

Commentary

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## Does Intentionality Matter? An Exploration of Discrimination With Ambiguous Intent

Danielle M. Gardner and Ann Marie Ryan  
*Michigan State University*

Although intentionality may be a valuable spectrum on which to categorically distinguish instances of discrimination, we consider whether or not differences on this construct actually reveal differing impacts for targets. Specifically, we wonder whether intentionality is very relevant to the experiences of targets of discrimination or whether the negative consequences stemming from the discriminatory interactions occur regardless of the perpetrator's intent. Further, we explore the potential consequences related to a target attempting to confront discrimination of ambiguous intent. Finally, we discuss discrimination of ambiguous intent from the perspective of the perpetrator, outlining theories related to intentional versus unintentional subtle discrimination.

### **Target Attributions of Discrimination of Ambiguous Intent**

Whether or not discrimination is intentional is potentially irrelevant to a target. In situations in which discrimination is of ambiguous intent, it is often up to the target to interpret the perpetrator's intentions and mentally designate the cause of the negative interaction. For example, when an out-group member faces rejection, he/she may construe this rejection in a number of ways, including a sense that one's personal qualities were rejected, that one's group was rejected, or that the perpetrator was indeed biased (Mendes, Major, McCoy, & Blascovich, 2008). We contend that regardless of the true root of the negative interaction, a target's perception of that interaction is enough to generate negative consequences.

If a target attributes the cause of a negative interaction to discrimination, regardless of the intentions of the potential perpetrator, damaging

Danielle M. Gardner and Ann Marie Ryan, Department of Psychology, Michigan State University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Danielle M. Gardner, Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, 316 Physics Road, Room 258, East Lansing, MI 48824. E-mail: [gardn333@msu.edu](mailto:gardn333@msu.edu)

consequences may follow. For example, research suggests that rejection in an interracial context can lead to more self-reported and nonverbal displays of anger than rejection from an in-group member, given the possible perception of bias and racism as the root of the rebuff (Mendes et al., 2008). Indeed, anger has been identified as one of the most common emotional states to follow racism perceptions (Bullock & Houston, 1987). As the Jones, Arena, Nittrouer, Alonso, and Lindsey (2017) focal article highlights, such outward expressions of anger may contribute to the cyclical nature of subtle discrimination; coworkers may respond to the target's negativity with attributions of blame and further instances of rejection and avoidance. Therefore, even though the initial interaction may not have been rooted in discriminatory intention, targets may still experience negative outcomes long beyond the interaction itself, given their construal of prejudice.

On the other hand, the theory of attributional ambiguity contends that attributions of discrimination in instances involving potential prejudice may have a buffering effect for self-esteem (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991). Specifically, it is argued that attributing a negative encounter as discrimination deflects potential self-blame to blame of the other. Weiner's (1985) attributional theory of emotion predicts similar outcomes, as he describes how attributing negative effects to causes external from the self (i.e., another person's prejudice) protects self-esteem, whereas attributions of internal causes, such as one's lack of worthiness, can damage self-esteem. As an extension, these theories would also suggest negative outcomes for those who experience discrimination and do not accurately mentally categorize it as such. Failing to attribute subtle discrimination as rooted in bias could cause targets to self-blame and consider internal factors as causal, such as one's personal deservingness. In line with this, individuals attributing ambiguous negative situations to causes other than discrimination have been shown to have lower self-esteem and greater depressed affect (Crocker & Major, 1994).

In attempting to reconcile these two assertions, we come to the conclusion of a lose–lose situation for targets of discrimination of ambiguous intent. On one hand, construing ambiguous discrimination as intentional may lead to anger (Mendes et al., 2008), which could trigger the cyclical nature of subtle discrimination. On the other hand, failing to identify a discriminatory experience as such may lead to damaged self-esteem and increased depressive affect (Crocker et al., 1991). Therefore, we assert that intentionality of ambiguous discrimination is irrelevant to the outcomes of a target's experience; whether or not the discrimination is intended by the perpetrator, and whether or not the target attributes the experience to discrimination, the target may still experience negative outcomes as a result of the discriminatory interaction.

### **Costs of Confronting Ambiguous Discrimination**

Beyond the consequences associated with experiencing and interpreting ambiguous discrimination, targets may face further negative outcomes when attempting to confront the discrimination in question. Although it is not the position of this commentary to entirely discourage targets from addressing the discrimination they face, as such confrontations have been associated with target feelings of empowerment and closure (Haslett & Lipman, 1997), we do wish to highlight the potentially increased costs associated with confronting discrimination of ambiguous intent compared with discrimination of clear intent.

Often, targets' willingness to confront discrimination is related to perceptions of cost (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). One potential cost involves coworker perceptions that the target is complaining. Such perceptions may result in dislike of the target, retaliation toward the target, and dismissal of the target's values (Kowalski, 1996). These costs are particularly relevant in instances of discrimination with ambiguous intent, as coworkers may believe that the target is choosing to interpret the interaction negatively. Indeed, Kaiser and Miller (2001) found that stigmatized individuals citing discrimination were perceived as complainers and evaluated more negatively than individuals citing other attributions for a failure, regardless of the likelihood that discrimination had actually occurred.

Along with the potential social costs of confrontation, there exists a likelihood that targets may be ineffective in their attempts to address discrimination given a perpetrator's defensiveness. For instance, Czopp and Monteith (2003) found that confrontations from a target were associated with greater perpetrator feelings of irritation and antagonism compared with confrontations from a nontarget. Further, perpetrators were more likely to perceive a target's confrontation as an overreaction compared with the same confrontation from a nontarget. Such findings may stem from majority group members' tendency to view themselves as nonprejudiced and to therefore react to accusations of discrimination from targets as threats to their sense of self (Kaiser & Miller, 2003). Consequently, majority members may deal with this threat and anxiety by derogating and disliking the target (Shelton & Stewart, 2004). This phenomenon may be especially pertinent to discrimination of ambiguous intent, in which the perpetrator can deflect a target's concern by blaming the target for misconstruing the situation.

### **Perpetrator Intentionality in Subtle and Ambiguous Discrimination**

Although it is necessary to shed light on the negative effects experienced by stigmatized targets, an evaluation of discrimination of ambiguous intent would not be complete without consideration of the perpetrator. Specifically, we highlight the potential differences between those who indeed intend to

discriminate compared with those who do so unintentionally. Although we argue that many negative effects experienced by the target remain regardless of perpetrator intention, it may be of value to characterize the differences stemming from varying intentionality to understand how to best address perpetrator behavior.

Perhaps obviously, a perpetrator may commit subtle discrimination because he/she intends to do so. Although instances of formal discrimination have become less common due to legislation (Hebl, Madera, & King, 2008) and social pressures (Dovidio, Glick, & Rudman, 2005), that is not to say that prejudice is no longer expressed in the workplace. In fact, people are now more likely to express their prejudices in ways in which their motives can go undetected (Hebl et al., 2008), such as in situations of subtle discrimination with ambiguous intent. Indeed, researchers have found that individuals will more likely reveal prejudice through interpersonal discrimination if they could appear to be acting on some other basis (Snyder, Kleck, Strenta, & Mentzer, 1979). Therefore, it is likely that a proportion of discrimination of this manner is indeed rooted in prejudice and intention.

However, it is also possible that perpetrators of subtle discrimination are committing these acts unintentionally. One possible framework to explain this phenomenon may lie in stereotype threat theory (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Specifically, researchers have found evidence suggesting that the fear of being labeled as prejudiced may cause majority members to distance themselves from minorities (Goff, Steele, & Davies, 2008). Through this explanation, we come to the ironic conclusion that a perpetrator's desire to not discriminate may in fact lead to unintentional subtle discrimination. Other research has suggested that intergroup interactions may cause majority group members anxiety and that this anxiety may occur regardless of prejudice. Researchers have found that even low-prejudiced members of majority groups tend to behave in an anxious and distant manner during intergroup interactions (Devine, Evett, & Vasquez-Suson, 1996). Consequently, we conclude that perpetrators may be committing subtle discrimination not only without intention but, in some cases, also without awareness of how they are acting. Remediation of such unintentional discrimination may be possible through adoption of diversity-focused organizational policies and informal efforts toward increased intergroup contact (Hebl et al., 2008). Such efforts may influence the establishment of social norms toward the conscious and fair treatment of coworkers of all demographics (Hebl, Ruggs, Martinez, Trump-Steele, & Nittrouer, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

Although intentionality may be a useful continuum on which to measure varying instances of discrimination, it may not be as meaningful in

terms of costs for the target. Specifically, we contend that intentionality is a perpetrator-focused construct that does not differentiate instances of target impact. However, that is not to say the continuum is without value, as categorizing instances of discrimination by levels of intentionality may help organizations decide how to most effectively confront the bias in question. Therefore, the intentionality continuum may provide indirect benefits to targets via improved organizational reactions to discrimination of varying intentionality.

Within this commentary, we explore the potential mechanisms through which subtle discrimination of ambiguous intent may impact targets, examine the costs associated with confronting discrimination of this nature, and consider varying intentionality from the perspective of the perpetrator. As Jones et al. note and this work highlights, discrimination is discrimination regardless of intent. Therefore, we contend that discrimination of ambiguous intent should be taken seriously from the perspective of researchers and practitioners, as discrimination of this type is becoming more common and continues to impact workers daily.

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## The Subtleties of Subtle Discrimination: An Interesting but Incomplete Picture

Shanna R. Daniels, Pamela L. Perrewé, and Gerald R. Ferris  
Florida State University

The focal article on subtle discrimination provided by Jones, Arena, Nittrouer, Alonso, and Lindsey (2017) examines questions about the difference between overt and subtle discrimination and the conditions under which discrimination might vary by subtlety, formality, and intentionality. The authors suggest that a dynamic perspective of subtle discrimination would provide a more comprehensive understanding of its correlates. This article addresses two concerns regarding the authors' proposition to move toward a dynamic model of subtle discrimination. The first concerns definitional is-

Shanna R. Daniels, Pamela L. Perrewé, and Gerald R. Ferris, Department of Management, College of Business, Florida State University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Shanna R. Daniels, Department of Management, College of Business, Florida State University, 821 Academic Way, P.O. Box 3061110, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1110. E-mail: [srdaniels@fsu.edu](mailto:srdaniels@fsu.edu)