
Article:
Iyer, A., Jetten, J., Branscombe, N.R. et al. (2014) The difficulty of recognising less obvious forms of group-based discrimination. Group Processes and Intergroup Relations, 17 (5). pp. 577-589. ISSN: 1368-4302

https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430214522139

The difficulty of recognizing less obvious forms of group-based discrimination

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This research was supported by Discovery Project Grant DP0984576 from the Australia Research Council.

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published in *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 17* (5), 577-589

DOI: 10.1177/1368430214522139

Abstract

Research on perceptions of discrimination has focused on group-based differential treatment that is widely accepted as being illegitimate (e.g., based on race or gender). The present research investigates how individuals interpret less obvious forms of group-based exclusion based on age (Study 1) and vision correction status (Study 2). We propose that individuals will not question the legitimacy of such treatment, unless they are provided with explicit cues to do so. Participants who merely encountered exclusion (baseline control) did not differ from those who were directed to consider the legitimate reasons for this treatment, with respect to perceived legitimacy, felt anger, and collective action intentions. In contrast, individuals who were directed to consider the illegitimate reasons for the exclusion perceived it to be less legitimate, felt more anger, and reported higher collective action intentions. Participants' own status as potential victims or mere observers of the exclusion criterion did not influence their legitimacy perceptions or felt anger. Results suggest that when confronted with forms of group-based exclusion that are not commonly defined as discrimination, people do not perceive an injustice unless explicitly directed to seek it out.

A large literature has investigated the social and psychological dynamics surrounding the interpretation of workplace discrimination (for reviews see Nier & Gaertner, 2012; Paludi, Paludi, & DeSouza, 2011). This empirical work has almost exclusively focused on discrimination based on standard demographic categories, such as race, gender, older age, sexual orientation, and religion. As a result, psychologists have developed a considerable understanding of responses to differential treatment that is clearly proscribed through formal mechanisms such as anti-discrimination laws (Barron & Hebl, 2010), and informal mechanisms such as cultural ideals and social norms (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002).

Almost no research has investigated employment discrimination that is experienced by groups outside these standard categories. However, evidence suggests that less obvious forms of group-based differential treatment can also occur in the workplace. For instance, some organizations automatically exclude all unemployed people from consideration for job openings (Rampell, 2011). Similarly, the United States Armed Forces uses height requirements to disqualify new recruits, irrespective of individual capabilities (Powers, 2012). Such group-based exclusion can pose significant obstacles to individuals' employment prospects, and thus is similar to more widely recognized forms of discrimination (e.g., based on race or gender). What differentiates less obvious discrimination from its more easily recognized counterpart is thus not its broader importance, but rather the extent to which it has been debated and discussed in society. Indeed, every contemporary form of recognized discrimination was once itself a less obvious form of exclusion: at various points in history, differential treatment against various groups (e.g., based on race, gender, physical disability, or sexuality) has been considered acceptable and appropriate, with societal proscriptions against such treatment only evolving over time (see Jetten, Branscombe, Iyer, & Asai, 2013; Jetten, Iyer, Branscombe, & Zhang, in press).

Less obvious forms of exclusion could thus represent emerging social problems, although they have yet to receive broad societal recognition.

Given that such instances of group-based exclusion have not yet been subjected to broader social and legal debate, little is known about how individuals will respond, whether they are directly affected by the exclusion or are merely observing it. The present research investigates individuals' responses when they encounter such less obvious forms of differential group-based treatment: will they interpret it as being acceptable and fair, or inappropriate and illegitimate?

On the one hand, such instances of negative treatment meet the criteria required to be labeled discrimination: (1) an individual's outcome or treatment is determined by their group characteristics, without consideration of individual merit; and (2) these group characteristics do not determine an individuals' performance or ability on the dimension in question (see Jetten et al., 2013; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). Thus, these are instances where group membership is not directly associated with the justification for negative treatment. If individuals recognize these characteristics of group-based exclusion, they should interpret this treatment as the discrimination that it is (see Inman, 2001; Inman & Baron, 1996).

However, less obvious forms of differential treatment are not already proscribed by formal or informal means. As such, it might be quite difficult for people to determine whether this group-based exclusion is legitimate or not. Research indicates that individuals believe in a just world (see Lerner, 2003) and they often assume that policies and procedures are appropriate and fair, simply because they exist. Individuals are meaning-makers, and are thus likely to develop a rationale for why the familiar status quo represents the way things should be (Eidelman, Crandall, & Pattershall, 2009; Eidelman, Pattershall, & Crandall, 2010; Kunda, 1990). Indeed, research has shown that individuals are not likely to notice instances of ambiguous sexism unless

they are paying deliberate attention to this task (Becker & Swim, 2011; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). This is precisely why some have argued that affirmative action programs—which systematically monitor organizational policies and procedures for evidence of bias—are necessary: individuals have difficulty identifying (and thus challenging) discrimination in the absence of proactive efforts to critically investigate the nature of group differences (see Crosby, Iyer, Clayton, & Downing, 2003; North & Fiske, 2012). This perspective suggests the hypothesis that individuals' default response will be to perceive less obvious forms of employment discrimination as legitimate.

In the present research, we examine people's responses to less obvious forms of group-based differential treatment in the workplace. Both studies assess perceived legitimacy as the central dependent variable. We also measure broader responses to the group-based differential treatment, such as willingness to question the eligibility criterion (Study 1), felt anger (Study 2), and collective action intentions to challenge the exclusion criterion (Study 2). Previous research has shown increased levels of anger and collective action intentions in response to illegitimate inter-group inequality, whether participants are members of a disadvantaged group (e.g., Hansen & Sassenberg, 2011; Iyer & Ryan 2009; Jetten, Schmitt, Branscombe, Garza, & Mewse, 2011; van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004) or an advantaged group (e.g., Cronin, Reysen, & Branscombe, 2012; Iyer, Schmader, & Lickel, 2007; Iyer & Ryan, 2009). Building on this work, we investigate whether the perceived legitimacy of novel forms of group-based differential treatment would shape individuals' broader responses such as anger and collective action intentions.

In both studies, participants learn that an eligibility criterion excludes some individuals from applying for a job on the basis of their category membership. As will be described in the

studies, no information was provided in the materials to link group membership and expected job performance. Thus, the job description did not necessarily warrant the use of group-based eligibility criteria. Participants in the *baseline control* condition are directed to consider the activities involved in the job description, and thus are not provided any explicit cues regarding legitimacy. This condition should represent a common context in which individuals learn about group-based differential treatment.

We expect that individuals in the baseline control condition will perceive the exclusion to be legitimate, because they will assume that the status quo represents an appropriate set of circumstances (Eidelman et al., 2009). To assess this hypothesis, we compared the baseline control condition to two conditions that explicitly directed participants' attention to issues of legitimacy. The *salient high legitimacy* condition asked participants to explicitly examine the legitimacy of the exclusion criteria, and the *salient low legitimacy* condition asked participants to explicitly examine the illegitimacy of the exclusion criteria.

We predict that responses in the baseline control condition will not differ from those in the high legitimacy condition. Given individuals' propensity to believe in a just world (Lerner, 2003), we expect that they will see the differential treatment as legitimate, regardless of whether they are directed to examine the legitimacy of the selection criterion or are not directed to focus on legitimacy. In contrast, responses in the baseline control condition will differ from the condition where participants are asked to explicitly examine the illegitimacy of the exclusion criteria. Directing attention to the possible unfairness of the discrimination is likely to challenge the validity of individuals' rationale for why the status quo represents an appropriate state of affairs. As a result, consciousness regarding this type of group-based discrimination will be raised—a first step in the de-legitimizing process (Gurin, 1985; Simon & Klandermans, 2001).

We predict that this de-legitimization will result in lower perceptions of legitimacy, increased willingness to question the eligibility criterion, increased anger, and increased collective action intentions.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedure. Working adults were invited to participate in an online survey examining attitudes toward recruitment for the position of Aviation Corps Officer (SSO Pilot) using three recruitment strategies: (1) a link to the survey was posted on online psychology survey websites, (2) the link was emailed to networks of colleagues and acquaintances (who were unaware of the research questions) and, (3) the link was emailed to employees of a State Government department, after permission was granted by the Manager.

The study was initially accessed by 297 people, but only 166 (56%) submitted complete surveys with minimal missing values. Seven participants were subsequently dropped from the sample, either because they indicated that they had no prior work experience ($n = 2$) or because they did not provide their age ($n = 5$)—which was relevant to the selection criterion.

The final sample of 157 participants (76 male, 81 female) ranged in age from 17 and 70 years ($M = 34.19$, $SD = 13.597$). Participants self-identified as Australian/Oceanian (45%), European (31%), African, Asian, American or multinational (21%), or did not specify their nationality (3%). Participants' reported work experience ranged from 1 to 49 years ($M = 12.68$, $SD = 12.97$). A range of occupations was reported, with the majority of participants employed in the fields of architecture and engineering, office and administration, business and financial, education, and health. With respect to current employment, 103 participants had full-time jobs (66%), 13 were employed part time (8%), 32 were employed on a casual basis (20%), 6 were

employed on a contractual basis (4%) and the remainder were employed on other terms (n = 3, 2%).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: salient high legitimacy, salient low legitimacy, and baseline control (no information regarding legitimacy).

Materials and Measures.

Position description and eligibility criterion. The first part of the questionnaire presented information about a trainee position as an Aviation Corps Officer. The text listed the activities and responsibilities of this job, which included flying helicopters, communicating with other personnel, and performing complex cognitive tasks, while carrying out precise manual activities. Participants next read that due to the "demanding and challenging" nature of this position, applications for the trainee position would not be accepted from individuals over the age of 35 years. The materials stated that Aviation Corps Officers need to be "in peak mental and physical condition and capable of undertaking field and related training," but no direct link was made between performance and age. That is, no clear and compelling justification was provided for the use of age as a specific eligibility criterion.

Legitimacy focus manipulation. Participants completed one of three reflection tasks. The *baseline control* condition asked participants to rank the work activities and responsibilities of the position in order of importance. While this task required good engagement with the eligibility criteria, there was no mention of legitimacy. In the other two conditions, attention was explicitly directed to the legitimacy of the eligibility criterion. In the *salient high legitimacy* condition, participants were instructed to write about why age is a fair and legitimate eligibility criterion for the position. In the *salient low legitimacy* condition, participants were instructed to write about why age is an unfair and illegitimate eligibility criterion for the position.

Dependent measures. Five items (α = .85) assessed the *perceived legitimacy* of the eligibility criterion (e.g., "There are legitimate reasons why being 35 years of age or under should be an eligibility criterion for performing this role," and "The eligibility criterion of being 35 years of age or under is unfair for this role" (reverse scored). A single item measured the extent to which participants directly *questioned the criterion*: "I believe that people over the age of 35 would be able to perform this role just as well as people under the age of 35." Responses to all items were provided using a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Results

In order to assess whether participants' responses were shaped by their own possible outcomes under the exclusion policy, we categorized them into two groups based on reported age: under 35 years of age (i.e., would be advantaged by the criterion; n = 101) and over 35 years of age (i.e., would be disadvantaged by the criterion; n = 55). A series of between-subjects Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the impact of age-group status (advantaged or disadvantaged) and legitimacy focus (baseline control, salient low legitimacy, salient high legitimacy) on the dependent variables.

Perceived legitimacy of eligibility criterion. As expected, the legitimacy focus manipulation had a significant impact on perceived legitimacy, F (2, 157) = 3.30, p = .040, partial ε^2 = .04. Follow-up contrasts indicated that participants in the baseline control condition (M = 4.07, SD = 1.38) and the salient high legitimacy condition (M = 4.17, SD = 1.68) perceived the criterion to be equally legitimate, t (157) = 0.64, p > .999. However, participants in the salient low legitimacy condition perceived the criterion as significantly less legitimate (M = 3.45, SD = 1.51) than did participants in the baseline control condition, t (157) = 2.10, p = .049, and in the salient high legitimacy condition, t (157) = 2.44, p =.048.

There was no main effect of age status group on perceptions of legitimacy, F (1, 157) = 2.35, p = .128, partial ε^2 = .02. Thus, participants perceived the criterion as equally legitimate, regardless of whether they would be eligible (M = 3.74, SD = 1.54) or ineligible (M = 4.09, SD = 1.56) for the position. No significant interaction emerged between the legitimacy focus manipulation and age status group, F (2, 157) = 0.33, p = .720, partial ε^2 = .00.

We coded participants' open-ended responses in the manipulation task to explore the type of information they used to either question or condone the use of the selection criterion. Participants in the *salient high legitimacy condition* noted that older age is a legitimate selection criterion for this position because it is associated with decreased physical abilities (62.3%), decreased cognitive (62.3%), fewer years of future service (22.6%), decreased ability to learn (15.7%), greater likelihood of having health problems (6.6%), greater likelihood of having family commitments that would distract from the job (5.8%), lower social communication skills (1.9%), and having less enthusiasm for the job (1%). Participants in the *salient low legitimacy condition* noted the following reasons why age is not a legitimate criterion for this position: older age is associated with more positive worker characteristics such as increased wisdom (44%) and communication skills (6.3%), older age is unrelated to declines in physical abilities (40.4%) or cognitive abilities (56.6%), and that age-based treatment violated moral principles (16.3%) or the law (6.6%). Overall, then, participants generally used the perceived association (or lack thereof) between people's age and their abilities to justify their efforts to condone or question the use of age as a selection criterion.

Questioning the criterion. The legitimacy focus manipulation had a significant effect on participants' willingness to question the use of age as an eligibility criterion, F (2, 157) = 5.54, p = .005, partial ε^2 = .07. Follow-up tests indicated that participants in the baseline control

condition (M = 4.84, SD = 1.55) were equally unlikely to question the criterion as were participants in the salient high legitimacy condition (M = 4.51, SD = 1.92), t (157) = 1.01, p = .924. In contrast, participants in the salient low legitimacy condition questioned the criterion significantly more (M = 5.51, SD = 1.50) than did participants in the baseline control condition, t (157) = 2.15, p = .049, or participants in the salient high legitimacy condition, t (157) = 3.10, p =.007.

There was no main effect of age status group, F (1, 157) = 1.41, p = .237, partial ε^2 = .07. Participants questioned the basis of the eligibility criterion equally, whether they themselves would be eligible (M = 5.05, SD = 1.54) or ineligible (M = 4.78, SD = 1.99) for the position. In addition, no significant interaction emerged, F (2, 157) = 1.40, p = .250, partial ε^2 = .02.[1]

Discussion

The present study provides preliminary evidence that less obvious forms of group-based exclusion are not automatically perceived as illegitimate discrimination. Participants in the baseline control condition interpreted the eligibility criterion to be as fair, as did participants who were specifically directed to focus on the legitimacy of the differential treatment. Thus, even in the absence of specific legitimizing rationales or explicit directions, individuals are willing to trust that there is a solid rationale underlying existing group-based discrimination (see Eidelman et al., 2009).

There is also evidence, however, that individuals are not beholden to this legitimating view of the world. When explicitly directed to focus on the illegitimate nature of the eligibility criterion, individuals perceived the differential treatment as less legitimate and questioned its basis, compared to individuals in the baseline control and the legitimate treatment conditions. This indicates that such cues can serve an important first step in developing political

consciousness regarding the nature of group-based differential treatment (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). More broadly, the results add to a literature that argues against the existence of a general motivation to accept the status quo (see Kay & Friesen, 2011; Spears, Jetten, & Doosje, 2001): if people have an opportunity to critically examine an instance of group-based differential treatment, they do indeed come to question its legitimacy. Interestingly, our results also show that individuals use the same types of arguments to either question or condone the differential treatment.

To replicate and extend these findings, we conducted a second study in a different occupational context (air traffic controller) and using a different dimension of differential treatment (individuals' vision status). We assessed perceived legitimacy of the differential treatment, and also assessed two commonly documented responses to group-based discrimination: felt anger and willingness to challenge the exclusion criterion. We hypothesized that responses in the baseline control condition should not differ from those in the high legitimacy condition (who are directed to explicitly examine the legitimacy of the exclusion criterion). In contrast, participants in the baseline control and high legitimacy conditions should perceive the exclusion as more legitimate than participants in the low legitimacy condition (who are directed to explicitly examine the illegitimacy of the exclusion criterion).

Study 2

Method

Participants and Procedure. Seventy-six first-year university students participated in the study for course credit. The sample included 32 men and 44 women, whose ages ranged from 17 to 48 years (M = 21.50, SD = 4.76). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three

legitimacy focus conditions: baseline control (i.e., no explicit focus on issues of [il]legitimacy), salient high legitimacy, and salient low legitimacy.

Materials.

Position description and eligibility criterion. Participants read that the position of air traffic controller is "one of the most demanding and challenging of any job." The materials stated that the role of air traffic controller requires 20/20 vision, and that thus, individuals "requiring correction through the use of contacts, glasses, or laser surgery will not be considered." No explanation or compelling justification was provided for use of vision correction status as an eligibility criterion. Given that individuals with corrected vision do meet the requirement of having 20/20 vision, this instance of differential treatment meets the criteria to be labeled discrimination.

The next page of the questionnaire packet provided more information about the activities and responsibilities of the Air Traffic Controller position, such as monitoring aircraft using computer equipment and radar, alerting airport emergency services in cases of emergency, and determining the timing and procedures for flight vector changes.

Legitimacy focus manipulation. Participants completed one of three reflection tasks: baseline control, salient high legitimacy, and salient low legitimacy. All instructions were identical to those developed for Study 1.

Measures. Four items (α = .85) assessed the *perceived legitimacy* of the exclusion criterion (rational, justified, sensible, legitimate). Participants indicated their responses using a seven-point response scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Three items ($\alpha = .95$) assessed participants' reported *anger* if they were to be rejected from the air traffic controller position because they had corrected eyesight: furious, outraged, and angry. Responses were provided using a five-point scale (1 = *very slightly*, 5 = *extremely*).

Collective action intentions to challenge the eligibility criterion were measured with eight items ($\alpha = .94$). Participants read that various groups were taking action against the criterion, and indicated their willingness to take various actions to support these groups (1 = *very unwilling*, 7 = *very willing*). These actions ranged from low-cost (e.g., wear a button, sign a petition) to high-cost (e.g., attend a rally, volunteer with the group), and formed a single reliable measure.

Results

In order to assess whether participants' responses would be shaped by their own fate under the exclusion policy, we categorized participants into two groups based on their vision correction status: uncorrected vision (i.e., eligible on the basis of the criterion; $n = 34$) and corrected vision (i.e., ineligible on the basis of the criterion; $n = 42$). A series of between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the impact of vision correction status (corrected or uncorrected) and legitimacy focus (baseline control, salient high legitimacy, and salient low legitimacy) on the dependent variables.

Perceived legitimacy. The legitimacy focus manipulation had a significant effect on perceived legitimacy, $F\ (2, 76) = 9.596$, $p < .001$, partial $\varepsilon^2 = .21$. Follow-up contrasts indicated that participants perceived the criterion to be equally legitimate in the baseline control condition ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.09$) and the salient high legitimacy condition ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.21$), $t\ (76) = 0.25$, $p > .999$. Participants in the salient low legitimacy condition perceived the criterion as less legitimate ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.16$), compared to participants in the salient high legitimacy

condition, t (76) = 2.86, p =.017, and participants in the baseline control condition, t (76) = 2.91, p = .015.

There was no main effect of vision status group on perceived legitimacy, F (1, 76) = 0.01, p = .909, partial ε^2 = .00. Thus, participants perceived the criterion as equally legitimate, whether they themselves would be eligible (M = 4.64, SD = 1.71) or ineligible (M = 4.54, SD = 1.28) for the position. No significant interaction emerged, F (2, 76) = 0.60, p = .942, partial ε^2 = .00.

Felt anger. There was a significant effect of legitimacy focus on participants' reported anger if they were to be excluded based on the eligibility criterion, F (2, 76) = 4.24, p = .018, partial ε^2 = .11. Follow-up contrasts indicated that participants in the baseline control condition (M = 2.59, SD = 1.18) reported being as angry as participants in the salient high legitimacy condition (M = 2.75, SD = 1.26), t (76) = 0.45, p > .999. Participants in the salient low legitimacy condition reported significantly higher levels of anger (M = 3.60, SD = 1.20) compared to participants in the baseline control condition, t (76) = 2.85, p = .017, and in the salient high legitimacy condition, t (76) = 2.56, p =.038.

There was no main effect of corrected vision status on feelings of anger, F (1, 76) = 0.78, p = .781, partial ε^2 = .00. Thus, participants reported equal levels of anger, whether they themselves would be eligible (M = 2.92, SD = 1.33) or ineligible (M = 3.05, SD = 1.25) for the position on its basis. In addition, there was no significant interaction, F (2, 76) = 1.32, p = .272, partial ε^2 = .03.

Collective action intentions. There was a significant effect of legitimacy focus on participants' reported collective action intentions if they were to be excluded based on this policy, F (2, 76) = 3.26, p = .044, partial ε^2 = .08. Follow-up contrasts indicated that participants in the baseline control condition (M = 2.48, SD = 1.26) did not differ from those in the salient

high legitimacy condition (M = 2.73, SD = 1.58), t (76) = 1.02, p = .929. Participants in the salient low legitimacy condition reported more willingness to take collective action (M = 3.69, SD = 1.85) compared to participants in the baseline control condition, t (76) = 2.71, p = .026, and participants in the salient high legitimacy condition, t (76) = 2.28, p = .027.

A significant main effect of vision correction status emerged on collective action intentions, F (1, 76) = 8.06, p = .006, partial ε^2 = .08. Participants with corrected vision (and thus excluded from the job based on the eligibility criterion) reported significantly higher collective action intentions (M = 3.55, SD = 1.66) than did participants with uncorrected vision who were not excluded based on the criterion (M = 2.45, SD = 1.45). No significant interaction emerged between the legitimacy focus manipulation and vision status group, F (2, 76) = 0.12, p = .889, partial ε^2 = .02.

Discussion

Study 2 indicates that individuals who encounter differential treatment without deliberately focusing on its rationale are likely to interpret it as fair and appropriate, in a way entirely consistent with those who explicitly focus on reasons for the legitimacy of the treatment. In contrast, individuals who explicitly examine the illegitimate basis of the differential treatment perceive it to be less legitimate. Taken together, these results replicate the findings from Study 1.

Study 2 also extends the first study by examining levels of felt anger about the differential treatment and willingness to take action against it. Compared to the baseline control condition and those who focus on the legitimacy of the exclusion, individuals who focus on the illegitimate basis of the exclusion feel angrier, and are more willing to take collective action to challenge the criterion. These findings are consistent with research that has manipulated legitimacy of group status: people are more accepting of their group's low-status position when it is legitimate rather

than illegitimate (Ellemers, Wilke, & van Kippenberg, 1993), and show less bias towards other groups (Hornsey, Spears, Cremers, & Hogg, 2003). The results provide additional evidence for the role of such cues in the development of political consciousness regarding group-based discrimination.

As in Study 1, participants' potential exclusion based on the criterion did not impact their perceptions of legitimacy or felt anger. However there was an effect of group status on collective action intentions: participants with corrected vision (i.e., who would be excluded under the criterion) reported stronger intentions to challenge the exclusion, compared to participants with uncorrected vision (i.e., who would not be excluded under the criterion). It is unclear why it was only on this dependent measure that group status showed a main effect. However, it is important to note that group status did not interact with the legitimacy focus manipulation; participants' pattern of responses across the different legitimacy focus conditions thus did not vary based on their likelihood of being excluded.

General Discussion

The present research examined individuals' responses to the use of age 35 (Study 1) and vision correction status (Study 2) as categorical criteria to determine individuals' eligibility for employment. Both cases of differential treatment reflect novel and less obvious forms of employment discrimination, as they involve groups that are not immediately included in broader conversations regarding societal disadvantage. This means that people do not immediately question the use of these group characteristics as exclusion criteria. Rather, as demonstrated in the two studies, individuals will be influenced by cues that underscore the (il)legitimate nature of the discrimination. More specifically, results showed that when individuals' attention was not explicitly directed to issues of legitimacy, they interpreted the discrimination to be as fair and

appropriate as they did when they had been asked to focus explicitly on the legitimate basis of the treatment. In contrast, individuals who had been instructed to focus on the illegitimate basis of the exclusion did indeed perceive it to be more illegitimate. Indeed, similar issues (e.g., the link between age and cognitive ability) were considered to arrive at the judgment of either legitimacy or illegitimacy. These legitimacy perceptions had important implications for responses to the exclusion: individuals were less likely to respond to legitimate exclusion with anger and collective action, compared to illegitimate exclusion.

The present studies add to a growing body of work on "legitimate discrimination" that has not yet been proscribed by legal or social mechanisms. Research has shown that perceived legitimacy exacerbates the negative consequences of pervasive discrimination: when an ingroup's pervasive exclusion is framed as legitimate (versus illegitimate), group members report lower group identification, decreased anger at the injustice (but increased anger at the ingroup), lower intentions to participate in collective action to challenge the group's status, and increased individual mobility intentions to leave the low-status group (Hansen & Sassenberg, 2011; Jetten, Schmitt, & Branscombe, 2013; Jetten et al., 2011). The present research extends this literature by demonstrating the negative consequences of perceiving legitimate discrimination in a different context: when one might be victimized by, or merely observes, less obvious forms of group-based exclusion.

By focusing on less obvious forms of discrimination, the present studies also contribute a novel perspective to the literatures on perceiving discrimination in the workplace (see Nier & Gaertner, 2012; Paludi et al., 2011) and more broadly (Major et al., 2002). Previous work has focused on understanding victims' and observers' responses to established forms of discrimination that are generally understood to be illegitimate (e.g., on the basis of race, gender,

or older age). However, this research says little about individuals' responses to less obvious forms of discrimination; when group-based exclusion has not already been demarcated by society as violating accepted principles of justice and fairness, will individuals perceive it to be legitimate or illegitimate? The present studies provide a first step in addressing this important issue: in the absence of explicit cues regarding potential illegitimacy, individuals tend to see less obvious forms of discrimination as fair and appropriate. Our research thus identifies the conditions in which individuals are willing to accept the status quo, even when the standard procedures violate norms of fairness by allocating outcomes on the basis of group membership (see also Crandall et al., 2002).

Our results highlight the difficulty of perceiving group-based discrimination in employment contexts. The key finding is in the baseline control condition: when participants were not instructed to focus on high or low legitimacy, they perceived the exclusion as legitimate and fair. The significance of this finding is enhanced when one considers the context in which it was documented: in the absence of demand characteristics directing participants' attention to legitimacy (i.e., the baseline control condition), individuals do not perceive such exclusion as group-based discrimination. This baseline control condition arguably represents the type of circumstances in which most individuals learn about an instance of group-based differential treatment; this, in turn, suggests that most individuals will have trouble identifying less obvious forms of discrimination in the workplace.

Individuals' difficulty in perceiving discrimination underscores the need for affirmative action programs (AAPs), which direct organizations to systematically monitor policies and practices for bias against a target group (e.g., based on race or gender), often before a complaint of discrimination is brought forward (Crosby et al., 2003). Such proactive audits explicitly direct

individuals to acknowledge group differences and to critically assess their legitimacy. Our findings suggest that such audits—which mirror the salient low legitimacy condition in the present studies—provide precisely the sort of conditions that help individuals recognize the unfairness of group-based exclusion. More generally, recognizing the illegitimate nature of discrimination sets the stage for social change to occur: research shows that perceiving intergroup inequality to be illegitimate increases individuals' feelings of anger and their willingness to take collective action (e.g., Cronin et al., 2012; Leach, Iyer, & Pederson, 2006; Iyer et al., 2007; Iyer & Ryan, 2009; for a review see Dixon, Tropp, Durrheim, and Tredoux, 2010). In addition, our findings also provide indirect evidence for the effectiveness of AAPs and other diversity programs in influencing individual attitudes (see also Barron & Hebl, 2010). The process of conducting proactive audits as part of an AAP is likely to increase individuals' awareness of the illegitimacy of group-based differential treatment.

Across our two studies, results were broadly consistent for participants who would have been excluded by the exclusion criteria and participants who would have been unaffected by the criteria. Participants' group status as potential victims or mere observers did not influence their perceptions of legitimacy or felt anger. This pattern of results suggests that the self-relevance of the exclusion criteria was not the primary determinant of individuals' responses, which is not entirely consistent with previous research documenting different perceptions of discrimination among victims and observers (e.g., Inman, 2001; Inman & Baron, 1996). However, this previous work investigated responses to established forms of discrimination (e.g., based on gender and race), which may account for the different patterns of results.

Another possible explanation for these divergent results is that the particular jobs used were not perceived as highly relevant to our participants. Perhaps individuals did not mind that

they would have been excluded by the criteria because they had little interest in specialized occupation sectors such as aviation corps officers (Study 1) or air traffic controllers (Study 2). Another possible explanation is that participants who would be victimized by the exclusion criterion protected against the threat of exclusion by employing a psychological disengagement strategy, whereby they downplayed the significance of the domain (see Major & O'Brien, 2005). To directly investigate these possibilities, future studies should employ exclusion criteria that are more directly relevant to participants, and should investigate participants' possible use of psychological disengagement strategies.

Although the self-relevance of the exclusion criteria in our studies may have been limited, they still posed an obstacle to obtaining an important outcome: paid employment. Less obvious forms of discrimination can thus have significant implications for people's material outcomes and psychological well-being, just as do more widely recognized forms of discrimination (e.g., on the basis of race or gender). What differentiates less obvious discrimination from its more easily recognized counterpart is thus not its broader impact, but rather the extent to which it has been debated and discussed in society. Less obvious forms of exclusion could thus represent emerging social problems, although they have yet to receive broad societal recognition. As such, it is important to understand how observers and potential victims alike perceive and respond to such group-based differential treatment.

An important direction for future research is to investigate the process underlying this pattern of effects: why is it difficult for individuals to recognize less obvious forms of discrimination? We propose that this phenomenon reflects individuals' default tendency to believe in a just world and to rationalize the status quo. This is consistent with the pattern of effects uncovered in both studies: responses in the baseline control condition were similar to

those in the high legitimacy condition only. Future work should investigate whether manipulations that enhance individuals' belief in a just world will strengthen their willingness to legitimize such group-based exclusion. Similarly, manipulations that heighten the belief that the status quo represents an appropriate state of affairs may also encourage the process of legitimizing group-based exclusion.

Lastly, future work should also investigate the possible boundary conditions of our effects. We noted that novel forms of group-based differential treatment have not been subject to scrutiny and debate. As such, the use of group characteristics as selection criteria is subject to a range of legitimacy appraisals under different conditions and by different individuals. However, the current research only examined two contexts of group-based exclusion. It seems feasible that other types of contexts would constrain the extent to which group-based differential treatment could be interpreted in such fluid terms. For instance, the use of a minimum age requirement in order for individuals to drive or vote represents group-based differential treatment, but this selection criterion is widely regarded as being legitimate and acceptable. In contrast, the use of age to disqualify older individuals from sedentary jobs such as clerical work would likely be seen as inappropriate and unfair. Research should explore the contexts in which individuals' legitimacy appraisals regarding group-based differential treatment might be less open to change.

Conclusions

The present research offers one of the first systematic investigations of individuals' responses to less obvious forms of discrimination, where there is little pre-existing legal or normative information to guide their responses. We have shown that individuals do not question the legitimacy of group-based exclusion, unless they are provided with explicit cues that lead them to consider why this exclusion might be unfair. This result suggests a starting point for the

development of political consciousness, whereby individuals shift in their perception of group-based discrimination from legitimate to illegitimate, and decide to challenge it.

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Footnote

1. We also conducted a series of regression analyses to assess whether the original continuous measure of age moderated the relationship between the experimental manipulation and each outcome variable. In no case did age moderate these results.

TABLE 1.

Descriptive statistics by legitimacy condition, Studies 1 and 2.

Measure	Mean (Standard Deviation)		
	Baseline Control Condition	High Legitimacy Condition	Low Legitimacy Condition
Study 1			
Perceived legitimacy	4.07_a (1.38)	4.17 (1.68)	3.45_b (1.51)
Questioned criterion	4.84_a (1.55)	4.51_a (1.92)	5.51_b (1.50)
Study 2			
Perceived legitimacy	4.86 (1.09)	4.94_a (1.21)	3.41_b (1.16)
Felt anger	2.59_a (1.18)	2.75_a (1.26)	3.60_b (1.20)
Collective action intentions	2.48_a (1.26)	2.73_a (1.58)	3.69_b (1.85)

Note. Means within each row that do not share the same subscript are significantly different at $p < .05$.

All scores are positively worded such that higher scores represent higher levels of the construct as labelled