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To cite this article: Jochem Thijs & Dea Piscoi (2016) Perceiving Discrimination in “Real Life”: Distinguishing Negative Events From Discrimination Attributions, *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 38:3, 166-172, DOI: [10.1080/01973533.2016.1186027](https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2016.1186027)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2016.1186027>



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Published online: 18 May 2016.



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## Perceiving Discrimination in “Real Life”: Distinguishing Negative Events From Discrimination Attributions

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### ABSTRACT

The present survey study examined a sample of ethnic minority preadolescents (ages 9–13) and made the empirical distinction between their exposure to peer victimization and the extent to which they attributed this to discrimination. Both peer victimization and the attribution to discrimination were associated with lower self-esteem and more emotional problems, but the discrimination attribution buffered against the negative effect of victimization on self-esteem. Our findings concur with the widespread evidence for the harmful consequences of discrimination but also show that it can be self-protective to make attributions to discrimination in “real life.”

Are perceptions of discrimination always harmful for the self-evaluations of members of low-status groups? In social psychology there has been an ongoing debate about this issue for many years. On one hand, discrimination is argued to be psychologically threatening because it often implies that a fixed and important part of the self is not accepted and even attacked (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). As people’s self-evaluations are partly based on their perceptions of how they are evaluated by others (Harter, 1999), perceiving and experiencing group-based discrimination should have negative consequences for their selves (e.g., Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951). Numerous survey studies have supported this idea by consistently showing that perceived discrimination is associated with lower self-esteem and less positive self-feelings (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014; Tawa, Suyemoto, & Roemer, 2012).

However, others have argued in a different direction. In their seminal 1989 article on “the self-protective properties of stigma,” Crocker and Major elaborated the somewhat controversial idea that perceiving discrimination may also have some “benefits,” as it provides an external attribution for negative personal outcomes and experiences (see also Allport, 1954; Dion & Earn, 1975; Goffman, 1963). By definition, discrimination involves unjust treatment of others based on group memberships that are often beyond their control (Major & Sawyer, 2009), and this implies that its “cause” lies with the perpetrators rather than the victims. Hence, the idea is that people can protect their self-esteem by

attributing their lack of success to discrimination and the prejudices of others rather than blaming it on their own personal shortcomings (Crocker & Major, 1989). This so-called *discounting hypothesis* does not state that people desire to be discriminated against, or that perceptions of discrimination are unrelated to actual instances of discrimination. Yet it claims that perceptions of discrimination can provide people with self-protective explanations that are sometimes hard to disprove. Most if not all support for this discounting hypothesis has been obtained in experiments. The typical proceedings in those experiments are that people from stigmatized groups (African Americans, women) are asked to perform a task in the laboratory, after which they are provided with negative (bogus) feedback by a third person (confederate). The probability of discrimination is systematically manipulated by varying the extent to which this third person can be aware of the subject’s group membership and the extent to which she or he is prejudiced against that group. The results of these experiments show that subjects who receive negative feedback tend to attribute this to discrimination when the latter is a strong possibility, and doing so is related to higher self-esteem and more positive self-feelings (Major & Sawyer, 2009; but see Schmitt et al., 2014).

The discounting hypothesis has been criticized on at least two grounds. First, it has been argued and shown that attributions to discrimination are almost never fully external, as they involve people’s social identities, which are internal and often central characteristics of them. Thus, the experience of discrimination would still entail

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an attack on their core self (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). This criticism was acknowledged by Major and colleagues, but they also showed that attributing a negative outcome (rejection) to discrimination was associated with less self-blame than attributing it to a personal characteristic (being stupid; Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003). The second criticism relates to the nature of the discrimination attributions in the experimental studies. It has been noted that these attributions involve artificial and isolated instances of rejection that say little about discrimination in real life, and more specifically that

the effects of making attributions to prejudice may be fundamentally different depending on whether the attribution is specific to a single instance of prejudice or whether it is reflective of a more general sense of stable and pervasive prejudice against one's group. (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999, p. 136)

It is reasonable to assume that it is more threatening to perceive discrimination in "real-life" contexts than in "artificial" laboratory situations. Yet there is another important difference between the experimental and the survey research that has been overlooked by many researchers. In the experimental studies, participants are first confronted with negative feedback or rejection, and then given the opportunity to attribute this to prejudice or discrimination. Thus, perceptions of discrimination are assessed conditional upon negative events. This feature is clearly absent in the "real-life" survey studies, because "when people are asked how often they experience discrimination, their resulting response confounds perceived exposure to negative events with attributions for those events" (Major & Sawyer, 2009, p. 91). An important consequence of this is that, theoretically, the negative effects of perceived discrimination in the survey studies could involve the effects of negative treatment per se (e.g., social rejection) rather than the (perceived) reason for that treatment (one's group membership). There is no doubt that it is painful and harmful for the self to be socially rejected (Leary, 1990), but the experience of social rejection is conceptually distinct from the degree to which it is attributed to discrimination. Thus, and despite the consistent evidence for the damaging effects of perceived discrimination in daily life, it may still be the case that attributions to discrimination protect low-status minority group members against the negative effects of "real-life" rejection experiences.

In the present survey study, we evaluated this possibility among a sample of ethnic minority preadolescents (ages 8–13) living in the Netherlands. As preadolescent children typically understand ethnic discrimination in terms of peer victimization (Verkuyten, Kinket, & van der Wielen, 1997), we asked the respondents to rate how often they were the target of bullying, name calling,

and exclusion. Next we measured their discrimination attributions by asking them to estimate whether their victimization experiences were "because of their ethnicity." Consistent with previous survey research on peer victimization (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), we expected that frequently victimized children would have lower self-esteem than their less frequently victimized counterparts. Yet, in line with the discounting hypothesis, we also tested whether their attributions to discrimination had a self-protective effect, that is to say, whether these attributions would diminish the negative effect of peer victimization on their self-esteem.

To better evaluate the effect of making attributions to discrimination, we also looked at children's self-reported emotional problems as an outcome variable. In their experimental work on gender discrimination, Major et al. (2003) already demonstrated the limits of the discounting effect by showing that attributions to discrimination protected against negative self-feelings but not against anxiety. Even in the absence of self-blame, people may still feel apprehensive about experiences with discrimination because it implies that one is rejected by others on grounds over which one has no (or little) control (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002; Schmitt et al., 2014). Children's emotional problems include fear and worries, and somatic complaints that go with these conditions (Goodman, 2001). Children who experience peer victimization are likely to suffer more of them (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). As emotional problems do not directly reflect children's evaluations of themselves, we did not anticipate that their attributions to discrimination would mitigate the effects of peer victimization on those problems.

In testing our hypotheses we controlled for children's gender and age, because girls tend to have more emotional problems and lower self-esteem than boys and because self-esteem grows during preadolescence (Harter, 1999). In addition, we controlled for participants' ethnic identification. Several studies have shown that highly identified group members are more vigilant in that they perceive more discrimination than lowly identified group members (e.g., Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). However, ethnic identification can also be a source of positive self-feelings (e.g., Verkuyten & Thijs, 2006), and therefore it is important to control for it while examining the effect of the attribution to discrimination.

## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

The sample consisted of 379 ethnic minority preadolescents ( $M_{age} = 10.84$  years,  $SD = 1.07$ ; 50.9% girls)

drawn from 17 schools in the Netherlands. All participants indicated that both of their parents were not Dutch, and according to their ethnic self-definition they belonged to a single non-Western minority group. Most of these children identified themselves as Moroccan (46.2%) or Turkish (28.8%), and 31 different ethnic self-labels were given in total.

The children filled out a questionnaire in the classroom, anonymously and under supervision of the teacher or research assistants. All children were informed about the goal of the questionnaire and participated voluntarily. Passive consent was obtained from the parents. The questionnaire included items for the study variables (peer victimization, the attribution to discrimination, ethnic identification, global self-esteem, and emotional problems) but also items for children's relationship with their main teacher, peer acceptance, hyperactivity/inattention, children's attitudes toward cultural diversity, and the perceived multicultural norms of their teacher (Thijs, Westhof, & Koomen, 2012). Originally the sample consisted of 403 children, for whom the pattern of missing values on our measures of peer victimization, ethnic identification (4.5% missing), global self-esteem (1.2% missing), and emotional problems (2.2% missing) was not significantly different from completely at random: Little's MCAR test,  $\chi^2(16) = 15.43$ ,  $p = .49$ . However, 6% of the cases had to be excluded from the analyses because they had not responded to one or more of the peer victimization items and because the answers to the discrimination attribution questions were conditional upon those responses (see next).

## Measures

### Peer victimization

Children completed three items to rate the frequency of their personal experiences (as targets) with name calling, bullying, and social exclusion. These three types of experiences are important aspects of peer victimization that have been successfully examined in previous research (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2006). The three items had a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*absolutely never!*) to 5 (*very often!*), and they loaded on one principal component explaining 70.4% of the variance. Cronbach's alpha was 0.79.

### Discrimination attribution

Directly after each of the three aforementioned peer victimization items, respondents were asked to estimate the degree to which each experience was due to their ethnicity ("And is this ever because you are [e.g., Turkish]?"). The response scale ranged from 1 (*no, certainly not!*) to 5 (*yes, certainly!*). Respondents did

not have to complete this follow-up question if they never experienced the particular type of victimization involved (indicated by a score of 1). However, there were also many missing values on the three-item scale (21.8%) among the students who reported a minimum score of 2 on each of the victimization items ( $n = 178$ ). This could be due to the response format of the victimization and attribution questions. For each victimization question, we placed the instruction "You may skip the next question" under the response option "Absolutely never!" Possibly students read and followed this instruction even though they selected other response options. Among the at least "minimally" victimized students, the three items yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 and one factor explaining 73.8% of the variance.

### Ethnic identification

Children's identification with their ethnic in-group was assessed with four items that were based on previous Dutch research (Verkuyten, 2005). On a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*no, absolutely not!*) to 5 (*yes, certainly!*) children indicated whether they liked being a member of their ethnic group, whether they were proud of it, whether they found it important, and whether they thought about it a lot. The four items loaded on one principal component explaining 57.4% of the variance, and Cronbach's alpha was 0.68.

### Self-esteem

Global self-esteem was assessed with five items adapted from Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children, which is an established, reliable, and valid self-concept measure (see Harter, 1999). Sample items are "Some children are happy with the way they are. How about you?" and "Some children are very satisfied with the way they do things. How about you?" Agreement with the items was rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*no, certainly not!*) to 5 (*yes, certainly!*). Cronbach's alpha was 0.84 for this scale, and the items loaded on one factor explaining 61.5% of the variance.

### Emotional problems

Children reported on their emotional problems by using an adaptation of the Homonymous subscale from the self-report version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 2001). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire is a brief, widely used screening and research instrument addressing both negative and positive aspects of behavior (Goodman, 2001; van Widenfelt, Goedhart, Treffers, & Goodman, 2003). The Emotional Problems subscale consists of five items. To reduce children's tendency to give socially desirable responses, we reformulated these items so they referred

to other children as well (see Harter, 1999). Thus children were asked, for example, “Some children worry a lot. You too?” and “Some children are often unhappy or sad. You too?” We used the same 5-point response scale as for the discrimination attribution and self-esteem measures, and Cronbach’s alpha was 0.71. A single factor explained 46.9% of the variance.

### Data analytic strategy

#### Data imputation and regression analyses

We used multiple imputations in SPSS to estimate missing values at the item level. Following recommendations by Acock (2005), we ran 20 imputations in which we used gender and age as predictors, as well as all of the aforementioned items (see Participants and Procedure section) but not the victimization measures as dependents and predictors. These imputations were separately performed for the children who had a minimum score of 2 for each of the victimization items and for the children who reported an absence of at least one type of peer victimization.<sup>1</sup> For the latter, the three discrimination attribution questions were not meaningful and therefore not included in the imputations. We conducted multiple regression analyses across the 20 imputed data sets, and we report the pooled results here. Please note that, although we do not give in them text, the results and conclusions were very similar when we analyzed the complete cases only.

#### Dummy variable for discrimination not applicable

To account for the fact that the set of discrimination attribution questions was not meaningful for children who reported a complete absence (indicated by a score of 1) for at least one of the victimization types ( $n = 201$ ), we created a dummy variable (“Discrimination not applicable” [DNA]) that was coded 1 for them and 0 for the rest of the participants. In addition, we imputed a random score on the discrimination attribution measure for those children, and we included the interactions between the DNA dummy, the discrimination attribution, and peer victimization in our analyses. As a result, we could examine the combined effects of the

latter separately for those students for whom all discrimination questions were applicable.

#### Standardization

As the pooled regression results do not include effect sizes or standardized coefficients, we facilitated their interpretation by standardizing all continuous measures<sup>2</sup> (separately in each of the 20 data sets) including the interaction between the discrimination attribution and peer victimization and by using a contrast for gender (coded 0.5 for girls and  $-0.5$  for boys). Thus, the regression coefficients for the continuous predictors can be considered as standardized betas, with values of 0.1, 0.3, and 0.5, indicating, respectively, small, medium, and large effects (Cohen, 1992).

#### Controls

Preliminary analyses (see Table 1) showed that girls reported more emotional problems than boys and that older children reported higher self-esteem ( $r = .13$ ) and less victimization than their younger peers. Ethnic identification was positively associated with ethnic self-esteem. Hence, it was meaningful to include gender, age, and ethnic identification as control variables. As the gender contrast involves a difference of 1, and as the continuous variables were standardized, its regression effects can be effectively interpreted as *ds*. This means that values of 0.2, 0.5, and 0.8, respectively, indicate small, medium, and large effects (Cohen, 1992).

### Results

We conducted our regression analyses in two consecutive steps. In the first step we did not include the dummy DNA, and we regressed self-esteem and emotional problems on the continuous measure for peer victimization while controlling for children’s ethnic identification, gender, and age. Results are shown under Model 1 in Table 2. Victimized children reported lower self-esteem and especially more emotional problems than their nonvictimized peers. In addition, high identifiers had higher self-esteem, and girls had somewhat

**Table 1.** Correlations for all variables.

	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Discrimination attribution	0.30	−0.12	0.27	−0.06	−0.05	−0.05
2. Victimization		−0.07	0.27	−0.01	−0.10	−0.24
3. Self-esteem	−0.22		−0.28	0.37	−0.07	−0.02
4. Emotional problems	0.41	−0.36		−0.09	0.24	0.05
5. Ethnic identification	−0.04	0.28	−0.03		−0.05	0.00
6. Gender	0.00	−0.07	0.25	0.00		0.00
7. Age	−0.32	0.13	−0.05	0.11	0.00	

Note. Correlations below the diagonal pertain to all subjects ( $n = 379$ ). Correlations above the diagonal pertain to the 178 respondents for whom the set of discrimination questions was meaningful.

**Table 2.** Effects of peer victimization and discrimination on self-esteem and emotional problems.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	SE	EP	SE	EP
Constant	0.00	-0.01	-0.17	0.15
Victimization	-0.20	0.44	-0.08	0.29
Discrimination attribution	—	—	-0.28	0.23
Discrimination attribution × Victimization	—	—	0.21	-0.05
Ethnic identification	0.27	-0.02	0.27	-0.01
Gender	-0.14	0.51	-0.10	0.49
Age	0.03	0.09	0.03	0.10
DNA (dummy)	—	—	0.21	-0.15
Victimization × DNA	—	—	-0.15	0.22
Discrimination attribution × DNA	—	—	0.29	-0.27
Discrimination attribution × Victimization × DNA	—	—	-0.16	0.00

Note. All continuous variables are standardized. The interaction term for Discrimination × Victimization is standardized as well. SE = self-esteem; EP = emotional problems; DNA = discrimination not applicable.

lower self-esteem but clearly more emotional problems compared to boys.

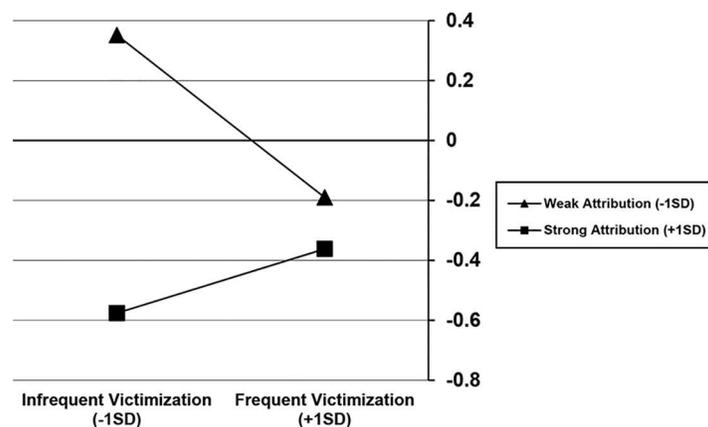
In the second step, we entered the attribution to discrimination and the two-way interaction between this attribution and peer victimization as predictors. To obtain these effects for those respondents for whom the set of discrimination questions was meaningful, we also included the DNA dummy and its two- and three-way interactions with peer victimization and the discrimination attribution. Please note that the effect of peer victimization dropped as a consequence of this. Model 2 (Table 2) shows that the attribution to discrimination was related to lower self-esteem and more emotional problems, and both effects were small to medium in size.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the two-way interaction between the discrimination attribution and peer victimization was negligible for emotional problems but small to medium in size for self-esteem. To further examine the nature of this interaction, we used simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991). More specifically, we calculated the effect of peer victimization when

the attribution to discrimination was relatively weak ( $1\ SD < M$ ) versus relatively strong ( $1\ SD > M$ ). As shown in Figure 1, peer victimization had a negative effect when children made weak attributions to discrimination ( $b = -0.27$ ) but not when they made strong attributions ( $b = 0.11$ ).

## Discussion

There is ample proof that “real-life” experiences of ethnic discrimination can harm the psychological well-being of members of low-status groups. Yet, at the same time, there is convincing experimental evidence showing that it can be self-protective to perceive prejudice directed at one’s group. The present survey study tried to shed some light on this apparent contradiction by examining preadolescents’ experiences with peer victimization and the degree to which they attributed those experiences to discrimination based on their ethnicity. Unlike their experimental counterparts, previous survey studies on perceived discrimination have typically not made the distinction between the exposure to negative events and their explanations in terms of discrimination (see Major & Sawyer, 2009). Yet doing so is necessary to evaluate whether the latter provide opportunities for self-protection.

Our findings clearly support the discounting hypothesis that it can be self-protective to make attributions to discrimination. As expected and consistent with previous research (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), we found a clear negative link between peer victimization and self-esteem in the overall sample. Children who are the targets of name calling, bullying, and social exclusion learn that they are not accepted by others, and they use this information to draw negative conclusions about themselves (Harter, 1999). However, within the smaller group of children who reported at least a minimum degree of victimization—and for whom the

**Figure 1.** Effects of peer victimization on self-esteem depending on the strength of the attribution to discrimination.

discrimination questions were meaningful—the effect on self-esteem was diminished by the discrimination attribution. Thus, there appeared to be some advantage to attribute one's rejection experiences to the discriminatory behaviors of others, presumably because doing so implies that the self is less responsible for such negative outcomes (Major & Sawyer, 2009). To our knowledge, this is the first survey study that demonstrates this self-protective effect in a nonexperimental context.

Still, our findings show that, even if there is some advantage to perceiving discrimination in “real life,” there are clear limits to this advantage. As anticipated, the discrimination attribution did not moderate the rather substantial effect of peer victimization on emotional problems. This supports the idea that it does not protect against anxiety and sadness (Major et al., 2003). Moreover, despite its moderating, self-protective effect, the main effects of the attribution measure on self-esteem and emotional problems were clearly unfavorable. By making attributions to discrimination, the children acknowledged that their ethnicity—a characteristic that is typically beyond their control—can be a reason for peer victimization. This is stressful, as it implies that one is unfairly treated, that the world is unjust (see Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007), and that one has limited mastery over one's life (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998). In addition, ethnic discrimination entails the devaluation of a group membership that is often central to the identity of ethnic minorities, and thereby a direct attack on their selves (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002).

Taken together, our results are consistent with the discounting hypothesis but also with the numerous survey studies showing a negative link between perceived discrimination and psychological well-being (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Schmitt et al., 2014). We obtained evidence for the attributional advantage of perceived discrimination but only in relation to self-esteem. But as shown by the positions of the lines in Figure 1, the direct negative effects of the attribution outweighed its positive self-protective effects. Apparently, it did not pay off to make attributions to discrimination when peer victimization was infrequent, and luckily the latter was the case for most of our respondents. Future studies should further investigate the contradictory effects of these attributions on self-esteem in “real life” by examining the different pathways underlying them (cf. Eccleston & Major, 2006). These studies could also look at the social costs of making attributions to discrimination (Kaiser & Miller, 2003). Both children and adults might be negatively viewed by others when suggesting that they are ethnically discriminated, and this could further diminish their psychological well-being.

There are some limitations to the present study. First, there were relatively many missing values on our attribution measure. Perhaps the attribution questions might have been difficult to answer because of their indirect referring to children's victimization experiences (“And is this ever because you are [e.g., Turkish]?”). Future research should use more explicit and easier questions. Next, our analyses are based on cross-sectional data, which means that we cannot make strong claims about the direction of effects, and our sample was limited to ethnic minority preadolescents in one particular country. Hence, future studies should use longitudinal analyses to replicate our findings for different ages and in different national contexts. In addition, future research could examine individual differences in the effects of perceived discrimination by examining the degree to which its victims are focused on their stigmatized status (Pinel & Bosson, 2013).

In conclusion, this study was able to contribute to the debate about the psychological impact of perceived discrimination by distinguishing participants' negative experiences from their discrimination attributions. Our findings concur with the widespread evidence that experiencing discrimination has harmful psychological consequences. Yet they also align with the discounting hypothesis by indicating that it can be self-protective to make attributions to discrimination, even in “real-life” situations. We hope that future research will elaborate on our findings to further understand what it means to belong to a stigmatized low-status group.

## Notes

1. In both subsamples, all respondents had completed at least 70% of the relevant scale items.
2. For the attribution measure, this standardization took place prior to the random imputation for the children in the DNA group.
3. Additional analyses revealed a positive interaction between the discrimination attribution and ethnic identification for self-esteem ( $b = 0.17$ ), suggesting a self-protective effect of ethnic identification.

## Funding

This research was funded by the Jacobs Foundation.

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