Attributions to discrimination and self-esteem: Impact of group identification and situational ambiguity

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Abstract

This study examined group identification and situational ambiguity as moderators of attributions to discrimination and self-esteem following negative feedback. As predicted, high gender-identified women made more discrimination attributions than low identified women when situational prejudice cues were ambiguous, but not when prejudice cues were absent or overt. Also as predicted, women exposed to overt prejudice cues had higher self-esteem than those exposed to ambiguous cues or no prejudice cues. The relationship between discrimination attributions and self-esteem was positive among women exposed to overt prejudice but negative among those exposed to no prejudice. Across conditions, however, the more that women discounted ability as a cause of their negative feedback (i.e., blamed discrimination more than ability), the higher their self-esteem. Results qualify and extend prior research and demonstrate that personal and situational factors moderate both the tendency to make attributions to discrimination and the consequences of those attributions for self-esteem.

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What is it like to be a target of prejudice—to regularly face discrimination because of one’s race, religion, or sex? One consequence of this predicament is attributional ambiguity—uncertainty about whether the outcomes you receive are indicators of something about you as an individual, or indicators of social prejudices that other people have against you because of your stigma (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major & Crocker, 1993). Although attributional ambiguity can be problematic for the stigmatized, Crocker and Major (1989) posed the provocative hypothesis that it might also provide an opportunity for self-esteem protection when personal outcomes are negative. Specifically, they predicted that attributing negative treatment to pre-

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When do members of stigmatized groups attribute negative outcomes to discrimination?

Some studies suggest that members of stigmatized groups are highly sensitive to the possibility that they are being discriminated against and blame negative outcomes on discrimination when it is a plausible cause of their outcomes. For example, women who receive negative outcomes from men are more likely to blame those outcomes on discrimination than are women who receive the same outcomes from women (Dion, 1975); Jewish students who receive negative outcomes from Gentiles frequently mention their religion as a cause (Dion & Earn, 1975); women who receive negative feedback on an essay from a male evaluator who holds very traditional attitudes toward women are more likely to attribute the feedback to his prejudice than women who receive negative feedback from an evaluator with liberal attitudes towards women (Crocker, Voelkl, TESTA, & Major, 1991; Experiment 1), and Black students who receive negative interpersonal feedback from a White student who can see them (and hence knows their race) are more likely to attribute the feedback to prejudice than Black students who receive the same feedback from a White evaluator who cannot see them (Crocker et al., 1991, Experiment 2).

Other studies, in contrast, suggest that members of stigmatized groups are relatively insensitive to cues indicating that they are personally victims of prejudice. For example, only a small minority of women who experience unwanted sex-related behaviors on the job that objectively qualify as sexual harassment acknowledge that they have been "sexually harassed" (Magley, Hulin, Fitzgerald, & DeNardo, 1999). Members of stigmatized groups typically report experiencing less discrimination directed against themselves personally than they perceive directed against their group (see Crosby, 1982; Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990, for reviews). Finally, recent evidence suggests that even when they experience affective discomfort during an interaction with a prejudiced other, members of stigmatized groups may fail to realize that prejudice was the source of their distress (Vorauer & Kunhyr, 2001).

We suggest that these differing results may be due to personal and situational variables that moderate the likelihood of attributing negative outcomes to discrimination. An attribution to discrimination involves the judgment that: (1) the individual (or group) was treated unjustly and (2) the treatment was based on social identity/group membership (Major et al., 2002). Accordingly, personal and situational factors that increase the likelihood that outcomes are seen as linked to group membership and are seen as unjust should increase the likelihood that individuals will attribute those outcomes to discrimination.

Group identification. One individual difference factor likely to increase the perception that unjust outcomes are linked to group membership is the extent to which an individual is identified with his or her stigmatized group. Group identification can be defined as the centrality or importance of group membership to self-definition (Tropp & Wright, 2001). 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. Group identification may also increase the likelihood that intergroup rather than interpersonal comparisons will be made in ambiguous situations (Gurin, 1985). Thus, individuals who are highly group identified might be more likely to view the world through the lens of their group membership and favor group-level explanations for events over individual-level explanations. Accordingly, when individuals who are highly identified with their group are placed in situations in which there are cues that unjust treatment may have occurred, they may more readily make the cognitive leap from judgments of personal injustice to judgments of group-based injustice, i.e., discrimination. For these reasons, Crocker and Major (1989) hypothesized that the more central group membership is to an individual, the more likely he or she would be to make attributions to discrimination.²

Several 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 & Townshend, 1986; Major et al., 2002). The correlational nature of these studies, however, makes it impossible to discern the causal direction of this relationship. Branscombe and colleagues (Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001) argue that increased group identification is an outcome, rather than an antecedent to perceptions of prejudice. There is some experimental evidence consistent with this hypothesis (Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001). While we do not disagree that increased group identification may be a response to perceiving discrimination against one's group, we also believe that the

²Group identification can be distinguished from individual differences in sensitivity to stigmatization, such as stigma consciousness (Pinel, 1999), sensitivity to sexism (Stangor, Sechrist, & Swim, 2001), and race-based rejection sensitivity (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002). Measures of sensitivity to stigmatization assess 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). Unlike these constructs, the construct of group identification does not overlap conceptually with perceived discrimination. Furthermore, group identification among stigmatized groups tends to be positively associated with self-esteem (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999), whereas measures of stigma sensitivity tend to be negatively associated with self-esteem (e.g., Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002).
reverse direction occurs. That is, we predicted that group identification would influence the way in which attributionally ambiguous circumstances are construed and explained.

Clarity of discrimination. A situational factor likely to moderate attributions to discrimination is the clarity, or intensity, of cues to prejudice in the situation. As situational clarity of cues to prejudice increases, the likelihood that negative outcomes will be attributed to discrimination should increase as well (Crocker et al., 1991, Study 1; Feldman-Barrett & Swim, 1998; Operario & Fiske, 2001, Study 2). Clarity of cues to prejudice in the situation may interact, however, with individual differences in ingroup identification to influence attributions to discrimination. According to Snyder and Ickes (1985), ‘strong’ situations have salient cues that are likely to guide behavior, whereas ‘weak’ situations contain few or no guiding cues to behavior. Snyder and Ickes argue that in strong situations, salient contextual cues are likely to overwhelm the influence of individual differences on behavior. In contrast, in weak situations, individual differences are more likely to be influential.

Situations in which cues to potential prejudice are overt (and another’s prejudice is a salient cause of outcomes) or absent (and one’s own performance is a salient cause of outcomes) are likely to be “strong” situations, whereas situations that are attributionally ambiguous are more likely to be “weak” situations.

Based on this reasoning, we predicted that individual differences in group identification would influence attributions to discrimination in attributionally ambiguous situations, but not in situations in which cues to prejudice were overt or absent. We tested this prediction in an experiment in which women high and low in gender identification received negative performance feedback under one of three prejudice conditions: no cues, ambiguous cues, or overt cues. In the absence of situational cues suggestive of prejudice, we expected that women, regardless of their level of gender identification, would be unlikely to blame negative performance feedback on discrimination. In the presence of strong, overt situational cues to prejudice, in contrast, we expected that women would be quite likely to attribute negative performance feedback to discrimination, regardless of their level of gender identification. In the presence of attributionally ambiguous cues, we expected women high in gender identification to be more likely than women low in gender identification to blame negative performance feedback on discrimination.

Does attributing negative outcomes to prejudice protect self-esteem?

A second issue addressed in this study concerned the self-esteem implications of being able to attribute negative outcomes to discrimination. Drawing on Kelley’s (1973) discounting principle and cognitive theories of emotion (e.g., Weiner, 1985), Dion (1975) and Crocker and Major (1989) proposed that awareness that others may discriminate against one’s group can protect self-esteem. In particular, Crocker and Major (1989) speculated that attributing negative outcomes to discrimination (presumably an external factor) would protect self-esteem from negative outcomes because it would allow an individual to discount ability (or other internal factors) as causal. Consistent with the hypothesis that attributions to prejudice can protect self-esteem, Dion (1975) found that women who received severe negative feedback from male opponents and believed it was due to prejudice had higher self-esteem than women who did not see their male competitors as prejudiced. Crocker et al. (1991, Experiment 1) found that women who received negative feedback from a sexist male counterpart had less depressed affect and marginally higher self-esteem than women who received negative feedback from an evaluator with liberal attitudes towards women. Major, Kaiser, and McCoy (in press) found that women randomly assigned to a condition in which rejection appeared to be due to a sexist professor had higher self-esteem than women assigned to a condition where rejection appeared to be due to presumptions about their lack of ability.

Some researchers, however, argue that acknowledging discrimination against oneself or one’s group is not self-protective, and may in fact be damaging to self-esteem. Specifically, Schmitt and Branscombe (2001) contend that because one’s group membership is an aspect of self, attributions to prejudice have a strong internal component. Furthermore, they argue that because attributions to prejudice threaten an important aspect of self (one’s social identity), “attributions to prejudice...are detrimental to the psychological well-being of the disadvantaged.” Support for this perspective comes from correlational studies demonstrating that the more members of stigmatized groups perceive themselves (or their group) as victims of pervasive discrimination, the poorer their psychological well-being and the lower their self-esteem. For example, among women, reports of being exposed to sexist events are positively correlated with depression, anxiety, and somatization (Klonoff, Landrine, & Campbell, 2000) and with lower self-esteem.

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3 This prediction contradicts findings of Ruggiero and Taylor (1995, 1997) who reported that attributions to discrimination among members of stigmatized groups are relatively insensitive to the objective probabilities of discrimination present in the situation. Their results, however, should be interpreted with caution. Studies conducted outside of Ruggiero’s laboratory using the same paradigm have been unable to replicate their findings (e.g., Inman, in press; Kaiser & Miller, 2001a, 2001b). Furthermore, Ruggiero has retracted four of her other papers from publication, admitting that the data in those papers were invalid.
(Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrnyowicz, & Owen, 2002; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Perceiving oneself as a victim of pervasive prejudice also is associated with lower personal and collective self-esteem among African Americans (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Interestingly, evidence that attributions to discrimination are positively related to self-esteem comes predominantly from experimental studies that examine reactions to a specific threatening event (e.g., a rejection) where discrimination is a possible explanation for the event. In contrast, evidence that attributions to discrimination are negatively related to self-esteem comes predominantly from correlational studies that examine chronic tendencies to perceive discrimination. When people are asked on questionnaires whether they have been victims of prejudice (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt et al., 2002), individual differences that are associated both with perceiving oneself as a victim and with poor psychological well-being, such as rejection sensitivity (Downey and Feldman, 1986), may contribute to a negative relationship between subjective perceptions of discrimination and well-being (see Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002, for an example). The interpretive ambiguity of correlational results is exacerbated by the fact that, in most correlational studies, one does not know the actual level of discrimination to which that individual has been exposed. Indeed, one might be able to reconcile the disparity of findings in the literature by examining the extent to which an attribution to discrimination is warranted by the objective evidence that discrimination has taken place.

In the present study we examined whether the situational clarity or ambiguity of prejudice cues moderates self-esteem following negative feedback. We predicted that self-esteem would be more protected from negative feedback in situations where there are clear cues indicating prejudice than in situations in which cues to prejudice are absent or ambiguous. This prediction was derived from Crocker and Major (1989, p. 621), who 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. When one is faced with blatant prejudice...it is clear that the proper attribution for negative outcomes is prejudice...the ambiguity surrounding both positive and negative treatment that may result from covert prejudice is problematical for the stigmatized individual." Although we did not make strong predictions in the case where cues to prejudice are absent or ambiguous, we examined the possibility that attributing one's negative outcomes to discrimination in a situation that does not clearly support that explanation might actually be harmful to one's self-esteem. Additionally, we explored whether group identification moderates the extent to which an attribution to discrimination is self-protective.

Finally, we tested the hypothesis that attributions to discrimination protect self-esteem to the extent that they lead individuals to discount their own role in producing negative events. The discounting principle (Kelley, 1973) assumes that explanations of actions commonly involve a trade-off between causes internal and external to a person. Contrary to the discounting principle, however, internal and external causes for events are not necessarily inversely related (McClore, 1998). Increased ratings of personal causes often have no effect on ratings of situational causes and vice versa. One implication of this analysis is that perceiving that another person is prejudiced against one's group does not preclude blaming a negative outcome on aspects of oneself, such as one's lack of ability. Similarly, perceiving that one is poorly qualified for a position does not preclude blaming one's rejection on another's prejudice. Consequently, self-esteem in response to negative events may depend on the relative degree to which individuals blame a negative event on discrimination or on themselves, i.e., their degree of discounting. We reasoned that the relationship between internal and external causal factors, and thus the discounting process, is affected by the clarity or ambiguity of prejudice cues in the situation. The more obvious prejudice is in a situation, the more that discounting should occur. When situations contain no cues to prejudice, in contrast, attributions to discrimination may occur relatively independently of attributions to ability. Personal self-esteem should be protected by attributions to discrimination when they lead individuals to discount self-blame (see Major et al., in press).

Method

Participants and design

Eighty-seven female undergraduates at the University of California, Santa Barbara participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Several weeks prior to the experiment, all participants had participated in a prescreening session in which they completed the Identity subscale of the Collective Self-Esteem (CSE) scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) and the performance and social subscales of State Self-esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). The 4-item Identity subscale was phrased to assess identification with women as a social group (e.g., "Being a woman is an important reflection of who I am;" \(a = .81\)). The 7-item subscales of the State Self-esteem Scale assessed the extent to which individuals were feeling good about their abilities (e.g., "I feel
confident about my abilities;” \( \alpha = .83 \) and their social skills (e.g., “I feel self-conscious;” reverse scored, \( \alpha = .85 \)) at that moment. All scales were completed on a 0 (Not at All) to 6 (Very Much) response format.

To obtain samples of unambiguously high and low gender identified women, we selected randomly those whose group identification scores fell in the top 40% \( (n = 41) \) and the bottom 40% \( (n = 46) \) of the distribution based on the full sample in the prescreening session. These women were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions. The design was a 2 (Gender Identification: Low vs. High) \( \times \) 3 (Prejudice Cues: None vs. Ambiguous vs. Overt) between-subjects factorial. Cell sizes ranged from 13 to 18 participants.

**Procedure**

Participants were run in four-person groups that included two participants, one female confederate, and one male confederate. A male confederate participated to give the appearance that both women and men were being studied, thereby reducing suspicion regarding the actual purpose of the experiment. The female confederate delivered the prejudice cues manipulation (described below). Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants were greeted by a European-American female experimenter and seated at one of four tables, arranged so as to minimize the possibility of discussion among participants. The experimenter informed participants that they would be taking a creativity test and that their answers to the test would be evaluated by a male graduate student who would grade their responses on both quantity (the number of uses they listed for each of several items) and quality (the level of creativity, imagination, and inventiveness of each response). To emphasize the desirability of doing well, participants were told that the student in each session who the evaluator judged to have the highest level of creative potential would be the “team leader” for a second creativity task. Participants learned that if they were not selected as team leader, they would have to take direction from the team leader on the second creativity task. Participants were also told that the person selected as the team leader would receive an extra bonus—a chance to win $100 in a lottery.

Before beginning the creative potential task, participants were asked to fill out their gender, their code number, and the time of the session at the top of the form the evaluator would use to grade their responses. The experimenter then instructed the participants to begin the task, which involved listing as many creative uses as possible for five items (ice, crayon, shoelace, book, and rubber band). After 5 min, the experimenter collected the tests, gave participants a filler questionnaire to complete, and briefly left the room (ostensibly to deliver the tests to the male graduate student who would score them). After returning to the room for approximately 8 min, the experimenter again left the room to collect the test results. While the experimenter was out of the room, the female confederate introduced the experimental manipulation of prejudice cues (see below). The experimenter was blind to the experimental manipulation.

Upon returning to the room, the experimenter distributed a folder to each participant containing their test feedback as well as the dependent measures. Each participant received feedback indicating that they were below average in imagination, intellectual inventiveness, and overall creative potential, that they had received an overall grade of “D,” and that they had not been selected as team leader for the second project. To further reinforce the negative feedback, the experimenter also announced that the person selected as the team leader for the second project should see her when finished to receive the lottery ticket and information about the team leader role. After giving participants time to digest their feedback, the experimenter asked them to complete the accompanying questionnaires. When both participants had finished, they were fully and carefully debriefed and informed of all deceptions following procedures recommended by Aronson, Brewer, and Carlsmith (1985). All were then entered into the lottery and the $100 prize was awarded at the completion of the experiment.

**Manipulation of prejudice cues.** Our manipulation of situational prejudice cues was based on a procedure developed by Bylsma, Major, and Cozzarelli (1995). When the experimenter left the room (ostensibly to retrieve the test results), the female confederate delivered the manipulation by making one of three general statements, spoken to the group at large. In the No Prejudice Cues (NP) condition, she stated, “You know, I hope this doesn’t go longer than an hour because I have an appointment across campus.” In the Ambiguous Prejudice Cues (AP) 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 Overt Prejudice Cues (OP) condition, she said, “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 the team leader—he always picks a guy.” To make the prejudice cues even more explicit in the OP condition, participants also heard the experimenter announce that the male confederate was selected as team leader and saw her give him a lottery ticket and a sheet explaining the team leader role.

**Dependent measures**

**Attributions.** Our primary dependent measure was the extent to which participants attributed their poor feed-
back to sex discrimination. Participants were asked to what extent their performance evaluation on the creative potential task was due to: "Sex discrimination," "Unfair treatment against you," and "Prejudiced evaluator." In addition, participants were asked, "To what extent do you think that the evaluator grades women unfairly?" All items were rated on a scale ranging from 0 (Not at all) to 6 (Very Much). Responses were averaged to form an index of attributions to discrimination ($z = .89$). Participants were also asked to what extent their performance evaluation was due to their "creative ability" (a stable, internal cause) as well as several other causes. In order to assess discounting (the extent to which women attributed a negative outcome to discrimination rather than to their personal abilities), we computed a discounting variable by standardizing attributions to discrimination and ability, and subtracting attributions to ability from attributions to discrimination.

Self-esteem. Post-feedback self-esteem was assessed subsequent to the attribution measures using the same performance and social state-self esteem scales participants had completed prior to the experiment (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). The subscales were reliable (performance $z = .84$; social $z = .93$) and highly correlated ($r = .82$, $p < .001$) in the experimental context.

When do women attribute negative outcomes to discrimination?

We analyzed attributions with 2 (Gender Identification: High vs. Low) $\times$ 3 (Prejudice Cues: No Cues vs. Ambiguous Cues vs. Overt Cues) between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVAs). There was a significant main effect of prejudice cues on women's attributions to sex discrimination, $F(1, 81) = 38.68$, $p < .001$. Tukey HSD tests revealed that women in the Overt Prejudice Cues (OP) condition ($M = 3.94$) were significantly more likely to attribute their failure to discrimination than women in the Ambiguous Prejudice Cues (AP) condition ($M = 3.00$) who were in turn significantly more likely to attribute their failure to discrimination than women in the No Prejudice Cues (NP) condition ($M = 1.14$), all $ps < .05$.

As predicted, however, this main effect was moderated by gender identification, $F(1, 81) = 3.30$, $p < .05$ (see Table 1). The main effect of gender identification was not significant, $F(1, 81) = 1.73$, $p > .05$. Simple effects tests of the interaction revealed that attributes to discrimination varied as a function of gender identification only in the AP condition. Women exposed to ambiguous cues who were highly gender identified were more likely to attribute their negative feedback to sex discrimination ($M = 3.65$) than women who were low in gender identification ($M = 2.35$), $F(1, 81) = 7.17$, $p < .05$. In the NP condition, women who were high ($M = 0.95$) and low ($M = 1.34$) in gender identification did not differ in their attributions to discrimination, $F < 1$. Likewise, in the OP condition, women who were high ($M = 4.00$) and low ($M = 3.86$) in gender identification did not differ in their attributions to discrimination, $F < 1$.

Additional simple effect tests showed that the experimental manipulation had significant effects on

Results

There were no differences between experimental conditions on any pre-test variables (i.e., gender identification, initial performance or social self-esteem), all $F$s < 1. All participants correctly indicated that they had received a 'D' on their creativity test and had been rejected for the leadership role. Results are organized according to the major questions addressed.

Table 1
Attributions to discrimination and ability as a function of situational cues to prejudice and gender identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No prejudice</th>
<th>Ambiguous prejudice</th>
<th>Overt prejudice</th>
<th>$F$ for simple effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attributions to discrimination$^a$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low gender identified</td>
<td>1.34$^a$</td>
<td>2.35$^a$</td>
<td>3.86$^b$</td>
<td>14.50$^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High gender identified</td>
<td>.95$^a$</td>
<td>3.65$^b$</td>
<td>4.00$^b$</td>
<td>27.81$^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$ for Simple effect</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>7.17$^*$</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributions to ability$^b$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low gender identified</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High gender identified</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discounting$^c$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low gender identified</td>
<td>-1.07</td>
<td>-13</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High gender identified</td>
<td>-1.18</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Responses could range from 0 to 6. Means within each row not sharing the same subscript differ significantly according to Tukey HSD tests.

$^a$ Significant interaction, $F(1, 81) = 3.30$, $p < .05$.

$^b$ No significant effects.

$^c$ Significant main effect of prejudice cues, $F(2, 81) = 16.18$, $p < .001$.

$^{**}p < .05$.

$^{***}p < .001$. 
attributions to discrimination among both high, \(F(1, 81) = 27.81, p < .001\), and low identified women, \(F(1, 81) = 14.50, p < .001\). The pattern differed; however, for high and low identified women. Tukey HSD tests showed that among women low in gender identification, attributions to discrimination were significantly higher in the OP condition than in either the AP condition or the NP condition, which did not differ from one another. In contrast, among women who were high in gender identification, attributions to discrimination were equally high in the OP and AP conditions, and higher in both conditions than the NP condition.

**Attributions to ability.** We examined the effects of prejudice cues and gender identification on participants' attributions to creative ability with a 2 × 3 ANOVA. Results yielded no significant main effects or interactions, all ps > .10. Women in the no prejudice condition \((M = 2.83)\) were just as likely to attribute their feedback to ability as were women in the ambiguous cue condition \((M = 1.96)\) and the overt prejudice condition \((M = 2.46)\). There were no effects for group identification.

**Discounting: The relationship between attributions to ability and discrimination.** Consistent with McClure's (1998) observation that internal and external causes are not necessarily seen as inversely related, attributions to creative ability were only slightly negatively correlated with attributions to discrimination overall, \(r = -.17, p = .11\). Inspection of the within cell correlations revealed that the relationship was negative and marginally significant in the overt prejudice condition \((r = -.33, p < .07)\), negative but not significant in the ambiguous prejudice condition \((r = -.22, p > .10)\), and positive, although not significant, in no prejudice cues condition \((r = .10, p > .10)\). When comparing the two extreme conditions (NP and OP), these relationships were marginally different from one another, \(z = 1.64, p = .10\). Although not conclusive, these correlations suggest that situational factors affect discounting.

Results of a 2 × 3 ANOVA on the discounting variable revealed a significant main effect of prejudice cue condition, \(F(2, 81) = 16.18, p < .001\). Women discounted ability significantly more in the presence of overt prejudice \((M = 0.66)\) or ambiguous prejudice \((M = 0.45)\) than they did in the absence of prejudice cues \((M = -1.13)\). Discounting differed significantly from zero in the NP condition, \(t(28) = -5.00, p < .001\), and the OP condition, \(t(31) = 2.73, p < .01\), but not in the AP condition, \(t(25) = 1.65, p < .12\), suggesting that women favored making an internal attribution over a prejudice attribution when there were no cues to prejudice in the situation, but favored making a prejudice attribution over an internal attribution when the cues to prejudice were very clear. We also observed a trend such that high gender identified women were marginally more likely to discount ability relative to discrimination \((M = 0.69)\) than were low gender identified women \((M = -0.21), F(1, 81) = 3.36, p < .10\). The interaction was not significant, \(F(1, 81) = 1.64, p > .10\).

**Does exposure to prejudice protect self-esteem from negative feedback?**

Our next analysis examined the impact of exposure to prejudice cues and gender identification on self-esteem. We submitted post-feedback performance self-esteem and post-feedback social self-esteem to separate 2 (Gender Identification) × 3 (Prejudice Cues) ANCOVAs, controlling for pre-measures of the respective domain-specific self-esteem (the homogeneity of regression assumption of ANCOVA was met). As might be expected from the very high correlation we reported earlier between post-feedback performance and social self-esteem \((r = .81)\), these analyses yielded the same pattern of results. Accordingly, we averaged women's responses to all 14 self-esteem items to yield a highly reliable measure of state self-esteem \((x = .94)\) that we used in all subsequent analyses. Means reported are adjusted for initial self-esteem.

Results of a 2 × 3 ANCOVA on state self-esteem revealed a significant main effect of Prejudice Cues, \(F(1, 80) = 6.25, p < .001\). Consistent with predictions, planned comparisons indicated that women's self-esteem in the OP condition \((M = 4.48)\) was significantly higher than in the NP condition \((M = 3.91)\). Self-esteem in the OP condition also was significantly higher than the AP condition \((M = 3.52)\). Self-esteem in the NP and AP conditions did not differ significantly. Gender identification had no main or interactive effect, both \(F < 1\).

**Is the relationship between attributions and self-esteem moderated by personal or situational factors?**

The ANCOVA results illustrate that the nature of prejudice in the situation affected women's self-esteem, but they do not address the question of how women's subjective perception of prejudice in the situation relates to their self-esteem, nor whether this relationship varies across different types of situations or people. Thus, the goal of our final series of analyses was to test whether the relationship between attributions and self-esteem was moderated by the clarity of the situational cues to prejudice and/or by level of gender identification. We performed three separate moderated regression analyses to examine whether, (1) attributions to discrimination, (2) attributions to ability, or (3) discounting were differentially predictive of self-esteem as a function of situational cues or gender identification. Because the situational cues to prejudice variable had three levels, it was represented by two dummy-coded variables in these analyses (one that captures the NP vs. OP comparison and one that captures the AP vs. OP comparison) with
the OP condition as the reference group. Hierarchical analyses were used because the test of each main effect or interaction involving situational cues to prejudice needed to be represented as two terms entered together on a single step. Thus, the interaction between attributions to discrimination and situational cues predicting post-failure self-esteem is tested as the change in $R^2$ for the step of the analysis including two component terms: attributions to discrimination $\times$ the NP vs. OP cues and attributions to discrimination $\times$ the AP vs. OP cues.

**Attributions to discrimination.** On Step 1 of the analysis predicting post-failure feedback state self-esteem, we entered initial self-esteem as a covariate. On Step 2, we entered gender identification (dummy coded $0 =$ low and $1 =$ high). On Step 3, we entered the two dummy coded variables representing our experimental manipulation of cues to prejudice (NP vs. OP and AP vs. OP). On Step 4, we entered attributions to discrimination. On Step 5, we entered the two components of the predicted attribution to discrimination by situation interaction: attribution $\times$ NP vs. OP cues and attribution $\times$ AP vs. OP cues. On Step 6, we entered the two component terms of the gender identification by situation interaction: gender identification $\times$ NP vs. OP cues and gender identification $\times$ AP vs. OP cues. On Step 7, we entered the gender identification by attribution to discrimination interaction. And on Step 8, we entered the two component terms of the three-way interaction: gender identification $\times$ attribution $\times$ NP vs. OP cues, and gender identification $\times$ attribution $\times$ AP vs. OP cues. The changes in $R^2$ at each step in this analysis are summarized in Table 2.

Not surprisingly, initial self-esteem was a significant predictor of post-failure feedback self-esteem. Similarly, as already presented in the above ANOVAs, the experimental manipulation had an additional significant effect on self-esteem when entered on Step 3. Neither the inclusion of gender identification (on Step 2) nor attributions to discrimination (on Step 4) contributed significantly to our ability to account for variance in self-esteem. However, on Step 5, the overall interaction between attributions to discrimination and situational cues to prejudice was significant. On Step 8, one term of the three-way interaction was marginally significant ($p < .10$), but the overall three-way interaction was not. None of the other interactions approached significance.

To probe the nature of the significant two-way interaction, we first examined the two component terms entered on that step of the analysis. The term representing attributions to discrimination $\times$ NP vs. OP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Term Description</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$\Delta R^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Covariate</td>
<td>Initial self-esteem</td>
<td>.533***</td>
<td>.284***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender identification (GI)</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Experimental manipulation of cues to prejudice</td>
<td>NP vs. OP cues</td>
<td>-.205*</td>
<td>.093**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AP vs. OP cues</td>
<td>-.343***</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4: Attribution</td>
<td>Attribution to discrimination (ATD)</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.053*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ATD $\times$ NP vs. OP cues</td>
<td>-.484**</td>
<td>.197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ATD $\times$ AP vs. OP cues</td>
<td>.070</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6: GI $\times$ cues to prejudice interaction</td>
<td>GI $\times$ NP vs. OP cues</td>
<td>.093</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GI $\times$ AP vs. OP cues</td>
<td>-.063</td>
<td>.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 7: ATD $\times$ GI Interaction</td>
<td>ATD $\times$ GI</td>
<td>-.126</td>
<td>.247*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 8: Three-way interaction</td>
<td>GI $\times$ ATD $\times$ NP vs. OP cues</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.053*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GI $\times$ ATD $\times$ AP vs. OP cues</td>
<td>-.343***</td>
<td>.093</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Standardized regression coefficients are reported from the step on which each variable was first entered.

* $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.
* $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$. 

### Table 2
Model summary of hierarchical regression analysis testing cues to prejudice and gender identification as moderators of the relationship between attributions to discrimination and post-failure self-esteem.
conditions was significant, $\beta = -0.48$, $p < .01$. This indicates that the relationship between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem in the overt prejudice condition was significantly different from the relationship between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem in the no cues to prejudice condition. The term representing attributions $\times$ AP vs. OP conditions was not significant, $\beta = -0.20$, $p > .10$. This indicates that the relationship between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem in the overt prejudice condition was not significantly different from the relationship in the ambiguous cues condition. As shown in Fig. 1, simple slope analyses revealed that when situational cues to prejudice were overt, the more women attributed their failure to discrimination, the higher their subsequent self-esteem, $\beta = 0.42$, $p = 0.05$. In contrast, when situational cues to prejudice were absent, the more women attributed their failure to discrimination the lower their self-esteem tended to be, $\beta = -0.42$, $p < .07$. [The simple slope relationship between attributions to prejudice and post-failure self-esteem in the ambiguous condition was not significant, $\beta = 0.00$, $p > .10$.]

**Attributions to ability.** We performed the same regression analysis substituting attributions to ability for attributions to discrimination. Results revealed that increased attributions to ability were associated with lower self-esteem, $\beta = -0.23$, $p < .01$. This relationship was not moderated by cues to prejudice or gender identification.

**Discounting.** Theoretically, attributions to discrimination should protect self-esteem from negative feedback to the extent that they lead an individual to discount stable, internal, global aspects of self (e.g., a lack of ability) as causal. To test this hypothesis, our final analysis examined the relationship between discounting and self-esteem. We performed the same regression analysis as above, substituting the discounting variable for attributions. Results revealed that as discounting increased, post-feedback self-esteem also increased, $\beta = 0.21$, $p < .05$. This protective relationship was not significantly moderated by cues to prejudice or by gender identification.

**Discussion**

Since Crocker and Major (1989) first published their paper on the self-protective properties of stigma, both their hypothesis that stigmatized individuals attribute negative outcomes to discrimination in attributionally ambiguous circumstances, as well as their hypothesis that attributions to prejudice can protect self-esteem have proved controversial. The present study extends and qualifies Crocker and Major’s original attributional ambiguity hypotheses by examining conditions under which the stigmatized make attributions to discrimination as well as conditions under which this attribution is, and is not, protective of self-esteem.

**When do members of stigmatized groups make attributions to discrimination?**

Our findings indicate that the extent to which members of stigmatized groups will attribute negative personal outcomes to discrimination depends on both characteristics of the individual and of the situation. As situational cues made prejudice a more plausible explanation for negative feedback, attributions to discrimination increased. Women were highly unlikely to blame negative feedback on discrimination in the absence of prejudice cues, but were highly likely to do so in the presence of overt prejudice cues. These attributional patterns were the same regardless of women’s level of gender identification. Consistent with Snyder and Ickes’ (1985) contention that “strong” situations overwhelm individual differences, whereas “weak” situations do not, individual differences emerged only in the attributionally ambiguous condition. In this condition, women who were highly identified with their gender group (i.e., who had stated earlier that their gender was a significant element of their social identity) were significantly more likely to blame a negative evaluation on sex discrimination than were women who were not highly identified with their gender group. Increased identification with one’s group may shift interpretation of ambiguous events from the individual to the group level (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and make individuals more aware of the potential for group injustice. Interestingly, highly identified women in the ambiguous condition attributed negative feedback to sex discrimination just as much as did women in the overt prejudice condition. In contrast, low identified women in the ambiguous condition were just as unlikely to attribute feedback to discrimination as were women in the no cues to prejudice condition. These findings are supportive of claims that group identification results in greater sensitivity to discrimi-
nation (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; Gurin, 1985). The current study clarifies, however, that group identification does not result in greater sensitivity in all situations, but only in attributionally ambiguous situations. For members of stigmatized groups, however, attributional ambiguity is likely to be a common aspect of situations.

We found no relationship between group identification and attributions to ability. Furthermore, replicating the findings of other recent studies (Kaiser & Miller, 2001a, 2001b; Major et al., 2002), attributions to ability also did not vary systematically as a function of situational cues to prejudice. Rather, what seemed to vary across conditions was the relationship between attributions to discrimination vs. ability and the relative blame assigned to discrimination vs. ability. Attributions to discrimination and attributions to ability were correlated negatively (p < .07) in the overt cue condition, negatively but not significantly in the ambiguous condition, and positively, but not significantly, in the no prejudice cue condition. Analysis of discounting (attributions to discrimination—attributions to ability) revealed that women blamed their poor score more on discrimination than ability when cues that discrimination was a plausible explanation for their negative outcomes were clear. In contrast, when such cues were absent, they blamed their poor score more on their ability than discrimination. In the ambiguous condition, relative attributions to ability vs. discrimination did not significantly differ from zero, suggesting that women gave both explanations equal consideration.

Attributions to discrimination, discounting, and self-esteem

As hypothesized, self-esteem following negative feedback was significantly higher among women exposed to overt prejudice than among women exposed to either no prejudice cues or ambiguous prejudice. This pattern provides support for Crocker and Major's (1989) speculation that blatant prejudice may offer more self-protective benefits than prejudice that is hidden or disguised. It also provides experimental support for their hypothesis that being able to blame negative outcomes on discrimination can protect self-esteem among members of devalued groups.

Why did exposure to ambiguous prejudice cues not protect self-esteem? We suspect that the answer lies in the causal uncertainty that ambiguous situations engender. Recall that discounting among participants in the ambiguous cue condition did not differ significantly from zero: these women did not blame their outcome more on one factor than the other. The ambiguity of not being sure what one's outcomes are due to may enhance feelings of uncertainty. Uncertainty is an affectively unpleasant state (van den Bos & Lind, 2002), and may lead to reduced well-being relative to being confident that one's outcomes are due to prejudice. When one is faced with blatant prejudice, in contrast, there is no uncertainty about the cause of one's outcomes. It is clear that the proper attribution for negative outcomes is prejudice rather than one's lack of ability.

Examination of the relationship between attributions and self-esteem across experimental conditions provided valuable clues to why prior research has found different relationships between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem. Evidence that attributions to discrimination are positively related to self-esteem has come predominantly from experimental studies that examine reactions to a specific self-relevant threatening event (e.g., a rejection) where discrimination was a possible explanation for the event. In contrast, evidence that attributions to discrimination are negatively related to self-esteem has come predominantly from correlational studies that examine chronic tendencies to perceive discrimination. In the current study, we found that across conditions, greater discounting and lower attributions to ability were associated with higher self-esteem. However, the relationship between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem varied substantially by condition. In the presence of overt cues to prejudice, attributing negative outcome to discrimination was associated with higher self-esteem. In contrast, in the absence of cues to prejudice, the same attribution was associated with lower self-esteem.

These differing correlations suggest that the meaning of attributions to discrimination varies as a function of the context in which they are assessed (see Major et al., 2002). When prejudice cues are overt, such as when an evaluator is unambiguously sexist or racist, blaming poor outcomes on discrimination is situationally defensible, socially sanctioned, and likely to be validated by others. When prejudice is overt, people blame negative outcomes on discrimination rather than themselves, and their self-esteem is buffered as a result of this discounting process. Thus, attributing negative outcomes to discrimination in contexts where prejudice is blatant appears to be an effective strategy for protecting personal self-esteem. Those who fail to make an attribution to discrimination under these circumstances may be engaging in denial or suppression, which is associated with lower self-esteem (Major & Gramzow, 1999).

In contrast, attributing negative outcomes to discrimination in contexts in which prejudice cues are weak or nonexistent is not a self-protective strategy. The more women blamed a poor score on discrimination under these circumstances, the lower their self-esteem. Blaming discrimination in this situation was not associated with a reduction in attributions to ability. The negative relationship observed between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem in the absence of situational cues to prejudice replicates the negative relationship observed between perceptions of prejudice and self-esteem in
prior questionnaire studies (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999). We suspect that blaming negative outcomes on prejudice in the absence of situational cues to prejudice may reflect chronic tendencies to perceive oneself as a victim, to be sensitive to rejection, or to blame others for one's misfortune. Because these same chronic tendencies are also associated with lower self-esteem (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996; Tennen & Affleck, 1990), these tendencies may contribute to the negative relationship observed between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem in such situations (e.g., Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002).

Although we did not make specific predictions, we also examined whether gender identification moderated the impact of experimental condition on self-esteem, as well as the relationship between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem. Gender identification did not interact significantly with either experimental condition or attributions to discrimination to predict self-esteem.

Conclusions and future directions

The findings of present study begin to reconcile some of the controversy over Crocker and Major's (1989) original attributional ambiguity hypothesis by highlighting the importance of considering personal and situational factors that moderate explanations for particular outcomes and the consequences of these explanations. This study adds to growing evidence that it is overly simplistic to assert that attributing negative outcomes to prejudice protects self-esteem. Our findings underscore the complexity of attributional ambiguity phenomena and illustrate that our understanding of the predicament of stigma is still evolving. As with other important phenomena in social psychology (e.g., cognitive dissonance, stereotype threat, the effectiveness of persuasion, etc.), certain conditions must be met for the hypothesized effects of attributional ambiguity to occur. Ironically, the self-protection component of making attributions to discrimination applies most clearly when the situation is unambiguously prejudiced. Future research needs to specify the clarity of prejudice cues in the environment and give more attention to situations where cues to prejudice are ambiguous. In the real world, ambiguity is likely to be the rule, rather than the exception. In ambiguous situations, individual characteristics such as level of group identification are likely to play an important role in whether or not prejudice is perceived. In addition, ambiguous situations appear to be especially difficult for members of stigmatized groups. Because they disguise prejudice, they create uncertainty and interfere with the target's ability to discount their own role in producing negative outcomes.

It is our hope that the results of this study will stimulate additional research in this area. For example, future investigations may benefit from assessing individual differences in rejection sensitivity to determine if the negative relationship between attributing a given outcome to discrimination and self-esteem in the absence of clear cues to prejudice is mediated by a chronic sensitivity to negative social feedback of any kind. Furthermore, aside from self-esteem, future research should also examine the implications of perceiving discrimination on other measures of psychological well-being including perceptions of control, optimism, or interpersonal trust. Finally, the present research focused exclusively on attributions of discrimination made by women in response to sex discrimination. These findings will need to be replicated with other stigmatized groups in order to generalize our conclusions to the experience of stigma more broadly.

References


