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Prejudice and self-esteem: A transactional model
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This paper reviews three theoretical models of how prejudice affects the self-esteem of its targets. The stimulus-response model assumes that prejudice has a direct, negative effect on self-esteem. The stimulus-perception-response model recognises that perceptions of prejudice may not directly mirror experiences with prejudice, but predicts that the subjective perception of being a target of prejudice has a direct, negative effect on self-esteem. Both of these models are found to be inadequate. We propose a third, transactional model, which assumes that individuals do not respond in uniform way to being the target of prejudice. Rather, this model contends that self-esteem and emotional responses to prejudice are determined by cognitive appraisals of prejudicial events and coping strategies used in response to these events; these processes, in turn, are shaped by personal, situational, and structural factors. Experiments are presented showing that self-esteem in response to perceived prejudice is moderated by presence or absence of threats to personal identity, clarity of prejudices cues in the situation, ingroup identification, dispositional optimism, endorsement of legitimising ideologies, and group status. We argue that a transactional model of responses to prejudice emphasises sources of resistance as well as vulnerability among targets of prejudice.

Identities derived from group memberships are a core component of the self and provide individuals with a sense of belonging, esteem, and proscriptions for behaviour (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Whereas some social identities are valued, respected, and sought out, others are devalued, disrespected, and avoided. Among these negative social identities, some are devalued only in certain narrow contexts, whereas others are consensually devalued, or stigmatised. Stigmatisation may stem from...
possession of a tribal stigma, such as membership in a devalued ethnic or religious group, a physical stigma, such as disability or disfigurement, or a character stigma, such as drug addiction (Goffman, 1963). Defining features of stigmatisation include the possibility that one will be a target of prejudice or discrimination, as well as uncertainty about whether one’s outcomes are due to discrimination or to some other cause (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998).

What are the behavioural and psychological implications of possessing a social identity that is consensually devalued, of being a target of pervasive negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination? Researchers have examined a variety of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural consequences of this predicament, such as self-stereotyping, group identification, collective self-esteem, outgroup-directed hostility, task performance, social interactions, and personal self-esteem (see Crocker et al., 1998, for a review). Each of these outcomes is an important domain of inquiry. Here we focus on how perceiving the social self as a target of prejudice affects personal self-esteem and esteem-related emotions. In Western cultures, personal self-esteem is strongly related to the affective quality of experience, with people who have high personal self-esteem reporting more positive affect, more life satisfaction, less hopelessness, and less depression than people with low self-esteem (see Crocker & Quinn, 2000). Self-esteem is the strongest predictor of life satisfaction in the United States, stronger than all demographic and objective outcomes (such as age, income, education, and marital status) and other psychological variables (Diener, 1984). Self-esteem also is positively related to other significant life outcomes, including perceived control, task persistence and motivation, and social inclusion (see Baumeister, 1998, for a review). Thus, how prejudice affects the personal self-esteem of its targets is an important psychological concern.

In this paper we discuss three different theoretical models of how prejudice might affect the self-esteem of its targets. The stimulus–response model assumes that prejudice has a direct, negative effect on the self-esteem of its targets. The stimulus–perception–response model recognises that perceptions of prejudice may not directly mirror experiences with prejudice, but predicts that the subjective perception of being a target of prejudice has a direct, negative effect on self-esteem. A third, transactional model assumes that individuals do not respond in a uniform way to being the target of prejudice; rather, self-esteem and affective responses to being a target of prejudice are determined by how individuals cognitively appraise the event and the coping strategies they use to deal with the event. These processes, in turn, are a function of characteristics of both the person and the situation. We discuss each of these perspectives, and the evidence in support of them, below.
Many people assume that experiencing stressful life events leads directly to negative physical and mental health outcomes (Allison, 1998). This assumption, for example, guided the development of the Holmes and Rahe Social Readjustment Rating scale (1967), which was designed to determine the impact of number of stressful life events experienced on subsequent health. People whose social identities are consensually devalued are more likely to experience various forms of stressful events in their daily lives than are individuals whose social identities are more valued (Allison, 1998). Hence, the stimulus–response perspective predicts that being a victim of prejudice and discrimination will have a direct, negative effect on targets’ self-esteem (see Figure 1). Certainly there is ample evidence that prejudice and discrimination cause targets harm. Prejudice limits targets’ access to resources such as employment, income, housing, education, and medical care, and compromises their physical well being (see Allison, 1998; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999, for reviews). Prejudice also exposes targets to many forms of interpersonal threat, including being ignored, excluded, patronised, belittled, ridiculed, and the target of physical violence (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995).

Based on such evidence, a number of scholars have asserted that experiencing pervasive prejudice and discrimination inevitably leaves “marks of oppression” on the personalities and self-esteem of their victims (e.g., self-hatred, neuroticism) (e.g., Allport, 1954/1979; Cartwright, 1950; Erikson, 1956). For example, although Allport (1954) recognised that targets vary in how they respond to prejudice and discrimination, he nonetheless observed that, “One’s reputation, whether false or true, cannot be hammered, hammered, hammered, into one’s head, without doing something to one’s character” (p. 142). Cartwright noted, “To a considerable extent, personal feelings of worth depend on the social evaluation of the group with which a person is identified. Self-hatred and feelings ofworthlessness tend to arise from membership in underprivileged or outcast groups” (1950, p. 440). Likewise, in commenting on their observation that a large percentage of African-American children in their study seemed to prefer White skin colouring to Black skin colouring, Clark and Clark (1950) wrote, “They [their data] would seem to point strongly to

![Figure 1. Stimulus–response model.](image-url)
the need for a definite mental hygiene and educational program that would relieve children of the tremendous burden of feelings of inadequacy and inferiority which seem to become integrated into the very structure of the personality as it is developing” (p. 350).

Reflecting this perspective, many studies have compared the self-esteem of members of stigmatised groups to the self-esteem of members of nonstigmatised groups, on the assumption that group differences in self-esteem would be due to group differences in experiences with prejudice and discrimination. As we discuss more fully elsewhere, however, researchers adopting this approach frequently encountered a paradox (see Crocker & Major, 1989). Members of chronically stigmatised groups often do not exhibit lower self-esteem than members of nonstigmatised groups (Crocker & Major, 1989; Porter & Washington, 1979; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Simpson & Yinger, 1985). Indeed, some groups that are exposed to repeated, pervasive, and severe discrimination, such as African-Americans, have higher self-esteem than groups who are rarely targets of prejudice, such as European-Americans (Twenge & Crocker, 2002). Stimulus–response models are inadequate to explain these findings.

**STIMULUS – PERCEPTION – RESPONSE MODEL**

A second approach to conceptualising how prejudice affects the self-esteem of its targets assumes that perceived prejudice mediates the effects of exposure to prejudice on self-esteem (see Figure 2). According to this perspective, objective prejudice is not always perceived. This difference

![Figure 2. Stimulus–perception–response model.](image-url)
between objective exposure and subjective perceptions of discrimination can lead to variability in targets’ response to objective prejudice. If the self or ingroup is perceived to be a victim of discrimination, however, this perception has a direct, negative effect on self-esteem. In the following sections, we briefly review the evidence with regard to each of the two paths in the S–P–R model: from objective prejudice to perceived prejudice, and from perceived prejudice to self-esteem (for a more complete discussion, see Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002b).

From objective to perceived discrimination

Objective exposure to discrimination and subjective perceptions of the self or group as a victim of discrimination often do not correspond (see Crosby, 1982; Feldman-Barrett & Swim, 1998; Stangor, Swim, & Sechrist, this volume). Some individuals who are targets of discrimination fail to realize it, whereas other individuals believe they are victims of discrimination even when they are not. Recent reviews of this literature (Major et al., 2002b; Stangor, et al., this volume) indicate that whether or not people perceive themselves as targets of prejudice depends on a variety of personal, situational, and structural factors. For example, individuals are more likely to perceive discrimination against their group as a whole than against themselves personally (Crosby, 1982; Taylor, Wright, & Porter, 1994), are more likely to detect discrimination when information is presented aggregated across members of a group than on a case-by-case basis (Crosby, Pufall, Snyder, O’Connell, & Whalen, 1989), and are more likely to perceive themselves as targets of discrimination as the intensity of prejudice cues in the environment increases (Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003c).

In addition, some individuals are more sensitive to prejudice in their environment than are others. For example, African-American students who scored high on a measure of race-rejection sensitivity prior to beginning college were more likely to perceive negative race-related experiences and discrimination over the course of their first 3 weeks in college (Mendoza-Denton, Purdie, Downey, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2003). Individual differences in stigma-consciousness (i.e., the expectation of being stereotyped and reacted to on the basis of group membership) are positively related to perceptions of being discriminated against both at a personal and group level (Pinel, 1999). Individual differences in identification with the devalued group are also related positively to perceptions of personal and group identification (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Crosby et al., 1989; Major, Gramzow, McCoy, Levin, Schmader, & Sidanius, 2002a; Sellers & Shelton, 2003), especially when prejudice cues in the environment are attributionally ambiguous (Major et al., 2003c; Operario & Fiske, 2001). For example, Major et al. (2003c) found that in
the absence of situational cues indicating that an evaluator was prejudiced, or in the presence of blatant cues, level of gender identification did not predict the extent to which women blamed a poor evaluation on discrimination. However, when prejudice cues were ambiguous, women high in group identification were significantly more likely to blame a poor grade on discrimination than were those who were low in group identification (see Figure 3).

Individual differences in endorsement of beliefs that legitimise status differences in society also influence perceptions of personal and group discrimination. Such beliefs include the belief that status systems are permeable, that hard work is rewarded, and that one’s outcomes and status are under one’s own control, among others (Major & Schmader, 2001). In three studies, Major et al. (2002a), found that the more strongly low-status participants (Latino/a-Americans; women) endorsed the ideology of individual mobility (e.g., agreed with items such as “Advancement in American society is possible for individuals of all ethnic groups”), the less likely they were to report in general that they personally, or members of their group, were a target of ethnic discrimination. They were also less likely to blame discrimination when a higher-status confederate (European-American; man) rejected them for a desirable role ($\beta = -.45$). In contrast, among members of high-status groups, the more they endorsed the ideology of individual mobility, the more likely they were to blame discrimination when a member of a lower-status group rejected them for a desirable role ($\beta = .52$). This interaction is illustrated in Figure 4.

![Figure 3. Attributions to discrimination as a function of clarity of prejudice cues and group identification (from Major et al., 2003c).](image-url)
As the studies by Major et al. (2002a) illustrate, relative group status also influences the extent to which discrimination is perceived. Reflecting their greater exposure to and experiences with discrimination, members of stigmatised groups are more likely than members of nonstigmatised groups to report on questionnaires or interviews that they and members of their group have been victims of discrimination (Major et al., 2002a; Operario & Fiske, 2001). When status differences in exposure are controlled experimentally, however, main effects of group status on attributions to discrimination are often not observed (Inman, 2001; Major et al., 2002a).

To summarise, perceived discrimination against the self (or group) does not always directly match objective exposure to discrimination. This disconnection between exposure and subjective perception may account for some of the variability in individual responses to prejudice. Both vigilance for and denial of discrimination may be associated with psychological costs, but under different circumstances (see Major et al., 2002b, 2003c; Miller & Kaiser, 2001, for a fuller discussion of this issue).

Figure 4. Attributions to discrimination among high- and low-status group members as a function of individual differences in the belief in individual mobility (from Major et al., 2002a).
From perceived prejudice to lower self-esteem

The second assumption of the stimulus–perception–response approach is that perceiving oneself as a victim of prejudice and discrimination has a direct, negative effect on personal self-esteem (see Figure 2). This prediction is derived from symbolic interactionist theories of the development of the self, which posit that self-perceptions are based on perceptions of how others see the self (see Crocker & Major, 1989, for a discussion). This prediction is also consistent with theories that propose that psychological well-being is dependent on inclusion by others (Leary, 1990; Williams, 1997), the fulfillment of affiliation needs (Bowlby, 1969), and the perception that one is valued by others (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997). For example, research has shown that ostracism or exclusion by others results in lowered self-esteem (Leary et al., 1995; Williams, Shore, & Grahe, 1998). In addition, perceiving that one’s outcomes are due to discrimination requires recognising that others devalue an important and enduring aspect of the self—one’s social identity (Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002a). For the stigmatised, discrimination also implies that important outcomes are under the control of powerful others. Consequently, perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination is hypothesised to have a direct, negative effect on self-esteem for members of stigmatised groups.

Consistent with the S–P–R model, a number of correlational studies report a negative relationship among members of disadvantaged groups between perceptions of discrimination and measures of psychological well-being. For example, the more women report being the victim of sexism, the more depression (Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1998) and less social self-esteem they report (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Higher general negative affect (hostile, depressed, and anxious affect combined) was also observed among women asked to imagine that they were excluded from a course by a sexist professor than among women asked to imagine that they were rejected by a professor who was a "jerk" (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002b). Perceptions of personal discrimination are also associated with lower self-esteem among gay men (Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001) and African-Americans (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Almost all of the studies cited in support of the existence of a direct, negative effect of perceiving prejudice against the self or group on self-esteem are correlational. As we have discussed extensively elsewhere (Major et al., 2002b), although the negative correlation between perceiving prejudice and self-esteem is reliable, its meaning is unclear for several reasons. First, of course, one cannot infer causation from correlation. It is possible that the causal direction is from self-esteem and depressed affect to perceptions of discrimination rather than the reverse. For example, Sechrist, Swim, and Mark (2003) found that women in whom a negative mood was
induced were more likely to perceive themselves, and their group, as victims of discrimination than were women in whom a positive mood was induced, as long as an external attribution for induced mood was not provided.

Second, self-reports of frequently being a victim of discrimination are difficult to interpret. Typically, respondents are asked to indicate the extent (or frequency) with which they have been targets of prejudice in the past, e.g., “I consider myself a person who has been deprived of opportunities because of my gender” (Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002). Responses to such questions reflect the frequency (and/or severity) of exposure to objectively discriminatory events as well as subjective interpretations of and explanations for those events. Indeed, some researchers consider responses to questions such as these to reflect the amount of objective discrimination that respondents have experienced (Klonoff & Landrine, 1997) whereas others consider responses to the same questions to reflect attributational processes (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002a).

Third, the relationship between perceptions of discrimination and self-esteem may be inflated by a “third variable” that biases both measures, such as individual differences in negative affectivity or interpersonal sensitivity (Major, Richards, Cooper, Cozzarelli, & Zubek, 1998). This problem is compounded when researchers ask participants the extent to which they feel like a “victim” (e.g., “I feel like I am personally a victim of society because of my gender”, Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1997). Mendoza-Denton et al. (2003) found that among African-American participants, sensitivity to race-based rejection was negatively correlated with personal self-esteem, consistent with the S–P–R model. Both variables, however, were also correlated with individual differences in sensitivity to rejection in close relationships. Furthermore, when sensitivity to rejection in close relationships was partialed out, the relationship between race-based rejection sensitivity and self-esteem was no longer significant. In contrast, the negative relationship between rejection sensitivity in close relationships and self-esteem remained significant when controlling for race-based rejection sensitivity.

Our argument that individual differences in negative affectivity, rejection sensitivity, and related measures may inflate the relationship between perceived discrimination and self-esteem is not meant to imply that individuals who perceive themselves as targets of discrimination are neurotic or “making it up”. Nor is it meant to imply that the relationship is not meaningful. Our point is an empirical one: researchers examining the relationship between perceptions of victimisation (due to any cause, including discrimination) and self-esteem should assess this relationship controlling for individual differences that might bias the correlation among these measures (or use experimental manipulations). In sum, although there is a consistent and reliable negative correlation between perceiving oneself as
a frequent victim of discrimination and self-esteem, there is as yet little evidence that it is the perception of prejudice directed against the self or group that directly causes lowered personal self-esteem.

TRANSACTIONAL MODEL OF RESPONSES TO PREJUDICE

A third approach to understanding the impact of prejudice on self-esteem is shown in Figure 5. This approach draws upon transactional stress and coping models (e.g., Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Possessing a consensually devalued social identity is a stressor similar to other types of chronic and acute stressors (Allison, 1998; Clark et al., 1999; Miller & Kaiser, 2001; Miller & Major, 2000). Thus, theoretical and empirical insights gained from research on adjustment to stressful events in general can be usefully applied to advance understanding of how people respond to being a target of prejudice. This perspective guides our own research (see Kaiser, Major, & McCoy, in press; Major et al., 2002b; Miller & Kaiser, 2001; Miller & Major, 2000).

Transactional models of stress and coping were designed to explain significant variability across individuals in adaptation and response to stressful events (Bandura, 1977; Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A core premise of transactional models is that responses to stressful life events are unlikely to be uniform. Emotional responses to stressful events are assumed to be a function of how individuals cognitively appraise the event and the coping strategies they use to deal with events that are appraised as stressful. Events are appraised as stressful when internal or external demands are seen as taxing or exceeding the adaptive resources of the individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Cognitive appraisals are judgements about the relationship between an individual and his or her environment and the implications of this relationship for psychological well-being (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In primary appraisal, a person assesses whether an event has the potential to threaten important, self-relevant goals or values. In
secondary appraisal, an individual considers whether he or she is capable of remediying a stressful person–environment relationship. Although primary and secondary appraisals can be conceptually distinguished, they are interdependent, and often empirically indistinguishable (Lazarus, 1999). Coping is a goal-directed process aimed at regulating emotion, cognition, behaviour, physiology, and the environment, in response to stressful events or circumstances (Compas, Conner-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Lazarus (1999) observed that although cognitive appraisals and coping are conceptually distinct constructs, it is often difficult to distinguish the two. For example, one method of coping is cognitive reappraisal—redefining an event as less threatening than it was originally appraised as being.

Cognitive appraisals and coping are a function of characteristics of both the person and the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Situational factors that affect appraisals and/or coping include, for example, the severity, imminence, and predictability of the stressor, its self-relevance, and whether supportive others are present in the situation (Lazarus, 1999). Person factors include, for example, dispositional optimism, locus of control, and self-esteem (Major et al., 1998; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001; Taylor, 1989). Structural factors, such as membership in a group with high social status and ample resources, also moderate coping and appraisal processes (Adler & Ostrove, 1999; James, Hartnett, & Kalsbeek, 1983; Sapolsky, 1995). These situational, structural, and personal factors moderate the relationship between stressors and psychological response via their impact on cognitive appraisals and coping.

In the following sections, we use the conceptual model illustrated in Figure 3 as an organising framework for discussing our own research programme addressing targets’ self-esteem and esteem-related emotional responses to perceiving discrimination based on their social identity. According to our transactional model, although an event may be perceived as discriminatory, the consequences of that perception for self-esteem are unlikely to be direct or uniform. Rather, they will depend on how the discriminatory event is appraised and coped with; these processes, in turn, are shaped by a variety of personal, situational, and structural factors.

MODERATORS OF THE IMPACT OF PERCEIVED PREJUDICE ON SELF-ESTEEM

The research we present here focuses on factors that moderate the relationship between perceptions of prejudice and self-esteem, presumably through their effects on appraisals and coping strategies. The moderators we address do not by any means exhaust the list of potential moderators, but illustrate the type of factors likely to moderate the relationship between
perceived prejudice and self-esteem. We address various ways of coping with perceived prejudice in more detail elsewhere (e.g., Major et al., 2002b; Major, Quinton, McCoy, & Schmader, 2000; Major & Schmader, 1998; Miller & Kaiser, 2001; Miller & Major, 2000).

**Threats to personal identity**

An important variable that moderates the impact of perceived prejudice on personal self-esteem is whether or not the person has also experienced a threat to his or her personal identity. Personal identity refers to a person’s sense of his or her unique self; i.e., the self based in an individual’s unique characteristics and traits. Personal identity can be distinguished from social identity, i.e., the self derived from membership in social categories or groups, and which is shared to some extent with others. People may experience threat (e.g., rejection; a poor evaluation) based on aspects of their personal identity (for example, their personality or ability) or social identity (for example, their gender or ethnic group membership), or may experience both types of identity threat. For example, a person who is told that their group is lazy (a threat to social identity) may also be told that they are personally incompetent (a threat to personal identity). The impact of a threat to social identity on personal self-esteem is likely to vary depending on whether the person has or has not also experienced a threat to their personal identity.

Several scholars (Crocker & Major, 1989; Dion, 1975; Dion & Earn, 1975; Major & Crocker, 1993) propose that perceiving oneself as a target of prejudice based on one’s social identity can help to protect personal self-esteem when individuals are faced with threats to their personal identity. Drawing on Kelley’s (1973) discounting principle, Crocker and Major (1989) hypothesised that the perceived availability of prejudice as a plausible external cause of negative outcomes might allow the stigmatised to discount their own role in producing those outcomes. Furthermore, Crocker and Major (1989) hypothesised that because prejudice is external to the personal self, attributing negative outcomes to prejudice should protect personal self-esteem relative to making attributions to “internal, stable, and global causes such as lack of ability” (p. 613). They based their hypothesis on theoretical models of emotion positing that attributing negative events to causes external to the self protects affect and self-esteem, whereas attributing negative outcomes to causes internal to the self for which one is responsible, such as one’s lack of ability, leads to negative affect and low self-esteem (e.g., Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Weiner, 1995). In support of their predictions, Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, and Major (1991) found that women who received negative evaluations on an essay from a sexist male evaluator were more likely to attribute it to sexism, reported significantly less depressed...
affect, and reported marginally higher self-esteem, than women who received negative feedback from a non-sexist evaluator. As we noted elsewhere (Major et al., 2002b), the discounting hypothesis can be considered a reappraisal coping process by which an individual cognitively reframes a threatening situation in a manner that avoids implicating core stable aspects of the personal self as the cause of the event, such as intelligence or personality.

Subsequent statements of the theory differentiated between attributing a negative event to one’s social identity and attributing it to prejudice against one’s social identity (Crocker & Major, 1994; Major et al., 2002b). In order to qualify as discrimination, an event must be perceived as both unjust and due to group membership. If an individual perceives herself as treated unjustly, but blames her treatment on her personal, rather than social, identity this is not an attribution to discrimination. More importantly, if an individual attributes his treatment to his social identity, but also believes the treatment was justified, this too does not qualify as an attribution to discrimination. The latter attribution is an attribution to justifiable differential treatment. This definitional clarification is important because attributions to justifiable differential treatment lack the self-protective properties sometimes associated with attributions to discrimination. For example, Crocker, Cornwell, and Major (1993) found that overweight women who were rejected as a partner by a man who knew their weight blamed the rejection on their weight, rather than on prejudice. Furthermore, blaming weight was associated with negative emotional consequences for the overweight women. Crocker and Major (1994) argued that rejection on the basis of weight is often seen as justified because weight is presumed to be under personal control.

In more recent refinements, Major and her colleagues (Major et al., 2002b; Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003a) reconceptualised the discounting hypothesis as a theory of the emotional consequences of attributions of blame rather than of attributions of causality. According to their self-blame discounting hypothesis, an attribution to discrimination involves attributing responsibility (or blame) for a negative event to another whose actions are unjustified. Furthermore, it is judgements of blame, rather than judgements about the locus of causality (internal vs external) that are the critical determinants of emotion due to negative events (Weiner, 1985). Thus, Major et al. (2002b) argued that attributing a negative event to discrimination protects self-esteem to the extent that it discounts self-blame rather than internal causes. This distinction is important because attributions to prejudice, because they implicate one’s group membership, contain an internal as well as an external component (see Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002b). Indeed, Major et al. (2003a) found that attributions to discrimination protect self-esteem to the extent that they discount self-blame, but not internal causation, for a negative outcome.
Perceived discrimination is likely to buffer self-esteem primarily when an individual experiences a threat to an internal, stable aspect of the personal self. Recent evidence indicates that although attributing a negative event to discrimination protects self-esteem relative to attributing the event to internal, stable qualities of self, it does not protect self-esteem relative to making purely external attributions (Major et al., 2003a; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002b). Schmitt and Branscombe (2002b) found that women experienced more negative affect (on a composite measure of depressed, anxious, and hostile affect) if they imagined being rejected from a course by a sexist professor who excluded women than if they imagined being rejected because of purely external factors (i.e., the professor was a “jerk” who excluded everyone). In a replication and extension of this study, Major et al. (2003a) found that women and men who were asked to imagine that they were excluded from a course by a sexist professor were significantly less depressed (but not less angry) than men and women asked to imagine they were excluded because the professor thought they were unintelligent. These experiments indicate that whether an attribution to discrimination is likely to have beneficial or detrimental emotional effects depends on what the alternative attribution to discrimination is likely to be and the specific emotion in question.

When predicting emotional reactions to perceiving the self as a target of prejudice, it is particularly important to differentiate among self-directed emotions such as depression and self-esteem and other-directed emotions such as anger and hostility (Major et al., 2003a; Major et al., 2002b). Crocker and Major (1989) hypothesised that attributing a negative event to discrimination could protect self-esteem and related self-relevant emotions, such as depression. They did not hypothesise, nor would one expect, that attributions to discrimination would protect individuals from experiencing anger. In their initial test of the discounting hypothesis, Crocker and colleagues (1991) found that attributing a negative evaluation to discrimination buffered women from experiencing depressed affect, but not from hostile or anxious affect. The study by Major et al. (2003a) described above observed similar emotional specificity. Furthermore, Branscombe et al. (1999) found perceptions of discrimination among African-Americans to be positively associated with hostility towards Whites. Thus, when researchers combine hostile and depressed affect into a single composite measure (e.g., Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002b) the results are difficult to interpret and likely to produce misleading conclusions.

In sum, research suggests that in the context of a threat to personal identity, perceiving discrimination based on one’s social identity can buffer personal self-esteem to the extent that it shifts blame from stable, unique aspects of the personal self to the prejudice of others. It is important to
note that blaming specific events on discrimination (e.g., “I failed the test because the grader is sexist”) is conceptually and methodologically distinct from self-reports of experiencing pervasive discrimination (e.g., “I am a victim of society because of my gender”). As noted above, self-reports of experiences with discrimination confound attributional processes with frequency and severity of exposure to discrimination. In contrast, experiments that test the prediction that an attribution to prejudice can protect self-esteem from personal threat control for exposure to a negative event across participants and manipulate the plausibility that prejudice could have caused the event. Attributing a negative event to discrimination can be viewed as a coping strategy that mitigates the threat to personal self-esteem that might arise from blaming the event on internal, stable aspects of the self. Self-reported experiences of being a target of pervasive prejudice that are assessed in the absence of a direct personal threat do not serve such a purpose. Thus, we regard the presence of a personal threat as an important contextual factor that moderates the emotional consequences of perceived discrimination.

Clarity of prejudice cues

A second factor that moderates the relationship between perceived prejudice and self-esteem is the clarity, or intensity, of prejudice cues in the environment. Crocker and Major (1989) hypothesised that blatant prejudice protects self-esteem from threat more than prejudice that is hidden or disguised. When one is faced with blatant prejudice, there is no uncertainty about who is to blame for the negative event. In contrast, being exposed to ambiguous prejudice leaves members of stigmatised groups with considerable uncertainty about the causes of negative feedback. Thus, they may be unable to reap the benefits of attributions to discrimination because they cannot fully discount their role in producing negative outcomes. Major, et al. (2003c) tested this hypothesis in a study in which women received negative feedback from a man in the presence of cues indicating that he was either clearly sexist, ambiguously sexist, or no cues to his sexism were revealed. As predicted, women reported significantly higher state self-esteem when the negative feedback came from a clearly sexist man than when the man’s sexism was ambiguous or no cues to his sexism were mentioned. In addition, women in the clear cues to sexism condition discounted the negative feedback (i.e., attributed the feedback more to discrimination than to their lack ability) more than did women in the ambiguous cues condition or the no cues condition. Across conditions, the more women discounted their ability as a cause of the feedback, the higher their personal self-esteem.
Internal analyses examining the correlation between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem within experimental conditions revealed that this relationship varied dramatically by context. Blaming discrimination was *positively* associated with self-esteem in the clear cues condition, was *unassociated* with self-esteem in the ambiguous cue condition, and was *negatively* associated with self-esteem when no cues to the man’s sexism were present. This interaction is illustrated in Figure 6. These results suggest that correlational studies and experimental studies may sometimes produce such different results because of differences in the clarity of prejudice cues in the situation in which they are assessed. These results also suggest that being overly vigilant for signs of prejudice (i.e., blaming outcomes on discrimination when no cues are present) is negatively associated with self-esteem. So too, however, is denying blatant discrimination (i.e., failing to blame outcomes on discrimination when discrimination is clear). In sum, when clear situational cues to discrimination facilitate the discounting of one’s own role in causing a

![Figure 6](image-url)

**Figure 6.** Self-esteem as a function of clarity of prejudice cues and attributions to discrimination (from Major et al., 2003c).
negative outcome, it can buffer personal self-esteem from the consequences of that outcome.

**Group identification**

A third variable that moderates the impact of perceived discrimination against the group on personal self-esteem is the extent to which the individual is identified with the targeted group. The more identified one is with a group, the greater likelihood that negative group-related events will be appraised as self-relevant. Negative events that are more self-relevant are appraised as more threatening (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Patterson & Neufeld, 1987). Thus, the more central and important a particular social identity is to an individual, the more threatening it might be for that individual to perceive discrimination against that social identity. McCoy and Major (2003) tested this hypothesis in two experiments. In their first experiment, women, all of whom had previously completed a measure of gender identification, received negative feedback on a speech from a male evaluator. Thus, all received a threat to their personal identity. On the basis of an exchange of attitude questionnaires, the women learned that the evaluator had clearly sexist or nonsexist attitudes towards women. Women low in gender identification reported less depressed emotion, and higher self-esteem, in the sexist than nonsexist condition. In contrast, among highly gender-identified women, self-esteem and depressed emotions did not differ between the sexist and nonsexist conditions (see Figure 7). This interaction suggests that perceiving prejudice against one’s social identity protects personal self-esteem from threat only when that social identity is not a core aspect of self. When social identity is a core aspect of the self, prejudice against that social identity is more self-relevant, and hence more personally threatening. It is important to note that, however, even among women who were highly group identified, the sexist condition did not result in lower self-esteem than the nonsexist condition. As discussed above, we believe this occurred because all women experienced a threat to their personal identity in this study.

In McCoy and Major’s (2003) second experiment, Latino/a-American students, all of whom had previously completed a measure of ethnic group identification, read an article documenting pervasive prejudice against Latino/as or a control article. Threat appraisals as well as emotional responses were then assessed. Consistent with predictions, group identification also moderated the impact of perceptions of pervasive ingroup prejudice on emotional responses. Among participants in the ingroup prejudice condition, group identification was positively associated with depressed affect, such that participants high in ethnic group identification were more depressed after reading about prejudice against their group than
were participants low in ethnic group identification. In contrast, in the control condition, group identification was negatively associated with depressed emotions. Furthermore, group identification also interacted with experimental condition to predict threat appraisals. The more Latino/a-American students in the prejudice condition identified with their ethnic group, the more they reported being personally threatened by racism. These primary appraisals of threat, in turn, fully mediated the positive relationship between group identification and depressed emotion. Collectively these two experiments indicate that individual differences in group identification moderate the impact of perceived prejudice against the group on personal self-esteem. Furthermore, consistent with our transactional model, the second experiment demonstrated that group identification moderated the relationship between perceived prejudice against the group and depressed emotion via its impact on cognitive appraisals of personal threat.

Although identification with a group can increase an individual’s vulnerability to perceived threats against the group, identifying with a group can also be an important coping strategy in response to group threat (Allport, 1954/1979). Groups can provide emotional, informational, and instrumental support, social validation for one’s perceptions, and social consensus for one’s attributions. Turning to the group can facilitate
attempts to directly solve the problem of prejudice (e.g., collective action) as well as facilitate attempts to deal with the emotions resulting from perceiving prejudice. Branscombe and colleagues proposed that group identification increases in response to perceived prejudice against the group, and that this increased group identification enhances psychological well-being. They further proposed that this increase in identification with the group partially offsets a direct negative effect of perceived prejudice against the group on self-esteem and psychological well-being. Thus, perceived prejudice has an indirect, positive effect on well-being, mediated by its impact on group identification (Branscombe et al., 1999). Several studies have shown that perceptions of prejudice and group identification are positively associated (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999; Major et al., 2002a; Operario & Fiske, 2000). Further, Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, and Spears (2001) showed experimentally that customers in a piercing salon who read that prejudice existed against body piercers subsequently identified more strongly with that group than customers who read that prejudice against body piercers was decreasing. A number of studies also report a positive association between group identification and self-esteem among stigmatised groups (Bat-Chava, 1994; Branscombe et al., 1999; Munford, 1994; Phinney, 1990; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998). These findings are consistent with the idea that group identification can be an effective coping strategy in response to perceptions of prejudice against the group.

However, not all members of stigmatised groups may cope with discrimination by increasing their identification with the group. Some individuals and groups may cope with perceived prejudice against the group by decreasing their affiliation and identification with a group (e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002). Research by Ellemers and colleagues suggests that highly identified members of a group respond to threats to the group by increasing their identification with the group, whereas those members who are low in identification decrease their identification even more in response to threats to the group (see Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002 for a review). In the study described above, McCoy and Major (2003, Exp. 2) observed a significant interaction between prejudice condition and initial levels of group identification on subsequent identification with the group. Specifically, after reading about pervasive discrimination towards their ingroup, Latino/a-American students who had previously reported low levels of ethnic group identification identified even less with their ethnic group, whereas previously highly group identified Latino/a-American students identified even more strongly with their ethnic group. Further research is needed to determine when group identification is a buffer against vs a source of vulnerability to prejudice against the group.
Optimism

Stable characteristics of persons also moderate the relationship between perceived prejudice and self-esteem. Research in the health domain indicates that personal resources, such as dispositional optimism and an internal locus of control, are important moderators of emotional responses to stressors. For example, relative to people with a pessimistic outlook on life, optimistic individuals tend to fare better emotionally in the face of a wide variety of stressful events (see Scheier et al., 2001, for a review). Optimism is theorised to affect adjustment through its impact on cognitive appraisals. People with an optimistic outlook tend to appraise potentially stressful events as less harmful and taxing than people with a pessimistic outlook on life. Their more benign appraisals, in turn, are associated with greater psychological resilience in the face of stressful life events (Major et al., 1998).

Kaiser et al. (in press) examined whether dispositional optimism moderated the impact of perceived prejudice against the group on personal self-esteem, and whether it did so via its impact on cognitive appraisals. In their first study, men and women who had previously completed a measure of dispositional optimism were randomly assigned to read an article about prejudice against their own gender group or one of two control articles (i.e., an article about prejudice against the elderly or a neutral article unrelated to prejudice). Participants then completed measures of self-esteem and depressed emotions. Among men and women who read about pervasive sexism directed towards their own gender group, an optimistic outlook on life was associated with significantly higher self-esteem and less depression. Among participants who read control information, optimism was unrelated to depressed emotions and still significantly, but more weakly, positively related to self-esteem. There was no main effect of the prejudice manipulation on self-esteem or depressed emotions, even though participants in the sexism condition perceived greater prejudice against their gender group than participants in the control conditions.

A follow-up study examined whether cognitive appraisals of personal threat mediated the relationship between optimism and self-evaluative emotions (Kaiser et al., in press, Study 2). Women who were dispositional optimists or pessimists were recruited and asked to read an article documenting pervasive sexism against women. They then completed measures of primary and secondary appraisals, personal self-esteem, and depressed emotions. Again, optimism was positively related to self-esteem and negatively related to depressed emotions. Furthermore, as predicted, this relationship was mediated by cognitive appraisals. Compared to pessimists, optimists appraised prejudice against their group as less personally threatening and believed they were better prepared to cope with prejudice. These more benign appraisals, in turn, were related to higher self-
esteem and less depression. In sum, these studies demonstrate that individual differences in personal resources, such as dispositional optimism, moderate the relationship between perceived prejudice against the group and self-evaluative emotions, and that they do so via their impact on cognitive appraisals of threat.

Legitimising ideologies

The accessibility of ideologies that legitimise group status differences also moderates the self-esteem implications of perceived discrimination against the group (Kaiser & Major, in press; Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003b). Legitimising ideologies locate the source of group status differences within individual attributes of group members (e.g., low effort, lack of ability). Endorsing legitimising ideologies helps people to feel that their environments are predictable and controllable, and is positively related to psychological health (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). However, because legitimising ideologies encourage blaming the self for outcomes that may in fact be due to factors outside one’s control, endorsing them can also make individuals who are targets of prejudice and discrimination feel like moral failures. For example, Quinn and Crocker (1999) found that overweight women who had been primed with the Protestant work ethic ideology prior to reading about discrimination against the overweight reported lower self-esteem and lower well-being than overweight women primed with an inclusive ideology. The prime had no effect on average weight women.

Major et al. (2003b) demonstrated that this vulnerability is not limited to group membership perceived as controllable, as overweight generally is seen as being. They investigated whether individual differences in endorsement of legitimising ideologies moderated women’s self-esteem in response to reading about sexism and Latino/a-Americans’ self-esteem in response to reading about racism against Latino/a-Americans. In an initial study, women, all of whom had previously completed measures of individual mobility and self-esteem, read an article describing pervasive sexism against women, or one of 2 control articles. As predicted, women who read that sexism was pervasive and who strongly endorsed the ideology of individual mobility reported decreased self-esteem relative to women who less strongly endorsed this ideology. In contrast, when women read neutral information, endorsement of legitimising ideology tended to be positively associated with self-esteem. There was no main effect of sexism condition on self-esteem, even though women in the sexism condition perceived more discrimination against women than did women in the control conditions.

In another study, Latino-Americans who read that prejudice against their own ethnic group was pervasive reported lower self-esteem the more they
endorsed the ideology of individual mobility. In contrast, among Latino-
Americans who read about prejudice against a non-self-relevant group, 
endorsing the ideology of individual mobility was unassociated with self-
esteeem. Again, there was no main effect of prejudice condition on self-
esteeem, even though participants in the racism condition perceived more 
discrimination against Latino/a-Americans than did those in the control 
condition. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that the extent to which 
individuals chronically or temporarily endorse ideologies that legitimise 
their low status moderates the impact of perceived prejudice against the 
group on personal self-esteem.

**Group status**

Experiences of being a target of prejudice vary with the social status of one’s 
group. Because they face less frequent and less severe forms of discrimina-
tion, members of high-status groups, relative to low-status groups, are likely 
to appraise the discrimination they do experience as less threatening 
(Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002a). For these reasons, Schmitt and 
Branscombe (2002a) argue that attributions to discrimination are less 
detrimental to the self-esteem and well-being of members of high-status 
groups, than for low-status groups. They cite evidence that perceptions of 
discrimination are negatively correlated with psychological well-being 
among low-status groups but not among higher-status groups in support 
of their argument (e.g., Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1998). However, as we 
noted above, these studies have several interpretational problems. For 
example, members of high- and low-status groups may be thinking of 
examples of discrimination that vary greatly in severity when responding to 
self-report questions about experience with discrimination. Thus, observed 
status differences may be due to the effects of objective experiences with 
discrimination on well-being rather than the effects of attributional 
processes on well-being.

Does group status moderate the emotional consequences of attributing 
the same negative event to discrimination? Evidence is mixed. In one study, 
women who imagined being excluded from a course because of prejudice 
reported more negative affect (a composite of hostile, anxious, and 
depressed affect) than men who imagined being rejected due to prejudice 
(Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002b). A replication and extension of this study, 
however, failed to replicate this gender difference (Major et al., 2003a). 
Women as well as men in this latter experiment experienced less depressed 
affect if they were rejected because of prejudice than if they were rejected 
because of a presumed lack of intelligence.

In sum, a variety of personal, situational, and structural factors 
moderate the impact of perceived discrimination on personal self-esteem
via their impact on appraisals and coping. Our research indicates that perceiving discrimination based on one’s social identity is likely to protect personal self-esteem when it occurs in the context of a personal threat and provides a less threatening explanation for a negative self-relevant outcome, and when the contextual cues to prejudice are clear thereby facilitating discounting of self-blame (Major et al., 2003c; Major et al., 2003a). Our research also indicates that personal resources, such as dispositional optimism, can buffer personal self-esteem from perceived prejudice against the group by reducing the extent to which prejudice is appraised as personally threatening (Kaiser et al., in press). In contrast, the personal self-esteem of individuals who identify highly with the targeted group (McCoy & Major, 2003), and who endorse ideologies that legitimise the low status of the targeted group by implicating their lower inputs (Major et al., 2003b), is vulnerable to perceived prejudice against the ingroup. Thus, framing target responses to prejudice within a transactional coping model allows for increased understanding and prediction of self-esteem variability in targets’ responses to prejudice.

CONCLUSIONS

We argue that insights from the stress and coping literature can inform research and theory concerning the psychological consequences of being a target of prejudice. In this paper we have presented a transactional model of coping with prejudice. This model contends that self-esteem and affective responses to being a target of prejudice are determined by how individuals cognitively appraise prejudicial events and the coping strategies they use to deal with those events. These processes, in turn, are a function of characteristics of the person, the situation, and the larger social structure. This model assumes variability in the perception of discrimination, as well as variability in the consequences of this perception for targets’ self-esteem. We addressed several personal, situational, and structural factors that contribute to this variability through their effects on appraisals and coping. In our view, conceptualising targets’ responses to prejudice and discrimination within a transactional model emphasises sources of resistance as well as vulnerability among targets. Such an approach will advance theory and research on how individuals respond cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally to being a target of prejudice because of their social identity.

We close by noting that although here we conceptualised successful adaptation among the stigmatised in terms of feelings of personal self-worth, successful adaptation can also be conceptualised in other ways. For example, successful adaptation may involve feeling that one’s ingroup is worthy, or feeling attached to one’s ingroup. Successful adaptation may also
involve feeling anger at the injustices faced by their group. Although anger is rarely seen as a healthy emotion, anger may be necessary for people to publicly claim discrimination when it occurs, and to work for social change.

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