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# The Sky is Falling, But Not on Me: A Cautionary Tale of Illusions of Control, in Four Acts

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*Since the early 1980s, researchers have attempted to unravel the sources of a tendency for minority group members to report higher levels of discrimination directed at their group than at themselves personally. The favored explanation for this personal / group discrimination discrepancy has been denial of personal discrimination. However, subsequent research has revealed that this discrepancy is not specific to the domain of discrimination, or to negative events, or even to minority group members. Rather, it is a generalized personal / group discrepancy, perhaps explained by a culture-based heuristic that leads people to calculate the magnitude of the effect of an event to be proportional to the size of the social unit being affected. Thus groups are affected more than individual persons and the size of the effect increases with the size of the group.*

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Nasrudin decided that he could benefit by learning something new. He went to see a master musician and asked, "How much do you charge to teach lute-playing?"

"Three silver pieces for the first month; after that, one silver piece a month."

"Excellent!" said Nasrudin. "I shall begin with the second month."

Sufism is a mystical sect of Islam, and Sufis often use tales involving the comical character Nasrudin to raise critical questions and lead us to new insights. The exploits of modern social scientists often remind one of this particular Sufi tale. Like Nasrudin, modern social scientists often find themselves taking shortcuts, pushed as they are by competitive forces to make breakthroughs in less time and with fewer resources.

One way that social scientists have found themselves taking shortcuts is by avoiding the big picture and by focusing on narrow issues within very limited contexts. This is no doubt related to the increasing specialization in modern societies generally (Moghaddam, 1989, 1997). Each generation of researchers is becoming more specialized than the last, so that fewer and fewer researchers attend to larger and fuzzier issues, such as culture. But by becoming narrower and narrower in their outlook, and by tackling smaller and smaller topics, researchers often experience the illusion that they have understood a phenomenon completely, and are in control.

Increasing specialization is also associated with efforts to achieve greater technical efficiency. Emphasis is placed in elaborate sampling and survey techniques, as well as more sophisticated computational procedures for analyzing data. Unfortunately, this focus on reliability sometimes means that we do not have the time and resources to give adequate attention to validity. Consequently, we manage to measure things precisely, but without giving adequate attention to the meaning of exactly what it is we are measuring.

The goal of this article is to briefly report on one recent example of such an illusion of control among social scientists, including the present authors. We hope that by sharing our illusions, we shall be able to take a step, albeit modest, toward appreciating the larger picture. Our story begins, in "Act One," with a series of unexpected and potentially important findings in the area of discrimination. During "Act Two," we witness how the initial findings led to

considerable excitement and a great deal of enthusiastic theorizing among researchers eager to explain the new phenomenon. In "Act Three," we discover that the phenomenon under study proves to be something other than had been originally assumed. Indeed, it may prove to be much more pervasive and important than had been assumed. Finally, in "Act Four," the mystery is elaborated in a cultural setting.

### ACT ONE: THE INITIAL FINDINGS

In 1982, Crosby published an important social psychological study on working women in the Boston area. Given the climate of the time, it is not surprising that in part of her survey, Crosby asked the participants in her study about their experiences with gender discrimination. It turned out that when reporting their personal experiences with discrimination, the female participants reported lower levels of discrimination than they reported for women as a whole. A review of the literature of the early 1980s revealed that a number of other studies also reported this trend, although in all cases the finding was not an intended outcome of the research (Guimond & Dube-Simard, 1983; Taylor, Wong-Rieger, McKirnan, & Bercusson, 1982).

In the late 1980s, a carefully designed field study was conducted by Taylor and associates (Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990) as the first empirical attempt to directly test this phenomenon, newly termed by these researchers as *the personal/group discrimination discrepancy*. The participants in the study were two groups of visible minority immigrant women in Canada: first generation Haitians and Indians. These groups were selected because it can be argued that they face discrimination on at least three bases: as women, as visible minorities, and as first-generation immigrants. The participants were interviewed in their own homes by bilingual coethnic interviewers, using back-translated research instruments (for methodology details, see Moghaddam & Taylor 1987; Moghaddam, Taylor, & Lalonde, 1989). The research results confirmed the personal/group discrimination discrepancy: The participants reported higher levels of discrimination for their group than for themselves personally (Taylor et al., 1990). The next challenge was to provide a convincing explanation for this phenomenon.

## **ACT TWO: ASSESSING ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS**

How, then, are we to explain the report of discrimination being higher for the group than for the self? If all these minority group members report lower levels of personal discrimination, who is experiencing the higher group-level discrimination?

### **ASSESSING MUNDANE EXPLANATIONS**

A first task was to make sure that the personal/group discrimination discrepancy is not an artifactual outcome of research procedures. To this end, researchers tested and discounted the possibility that a systematic response bias, or perhaps a subtle bias in the wording of questions, may have led to this finding (Taylor, Wright, & Porter, 1993). For example, in addition to the two standard questions on discrimination at the personal and group levels, different samples of university women were asked to rate the frequency with which they perceived discrimination at the personal and group levels, and the severity of discrimination they perceived at these same two levels. The results showed the same trend of higher perceived discrimination at the group than at the personal level.

Another of the more mundane explanations for the phenomenon is that people are not able to accurately identify the actual level of discrimination leveled at themselves personally, and at their group. But a laboratory study showed that college students, at least, are able to make reality-based assessments of discrimination (Taylor, Wright, & Ruggiero, 1991).

Researchers came to the conclusion that the personal/group discrimination discrepancy is a robust phenomenon that is best explained by one or both of the following judgmental biases: first, an exaggeration of group discrimination; second, a denial of personal discrimination (Crosby, 1984; Taylor et al., 1993). A number of steps have been taken to try to test these explanations.

### **THE EXAGGERATION EXPLANATION**

The exaggeration explanation has not received as much research attention as has the denial explanation. One reason for this may be that researchers exploring discrimination tend to be fairly

liberal in political outlook, and so find an exaggeration of group level discrimination explanation less appealing. If minority group members exaggerate levels of discrimination at the group level and the real level is closer to their lower reports for the personal level, then this has implications for wider policies, such as affirmative action, that are introduced to combat discrimination. The exaggeration explanation seems to lend support to claims reflected in the backlash by angry White men against minority movements. Thus there may be a subtle bias at work here, leading to more emphasis on a denial of personal discrimination explanation.

One way that researchers did attempt to test the exaggeration of group discrimination explanation was by asking participants to assess the average level of discrimination faced by a group, as well as by themselves personally. Results show that even when asked about the average of the group, participants still reported discrimination at the personal level to be lower than discrimination faced by the group on average (Taylor et al., 1993).

## THE DENIAL EXPLANATION

The denial explanation has been given a great deal more research attention and does seem to enjoy support from a variety of sources. This includes, for example, evidence suggesting that people see themselves as better than average and that they generally attempt to present the self in a positive manner. This evidence comes from widely differing perspectives, including scholarship extending Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical thesis (e.g., Harré, 1993), as well as more traditional cognitive social psychology (see the general review by Fiske & Taylor, 1991). From this perspective the personal/ group discrimination discrepancy may arise because people want to evade the shame and low status associated with being a victim of prejudice. An implication of a denial explanation is that minority group members attribute the causes of a failure to factors other than discrimination.

However, the attributional implications of a denial explanation run contrary to another widely influential interpretation of how minorities deal with discrimination, proposed by Crocker and Major (1989). These researchers argue that minorities protect their own self-esteem by attributing failures to discrimination. For example, when minority group members fail to get a job, they could

attribute the failure to discrimination ("I was the best candidate, but they do not hire women managers").

Ruggiero and Taylor (in press-a, in press-b) tested competing explanations from the personal/group discrimination discrepancy literature that suggest discrimination will be denied, and from the self-protecting attributions literature that suggest discrimination will be highlighted when minorities receive negative evaluations. They found that their White female college student participants denied discrimination against themselves personally when the situation was ambiguous, seemingly because this helped to maintain the image that they themselves were in control of their outcome. Only when there was no ambiguity did these participants admit discrimination against themselves personally. The tendency for women to play down discrimination against the self was confirmed in another study using different samples of women students and working women (Ruggiero & Taylor, in press-b).

To sum up, since the early 1980s there has been an increasing focus on the tendency for minority group members to report discrimination at the group level to be higher than at the personal level. A variety of technically sophisticated field and experimental techniques have been applied to this phenomenon, with an emerging consensus that it arises because of denial of personal discrimination. This impressive and potentially important research program is based on a number of assumptions. First, it is assumed that the phenomenon is specific to the domain of discrimination. Second, by implication, it is assumed the phenomenon could only occur with negative events. Third, it is assumed that the phenomenon is specific to minority group members.

### **ACT THREE: SUDDENLY, IT ALL LOOKS VERY DIFFERENT**

Let us begin with three "what ifs."

1. What if this phenomenon is not specific to the domain of discrimination, but is something that arises whenever people make assessments of how much they are affected by events personally and how much their group is affected by events?
2. What if this phenomenon is not specific to negative events, but also extends to positive ones?

3. What if this phenomenon is not specific to minorities, but also extends to majority group members?

### THE DOMAIN SPECIFICITY ASSUMPTION

There is solid evidence to support the idea that, at least under some conditions, there is a generalized tendency for people to judge events as affecting their group more than themselves personally—to see the sky as falling, but not on themselves. This tendency is not specific to the domain of discrimination, but has implications for how judgments are made in a wide variety of domains, including that of discrimination. This evidence comes from both published reports not intended to address this issue directly, as well as a series of studies recently conducted to test this proposition directly.

As regards general reports, an example is a national survey among school superintendents and principals that showed respondents perceived a 39% increase in school violence in their own districts, but a 63% increase in neighboring districts, and a 97% increase in the nation's schools as a whole (Boothe, Bradley, Keough, & Kirk, 1993). A survey of perceptions of the economic situation in Germany revealed that 87% thought the general population was in a "not so good" or "bad" economic situation, although only 37% reported the same for themselves (*Die Zeit*, September, 1994, quoted by James T. Lamiell, personal communication, January 6, 1995). Such reports provide indirect support for the idea that there is a generalized personal/group discrepancy which is not specific to the domain of discrimination.

A series of recent studies have provided a direct test of the domain specificity of this phenomenon (Moghaddam & Hutcheson, 1995; Moghaddam, Stolkin, & Hutcheson, in press). In a first study, college students rated the extent to which each of eight issues affected (a) themselves personally, (b) their close friends, (c) persons of their gender, and (d) the population in general.<sup>1</sup> The eight domains were: (a) the current economic recession, (b) ecological issues (such as the greenhouse effect, global warming), (c) the threat of AIDS, (d) computer technology, (e) gender discrimination, (f) rising health costs, (g) the end of the Cold War, and (h) racial discrimination.

In a second study, a different group of college students made the same ratings, but this time for the average person in the three groups (close friends, gender group, general population). The re-



sults of both studies showed a clear trend, with respondents reporting levels of affectedness higher for groups than for the self. Overall, the responses reflected an additive pattern, so that the general population was judged to be affected more than the gender group, the gender group more than close friends, and close friends more than the self.

### THE NEGATIVE DOMAINS ASSUMPTION

After research evidence showed that the personal/group discrepancy is not specific to the domain of discrimination, a question still remained as to whether or not this phenomenon is specific to negative domains. In discussing results showing that the phenomenon is not specific to discrimination, Taylor and Moghaddam (1994) proposed that "These results suggest that judgments about the self are consistently lower than those directed at the group, whatever the domain of *negative* experience" (p. 175, italics added). The continued interpretation of results in a way suggesting that the personal/group discrepancy is specific to negative domains probably arose because researchers had already committed to a denial explanation of the phenomenon, and such an explanation only seems compelling with respect to negative events.

To test the possibility that a generalized personal/group discrepancy extends to both negative and positive events, a series of studies were conducted involving two stages.<sup>2</sup> First, participants were asked to rate the negative/positive influence of various events. From these ratings, sets of events were selected that clearly fell into the categories of negative influence (e.g., violent crime, gender discrimination) and positive influence (e.g., advances in medical technology, increased reliability and safety of automobiles). Second, respondents rated the extent to which these negative and positive events affected themselves personally, their close friends, their gender group, and the general population. Results from two sets of different respondents show a generalized personal/group discrepancy for both negative and positive events, with the self reported as least affected and the general population reported as most affected. Clearly, then, this phenomenon is not specific to negative events.

## **THE MINORITY SPECIFIC ASSUMPTION**

Following the tradition set by Crosby (1982, 1984), researchers have studied a personal/group discrepancy in the domain of discrimination among minority group members (Taylor and his associates continue to study this phenomenon among women; see Ruggeiro & Taylor, in press-a, in press-b). We have already seen that this phenomenon is not specific to discrimination, or even to negative events generally. We now turn our attention to the assumption that this phenomenon is specific to minority groups.

Studies conducted by Moghaddam and Hutcheson (1995) and Crystal and Moghaddam (1996) have involved both majority group and minority group members, roughly equal numbers of White males and females. A comparison of responses across gender groups reveals two interesting trends. First, for both males and females, there was a generalized personal/group discrepancy. The results clearly demonstrate that the discrepancy is not limited to minority group members, because White males reported the standard pattern of affectedness, highest for the population in general and lowest for the self. However, a second finding was that although both men and women showed the same pattern of personal/group discrepancy, women tended to report higher levels of affectedness generally, perhaps as a result of their lower status (Eagly, 1987). As expected, women report higher levels of affectedness for gender discrimination specifically.

In conclusion, then, what started as a focused study of a phenomenon assumed to be specific to perceptions of discrimination or at least to negative events, among minority group members, has proved not to be specific to discrimination, or to negative events, or even to minority group members.

## **ACT FOUR: RETHINKING A PERSONAL/ GROUP DISCREPANCY IN A CULTURAL SETTING**

There seems to be a generalized personal/group discrepancy that is pervasive across domains and minority and majority group members, but that also influences how people perceive specific

events such as those involving discrimination. How are we to explain this phenomenon?

The explanation favored so far by researchers is denial, but this is contradicted by the finding that the discrepancy in question extends to both negative and positive events. Although the denial explanation seems compelling with respect to negative events, it seems implausible with respect to positive events.

Our proposition is that this phenomenon reflects a culturally derived heuristic that leads people to estimate the magnitude of the effect of events as increasing with the size of the social unit being affected. This interpretation is in line with recent studies that found the effect to be additive, increasing in magnitude from the individual to close friends, to gender group, to general population. Our expectation, then, is that the effect of events will be judged to be greater on groups than on individuals, and greater on larger groups than smaller ones.

Modern media probably contributes to this heuristic. To be newsworthy, an event, any event, must have an unusual effect. Thus we hear about extreme cases of how much people have been affected by climate changes, by increasing crime, by good luck on lotteries, by modern technology, by health care costs, and by countless other similar events. Coupled with this vast amount of information about the world and how events affect people, is a constant reminder to everyone that individual persons have access to very little information relative to the total amount of information available. This process has a potentially pernicious effect: We rely less on our own personal experiences and base our judgments more on what we hear about people in the media.

We emphasize the cultural basis of the generalized personal/group discrepancy, seeing this as an example of skilled behavior, acquired through socialization processes. Thus we do not view this as reflecting some deeper level central processing mechanism that is apart from or above cultural influences. This is because the central processing mechanisms discussed in traditional cognitive psychology are themselves cultural constructions.

Future research on a generalized personal/group discrepancy might usefully explore this phenomenon in cultural settings where the mass media and the information age have significantly less influence. The traditional sectors of some Third World societies

might qualify. Another possibility is to study this phenomenon among the members of a closed group, such as a sports team, and ensure that each person perceives they have all the relevant information about how events have impacted the rest of the group members. These and other research strategies may further unravel the sources of this phenomenon.

### CONCLUDING COMMENT

The available research evidence suggests that the generalized personal/group discrepancy is a heuristic phenomenon far more pervasive than had originally been assumed, across domains and across groups. This pervasive phenomenon has particularly important implications in areas associated with perceived fairness and justice, including discrimination against minorities. However, questions remain as to how pervasive this phenomenon really is and under what conditions it will not appear. Clearly, we still face the challenge of demonstrating the sources and limits to the pervasiveness of a generalized personal/group discrepancy.

### Notes

1. Whereas in previous studies participants had only been asked to rate the impact of discrimination on themselves personally and on one of their groups, in this study they are asked to rate this impact on themselves and on three groups of increasing size.

2. Details available from the first author.

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