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Positive and negative responses to personal discrimination: Does coping make a difference?

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Abstract

Although psychological research has found that perceiving personal discrimination is associated with negative psychological symptoms, group consciousness theories suggest that perceiving personal discrimination can be empowering. To attempt to reconcile these presumably opposing findings, the present study suggested that how one copes with perceiving personal discrimination may better predict whether the outcomes are negative or positive than the perception of personal discrimination alone. American female university students ($N = 262$) completed a questionnaire assessing their perceptions of personal discrimination, psychological symptoms and psychosocial behaviors. A series of hierarchical regression analyses indicated that coping mechanisms predicted psychosocial behaviors over and above personal discrimination so that the more women utilized social support coping, the more collective action and less helplessness behavior they reported. Also, the more women used avoidance coping, the more helplessness behavior they reported.

Positive and negative responses to personal discrimination:

Does coping make a difference?

Imagine a situation where a woman has discovered that she is earning less

money than her male colleagues. In America, the expected reaction might be that she would experience a range of negative reactions: anger, anxiety, depression. Consistent with this, psychological theory and research suggest that when a woman believes she has personally experienced discrimination due to gender, she will also experience negative psychological symptoms. In particular, Crosby's (1984) "denial of personal discrimination" hypothesis suggests that the experience of being a victim is so anxiety-provoking that women will deny the extent to which they experience personal discrimination. Therefore, those women who do report perceiving personal discrimination, should also report feelings of anxiety. In fact, research has shown that perceiving personal discrimination is associated with negative emotions such as depression and anxiety (Dion & Earn, 1975; Dion, Dion & Pak; 1992, Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, Manning, & Lund, 1995; Pak, Dion & Dion, 1991) as well as physical symptoms such as headaches (Landrine et al., 1995). Thus, consistent with the denial hypothesis, perceiving personal discrimination appears to have negative consequences.

At the same time however, group consciousness theories (Bartky, 1977; Bowles & Duelli Klein, 1982; Dreifus, 1973), which are based in the practical experiences of activists, and have been more recently developed in the context of new social movement theories (Gamson, 1992), make opposite predictions regarding the effects of perceiving personal discrimination. They suggest that perceiving personal discrimination is associated with positive outcomes, namely participation in collective actions aimed at enhancing the status of women. In particular, when women define an experience as personal discrimination due to gender, the group becomes personally relevant. Defining a personal experience as group discrimination involves the recognition that what happens to the group (discrimination) has affected one's personal life. As such, behaviors aimed at enhancing group status become more relevant to enhancing one's own status.

In contrast, if a woman does not define a personal experience as group discrimination, she may be more likely to define it as being due to other

circumstances such as personal characteristics. As such, the effect of the group on the individual's experience is not apparent. Because the group is less personally relevant, participation in collective action would be an unlikely response for what may be considered as her own problem rather than a group problem. A woman who recognizes that her pay inequity is a function of gender discrimination may realize that what is happening to her happens to many women. She may therefore gather women in the office to sign a petition against the company or file an official complaint. However, if the woman experiencing pay inequity is not defining the situation as personal discrimination due to gender, she will not likely realize that this problem happens to other women. She may therefore be less likely to participate in actions that help other women. In support of group consciousness theories, research has found that recognizing personal discrimination is associated with taking actions aimed at enhancing group status (Foster & Matheson, 1995, 1997). Thus, consistent with group consciousness theories, there appear to be positive outcomes associated with perceiving personal discrimination.

Psychological and group consciousness theories of discrimination thus provide opposite predictions for the implications of recognizing personal discrimination: while some data suggest recognizing personal discrimination may be psychologically harmful, other data suggest it may be empowering.

Indeed, there must be a mechanism that explains how a presumably negative experience may also be positive. A greater understanding of the effects of perceiving personal discrimination may be gained by examining coping mechanisms. How one copes with the experience may explain whether the outcomes are negative (e.g., anxiety, depression) or positive (e.g., collective action). Indeed, research in the areas of depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991), coping styles (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and task performance (Sarason, 1975), have long suggested there are particular coping mechanisms more instrumental than others. For example, focusing on the emotions evoked by a negative event appears to have negative consequences, while focusing on

resolving the problem appears to be beneficial (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978, Brockner & Hulton, 1978; Hart, Wearing, Headey, 1995; Heckhausen, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Sarason, 1975; Seligman, 1975). Thus, in order to understand how perceiving personal discrimination can be related to anxiety and depression, yet at the same time, predict taking collective action, it may be that the ways in which women cope with their perceived discrimination may better explain the differential outcomes than the perception of personal discrimination itself.

Psychological and group consciousness theories of discrimination suggest two different coping mechanisms that may explain the existence of both negative and positive outcomes of perceiving personal discrimination.

Crosby's (1984) denial hypothesis suggests that women minimize the amount of personal discrimination they report in order to avoid the anxiety associated with being a victim. "Avoiding the problem" is therefore theorized to be a coping mechanism by which to reduce the associated threat and anxiety. For example, a woman using avoidance to cope with her perceived personal discrimination may reason that the situation will "blow over", or that "it's not a problem".

However, while avoidance is a coping mechanism that is theoretically derived, it is unclear whether women actually use avoidance to cope with perceiving personal discrimination. Most often in the literature, avoidance or denial is used as a possible explanation for low levels of reported personal discrimination (e.g., Crosby, 1984; Ruggiero & Taylor, 1995). To date, avoidance coping strategies have not been directly assessed in relation to perceiving personal discrimination in terms of whether they are actually used, or whether they can explain psychological symptoms and behaviors.

Although the denial hypothesis (Crosby, 1984) would suggest that avoidance may be utilized by women, it does not address whether avoidance is effective, that is, whether it reduces negative psychological symptoms such as anxiety. In fact, many studies suggest that avoidance coping only serves to maintain negative psychological symptoms. For example, avoidance coping

has been associated with greater somatic symptoms (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988), negative psychological symptoms (Evans & Evans, 1995; Spaccarelli & Fuchs, 1997; Ullman, 1996) and eating disorders (Koff & Sangani, 1997; Mayhew & Edelman, 1989). In terms of gender discrimination, the tendency to use avoidance coping may also serve indirectly to maintain negative psychological symptoms in that if one avoids the problem it will not be resolved and therefore be more likely to reoccur. In turn, consistent with the learned helplessness literature (e.g., Seligman, 1975), continued exposure to negative experiences may create feelings of anxiety and helplessness. For example, the woman who discovers she is being paid less than her male colleagues may reason that she is lucky to have a job and therefore choose to cope by convincing herself that “it’s not really a problem”. By avoiding the problem, the situation is never resolved. As such, a lack of resolution may lead to continued discrimination in the same (e.g., increasing wage gap) and/or other facets of her job (e.g., sexual harassment). Continued discrimination may in turn create and maintain anxiety, depression, or helplessness. Thus, avoidance coping may be associated with negative psychological outcomes.

While avoidance coping may explain the negative outcomes of perceiving personal discrimination, it is not likely to explain the existence of positive outcomes such as taking collective action. Indeed, if women are avoiding the problems associated with personal discrimination, they will not likely participate in actions that confront personal discrimination. Instead, group consciousness theories (Carey, 1980; Dreifus, 1973) would suggest that a more empowering coping mechanism is to utilize social support. These theories suggest that the perception of personal discrimination provides women with a sense of social support. By defining a personal experience as discrimination due to gender, women realize that the same experience happens to other women, and not to them alone. They therefore have the opportunity to seek out the social support of others experiencing similar situations. In turn, with the social resources and support of others around them, they may feel more empowered to act to change discrimination. For example, upon recognizing

that her pay inequity is group-based (i.e., gender as the group), that woman now has other women to whom she can turn for support. With others to depend on, she may feel less helpless to participate in behaviors aimed at enhancing women's status (e.g., collectively confronting the boss or signing a petition). In contrast, if that same woman defines her pay inequity, not as personal discrimination, but as being due to personal characteristics (e.g., less experience, or ability), she is less likely to recognize that other women are experiencing the same problem and will be unaware of the potential for social support. As such, she may feel more isolated and helpless and less likely to participate in collective action. While research supports the fact the greater perceived personal discrimination is associated with the belief that social resources are available (Foster & Matheson, 1995), it is unclear whether women will make use of these resources in the form of utilizing social support coping and how it may reduce the negative outcomes of perceiving personal discrimination. Thus, there is a need to examine social support as a potential coping mechanism and whether it may explain the positive outcomes of personal discrimination, namely taking collective action.

The purpose of this study therefore was to examine how coping mechanisms may provide a greater understanding of the psychosocial outcomes of perceiving personal discrimination. In order to reconcile the fact that perceiving personal discrimination has been associated with both negative and positive outcomes, it was suggested that coping mechanisms may predict these outcomes over and above the perception of personal discrimination alone. In particular, it was hypothesized that avoidance coping would be associated with negative outcomes while social support coping would be associated with positive outcomes.

Method

Participants and Procedure

During the spring semester of 1997, female participants ($N = 262$; Mean age = 21 years) from psychology courses at the University of North Dakota were

asked to read and sign a consent form describing their participation in the study. They then completed a 45 minute questionnaire, after which they were given an oral and written debriefing regarding the purpose of the study.

Materials

Perceptions of personal discrimination . Using a scale derived from Foster & Matheson (1995) that ranged from disagree totally (-5) to agree totally (5), perceptions of personal discrimination were assessed by having participants indicate the extent to which they disagreed or agreed with nine statements. Example items included: “Men have more employment opportunities than I”, “I personally have not suffered from the effects of sexual discrimination”. Some items were recoded so that on all items high scores reflected high perceived personal discrimination. The mean rating across all nine items was used as the overall personal discrimination score (Cronbach alpha = .87).

Coping Mechanisms

In order to ensure that coping responses reflected how participants may cope with discrimination against women rather than other negative events, participants read a paragraph that depicted women’s status in North America. They were then asked to indicate the ways in which they may be likely to cope with this situation if it happened to them by rating various statements on a scale of “not at all likely to respond like this” (0) to “extremely likely to respond like this” (10). The paragraph and instructions read as follows:

Today in the media we often hear about instances of discrimination against women. For example, recent statistics indicate that the average woman makes only 68 cents for every full dollar earned by the average man. (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1993). That means that for the same work women are paid almost 30% less than men. Discrimination not only occurs in the work force, but in interpersonal relationships. For example, in this country a woman is raped every 5 minutes and assaulted every 28 seconds (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994). This extreme incidence of rape and assault does not happen to men. At home, women also

experience discrimination. For example, while women have entered the work force to a great extent, those women with children are still expected to take on the household responsibilities--that is, juggle both home and family. In contrast, men are not expected to work and clean house, take care of the kids, cook meals etc., the way women are. For example 77% of women report having to do the household chores after coming home from work. Also, in 1992, 90,760 women took parental leave (to take care of their baby after birth) while fewer than 1000 men took time off to take care of their new babies. (Lero & Johnson, 1994). So, there is an imbalance in how much women are expected to do at home compared to men.

When you hear about all this discrimination against women that occurs in so many aspects of women's lives, consider the ways in which it could happen to you. How would you be most likely to respond? Please read the statements below, which reflect possible ways of responding to experiencing discrimination. Then indicate by circling the number that best reflects your opinion on how likely you would respond if/when discrimination happens to you.

Social Support Coping . Using items derived from the Ways of Coping Scale (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), participants indicated the extent to which they would participate in five behaviors: "Talk to someone to find out more about the situation", "Accept sympathy and understanding from someone", "Talk to someone who could do something concrete about the situation", "Ask a relative or friend I respect for advice" and "Talk to someone about how I am feeling". The mean rating across all five items was used as the overall social support coping score (Cronbach alpha = .84).

Avoidance Coping . Using items derived from the Ways of Coping Scale (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), participants indicated the extent to which they would participate in six behaviors: "Go along with fate, sometimes people just have bad luck", "Go on as if nothing happened", "Try to forget the whole thing", "Don't let it get to me; refuse to think about it too much", "Make light

of the situation; refuse to get too serious about it” and “Accept it, since nothing can be done”. The mean rating across all six items was used as the overall avoidance coping score (Cronbach alpha = .73).

Psychosocial Outcomes

Anxiety. To assess anxiety, the Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970) was used. Participants completed both the state (Cronbach alpha=.92) and trait anxiety scales (Cronbach alpha = .93).

Depression To assess depression, the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979) was used. (Cronbach alpha = .89).

Collective action (Foster & Matheson, 1995). Collective action is defined as actions to enhance group status. These may be actions in which the group participates (e.g., "I have participated in protests regarding women's issues) or actions in which the individual alone acts to enhance group status (e.g., "I have gone out of my way to collect information on women's issues", “ Whenever I am presented with a petition advocating the women’s movement’s position on a social issue (e.g., pro-choice, pay equity, affirmative action), I sign it”).

Using a scale ranging from “never participate/engage in” (0) to “always participate/engage in” (10), participants indicated how often they participate in 24 actions. The mean rating across all 24 items was used as the overall collective action score (Cronbach alpha = .93).

Helplessness behavior. In order to assess the extent to which participants would engage in helplessness behavior, seven items were derived from Peterson’s (1993) helplessness behavior scale and modified to reflect helplessness behaviors with respect to women in particular. Using a scale ranging from “never participate/engage in” (0) to “always participate/engage in” (10), participants responded to eight items: “I give up in the middle of doing something about discrimination against women”, “I say negative things about being a woman”, “I don’t act for women because ‘it doesn’t matter’”, “I let people take advantage of me as a woman”, “I don’t stand up for myself as a

woman”, “Even though certain strategies to fight discrimination against women may not work, I don’t bother to use new ones”, “I refuse to take action for women on my own”. Two additional items developed for this study were also included in the scale: “If I was the victim of a discriminatory remark, I would just escape the situation”, “I prefer not to associate with women who talk about women’s victimization”. The mean rating across all 9 items was used as the overall helplessness behavior score (Cronbach alpha = .73).

Results

The extent to which avoidance and social support were coping mechanisms that women actually use, was first assessed. Means indicated that social support coping ($M = 5.99$, $SD = 2.4$) was utilized more so than avoidance coping ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.92$), $t(246) = -12.64$, $p < .001$. However, examination of the range indicated that extreme scores were chosen for both social support (range = 10) and avoidance coping (range = 9.17). Moreover, both variables were normally distributed (skewness for social support = $-.43$, skewness for avoidance = $.49$; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989), suggesting that both social support and avoidance coping were utilized by women.

To assess the direction of the relationship between personal discrimination and coping, correlations were calculated. Perceiving personal discrimination was negatively related to avoidance coping, $r = -.24$, $p < .01$, indicating that the more women perceived personal discrimination, the less they tended to endorse avoidance coping. In contrast, perceiving personal discrimination was positively associated with social support coping, $r = .22$, $p < .01$, indicating that the more women perceived personal discrimination, the more they tended to endorse social support coping.

To assess the extent to which coping may better explain negative and positive outcomes than personal discrimination alone, a series of hierarchical regressions was conducted. Anxiety, depression, helplessness behavior and collective action served as the dependent variables. Each dependent variable was regressed onto personal discrimination on the first step, and the coping

mechanisms (social support, avoidance) on the second step.

Anxiety. Perceiving personal discrimination explained 6% of the variability in state anxiety, $F(1,235) = 14.5, p < .001$ and 5.6% of the variability in trait anxiety, $F(1,233) = 13.78, p < .001$. Thus, consistent with past research (e.g., Landrine et al., 1995), the more women perceived personal discrimination, the more state anxiety ($\beta = .24, p < .001$) and trait anxiety ($\beta = .24, p < .001$) they reported. However, coping mechanisms did not explain variability in state anxiety, $F_{\text{change}}(2, 233) = 1.43, ns$, or trait anxiety, $F_{\text{change}}(2,231) = .925, ns$, over and above perceiving personal discrimination.

Depression. Perceiving personal discrimination explained 2% of the variability in depression, $F(1,229) = 3.67, p < .05$, such that the more personal discrimination women perceived, the more depression they reported ($\beta = .13, p < .05$). However, coping mechanisms did not explain variability in depression over and above personal discrimination, $F_{\text{change}}(3,227) = 2.51, ns$.

Helplessness Behavior. Perceiving personal discrimination was unrelated to helplessness behavior, $F(1,239) = .748, ns$. However, coping mechanisms did explain variability in helplessness behavior over and above perceiving personal discrimination, $F_{\text{change}}(3,237) = 17.38, p < .001$. Standardized beta weights indicated that the more women utilized social support coping ($\beta = -.21, p < .001$), the less helplessness behavior they reported. However, the more women utilized avoidance coping, the more helplessness behavior they reported ($\beta = .27, p < .001$).

Collective Action. Consistent with past research (e.g., Foster & Matheson, 1997), perceiving personal discrimination explained 11% of the variability in collective action, $F(1,238) = 30.09, p < .001$ such that the more personal discrimination women perceived, the more collective action they reported taking ($\beta = .34, p < .001$). In addition, coping mechanisms were associated with taking collective action over and above perceiving personal discrimination, $F_{\text{change}}(2,234) = 13.7, p < .001$. Standardized beta weights indicated that the more women utilized social support coping, the more

collective action they reported taking ($\beta = .32, p < .001$). Avoidance coping was unrelated to taking collective action.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether coping mechanisms would provide a greater understanding how personal discrimination is related to both positive and negative outcomes. Consistent with past research (e.g., Landrine et al., 1995) personal discrimination was related to negative psychological symptoms. In particular, the more American women perceived personal discrimination, the more they reported feeling anxious and depressed.

Thus, perceiving oneself to be a victim of discrimination appears to have had negative psychological consequences.

Although, the variance in negative emotions explained by personal discrimination was low, this may be due to the use of measures that assessed a generalized sense of anxiety and depression rather than emotions that were felt in direct response to perceiving personal discrimination. Using these generalized measures of depression and anxiety may not access the negative emotions due to discrimination that are experienced by women who are not feeling depressed in general. Indeed, women who are not depressed in general may nevertheless feel frustrated and upset about personal discrimination.

However, the use of clinical measures may not tap such negative reactions to discrimination. Thus, the relationship between personal discrimination and negative emotions may have been attenuated by the use of general versus situation-specific measures of emotion.

In addition to psychological symptoms, the relationship between personal discrimination and psychosocial behaviors was examined. Consistent with past research (Foster & Matheson, 1995, 1997), the more American women perceived personal discrimination, the more they reported participating in collective action. This finding supports group consciousness theories (Bartky, 1977; Carey, 1980; Dreifus, 1973) which suggest that perceiving personal discrimination enhances the personal relevance of the group, and as such,

women will be more likely to participate in a group-based response such as collective action. Thus, as expected perceiving personal discrimination was related to both positive (collective action) and negative outcomes (anxiety and depression).

In order to explain how personal discrimination could be related to both positive and negative outcomes, the present study examined the ways in which women may cope with personal discrimination. The more women perceived personal discrimination, the more they reported they would use social support coping. Thus, consistent with group consciousness theories (e.g., Dreifus, 1973), the belief that one is discriminated against appeared to provide these women with a coping mechanism, namely the support of others.

In contrast, personal discrimination and avoidance coping were negatively related so that the more women perceived personal discrimination, they less they endorsed avoidance coping. It could be argued that this finding suggests avoidance coping is not actually used by women who perceive personal discrimination. However, the normal distribution and large range of responses indicates that avoidance coping was indeed used by women in this sample. An alternative explanation for the negative relationship between perceived personal discrimination and avoidance coping may provide support for Crosby's (1984) denial hypothesis. In particular, the negative correlation between personal discrimination and avoidance coping can also be interpreted to suggest women with lower levels of personal discrimination nevertheless endorsed greater avoidance coping. The reason why women who did not tend to perceive a problem (discrimination) would nevertheless endorse avoiding the problem may reflect a denial of personal discrimination. Crosby's (1984) denial hypothesis suggests that women are motivated to deny or avoid recognizing personal discrimination due to the stress associated with being disadvantaged. As such, it would be expected that those who participate in a great deal of avoidance coping would also report minimal levels of personal discrimination. Consistent with Crosby (1984), low levels of personal discrimination may therefore be a function of avoiding the reality of their own

personal disadvantage.

Indeed, the correlational nature of this research precludes any conclusions regarding causation. It is unclear whether women's use of avoidance coping reduces their perceived personal discrimination due to motivation or due to the fact that with increased avoidance, women simply notice less discrimination.

Experimental studies are needed to clarify causation as well as the causal direction between avoidance coping and personal discrimination.

Given that American women did utilize both social support and avoidance, it was further hypothesized that these coping mechanisms would differentially predict positive and negative outcomes over and above personal discrimination. This hypothesis however, was only partially supported. In particular, coping mechanisms did not predict anxiety or depression over and above the perception of personal discrimination. Again, this may be due to the types of measures utilized. Unlike the generalized measures of anxiety and depression, the use of coping mechanisms was assessed specifically in relation to gender discrimination. Women were asked to indicate which responses they would use upon experiencing gender discrimination. Thus, while the coping mechanisms were operationalized as situation-specific, emotions were not. It may be unlikely that coping with discrimination was able to alleviate a generalized sense of anxiety and depression that may be due to factors other than discrimination. Future research should therefore assess measures of emotions that are felt in direct response to discrimination.

Alternatively, the lack of association between coping and psychological symptoms may be a function of the region in which these participants have been socialized. North Dakota's population is one whose historical roots are based in a strong work ethic (agriculture) and having to cope with extremely harsh conditions. As such, there is an underlying ideology across the region that depicts the North Dakotan as hardy, strong and independent.

Consequently, this population may have learned to alleviate their negative feelings using mechanisms that may involve greater independence than the use of social support. Thus, future research should also examine alternative

coping mechanisms that may be more strongly related to anxiety and depression for this population in particular. In addition, the emotional reactions of non- American women to discrimination should be examined.

Some populations of women may not be expected to show anxiety and depression. Instead they may be expected to be stoic and accept their status without negative emotional reactions.

Another explanation for the lack of relationship between coping mechanisms and anxiety and depression may be that it reflects a realistic response by these women to discrimination. It may be that perceiving personal discrimination is an experience that almost always invokes a sense of anxiety and depression. Given the extent to which sexism is entrenched in society and therefore in the lifetimes of women, coping mechanisms may not necessarily be able to alleviate the anxiety and depression that is associated with such a pervasive experience as discrimination. In other words, people may never “feel good” about being discriminated against, regardless of how well they cope.

Coping mechanisms did, however predict behaviors over and above the perception of personal discrimination. This finding suggests that it is not merely the perception of personal discrimination but how one copes that provides a more complete understanding of whether positive (e.g., collective action) or negative (helplessness behavior) behavioral outcomes occur.

Specifically, the more women reported endorsing social support to cope with personal discrimination, the more they engaged in collective action and the less they engaged in helplessness behavior. This relation is consistent with group consciousness theories which suggest that once women recognize that the group experiences the same discrimination they do, they will utilize the social support of this group, which will reduce a sense of helplessness to change their situation and empower them to act to enhance the status of women. Therefore, social support appears to be an effective coping mechanism in that women appear less likely to accept discrimination and more likely to act to enhance women’s status.

In contrast, the more American women reported avoiding the problem to cope with gender discrimination, the more they engaged in helplessness behavior. If avoiding the problems associated with discrimination encourages helplessness behaviors such as acceptance and giving up, not only will the general status of women not be improved, but a dangerous cycle may ensue. For example, a woman who recognizes she is earning less money than her male colleagues may choose to avoid the problem; she may reason that forcing the issue with her employer may not be worth the consequences, or that the difference in wages “isn’t that big”. By avoiding the problem, the situation does not change and each year, the wage gap may increase, or because the problem wasn’t alleviated in one facet, she may begin to experience discrimination in other facets of her job (e.g., harassment). The problem may begin to look more and more uncontrollable, and the cycle between anxiety, depression and helplessness (e.g., Seligman, 1975) may ensue. Thus, consistent with other literatures (e.g., Pennebaker & Susman, 1988), while avoidance coping may be a mechanism that is indeed used, it may be ineffective in the long run, encouraging a cycle between continued discrimination and helplessness.

The finding that coping mechanisms predicted behaviors but not emotions over and above the perception of personal discrimination may suggest that what was initially thought to be “contradictory results” (i.e., the co-existence of positive and negative outcomes), may not be. Negative emotions associated with discrimination may indeed exist at the same time positive behavioral responses occur. Women may feel anxiety and depression associated with personal discrimination, but may still act against discrimination, given the appropriate coping mechanism. Nevertheless, some may argue that this finding appears inconsistent with helplessness theories of behavior (e.g., Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978; Seligman, 1975), which suggest that the more anxious and depressed people feel, the less likely they will be to participate in instrumental behavior. However, the expectation that, if women are anxious and depressed about discrimination they will not

act to change, may suggest that in order to obtain social change, women should not become upset. Such an implication may serve not only to undermine the severity and endurance of negative emotions associated with discrimination, but also to undermine people's ability to act on the basis of something other than emotion. It may be that women can be angry and upset about their discrimination, but still be able to act out against it. Indeed, relative deprivation theory and research suggests that negative emotion may motivate collective action (Birt & Dion, 1987; Runciman 1966).

If people can be upset, but nevertheless participate in instrumental behaviors, institutions may need to reconsider the extent to which they release information about discrimination to the public. Traditionally, institutions such as universities or corporations, and even the police withhold information about the risk of discrimination from the public. For example, universities may not make rape incidence statistics available to their students. The decision not to disclose information about the incidence of rape or harassment has often been based on the desire not to start a public panic. Such an "ignorance is bliss" argument however may not be helpful. Indeed, as the present study suggests, avoidance of the problem may promote helplessness, the very problem institutions seek to prevent. If we educate individuals on how to utilize their social support networks, they may not only be better informed, but may act to resolve the problem at hand, despite how anxious and depressed they may feel.

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