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Responding to Discrimination as a Function of Meritocracy Beliefs and Personal Experiences: Testing the Model of Shattered Assumptions

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Abstract

We examined whether the model of shattered assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) could be applied to the reactions of victims of discrimination. Consistent with this model, it was hypothesized that those whose positive world assumptions are inconsistent with their negative experiences of discrimination would report more negative responses than those whose world assumptions match their experience. Disadvantaged group (both gender and ethnicity) members' responses to discrimination (self-esteem, collective action, intergroup anxiety) were predicted from their meritocracy beliefs and personal experiences of discrimination. Regression analyses showed a significant interaction between meritocracy beliefs and personal discrimination such that among those who reported personal discrimination, stronger beliefs that the meritocracy exists predicted decreased self-esteem and collective action as well as increased intergroup anxiety. Among those who reported little personal discrimination, stronger beliefs that the meritocracy exists predicted increased self-esteem. Implications for promoting a critical view of the social system was discussed.

Key Words: Meritocracy, gender discrimination, shattered assumptions

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Increasing evidence shows that discrimination based on group membership is associated negative psychological consequences. In particular, being the victim of discrimination is associated with negative mental health symptoms such as decreased self-esteem, increased depression and anxiety (Branscombe, 1998; Branscombe, Schmitt & Harvey, 1999; Dion & Earn, 1975; Dion, Dion & Pak, 1992; Foster, 2000; Klonoff, Landrine & Campbell, 2000; Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, Manning & Lund, 1995; Pak, Dion & Dion, 1991; Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobryonwicz & Owen, 2002) as well as negative physical symptoms such as headaches (Landrine, et al., 1995) and increased blood pressure (Krieger & Sidney, 1996). Consequently, there is a need to understand the factors that may serve to buffer or diminish negative discrimination-related symptoms.

According to stress and coping models (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), one factor that appears to affect the ways in which people respond to a stressful event is their assumptions about the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, 1992; Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983). Janoff-Bulman refers to three sets of world assumptions. People believe that they are personally invulnerable to negative events, that the world is meaningful and just (i.e., that people get what they deserve) and that they themselves are worthy, good people. Distress occurs because traumatic events violate these assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). When one experiences violence or disease, a sense of safety is lost and victims fear future traumatic events (e.g., Burgess & Holmstrom, 1974). Thus, the assumption of personal invulnerability is shattered. Victims who believe the world is just and that they are good people struggle to understand what they did to deserve such

an experience. When "bad things happen to good people" (Kushner, 1981), the assumption that the world is meaningful is shattered. In other words, distress is experienced when a traumatic event creates a mismatch between our beliefs (how we think the world works) and our experiences (how it does work, given the trauma). The process of coping, according to Janoff-Bulman, involves the process of changing one's assumptive world to match the experience. When world assumptions and experiences are more consistent, psychological well-being increases.

An important question is whether we can utilize this model for understanding the types of people, beliefs and conditions under which victims of discrimination will experience decreased well-being. Granted, Janoff-Bulman and Frieze themselves (1983) have explicitly distinguished trauma victims from victims of discrimination. They define victims of trauma as those who have suffered life changes from events such as crime, disease or natural disasters, namely extreme or out of the ordinary events. They note that while one can certainly be a victim of discrimination, the victims of extreme events may be very different.

However, there are reasons why the model of shattered assumptions may also be very useful for understanding the psychological reactions of victims of discrimination (see also Major, Quinton & McCoy, 2002). First, models of group consciousness do indeed refer to a stage at which group members realize their previous assumptions do not meet their current experiences. For example, Taylor & McKirnan's Five Stage Model (1984) refers to a "consciousness-raising stage" where disadvantaged group members who have been unable to attain success (experience of discrimination) no longer believe that individual successes are a function of individual ability or effort (i.e., a justice world assumption). Feminist consciousness

models further suggest that this can often be an "a-ha" experience that is shocking and difficult for women to accept (e.g, Bartky, 1977; Bowles & Klein, 1983; Downing & Rousch, 1985). Thus, group consciousness models also make references to the shattering of assumptions and its implications.

Second, the world assumptions of personal invulnerability and the world as meaningful are indeed relevant to victims of discrimination. The robust finding that victims of discrimination maintain the belief that they personally experience less discrimination than the rest of their group (e.g., Crosby, 1984; Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam & Lalonde, 1990) suggests that discrimination victims maintain assumptions of personal invulnerability. At the same time however, this assumption can certainly be violated, as evidenced by disadvantaged group members who anticipate experiencing discrimination (Swim, Cohen & Hyers, 1998) and those who report that their experiences of discrimination are pervasive across time and contexts (Branscombe, et al., 1999). For these reasons, the model of shattered assumptions may also be relevant for discrimination victims.

Some evidence suggests that maintaining positive world assumptions will help to buffer disadvantaged group members in that such assumptions appear to reduce disadvantaged group members' perceptions of discrimination. For example, high believers in a just world have reported reduced group (Birt & Dion, 1987; Dalbert, Fisch & Montada, 1992; Hafer & Olson, 1993) and personal discrimination (Lipkus, & Siegler, 1992). Ethnic minorities who believe that disadvantaged groups can attain a higher status reported decreased perceptions of personal discrimination (Study 1; Major, Gramzow, McCoy, Levin, Schmader & Sidanius, 2002). In study 2, participants were told they would be assigned the role of "co-manager" (i.e., desirable

status) or "clerk" (i.e., undesirable) by a student already assigned the role of "manager." The more Latin American participants believed in individual mobility, the less likely they were to define their rejection by the European-American manager as discrimination. As such, we might expect that holding positive world assumptions may enhance well-being among disadvantaged group members. Indeed, if the perception of the stressor itself is decreased (i.e., experience of discrimination), then well-being increases.

The psychological benefits of positive world assumptions however, may exist because the assumptions being examined are in essence, still unviolated or "unshattered". That is, if those who hold a world assumption perceive little discrimination, then these are people for whom their assumptions (word as just) still match their experiences (low discrimination). Thus, for those who report little experience with personal discrimination, world as meaningful assumptions may be beneficial. Yet, among those who *do* experience personal discrimination, positive world assumptions may be more damaging. It is those who experience personal discrimination but hold positive world assumptions who will likely be confronting a mismatch between their experience and their beliefs. As Janoff-Bulman's model (1992) suggests, it is this mismatch that will be associated with decreased well-being. To better understand the consequences of shattered assumptions for disadvantaged group members, the present study therefore examined how positive world assumptions predict responses to discrimination among those who do, and do not personally experience discrimination.

Operational Definitions

There are indeed a variety of positive world assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1989), that have also been referred to as "legitimacy beliefs" (Jost & Major, 2001), system-justification

beliefs (Jost & Banaji, 1994) or hierarchy-enhancing beliefs (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993). We, however, focused meritocracy beliefs, as a belief that is referred to by several authors as a persistent ideology in North America (e.g., Kleugal & Smith, 1986; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1994). Meritocracy beliefs are most commonly defined as a preference for the merit principle, or an endorsement of merit as an appropriate way of distributing goods (Son Hing, Bobocel & Zanna, 2002), which reflects what people think *should* happen. In contrast, we examined a belief or disbelief in the existence of the meritocracy (Lalonde, Doan & Patterson, 2000), reflecting what people think *does* happen. We used the latter definition as a world assumption because although individuals may endorse the meritocracy as a positive goal, they may or may not assume that it has not been achieved. As such, belief in the existence of the meritocracy reflects an assumption about how the current system operates.

For the outcome variables, we were interested in responses to discrimination that occur across a variety of levels: individual (self-esteem), group (collective action), and intergroup (intergroup anxiety). First, theories of coping with discrimination often examine the consequences of discrimination for the individual's self-esteem (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt & Harvey, 1999; Crocker & Major, 1989). For example, research has shown that perceptions of chronic and pervasive discrimination are associated with lower self-esteem (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999, Corning, 2002; Schmitt et al., 2002). Thus we were interested in how meritocracy beliefs would moderate this relationship. Second, we were interested in the group-level consequences of discrimination, namely collective action. Collective action can be defined as any behavior directed at enhancing the group status, whether it is taken individually, or with the

group (Wright, Taylor & Moghaddam, 1990). Given the relationship between stronger perceptions of personal discrimination and increased collective action (e.g. Foster & Matheson, 1995, 1999; Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996), we were interested in how meritocracy beliefs would moderate this relationship. Finally, discrimination can also have implications for how disadvantaged groups respond to other groups. Theories of intergroup relations (e.g. Social identity theory; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Equity theory; Walster, Walster & Berscheid, 1978) state that when an identity threat or a perceived inequity such as discrimination exists, group members try to restore their positive identity or sense of equity. Among the possible ways to do so is to assimilate into the advantaged group; by distancing oneself from one's disadvantage, a positive identity or sense of equity can be attained. As such, we were interested in the extent to which disadvantaged group members would distance themselves from disadvantage, in the form of "intergroup anxiety" (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Although originally conceptualized as how anxious dominant group members may feel among minority group members, we examined disadvantaged group members' anxiety about being around other disadvantaged group members, as an estimate of how much participants distance themselves from disadvantage in general.

Hypotheses

We expected an interaction between meritocracy beliefs and personal discrimination on responses to discrimination (self-esteem, collective action, intergroup anxiety) (see Figure 1 for hypothesized interaction). As Janoff-Bulman's (1992) model suggests, psychological distress is a function of the mismatch between how one thinks the world works (positive world assumptions) and how it does work (negative experiences). In contrast, the coping process is begun when one's assumptive world changes to match one's experiences. Thus, we expected

that among those who have experienced discrimination, those who believe the meritocracy exists (mismatch) will report lower self-esteem and collective action as well as increased intergroup anxiety than those who disbelieve the meritocracy exists.

Similar hypotheses were made about how meritocracy beliefs may affect well-being among those who have not experienced personal discrimination. Those who have not experienced discrimination and believe the meritocracy exists are reporting experiences that are consistent with their beliefs, and likely have unshattered assumptions. In contrast, those who have not experienced personal discrimination but disbelieve the meritocracy exists are reporting a mismatch between their experiences (no discrimination) and beliefs (the system does not provide equal opportunities to all groups). Moreover, such negative expectations, despite no negative experience may reflect a pessimistic world view, which often has negative mental health effects (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). Thus, we expected that among those who have not experienced discrimination, believers in the meritocracy would report greater self-esteem, collective action and less intergroup anxiety than disbelievers.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants (N = 138; 117 female, 21 male) at West Chester University were recruited via posters in the psychology department, that requested students who belonged to disadvantaged (either ethnic or gender) groups to sign up to complete a questionnaire on their social and personal opinions. Incentive to participate was a $150 lottery. Reported ethnicity/gender categories were African American (36%), European American women (48.8%), Asian American (4%), Latin American (1%) and 10.2% described themselves as “other” or “minority”.

Participants signed informed consent, completed the questionnaire and were given oral and written debriefing.

Materials

For all the scales that followed, participants were instructed which reference group to use when evaluating each item. If they had identified themselves as an ethnic minority, they were asked to compare themselves to society's majority/dominant ethnic group. If they had identified gender as their disadvantaged group, they were asked to compare themselves with men.

Meritocracy beliefs. Four items from Lalonde et al.'s (2000) Belief in meritocracy ideology scale were rated using a 7 point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Items were: "Everybody in this country has equal opportunities", "If you are a member of a "minority group" you can climb the ladder of success only so far", "Many social barriers prevent "minority groups" from getting ahead", "Our present social system works to the disadvantage of people from visible minorities." Items were recoded so that higher scores reflected the belief that the meritocracy exists. The sum of the items was used as the overall score (Cronbach alpha = .71).

Personal Discrimination (Foster & Matheson, 1995). Using a 7 point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree), nine items assessed the extent to which participants have personally experienced discrimination based on their group membership. Example items included, "The majority group have more employment opportunities than I do", "I have less power than most majority group members." The sum of the items was used as the overall score (Cronbach alpha = .80).

State Self- Esteem Scale (SSES; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). To assess self-esteem, the performance and social subscales of the SSES were used. Participants were asked to consider

what was true of them at that moment and rated 14 items using a scale ranging from "not at all" (0) to "extremely" (4). Sample items included "I feel confident about my abilities"; "I feel that I have less scholastic ability right now than others"; "I feel inferior to others at this moment"; "I feel concerned about the impression I am making". An overall self-esteem score was computed using the sum of the items (Cronbach alpha = .87).

Collective Actions (Foster & Matheson, 1995). Using a 7 point scale ("never participate in" to "always participate in"), participants rated 25 actions aimed at enhancing group status. Actions range from low-risk behaviors (e.g., "I go out of my way to collect information on minority issues") to higher-risk behaviours (e.g., "I organize events that deal with minority issues"). The sum across all items was used as the overall score (Cronbach alpha = .93).

Intergroup Anxiety (Britt, Boniecki, Vescio, Biernat, Brown, 1996). Using a 7 point scale ("not at all" to "very much so"), participants responded to 11 items that were reworded to assess disadvantaged group members' anxiety about being around other disadvantaged group members. Example items included "I would feel nervous if I had to sit alone in a room with some other minorities" ; "I can interact with other minorities without experiencing much anxiety". The sum of the items was used as the overall score (Cronbach alpha = .74).

Results

To test how personal discrimination and beliefs about the meritocracy predicted responses to discrimination, several regression analyses were conducted on the combined sample[1]. The predictor variables were centered and entered onto the first step and their product term was entered onto the second step (Aiken & West, 1991). Table 1 shows the intercorrelations among the variables and Table 2 summarizes the regressions. Significant

interactions were plotted using the method of Cohen and Cohen (1983) and the simple slopes were tested as described in Aiken and West (1991).

Self-Esteem. There were no significant main effects, $F(2,130) = .88$, $p = .42$. There was however, a significant interaction predicting 8.9% of the variability in self-esteem, $F(1,129) = 12.94$, $p = .0001$ (see Figure 2). Both simple effects were significant. Among those who reported high personal discrimination, stronger belief that the meritocracy exists was associated with lower self-esteem, $\beta = -.34$, $t(131) = -2.77$, $p = .006$. Thus, consistent with expectations, those whose experiences and beliefs were inconsistent reported lower self-esteem than those whose experiences and beliefs were consistent. Among those who reported little personal discrimination, stronger beliefs that the meritocracy exists (i.e., matched experiences and beliefs) was associated with greater self-esteem, $\beta = .25$, $t(131) = 2.057$, $p = .042$.

Collective Action. The main effects predicted 20.1% of the variability in collective action, $F(2,130) = 16.31$, $p = .0001$ (see Figure 3). Only perceived personal discrimination uniquely predicted collective action such that the more personal discrimination reported, the more collective action was reported, $\beta = .40$, $p = .001$. This was qualified by a significant interaction that predicted an additional 6.7% of the variability in collective action. Consistent with expectations, there was a simple effect of meritocracy beliefs among those who have experienced personal discrimination such that stronger belief in the meritocracy was associated with lower action-taking, $\beta = -.33$, $t(131) = -2.95$, $p = .004$, again suggesting that those with a mismatch between experiences and beliefs took less action. There was no simple effect among those who reported low personal discrimination, $\beta = .16$, $t(131) = 1.45$, $p = .147$.

Intergroup Anxiety. Again there were no significant main effects, $F(2, 126) = .884$, $p =$

.42, yet there was the expected interaction, predicting 7.3% of the variability in intergroup anxiety, $F(1,125) = 9.98$, $p = .002$ (see Figure 4). Among those who perceived personal discrimination, stronger beliefs that the meritocracy exists was associated with greater intergroup anxiety, $\beta = .32$, $t(128) = 2.50$, $p = .014$. Thus, consistent with expectations, those whose negative experiences were inconsistent with their beliefs reported greater discomfort with other disadvantaged groups than those whose experiences and beliefs were consistent. Among those who perceived little personal discrimination, meritocracy beliefs were not associated with intergroup anxiety $\beta = -.19$, $t(128) = -1.53$, $p = .128$.

Discussion

Across all of the dependent variables, expectations about those who reported personal discrimination were confirmed. Compared to those whose reported experiences and beliefs were consistent, those whose experiences of discrimination did not match their beliefs that the meritocracy exists reported less self-esteem and greater intergroup anxiety, suggesting that they appeared to feel greater discomfort not only with themselves, but with others who also experience discrimination. Consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), this may suggest that the experience of discrimination creates a negative social identity, and identifying with others who experience discrimination may increase the threat of discrimination for themselves. As such, disadvantaged group members may choose to disassociate with others experiencing disadvantage. A discomfort with others' disadvantage may also explain this group's decreased participation in collective action; if they are trying to distance themselves from disadvantage participating in actions to reduce disadvantage are unlikely. Importantly, this

data is also consistent with Janoff-Bulman's (1992) model of trauma. Those who believe the meritocracy exists but experience discrimination may be a group whose negative experiences are shattering their world assumptions, and such are experiencing greater distress, not only on a psychological level, but a social one.

In contrast, those with discrimination experiences that were consistent with their beliefs that the meritocracy does not exist reported more positive responses to discrimination (increased self-esteem and action, decreased intergroup anxiety). This group of individuals may be, as Janoff-Bulman (1992) suggests, those who have begun the coping process by changing their world assumptions to be more consistent with their own experiences. The shock of shattered assumptions may have passed and as such, psychological and social well-being may ensue. This suggests that encouraging a disbelief in the meritocracy may be a useful educational tool to enhance psychological, social and intergroup benefits for those experiencing discrimination. If victims of discrimination can be encouraged to have a critical view of the system, perhaps the coping process can begin before the consequences become more severe (e.g., depression; Landrine et al., 1995; high blood pressure; Krieger & Sidney, 1996).

Also as expected, those who reported little personal discrimination and believe the meritocracy exists, reported greater self esteem than disbelievers. These may be individuals for whom assumptions are unshattered, and as such, increased well-being would be expected. In contrast, the fact that disbelievers reported lower self-esteem suggests that being critical of the meritocracy may not be useful for disadvantaged group members who have not yet experienced discrimination. This may be, as Janoff-Bulman's model would suggest, because this group is reporting a mismatch between experiences and beliefs. They believe that the system is unfair to

disadvantaged groups, yet do not have the personal experience that would be expected to facilitate such a belief. Much like the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance, this inconsistency (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959) may be distressing. Alternatively, this may be a group of people who are somewhat pessimistic, namely those who have negative beliefs about the world despite the lack of negative experience. Thus, while a critical view of the system may be helpful for victims, it may only serve to maintain negativity for non-victims.

However, it may be premature to recommend that a critical view of the system is not useful for non-victims. There may be conditions under which being critical of the system is positive for those who have not yet experienced discrimination. Janoff-Bulman (1992) suggests that those for whom world assumptions have already been challenged, coping may be easier once a traumatic event occurs. For example, a woman who had not previously experienced discrimination, may cope better upon experiencing an acute situation such as sexual harassment if she is already critical of the social system, than a woman who is not critical. Consistent with this, our recent work (Foster & Tsarfati, 2005) has examined how women, who reported no prior experiences with discrimination, and who either believed or disbelieved the meritocracy exists, would respond to an acute laboratory situation of discrimination. Results showed that those with no prior experience, but disbelieved the meritocracy exists showed greater well-being upon experiencing acute discrimination than believers. Together, these studies suggest that being critical of the social system may not be helpful for disadvantaged group members until discrimination actually occurs, at which time such beliefs may buffer the negative consequences of discrimination.

One difficulty with applying the model of shattered assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1992)

to victims of discrimination is that shattered assumptions may be more difficult to categorize than for victims of an acute trauma. For victims of an extreme experience such as disease or violence, the salience of the event is more apparent and therefore the moment at which assumptions become shattered may also be apparent. In contrast, for victims of discrimination, this distinction may be less obvious. Some victims may experience an extreme form of discrimination such as rape, or harassment, while many others experience more subtle, everyday events such as sexist comments and sexual objectification (Swim, Hyers, Cohen & Ferguson, 2001). The point at which assumptions are shattered may therefore be more difficult to ascertain. Further, Janoff-Bulman's (1992) model, as with most models of coping, is a process model. It is indeed difficult to capture each moment of the process as it occurs using a cross-sectional design. Our future research will examine these issues using a methodology (i.e., diary studies) that is more able to capture the dynamic coping process. Despite these limitations however, this study suggests that models of coping with other traumatic events may also be useful for understanding who will experience discrimination-related distress and who may be buffered. Thus, although there will no doubt be differences among victims of different forms of trauma, there also appear to be similarities among victims, whether the trauma is out of the ordinary (e.g., natural disaster) or as common as discrimination.

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Endnotes

1. To test for possible moderating effect of gender and ethnicity, the 2, 3 and 4-way interactions between personal discrimination, meritocracy beliefs, sex and ethnicity were conducted. The moderating effects of sex and/or ethnicity were significant in only one case; there was a significant sex by meritocracy beliefs interaction, $F(6, 119) = 3.61$, $p = .003$, such that among women, stronger beliefs that the meritocracy exists was associated with decreased collective action, $\beta = -.42$, $p = .001$. Among men, there was a marginal relationship between stronger belief the meritocracy exists and increased collective action, $\beta = .42$, $p = .06$. This is consistent with social dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993) and system-justification (e.g., Jost & Thompson, 2000) theories which suggest that support for system-justifying beliefs will decrease well-being for low status groups but increase well-being for high status groups. However, we are cautious interpreting this effect given there were only 21 men in the sample. For this reason, and because no other moderating effects were found, subsequent analyses were performed on the combined sample.

Author Note

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Table 1

Intercorrelations among variables

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Personal Discrimination	--				
2. Meritocracy Beliefs	-.47**	--			
3. Self-esteem	.14	-.10	--		
4. Collective Action	.44**	-.27**	.37**		
5. Intergroup Anxiety	-.11	.08	-.33**	-.40**	--

Table 2

Summary of hierarchical regressions

Predicted	Predictors	r	B	Beta	R^2_{change}
Intergroup Anxiety	Meritocracy beliefs	.10	.67	.06	
	Discrimination	-.11	-.44	-.04	.014
	Interaction	.28**	2.77**	.27**	.073**
Self Esteem	Meritocracy beliefs	-.09	-.31	-.04	
	Discrimination	.14	.53	.08	.021
	Interaction	-.33**	-2.06**	-.31**	.095**
Collective action	Meritocracy beliefs	-.27	-2.32	-.08	
	Discrimination	.44**	10.28**	.38**	.201**
	Interaction	-.32**	-6.80**	-.26**	.067**

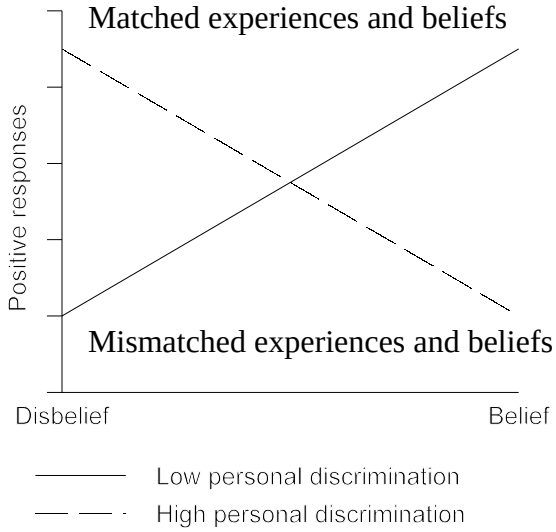
Figure Captions

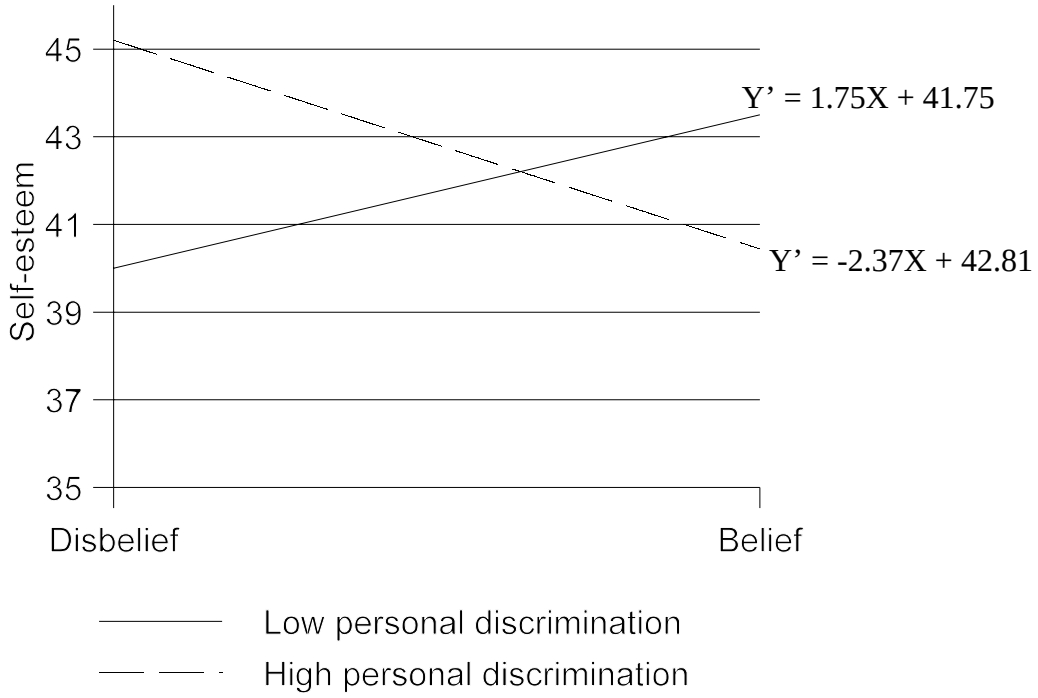
Figure 1 *Hypothesized interaction between perceived personal discrimination and meritocracy beliefs*

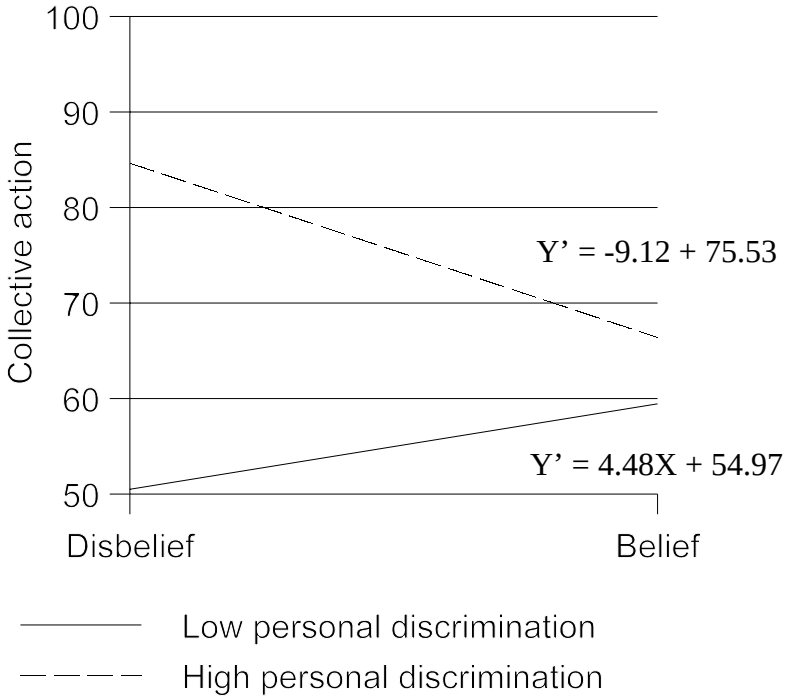
Figure 2 *Interaction between perceived personal discrimination and meritocracy beliefs on self- esteem*

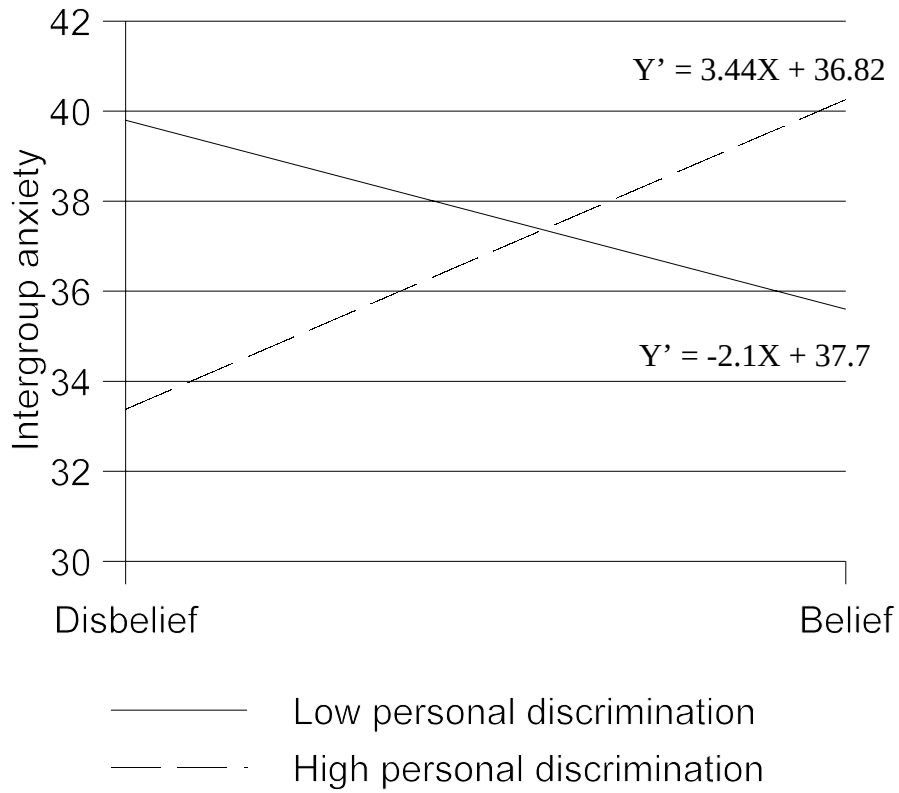
Figure 3 *Interaction between perceived personal discrimination and meritocracy beliefs on collective action*

Figure 4 *Interaction of perceived personal discrimination and meritocracy beliefs on intergroup anxiety*


Matched experiences and beliefs
Positive responses
Mismatched experiences and beliefs
Disbelief
Belief
Low personal discrimination
High personal discrimination


45
43
41
39
37
35
Self-esteem
Disbelief
Belief
Y' = 1.75X + 41.75
Y' = -2.37X + 42.81
Low personal discrimination
High personal discrimination


100
90
80
70
60
50
Collective action
Y' = -9.12 + 75.53
Y' = 4.48X + 54.97
Disbelief
Belief
Low personal discrimination
High personal discrimination


42
40
38
36
34
32
30
Intergroup anxiety
Y' = 3.44X + 36.82
Y' = -2.1X + 37.7
Disbelief
Belief
Low personal discrimination
High personal discrimination