Handbook of Self-Enhancement and Self-Protection

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Attributions to Discrimination as a Self-Protective Strategy

Evaluating the Evidence

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Social rejection is a fact of life; everyone has had the experience of being disliked, excluded, or devalued at one time or another. Social rejection also hurts. Experiencing rejection often leads, at least temporarily, to negative feelings and a loss of self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). For those who are lucky in life, rejection experiences are rare. But for some, especially those who are members of stigmatized groups, rejection experiences are common occurrences. People who are stigmatized possess (or are perceived to possess) a social identity that is broadly devalued in society or in particular social contexts (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Examples of groups that are stigmatized across a wide variety of contexts in the United States include minority ethnic and religious groups, such as African Americans and Muslims; people who are overweight, mentally ill, disfigured, or disabled; and people who are perceived to have engaged in socially unacceptable behaviors (e.g., child abusers, drug addicts, homosexuals). Other groups, such as women and Asian Americans, experience devaluation in more specific contexts: in masculine domains for women and in some social domains for Asian Americans. As a result of personal experiences, observations of how others like themselves are treated, and exposure to media and other cultural messages, members of stigmatized groups typically are aware of their devalued status, the negative stereotypes that are applied to them, and their potential for being targets of discrimination (Crocker et al., 1998).

In this chapter, we consider the implications of this predicament for the self-esteem of the stigmatized. In particular, we examine the hypothesis that one mechanism by which the
stigmatized can protect their self-esteem is to blame social rejection, setbacks, and other negative experiences on prejudice and discrimination directed against their stigma (Crocker & Major, 1989). We also consider whether blaming negative experiences on discrimination protects the self-esteem of those who are relatively advantaged in society. In the following sections we first briefly review theory and research on the relationship between stigma and self-esteem. We then consider theory and research examining whether perceiving the self to be a victim of discrimination is damaging or protective of self-esteem and factors that moderate these effects. We also consider whether attributions to discrimination are self-protective for members of high-status groups. Finally, we consider the implications of attributions to discrimination for implicit, as well as explicit, self-esteem.

**Stigma and Self-Esteem**

There is substantial evidence that stigmatization is harmful to its targets (Crocker et al., 1998; Link & Phelan, 2001). Prejudice and discrimination against the stigmatized limit their access to important resources, including adequate housing, education, medical care, employment, and income, and are linked to poorer health outcomes among the stigmatized, including a higher incidence of anxiety, depression, heart disease, low-birthweight babies, and cancer (Contrada et al., 2001; Harrell, Hall, & Talafarre, 2003; Klonoff, Landrine, & Campbell, 2000; Paradis, 2006; Williams & Mohammed, 2009).

It is commonly assumed that experiencing stigmatization also harms self-esteem (see Crocker & Major, 1989). For example, symbolic interaction theories posit that people's self-perceptions are based on their perceptions of how they are viewed by others (Cooley, 1956; Mead, 1934). These theories thus predict that people who are devalued in society are likely to internalize that devaluation, resulting in lowered self-esteem. Theory and research on the self-fulfilling prophecy posit that people's cognitions, behaviors, and self-views are shaped by how they are viewed and treated by others (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Merton, 1948). One implication of these theories is that people who are viewed and treated negatively by others may come to see themselves accordingly. Theories such as sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000) posit that experiencing social rejection threatens the core need to belong and leads to lower self-esteem.

Empirical studies examining the relationship between stigma and self-esteem, however, often find that members of stigmatized groups do not have lower self-esteem than members of nonstigmatized groups (see Crocker & Major, 1989; Porter & Washington, 1979; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972, for reviews). For example, African Americans, a group that has faced persistent and severe devaluation and discrimination for hundreds of years in the United States, report levels of self-esteem equal to or greater than those of European Americans (Rosenberg, 1965; Twenge & Crocker, 2002). Many other stigmatized groups also do not report diminished self-esteem, including Latinos (Jensen, White, & Galliher, 1982; Martinez & Dukes, 1991), people with disabilities (Johnson, Johnson, & Rynders, 1981), gay and lesbian individuals (Carlson & Baxter, 1984), and mentally retarded people (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). The data with regard to other stigmatized groups is mixed. For example, there is some evidence that women (especially white women) have lower self-esteem than (white) men (Gentile et al., 2009; Major, Barr, Zubek, & Babey, 1999) and that the overweight (particularly overweight women) have lower self-esteem than those who are of average weight.
(Miller & Downey, 1999). Overall, however, despite often facing severe and pervasive discrimination, many members of stigmatized groups do not have lower self-esteem than those who belong to nonstigmatized groups. What can account for this paradox?

**Do Attributions to Discrimination Protect Self-Esteem?**

Crocker and Major (1989) theorized that several cognitive mechanisms associated with membership in a stigmatized group may buffer the self-esteem of members of stigmatized or oppressed groups against social rejection and negative outcomes. One of these self-protective mechanisms, they proposed, is to attribute negative outcomes to the prejudiced attitudes of others rather than to themselves. In particular, because the stigmatized are aware of their devalued status and their potential for being targets of prejudice, Crocker and Major (1989) suggested that they may experience *attributational ambiguity* about their negative outcomes. For example, if a black person fails to get a job, is criticized, or is denied promotion, he or she may be uncertain whether the event occurred because of his or her personal inadequacies or whether it occurred because the evaluator was racist. Drawing on Kelley’s discounting principle (1973), Crocker and Major (1989) hypothesized that the availability of prejudice as a plausible external cause of social rejection allows the stigmatized to *discount* their own roles in producing those outcomes. That is, attributing a job rejection to discrimination reduces the extent to which it is blamed on oneself. Furthermore, they proposed that because the prejudice of others is *external to the self*, attributing negative outcomes to prejudice should protect self-esteem relative to making attributions to “internal, stable, and global causes such as a lack of ability” (p. 613). They derived this latter hypothesis from theory and research showing that attributing negative events to causes external to the self protects self-esteem, whereas attributing negative outcomes to causes internal to the self, such as a lack of ability, leads to low self-esteem (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Weiner, 1985). Crocker and Major (1989) observed that “this self-protective mechanism is particularly powerful because it may be used not only in response to negative evaluations or outcomes that do, in fact, stem from prejudice against the stigmatized group, but also in response to negative outcomes that do not stem from prejudice” (p. 612).

Importantly, Crocker and Major (1989) focused on the impact of attributions to discrimination on personal self-esteem and self-esteem-related emotions (e.g., worthlessness, depression, sadness, shame). They were not concerned with emotions such as anger or hostility. This distinction is important, as the perception of injustice is often associated with the emotional response of anger (see Miller & Kaiser, 2001, for a review). Anger is also a frequent affective response to perceiving that one is a target of discrimination (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Also, Crocker and Major (1989) focused on the impact of discrimination attributions on personal, rather than collective, self-esteem. That is, they were concerned with how stigma affects feelings about the individual self rather than feelings about the stigma more generally or feelings about one’s stigmatized group.

Several early studies provided support for Crocker and Major’s (1989) hypothesis. For example, K. L. Dion (1975) reported that following receipt of negative feedback from a male evaluator, female participants who believed that they had been discriminated against reported higher self-esteem than those who did not believe they had been discriminated
against. Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, and Major (1991) manipulated the perceived attitudes of a male evaluator and found that women reported fewer depressed emotions (but not less anger or hostility) following negative feedback when told the evaluator held sexist attitudes than when told he held nonsexist attitudes. A second study found that when African American participants received a negative evaluation from a white evaluator whom they thought was aware of their race, they attributed the feedback more to discrimination and reported marginally higher self-esteem than participants who thought the evaluator was unaware of their race (Crocker et al., 1991).

Despite this early support, the proposition that perceiving oneself to be a target of discrimination is a self-esteem protective strategy proved to be highly controversial. For example, Schmitt and Branscombe (2002b) argued that because prejudice signals rejection and exclusion on the part of the dominant group, “attributions to prejudice . . . are detrimental to the psychological well-being of the disadvantaged.” (p. 193). In addition, whereas some subsequent research provided support for attributions as a self-esteem protective strategy, other research contradicts this perspective. These theoretical challenges and conflicting empirical findings led to subsequent theoretical refinements and clarifications of how and when attributions to discrimination protect self-esteem. We consider these next.

Attributions to Discrimination and Self-Esteem: Theoretical Refinements

Measurement and Terminology

Scholars often use the terms attributions to discrimination and perceived discrimination interchangeably. However, these constructs are typically studied in two distinct ways that yield conflicting findings about the nature of the relationship between discrimination attributions or perceptions and self-esteem. Researchers using survey methods typically ask participants to indicate the extent to which they personally and/or members of their group have experienced discrimination and then correlate their responses with an outcome variable, such as self-esteem. Studies using this approach frequently report that the more people perceive themselves to have been victims of discrimination, the lower self-esteem and more depressed affect they report (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Klonoff et al., 2000; Meyer, 1995; Swim et al., 2001). There are a number of problems with this approach that cloud interpretation of these findings (see Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Major & Sawyer, 2009, for a discussion). For example, when perceived discrimination is assessed retrospectively on questionnaires, self-reports of experiences with discrimination confound attributional processes with frequency and severity of exposure to discrimination. In other words, it is unclear whether making an attribution to discrimination is damaging in itself or whether constant mistreatment is the detrimental factor. This confounding makes it difficult to disentangle the effects of exposure from the effects of attributions to discrimination.

Researchers using experimental methods, in contrast, typically manipulate or control for exposure to a negative event across participants, manipulate the plausibility that prejudice could have caused the event (or measure individual difference variables that might predict this attribution), measure the extent to which participants attribute the event to discrimination, and assess self-esteem (Crocker et al., 1991). This approach disentangles the psychological consequences of exposure to negative events from attributions for those events. Studies using
this approach more often find that attributing a specific negative outcome to discrimination can protect self-esteem (Hoyt, Aguilar, Kaiser, Blascovich, & Lee, 2007).

Major, Quinton, and McCoy (2002) posited that measures of perceived exposure to discrimination and attributions of specific events to discrimination may tap different processes. The former can be conceptualized as a threat appraisal, in that individuals who report that they are frequently victims of discrimination are appraising their environment as hostile and dangerous. In contrast, the latter can be viewed as a cognitive reappraisal coping strategy, in that blaming an event on discrimination mitigates the threat to personal self-esteem that might arise from blaming the event on internal, stable aspects of the self. Thus, when considering the relationship between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem, it is important to take into account exactly what construct was measured and the context and manner in which it was assessed.

Is Discrimination an External or an Internal Attribution?

Crocker and Major (1989) proposed that an attribution to prejudice is an external attribution. Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a) challenged this, observing that because one's group membership is an aspect of the self, attributions to prejudice have a strong internal component. Furthermore, they argued that because attributions to discrimination threaten an important aspect of the self—one's social identity—making such attributions will heighten rather than decrease self-esteem. To test their claims, they asked participants to imagine that a professor refused their request to add a closed class. Half learned the professor was a “jerk” and did not honor anyone’s request; the remaining half learned the professor was “sexist” and did not honor the request of any members of the participant’s gender. As they predicted, women who read the “sexist” rejection vignette rated the rejection as more due to internal causes than women who read the “everyone rejected” vignette, and the former also reported more negative affect (a composite of depression, hostility, and anger emotions) than the latter.

This study made the important point that attributions to discrimination have an internal component. However, this study did not provide an adequate test of Crocker and Major’s (1989) discounting hypothesis for two reasons. First, it did not compare the emotional effects of attributing rejection to discrimination with the emotional effects of attributing rejection to internal, stable factors of the self (e.g., a lack of ability). Second, it did not examine the effects of discrimination attributions on self-related emotions separately from their effects on other-directed emotions (e.g., anger, cruelty). Major, Kaiser, and McCoy (2003) replicated Schmitt and Branscombe’s (2002a) studies, adding a third condition in which participants were asked to imagine a professor who refused to honor their course request because “he thought they were stupid.” They also examined depressed/self-esteem emotions separately from hostile/anger emotions. As predicted, participants in the personal rejection condition rated the rejection as due significantly more to internal causes and felt significantly more depressed compared with those in the sexist rejection condition. The former did not, however, feel more hostile or anxious than the latter. In sum, these studies make several important points, including that attributing negative outcomes to discrimination: (1) is more external than attributing them to internal, stable properties of the self, (2) protects self-esteem relative to attributing them to internal, stable properties of the self, but (3) is not self-protective compared with attributing negative outcomes to random external factors.
Do Attributions to Discrimination Always Lead to Discounting of internal Factors?

Crocker and Major (1989) assumed that the presence of discrimination as a plausible cause of a person’s outcomes leads to discounting of internal factors as causal. They based their assumption on Kelley’s (1973) idea that explanations of actions commonly involve a trade-off between causes internal and external to a person. In a review of research on the discounting principle, however, McClure (1998) observed that outcomes can have multiple causes and that both internal and external sources can be seen as influencing one’s situation. Furthermore, internal and external causes are not necessarily inversely related—increased ratings of external factors may have no effect on ratings of internal factors, and vice versa. Consequently, attributing an outcome to discrimination does not necessarily imply that a person will attribute no responsibility to the self.

This implies that it is insufficient, and potentially misleading, to examine the relationship between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem without controlling for self-attributions, as the relationship may not be negative, as is typically assumed. Several studies provide evidence of this. In one study (Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003), women received negative feedback from a male evaluator under conditions that were clearly sexist, possibly sexist, or contained no overt cues to sexism. The relationship between discrimination attributions and self-attributions varied by condition: They were negatively related in the clear sexist condition, unrelated in the ambiguous condition, and positively related in the no-sexism cues condition. Hence, *women discounted their own contributions to the negative feedback only when evidence of injustice was clear*. Furthermore, when self-attributions were not controlled for, the relationship between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem varied by condition. Attributions of feedback to discrimination were positively related to self-esteem in the clear-sexist condition, unrelated in the ambiguous condition, and negatively related in the no-cues condition. Across conditions, however, discounting (blaming feedback more on discrimination than on a lack of ability) was positively related to self-esteem. This experiment illustrates the importance of examining the implications of discrimination attributions for self-esteem *relative to self-attributions*, especially when discrimination is ambiguous, as it usually is in real-life contexts.

A set of recent studies illustrates the importance of doing this in survey contexts. Major and colleagues (Major, Henry, Kaiser, Simon, & Sawyer, 2009) asked women and members of ethnic minority groups to indicate on a questionnaire the extent to which they had experienced negative events because of their gender or ethnicity. In a separate set of questions, they asked them to indicate the extent to which they had experienced negative events because of something about them as individuals, such as their personalities. These two perceptions were *positively correlated*. That is, the more people said they had experienced negative events because of their gender or ethnicity, the more they also said they had experienced negative events because of their individual characteristics. Furthermore, although perceptions of discrimination were negatively related to self-esteem when self-attributions were not controlled, this relationship became nonsignificant when self-attributions were controlled.

Locus of Causality versus Responsibility

Crocker and Major (1989) originally proposed that attributing a negative outcome to one’s social identity (an external factor) protects self-esteem because it leads to discounting of the
self (an internal factor) as causal. They later distinguished between attributing outcomes to one’s social identity versus to prejudice based on one’s social identity, noting that the latter, but not the former, carries with it an assumption of injustice (Crocker & Major, 1994). Major, Quinton, and McCoy (2002) further refined the theory, noting that the question that must be resolved by the stigmatized target to protect his or her self-esteem in the face of rejection is not “Did something internal or external to me cause this outcome?” but rather “Who is to blame for this outcome—you or me?” This follows from Weiner’s (1985) perspective that judgments of responsibility (or blame, in the case of negative outcomes) rather than judgments about the locus of causality (internal vs. external) are the critical determinants of emotion. According to Major, Quinton, and McCoy (2002), attributions to discrimination will protect self-esteem only to the extent that they shift responsibility (blame) for negative events away from the self. Major, Kaiser, and McCoy (2003) demonstrated this in the study described earlier. Discounting self-blame (blaming the professor’s rejection on discrimination more than on the self) mediated the relationship between condition (sexist rejection or personal rejection) and depressed affect, whereas discounting internal factors (relative to discrimination) did not.

When Do Attributions to Discrimination Protect Self-Esteem?

As illustrated by the research reviewed here, the relationship between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem is not straightforward. Inconsistencies in findings led to efforts to identify factors that predict when and for whom an attribution to discrimination is (or is not) self-esteem protective. In seeking to understand this issue, it is useful to clarify the features of an attribution to discrimination. Major, Quinton, and McCoy (2002) define an attribution to discrimination as a causal judgment that has two essential components: (1) a judgment that treatment was unjust or undeserved and (2) a judgment that treatment was based on social identity or group membership. Both components are necessary. Thus people who regard a negative outcome (e.g., a job rejection) as undeserved but who do not blame it on a social identity or group membership (e.g., “I am not well connected”) are not making a discrimination attribution according to this definition. Nor does it qualify as an attribution to discrimination if a person attributes an outcome to his or her group membership but believes differential treatment on the basis of group membership is justifiable or deserved. For example, a woman who believes that men are better fighters than women is unlikely to feel she was discriminated against if she is denied combat duty because of her gender. Research has shown that the more ambiguous it is that negative outcomes are unjust (vs. deserved) and linked to a group (vs. a personal) characteristic, the less likely a person is to attribute a negative outcome to discrimination (see Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Major & Sawyer, 2009, for reviews).

We propose that ambiguity about discrimination also undermines the self-protective effects of attributing negative outcomes to discrimination. That is, the more ambiguity people experience about whether their treatment is undeserved (vs. deserved) and/or was based on their social identity (vs. a personal attribute), the less likely it is that attributing negative treatment to discrimination will protect their self-esteem. This is consistent with Crocker and Major’s (1989) observation that “overt prejudice or discrimination should be less damaging to the self-esteem of its targets than is prejudice or discrimination that is hidden behind
of cloak of fairness” (p. 621). When injustice is ambiguous (vs. clear), the role of the self in producing negative outcomes is more difficult to discount. We consider evidence for this claim next, focusing on factors that increase or decrease ambiguity surrounding attributions to discrimination.

**Situational Factors**

Situational cues can make prejudice more or less ambiguous, with implications for the self-protective properties of attributions to discrimination. The study by Major, Quinton, and Schmader (2003), reviewed earlier, which manipulated the clarity or ambiguity of situational cues to injustice, illustrated this clearly. Women rejected in a context of clear prejudice cues reported significantly higher self-esteem than women rejected in the presence of ambiguous prejudice cues or no cues; these latter two conditions did not differ from each other. Furthermore, attributing negative feedback to discrimination was positively and significantly related to self-esteem when discrimination cues were obvious, unrelated to self-esteem when discrimination cues were ambiguous, and negatively and significantly related to self-esteem when cues were absent. Women discounted self-blame (attributed rejection more to discrimination than to the self) when situational cues to injustice were obvious but not when they were ambiguous or absent.

**Group Membership**

Ambiguity about the extent to which negative outcomes are due to prejudice also varies by type of stigma or social identity. In general, people whose stigma is (or is perceived to be) controllable are held more responsible for their condition (by both themselves and others). They also are treated more negatively than people whose stigma is believed to be uncontrollable (Rodin, Price, Sanchez, & McElligot, 1989; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988). Furthermore, this negative treatment is often regarded as fair, even by those who have the stigma (Crandall, 1994). Consequently, when faced with social rejection or other negative outcomes, individuals who feel responsible for their stigma may blame themselves to some extent, even when discrimination cues are obvious. Ambiguity about the extent to which negative outcomes are truly undeserved is also likely to be experienced by those who have accepted (at least to some extent) negative attitudes toward or stereotypes about their stigmatized group. Consequently, people who feel responsible for their stigma or endorse negative attitudes toward their stigma may not fully discount self-blame, even when they also blame their outcomes on discrimination. People who feel control over or responsibility for their stigma may also regard their stigma as an aspect of their personal identity rather than as a part of group membership, creating ambiguity about whether rejection on the basis of stigma qualifies as group-based discrimination.

Consider, for example, the plight of those who are overweight in the United States. Despite substantial evidence that it is extremely difficult to lose weight permanently, both those who are of average weight and those who are overweight perceive weight to be controllable. Furthermore, the overweight dislike overweight people just as much as do those of average weight. In addition, the overweight do not identify themselves with the group “overweight” (Crandall, 1994). Consequently, even when the overweight experience negative outcomes that are clearly due to their weight, they are unlikely to fully discount self-blame.
For example, Crocker, Cornwell, and Major (1993) found that although overweight women who were rejected by a male who was aware of their weight attributed the rejection to their weight, they did not blame the male for being prejudiced. Furthermore, attributing rejection to weight did not protect their self-esteem. Although we are unaware of any experiments testing this directly, we would expect attributions to discrimination to be more self-protective for those who are perceived (by self and others) as having no control over their stigma and for those whose stigma is associated with a recognized group identity, such as tribal stigmas of race, ethnicity, or gender.

**Group Identification**

People vary in the extent to which they identify with their group. Group identification refers to the extent to which people include the ingroup as a central part of their self-concepts (Luhmann & Crocker, 1992; McCoy & Major, 2003; Smith & Henry, 1996; Tropp & Wright, 2001). Although group identification influences how people respond to discrimination, it is unclear exactly how group identification influences the self-esteem of those who face discrimination. In general, group identification is positively related to perceived discrimination among members of minority groups. For example, ethnic minorities and women who regard their groups as more central to their self-concepts (i.e., are high in group identification) are more likely to attribute negative feedback to discrimination, especially under attributionally ambiguous circumstances (Eccleston & Major, 2006; Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003; Operario & Fiske, 2001). Furthermore, a number of correlational studies report a positive relationship between group identification and global self-esteem (Branscombe et al., 1999; Munford, 1994; Phinney, 1991; Phinney & Chavira, 1992). This implies that those who are highly group identified are more likely to reap the self-esteem protective benefits associated with attributing negative outcomes to discrimination than those who are less group identified. However, it is also possible that those high in group identification may not experience self-protective benefits from attributing negative feedback to group-based discrimination because doing so does not discount the self. That is, for those who regard their group as a central component of their self-concept, rejection based on group membership may be experienced as a rejection of the personal self.

Several experiments provide support for this latter hypothesis. In one study, women received negative feedback from a male evaluator whom they were told held sexist or non-sexist attitudes toward women (McCoy & Major, 2003, Experiment 1). Women low in group identification reported higher self-esteem and less depressed emotion in the sexist compared with the nonsexist condition, replicating a pattern observed earlier by Crocker et al. (1991). In contrast, self-esteem and depressed emotion among women high in identification did not differ by condition. Thus, even though highly identified women recognized that their evaluator was sexist and attributed their rejection to discrimination, this did not buffer their self-esteem. In a second experiment, Latino American participants read a research article documenting pervasive discrimination against either their own ethnic group or a non-self-relevant group (McCoy & Major, 2003, Experiment 2). Compared with those low in ethnic identification, Latinos who were highly identified reported decreased self-esteem, increased depressed emotions, and greater feelings of threat if they read that discrimination against their ingroup was pervasive. If they read about pervasive discrimination against a non-self-relevant group, in contrast, there were no significant differences by group identification,
although high identifiers tended to report somewhat higher well-being. In sum, these two experiments suggest that when directly faced with evidence of group or personal discrimination, those who regard their groups as a less central part of their self-concepts are more likely to benefit from making an attribution to discrimination than those who regard their groups as a more central aspect of their self-concepts. Although group identification may make an individual temporarily vulnerable when faced with discrimination, it is also possible that group identification may serve as a resource that can be drawn on over time to cope with setbacks and social rejection, thus explaining the positive correlation that is often observed between group identification and self-esteem.

**General Beliefs about Justice/Injustice**

People also vary in the extent to which they believe that status differences between groups in their society are fair. These general beliefs or worldviews influence the extent to which people attribute their own negative outcomes (and those of their ingroups) to unjust discrimination (Major, Gramzow, et al., 2002) and may affect people’s certainty about whether their own negative outcomes are deserved or undeserved.

Examples of status-justifying beliefs in American society include the Protestant ethic, which posits that success is a reflection of hard work; the belief in individual mobility, which posits that advancement is possible for all individuals in society, regardless of group membership; and the belief in a just world, which posits that people deserve what they get and get what they deserve. Although these beliefs are widely held in America, they are not universally endorsed. Some individuals explain existing status hierarchies in terms of discrimination, bias, and favoritism, for example, rather than in terms of individual deservingness.

Individual differences in endorsement of status-justifying beliefs moderate the relationship between perceived discrimination and self-esteem (Major, Kaiser, O’Brien, & McCoy, 2007). For example, the self-esteem of Latino Americans and African Americans who endorse the belief in individual mobility is negatively related to perceptions of self or ingroup as a victim of discrimination. In contrast, the self-esteem of Latino Americans and African Americans who reject the belief in individual mobility is positively related to perceptions of self or ingroup as a victim of discrimination (Foster & Tsartari, 2005; Major et al., 2007). Major et al. (2007, Experiment 2) randomly assigned Latino American participants to read an article describing pervasive discrimination against either their own ethnic group or a non-self-relevant group. Latino Americans who endorsed the belief in individual mobility had lower self-esteem after reading that their own group (vs. a non-self-relevant group) was a victim of discrimination. In contrast, Latino Americans who rejected the belief in individual mobility showed the reverse pattern: They had higher self-esteem after reading that their own group (vs. a non-self-relevant group) was a victim of discrimination. In a third study, Major et al. (2007) assigned women to read an article describing discrimination against women in the United States as either prevalent or rare. Women who endorsed the belief in individual mobility had lower self-esteem if they read that discrimination against women was prevalent rather than rare. In contrast, women who rejected the belief in individual mobility had higher self-esteem if they read that discrimination against women was prevalent rather than rare (Major et al., 2007, Experiment 2). Thus this last study illustrated that members of low-status groups who believe that status is unfairly distributed in society experience a threat to their self-esteem when informed that status is, in fact, fairly accorded.
In sum, this line of research illustrates that general beliefs about the extent to which status in society is fair and individually deserved moderate the relationship between perceived discrimination and self-esteem among members of disadvantaged groups. One potential explanation for these provocative findings is that members of low-status groups who endorse status-justifying beliefs experience more ambiguity about the extent to which they (or their group) are to blame for their negative outcomes and disadvantaged position in society. Thus, when faced with evidence of group or personal devaluation, they may not fully discount self-blame, leading to lowered self-esteem. In contrast, members of low-status groups who reject status-justifying beliefs more confidently blame their own (and their group's) negative outcomes on discrimination rather than on themselves (or their group). Evidence of group or personal devaluation only bolsters this belief and their self-esteem. Informing them that group status is, in fact, fairly accorded in society, however, challenges this belief and introduces ambiguity about the role of personal (or group) deservingness in producing negative outcomes. Hence this information threatens a key strategy by which they protect their self-esteem in the face of social disadvantage, resulting in lower self-esteem.

**Do High-Status Groups Benefit from Attributing Negative Outcomes to Discrimination?**

Most research examining attributions to discrimination as a self-protective strategy has focused on people who are generally aware that they are vulnerable to being targets of discrimination because of their stigmatized status in society. This raises the question of whether attributions to discrimination can also be self-protective for members of chronically high-status groups. Several studies suggest that they are. In one study that used immersive virtual environment technology, Hoyt and colleagues (2007) asked Latino and white participants to perform as leaders of three-person groups in an employee-hiring task conducted in a virtual world. Within this world, half of the participants saw themselves portrayed as white and half saw themselves portrayed as Latino. Following the task, all participants received negative feedback from the other two group members (both of whom were portrayed as white). Compared with participants portrayed in the virtual world as White, participants portrayed as Latino were more likely to attribute the negative feedback to the other group members’ prejudice and reported higher well-being (higher self-esteem and less depressed affect). In addition, discrimination attributions mediated the relationship between experimental condition and well-being. Importantly, these effects occurred regardless of the actual ethnicity of the participants. That is, white participants with an “induced” ethnic stigma attributed their rejection to discrimination and benefited from this attribution just as much as did Latino students portrayed as Latino. And Latino students whose stigma was “removed” (because they were portrayed as whites) were just as unlikely to attribute their rejection to discrimination as were whites portrayed as white. It is important to note, however, that in this study the white participants who attributed negative feedback to prejudice did so on behalf of a virtual identity as Latino, rather than of their real identity as white.

Studies exploring reactions to affirmative action policies more clearly show that attributing rejection to “reverse discrimination” serves a self-protective function for members of high-status groups. In one study, men and women were rejected for a leadership role and were told that the decision was based solely on their sex (sex-based condition), solely on their
lack of merit (merit-based condition), or on both sex and merit (Major, Feinstein, & Crocker, 1994). Men and women reacted quite similarly to rejection under these conditions. Regardless of gender, participants rejected in the sex-based condition were less likely to blame their rejection on themselves (lack of merit) and were more likely to blame their rejection on their sex than participants in the merit-based condition. Participants who were rejected under more attributionally ambiguous circumstances (i.e., who were told that both sex and merit contributed to their rejection) were more likely to attribute their rejection to sex but were just as likely to attribute their rejection to a lack of merit as those in the merit-alone condition.

Thus, despite recognizing that their group membership contributed to their rejection, men and women in the ambiguous condition did not discount self-blame. Furthermore, regardless of gender, participants who were told that the decision was based solely on their sex were significantly less depressed than those told they were rejected solely on the basis of merit or those told they were rejected on the basis of sex and merit. Importantly, participants rejected in the attributionally ambiguous sex-and-m merit condition were just as depressed as those rejected solely on the basis of a lack of merit. This provides further support for our claim that people do not derive self-esteem protection from attributing negative outcomes to discrimination if they suspect that they may also be responsible for those outcomes.

Another set of studies demonstrated that white men’s belief that affirmative action is a form of reverse discrimination protects their self-esteem from threats to their self-image by boosting their general sense of competence (Unzueta, Lowery, & Knowles, 2008). The first of these studies showed that the more that white male college students believed that their university’s affirmative action policies utilized quotas (which they regarded as reverse discrimination), the higher their self-perceived competence and their personal self-esteem were. Self-perceived competence mediated the relationship between belief in quotas and self-esteem. In a second study, Unzueta et al. (2008) manipulated threat to self-esteem by giving some white men positive feedback and others negative feedback on an intelligence test. Men who did not believe that quotas were used (i.e., who did not believe affirmative action involves reverse discrimination) had lower self-esteem after receiving negative than positive feedback, whereas men who did believe that quotas were used (i.e., who make reverse-discrimination attributions) were unaffected by feedback. Again, self-perceived competence mediated this effect. A third study manipulated, rather than measured, beliefs about affirmative action and also manipulated test feedback. Some white men were told that most businesses set aside positions that can be filled only by underrepresented minority applicants (i.e., practice quotas or reverse discrimination), whereas others were told that most businesses do not use quotas. The authors reasoned that telling white men that affirmative action is not a quota policy is equivalent to taking away a self-esteem-protective belief. Thus men in the nonquota condition given negative feedback should show lower self-perceived competence and lower self-esteem. In contrast, telling white men that affirmative action does involve quotas gives them a self-esteem-protecting belief (i.e., they are victims of reverse discrimination) that should protect their sense of competence and self-esteem in the face of negative feedback.

Results confirmed their hypotheses. White men who were given negative test feedback and who were told that affirmative action does not involve quotas reported significantly lower self-perceived competence and lower self-esteem than the other three groups, which did not differ from each other. Note that beliefs about affirmative action policies were manipulated separately from and were not linked to negative test feedback in this study. Thus this study illustrates that the self-protective power for white men of believing in reverse discrimi-
nation extends beyond situations in which threats to self-esteem can directly be attributed to discrimination.

Unzueta et al. (2008) speculated that perceiving the self as a victim of reverse discrimination may protect white men's self-esteem through two mechanisms. It may allow them to augment their past successes, that is, to reinterpret them as more impressive testaments of their competence because they were achieved despite adversity; or it may allow them to discount past failures, that is, to reinterpret them as nondiagnostic of their true competency. Consequently, the belief that affirmative action involves reverse discrimination against white men may persist among white men precisely because of its self-esteem-protective benefits.

**Is High Self-Esteem in the Face of Stigmatization “Genuine”?**

All of the research reviewed herein measured personal self-esteem using explicit measures (i.e., self-reports). The counterintuitive nature of many of the findings raises the question of whether the high self-esteem observed among stigmatized groups reflects their “true” or “genuine” self-esteem. It is possible, for example, that members of devalued groups defensively amplify their explicit self-esteem in response to perceived prejudice to compensate for uncomfortable feelings of self-doubt (Baumeister, 1982; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). People with “defensive” or “discrepant” self-esteem, for example, are postulated to harbor deep insecurities and self-doubts but to compensate for them by artificially inflating their self-esteem (Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003; Lambird & Mann, 2006; Zeigler-Hill, 2006). It is also possible that the stigmatized are motivated for self-presentational reasons to distort their explicit self-esteem responses (Fazio & Olson, 2003; Nosek, 2005). For example, they may inflate their explicit self-esteem to conform to cultural norms for self-enhancement in Western societies (Kobayashi & Greenwald, 2003). It may therefore be useful to measure self-esteem in response to discrimination using measures less subject to self-report biases and distortions, such as measures of implicit self-esteem (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; Spalding & Hardin, 1999).

Assessing implicit self-esteem in response to discrimination may also provide unique information unrepresented in measures of explicit self-esteem. Implicit attitudes are thought to reflect affective and unconscious beliefs that stem from an associational learning system, whereas explicit attitudes are thought to be controlled, conscious beliefs and to stem from rule-based learning (Epstein, 1994; Smith & DeCoster, 2000; Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000). Thus implicit and explicit self-esteem seem to be distinct constructs that reflect different attitude systems.

Data regarding how perceived discrimination influences the implicit self-esteem of members of stigmatized groups, however, are rare. In one of the few studies on this topic, Verkuyten (2005) examined the implicit and explicit personal and collective self-esteem of majority-group adolescents (Dutch in the Netherlands and Turkish in Turkey) versus minority-group adolescents (Turkish in the Netherlands). On explicit measures of self-esteem, minorities (Turkish—Dutch) reported higher personal and collective self-esteem than majority groups. In contrast, minorities did not differ from majority groups on measures of implicit personal self-esteem and had lower implicit collective self-esteem than majority groups. Another study observed similar results: Majority and minority groups had equivalent levels of implicit
personal self-esteem, but minority groups had lower levels of implicit collective self-esteem than majority groups (Pelham & Herbs, 1999). Verkuyten (2005) also found that perceived discrimination among minorities was unrelated to their personal self-esteem (implicitly or explicitly measured) or their explicit collective self-esteem. However, perceived discrimination was negatively related to implicit collective self-esteem among minority adolescents. These studies suggest that minorities are able to protect their personal self-esteem, implicit or explicit, in the face of discrimination. They also suggest, however, that negative information about one’s group in society adversely affects implicit views about the group. Although individuals may be able to cope with discrimination in a manner that preserves their explicit collective self-esteem, they may be unable to protect their automatically formed, implicit views about the group.

We believe an important direction for future research is to examine implicit personal self-esteem in response to a specific discriminatory stressor. It is possible that, although the implicit personal self-esteem of stigmatized groups may not differ overall from that of high-status groups, they may nonetheless experience a decrease in implicit personal self-esteem immediately after encountering discrimination. Although explicit self-esteem may be protected by discounting negative events as due to discrimination rather than to the self, implicit self-esteem may respond only to the negative valence of the situation. Alternatively, threats to the self may automatically trigger implicit self-esteem compensation to defend against threat. For example, people exhibit higher implicit self-esteem after rejection than after acceptance by another person (Rudman, Dohn, & Fairchild, 2007). It has yet to be explored whether people engage in similar implicit self-esteem compensation following threats to the group.

**Summary and Conclusions**

Although it is widely assumed that perceiving oneself to be a target of discrimination damages self-esteem, decades of research on this topic question the validity of this assumption. Under some circumstances, perceived discrimination is associated with diminished self-esteem, whereas under other circumstances it is associated with higher self-esteem. In this chapter we considered the hypothesis that attributing negative outcomes to discrimination based on one’s group membership or stigma is a self-esteem-protective strategy because it enables members of stigmatized groups to discount their own roles in producing those outcomes. We reviewed theoretical refinements of this hypothesis and empirical evidence testing it. We concluded that, contrary to the discounting hypothesis, blaming negative outcomes on discrimination (i.e., judging that the outcomes are unjust and based on one’s group membership) does not necessarily lead to discounting of the self as causal. Furthermore, we concluded that attributing negative outcomes to discrimination protects self-esteem only to the extent that this judgment is associated with discounting of self-blame. Features of the situation, group, or person that introduce ambiguity about the extent to which outcomes are deserved versus undeserved or caused by personal versus group attributes lessen the self-esteem-protective benefits of attributing negative outcomes to discrimination. Factors that decrease ambiguity, in contrast, strengthen the extent to which attributions to discrimination protect self-esteem. This is true for members of high-status, as well as low-status, groups.

The research reviewed here has important implications. In real-life contexts, discrimination is typically masked or ambiguous rather than blatant, especially toward those who are
tribally stigmatized (e.g., members of ethnic minority groups). Consequently, unless supported by a shared and strong belief system (e.g., a belief that “people like us” are targets of discrimination or reverse discrimination), attributing negative events to discrimination in real-life contexts may often be accompanied by nagging doubts that oneself might also be to blame. These doubts, in turn, lessen the self-protective benefits of discrimination attributions. Furthermore, because claiming one is a victim of discrimination often has negative interpersonal costs (Kaiser & Miller, 2001), in many real-life contexts attributing outcomes to discrimination may hurt more than it helps.

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**References**


