The Journal of Social Psychology

Perceptions of Personal Sex Discrimination: The Role of Belief in a Just World and Situational Ambiguity

Becky Choma a, Carolyn Hafer b, Faye Crosby c & Mindi Foster d

a Plymouth University
b Brock University
c University of California, Santa Cruz, USA
d Wilfrid Laurier University

Accepted author version posted online: 28 Feb 2012.

To cite this article: Becky Choma, Carolyn Hafer, Faye Crosby & Mindi Foster (2012): Perceptions of Personal Sex Discrimination: The Role of Belief in a Just World and Situational Ambiguity, The Journal of Social Psychology, 152:5, 568-585

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2012.667459

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.
The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Perceptions of Personal Sex Discrimination: The Role of Belief in a Just World and Situational Ambiguity

BECKY CHOMA
Plymouth University

CAROLYN HAFER
Brock University

FAYE CROSBY
University of California, Santa Cruz

MINDI FOSTER
Wilfrid Laurier University

ABSTRACT. The roles of belief in a just world (BJW) and discrimination against one’s group in perceptions of personal discrimination were examined. Female participants (n = 63) were personally discriminated against in a laboratory setting. We manipulated whether the experimenter appeared to discriminate against other participants, which presumably made the presence of personal discrimination less ambiguous, or did not appear to discriminate against others, which presumably made personal discrimination more ambiguous. In the no group discrimination condition, but not in the group discrimination condition, participants’ perceptions of being personally discriminated against depended on individual differences in BJW: Women with a strong BJW perceived less personal discrimination than those with a weak BJW. Also, strong BJW women in the group discrimination condition perceived less personal discrimination than strong BJW women in the no group discrimination condition.

Keywords: belief in a just world, legitimizing beliefs, personal discrimination, sexism

SEX DISCRIMINATION HAS BEEN a persistent problem around the globe. In 2005, Canadian women (averaged across all age groups) working full time...
earned $17,893 less than men (Statistics Canada, Minister of Industry, 2008). Although the gender gap declined from 1980 to 2000, whereby the earnings of women aged 25 to 29, for instance, increased from 75 cents to 85 cents for every dollar earned by men, the gap remained unchanged from 2000 to 2005. The disparity is even more dramatic in certain employment sectors; a report in the United Kingdom concluded that women working in the financial sector earned 80% less performance-related pay (e.g., bonuses) than their male counterparts (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009). Perceiving sex discrimination has been associated with psychological and physiological consequences (e.g., Major & O’Brien, 2005; Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Postmes, 2003).

The perceptions of women who are victims of discrimination are one factor that psychologists have identified as particularly influential in the persistence of sex discrimination. In some circumstances, women attribute negative outcomes they receive from outgroup members to discrimination (e.g., Dion, 1975; Dion & Earn, 1975; see also Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Morera, Dupont, Leyens, & Désert, 2004). In other situations, women are insensitive, or not attuned, to cues of personal discrimination (see Crosby, 1984; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Olson & Hafer, 2001). Indeed, in a classic study of employment and attitudes among American women and men, Crosby (1984) discovered what she came to call “the denial of personal discrimination” in working women. The employed women in Crosby’s sample knew that women in general were discriminated against but generally minimized their perception of the extent of their own discrimination, which was visible to the researcher from objective data about women’s and men’s qualifications and earnings (Crosby, 1982, 1984; see also Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990; for reviews see Major et al., 2002; Olson & Hafer, 1996, 2001; Taylor, Wright, & Porter, 1994). That is, although they reported relatively high group discrimination (i.e., discrimination directed at members of their gender group in general), the women reported minimal personal discrimination (i.e., discrimination directed toward them personally as members of their gender group).

If women fail to recognize that discrimination can affect them personally, they will be more likely to accept their disadvantaged status than to take any action against it, thereby maintaining the status quo (e.g., Crosby, 1984; Foster & Matheson, 1995; Hafer & Olson, 1989, 1993; Major, 1994). According to theories of intergroup relations, one of the contributing factors of social change is a basic recognition of how one’s personal situation relates to one’s group membership (e.g., Crosby, 1976; Runciman, 1966; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Hence, an understanding of the factors that might encourage perceived personal disadvantage is critical.

In the present research, we examined the moderating role of individual differences in belief in a just world and ambiguity of situational cues to sex discrimination.
Belief in a Just World

The notion that individuals report minimal perceptions of personal discrimination in part because of a belief in a just world (BJW) was originally proposed by Crosby (1984; see also Major et al., 2002; Olson & Hafer, 2001). According to belief in a just world theory (e.g., Lerner, 1980), individuals are motivated to maintain a belief that the world is a fair and just place wherein people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. Although most individuals are thought to hold some form of a BJW due to natural developmental processes (Lerner, 1977), individuals have been shown to vary in the strength of their BJW (see Furnham, 2003; Furnham & Proctor, 1989 for reviews).

Presumably, a strong BJW motivates individuals to perceive their own and others’ outcomes as fair (for a review see Hafer & Choma, 2009). Given that discrimination is an example of unfairness, a strong BJW should lead to lower reports of discrimination. In support of this claim, studies have shown that the strength of one’s BJW and perceptions of discrimination against one’s group are correlated negatively (e.g., Birt & Dion, 1987; Dalbert, Fisch, & Montada, 1992; Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000).

Few studies have investigated the relation between BJW and perceived personal discrimination. In one exception, Lipkus and Seigler (1993) reported that a strong BJW was related to lower perceptions of personal sex, age, and religious discrimination. Similarly, Major, Eccleston, Quinton, and McCoy (2001, unpublished data as cited in Major et al., 2002) found that a strong BJW among American college women was associated with minimal perceptions of personal discrimination. We extended previous research in three ways. First, we investigated BJW and responses to a specific incident of personal discrimination rather than the relation between BJW and perceptions that one is, in general, a target of discrimination as in previous research (e.g., Lipkus & Siegler, 1993). Second, we examined whether BJW interacts with a situational predictor of perceived personal discrimination—the ambiguity of situational cues to discrimination. Although BJW and situational ambiguity have previously been studied in relation to perceived discrimination, researchers have yet to investigate these variables simultaneously, and test how the two variables interact to predict personal discrimination perceptions. Third, we investigated whether BJW demonstrated the proposed effects controlling for related legitimizing beliefs.

System-Justifying Beliefs

A number of individual differences are related to the degree to which people believe in a just world (see Furnham, 2003; Furnham & Proctor, 1989). Several of these, along with BJW, are thought to share system-justifying characteristics. That is, they help to maintain the status quo, for example, by rationalizing the status quo as fair (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). As outlined in the previous section, in
the present study, we sought to determine whether the effects we are predicting for BJW are independent of related individual differences.

One of the most widely studied system-justifying individual differences is political conservatism (see Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Politically conservative individuals prefer inequality versus equality, and tradition over social change (i.e., the status quo). Personal control can also be seen as a system-justifying belief in that, like BJW and political conservatism, it is associated with perceiving social systems as fair (Jost & Major, 2001). Personal control has also been proposed as a motivating factor for minimizing personal discrimination (see Major et al., 2002; Valentine, Silver, & Twigg, 1999). Both personal control and political conservatism are related positively to BJW (see Furnham, 2003). Therefore, to help isolate the relation between BJW and perceptions of personal discrimination, we included these two individual differences as covariates.

Situational Ambiguity

Individuals tend to perceive negative outcomes as discrimination in conditions where the presence of discrimination or unfairness is less ambiguous (e.g., Crocker et al., 1991, Study 1; Feldman-Barrett & Swim, 1998; Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003; Operario & Fiske, 2001, Study 2). Investigating how individual differences moderate the effects of ambiguity of situational cues, however, permits a more nuanced account of the impact of situational ambiguity on perceptions of personal discrimination.

Individual differences tend to have a lesser role in affecting how people respond in circumstances characterized by salient cues; alternatively, individual differences tend to play a more central role in how people respond in circumstances characterized by weak cues (Snyder & Ickes, 1985). For example, if a person attends a wedding where the guests wait in line to shake hands with the bride and groom (i.e., salient social cues), that person will likely join the line and shake hands. If, however, there is no receiving line and only some people are approaching the bride and groom (i.e., weak social cues), whether or not an individual shakes hands with the bride and groom will depend more so on their dispositional characteristics: If the person is shy, he or she will be less likely to shake hands than if he or she is extroverted. Drawing on these notions, in the context of discrimination, Major et al. (2003) explored the interaction between ambiguity of situational cues to discrimination and individual differences in group identification in predicting attributions of negative outcomes to personal sex discrimination among a sample of American women. As expected, in conditions where cues to personal discrimination were ambiguous, women high in gender identification tended to perceive greater sexism compared to women low in gender identification. In the unambiguous conditions, in contrast, women high and low in gender identification did not differ in their perceptions of sexism. Thus,
individual differences were especially relevant in the context of ambiguous cues to discrimination. One of the key individual differences related to perceptions of discrimination is BJW. Yet the effect of BJW on perceptions of discrimination has yet to be studied in the context of situational ambiguity. Therefore, building on this previous research, we propose that a BJW interacts with situational ambiguity in a similar manner to group identification, such that individuals with a strong BJW will be less likely to perceive personal discrimination compared to those with a weak BJW when personal discrimination is highly ambiguous; when cues are less ambiguous, however, those with a strong and weak BJW should not differ in their perceptions of personal discrimination.

Our operationalization of ambiguity of situational cues to discrimination is based on research by Foster and Matheson (1995, 1999). According to Foster and Matheson (1995), members of stigmatized groups are more likely to interpret their negative outcomes as resulting from discrimination against their group when: they receive less than out-group members (i.e., personal-level comparison), and they perceive that other members of their ingroup also receive less than outgroup members (i.e., inter-group comparison). That is, individuals are more likely to perceive discrimination in less ambiguous situations; seeing that similar others are also being unfairly treated appears to reduce situational ambiguity. Supporting these assertions, Foster and Matheson (1999) demonstrated that women’s perceptions of personal discrimination were higher among those who reported sharing with other women similar social experiences where their situation was worse than men’s. Foster and Matheson’s research implies that discriminatory contexts are less ambiguous in situations where individuals are faced with cues indicating that not only they, but also other ingroup members, are victims of discrimination. In other words, personal discrimination is clearer (i.e., less ambiguous) when individuals perceive having shared social experiences with other members of their ingroup. As such, in the present study, ambiguity of personal discrimination was operationalized as the presence of cues that other members of the participant’s ingroup were also victims of discrimination.

The Present Study

To test our reasoning, we conducted a laboratory experiment in which female undergraduate participants were informed that they had performed poorly on a computer task presumably designed to assess their cognitive ability. To create highly ambiguous or less ambiguous situations of personal sex discrimination, we manipulated the presence of cues to group sex discrimination (i.e., sex discrimination directed toward other female participants, or ingroup members). Drawing on Foster and Matheson’s (1995, 1999) work, the absence of cues that other women were discriminated against in the face of sex discrimination against oneself makes the presence of personal discrimination more ambiguous. In comparison, the presence of cues that other women were victims of discrimination (i.e., shared
social experiences) in the face of sex discrimination against oneself should reduce the ambiguity of personal discrimination. Individual differences should predict perceptions of personal discrimination, therefore, when there are no cues to group sex discrimination; yet play a lesser role in perceptions of personal discrimination in the less ambiguous situation where there are cues to group discrimination.

In summary, the purpose of the present research was to investigate variables that might predict whether someone perceives that they personally are the target of sex discrimination. Importantly, in contrast to research investigating perceptions of personal sex discrimination in general, we examined perceptions of personal discrimination in response to a specific incident of discrimination. Further, we examined the moderating role of belief in a just world and ambiguity of situational cues to discrimination in the same study. Finally, we tested the effect of belief in a just world controlling for related individual differences (i.e., perceived control, political conservatism). We predicted (Hypothesis 1A) that, in a condition where cues to personal sex discrimination were highly ambiguous (i.e., cues to group discrimination are absent), individual differences in BJW would be especially relevant for perceptions of personal sex discrimination. In particular, we hypothesized that individuals with a strong BJW, compared to those with a weak BJW, would report less personal sex discrimination. In contrast, we expected that, in the condition where cues to personal sex discrimination were less ambiguous (i.e., cues to group discrimination are present), individual differences in BJW would play a lesser role in perceptions of personal sex discrimination. We also anticipated (Hypothesis 1B) that strong believers in a just world in the ambiguous condition compared to strong believers in the less ambiguous condition would report less personal discrimination. Conversely, weak believers in a just world were not expected to differ as a function of the manipulation (Hypothesis 1B).

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were first-year female undergraduate students at Brock University, in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada ($n = 63$). The students received course credit in exchange for their participation in a two-part study entitled “Personality Differences and Cognitive Abilities.”

**Procedure and Manipulations**

In the first session, participants, in groups of five to ten, completed a questionnaire package that involved materials for a number of other investigations and contained measures of BJW, perceived control, and political conservatism. The women participated individually in the second session, approximately one to three weeks after the initial session, and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions.
experimental conditions in which the presence of cues for group sex discrimination—that is, discrimination directed toward the other women participating in the study—was manipulated.

Upon entering the lab for the second session, participants were informed that the 1 hour 30 minute session involved more than one study. The experimenter then explained that participants would be entered into a lottery for $50 for completing the first study on “cognitive abilities.” They were informed that their score would determine their activity for the remainder of the session. Specifically, participants were told that if their score on the cognitive abilities task was high enough, they would be assigned to participate in the “Elite Student” study in which their personal opinions would give valuable information about new initiatives being considered by the university. Participants were also told that the study would take place in a much nicer room, refreshments and snacks would be available, and they would be entered into an additional lottery for $200 (in reality all participants were entered into a draw for $200). Participants learned that if they did not perform well on the cognitive abilities task, they would spend the rest of the session participating in a much more monotonous study in a similar room as the current testing room; neither refreshments nor a lottery would be included. Thus, students believed that a low test score would lead to lesser prestige, comfort, and material resources than would a high score (for similar procedures, see, for example, Foster & Dion, 2003; Taylor, Wright, & Ruggiero, 1990).\(^1\)

Participants then performed a computer-administered word completion task supposedly measuring their cognitive ability. After completing the task, participants were shown the relevant scoring rules to set the stage for potential sex discrimination. The rules specified that more points were awarded for “low frequency” words than for “high frequency” words. Examples given for each word type showed a preponderance of stereotypically male-oriented words (e.g., “drill”, “puck”) for the high scoring words, and a preponderance of stereotypically female-oriented words for the low scoring words (e.g., “dress”, “doll”).

Participants were subsequently shown graphs illustrating the demographic make-up of the high status and low status groups in the experiment so far. Participants in the group discrimination cues condition (less ambiguous condition) were shown figures with men comprising most of the high-status group, and women comprising most of the low-status group. In contrast, participants in the no group discrimination cues condition (ambiguous condition) were shown graphs with equal numbers of men and women in the high- and low-status groups. Participants were then provided with bogus feedback about their performance indicating that they would be in the low status group for the rest of the session. To summarize, having the experimenter hint at the gender biased nature of the words used in the task and review figures illustrating the unequal distribution of women and men in the low and high status groups was intended to cue inherent discrimination against women in the criteria used for assigning participants to the high status group.
The experimenter then revealed that the test was outdated and that the scores were, therefore, supposed to be adjusted for women. All participants were advised that, even though the test was outdated, their own score would not be adjusted. This information was intended to highlight to participants that nothing would be done to rectify the unfair consequences of the gender biased test. Thus, a failure to adjust a woman’s score was meant as a cue for sex discrimination. In the group discrimination cues condition, participants were told that even though the test was “outdated”, the scores of other women in the study had not been (and would not be) adjusted (participants were also told that their scores would not be adjusted). In the no group discrimination cues condition, participants were informed that the scores of other women in the study had been adjusted (but that their score would not be adjusted). All decisions to adjust or not adjust scores were attributed to a male researcher who was supposedly in charge of the study but was, in fact, fictional.2

After receiving the false feedback about other men and women in the study, as well as their own score and information on adjustments, participants completed a brief second computer task that was part of another investigation. Participants were not provided with performance feedback on this task and their performance did not affect their assignment to the low-status group. Finally, participants completed a questionnaire package containing, among other items, measures of the perceived discriminatory nature of the experiment. The questionnaire was presented as an anonymous feedback form to help the Department of Psychology ensure that its research was “ethical, educational and, overall, beneficial to participants.” The participant completed the questionnaire while the experimenter was out of the room and placed it amongst a stack of other supposed questionnaires. Participants were then fully debriefed.3

Measures

Belief in a just world. Participants completed Lipkus’s (1991) 7-item Global Belief in a Just World Scale (e.g., “I feel that people get what they are entitled to have”), indicating their agreement with items using a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale. Scores were computed by averaging the items (α = .88); higher scores indicated stronger belief in a just world.

Manipulation check. To determine whether the manipulation of cues for group sex discrimination was successful, participants responded to three items: “To what extent was the procedure that was used discriminatory to women in general?”; “To what extent was the procedure that was used fair to women in general”; and “To what extent was the procedure that was used biased against women in general?” The response scales ranged from 1 (extremely unfair/not at all discriminatory/not at all biased) to 7 (extremely fair/extremely discriminatory/extremely biased).
A score was computed by averaging the three items (fairness was reverse-keyed) such that higher scores indicated greater perceived discrimination against women in general ($\alpha = .91$).

**Dependent measure.** The primary dependent variable was the degree to which participants perceived that they were personally the target of sex-discrimination. Participants responded to three items: “To what extent was the procedure that was used discriminatory to you personally?”; “To what extent was the procedure that was used fair to you personally?”; and “To what extent was the procedure that was used biased against you personally?” The response scales ranged from 1 (extremely unfair/not at all discriminatory/not at all biased) to 7 (extremely fair/extremely discriminatory/extremely biased). A score was computed by averaging the three items (fairness was reverse-keyed) such that higher scores indicated greater perceived personal discrimination ($\alpha = .80$).

**Related variables.** To measure perceived control, participants completed the control subscale of the World Assumptions Scale (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Participants indicated their agreement with four items (e.g., “If people took preventive actions, most misfortune could be avoided”) on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Scores were computed by averaging the items ($\alpha = .73$); higher scores indicated greater perceived control.

Political conservatism was measured using two items (see Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002). In particular, participants were asked to rate on a scale from 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative) how liberal or conservative they tend to be when it comes to social policy and economic policy. Scores were computed by averaging the items ($\alpha = .80$); higher scores indicated greater endorsement of political conservatism.

**Results**

**Preliminary Analyses**

Zero-order correlations were conducted to examine the relations between BJW ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.76$), perceived control ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.79$), and political conservatism ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.01$). BJW was associated positively with greater perceived control, $r = .58$, $p < .001$, and unrelated to political conservatism, $r = .03$, ns. Perceived control and political conservatism were uncorrelated, $r = .08$, ns.

To determine whether our manipulation of cues for group sex discrimination was successful, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with cues for group sex discrimination and BJW as the independent variables and perceived discrimination against women as the dependent measure. We first
performed a median split on BJW such that participants scoring 3 (i.e., midpoint of the scale) and higher were classified as strong BJW, whereas participants scoring lower than 3 were classified as weak BJW. As expected, there was a main effect for experimental condition, $F(1,59) = 5.63, p = .021$: participants in the group discrimination condition perceived significantly greater discrimination against women ($M = 2.56, SD = 1.64$) compared to participants in the no group discrimination condition ($M = 1.80, SD = 1.08$). Also, as expected, the main effect for BJW and the interaction effect were non-significant, $F(1,59) = 1.60; F(1,59) = 2.52$, respectively. Therefore, our manipulation of cues for group sex discrimination was successful among strong and weak BJWs.

**Primary Analyses**

To test the hypothesized interaction between BJW and cues for group sex discrimination, we then conducted an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with BJW (strong vs. weak) and cues for group sex discrimination (present vs. absent) as between-subject independent variables $^4$. Perceived control and political conservatism were included as between-subject covariates.

Results from the ANCOVA showed that control was a marginally significant covariate, $F(1,56) = 3.77, p = .057, \eta^2 = .063$; however, political conservatism was not statistically significant, $F(1,56) = 2.05, ns$. The main effects for BJW and cues for group sex discrimination were not statistically significant, $F(1,56) = .44, ns, F(1,56) = 2.06, ns$; respectively. As predicted, there was a significant two-way interaction between BJW and cues for group sex discrimination on perceptions of personal discrimination, $F(1,56) = 7.07, p = .010, \eta^2 = .112$, (see Figure 1). Results from pairwise comparisons showed that, as hypothesized (*Hypothesis 1A*), in the no group discrimination condition, participants with a strong BJW ($M = 1.33, SD = 0.49$) perceived significantly less ($p = .028$) personal discrimination than those with a weak BJW ($M = 2.17, SD = 1.29$). There was no significant difference between those with a strong or weak belief in a just world in the group discrimination condition ($M = 2.33, SD = 1.30; M = 1.86, SD = 0.74$, respectively, see Figure 1). Also, consistent with *Hypothesis 1B*, women with a strong BJW perceived significantly less ($p = .006$) personal discrimination in the no group discrimination condition than in the group discrimination condition, whereas those with a weak BJW did not differ in their reported perceived personal discrimination across conditions.$^5$

**Discussion**

Despite evidence that sexism persists, few women report personal discrimination (e.g., Crosby, 1984; Foster & Matheson, 1995; Hafer & Olson, 1989, 1993; Major, 1994). Thus, discerning variables associated with perceiving personal
discrimination is critical, especially studying how certain individual difference and situational variables interact to predict perceptions of personal discrimination. Belief in a just world has been identified as a key individual difference variable influencing perceptions of personal discrimination (Crosby, 1984; Major et al., 2002; Olson & Hafer, 2001). The present research extended prior works (e.g., Lipkus & Siegler, 1993; Major et al., 2001, as cited in Major et al., 2002; Major et al., 2003) by investigating the interactive effects of individual differences in belief in a just world and the ambiguity of situational cues to discrimination on women’s perceptions of personal sex discrimination. Also, the present research added to previous literature by examining a person by situation interaction in the context of reactions to a specific incident of discrimination, rather than perceptions that one is, in general, the target of discrimination. Furthermore, the moderating role of BJW was tested controlling for potential confounding individual differences (i.e., personal control, political conservatism).

Dispositional belief in a just world interacted with situational ambiguity to predict perceptions of personal discrimination, consistent with Hypothesis 1A. When events implied that the participant was the only victim of discrimination (presumably a highly ambiguous context), individuals with a strong BJW perceived less personal discrimination than those with a weak BJW. The difference between those with a strong versus weak BJW was non-significant when participants learned that other women had similarly been discriminated against (a less ambiguous context). In other words, women with a strong BJW compared
to those with a weak BJW were less likely to perceive personal discrimination in the absence of information about the experience of other women in the study (see also Foster & Matheson, 1995). Consistent with Hypothesis 1B, women with a strong BJW perceived more personal discrimination in the less ambiguous condition than the highly ambiguous condition. Our pattern of findings is conceptually similar to that of Major et al. (2003), who reported that individual differences in group identification predicted perceptions of discrimination in an ambiguous situation, but not in an unambiguous situation. The less ambiguous situation in both Major et al.’s (2003) and our study appeared to overwhelm the influence of individual differences, whereas, in the more ambiguous situations, individual differences played a larger role in the degree to which individuals perceived personal discrimination (see Snyder & Ickes, 1985). Belief in a just world has previously been shown to relate to perceptions of discrimination (e.g., Birt & Dion, 1987; Dalbert et al., 1992; Lipkus & Seigler, 1993; Major et al., 2001, as cited in Major et al., 2002; Neville et al., 2000). Critically though, the present research illustrates that the effect of BJW on perceptions of discrimination is context dependent, thus qualifying previous accounts of the role of BJW in perceptions of personal discrimination (e.g., Crosby, 1984; Major et al., 2002; Olson & Hafer, 2001).

One interpretation of our findings is that individuals with a strong BJW justify personal discrimination in the absence of group discrimination to preserve their belief that the world is a fair and just place (Crosby, 1984; Lerner, 1980). That is, strongly endorsing a belief in a just world might motivate people (consciously or unconsciously) to rationalize injustice, including personal discrimination (c.f., Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2001). Conversely, when discrimination is not restricted to the self, as when there was group discrimination in the present study, those with a strong BJW might find it difficult to justify discrimination.

A less motivational interpretation of our findings is that individuals with a strong BJW dispassionately (i.e., not in response to a threat to a belief that the world is a fair place) applied a “just world schema” to the situation when it was restricted to themselves. That is, participants may have assimilated information in a way that fit with their just world schema. If so, strong BJWs might have interpreted their negative outcomes as less discriminatory compared to weak BJWs. It seems that this schema-driven processing was overridden when the situation clearly did not fit the worldview of those with a strong BJW (i.e., personal and group discrimination were present). Likely some combination of these “hot” (i.e., motivated to preserve the BJW) and “cold” (i.e., application of just world schema) processes are at play (Olson & Hafer, 1996). Therefore, the motivation to see the world as a fair and just place, as well as relying on a just world schema to interpret ones’ experiences, likely affects individuals’ perceptions of personal discrimination.

The BJW has, at times, been conceptualized as a legitimizing belief, one that serves to maintain the status quo (Hafer & Choma, 2009). It is interesting to note that our findings regarding BJW were obtained in analyses that
had controlled for variables (i.e., political conservatism, personal control) that are also conceptualized as legitimating the status quo (see Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Future researchers may wish to explore the subtle but perhaps significant differences among different types of status-preserving beliefs (see Hafer & Choma, 2009). For instance, do clearer situational cues to discrimination similarly dampen the tendency to preserve the status quo among people possessing other system-justifying beliefs? It might also be informative to determine whether the effects of certain system-legitimizing variables hold even after accounting for conceptually-related individual differences, as done in the current study. Moreover, it would be valuable to explore whether such individual differences [e.g., group identification as explored by Major et al. (2003), and BJW, explored in the present research] differentially interact with situational ambiguity across various contexts.

The limiting conditions of the effect of BJW for perceptions of personal discrimination are also an important avenue for future research. The moderating effect of BJW, for instance, might be specific to lower-status groups such as women. Major, Gramzow et al. (2002) showed that stronger belief in individual mobility was related to lower perceptions of discrimination among low status group members, but greater perceptions of discrimination among high status group members. Accordingly, the pattern of results we found for BJW and group discrimination might differ where an individual is a member of a high status group like men. Future research is needed to explore this possibility.

Researchers studying perceptions of personal discrimination typically interpret their results in terms of perceiving more or less discrimination. Yet the absolute values of perceived discrimination often imply minimal perception of personal discrimination (see e.g., Major Gramzow et al., 2002, Major et al., 2003). In our study, women with a strong BJW in the cues for group discrimination condition reported the most personal discrimination. However, even the mean for this group was far below the mid-point of the scale, implying that although these women perceived relatively more personal discrimination, in absolute terms they still perceived their outcomes as fair. We expected that by including many cues to discrimination in our design (e.g., the experimenter hinting at the gender biased nature of the words used in the task, reviewing figures highlighting the inequity in the distribution of women and men in the high status group, sharing that the test was outdated, and attributing the decision to adjust scores to a male researcher), sex discrimination in the group discrimination condition would be obvious, translating into high self-reports of personal discrimination. Our findings attest to the difficulty in creating conditions in which people will report perceived discrimination, and the necessity of stronger experimental manipulations in research that aims to elicit perceived discrimination and not simply lower levels of perceived fairness.

The present finding that women perceive minimal personal discrimination, especially those with a strong BJW who are not exposed to others with similar
experiences, has implications for social action. Although, according to Foster and Matheson (1995, 1999), engaging in collective action is most probable among women who perceive discrimination against their ingroup and themselves personally, the results from the present study and previous works (e.g., Major et al., 2003) indicate that it might be uncommon for women to perceive personal discrimination; even when bias extends to other ingroup members and even when individuals do not have a strong BJW. Consequently, the majority of individuals who are targets of discrimination might not engage in social action because they do not perceive personal discrimination in the first place (Crosby, 1982; Hafer & Olson, 1993).

Future researchers might investigate factors that move victims of discrimination from simply perceiving their outcomes as less fair, to seeing their outcomes as unfair or discriminatory. For example, research suggests that individuals do perceive some personal discrimination when asked to consider if a negative outcome can be attributed to someone else (e.g., Sechrist, Swim, & Stangor, 2004). Yet, even when they appear to acknowledge that they are discriminated against, women tend not complain or confront (Stangor, Swim, Van Allen, & Sechrist, 2002; Swim & Hyers, 1999). Thus, it might be fruitful for researchers to explore how self-directed assessments (e.g., “I personally have been discriminated against”) in comparison to other-directed assessments (e.g., “This happened to me because the evaluator was biased”) concerning personal discrimination affect participation in social action. Perhaps framing a similar discriminatory event in terms of other versus self differentially predicts collective action.

In conclusion, the present study extends previous research by examining the effect of BJW and discrimination against one’s group on perceptions of a specific incident of personal sex discrimination. This study showed that BJW relates to perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination depending on whether or not, in addition to cues that one is personally discriminated against, one learns that other ingroup members are victims of discrimination. Future research should examine the implications of our findings for social action, as well as whether our findings generalize to other disadvantaged groups.

NOTES

1. The experimenter was male or female, counterbalanced with condition.
2. We also independently manipulated the presence or absence of personal sex-discrimination (i.e., sex discrimination directed at the participant personally), which resulted in two additional conditions: group discrimination only and no discrimination. In contrast to the participants presented in the current article—who were all in the personal discrimination condition—participants excluded from the current article were told that their score had been, or would be adjusted. Thus, a manipulation of whether the participant’s scores had already been or would be adjusted was nested within a no sex bias condition. There was no relation between BJW and perceptions of personal discrimination.
in these conditions. Furthermore, the pattern of results was identical for analyses conducted separately with either the “already adjusted” condition or the “would be adjusted” condition. Thus, we collapsed across these conditions.

3. None of the participants indicated suspicion about the purpose of the study.

4. There were concerns about linearity among weak BJW women in the no group discrimination condition. Given that problems with linearity raise concerns about interpreting coefficients and weakens the power of regression analyses (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), an ANCOVA was performed rather than regression. Importantly, however, the pattern of results using regression was the same as those reported using ANCOVA (the interaction between BJW and condition was \( p = .13 \)).

5. The primary analyses (using both ANOVA and regression) with political conservatism and perceived control in place of BJW did not produce significant interaction effects with situational ambiguity.

AUTHOR NOTES

Becky Choma is affiliated with the Department of Psychology, Plymouth University. Carolyn Hafer is affiliated with the Department of Psychology, Brock University. Faye Crosby is affiliated with the Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Cruz. Mindi Foster is affiliated with the Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University.

REFERENCES


Received May 20, 2011
Accepted February 13, 2012