of stigmatized groups are more likely than members of non-stigmatized groups to experience attributional ambiguity in their daily lives, we would not expect that the stigmatized would in general be more likely to blame poor outcomes on prejudice than members of higher status groups who experience the same outcomes. Members of nonstigmatized groups are more likely to be in positions of power and to have control over the resources of the stigmatized than vice versa. In those relatively infrequent circumstances where roles are reversed and metastereotypes about high-status groups are salient, members of high-status groups may be just as likely to blame poor outcomes on prejudice as the stigmatized. Indeed, if members of high-status groups believe strongly that the higher status of their group is legitimate and deserved (e.g., reflects the greater ability of their group), they might be especially likely to blame poor outcomes on prejudice. This may be particularly true if a member of a lower status group receives a better outcome than they do.

Major and colleagues obtained results consistent with this hypothesis in three studies (Major et al., in press). Their first study demonstrated that the more White students endorsed the ideology of individual mobility, the more likely they were to say on a survey that they personally were targets of discrimination ( $\beta = .40$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In a second study, White students were rejected for a desirable co-manager role by either a Latin or White co-manager, who chose instead a Latino student for the desirable position. The more White students endorsed the ideology of individual mobility, the more likely they were to blame rejection by a Latino manager (but not a White manager) on discrimination ( $\beta = .52$ ,  $p < .10$ ). In a third study using a similar methodology, the more men endorsed the ideology of individual mobility, the more they attributed rejection by a female to discrimination ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .10$ ).

As shown in Fig. 2, if individual differences in ideology are ignored, members of stigmatized groups did not differ from high-status groups in their propensity to attribute specific negative events to discrimination. However, among those who rejected the ideology of individual mobility, members of low-status groups (Latino, women) were *more* likely than members of high-status groups (Whites, men) to blame rejection by an out-group member on discrimination. In contrast, among those who endorsed this ideology, members of low-status groups were *less* likely than members of high-status groups to blame their rejection on discrimination. These findings help to clarify inconsistencies in the literature and illustrate the importance of ideologies as moderators of status differences in attributions to discrimination.



†  $p < .10$

Fig. 2. Attributions to discrimination among high-status (European American) and low-status (Latino American) group members following rejection by an out-group member as a function of individual differences in the belief in individual mobility (from Major et al., in press, Study 2).

#### D. PERCEIVING AND ATTRIBUTING OUTCOMES TO DISCRIMINATION: SUMMARY

Empirical support exists for predictions that members of stigmatized groups will be vigilant to signs of prejudice in their environment, as well as for predictions that members of stigmatized groups will minimize the extent to which they are targets of prejudice. An increasing body of research establishes the importance of addressing not whether targets of prejudice are vigilant to or minimize discrimination but rather *under what conditions* and *for whom* minimization versus acknowledgment of discrimination occurs. Clearly, there are circumstances under which the stigmatized are vigilant and circumstances under which they are unaware. Contrary to some findings (Ruggiero & Taylor, 1995, 1997), members of stigmatized groups are sensitive to situational cues that make prejudice a more or less plausible explanation for their outcomes. These include situations that make group identity salient and situations that make the possibility of injustice more salient. Furthermore, some individuals are chronically more attuned than others to the possibility of being a target of prejudice. Individuals who are high in group identification or group consciousness or who are highly sensitive to stigmatization (e.g., stigma consciousness and race-rejection sensitivity), for example, are more likely to perceive themselves and their group as being victims of discrimination.

Personal factors interact in complex ways with situational and structural factors, however, to shape perceptions of and attributions to discrimination. Individuals who are high in group identification, for example, are more likely than those

low in group identification to attribute negative outcomes to discrimination when situational cues to prejudice are ambiguous, but not when they are absent or overt. Individuals who reject the ideology of individual mobility are more likely than those who endorse this ideology to blame rejection by a higher status out-group on discrimination, but they are not more likely to blame rejection by an in-group member on discrimination. Furthermore, endorsement of the ideology of individual mobility is associated with a decreased tendency to attribute rejection to discrimination among members of stigmatized groups. In contrast, among high-status groups, endorsement of the same ideology is associated with an increased tendency to attribute rejection by a lower status out-group to discrimination. Collectively, these findings illustrate the importance of examining the ways in which personal, situational, and structural factors interact to moderate perceptions and attributions to discrimination.

## **VII. Psychological Consequences of Attributing Outcomes to Discrimination**

In this section we address the psychological implications of perceiving oneself as a victim of discrimination and of attributing negative events to discrimination. As we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, there is little doubt that objective exposure to prejudicial and discriminatory treatment can have serious psychological and physical consequences for targets. In contrast, there is significant disagreement about the psychological consequences of *perceiving* oneself as a target of prejudice and of *attributing* specific threatening outcomes to discrimination, especially for the self-esteem and psychological well-being of stigmatized targets. Drawing on the seminal work of Dion (1975), Crocker and Major (1989; Major & Crocker, 1993) predicted that attributing negative treatment to the prejudice of others instead of to oneself could help to protect the self-esteem of the stigmatized from discriminatory treatment. They further speculated that people who are more vigilant for instances of prejudice against their group might be more likely to attribute negative outcomes to discrimination and hence would have higher self-esteem than those who are less vigilant. Since the early 1990s, researchers have tested, extended, and challenged these hypotheses (see Crocker *et al.*, 1998, for a review). The hypothesis that attributions to prejudice serve a self-protective function for the stigmatized has been strongly disputed by Branscombe and her colleagues (Branscombe *et al.*, 1999; Schmitt & Branscombe, *in press-a*). They argue 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" (*in press-a*).

We believe that theoretical disagreements and empirical inconsistencies in the literature are due largely to two factors. First, as noted earlier, researchers have not

distinguished between two conceptually related constructs—perceiving oneself as a victim of pervasive discrimination and attributing specific negative events to discrimination. Second, research has inadequately considered the extent to which personal, situational, and structural factors moderate the psychological implications of perceiving and making attributions to discrimination. In the following sections we first distinguish chronic perceptions of discrimination from specific attributions to discrimination. We then discuss the implications for well-being of perceiving oneself or one's group as a target of discrimination and of attributing negative outcomes to discrimination. Finally, we consider how personal factors (group identification and ideology), situational factors (clarity of discrimination), and structural factors (position of group in society—high versus low group status) moderate the consequences of attributions to discrimination. Because little research has addressed these issues, much of these sections are speculative.

### A. DISTINGUISHING TERMS

Stating on a questionnaire that one is a victim of frequent or pervasive prejudice is conceptually distinct from attributing specific self-relevant negative events to prejudice. Within a stress and coping framework, the perception that oneself or one's group is a victim of prejudice can be conceptualized as a threat appraisal (see also Feldman-Barrett & Swim, 1998). People who report that they or members of their group are frequent victims of prejudice are appraising their environment as threatening. If coping resources are appraised as insufficient to deal with the threat, or if ineffective coping strategies are used, we would expect people who appraise their environment as threatening to show poorer well-being than those who do not (Major et al., 1998). This process is illustrated schematically in Fig. 1a.

In contrast, the act of attributing specific negative outcomes (e.g., a rejection or a poor evaluation) to prejudice rather than to one's own lack of deservingness can be conceptualized as a coping strategy—as a cognitive effort to manage negative events that are appraised as stressful by shifting responsibility from the self to the prejudice of others. This process is illustrated in Fig. 1b. Because coping efforts are distinct from coping outcomes, the strategy of attributing negative events to discrimination may or may not be successful in protecting self-esteem in a given context. Coping strategies that are successful in some contexts are detrimental in others (Compas, Connor, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Furthermore, even if the attributional strategy of blaming negative events on prejudice successfully protects self-esteem, it may have other unintended consequences that are negative (e.g., making one disliked).

In the following sections, we first briefly review correlational studies that have examined the relationship between perceptions of discrimination and well-being (the process illustrated in Fig. 1a) and discuss problems with this research. We then review empirical studies that have tested the hypothesis that attributing specific

negative events to discrimination has self-esteem protective effects (the process illustrated in Fig. 1b).

## B. PERCEIVING THE SELF AS A TARGET OF DISCRIMINATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Although there are some exceptions (Crocker & Blanton, 1999), correlational studies generally find that the more members of stigmatized groups perceive themselves (or their group) as a target of discrimination, the lower their self-esteem and the poorer their psychological well-being. For example, women's reports of being exposed to sexist events are positively correlated with increased depression, anxiety, and somatization (Klonoff, Landrine, & Campbell, 2000) and lower social (but not performance) self-esteem (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Perceptions of discrimination based on race are positively correlated with anxiety and depression among immigrant groups in Finland (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000). Perceptions of personal discrimination are positively associated with depression among women (Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1998) and gay men (Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001) and with lower self-esteem among women (Schmitt *et al.*, 2002), African Americans (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999), and gay men (Meyer, 1995).

A study by Branscombe *et al.* (1999) is illustrative of this approach. They asked African American participants to complete questionnaires measuring perceived discrimination, ethnic group identification, personal self-esteem, and collective self-esteem. They created a latent variable of perceived discrimination by combining reports of past experiences with discrimination (e.g., "I feel like I am personally a victim of society because of my race") with participants' ratings of the extent to which several hypothetical events (e.g., being denied an apartment or job) were due to discrimination. Using structural equation modeling techniques to test relationships among variables, Branscombe and colleagues found a direct negative relationship between perceptions of discrimination and self-esteem ( $\beta = -.33$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Perceptions of discrimination also were associated positively with ethnic group identification ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .05$ ), which in turn was related positively to personal self-esteem ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $p < .05$ ). On the basis of this and related research (see also Schmitt *et al.*, 2002), Branscombe *et al.* (1999) argue that attributions to discrimination are harmful to self-esteem, but may indirectly be associated with higher self-esteem by increasing group identity.

Schmitt and Branscombe's (in press-a) conclusion that attributions to prejudice are harmful to self-esteem confuses perceptions that one is a victim of pervasive prejudice with attributing specific self-relevant negative events to prejudice. As discussed earlier, we believe that these constructs are not only distinct, but have very different implications for self-esteem. In addition, although we do not dispute

the negative correlations observed among the stigmatized between self-reports of being the target of discrimination and psychological well-being, we believe that there are several difficulties in interpreting the meaning of these correlations.

*1. Subjective Reports of Discrimination Are Confounded with Exposure to Discrimination*

One interpretational difficulty is that reports of frequently being a victim of discrimination could reflect not only subjective interpretations of events, but also the frequency of exposure to objectively discriminatory events. Indeed, researchers often use highly similar questions to assess both exposure to and subjective perceptions of discrimination. For example, Klonoff and Landrine (1997) assessed exposure to discrimination by asking, "How many times were you denied a raise, a promotion, tenure, a good assignment, a job, or other such thing at work that you deserved because you are a woman?" Schmitt et al. (2002) assessed subjective perceptions of discrimination by asking if respondents agreed that "I consider myself a person who has been deprived of opportunities because of my gender." As noted earlier, members of stigmatized groups consistently report on surveys that they experience more discrimination than do members of nonstigmatized or high-status groups. We believe that this reflects differences in the objective realities of the lives of the stigmatized and the nonstigmatized and not merely differences in subjective appraisals of the same events. To the extent that individuals who *perceive* themselves as victims of discrimination are more likely in fact to have *experienced* discriminatory treatment, it would not be surprising to find a negative association between perceptions of discrimination and well-being. Interpretational difficulties are compounded by the use of questions that include a negative experience *and* an interpretative clause, e.g., "I have difficulty getting a loan because I am Black" (McNeilly et al., 1996) and "Have you been subjected to insults or harassment by your neighbors because of your immigrant background?" (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000). The more that respondents reply in the affirmative to such statements, the more they are indicating both that they have experienced a negative event (e.g., been deprived of opportunities) *and* that they interpret the event in terms of discrimination. This ambiguity of meaning makes it difficult to disentangle the psychological consequences of exposure to negative outcomes from the psychological consequences of labeling such treatment as due to discrimination.

We are aware of only one correlational study that has attempted to distinguish between the psychological implications of *experiencing* a discriminatory event and *labeling* that event as discriminatory. Recall that Magley et al. (1999) asked working women how frequently they had experienced a variety of unwanted sex-related behaviors on the job within the past 24 months. The words "sexual harassment" did not appear until the last question, at which point respondents were asked

if they had been sexually harassed. Analyses examined the extent to which experiencing unwanted sex-related behaviors predicted psychological, health, and work outcomes independent of whether the woman labeled herself as sexually harassed. Across three different samples of women, the more women reported experiencing unwanted sex-related behavior on the job, the poorer their well-being. Importantly, whether women labeled themselves as sexually harassed had no effects on well-being. Thus, this study suggests that it is the experience of negative events (unwanted sexual behaviors), rather than defining those events as discriminatory (sexual harassment), that is related to poorer well-being. This finding is inconsistent with Schmitt and Branscombe's (in press-a) argument that perceiving oneself as a victim of *discrimination* leads to poorer well-being. It remains to be seen, however, whether these findings generalize to forms of discrimination other than sexual harassment.

## *2. Terminology May Inflate a Negative Relationship with Well-Being*

A second problem with interpreting the negative correlation observed between perceptions of discrimination and well-being is the way in which perception of discrimination items are worded. There is substantial evidence that perceiving oneself as a victim (unrelated to discrimination) is negatively associated with well-being (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Tennen & Affleck, 1990). Perceiving oneself as a victim threatens a sense of personal control and the belief in a just world (Crosby, 1982). Researchers examining the relationship between perceptions of personal discrimination and well-being often have used items that explicitly ask participants the extent to which they feel like a victim; for example, "I feel like I am personally a victim of society because of my gender" (Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1997) and "I personally have been a victim of sexual discrimination" (Schmitt *et al.*, 2002). In addition, some authors have combined items assessing prejudice from others (e.g., "People look down on me" because of my stigma) with items assessing personal shame (e.g., "There are times when I have felt ashamed" because of my stigma) (Mickelson, 2001). Not surprisingly, responses to measures such as these are negatively correlated with well-being. Researchers should be careful to avoid terminology that obfuscates the association between perceived discrimination and well-being.

## *3. Perceptions of Discrimination May Be Confounded with Individual Differences*

Individual differences that are associated both with perceiving oneself as a victim and with poor psychological well-being may inflate the negative relationship observed between subjective perceptions of discrimination and well-being. Unfortunately, few studies in this area have controlled for this possibility. There is



substantial evidence that relationships among self-report measures (e.g., measures of coping styles, perceived social support, and perceived social conflict) and measures of psychological well-being (e.g., depression and positive well-being) are inflated by individual differences in variables such as negative affectivity and neuroticism that bias both measures (Compas et al., 2001; Major, Zubek, Cooper, Cozzarelli, & Richards, 1997). This "third variable problem" can contribute to an inflated relationship between perceptions of discrimination and well-being.

A study by Mendoza-Denton et al. (in press) illustrates how this may occur. There is substantial evidence that people differ in the extent to which they are sensitive to rejection in close relationships. Furthermore, people who are high in rejection sensitivity have lower self-esteem than people who are low in rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Drawing on this work, Mendoza-Denton et al. (in press) created a measure of race-based rejection sensitivity (described earlier). African Americans report higher levels of race-rejection sensitivity, but not higher levels of rejection sensitivity in close relationships, than Whites. Mendoza-Denton et al. (in press, Study 1) found that African American respondents who were highly sensitive to rejection in close relationships were also highly sensitive to rejection on the basis of race ( $r = .28$ ). Furthermore, both types of rejection sensitivity were related negatively to self-esteem. However, once the authors controlled for the relationship between race-based rejection sensitivity and rejection sensitivity in close relationships, the relationship between race-based rejection sensitivity and self-esteem was no longer significant ( $r = -.09$ ). Importantly, the negative relationship between rejection sensitivity in close relationships and self-esteem remained significant when controlling for race-based rejection sensitivity ( $r = -.42$ ). This raises the possibility that the negative correlations observed between perceptions of discrimination and self-esteem in previous studies may be due in part to conceptual overlap between sensitivity to discrimination and sensitivity to other types of rejection.

Our argument that individual differences in negative affectivity, neuroticism, and related measures may inflate the relationship between perceived discrimination and well-being is not meant to imply that stigmatized people who perceive themselves as targets of discrimination are neurotic or "making it up." Objective discrimination clearly does occur, and we believe that reports of experiencing discrimination are often quite accurate. This is especially true when discrimination is assessed in terms of specific behaviors instead of retrospective self-reports summarized across time and a number of events. Swim et al. (2001), for example, found no correlation between neuroticism and the frequency with which women reported experiencing sexist events in a daily diary study. Our point is that researchers examining the relationship between perceptions of victimization (due to any cause, including discrimination) and psychological well-being should assess this relationship controlling for individual differences that might bias the correlation among these measures.

#### 4. Summary

The preponderance of correlational evidence indicates that members of stigmatized or low-status groups who generally perceive themselves or their group as targets of discrimination have lower self-esteem and poorer well-being than those who do not. Thus, there appears to be little support for Crocker and Major's (1989) speculation that "people who believe that they personally are frequent victims of discrimination should be particularly likely to attribute negative outcomes or performance feedback to prejudice or discrimination against their group, and hence, may have high self-esteem" (p. 621). We also believe, however, that there are serious methodological limitations in the correlational studies reviewed above. Causal inferences cannot be drawn from correlations among self-report measures collected at the same point in time. More care should be taken to distinguish between objective exposure to discrimination and subjective perceptions of discrimination to isolate the consequences of each for well-being. Questions about discrimination should be framed in ways that do not bias responses. Researchers should assess important dispositional variables (e.g., attributional style, rejection sensitivity, and neuroticism) that might inflate correlations between perceived discrimination and well-being. Researchers should also use prospective, rather than cross-sectional, designs.

#### 5. *Is Perceiving Prejudice Ever Adaptive?*

Although chronic vigilance for discrimination may be harmful for members of stigmatized groups, we believe that under some circumstances perceiving discrimination can be adaptive. Within the stress and coping literature, there is substantial evidence that using denial or disengagement as a strategy to cope with stressors is associated with increased psychological distress and poorer adaptation (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987; Bolger, 1990; Cohen & Roth, 1984; Major, Richards, Cooper, Cozzarelli, & Zubek, 1998). Deliberate suppression of thoughts about a stressor is associated with increases in intrusive thoughts of the stressor and poorer adjustment (Major & Gramzow, 1999; Smart & Wegner, 1999). These findings suggest that individuals who are exposed to overt acts of prejudice and discrimination and deny or minimize it might be vulnerable to increased rather than decreased physical and psychological problems (Clark *et al.*, 1999). There is some evidence consistent with this perspective. African American women who reported that they "usually accepted and kept quiet about unfair treatment" were four times more likely to report hypertension than African American women who reported that following unfair treatment they "took action and talked to others" (Krieger, 1990). In addition, working-class African Americans who said they were discriminated against and who reported accepting the unfair treatment had higher resting blood pressure than those who reported challenging the unfair treatment (Krieger &

Sidney, 1996). Thus, minimizing (or suppressing thoughts of) discrimination can have detrimental effects, at least physiologically.

A recent analysis suggests a way of reconciling these two literatures. Miller and Kaiser (2001) applied a model of coping developed by Compas et al. (2001) to coping with prejudice. Compas's model distinguishes between *voluntary* coping responses and *involuntary* responses to stressors. The term coping is reserved for "conscious volitional efforts to regulate emotion, thought, behavior, physiology, and the environment in response to stressful life events or circumstances" (Compas et al., 2001). Miller and Kaiser observe that one voluntary coping response the stigmatized might employ when faced with being a target of prejudice is to disengage from the problem (prejudice) by denying or minimizing its existence. This type of minimization is maladaptive (Gliner, Compas, & Kaiser, 2001). They note, however, people may also disengage from stressors involuntarily, for example, by screening them out at the preattentional level. People who do this successfully experience reduced levels of psychological distress (MacLeod & Hagan, 1992; MacLeod & Rutherford, 1992; Mogg, Bradley, & Hallowell, 1994). Thus, *involuntary* avoidance of awareness of being a target of prejudice and discrimination may be adaptive, whereas *voluntary* avoidance of prejudice and discrimination may be maladaptive. From this perspective, stigmatized people who "tune out" daily slights and hassles that arise from prejudice and discrimination at a preconscious level may experience less stress than those who perceive themselves as victims of prejudice and discrimination. In contrast, stigmatized people who actively suppress and/or deny that they are targets of prejudice even in the face of clear cues to prejudice may experience greater stress than those who correctly see that their negative outcomes are due to prejudice or discrimination (see Miller & Kaiser, 2001).

### C. DOES ATTRIBUTING NEGATIVE EVENTS TO DISCRIMINATION PROTECT AFFECT AND SELF-ESTEEM?

In this section, we review empirical studies that experimentally controlled for exposure to a negative event across participants and manipulated the plausibility that prejudice could have caused the event. Because the negative event to which people were exposed—a rejection, poor evaluation, or bad test grade—occurred independently of the perception of 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. As reviewed earlier, some theories predict that attributions to discrimination protect self-esteem from negative outcomes or failures (Crocker & Major, 1989). Other theories, in contrast, predict that attributions to discrimination will be detrimental to well-being because they implicate one's social identity and require acknowledging that the world is not just and fair, that important outcomes are out of one's control, and

that one is not a valued member of society (Branscombe *et al.*, 1999; Lerner, 1980; Major & Schmader, 2001; Pyszczynski *et al.*, 1997).

The first studies to test the hypothesis that attributing specific negative events to prejudice protects the self-esteem of the stigmatized from the threat those events engender were conducted by Dion (1975; Dion & Earn, 1975). As described earlier, Dion (1975) found that women who were excluded by male opponents were more likely to believe their opponents were prejudiced than women who were excluded by female opponents. Dion (1975) also found that self-esteem was higher among women who faced male opponents whom they evaluated as highly prejudiced than among women who faced male opponents whom they evaluated as low in prejudice. In contrast, Dion and Earn (1975) found attributions to discrimination to be harmful to well-being among Jewish participants. Jewish men who perceived their opponents as prejudiced and who attributed their exclusion to religious discrimination displayed higher, rather than lower, feelings of stress and negative affect. Thus, findings have been contradictory since the beginning.

Whereas the self-esteem protection findings of Dion (1975) were based on internal analyses, Crocker *et al.* (1991) experimentally tested the hypothesis that attributing negative events to discrimination can protect affect and self-esteem among the stigmatized. Their first study demonstrated that women were more likely to attribute negative feedback from a male to prejudice if he had previously expressed sexist attitudes than if he had not. Importantly, women also reported significantly less depressed affect and tended (although not significantly so) to have higher trait self-esteem following negative feedback if the evaluator held sexist attitudes than if he held liberal attitudes. In their second study, African American students who received interpersonal feedback from a White student were more likely to attribute the feedback to discrimination if the feedback was negative than positive and if the other student knew their race than if the other student did not know their race. Consistent with the self-protection hypothesis, changes in trait self-esteem from baseline among African American participants also tended to be higher following negative feedback if the White student could see them ( $M = .06$ ) than if the student could not see them ( $M = -.47$ ), although these differences were statistically nonsignificant. This suggests that African American students discounted feedback from a White student when their race was known. Although these studies were inconclusive, they provided preliminary evidence in support of the hypothesis that attributing negative outcomes to discrimination can serve a self-protective function for members of stigmatized groups.

Subsequent research, however, suggests that the affective and self-esteem implications of attributing negative feedback to discrimination are more complex than originally proposed. Ruggiero and Taylor (1997) hypothesized that attributing negative performance feedback to discrimination would protect performance self-esteem, but would be harmful to social self-esteem. In two studies, they

reported that performance state self-esteem was higher, but social state self-esteem was lower, among women and African Americans who believed there was a 100% probability of discrimination compared to women and African Americans who believed there was no probability of discrimination or who were in more attributionally ambiguous conditions. Furthermore, Ruggiero and Taylor reported that across conditions, attributions to discrimination were positively related to performance self-esteem among women ( $r = .55$ ), Asians ( $r = .50$ ), and African Americans ( $r = .54$ ), but were negatively related to social self-esteem among women ( $r = -.54$ ), Asians ( $r = -.53$ ), and African Americans ( $r = -.51$ ).

Although these findings are intuitively appealing, research conducted outside of Ruggiero's laboratory using her same paradigm did not replicate them (e.g., Inman, 2001; Kaiser & Miller, 2001; McCoy & Major, 2000). For example, contrary to the claim that attributions to discrimination have opposite implications for performance and social state self-esteem, McCoy and Major (2000) observed a positive correlation between postattribution performance and social self-esteem ( $r = .60$ ) as did Kaiser and Miller (2001) ( $r = .67$ ), Inman (in press) ( $r = .58$ ), and Major et al. (2001) ( $r = .82$ ). Furthermore, women's attributions of negative feedback to discrimination in a 50% probability condition were positively correlated with both performance self-esteem ( $r = .43$ ) and social self-esteem ( $r = .44$ ) in one study (McCoy & Major, 2000). In other attempts at replication, attributions to discrimination were positively related to social self-esteem ( $r = .30$ ) but unrelated to performance self-esteem ( $r = .08$ ) (M. Inman, personal communication, August, 14, 2001) and unrelated to either performance ( $r = .12$ ) or social self-esteem ( $r = .00$ ) in yet a third attempt at replication (Kaiser & Miller, 2001).

Ruggiero and Taylor (1997) also hypothesized that attributing feedback to discrimination would reduce perceptions of control. Consistent with this hypothesis, they reported that attributions to discrimination were strongly negatively correlated with perceptions of performance control ( $r = -.69$ ) and social control ( $r = -.68$ ) among Asians, as well as among African Americans ( $r = -.67$  for performance control,  $r = -.66$  for social control). Other researchers, however, have not only failed to replicate the negative correlation between attributions to discrimination and perceptions of control, but have also found the measures of control used by Ruggiero and Taylor (1997) to be psychometrically unreliable (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Inman, 2001). In summary, the self-esteem and perceived control findings reported by Ruggiero and Taylor (1997) appear to be unreliable. Nonetheless, the point that attributions to discrimination may protect self-esteem in some domains but be costly to self-esteem in other domains is important.

Schmitt and Branscombe (in press-b) challenged the hypothesis that attributions to discrimination protect self-esteem on the grounds that attributions to discrimination threaten an important aspect of the self—one's social identity. Accordingly,

they hypothesized that making such attributions will heighten negative affect for members of stigmatized groups. In a test of this hypothesis (described earlier), women were asked to imagine that they had been denied their request to add a course. Half were told to imagine a scenario in which a female friend told them that no one was admitted, that the professor was a "real jerk," and that he believed that a "room full of monkeys" would be better than students. The other half were asked to imagine that the female friend told them that several men were admitted after they were turned down and that the professor was "so sexist," "told sexist jokes all the time," and that he believed that women had to "work twice as hard to do half as well as men." Women who read the "sexist professor" vignette reported significantly more negative affect than women who read the "jerk professor" vignette. Thus, it felt worse to be rejected because of discrimination than because of purely external factors.

Schmitt and Branscombe's (in press-b) study failed, however, to include the crucial comparison condition essential to test the discounting hypothesis. Specifically, it failed to compare the affective consequences of blaming failure on discrimination as opposed to blaming it on internal, stable, and global aspects of self (e.g., one's intelligence or one's personality). We believe that although blaming a negative outcome on discrimination may be more affectively unpleasant than blaming it on a "jerk," it is still less painful than blaming it on one's ability or character. This is the rationale guiding self-handicapping (e.g., Jones & Berglas, 1978) and excuse making (Schlenker *et al.*, 2001), both of which protect self-esteem under some circumstances (Snyder & Higgins, 1988).

To test this hypothesis, Major, Kaiser, and McCoy (2001) replicated the two conditions of Schmitt and Branscombe's (in press-b) study described earlier and added a third condition in which participants were asked to imagine a scenario in which a female friend told them that everyone else who asked for an add code was let into the class except them, that the professor thought they were stupid, and that he believed they "would have to work twice as hard to do half as well as other students." Self-directed negative emotions (e.g., discouraged, blue, and depressed) and other-directed negative emotions (e.g., angry, cruel, and hostile) were assessed separately. As predicted, women who read the "professor thinks you are stupid" vignette were significantly more likely to report self-directed negative emotions than women who read either the "sexist professor" vignette or the "jerk professor" vignette. These latter two conditions did not differ. Other-directed negative emotions were significantly higher among women who read the "sexist professor" vignette or the "professor thinks you are stupid" vignettes compared to those who read the "jerk professor" vignette. The "stupid" and "sexist" vignettes did not differ. Thus, this study provides support for Crocker and Major's hypothesis that blaming outcomes on discrimination is less painful (in terms of inner-directed emotions) than blaming them on the self. Importantly, it also highlights the importance of distinguishing between inner-directed emotions such as sadness and depression

and outer-directed emotions such as anger and hostility. Although attributions to discrimination may lead to less depression, they do not necessarily lead to less anger than self-blame.

### *1. Summary*

The evidence that attributing negative events to discrimination, instead of to the self, protects the self-esteem of the stigmatized is inconsistent. Some research suggests that attributing negative feedback to discrimination is associated with higher self-esteem and reduced negative affect directed toward the self (Crocker et al., 1991, Study 1; Dion, 1975), especially as compared to self-blame (Major et al., 2001). Other research suggests that attributing negative feedback to discrimination increases stress and negative affect (Dion & Earn, 1975), especially compared to external blame (Schmitt & Branscombe, in press-b). Attempts to replicate Ruggiero and Taylor's (1997) findings have been unsuccessful. In the following section, we address factors that moderate the impact of attributions to discrimination on affect and self-esteem and thus may reconcile the above inconsistencies.

## **VIII. A Moderator Approach: When, and for Whom, Are Attributions to Discrimination Self-Protective?**

We believe that rather than asking "Are attributions to discrimination adaptive or maladaptive for self-esteem?" a more fruitful approach is to ask, "When, and for whom, are attributions to discrimination adaptive versus maladaptive?" Identifying moderators will yield a more complex, but also more accurate, understanding of the implications of believing that one's outcomes are the result of prejudice. In this section, we discuss factors that we believe moderate the impact of attributions to discrimination on self-esteem and self-directed negative affect: situational factors, especially the clarity of discrimination; personal factors, especially group identification and justice ideology; and structural factors, specifically group status. Because relatively little research has addressed these issues, the following sections are speculative.

### **A. SITUATIONAL MODERATORS**

The affective consequences of blaming poor outcomes on prejudice may depend on the clarity or ambiguity of prejudice cues in the situation (see Major & Schmader, 2001). Crocker and Major (1989, p. 621) hypothesized, "overt prejudice or discrimination should be less damaging to the self-esteem of its targets than is

prejudice or discrimination that is disguised or hidden behind a cloak of fairness. When one is faced with blatant prejudice . . . it is clear that the proper attribution for negative outcomes is prejudice.” Recent research provides support for this idea. Recall that Major *et al.* (2001) manipulated situational clarity of prejudice via the comments of a confederate. As described earlier, while a group of female participants was waiting for a male evaluator to give them results of a test, they overheard a female confederate make one of three comments: a no prejudice comment, an ambiguous prejudice comment, or a blatant prejudice comment. Participants then received a failing test grade and were rejected as team leader. Those in the blatant prejudice condition also saw the experimenter pick the lone male participant as the team leader. State self-esteem (performance and social) was then assessed (because these two types of state self-esteem were highly correlated, they were combined).

Women exposed to blatant prejudice had significantly higher state self-esteem than women in either the ambiguous or no prejudice conditions, who did not differ from each other. Furthermore, attributions to discrimination were positively associated with self-esteem when cues to prejudice were blatant, not associated with self-esteem when cues were ambiguous, and negatively associated with self-esteem when cues were absent. Thus, this study indicates that attributions to discrimination *are* protective of self-esteem in situations where discrimination is highly plausible but *are not* protective when not clearly warranted in the situation.

Two additional studies also suggest that self-esteem is more likely to be buffered from negative outcomes when cues to prejudice are clear than when they are ambiguous. Spalding (2000, Study 1) led Asian American participants to believe they were participating with a White partner (a confederate) in a study on first impressions. Participants were led to believe that the confederate held either prejudiced attitudes toward Asians or liberal attitudes toward Asians. Participants later received an evaluation from the confederate that was both negative and very stereotypical of Asians (e.g., nerdy) or positive and not stereotypical of Asians (e.g., socially skilled). Thus, for half of the participants, the partner’s feedback meshed with his or her attitudes (unambiguously positive or negative), whereas for the other half, the partner’s feedback and attitudes were inconsistent. Trait and state self-esteem was then assessed. Asian students who were evaluated negatively by a prejudiced evaluator had significantly higher performance self-esteem ( $M = 26.92$ , maximum scale score is 35) than students who were evaluated negatively by a nonprejudiced evaluator ( $M = 22.58$ ), replicating Crocker *et al.* (1991, Study 1). Furthermore, participants who received a negative evaluation from a prejudiced evaluator reported higher performance self-esteem than students who were evaluated positively by a prejudiced evaluator ( $M = 22.99$ ) and had self-esteem just as high as participants who were evaluated favorably by a nonprejudiced evaluator ( $M = 24.09$ ). Social self-esteem and trait self-esteem showed similar, although not significant, effects. In a second study, Spalding (2000,



Study 2) replicated these same patterns among women. Spalding's research provides further evidence in support of Crocker and Major's (1989) speculation that overt prejudice will be less damaging to self-esteem than disguised prejudice.

Why would being the target of acts of overt, unambiguous prejudice protect self-esteem, whereas being the target of ambiguous prejudice would not? Several explanations are possible. One possibility is that when one is faced with blatant prejudice, there is no uncertainty about the cause of one's outcomes. It is clear that the proper attribution for negative outcomes is prejudice (Crocker & Major, 1989). As we noted earlier, uncertainty is an affectively unpleasant state. Thus, the ambiguity of not being sure that one's outcomes are due to prejudice may be associated with enhanced feelings of uncertainty and hence reduced well-being relative to being confident that one's outcomes are due to prejudice or are not due to prejudice.

Second, although blaming others for one's misfortune typically is associated with impairments in emotional well-being (Tennen & Affleck, 1990), this may not be true of all forms of other-blame. There are some targets of blame that are socially sanctioned. Victims who blame those targets may not experience poorer well-being (Tennen & Affleck, 1990). For example, rape victims who blamed their rapist (Meyer & Taylor, 1986) and industrial accident victims who blamed their supervisors (Brewin, 1985; Frey, Rogner, Schuler, & Korte, 1985) did not demonstrate poorer well-being than those who did not engage in other-blame. We believe that in much of American society, people who are perceived to be overtly and unambiguously sexist or racist (e.g., "rednecks" and "skinheads") are considered blameworthy. Thus, we suggest that when prejudice is overt and unambiguous, it may be more socially permissible to blame misfortunes on prejudice than when prejudice is ambiguous. The more social consensus or social support that is perceived for making an attribution to prejudice, the more such attributions may protect self-esteem. Strong feelings of group identification and/or consciousness may facilitate this perception.

A third possible reason why being the target of overt, unambiguous prejudice may be more protective of self-esteem than being the target of ambiguous prejudice is that strong situations may overwhelm individual differences in the tendency to engage in other-blame, whereas weak situations may not. Chronic tendencies to perceive oneself as a victim, to be sensitive to rejection, or to blame others for one's misfortune may be associated with increased attributions to discrimination in weak or ambiguous situations. Because these same chronic tendencies are also associated with lower self-esteem, this may produce a negative relationship between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem in ambiguous or weak situations. In contrast, these individual differences may be irrelevant in strong situations where cues to injustice are clear. When situational cues are unambiguous, *most* people would be likely to make an attribution to discrimination (Major et al., 2001). Under such circumstances, those who fail to make an attribution to discrimination

may be voluntarily engaging in denial or suppression and hence may have lower self-esteem.

## B. INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCE MODERATORS

### *1. Group Identification*

Both perceptions of discrimination and attributions to discrimination are judgments linked to group membership. Accordingly, identification with or emotional attachment to the group targeted by prejudice may be an important moderator of the impact of perceived discrimination on self-esteem and affect. Group identification may affect several aspects of the coping process. First, the more identified one is with a group, the greater likelihood that group-related events that are negative will be appraised as self-relevant and hence threatening (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Patterson & Neufeld, 1987). Thus, group identification may affect the primary appraisal process. This implies that the more central and important a particular social identity is to an individual, the more painful it might be for that individual to perceive discrimination on the basis of that social identity or to attribute negative outcomes to discrimination linked to that identity. Consistent with this hypothesis, Major *et al.* (2001) found that attributions to discrimination were associated with decreased self-esteem among highly gender-identified women ( $\beta = -.42$ ) but increased self-esteem among less gender-identified women ( $\beta = .42$ ) who received negative feedback under attributionally ambiguous circumstances. Gender identification did not moderate the relation between attributions to discrimination and changes in self-esteem among women in a no prejudice cue condition or an overt prejudice cue condition.

Group identification may also affect the secondary appraisal process. People who are highly identified with their group may be more likely to believe they have the resources necessary to cope with discrimination against their group than people who are less identified. Groups can provide emotional and/or instrumental support, social validation for one's perceptions, and social consensus for one's attributions. Group identification may also lead to a sense of collective efficacy (Bandura, 1982). By acting as a coping resource, high group identification may thus reduce the extent to which discrimination is appraised as stressful. This suggests that individuals who are highly identified with their group will experience prejudice and discrimination against that group as less painful than those who are less identified.

Finally, group identification may influence the strategies that members of stigmatized groups use to cope with stigma-related stressors. Individuals who are highly identified with their stigmatized group may have a wider range of coping strategies available to them than those who are less identified. The three strategies that Crocker and Major (1989) identified as potentially being self-protective for the stigmatized all require some level of identification with a group: (1) devaluing

domains on which the group compares poorly and valuing domains on which the group compares well, (2) socially comparing with other members of the in-group and avoiding comparisons with advantaged out-groups, and (3) attributing personal negative outcomes to prejudice against one's group. Crocker and Major's analysis suggests that the more identified individuals are with their group, the more likely they might be to use these strategies. Group identification does predict attributing negative outcomes to prejudice under attributionally ambiguous circumstances.

In short, there are reasons for predicting that high group identification exacerbates the impact of perceived prejudice on well-being and reasons for predicting that it attenuates this relationship. Very little research has directly addressed this issue. Whether and how individual differences in group identification moderate emotional responses to perceiving discrimination, or attributing negative outcomes to discrimination, remain important questions for future research.

The hypothesis that group identification moderates the impact of attributions to discrimination on self-esteem can be distinguished from the "rejection-identification" model proposed by Branscombe, Schmitt, and colleagues (Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt & Branscombe, in press-a). According to their model, the perception that one's group is a victim of discrimination damages self-esteem because it threatens an important social identity. Perceived discrimination against one's group also leads to increased identification with the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Increases in group identification, in turn, are predicted to lead to increases in self-esteem. Thus, this model predicts that perceived discrimination has a direct negative effect on self-esteem, but an indirect positive effect on self-esteem that is mediated by increased group identification. In terms of our stress and coping perspective, Branscombe and Schmitt's approach treats group identification as a *coping strategy* that is enacted in response to a threat appraisal (perceived discrimination) rather than as an individual difference variable or a coping resource.

Tests of the rejection-identification model have examined the relationships among perceived discrimination, group identification, and well-being in samples of African Americans (Branscombe et al., 1999), women (Schmitt et al., 2002), and Latino Americans (Garza, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Zarate, 2000). As predicted, in these studies perceptions of discrimination were directly and negatively related to self-esteem and well-being, but directly and positively related to group identification. Group identification, in turn, was positively associated with self-esteem and well-being. Because all of these studies used cross-sectional, correlational designs, however, they did not directly test the causal assumptions of the model.

Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, and Spears (2001) partially addressed this problem by manipulating perceptions of discrimination among customers at a body piercing shop. Customers read that individuals with body piercings could expect negative discriminatory treatment from the general public or positive reactions from the general public or read no information. They then indicated how much they

perceived people with piercings to be disadvantaged by society and how much they personally identified with other people who have body piercings and completed a measure of collective self-esteem (e.g., "Overall, I often feel that people with a piercing are not worthwhile"). Path analyses revealed that group identification was higher among respondents who read that they could expect discrimination than among those who read they could expect positive reactions. In addition, the more customers identified with body piercers, the higher their collective self-esteem. Collective self-esteem was not directly affected by the discrimination manipulation, although it was influenced indirectly, via group identification.

Although this study establishes that perceiving discrimination against one's group causes enhanced identification with the group, it did not establish a causal association between perceived discrimination and collective self-esteem or between group identification and collective self-esteem. Furthermore, it is unclear how the self-selected nature of the stigma in this study affected the results. If body piercing is intended to set oneself apart from the mainstream, as these authors argue, the meaning of a positive association between perceived discrimination by the general public and group identification is unclear. Interpretation is also clouded by potential conceptual overlap between group identification and collective self-esteem.

Major *et al.* (2001) tested predictions from Branscombe's rejection-identification model in the context of an experiment examining the impact of group identification and situational clarity on attributions to discrimination (described earlier). Recollect that women in this study overheard a confederate make a neutral comment, an attributionally ambiguous comment, or that the evaluator was prejudiced against women. They then were rejected for a leadership position. All women had completed measures of self-esteem and gender identification prior to participating in the experiment and completed these measures again after being rejected and making attributions for their rejection. By assessing self-esteem and group identification prior to the experiment as well as postrejection, Major *et al.* were able to test more precisely the predictions of the rejection-identification model (i.e., that attributing a negative event to gender prejudice would increase women's identification with their group and that this increase in gender identification would be associated with increases in self-esteem).

As described earlier, women in the overt prejudice condition attributed their rejection more to prejudice and had higher self-esteem (controlling for baseline self-esteem) compared to women in the other two conditions. Contrary to the rejection-identification model, the experimental manipulation of prejudice cues did not significantly affect group identification, although there was a trend in the predicted direction. Internal analyses, however, revealed that attributing rejection to discrimination was associated with increases in gender identification above baseline levels,  $\beta = .26$ ,  $p < .05$ . Contrary to the rejection-identification model, however, there was no relation between increases in gender identification and increases in self-esteem (over preexperimental levels) overall or in any of the experimental conditions. Furthermore, including gender identification in a path model

affected none of the relationships observed between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem. Thus, although women's gender identification increased as they attributed rejection to discrimination, this increase in gender identification did not influence the relation between attributions to prejudice and self-esteem.

Collectively, the findings of Major et al. (2001) do not provide strong support for the rejection-identification model. This may be because the model applies better to the emotional implications of perceiving prejudice than attributing specific negative events to prejudice. We concur that group identification is an important coping strategy that members of stigmatized and oppressed groups use to deal with their perceived prejudice. Seeking social support from others is both a product of distress and a way of coping with distress (Major et al., 1998). Increasing identification with others who are similarly victimized increases access to social support and provides opportunities for social comparison and social validation. Further, many of the predictions from this model are consistent with existing theory and research. It is well established, for example, that intergroup threat can increase in-group cohesion (e.g., Taylor & Moriarty, 1987) and that perceiving oneself as a victim is associated with poor well-being (Tennen & Affleck, 1990). Furthermore, group identification is positively correlated with well-being among stigmatized groups (Bat-Chava, 1994; Munford, 1994; Phinney, 1990; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998), although the causal direction of this relationship remains unclear. In short, we believe the rejection-identification model identifies an important pathway by which members of stigmatized groups cope with the threat of perceiving themselves or their group as victims of discrimination.

## *2. Legitimizing Ideologies*

Another potentially important moderator of the affective and self-esteem implications of perceiving oneself or one's group as a victim of discrimination is the extent to which individuals endorse beliefs and ideologies that legitimize the status of their group. As we discussed earlier, a number of beliefs and ideologies serve to legitimize social inequality, such as the belief in a just world, in a meritocracy, in individual mobility, and in personal control, among others (see Major & Schmader, 2001; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). These beliefs and ideologies are likely to affect the stress and coping process at several different points.

First, we suspect that status-legitimizing ideologies operate at a preattentional level to affect primary appraisals. Status-legitimizing ideologies help people to feel that their environments are predictable, controllable, and just. Thus, stigmatized individuals who endorse legitimizing ideologies are less likely to appraise their environments as threatening—they "screen out" or fail to see evidence that they are targets of prejudice. Recall that members of stigmatized groups who endorse ideologies such as the belief in a just world, personal control, or individual mobility are less likely to perceive themselves or their group as victims of discrimination (Major et al., in press; Major et al., 2001).

Second, even if they do perceive themselves as targets of prejudice (a primary appraisal of threat), legitimizing ideologies influence secondary appraisals—assessments of whether one has the resources necessary to cope with events that are appraised as threatening. People high in perceived control, or who endorse the Protestant work ethic, for example, may believe that they have the resources necessary to cope with threatening events. Hence they may experience incidents of prejudice as less stressful than those who do not share these beliefs. Consistent with this reasoning, Tomaka and Blascovich (1994) found that participants high in just world beliefs appraised a potentially stressful task as more benign and as less stressful, showed autonomic reactions consistent with challenge (versus threat), and performed better on the task than participants low in just world beliefs. Thus, members of stigmatized groups who endorse status-legitimizing ideologies may perceive their environments as less stressful than those who reject these ideologies. The belief in personal control and a just world have been shown to relate positively to psychological health, even among disadvantaged groups (Kleugal & Smith, 1986; Schulz & Decker, 1985; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Third, legitimizing ideologies influence the coping strategies that people employ to deal with events appraised as stressful. By holding people responsible for their outcomes, legitimizing ideologies encourage people to make internal, rather than external, attributions. Consequently, members of stigmatized groups who endorse legitimizing ideologies may blame themselves rather than prejudice for their circumstances and engage in coping efforts targeted at improving themselves rather than the situation (Major *et al.*, 2000; Miller & Major, 2000). This attributional strategy decreases the likelihood that members of oppressed groups will strive for social change. Ironically, however, blaming victimization on oneself is often adaptive for mental health because it reduces perceptions of vulnerability to future victimization (Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Janoff-Bulman, 1982; Janoff-Bulman & Lang-Gunn, 1988). A person who blames negative events on something he or she can control—such as his or her own actions—maintains the perception that steps can be taken in the future to prevent a reoccurrence of those events. These positive illusions are related to better mental health (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Endorsing status-legitimizing ideologies, however, can also be maladaptive for mental health. Because legitimizing ideologies encourage blaming the self for outcomes that may in fact be due to factors outside of one's control, such as prejudice and discrimination, they can make those who are disadvantaged feel like moral failures. Consistent with this idea, Quinn and Crocker (1999, Study 1) found that perceptions of control and Protestant work ethic beliefs were negatively associated with psychological well-being among women who perceived themselves as very overweight, but they were positively associated with well-being among standard-weight women. In a second study, Quinn and Crocker (1999, Study 2) primed ideology by having women read a speech emphasizing either the Protestant work ethic ideology or an inclusive ideology (e.g., "Combining our differences into

unity"). All participants then read an article about discrimination against the overweight. For overweight women, priming Protestant work ethic ideology prior to reading about discrimination led to decreased well-being, whereas priming an inclusive ideology led to increased well-being. Normal-weight participants were unaffected by ideology priming.

Ideologies that encourage victims to blame themselves are especially damaging if, in fact, the individual is likely to experience the misfortune again, regardless of his or her attributions or actions (Janoff-Bulman & Lang-Gunn, 1988). We suspect that endorsing legitimizing ideologies may be associated with worse, rather than better, psychological health, particularly when people are confronted with prejudice against themselves or their group that is overt, unambiguous, and impossible to "screen out." If stigmatized individuals strongly endorse ideologies that legitimize their devaluation, they might be extremely uncomfortable in situations in which they are forced to recognize that their negative outcomes are the result of unjust discrimination rather than their own deserving. This situation directly challenges their ideological worldview and hence threatens their well-being (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Thus the more people endorse status-legitimizing ideologies, such as the belief in control or in a just world, the better they may fare when prejudice is subtle or ambiguous, but the worse they may fare when prejudice is overt and unambiguous.

Endorsing status-legitimizing ideologies also may reduce identification with one's low-status group. Group identification is negatively related to endorsement of legitimizing ideologies among low-status groups, but not high-status groups (e.g., Major et al., in press). Individuals who endorse ideologies that legitimize their lower status may pursue individual mobility strategies and avoid emotional attachments with their group. Consequently, they may be denied the benefits that group identification may provide for members of stigmatized groups.

### C. STRUCTURAL MODERATORS: GROUP STATUS

The status of one's group in the larger social hierarchy also moderates emotional reactions to perceived discrimination. As noted at the outset of this chapter, the experience of being a target of prejudice is not unique to members of stigmatized or low-status groups. Because stigma is contextual, a member of almost any group could experience devaluation on the basis of their social identity under some circumstances, as cries of "reverse discrimination" by members of high-status groups illustrate. Experiences with discrimination among members of high-status groups, however, are quite different from those experienced by members of stigmatized or chronically low-status groups (Crocker et al., 1998; Schmitt & Branscombe, in press-a). Members of high-status groups experience discrimination less frequently than members of low-status groups. In addition, when members of high-status

groups do experience discrimination, the incidences are less serious than those experienced by members of low-status groups (Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1998; Swim *et al.*, 2001). Experiences with being the target of prejudice and discrimination are also more isolated, avoidable, and temporary for members of high-status groups. In contrast, they are likely to be more pervasive, unavoidable, and chronic for the stigmatized. It is also far more risky for members of stigmatized groups to blame their misfortune on the powerful than it is for members of high-status groups to blame their misfortune on the powerless.

Schmitt and Branscombe (in press-a) propose that an attribution to prejudice has different effects depending on whether the aspect of the self that it implicates is a disadvantaged or a privileged group membership. In particular, they hypothesize that it is less psychologically painful for members of high-status groups to acknowledge that they are targets of discrimination, and to attribute negative outcomes to discrimination, than it is for members of low-status groups. Several correlational studies demonstrate a negative relationship between perceptions of discrimination and psychological well-being among women and Latinos but no relationship between perceptions of discrimination and well-being among men or Whites (Garza *et al.*, 2000; Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1998; Schmitt *et al.*, 2002). Within our framework, group status may affect both primary and secondary appraisals of prejudice. Members of stigmatized groups are more likely than members of high-status groups to appraise prejudice as stable, chronic, and pervasive and hence as a threat. Further, members of stigmatized groups have fewer resources at their disposal for coping with prejudice than do members of higher status groups. For these reasons, prejudice and discrimination may be appraised as more stressful by members of stigmatized than high-status groups.

The correlational studies described above examined the relationship between perceptions of discrimination (as assessed on surveys) and well-being, but not attributions for specific negative events and well-being. Thus, it is possible that the weaker relationship observed between perceived discrimination and well-being among members of high-status groups compared to low-status groups may be due to group status differences in exposure to prejudice rather than group status differences in the costs of recognizing prejudice (see earlier discussion). Thus, a more intriguing question is whether group status moderates the emotional consequences of attributing the *same* negative event to discrimination. We are aware of only two experiments that have addressed this question, and they arrived at different conclusions.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>An article published by Ruggiero and Marx (1998) ostensibly addressed this question. The first author retracted this article from publication in August, 2001, stating, "The data reported in the article are invalid and should not be considered part of the scientific literature of psychology" (2001, Retraction of Ruggiero & Marx, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 81, p. 178).



Schmitt and Branscombe (in press-b) compared attributions to discrimination and affect among men and women asked to imagine that a professor refused to admit them to a closed class. Half were asked to imagine that the professor admitted no one ("jerk professor") and half to imagine that the professor admitted only members of the other gender ("prejudiced professor"). Consistent with Schmitt and Branscombe's predictions, women imagined feeling more negative affect, and men imagined feeling less negative affect in the "prejudiced" condition compared to the "jerk" condition. In a replication and extension of Schmitt and Branscombe's study, however, Major et al. (2001-b) failed to replicate this gender effect. Women and men in their study responded the same affectively across conditions. For example, men as well as women reported more self-directed negative affect if rejected by a professor who thought they were stupid than if rejected by a professor who was prejudiced against their gender. Additional research is needed to resolve these inconsistent findings.

### *1. Summary*

Very little research has examined potential moderators of the relationship between perceiving or attributing a negative outcome to prejudice and well-being. Existing theoretical and empirical work, however, suggests three classes of moderators: situational factors (e.g., clarity of prejudice cues), personal factors (e.g., individual differences in group identification and legitimizing ideologies), and structural factors (e.g., group status). Clear cues to prejudice decrease uncertainty and legitimize other-blame. When attributions to prejudice are made under these conditions, self-esteem is protected. In situations where prejudice cues are ambiguous, however, uncertainty is aroused and no clear target of blame emerges. Attributions to discrimination are not self-protective under these conditions. Individual differences in group identification and endorsement of legitimizing ideologies may also moderate emotional responses to prejudice. Being highly group identified may make prejudice against one's group especially distressing, yet it may also provide group-level coping resources and strategies. Endorsing status-legitimizing ideologies may serve as a shield against perceiving or acknowledging prejudice and may promote the use of self-blame in the face of failure. Thus, there are reasons to expect that group identification and endorsement of legitimizing ideologies may either exacerbate or alleviate the impact of perceived discrimination on well-being. Compared to members of low-status groups, members of high-status groups are exposed to less prejudice, experience less serious incidences of prejudice, and experience prejudice less pervasively. Members of high-status groups also have more resources at their disposal for coping with perceived prejudice than do low-status groups. As a result, perceiving prejudice is likely to be appraised as less stressful by members of high-status than low-status groups.

## IX. Summary and Conclusions

Research addressing the affective and self-esteem implications of being a target of prejudice and discrimination has burgeoned since the early 1990s. Unfortunately, the increase in quantity has not been matched by an equivalent increase in clarity. Conceptual vagueness, imprecise use of terms, weak methodologies, exaggeration of positions, retraction of data, and failures to replicate often-cited findings have hindered progress in this area. In this chapter we critically reviewed theory and research with the goals of developing a unified theoretical perspective, resolving controversies, and separating empirical fact from fiction.

According to the stress and coping perspective we advance here (see also Major *et al.*, 1999; Miller & Major, 2000), being the target of prejudicial or discriminatory events is a *stigma-related stressor*. In order to understand adaptation in the face of stigma-related stressors, one must examine how stressors are cognitively appraised; the coping strategies used to deal with events that are appraised as stressful; and the personal, situational, and structural factors that affect cognitive appraisals and coping processes. We view perceiving oneself as a victim of prejudice or discrimination as a primary appraisal of threat. In contrast, we view attributing specific negative events (e.g., rejections and poor treatment) to prejudice or discrimination as a coping strategy used to deal with events that are appraised as stressful. This distinction is critical to our analysis. We argue that the failure of researchers to distinguish adequately among the psychological implications of being *exposed* to prejudicial or discriminatory events, *perceiving* that one is a pervasive victim of prejudice or discrimination, and *attributing* specific negative events to discrimination has contributed to inconsistent findings and contradictory conclusions.

Crocker and Major's (1989) attributional ambiguity analysis helped to kindle the current interest in examining prejudice from the target's point of view. Their hypothesis that the stigmatized may protect their self-esteem from threat by attributing negative outcomes to prejudice, instead of to their own (lack of) deservingness, proved especially controversial. Some of the controversy we suggest is more apparent than real, resulting from misinterpretations of Crocker and Major's hypotheses. Other disputes, however, we believe are valid and indicate that theoretical refinements are needed. We attempted here to specify more precisely the nature of an attribution to discrimination, arguing that it involves two necessary judgments: (1) the individual (or group) was treated unfairly and (2) the treatment was based on social identity (group membership). Integrating work published since Crocker and Major's (1989) review, we observed that attributions to discrimination are more correctly characterized as attributions of blame than external attributions. Further, we noted that attributions to discrimination contain both an internal and an external component. Finally, we noted that insufficient discounting of internal

causes might occur even when it is recognized that another's prejudice may have contributed to one's outcomes. For these reasons, the emotional consequences of attributional ambiguity may be less straightforward than Crocker and Major (1989) originally assumed.

One issue that has generated controversy is whether people who are chronic targets of prejudice are vigilant to or minimize signs of prejudice in their environment. There are cognitive and motivational reasons why victims might engage in either strategy. We reviewed empirical evidence in support of both perspectives, noting that researchers have conceptualized "minimization" in several different ways, contributing to conceptual confusion. We argue that it is important to address *under what conditions* and *for whom* minimization of versus vigilance to discrimination occurs. Clearly, there are circumstances under which the stigmatized are vigilant and circumstances under which they minimize prejudice. Contrary to some findings (Ruggiero & Taylor, 1995, 1997), members of stigmatized groups are sensitive to situational cues that make prejudice a more or less plausible explanation for their outcomes. These include situations that make group identity salient and situations that make the possibility of injustice more salient. Furthermore, some individuals are chronically more attuned than others to the possibility of being a target of prejudice. Members of stigmatized groups who are high in group identification or group consciousness or who are highly sensitive to stigmatization (e.g., stigma consciousness and race-rejection sensitivity), for example, are more likely to perceive themselves and their group as being victims of discrimination and to attribute negative outcomes to discrimination. Members of stigmatized groups who reject ideologies that legitimize their lower status in society (e.g., the ideology of individual mobility and the belief in personal control) also are more likely to perceive themselves as victims of discrimination and to attribute negative outcomes to discrimination. These individual differences are more influential in weak (attributionally ambiguous) situations than in strong (blatant prejudice) situations, illustrating the importance of considering person  $\times$  situation interactions. The larger social structure also shapes perceptions of and attributions to prejudice. Members of stigmatized groups are more likely than members of higher status groups to perceive that they or their group are victims of pervasive discrimination. However, group status interacts with person factors (ideology) and situational factors (ambiguity) to influence attributions to discrimination in specific situations. In general, we propose that factors that increase the likelihood that outcomes are perceived to be linked to group membership and are seen as unjust will increase the likelihood that people will perceive themselves as targets of prejudice as well as attribute specific negative outcomes to discrimination.

We also reviewed theory and research addressing the implications for affect and self-esteem of perceiving discrimination and of attributing negative events to discrimination. Although there is little dispute among scholars that objective exposure to prejudicial and discriminatory treatment can have serious psychological

and physical consequences for targets, there is significant disagreement about the consequences for affect and self-esteem of *perceiving* oneself as a target of prejudice and of *attributing* negative outcomes to discrimination. Branscombe and her colleagues (Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt & Branscombe, in press-a) have strongly disputed the hypothesis that attributions to prejudice serve a self-protective function for the stigmatized. They argue 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. In our view, what appear as theoretical disagreements are due largely to a failure to differentiate adequately between the implications of perceiving oneself as a victim of pervasive discrimination and the implications of attributing specific threatening events to discrimination. We also believe that insufficient attention has been paid to specifying the conditions under which perceptions of prejudice, and attributing negative events to prejudice, are adaptive versus maladaptive for psychological well-being.

The preponderance of correlational studies indicate that the more members of stigmatized or low-status groups perceive themselves or their group as victims of pervasive discrimination, the lower their self-esteem and psychological well-being. Most of these studies suffer from methodological weaknesses, including relying on cross-sectional, correlational data; insufficiently separating the effects of objective exposure to discrimination from subjective perceptions of discrimination; framing questions in ways that potentially bias responses, and failing to assess important dispositional variables that might inflate correlations between perceived discrimination and well-being. Nonetheless, we conclude that there is little evidence to support the idea that people who believe that they personally are frequent victims of discrimination will have high self-esteem (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989).

Drawing on an insightful analysis by Miller and Kaiser (2001), we speculate that people who “tune-out” daily slights and hassles that arise from prejudice and discrimination *at a preconscious level* (i.e., who engage in “involuntary avoidance”) experience less stress than those who chronically perceive themselves as victims of prejudice and discrimination. These individuals do not experience the psychological threat of prejudice. In contrast, we speculate that people who *actively suppress and/or deny* that they are targets of prejudice even in the face of clear cues to prejudice (i.e., who engage in “voluntary avoidance”) experience greater stress than those who correctly see that their negative outcomes are due to prejudice or discrimination. These individuals experience the threat of prejudice, but use a maladaptive coping strategy to deal with it.

Experimental tests of the hypothesis that attributing threatening events to discrimination protects self-esteem among the stigmatized have yielded inconsistent findings. Some studies find that attributing negative feedback to discrimination is associated with higher self-esteem and reduced negative affect, whereas others find the opposite. We propose that the relationship between attributions to

discrimination and self-esteem differs as a function of situational, personal, and structural factors. First, when attributions to prejudice are clearly justified by situational cues, attributing negative events to prejudice protects self-esteem (Major et al., 2001). This supports Crocker and Major's (1989) claim that overt prejudice is less damaging to the self-esteem of its targets than is prejudice that is hidden behind a cloak of fairness. However, attributing negative events to prejudice does not protect self-esteem, and may in fact damage self-esteem, when attributions to prejudice are made in the absence of clear situational cues that justify this attribution (Major et al., 2001). This finding is inconsistent with Crocker and Major's hypothesis that attributing outcomes to prejudice in attributionally ambiguous circumstances protects self-esteem.

Second, we suggest that the relationship between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem also differs as a function of individual factors, such as extent of group identification and endorsement of status-legitimizing ideologies. We speculate, for example, that being highly identified with a group that is a target of prejudice may make perceiving prejudice against that group more painful. However, group identification may also provide an individual with more coping resources and a wider array of coping strategies. Individual differences in endorsement of beliefs such as the belief in personal control may influence people's appraisals of their resources to cope with prejudice and their coping strategies in response to perceived prejudice. Third, there is suggestive evidence that the status of one's group in the larger social hierarchy moderates the affective and self-esteem implications of perceiving that oneself or one's group is a victim of pervasive prejudice. Recognizing that one is a victim of prejudice is associated with poorer well-being among members of stigmatized groups than among members of high-status groups (Schmitt & Branscombe, *in press-a*). Whether group status moderates the emotional consequence of attributing the same negative events to discrimination, however, is unclear.

There is increasing evidence that the coping strategy of attributing threatening events to discrimination instead of to one's lack of deservingness ultimately may backfire. Those who claim prejudice may be labeled as complainers and ostracized by individuals who control important outcomes (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). If the coping strategy of attributing negative outcomes to prejudice is used chronically, it may eventually result in perceptions of pervasive prejudice and group-related rejection sensitivity, both of which are associated with poorer, rather than better, well-being. People who attribute their outcomes to prejudice may avoid situations in which they suspect prejudice may occur (Pinel, 1999), experience anxiety in interactions with out-group members (Stephan & Stephan, 1996), and disengage their self-esteem from domains important for academic or economic success (Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998; Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001). This, in turn, may lead to poorer academic performance (Mendoza-Denton et al., *in press*; Steele et al., 2002; Terrell & Terrell, 1981).

Ultimately, those who believe their outcomes are chronically governed by prejudice lose a sense of control over their own fate.

An important agenda for future research is to identify adaptive coping strategies in response to perceived prejudice. Identification with the in-group is one important pathway by which the stigmatized maintain psychological well-being in the face of perceived prejudice (Branscombe *et al.*, 1999). Developing group consciousness may be an even better route. Group consciousness incorporates group identification with rejection of status-legitimizing ideologies. Individuals who are high in group consciousness have a greater sense of collective efficacy and greater willingness to engage in collective action on behalf of the group (Simon *et al.*, 1998). An alternative pathway to well-being among stigmatized groups may be far less effective for achieving social change, but perhaps just as, if not more, effective for maintaining individual self-esteem. Members of stigmatized groups may embrace ideologies that legitimize their lower status and define themselves and their futures in status-consistent ways. Believing that the world is just, predictable, and controllable, they remain blissfully unaware of the real extent to which they personally are targets of prejudice and discrimination. The illusion that they, and not bigoted others, control their fate provides the stigmatized something essential to well-being—hope. Perhaps this is why status-legitimizing ideologies are so widely held, even by those who are most disadvantaged by them.

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