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# It's Not My Fault: When and Why Attributions to Prejudice Protect Self-Esteem

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*This study tested the hypothesis that awareness of the possibility of being a target of discrimination can provide individuals with a means of self-esteem protection when they are faced with negative outcomes. Men and women contemplated being rejected from a course due to sexism, personal deservingness, or an exclusively external cause. Regardless of gender, participants in the sexism condition blamed themselves less, attributed the rejection less to internal causes, and anticipated feeling less depressed than those in the personal deservingness condition. Furthermore, the more participants discounted the rejection—blamed it more on discrimination than themselves—the less depressed emotions they anticipated feeling. Discounting did not buffer participants from feeling hostility or anxiety. These findings advance our understanding of when and why attributions to prejudice protect emotional well-being.*

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**Keywords:** attribution; discrimination; prejudice; self-esteem; stigma

What are the psychological consequences of perceiving that one has been a target of prejudice—of believing that one has been discriminated against because of one's gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or appearance? Certainly there is ample evidence that being the target of prejudice is associated with reduced well-being (see Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002, for a review). Furthermore, correlational studies reveal that those who generally perceive themselves as victims of pervasive discrimination have poorer well-being than those who do not. For example, perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination is positively associated with depression among women (Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1997) and gay men (Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001) and with lower self-esteem among women (Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002) and African Americans (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). (See Kaiser,

Major, & McCoy, in press; Major et al., 2002; McCoy & Major, in press, for a discussion of sources of emotional variability to perceived prejudice.)

Crocker and Major (1989; Major & Crocker, 1993) ventured the provocative hypothesis that awareness of the possibility of being a target of discrimination also may provide the stigmatized with a means of self-esteem protection when they are faced with negative outcomes (see also Dion, 1975; Dion & Earn, 1975). Drawing on Kelley's (1973) discounting principle, they hypothesized that the availability of prejudice as a plausible external cause of negative outcomes might allow the stigmatized to discount their own role in producing those outcomes. Furthermore, Crocker and Major (1989) hypothesized that because prejudice is external to the self, attributing negative outcomes to prejudice should protect affect and 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 deservingness, leads to negative affect and low self-esteem (e.g., Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Weiner, 1985).

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Recently, Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a, 2002b) challenged Crocker and Major's description of an attribution to prejudice as an external attribution. They contend that because one's group membership is an aspect of the self, attributions to prejudice have a strong internal component. Furthermore, Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a, 2002b) dispute the hypothesis that attributions to discrimination protect self-esteem. They argue that because attributions to discrimination threaten an important aspect of the self—one's social identity—making such attributions will heighten rather than decrease negative affect for members of stigmatized groups. Finally, Schmitt and Branscombe claim that attributions to discrimination are less damaging for members of high-status groups than for members of low-status groups because discrimination has a different, and more benign, meaning for the former than the latter.

In a test of their hypotheses, Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a) conducted two experiments in which participants were asked to imagine that a professor refused their request to add a closed class. In one condition (the everyone rejected condition), participants learned that the professor was a "jerk" and did not honor anyone's request to add the class. In a second condition, participants learned that the professor was "sexist" and let in no members of their own gender but let in 10 members of the other gender (the prejudice condition). The extent to which participants saw the rejection as due to discrimination, due to something about themselves (internal causes), and due to something about the professor (external causes) was assessed. In addition, participants in the second study indicated the extent to which they would experience 12 emotions, such as discouraged, blue, angry, and cruel.

Consistent with Schmitt and Branscombe's claim that attributions to prejudice have an internal component, participants in both studies rated internal causes higher when the ingroup was rejected than when everyone was rejected. However, consistent with Crocker and Major's (1989) claim that attributions to prejudice have an external component, participants in the first study also rated external causes just as high in the prejudice condition as in the everyone rejected condition. In the second study, participants rated external causes even higher when the ingroup was rejected than when everyone was rejected. Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a, Study 2) also found that women who read the "prejudice" vignette reported significantly more general negative affect than women who read the "everyone rejected" vignette. Thus, women reported more negative affect if they were rejected because of discrimination than because of purely external factors. Schmitt and Branscombe did not observe this pattern for men.

Schmitt and Branscombe's (2002a) studies make the important theoretical point that attributions to prejudice contain both an internal and an external component. Furthermore, they illustrate that for women, attributing rejection to prejudice feels worse than attributing it to purely external factors (e.g., a professor who is a "jerk"). However, Schmitt and Branscombe's studies failed to provide an adequate test of Crocker and Major's primary theoretical assumptions. An appropriate test would require (a) comparing the emotional effects of rejection due to discrimination to the emotional effects of rejection due to a lack of deservingness (e.g., a lack of ability) and (b) examining the impact of rejection due to discrimination on self-esteem-related emotions (e.g., depressed, blue) separately from its effects on other-directed emotions (e.g., angry, cruel).

Crocker and Major's discounting hypothesis does not require that attributions to discrimination are exclusively external. Rather, it assumes that an attribution to discrimination is more external than an attribution to personal deservingness. Consequently, attributing rejection to discrimination should be less painful than attributing it to internal, stable, global factors such as a lack of ability. This is the rationale guiding self-handicapping (e.g., Jones & Berglas, 1978) and excuse-making behaviors (Schlenker, Pontari, & Christopher, 2001), both of which protect self-esteem under some circumstances (Snyder & Higgins, 1988). Schmitt and Branscombe's comparison between discrimination attributions and external attributions is interesting but does not test the discounting hypotheses. An appropriate test requires comparing the emotional consequences of a discrimination attribution to the emotional consequences of an attribution to a lack of personal deservingness.

Crocker and Major's (1989; Major & Crocker, 1993) theoretical analysis also was not concerned with emotions such as anger or hostility. Rather, it addressed the implications of attributions to discrimination for self-esteem-related emotions (e.g., worthlessness, depression, sadness, shame) among the stigmatized. They predicted that attributions to discrimination can protect self-esteem from rejection or failure. They did not predict that attributions to discrimination protect the stigmatized from anger or anxiety. Indeed, in their initial test of their discounting hypothesis, they differentiated among different types of affect. Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, and Major (1991, Study 1) administered 12 mood items to women who had been evaluated by a sexist or nonsexist evaluator. These 12 items were selected from the depression, anxiety, and hostility subscales of the Multiple Affect Affective Check List (MAACL) (Zuckerman, Lubin, Vogel, & Valerius, 1964). Women who were negatively evaluated by a sexist evaluator experienced significantly less depressed emotions than

women negatively evaluated by a nonsexist evaluator, but they did not experience significantly less hostile emotions or less anxious emotions. Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a, Study 2) used the same 12 mood items as Crocker et al. (1991, Study 1) but reported results based on a composite of all 12 items. In the current study, we distinguish between emotions related to depression (depressed, worthless), hostility (angry, mad), and anxiety (fearful, worried) in testing the emotional implications of rejection based on discrimination compared to a lack of deservingness.

The distinction between self-directed emotions such as depression and other-directed emotions such as hostility is a particularly important one. There is substantial evidence that the perception of injustice is associated with the emotional response of anger (see Miller, 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). Consequently, one might expect people who blame rejection on discrimination to be just as angry, and perhaps angrier, than people who blame rejection on a lack of ability or on a "jerk." Several studies on prejudice illustrate the importance of differentiating between self-directed and other-directed affect (e.g., Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991; Vorauer & Kumhyr, 2001). Vorauer and Kumhyr (2001), for example, found that Aboriginal participants who interacted with a White partner who was highly prejudiced experienced more negative self-esteem-related feelings but not more negative other-directed feelings, compared to those who interacted with a low-prejudiced White partner. Of importance, Aboriginal participants paired with a highly prejudiced White partner failed to recognize that they were targets of prejudice. This study suggests that when targets experience behavioral manifestations of prejudice and fail to attribute those behaviors to prejudice, they may personalize the implications of the negative behavior. In summary, one goal of this study was to test adequately the Crocker and Major (1989; Major & Crocker, 1993) discounting hypothesis using the same paradigm used by Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a).

#### *Distinguishing Between Internal Causation and Self-Blame*

The second goal of this research was to extend the self-esteem protection hypothesis proposed by Crocker and Major (1989) beyond a simple internal versus external attribution dichotomy to consider the emotional implications of attributions of responsibility and blame. Major et al. (2002) recently proposed that the dilemma that must be resolved by the stigmatized target to protect his or her self-esteem in the face of poor treatment is not "Did something internal or external to me cause this out-

come?" but rather "Who is to blame for this outcome, you or me?"

A necessary component of making an attribution to discrimination is acknowledging that some part of the self (one's stigma or group membership) played a causal role in an outcome. Indeed, recognition of this fact led Crocker and Major (1994) to refine their discounting hypothesis to distinguish between attributing outcomes to one's social identity and attributing outcomes to prejudice based on one's social identity. Crocker and Major (1994) noted that although attributing treatment to one's social identity is an internal attribution, it does not necessarily carry with it the assumption of injustice, or moral wrongdoing, that attributing treatment to prejudice does. Indeed, some members of stigmatized groups may perceive that their treatment is due to others' reactions to their social identity but may perceive this treatment as legitimate. Consequently, they may not blame their negative treatment on prejudice but rather blame it on themselves. This may occur, for example, if the target perceives a stigma to be under their personal control. A study of overweight women demonstrated this pattern (Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993). Overweight women who were rejected as a partner by a man who knew their weight attributed their rejection to their weight but did not blame it on the man's prejudice.

Although Crocker and Major (1994) recognized that an attribution to discrimination involves the perception of moral wrongdoing on the part of another, they did not distinguish among the concepts of attributions to causality, responsibility, and blame. Some scholars argue that most respondents use these terms interchangeably (Tennen & Affleck, 1990). Others argue that these concepts should be differentiated theoretically (Fincham & Shultz, 1981; Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995). According to Weiner (1995), for example, holding a person responsible for an outcome is not the same as attributing the outcome to the person. He argues that even if the cause of an adverse event is located within the person and that cause is controllable by the individual, it is still possible that a judgment of responsibility will not be rendered if there are mitigating circumstances that negate moral responsibility. Furthermore, Weiner theorizes that it is judgments of responsibility (and/or blame, in the case of negative outcomes) rather than judgments about the locus of causality (internal vs. external) that are the critical determinants of emotion. A substantial amount of empirical research supports Weiner's hypotheses (see Weiner, 1995, for a review).

We believe that judgments of responsibility also play a critical role in determining when attributions to prejudice will protect self-esteem. Attributions to prejudice should be self-protective to the extent that they shift responsibility for negative events away from the self and

toward discrimination (see Major et al., 2002; Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003; McCoy & Major, in press). In other words, attributions to discriminations should protect self-esteem when they lead individuals to discount their own responsibility for producing negative events.

The discounting principle (Kelley, 1973) is based on Heider's (1958) idea that explanations of actions commonly involve a trade-off between causes internal and external to a person. A recent theoretical review indicates that internal and external causes for events are not necessarily inversely related (McClure, 1998). Often, increased ratings of internal causes have no effect on ratings of external causes, and vice versa. One implication of this analysis is that attributions to discrimination and self-blame are not necessarily inversely related. Perceiving that another person is prejudiced against one's group does not preclude blaming a negative outcome on aspects of oneself, such as one's lack of effort. Similarly, perceiving that one is poorly qualified for a position does not preclude blaming one's rejection on another's prejudice. Consequently, neither attributions to discrimination nor self-blame alone may be sufficient to mediate the relationship between negative events and emotion. The critical determinant of emotional responses is apt to be the relative degree to which individuals blame a negative event on themselves or discrimination, that is, their degree of discounting.

A recent study by Major et al. (2003) demonstrates this point. Women in this study received negative feedback that was clearly due to sexism, possibly due to sexism, or clearly not due to sexism. Their self-esteem subsequently was assessed. The relationship between attributions to discrimination and self-esteem varied by condition; for example, it was positive in the clear sexism condition and negative in the no sexism condition. Across all conditions, however, discounting was positively related to self-esteem. That is, women who attributed negative feedback more to discrimination than to their lack of ability had higher self-esteem. Thus, in the current study, we hypothesized that the more individuals discounted a negative event (i.e., blamed it on prejudice more than on themselves) the higher their self-esteem would be.

#### *Overview*

The current study tested the key theoretical assumptions of Crocker and Major's discounting hypothesis and our self-blame discounting hypothesis, using Schmitt and Branscombe's (2002a, Study 2) paradigm. Male and female participants read a vignette in which a professor rejected their request to enroll in a course. One third read that the professor was "sexist" and excluded only members of the participant's gender. This condition was

identical to the "prejudice" condition of Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a, Study 2). Another third read that the professor was "a jerk" and excluded everyone who tried to admit the class. This condition was identical to the "everyone excluded" condition of Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a, Study 2). The remaining third read that the professor "thought they were stupid" and excluded only the participant from the course in the personal rejection condition. Participants subsequently were asked to indicate the extent to which the rejection was due to discrimination, internal causes, external causes, and how much they were to blame for the rejection. We also assessed depressed, hostile, and anxious emotions and examined the impact of rejection condition on these types of emotions separately.

We predicted that ratings of self-blame would be lower in the prejudice condition compared to the personal rejection condition (Hypothesis 1). We also tested Crocker and Major's (1989) hypothesis that attributions to internal causes would be lower and attributions to external causes would be higher in the prejudice condition compared to the personal rejection condition (Hypotheses 2 and 3). We predicted that participants would report fewer depressed emotions (but not fewer hostile or anxious emotions) in the prejudice condition compared to the personal rejection condition (Hypothesis 4). Finally, we tested the hypothesis that discounting would mediate the depressed emotion effect (Hypothesis 5).

#### METHOD

##### *Participants*

Participants were 43 female and 42 male university student volunteers (*M* age = 20.84 years). Most participants (75%) were European American, with the remainder reporting Asian American (7.5%), Latino American (8.8%), African American (2.5%), or Other (6.3%) racial backgrounds. Male and female participants were randomly assigned to read one of three vignettes, resulting in a 2 (participant sex) × 3 (rejection condition) between-subjects design.

##### *Procedure*

Participants read a vignette, identical to that used by Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a, Study 2), in which a professor of the other sex denied them admission to a needed course. The attribution for the professor's refusal was manipulated by what a friend (who was always the same sex as the participant) said about the professor. All participants were asked to imagine the following situation:



Suppose that it's the beginning of the semester and you need an "add code" for a course required by your major. You stop by the professor's office and politely ask to be let into the class. To your disappointment, the professor turns you down and says, "Sorry, but I just can't give you an add code. Later that day, you talk to a good friend about not being able to get into the class. Your friend, a reliable source, says that he/she is not surprised the professor didn't let you into the class. He/she tells you that . . .

For one third of the participants (prejudice condition), the friend said the professor was "sexist" and had let several members of the other gender into the class even after turning the participant down. For another one third, the friend said the professor was "a real jerk" and did not give anyone add codes (everyone rejected condition). These manipulations were identical to the prejudice and everyone rejected conditions of Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a, Study 2).<sup>1</sup> For the remaining third of the participants (personal rejection condition), the friend said that the professor "thought they were stupid" and had let everyone else who asked for an add code except the participant into the class.

#### Dependent Measures

Participants indicated the extent to which they anticipated blaming themselves for being rejected from the course ("I am to blame for not receiving an add code," "It is my fault that I did not receive an add code,"  $\alpha = .70$ ). In addition, participants indicated the extent to which they anticipated the rejection was due to internal causes ("The professor refused to give me an add code because of something about me," "The professor refused to give me an add code because of who I am,"  $\alpha = .82$ ) and external causes ("The professor refused to give me an add code because of something about her/him," "The professor's decisions were due to her/his attitudes or personality,"  $\alpha = .86$ ). The internal and external items were identical to those used by Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a). Participants also completed a two-item manipulation check on perceived discrimination ("The professor's actions were due to gender discrimination," "The professor is sexist,"  $\alpha = .97$ ). All items were rated on 7-point scales with endpoints of 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*extremely*).

Participants then completed a 28-item mood scale. The depressed emotions measure was composed of four items from the MAACL depression subscale: discouraged, fine (reverse-coded), active (reverse-coded), and blue (these same items were assessed by Crocker et al., 1991, and Schmitt and Branscombe, 2002a, Study 2), as well as 12 additional affect items common on self-esteem scales: worthless, proud (reverse-coded), embarrassed, like a failure, disappointed in myself, pleased with myself

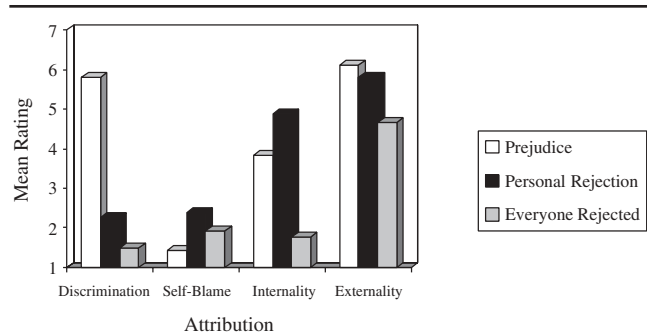


Figure 1 Mean attribution ratings as a function of experimental condition.

(reverse-coded), humiliated, ashamed, inferior to others, sad, depressed, and mortified. These 18 items formed a highly reliable scale of depressed emotions ( $\alpha = .94$ ). The hostile emotions measure was composed of four items from the MAACL hostility subscale: angry, cooperative (reverse-coded), cruel, and agreeable (reverse-coded) (these same items were used by Crocker et al. and Schmitt and Branscombe), as well as four additional items: mad, scornful, irritable, and hostile. These items formed a reliable scale ( $\alpha = .83$ ). The anxious emotions measure was composed of the four items from the MAACL anxiety subscale used by Crocker et al. and Schmitt and Branscombe: fearful, worried, calm (reverse-coded), and secure (reverse-coded) ( $\alpha = .65$ ).

All items were rated on 7-point scales with endpoints of 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*extremely*). Finally, participants provided demographic information including age, gender, and race and were then thanked for their participation.

#### RESULTS

All variables were analyzed with 2 (participant sex)  $\times$  3 (rejection condition: prejudice, personal rejection, everyone rejected) analyses of variance (ANOVAs) unless otherwise indicated. All significant effects were followed up with Bonferroni post hoc tests. Mean attributions for rejection by condition are shown in Figure 1.

#### Attributions to Discrimination

The manipulation check on attributions to discrimination was successful,  $F(2, 79) = 92.02, p < .001$ . Participants in the prejudice condition rated the rejection as significantly more due to discrimination ( $M = 5.80, SD = 1.26$ ) than did participants in the personal rejection condition ( $M = 2.27, SD = 1.66$ ). These participants, in turn, rated the rejection as significantly more due to discrimination than did those in the everyone rejected condition ( $M = 1.48, SD = 0.87$ ). Women were more likely to blame the rejection on discrimination ( $M = 3.42, SD = 2.12$ ) than were men ( $M = 2.90, SD = 2.44$ ),  $F(1, 79) = 3.97, p = .05$ . The interaction was not significant.

### Attributions for the Rejection

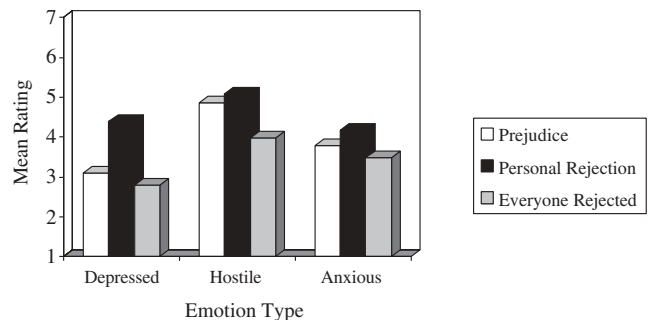
**Self-blame.** Analyses of self-blame revealed a significant main effect for rejection condition,  $F(2, 79) = 5.72, p = .01$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants in the prejudice condition were significantly less likely to imagine blaming themselves for the professor's refusal to let them in the course ( $M = 1.32, SD = 0.70$ ) than were participants in the personal rejection condition ( $M = 2.39, SD = 1.53$ ). Ratings of self-blame in the everyone rejected condition ( $M = 1.91, SD = 1.14$ ) fell in between these two conditions and were not significantly different from either. Participant sex was not involved in any significant effects,  $F_s < 0.55, p_s > .58$ .

**Internality.** Analyses of ratings of internality revealed a significant main effect for rejection condition,  $F(2, 79) = 31.17, p < .001$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 2, participants in the prejudice condition ( $M = 3.82, SD = 2.06$ ) anticipated attributing the rejection less to internal causes than did those in the personal rejection condition ( $M = 4.89, SD = 1.40$ ). Both groups rated internality significantly higher than did participants in the condition in which everyone was rejected ( $M = 1.76, SD = 0.98$ ). There were no main effects or interactions involving participant sex,  $F_s < 2.25, p_s > .11$ .

**Externality.** Analyses of ratings of externality revealed a significant main effect for rejection condition,  $F(2, 79) = 11.37, p < .001$ . Participants in the prejudice ( $M = 6.11, SD = 0.88$ ) and personal rejection ( $M = 5.80, SD = 1.13$ ) conditions attributed the professor's rejection of their request significantly more to external causes than did participants in the everyone rejected condition ( $M = 4.66, SD = 1.69$ ). Although ratings of externality in the prejudice condition were higher than in the personal rejection condition, contrary to Hypothesis 3, they did not differ significantly from each other. Women ( $M = 5.86, SD = 1.14$ ) also rated the rejection as more due to external causes than did men ( $M = 5.15, SD = 1.59$ ),  $F(1, 79) = 7.22, p < .01$ . The interaction was not significant.

### Emotions

**Depressed emotions.** As can be seen in Figure 2, rejection condition had a significant impact on participants' anticipated depressed emotions,  $F(2, 79) = 19.96, p < .001$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 4, participants in the prejudice condition ( $M = 3.10, SD = 0.72$ ) anticipated feeling significantly less depressed than those in the personal rejection condition ( $M = 4.40, SD = 1.35$ ). Participants in the personal rejection condition also anticipated feeling significantly more depressed than those in the everyone rejected condition ( $M = 2.80, SD = 0.87$ ). The prejudice and everyone rejected conditions did not significantly differ from each other. Neither the main effect for



**Figure 2** Mean emotional responses as a function of experimental condition.

participant sex,  $F(1, 79) = 2.07, p = .15$ , nor the interaction,  $F < 1$ , was significant.

**Hostile emotions.** As is illustrated in Figure 2, the analysis of hostile emotions revealed a significant main effect for rejection condition,  $F(2, 79) = 11.87, p < .001$ . Participants in the prejudice ( $M = 4.86, SD = 0.85$ ) and personal rejection conditions ( $M = 5.07, SD = 1.00$ ) imagined feeling more hostile affect compared to those in the everyone rejected condition ( $M = 3.97, SD = 0.96$ ). The prejudice and personal rejection conditions did not significantly differ from each other. Participant sex did not produce any significant effects,  $F_s < 2.22, p_s > .13$ .

**Anxious emotions.** Rejection condition had a significant effect on anxious emotions,  $F(2, 79) = 3.10, p = .05$  (see Figure 2). Participants expected to feel more anxiety in the personal rejection condition ( $M = 4.17, SD = 1.27$ ) than in the everyone rejected condition ( $M = 3.47, SD = 1.02$ ). Anxiety ratings in the prejudice conditions fell in between these two conditions and did not significantly differ from either ( $M = 3.78, SD = 0.85$ ). Participant sex did not produce any significant effects,  $F_s < 1.64, p_s > .20$ .

### Mediational Analyses

Bivariate correlations among the attributions and anticipated emotional responses to rejection among participants in the prejudice and personal rejection conditions are shown in Table 1. Overall, attributions to discrimination were negatively and significantly related to self-blame ( $r = -.26, p = .05$ ) and negatively (but not significantly) related to internal attributions ( $r = -.19$ ). Attributions to discrimination were unrelated to external attributions ( $r = .01$ ). There was a negative but nonsignificant correlation between internal and external attributions ( $r = -.21$ ). Furthermore, the less participants attributed their rejection to discrimination ( $r = -.49, p < .01$ ) and the more they blamed it on themselves ( $r = .43, p < .01$ ), the more they reported depressed feelings. Internal attributions also were positively related to

**TABLE 1: Correlations Among Attributions for Rejection and Affect**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Discrimination	—						
2. External	.01	—					
3. Internal	-.19	-.21	—				
4. Self-blame	-.26*	-.34*	.41**	—			
5. Depressed emotions	-.49**	-.18	.26 <sup>†</sup>	.43**	—		
6. Hostility	.01	.28 <sup>†</sup>	.12	.00	.36**	—	
7. Anxiety	-.17	.12	.01	.14	.77**	.46**	—

NOTE: Correlations are based on only the prejudice and personal rejection conditions.  $N = 56$ .

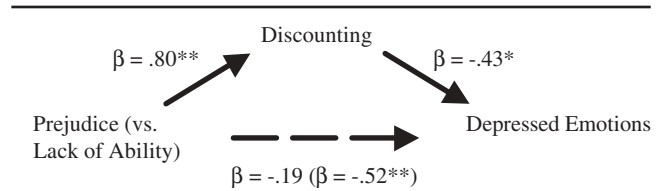
<sup>†</sup> $p = .06$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

depressed feelings ( $r = .26$ ,  $p = .06$ ). Attributions to discrimination, self blame, and internal attributions were unrelated to hostile affect or anxious affect.

According to our discounting hypothesis, awareness of the possibility that one is a target of prejudice protects self-esteem to the extent that it shifts blame for negative events toward discrimination and away from the self. Thus, we argued that the critical mediator of emotional response is the relative extent to which individuals blame negative outcomes on discrimination versus on themselves. We did not expect either attributions to discrimination or self-blame alone to mediate the relationship between experimental condition and self-esteem-related negative affect.

To test the discounting hypothesis, we created a discounting variable by subtracting participants' self-blame ratings from their attributions to discrimination (see also Major et al., 2003, for this technique). We then examined whether discounting mediated the effect of rejection condition on depressed emotions, following procedures specified by Baron and Kenny (1986). We examined mediation for the effects of prejudice versus personal rejection on depressed emotions because these are the conditions directly relevant to the discounting hypothesis.

Our first regression analysis (see Figure 3) examined whether experimental condition, dummy coded as 0 (personal rejection condition) and 1 (prejudice condition), was a significant predictor of depressed emotions. Results replicated those of the ANOVA reported previously ( $\beta = -.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2 = .28$ ),  $F(1, 54) = 20.46$ ,  $p < .001$ . Our second regression analyses examined whether experimental condition was a significant predictor of the discounting variable. Consistent with predictions, experimental condition was positively associated with discounting ( $\beta = .80$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2 = .63$ ),  $F(1, 54) = 92.46$ ,  $p < .001$ . It should be noted that discounting was negatively related to depressed emotions ( $r = -.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that the more participants shifted responsibility for the rejection toward discrimination and away from the self, the less depressed emotions they imagined feeling. The third step in testing for mediation involved



**Figure 3** Discounting mediational model.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

simultaneously entering experimental condition and discounting into a regression analysis predicting depressed emotions. The overall simultaneous regression was significant,  $R^2 = .30$ ,  $F(2, 53) = 11.41$ ,  $p < .001$ . This analysis revealed that discounting was a significant and negative predictor of depressed emotions ( $\beta = -.43$ ,  $p < .03$ ). Furthermore, when discounting was entered into the model, the direct relationship between experimental condition and depressed emotions was no longer significant ( $\beta = -.19$ ,  $p = .32$ ). A Sobel test examining the statistical significance of the drop in the beta for the direct path between experimental condition and depressed emotions was significant ( $z = 2.25$ ,  $p < .03$ ). Thus, consistent with Hypothesis 5, discounting mediated the relationship between experimental condition and depressed emotions.

Because internality ratings also were significantly lower in the prejudice condition relative to the personal rejection condition, we examined whether the discounting of internal causes relative to discrimination mediated the effect of experimental condition on depressed emotions. We created an internal discounting variable (internality ratings subtracted from discrimination ratings) and conducted the same series of analyses described above substituting this variable for discounting. Experimental condition was positively associated with internal discounting ( $\beta = .73$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .53$ ),  $F(1, 54) = 60.01$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, in the simultaneous regression, internal discounting was unrelated to depressed emotions ( $\beta = -.25$ ,  $p = .15$ ) and the relationship between experimental condition and depressed emotions remained significant ( $\beta = -.35$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus,

the discounting of internal causes relative to discrimination did not mediate the effect of condition on depressed emotions.<sup>2</sup>

In separate mediational analyses, we also examined whether attributions to discrimination alone or self-blame alone mediated the relationship between experimental condition and depressed affect. Neither was a significant mediator.

## DISCUSSION

This experiment tested the hypothesis that awareness of the possibility of being a target of discrimination can provide members of stigmatized groups with a means of self-esteem protection when they are faced with negative outcomes (Crocker & Major, 1989; Dion, 1975; Dion & Earn, 1975; Major & Crocker, 1993). Crocker and Major (1989) hypothesized that because prejudice is external to the self, attributing negative outcomes to prejudice should protect affect and self-esteem relative to making attributions to "internal, stable, and global causes such as lack of ability" (p. 613). Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a) challenged this hypothesis, claiming that attributions to discrimination are not exclusively external attributions but also have a significant internal component because they implicate one's social identity. Furthermore, they claimed that attributing negative outcomes to prejudice leads to lower self-esteem among members of low-status groups relative to high-status groups. We believe that Schmitt and Branscombe's (2002a) study did not provide a fair test of Crocker and Major's discounting hypothesis. The current study was designed to do so. We also tested the hypotheses that awareness that prejudice is a potential cause of rejection leads to less self-blame than does awareness that personal deservingness may have led to rejection. In addition, we tested the hypothesis that attributions to discrimination protect self-esteem from negative events when they reduce self-blame for those events. Findings were supportive of these hypotheses.

As predicted, participants who imagined being rejected from a course by a sexist professor blamed themselves significantly less than did participants who imagined being rejected by a professor who believed that they were unintelligent. Participants in the prejudice condition also rated rejection as due significantly less to internal causes ("something about me") than did participants in the personal rejection condition. However, to our surprise, rejection due to prejudice was not rated as more external than rejection due to personal deservingness. We suspect that this may have been due to the specific wording of our personal deservingness manipulation. To make this condition as strong as the other two, the professor was described as calling the student "stupid." We suspect that students thought it was strange for

professors to describe a student so callously. Consequently, they may have thought the rejection said something about the professor's character as well as their own ability level. Our results might have been even stronger had we used a more typical personal deservingness condition.

Consistent with findings of Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a, Study 2), in our study, rejection by a sexist professor was seen as due significantly more to external causes and as due significantly more to internal causes than was rejection by a professor who was a "jerk." Collectively, this pattern of findings illustrates the complex nature of attributions to discrimination. Although being rejected because of prejudice against one's group clearly implicates the self, it does not lead to as much self-blame and is not regarded as being due as much to internal causes as is being rejected because of lack of ability.

More important, participants asked to imagine that a prejudiced professor rejected them anticipated feeling significantly less depressed than participants who imagined being personally rejected because of assumed unintelligence. These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that believing that one has been rejected because of prejudice protects self-esteem relative to believing that one has been rejected because of a lack of ability. The self-protective effect of prejudice relative to personal deserving was observed among women as well as men, in contrast to Schmitt and Branscombe's (2002a) claim that prejudice is more detrimental to the self-esteem of members of low-status than high-status groups.

Results of this study emphasize the importance of distinguishing different types of emotional responses to prejudice. Crocker and Major's (1989) theoretical perspective concerned the consequences of attributions to discrimination for self-esteem-related emotions, not hostile or anxious emotions. Although participants in the prejudice condition anticipated feeling less depressed emotions than those in the personal rejection condition, they did not anticipate feeling less hostile or anxious emotions. Furthermore, although participants who were rejected because of prejudice expected to feel significantly more hostile than people in the "everyone rejected" condition, they did not expect to feel more depressed or anxious. Our results suggest that people who believe they were rejected because of prejudice will feel at least as angry as people who think they were rejected because a professor thinks they are stupid and even angrier than people who believe they (and everyone else) were rejected because someone is a jerk. These findings support Weiner's (1995) claim that different types of attributions are associated with distinct emotional responses. Ignoring these distinctions can produce misleading results.



Our conceptualization of the discounting hypothesis in terms of blame rather than attributions to internal versus external causes also received support. The more people blamed rejection on discrimination relative to blaming it on themselves, the less depression they experienced. Furthermore, discounting of self-blame mediated the effects of experimental condition on depressed emotions. Discounting of internal causes, in contrast, did not. These findings indicate that people are unlikely to derive emotional benefits from blaming negative outcomes on prejudice and discrimination if they also hold themselves (or their group) responsible for those outcomes (Major & Schmader, 2001). Indeed, judgments of justifiable negative treatment may be particularly harmful to members of stigmatized groups (Crocker et al., 1993).

A limitation of this study was its use of a vignette paradigm rather than a paradigm in which participants were actually exposed to prejudice. We used this paradigm to provide an exact replication of Schmitt and Branscombe's (2000a) study. Our results are valid only to the extent that participants were able to accurately predict their attributions and emotional responses to rejection and were willing to truthfully report them. Some emotional reactions may be less acceptable to report than others (e.g., hostility for women). Nonetheless, we feel that the theoretical benefits gained from exactly replicating the Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a) paradigm outweighed the drawbacks. Exact replication with the addition of the critical personal rejection condition allows for clear comparison across studies and permits firmer conclusions about differences observed between studies as well as provides important theoretical insights in the emotional consequences of attributions to discrimination. Furthermore, studies using more ecologically valid designs (e.g., Crocker et al., 1991; Major et al., 2003) have yielded results consistent with those of the current study.

The present research advances our understanding of when and why attributions to prejudice are self-protective. Clearly, it is overly simplistic to claim that attributing negative outcomes to prejudice protects self-esteem. Self-esteem is protected by blaming rejection on prejudice compared to blaming it on a lack of personal ability (or other indicator of a lack of deservingness). Self-esteem is not protected by blaming rejection on prejudice compared to blaming it on an indiscriminate jerk who excludes everyone. Indeed, it makes us even angrier to feel like a target of prejudice than to feel like the target of someone who excludes everyone (although it does not make us feel worse about ourselves). Thus, attributing outcomes to prejudice against one's social group may protect self-esteem only when it serves to protect an even more core component of the self. It may not

feel good to blame poor outcomes on prejudice but it may feel better than blaming them on a lack of intelligence.

This statement should not be taken to imply that we see perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination as beneficial. There is substantial evidence that being exposed to prejudice threatens well-being in a variety of ways. Furthermore, individuals who chronically perceive themselves or their group as victims of prejudice have poorer psychological well-being than those who do not (see Major et al., 2002, for a review). Perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination involves recognizing that you and your group are devalued by society at large, that negative events are outside of your control, and that you are likely to face similar events in the future. Nonetheless, when one encounters a threat to the self, recognizing that discrimination may have played a role in producing that threat does have some benefits. As this study illustrates, members of stigmatized and nonstigmatized groups can feel better about themselves if they attribute a negative outcome to discrimination rather than to a lack of personal deservingness.

#### NOTES

1. Many thanks to Michael T. Schmitt for providing us with his study stimuli.

2. We suspect that the discrepancy between our findings and those of Schmitt and Branscombe (2002a) resulted in part from their use of an affect measure that combined depressed affect with hostile affect. To investigate this possibility, we conducted a 3 (rejection condition)  $\times$  2 (participant gender) ANOVA on the same 12-item composite affect measure they used. We observed a significant main effect for rejection condition,  $F(2, 79) = 9.42, p < .001$ . Post hoc tests revealed that participants reported more general negative affect in the discrimination condition compared to the everyone rejected condition, replicating Schmitt and Branscombe's (2002a) finding. Participants also reported more general negative affect in the personal rejection condition compared to the everyone rejected condition. The discrimination and personal rejection conditions did not significantly differ from each other. The confounded nature of the composite affect measure, however, makes the meaning of this finding unclear.

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