Research article

Discrimination and subjective well-being: The moderating roles of identification with the heritage group and the host majority group

JULIETTE SCHAAFSMA*
Department of Humanities, Tilburg University, Tilburg The Netherlands

Abstract

This study examined the roles that identification with the heritage group and identification with the majority group play in the relationship between discrimination (subtle or blatant) and subjective well-being among ethnic minority group members. Participants were 320 ethnic Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands who completed a questionnaire that measured their well-being, their perceptions of subtle and blatant discrimination, and their heritage group and majority group identification. The analyses found that relationships between discrimination and well-being varied as a joint function of the source and strength of people’s ethnic identification. Individuals who identified more strongly with their heritage group were more likely to report discrimination than low identifiers but were less likely to be negatively affected by it. For those who identified strongly with their heritage group, experiences with subtle and blatant discrimination and well-being were unrelated, whereas for those who identified weakly with their heritage group, discrimination and well-being were negatively related. In contrast, individuals who identified more strongly with the majority group were less likely to report discrimination than low identifiers but were more likely to be negatively affected by it. For those who identified strongly with the majority group, discrimination and well-being were negatively related, whereas for those who identified weakly with the majority group, discrimination and well-being were unrelated. These results suggest that although identifying strongly with the heritage group may buffer ethnic minorities from the negative effects of discrimination, identifying strongly with the majority group may exacerbate these effects. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Ethnic minority members and immigrants in Europe are likely to encounter prejudice and discrimination in many aspects of their everyday lives. Research suggests that ethnic prejudice is relatively widespread among majority group members in both Western and Eastern Europe (e.g., Zick, Pettigrew, & Wagner, 2008), and there is evidence that this prejudice can be expressed either directly toward ethnic minority members (for example, by physically or verbally harassing them) or more indirectly (for example, by looking down upon or ignoring them) (e.g., Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). A recent large-scale study conducted in the European Union shows that a quarter of the ethnic minority group participants reported having recently felt discriminated against because of their ethnic background (Eurobarometer, 2009).

Being a victim of discrimination can negatively affect people’s psychological well-being. For example, some studies have found that experiences with discrimination are related to lower levels of life satisfaction and happiness (e.g., D. R. Williams & Chung, 1997), higher levels of anger and depression (e.g., Jackson et al., 1996), and a higher incidence of psychiatric symptoms (e.g., Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). Several authors have suggested that these negative effects arise because experiences with prejudice and discrimination are equivalent to being excluded and represent a threat to people’s goal of being valued and accepted by others (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Leary, 2009; Smart Richman, & Leary, 2009). It has also been argued, however, that ethnic minority members may be psychologically buffered from the negative effects of discrimination when they strongly identify with their ethnic group (e.g., Phinney, 1990, 2003).

Nevertheless, it is unclear whether and when ethnic identity may attenuate the impact of discrimination on well-being, particularly among ethnic minority members in Europe. The few studies that have examined the possible buffering effects of ethnic identity have been conducted in the USA, and these studies have generally yielded mixed results (e.g., Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). Moreover, in most of these studies, ethnic identity has been narrowly defined as the extent to which people identify with their heritage group. Yet, people are likely to hold multiple identities (e.g., Tajfel, 1978; Urban & Miller, 1998). For example, ethnic minority members may, independent of their level of identification with the heritage group, also identify with the majority group (e.g., Flannery, Reise, & Yu, 2001; Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000). In the last few years, researchers have come to recognize that such multiple sources of identification may have different implications for people’s relationships with others and for how they...

*Correspondence to: Juliette Schaafsma, Department of Humanities, Tilburg University, PO Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands.
E-mail: J.Schaafsma@uvt.nl
respond to negative events related to their social identity (e.g., Brook, Garcia, & Fleming, 2008; Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Rydell & Boucher, 2010). Thus, it is possible that a strong identification with the heritage group affects ethnic minority members’ reactions to discrimination in a different way than a strong identification with the majority group. So far, however, the effects of these different sources of ethnic identification on the relationship between discrimination and well-being have not been compared.

The aim of the present study was to shed more light on these issues and to examine the roles that identification with the heritage group and identification with the majority group play in the relationship between perceived discrimination and subjective well-being. The primary hypothesis guiding this study is that, whereas a strong identification with the heritage group may protect ethnic minority members from the negative effects of discrimination, a strong identification with the majority group may exacerbate these effects. Participants were ethnic Turks and Moroccans (first and second generation immigrants) in the Netherlands. These two groups occupy a relatively unfavorable position in the Dutch ethnic hierarchy and attitudes of Dutch majority members toward them seem to have become more negative in recent years (e.g., Phalet & Gijsberts, 2007; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). Data suggest that compared with other ethnic groups in the Netherlands, ethnic Turks and Moroccans most often feel they are victims of personal discrimination (Andriessen, Dagevos, Nieuers, & Boog, 2007).

It is expected that a strong identification with the heritage group will serve as a buffer to the negative effects of discrimination because it is likely to provide people with a sense of belonging and pride in an ethnic group. For example, ethnic minorities who are highly identified with their heritage group have been found to experience a strong sense of community and social connectedness (e.g., Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Lee & Davis, 2000), and there is considerable evidence that such feelings of affiliation protect people from the ill effects of stress (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986). Moreover, highly identified individuals may be better able to maintain a positive view of themselves, even in the face of discrimination, because they can focus on the positive attributes of their group (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt et al., 1999; Crocker & Major, 1989). For this reason, Branscombe and colleagues (Branscombe, Schmitt et al., 1999) argue in their rejection-identification model that individuals who experience prejudice or discrimination may also actively try to maintain a sense of belonging and self-esteem by identifying more strongly with their heritage group (but see also Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001; Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003). Thus, a strong identification with the heritage group may serve as an important psychological resource.

Nevertheless, data do not always support the idea that a strong identification with the heritage group serves as a buffer against perceived discrimination. For example, whereas some studies have found that a strong ethnic identity reduces the stress of discrimination (e.g., Mossakowski, 2003; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003; Sellers & Shelton, 2003), others have found that it may exacerbate the negative effects of discrimination on mental health (e.g., Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou, & Rummens, 1999; Yip, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2008), and yet others have found no evidence for the moderating effects of ethnic identity (e.g., Lee, 2003).

Part of these inconsistent results, however, may be because of the different types of measures that have been used to measure ethnic identification. For example, some studies (e.g., Lee, 2003) have used a global measure that combines several identity dimensions such as ethnic identity achievement and ethnic behaviors. Other studies, however, have focused on more specific aspects such as ethnic identity salience (e.g., Noh et al., 1999). It is possible that some of these measures of identity insufficiently captured people’s sense of attachment to and belonging within their heritage group. Based upon an extensive review, Phinney (1990, but see also Duckitt, Callagahn, & Wagner, 2005; Gudykunst & Bond, 1997; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998) concluded that this is an important aspect of ethnic identification that needs to be distinguished from other dimensions such as the ethnic categorization people choose, their involvement with the group, and their evaluation of the group. For example, people may categorize themselves as a member of a particular group without having a strong sense of belonging or attachment to that group. In this study, it is expected that such a sense of belonging or attachment to the heritage group may be a particularly good buffer against the negative effects of perceived discrimination, because it provides ethnic minority members with an alternative source of acceptance. Therefore, this study will focus specifically on this dimension of ethnic identity.

It is expected, however, that a strong identification (i.e., sense of attachment and belonging) with the majority group will exacerbate the negative effects of perceived discrimination on well-being. The primary reason for this assumption is that ethnic minority members who feel strongly attached to the majority group are likely to feel part of the majority group, and may not expect to be treated in terms of their ethnic group membership by majority group members. Thus, incidences of discrimination are likely to raise doubts among them about their acceptance and position within the majority group, and they may feel less valued as a group member than they desire or they may feel that their identity is being denied. As such, discrimination may constitute a specific type of acceptance threat among high identifiers, which Cheryan and Monin (2005) labeled identity denial (but see also Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). In a series of studies among Asian-American participants, they demonstrated that this type of threat may lead to increased negative affect. For individuals who do not identify strongly with the majority group, however, perceived discrimination by majority group members may represent less of a threat to or denial of their identity, and so it is less likely to negatively affect their well-being.

As mentioned earlier, prejudice toward ethnic minorities can be expressed either directly or indirectly. Research suggests, however, that the direct or overt expression of prejudice is much less common nowadays and that discriminatory behavior has taken on more subtle forms instead (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). These more subtle forms may involve, among other things, nonverbal
behaviors that may give minority members the feeling that they are not welcome or have to prove themselves more than others. Some have argued that repeated exposure to more subtle forms of discrimination may be more stressful and difficult to cope with than blatant discrimination because it may create noticeable ambiguity about whether one is being treated on the basis of one’s personal characteristics or on the basis of one’s ethnic group membership (e.g., Noh, Kaspar, & Wickrama, 2007). Given the possibility that relationships between discrimination and well-being may vary as a function of whether discrimination is blatant or more subtle, both types of discrimination were measured in this study.

METHOD

Sample

A total of 320 persons (152 men) participated in this study. Of these participants, 167 were of Turkish origin and 153 were of Moroccan origin (i.e., they or their parents had been born in Turkey or Morocco). Participants were between 17 and 75 years old, and the average age was 30 years (SD = 13.5). All participants were recruited via local contacts and associations. The educational level of participants ranged from 1 (no diploma) to 4 (university degree). Of all the participants, 15.6% had no diploma, 27.6% had a low educational level, 44.1% had a medium educational level and 12.7% had a high educational level.1 About half of the participants (50.2%) had a full-time or part-time job, 24.8% were students, and the rest (25%) were unemployed, retired or did voluntary work.

Measures

Subjective well-being was measured using the Dutch version of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). This scale consists of five items that measure global judgments of satisfaction with one’s life (e.g., I am satisfied with my life). Participants rated each item on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha was .88.

To measure perceptions of discrimination, two sets of items were used. One set of items (eight in total) examined experiences with subtle discrimination (e.g., How often do you have the feeling that you have to prove yourself more than usual because of your ethnic background?). Another set of items (five in total) measured people’s experiences with blatant discrimination (e.g., How often in your life have people been rude or offensive to you because of your ethnic background?). The content of these items had been established on the basis of an extensive literature review and expert interviews (e.g., with representatives of ethnic minority associations and anti-discrimination offices), and the items had been pilot tested among 20 individuals of Turkish and Moroccan origin. Participants responded to each item using a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). A full description of the scales is included in Appendix A.

A principal component analysis with direct oblimin rotation was conducted to examine whether a distinction can be made between subtle and blatant discrimination. Prior to this analysis, items were standardized within each ethnic group to remove any potential mean differences between them (e.g., Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). The principal component analysis yielded a two-factor solution. The eight items intended to measure subtle discrimination loaded on the first factor (>.76), which explained 54.9% of the variance. The items intended to measure blatant discrimination loaded on the second factor (>.58), which explained 12.6% of the variance. Cronbach’s alpha for the subtle discrimination scale was .94 and for the blatant discrimination scale .82.

Ethnic identification was measured with an adjusted version of the Psychological Acculturation Scale (Schaafsma, Nezlek, Krejtz, & Safron, 2010; Stevens, Pels, Vollebergh, & Crijnen, 2004; Tropp, Erkut, Coll, Alarcón, & Garcia, 1999). The items on this scale measure people’s sense of emotional attachment to and belonging within their heritage group and the majority group. Participants responded to six items that referred to their heritage group (e.g., I feel proud to be part of the Turkish/Moroccan culture), and six parallel items that referred to the Dutch majority group (e.g., I feel proud to be part of the Dutch culture). See Appendix B for an overview of the scales. Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), and they were standardized within each ethnic group prior to conducting a principal component analysis (with direct oblimin rotation). This analysis yielded the expected two-factor solution. All the heritage group identification items loaded on the first factor (>.73), which explained 35% of the variance. The majority group identification items loaded on the second factor (>.71), which explained 26.3% of the variance. Cronbach’s alpha for heritage group identification was .88 and for majority (Dutch) group identification .87.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for all the scales. Reports of experiences with subtle and blatant discrimination were compared using a paired samples t-test. This analysis revealed that on average, participants reported having experienced subtle discrimination more often than blatant discrimination, t(159) = 15.89, p < .001. An analysis comparing the ethnic identification scales revealed that participants also tended to identify more strongly with the Dutch majority group than with their heritage group, t(159) = −10.46, p < .001. The mean score for well-being was, as can be deduced from Table 1, above the midpoint of the scale.

Given the diversity of the sample in terms of ethnic background, age, gender, and educational level, possible between-group differences on the selected measures used in this study were examined by using ANOVA.
For well-being, a univariate ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for educational level, \(F(3, 310) = 11.63, p < .001\). Participants without a diploma reported lower levels of well-being \(M = 3.14\) compared with those with a low, medium or high educational level \(M_s > 3.36\). No other between-group differences were found for well-being.

The two identification measures were analyzed as multiple dependent measures using ANOVA. Only the multivariate effect (Pillai’s) for educational level was significant, \(F(6, 590) = 3.13, p < .01\). Univariate analyses showed a significant effect for identification with the majority group, but not for identification with the minority group. On average, participants without a diploma identified less strongly with Dutch culture \(M = 2.69\) than participants with a low, medium, or high educational level \(M_s > 3.33\).

The two discrimination measures were also analyzed as multiple dependent measures. This analysis revealed a significant multivariate effect (Pillai’s) for gender, \(F(2, 292) = 2.89, p < .05\). The univariate results showed a significant effect for subtle discrimination but not for blatant discrimination. On average, men reported having experienced subtle discrimination more often than women \(M = 2.60\) and \(M = 2.13\), respectively.

In light of these between-group differences, gender and educational level were controlled for in the regression analyses.

### Zero-Order Correlations between Perceived Discrimination, Ethnic Identification, and Well-Being

The zero-order correlations between the different measures are also presented in Table 1. As can be deduced from this table, the subtle and blatant discrimination scales were positively correlated as were the heritage group identification and majority group identification scales. The two identification scales were also positively related to well-being. Subtle discrimination scale was negatively related to well-being, but there was no significant correlation between the blatant discrimination scale and well-being. Of particular importance is also that people who identified more strongly with the heritage group were more likely to report subtle discrimination. In contrast, people who identified more strongly with the majority group were less likely to report subtle and blatant discrimination.

### Perceived Discrimination and Subjective Well-Being: The Moderating Roles of Heritage and Majority Group Identification

To examine whether relationships between perceived discrimination and well-being varied as a function of the source and strength of people’s ethnic identification, two hierarchical regression analyses were performed on subjective well-being, with the subtle and blatant discrimination measures separately. Each analysis was performed in four steps. In Step 1, gender and education level were entered as covariates. Gender was dummy-coded \(0 = \text{men}, 1 = \text{women}\). Educational level was treated as a continuous variable. In Step 2, discrimination (subtle or blatant) was included and in Step 3, heritage group identification and majority group identification were entered.

In Step 4, the interaction terms of Discrimination × Heritage Group Identification and Discrimination × Majority Group Identification were included. Following recommendations by Aiken and West (1991) and Van de Vijver and Leung (1997), predictors were standardized within each sample before they were entered into the equation.

Table 2 shows the results for the analysis that examined the effects of subtle discrimination and ethnic identification on subjective well-being. In Step 1, a significant positive effect was found for educational level: participants with a higher educational level reported higher levels of well-being compared with participants with a lower educational level. There was a positive effect of gender that reached conventional levels of significance: women tended to report higher levels of well-being than men. In Step 2, no main effect was found for experiences with subtle discrimination and the addition of this predictor also did not significantly increase the explained variance. The addition of the two ethnic identification measures in Step 3 significantly increased the explained variance, however. Identification with the majority group and identification with the heritage group had independent and positive effects on well-being. The addition of the interactions in Step 4 resulted in an increase in the explained variance as well. Both the Discrimination × Heritage Group Identification interaction and the Discrimination × Majority Group Identification interaction were significant.

Simple slopes analysis revealed that for individuals who were low (1 SD below the mean) on heritage group identification, there was a negative relationship between subtle discrimination and well-being, \(B = -1.15, p < .05\). Yet,
for individuals who were high on heritage group identification (1 SD above the mean), there was no relationship between subtle discrimination and well-being, \( B = .05, p = .32 \) (see Figure 1). This pattern was reversed for majority group identification. Here, simple slopes analysis revealed a negative relationship between subtle discrimination and well-being for those who were high (1 SD above the mean) on majority group identification (\( B = -.09, p < .05 \)), whereas there was no relationship between these constructs for those who were low (1 SD below the mean) on majority group identification (\( B = .06, p = .24 \)). The slopes are displayed in Figure 2.

Table 3 presents the results of the effects of blatant discrimination and ethnic identification on subjective well-being. This analysis also yielded no significant main effect of direct discrimination on well-being. The discrimination × heritage group identification interaction and the discrimination × majority group identification interaction were, however, significant. Simple slopes analyses revealed a similar pattern as was found for the subtle discrimination measure (see Figure 3). There was a negative relationship between blatant discrimination and well-being for individuals who were at 1 SD below the mean on heritage group identification (\( B = -.14, p < .05 \)), whereas there was no significant relationship for individuals who were at 1 SD above the mean (\( B = .03, p = .52 \)). Again, the pattern was reversed for majority group identification. There was a negative relationship that reached conventional levels of significance between blatant discrimination and well-being for individuals who were at 1 SD above the mean on majority group identification (\( B = -.08, p = .06 \)), whereas there was no relationship between blatant discrimination and well-being for those who were at 1 SD below the mean on majority group identification (\( B = .03, p = .44 \)) (see Figure 4).

Even though no \textit{a priori} expectations were formulated regarding relationships between perceived discrimination and well-being for ethnic minority members with a specific heritage and majority group identification combination (e.g., a strong identification with both the heritage and the majority group or a so-called dual identity), two additional regression analyses were performed to explore this interaction. In neither of these analyses, however, was the Discrimination × Heritage Group Identification × Majority Group Identification significant (\( B = -.05, p = .16 \) for subtle discrimination and \( B = -.02, p = .26 \) for blatant discrimination).

**DISCUSSION**

Discrimination can be a pervasive phenomenon in the lives of ethnic minority members, which is likely to have many negative consequences for their well-being. In the past few years, researchers have debated whether minority members’ identity may protect or exacerbate such negative effects (e.g., Mossakowski, 2003; Yip et al., 2008). The primary expectation of the present study was that the effects of being discriminated against would vary as a function of the source and strength of ethnic minority members’ identification. It was

---

**Figure 1.** Relationship between subtle discrimination and subjective well-being by level of heritage group identification

---

**Table 2.** Multiple regression analysis of subtle discrimination and heritage and majority group identification on subjective well-being, controlling for sex and educational level: Standardized regression coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th>Step 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.27 (.05)**</td>
<td>.27 (.05)**</td>
<td>.15 (.05)**</td>
<td>.14 (.04)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.16 (.09)*</td>
<td>.13 (.09)</td>
<td>.10 (.08)</td>
<td>.10 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtle discrimination</td>
<td>–.05 (.04)</td>
<td>–.01 (.04)</td>
<td>–.04 (.04)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification majority group</td>
<td>–.05 (.04)</td>
<td>–.01 (.04)</td>
<td>–.04 (.04)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification heritage group</td>
<td>.31 (.04)**</td>
<td>.32 (.04)**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination × Identification majority group</td>
<td>.15 (.04)**</td>
<td>.15 (.04)**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination × Identification heritage group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.15 (.04)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination × Heritage Group Identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>–.07 (.03)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination × Majority Group Identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>–.07 (.03)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
\[ R^2 = .10 \]
\[ F \text{ change} = 18.23*** \]

**Note:** All variables were standardized within each ethnic group prior to analysis.

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05; ‘p < .10. 
expected that a strong identification with the heritage group would serve as a buffer against the negative effects of being the target of discrimination and that a strong identification with the majority culture would exacerbate these negative effects.

The results of this study confirm the idea that the effects of both subtle and blatant discrimination on well-being depend on the source and strength of people’s ethnic identity. In terms of ethnic minority members’ identification with the heritage group, it was found that high identifiers were more likely to report subtle discrimination than low identifiers. At the same time, they were less likely to be negatively affected by experiences with both subtle and blatant discrimination than low identifiers. Although a negative relationship was found between experiences with discrimination and well-being for low heritage group identifiers, no relationship was found between discrimination and well-being for high identifiers. Although a negative relationship was found between experiences with discrimination and well-being for low heritage group identifiers, no relationship was found between discrimination and well-being for high identifiers. In terms of ethnic minority members’ identification with the majority culture, however, it was found that ethnic minority members who identified more strongly with the majority group were less likely to report subtle and blatant discrimination than low identifiers. Yet, experiences with discrimination seemed to affect them more strongly than low identifiers. For high majority group identifiers, a negative relationship was found between discrimination (subtle and blatant) and well-being, whereas there was no relationship between discrimination and well-being for low identifiers.

Thus, on the one hand, this study shows that even though a strong identification with the heritage group may make ethnic minority members more sensitive to (subtle) discriminatory cues (e.g., Operario & Fiske, 2001; Sellers & Shelton, 2003), it may also protect them from its negative effects. These results are important, because it has previously been argued that this tendency to be more aware of discriminatory events among high identifiers should exacerbate its negative effects (e.g., Yip et al., 2008). Given that ethnic identity was primarily defined as people’s sense of attachment to and belonging within an ethnic group, the results lend support to the idea that minority members may be protected from the adverse effects of discrimination when they have an alternative source of acceptance. Such an alternative source of acceptance is important, because discrimination is likely to signal rejection by the majority group (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt et al., 1999; Leary, 2009). When minority members have an alternative source of acceptance, however, this may provide them with a sense of belonging that may not only help them to be resilient to stressful events such as prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Phinney, 2003) but may also provide them with a sense of value and prevent negative stereotypes from infecting their self-concept (Mossakowski, 2003). As a result, negative reactions to perceived discrimination may diminish in intensity when minority members identify more strongly with their heritage group.

On the other hand, this study shows that even though a strong identification with the majority culture may lead minority members to be less aware of or perhaps downplay incidences of subtle or blatant discrimination, it is also likely to exacerbate its negative effects when it is noticed. One explanation for this finding is that ethnic minority members who identify strongly with the majority culture may expect to be accepted by majority group members and may not anticipate to be treated in terms of their ethnic group membership. When these expectations are violated, it may cause them to be concerned about their position within a group they value and want to be part of. Thus, for minority members who identify more strongly with the majority group, discrimination by majority group members is likely to constitute a specific type of acceptance threat: they may perceive that their identity is unrecognized or denied by fellow group members, and this may cause considerable psychological distress (e.g., Branscombe, Ellemers, et al., 1999; Cheryan & Monin, 2005). Low identifiers, on the other hand, may place less value on having close relationships with majority group members and may anticipate more or receiving a negative treatment because of their group membership. As a result, experiences with discrimination may be less threatening to them and therefore less likely to negatively impact their well-being.

It was found that the effects of both subtle and blatant discrimination on well-being were moderated by people’s ethnic identity. Previously, it has been argued that experiences with subtle discrimination should be more difficult to cope with than experiences with blatant discrimination because they are more attributionally ambiguous (e.g., Noh et al., 2007), and some have argued that the factors that moderate the effects of these two types of discrimination should therefore differ as well (e.g., Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003).
Nevertheless, the results of this study suggest that, even though subtle and blatant discrimination may be conceptually distinct, this distinction is less relevant when people’s ethnic identification is taken into account. A possible explanation for this finding is that minority group members who identify strongly with the heritage group may anticipate being treated in terms of their ethnic background. As a result, instances of subtle discrimination may be less attributionally ambiguous for them and, hence, more similar to blatant discrimination. In contrast, and as argued earlier, minority group members who identify strongly with the majority group may not anticipate being treated in terms of their ethnic background. For them, instances of blatant discrimination may be more attributionally ambiguous and, as such, more similar to subtle discrimination.

Although not a central focus of this study, it was also examined whether a dual identity (i.e., a strong identification with both the heritage group and the majority group) was a protective factor against experiences with subtle or blatant discrimination. For example, it has been argued that minority members with a dual identity have the ability to develop and maintain competence in both cultures, which may help them to exhibit healthy coping patterns in the face of adverse events (e.g., LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Mossakowski, 2001; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002), and this heightened identification may positively affect their well-being. In the present study, however, no direct link was found between perceived discrimination (subtle or blatant) and well-being. That is, it is possible that ethnic minority members identify more strongly with their heritage group following discrimination by majority group members (e.g., Bourguignon, Seron, Yzerbyt, & Herman, 2006; Jetten et al., 2001; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002), and this heightened identification may positively affect their well-being. In contrast, people’s identification with the majority group may decrease as a result of perceived discrimination (e.g., Portes & Zhou, 1993; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007), which, in turn, may negatively affect their well-being. In the present study, however, no direct link was found between perceived discrimination (subtle or blatant) and well-being after controlling for possible confounds, and so the first criterion for testing mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986) was not met. Nevertheless, it seems likely that processes of identification and discrimination operate in a cyclical manner: minority members’ ethnic identity may not only influence their perception of and cope with discrimination.

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis of blatant discrimination and heritage and majority group identification on subjective well-being, controlling for sex and educational level: Standardized regression coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th>Step 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.26 (.05)***</td>
<td>.26 (.05)***</td>
<td>.14 (.05)**</td>
<td>.13 (.05)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.15 (.09)*</td>
<td>.14 (.09)</td>
<td>.09 (.08)</td>
<td>.09 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blatant discrimination</td>
<td>.02 (.04)</td>
<td>.31 (.04)***</td>
<td>.33 (.04)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification majority group</td>
<td>.08 (.04) *</td>
<td>.16 (.04)***</td>
<td>.16 (.04)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification heritage group</td>
<td>.06 (.04)</td>
<td>.05 (.03)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination × Identification majority group</td>
<td>.08 (.04)</td>
<td>.05 (.03)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination × Identification heritage group</td>
<td>.05 (.03)*</td>
<td>.05 (.03)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F change</td>
<td>16.73***</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>44.14***</td>
<td>5.55*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All variables were standardized within each ethnic group prior to analysis.

* ***p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05; † p < .10

Figure 3. Relationship between blatant discrimination and subjective well-being by level of heritage group identification
perceptions of discrimination, but these perceptions of discrimination are likely to affect their ethnic identity as well (e.g., Operario & Fiske, 2001).

The absence of a direct link between perceived discrimination (subtle or blatant) and well-being in this study seems to contradict previous findings on the negative impact of discrimination on well-being. This inconsistency may be due in part to varying measures of well-being. For example, earlier studies have included a broad range of measures, such as scales for mental illness (e.g., depressive or anxiety symptoms), psychological distress or various indicators of general well-being (e.g., self-esteem, life satisfaction, or positive and negative affect) (for an overview, see Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). In addition, not all studies have controlled for potential confounding variables such as gender or educational level. Moreover, the vast majority of studies on the link between perceived discrimination and well-being have been performed in the USA and, to a more limited extent, in Canada, countries with a different migration policy and history than most European countries. For example, in the US overt racism or discrimination against Blacks – the group that is typically studied – is no longer tolerated in most social settings. In the Netherlands, however, the attitudes of native Dutch toward Turkish-origin and Moroccan-origin minority group members have become more negative in recent years, and these negative attitudes are now more openly expressed as well (e.g., Phalet & Gijsberts, 2007; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). It is possible that perceptions of and reactions to discrimination vary as a function of these and other contextual factors (e.g., Sellers et al., 1998). Future research should therefore incorporate more fully the sociocultural and political context when examining the occurrence and effects of discrimination.

A limitation of the current study is that it is unclear how people’s identification with the majority group is subjectively represented by them. For example, do they identify with the majority group per se, or do they identify with a superordinate national category that may include different ethnic groups? This question is important, because it may affect how people respond to threats to this particular identity (e.g., Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). Another limitation of this study is that the data are cross-sectional and that causal relationships cannot be established. It was assumed that perceptions of discrimination would result in lower levels of well-being, but the opposite direction is possible as well.

That is, individuals with low levels of well-being may be more likely to interpret ambiguous remarks or behaviors by majority group members as discriminatory. It should be noted, however, that laboratory research has also found that perceiving prejudice can negatively affect people’s well-being (e.g., Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997). Moreover, laboratory studies on the effects of social exclusion have found that this may increase emotional distress as well (e.g., Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). Thus, these findings seem to support the causal direction in which the findings of this study are interpreted.

Despite these limitations, the current findings have important practical as well as theoretical implications. Most importantly, they show that perceptions of subtle and blatant discrimination do not inevitably have negative consequences for ethnic minority members’ well-being and show that minority members’ identification with both their heritage group and the majority group are important in understanding the impact of perceived discrimination. The results suggest that reactions to different types of discrimination by the majority group depend on the extent to which minority members’ belonging needs are either fulfilled or threatened. Although a sense of belonging within their heritage group is likely to counteract the ill effects of perceived discrimination on well-being, a sense of belonging within the majority group may exacerbate these effects. Thus, although identifying with the majority group is generally viewed as desirable in the literature on multiple identities and in debates on multiculturalism, these findings suggest that it may have hidden costs as well. Future studies should, by examining more directly the underlying processes through which these negative effects occur, contribute to a further understanding of how different sources of ethnic identification attenuate or intensify the effects of discrimination on well-being.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by a grant (# 1419612) from the Province Noord-Brabant, the Netherlands. I am grateful to Paul Mutsaers, Fatima Aynaou, and several anti-discrimination offices (Radar, Adviespunt Discriminatie, and Basta!) for their help in collecting the data. I thank John B. Nezlek for his comments on previous drafts of this article.
REFERENCES


Discrimination and subjective well-being


APPENDIX A: ITEMS USED TO MEASURE SUBTLE AND BLATANT DISCRIMINATION

**Subtle Discrimination**

How often do you have the feeling that:

- You are not being accepted because of your ethnic background?
- People judge you negatively or look at you in an unusual way because of your ethnic background?
- People distrust you because of your ethnic background?
- People do not take you seriously because of your ethnic background?
- You have to prove yourself more than others because of your ethnic background?
- You are being ignored because of your ethnic background?
- People look down on you because of your ethnic background?

**Blatant Discrimination**

- How often in your life have you been teased or made fun of because of your ethnic background?
- How often in your life have people threatened you because of your ethnic background?
- How often in your life have people hit or pushed you because of your ethnic background?
- How often in your life have people rejected you because of your ethnic background?
- How often in your life have you been rejected because of your ethnic background?

**APPENDIX B: ITEMS USED TO MEASURE ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION**

Each question was asked in terms of participants’ minority culture and in terms of the majority culture.

- “Minority/majority” people understand me.
- I understand “minority/majority” persons.
- I feel comfortable with “minority/majority” people.
- I have a lot in common with “minority/majority” people.
- I feel proud to be a part of the “minority/majority” culture.
- I share most of my beliefs and values with “minority/majority” people.