

The Personal/Group Discrimination Discrepancy: Perceiving My Group, But Not Myself, to Be a Target for Discrimination

Donald M. Taylor
Stephen C. Wright
Fathali M. Moghaddam
McGill University

Richard N. Lalonde
York University

An unexpected finding that has surfaced in research on discrimination is that respondents perceive a higher level of discrimination directed at their group as a whole than at themselves as individual members of that group. The present study directly tested this personal/group discrepancy by focusing on two groups of Canadian immigrants who have been the targets of much discrimination, Haitian and South Asian women. Respondents were questioned about their personal and group discrimination on four separate dimensions: race, culture, status as newcomers to Canada, and gender. Strong support was found for the generality of the personal/group discrimination discrepancy. Three possible explanations for the discrepancy point to possible avenues for future research: the denial of personal discrimination, the exaggeration of group discrimination, and information-processing biases.

Research on prejudice has tended to be unclear about its unit of focus. At times the emphasis is on the group that experiences or holds prejudices, and at other times interest centers on the individual group member who is the victim or perpetrator of prejudice. The present article concerns itself with a phenomenon that points to the need for much greater clarity in describing the unit of focus when addressing the issue of discrimination. In several recent studies, whose theoretical purposes were quite unrelated, the respondents' perceptions of discrimination at both the personal and group levels were assessed. An unexpected but interesting finding emerged in each of these studies: Respondents perceived a higher level of discrimination directed at their group as a whole than at themselves as individual members of that group.

AUTHORS' NOTE: This research was supported by the Secretary of State, Multiculturalism Directorate, Canada, and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The authors would like to thank an associate editor and four anonymous reviewers for their substantive comments on an earlier draft of this article. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Donald M. Taylor, Department of Psychology, McGill University, 1205 Dr. Penfield Ave., Montreal, Quebec, Canada, H3A 1B1.

Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Vol. 16 No. 2, June 1990, 254-262
© 1990 by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc.

These studies involved a variety of populations, including working women in America (Crosby, 1982, 1984a), women in both French Canada and France (Dubé & Abbondanza, 1985), Francophones in the province of Quebec (Guimond & Dubé-Simard, 1983), and Anglophone Quebecers (Taylor, Wong-Rieger, McKirnan, & Bercusson, 1982). In each of these studies, investigating the personal/group discrimination discrepancy was not the major purpose. Indeed, Crosby (1984a) was the only one to even discuss the discrepancy directly, and she described it as "an unexpected finding" (p. 372).

The potential practical and theoretical implications of such a discrepancy are far-reaching. At the practical level, instruments designed to assess the extent of prejudice and discrimination in any particular context may very well yield different results depending on the form of the question, personal or group. At the theoretical level, despite the very tentative nature of the finding, already there have been a number of preliminary attempts to explain the personal/group discrepancy. All focus on the denial of personal discrimination as the explanatory concept (Crosby, 1984a; 1984b; Taylor & Dubé, 1986; Zanna, Crosby, & Loewenstein, 1986). Thus, it has been implicitly assumed that the relatively high levels of reported group discrimination reflect objective reality.

The exclusive focus on denial of personal discrimination as an explanation has likely arisen because subjects in Crosby's (1984a, 1984b) study reported virtually no personal experience with discrimination. The absence of reported discrimination by members of a group who are by all objective standards deprived points clearly to denial.

Even if the personal/group discrimination discrepancy emerges as a robust phenomenon, the exclusive focus on denial is premature. Two other categories of explanation are logically possible. First, it may be that the discrepancy arises not because people deny discrimination directed at them personally but, rather, because they exaggerate discrimination directed at their group as a whole. Second, beyond these motivational explanations of denial and exaggeration, it is possible that fundamental cognitive, information-processing processes account for the personal/group discrimination discrepancy.

The purpose of the present study was to directly test the personal/group discrimination discrepancy, which has to date arisen incidentally in other studies. Thus far, research has involved only groups that enjoy at least some positive status in their respective societies (e.g., women, Francophones, and Anglophones), and it is in this context that the denial explanation has arisen. In the present study, the focus was on groups whose members are often victims of overt acts of discrimination. Presumably denying personal discrimination would be more problematic for people in these circumstances.

Thus, Indian and Haitian women, both of whom constitute well-defined, visible minority groups in the context of urban Canada, were the focus of this study. Both groups of women are potential candidates for what has been labeled "multiple discrimination" (Ghosh, 1984; Moghaddam & Taylor, 1987). Members of these

groups are potential targets for racism and also for discrimination because of their very different cultural heritage, their status as newcomers to Canada, and finally their status as women. Women from India have been found to occupy a very low level in the Canadian status hierarchy (Berry, Kalin, & Taylor, 1977). The Haitian community in Montreal has received considerable public attention concerning the poor treatment it has received. Because our samples had multiple sources of potential discrimination, it was possible to make four separate tests of the discrepancy. Consequently, respondents were questioned about their perceptions of personal and group discrimination on the basis of race, culture, their status as newcomers to Canada, and gender.

METHOD

Subjects

Respondents in this study were 108 Indian women and 136 Haitian women residing in the Montreal area. The demographic profiles of the two samples were similar in important respects though certainly not identical. All respondents had arrived in Canada between 1966 and 1986.

The mean age for the Indian sample was 32.8 years. In accordance with Quebec population census information, Indian respondents were on average highly educated, 49% reporting having a university-level education. Another 27% had vocational/technical college training, leaving only 24% with high school education or less.

The mean age for the Haitian sample was 35.3. In the Haitian sample, 26% had received a university education, 39% had attended technical/vocational college, 22% had received a high school level education, and 13% had a primary school education or less. Again, this is consistent with Quebec population census data.

Procedure

The present study was part of a larger project focusing on immigrant acculturation. Respondents were interviewed individually in their own homes by trained coethnic female interviewers. Interviews with Indian respondents were conducted in Hindi, English, or any combination of these preferred by the respondent. Interviews with Haitian respondents were in French, Creole, or a combination of the two.

The decision to use coethnic interviewers in the present study was problematic in that it may have acted to increase the salience of group identity for respondents. However, for the communities studied in the present research it would have been unacceptable, from their point of view, not to use coethnic interviewers, and indeed without such interviewers the integrity of the data would have been highly suspect.

A structured interview procedure was used. The questionnaire remained with the interviewer, who read questions aloud to the individual respondent. Respondents were given a booklet of 9-point rating scales corresponding to the items in the questionnaire. Respondents gave their answers orally to the interviewer. This procedure allowed the respondents to concentrate more directly on their answers, as it freed them of the need to read the questions.

In the context of the formal interview, questions concerning the subject's experiences as new Canadians, their interest in support for assimilation and cultural heritage maintenance strategies, and a series of demographic questions were posed. The present study focused on demographic questions and those related to discrimination and privilege.

Demographic information. Background information was reported including age, marital status, religious group, length of residence in Quebec and Canada, employment, level of education, number of children, French and English proficiency, and participation in ethnic organizations.

Personal and group discrimination and privileged treatment. Respondents were first asked whether they personally had been "treated in a privileged way" because of their race. The question was then repeated with reference to their racial group as a whole. Next respondents were asked, in four separate items, whether they personally had been discriminated against because of their (a) race, (b) culture, (c) newcomer status to Canada or (d) sex. These were followed by four items asking whether Indian/Haitian women in general are discriminated against because of their (a) race, (b) culture, (c) newcomer status to Canada or (d) sex. Each item was responded to on a 9-point scale ranging from 1, *definitely no*, to 9, *definitely yes*. These eight items represented the direct measures of personal and group discrimination on four separate dimensions. The order of questioning was fixed for all respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to examine the major hypothesis, a $2 \times 4 \times 2$ analysis of variance was performed. The independent variables were ethnic group (Indian, Haitian) and the repeated measures of discrimination source (race, culture, newcomer, sex) and discrimination target (personal, group). The dependent variable was respondent's rating on the appropriate 9-point scale; higher numbers reflected greater perceived discrimination. The analysis yielded a significant three-way interaction. In addition, each of the two-way interactions and the three main effects were significant.

The results of the analysis are presented in Figure 1.

Effects for Ethnic Group

A significant main effect for ethnic group was the first finding of interest, $F(1, 235) = 32.19, p < .001$. This effect indicates that the Haitians reported significantly higher levels of discrimination ($M = 5.30$) than the Indians ($M = 4.09$). The generality of this overall difference for each potential source of discrimination is qualified by a significant two-way interaction between ethnic group and source of discrimination, $F(3, 705) = 10.46, p < .001$. Subsequent post hoc analysis using the Scheffé procedure showed that the Haitian sample reported significantly greater discrimination on the basis of race and status as a newcomer ($\alpha = .05$), but the two ethnic groups did not differ in perceived discrimination on the basis of culture or sex.

Clearly, in the context of Montreal, both groups of women perceive a good deal of discrimination. However, Haitian women see themselves and their group as the

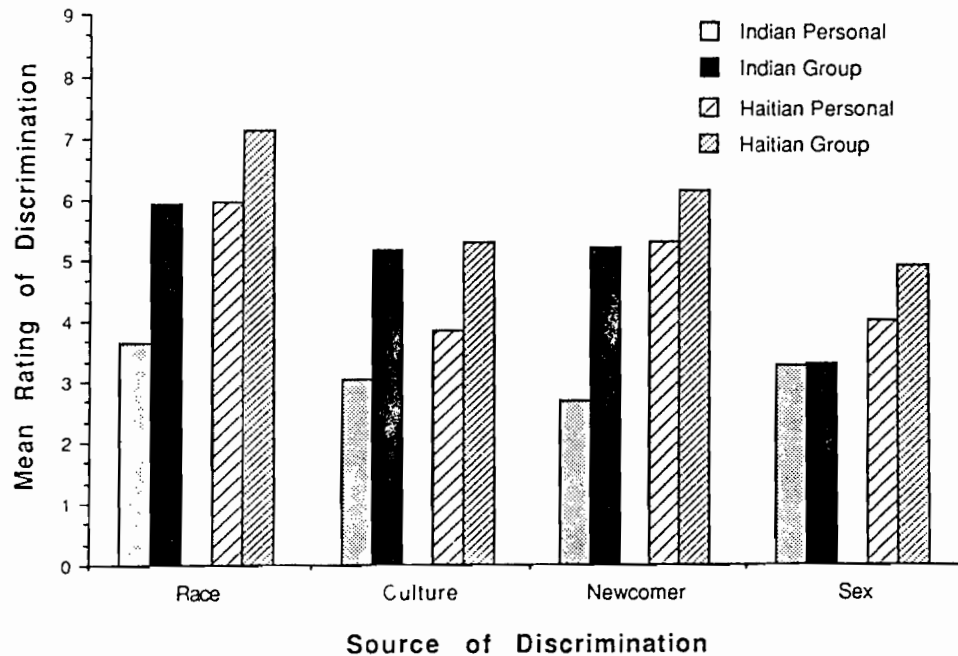


Figure 1 Significant three-way interaction involving ethnic group, source of discrimination, and discrimination target.

target of greater amounts of discrimination than Indian women do. The most compelling explanation for the greater discrimination perceived by Haitians is that at the present time they are the more numerous, the more racially visible, and the more recently arrived group. And by all public accounts, they are indeed the target for a great deal of discrimination. This explanation is reinforced by the finding that the greater discrimination perceived by Haitians centers on race and their newcomer status, not culture and gender.

Effects for Target of Discrimination

Strong support was found for the major hypothesis that ratings of group discrimination would be higher than those of personal discrimination. The significant main effect for target of discrimination, $F(1, 235) = 154.05, p < .001$, indicates that ratings for group discrimination ($M = 5.46$) were higher than those for personal discrimination ($M = 4.07$).

The main effect was embedded within a significant three-way interaction, $F(3, 705) = 14.02, p < .001$ (see Figure 1). What emerges from post hoc analyses is, first, that the differential ratings for group and personal discrimination are robust. The group discrimination ratings are higher for both Haitian and Indian women on all four sources of discrimination: race, culture, newcomer, and sex. Indeed, analysis using

the Newman-Keuls procedure shows that the only mean difference that does not reach statistical significance ($\alpha = .05$) involves discrimination on the basis of sex as perceived by the Indian women.

The three-way interaction arises because the magnitude of the personal/group discrepancy is larger for Indian than for Haitian women and because of variations in this trend as a function of discrimination source (e.g., race vs. sex).

Despite these variations, there is strong support for the personal/group discrepancy in perceived discrimination. In this direct test of the phenomenon, a consistent tendency to indicate greater group than personal discrimination emerges. In addition, for the first time the discrepancy arises in the context of groups whose levels of perceived personal discrimination are much higher than those reported previously by women (Crosby, 1982; Dubé & Abbondanza, 1985) and language groups in Quebec (Guimond & Dubé-Simard, 1983; Taylor et al., 1982).

Possible Explanations for the Personal/Group Discrimination Discrepancy

The present findings not only establish the personal/group discrimination discrepancy but also point to the need to consider a broader array of potential explanations for the phenomenon than have been suggested to date. There would seem to be three primary categories of possible explanation. The first, and the only one to be raised thus far in the literature, involves a motivational account centering on the denial of personal discrimination. Denial usually implies the failure to recognize the reality of an event. Consistent with this definition, subjects in previous research have reported virtually no experience with discrimination at the personal level. The relatively high levels of personal discrimination reported by respondents in the present study (see Figure 1) would seem to indicate that they were not totally denying personal discrimination. The present findings, therefore, cast some doubt on the value of denial as the only explanatory mechanism.

However, it would be premature to dismiss denial entirely at this stage. For example, because the end points on the rating scales were labeled *definitely no*, any ratings below the midpoint might be interpreted as reflecting some level of denial. Nevertheless, the fact that respondents did not tend to make low ratings on the questions about personal discrimination suggests that the extreme nature of the term *denial* may be misleading. Even as a motivational account, the responses of the present respondents may be more accurately described as possibly "minimizing" personal discrimination.

The second category of explanation for the personal/group discrepancy involves exaggeration of discrimination at the group level by respondents. In previous research this possibility has not been raised, no doubt because in the absence of compelling data it would be unpopular to suggest that minority groups exaggerate claims of discrimination.

Nevertheless, in certain circumstances group members may well be motivated to exaggerate group-directed discrimination. For example, claims of discrimination can be used as a basis for promoting social change designed to improve the status of a

minority group. As well, it can be self-serving for individuals if they experience personal success in spite of discrimination against their group. It may be difficult for individuals to bias their perceptions of their own concrete personal discrimination, but when they make judgments at the more abstract group level, motivational biases may well come into play.

The present results do not provide any direct evidence for the existence of exaggeration at the group level, nor is there any indication that ratings of group discrimination are completely reality based. The ratings are, however, high enough to suggest that the possibility of exaggeration of group discrimination deserves at least the same theoretical and empirical attention as the possibility of minimization of personal discrimination.

The third category of explanation is a cognitive, or information-processing, account of the personal/group discrimination discrepancy. The most direct form of such an explanation would be that the individual uses an "additive" strategy. That is, when asked about a group experience, the respondent may add to her own personal experiences with discrimination those of others with whom she is familiar, such as relatives and friends. By sheer numbers this group total would be more than the total for the individual. And indeed, if false consensus and projection effects operate in the present context (see Marks & Miller, 1987; Mullen et al., 1985, for reviews), any rating for group discrimination would be well above that for personal discrimination.

If, however, the discrimination discrepancy arises because of this "additive" strategy, then any question directed at the group level should evoke the same outcome. In the present study two questions were asked about respondents' experiences with *privileged* treatment because of race at both the personal and the group level. If an "additive" strategy is operating at the group level, ratings for privileged racial treatment at the group level should be higher than personal ratings.

In order to test this hypothesis, separate two-tailed *t* tests were performed for the two ethnic samples. A significant difference between privileged treatment directed at the person and at the group was found for both the Haitian, $t(135) = 6.63, p < .05$, and Indian, $t(107) = 12.45, p < .001$, samples. Both ethnic groups indicated that they *personally* ($M = 3.63$ for the Haitians; $M = 2.69$ for the Indians) received more privileged treatment than their respective *groups* did ($M = 3.25$ for the Haitians; $M = 2.28$ for the Indians). These results are inconsistent with an explanation that predicts higher ratings for the group because of an additive process.

Although this finding is inconsistent with an "additive" explanation, it is possible that the focus on privileged treatment may have affected the results. That is, asking respondents about their experiences with racial privilege, when they are clearly the targets for discrimination, may be so unusual as not to yield meaningful results.

The "additive process" is but one of many cognitive processes that may operate. For example, it could be that information about discrimination represents a greater proportion of the sum total of information available about the group than of the total information available about the individual. Given that respondents have a finite inventory of information concerning their group, a propensity by the media and within-group gossip to highlight extreme acts of discrimination could result in a

relatively large proportion of this store being devoted to discriminatory events. The proportion of personal experiences with discrimination relative to the wealth of other events might be considerably smaller. The investigation of this type of "availability of information" approach might serve to provide a cognitive basis for this discrepancy.

Finally, it is possible that, despite both the personal and group questions mentioning the respondent's group membership, group identity was triggered differentially. That is, perhaps group identity was made more salient in the "group" question, whereas more personal aspects of identity were evoked in the "individual" question (see Reicher, 1986; Turner, 1987). The result then might be that respondents focused on quite different information stores for the two questions, accounting for the higher levels of discrimination for the "group" question.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study explored the personal/group discrimination discrepancy by focusing on two visible minority groups in terms of four potential dimensions for discrimination. The results indicate that the tendency for group members to perceive a higher level of discrimination to be directed at their group as a whole than to be directed at themselves as individual members of that group is a robust phenomenon.

To date the explanatory mechanism proposed for the personal/group discrimination discrepancy has been some form of denial of personal discrimination. In the present study respondents did perceive moderate levels of personal discrimination, thus casting some doubt on denial as the sole explanation. At best respondents may be minimizing their personal experience with discrimination. However, two additional categories of explanation require attention: (a) the possibility that individuals exaggerate group discrimination and (b) a number of important cognitive information-processing mechanisms.

REFERENCES

- Berry, J. W., Kalin, R., & Taylor, D. M. (1977). *Multiculturalism and ethnic attitudes in Canada*. Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada.
- Crosby, F. (1982). *Relative deprivation and working women*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Crosby, F. (1984a). The denial of personal discrimination. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 27, 371-386.
- Crosby, F. (1984b). Relative deprivation in organizational settings. *Research in organizational behavior: An annual series of analytic essays and critical reviews*, 6, 51-93.
- Dubé, L., & Abbondanza, M. (1985). *A personal and collective look at the situation between the sexes: Differences, justice and causal attribution*. Unpublished manuscript, Université de Montreal.
- Ghosh, R. (1984). Education, gender and the immigrant experience. In R. J. Samuda, J. W. Berry, & M. Laferriere (Eds.), *Multiculturalism in Canada: Social and educational perspectives*. Newton, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Guimond, S., & Dubé-Simard, L. (1983). Relative deprivation theory and the Quebec nationalist movement: The cognitive-emotion distinction and the personal-group deprivation issue. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44(3), 526-535.

- Marks, G., & Miller, N. (1987). Ten years of research on the false-consensus effect: An empirical and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, *102*, 72-90.
- Moghaddam, F. M., & Taylor, D. M. (1987). The meaning of multiculturalism for visible minority immigrant women. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, *19*, 122-139.
- Mullen, B., Atkins, J. L., Champion, D. S., Edwards, C., Hardy, D., Story, J., & Vanderklok, M. (1985). The false consensus effect: A meta-analysis of 115 hypothesis tests. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *21*, 262-283.
- Reicher, S. (1986). Contact, action and racialization: Some British evidence. In M. Hewstone & R. Brown (Eds.), *Contact and conflict in intergroup encounters*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Taylor, D. M., & Dubé, L. (1986). Two faces of identity: The "I" and the "we." *Journal of Social Issues*, *72*, 81-98.
- Taylor, D. M., Wong-Rieger, D., McKirman, D. J., & Bercusson, T. (1982). Social comparison in a group context. *Journal of Social Psychology*, *117*, 257-269.
- Turner, J. C. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Zanna, M. P., Crosby, F., & Loewenstein, G. (1986). Male reference groups and discontent among female professionals. In F. A. Gutek & L. Larwood (Eds.), *Women's career development*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

