Taking the Ambiguity Out of Subtle and Interpersonal Workplace Discrimination

Article *in* Industrial and Organizational Psychology · March 2017

DOI: 10.1017/iop.2016.106

3 authors:

Christopher K. Marshburn
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
9 PUBLICATIONS **61** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

Nicole Thurmond Harrington
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
2 PUBLICATIONS **1** CITATION
SEE PROFILE

Enrica N. Ruggs
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
30 PUBLICATIONS **320** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

Taking the Ambiguity Out of Subtle and Interpersonal Workplace Discrimination

Christopher K. Marshburn, Nicole T. Harrington, and Enrica N. Ruggs
University of North Carolina, Charlotte

In their target article, Jones, Arena, Nittrouer, Alonso, and Lindsey (2017) make a compelling argument that discrimination may be best conceptualized continuously rather than categorically with respect to dimensions of subtlety, formality, and intentionality. We agree that such a framework can help capture the multifaceted nature of discrimination. The authors note that subtle and interpersonal discrimination, in particular, are difficult to address through formal organizational policy. In the workplace, subtle and often interpersonal discrimination can be overlooked or attributed to misunderstanding and, thus, may go unpunished (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). Research demonstrates that traditionally marginalized group members (e.g., racial and ethnic minorities; women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender members) experience subtle discrimination at higher rates relative to nonoppressed group members (Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Leskinen, Huerta, & Magley, 2013). Furthermore, marginalized group members (e.g., Black Americans) are better at detecting discrimination (Nelson, Adams, & Salter, 2013). However, they may be less likely to report experiences of discrimination for fear of backlash (Kaiser & Major, 2006). Even when they do confront discrimination, it may do little to change the perpetrator's attitudes (Hyers, 2010).

Jones and colleagues acknowledge that managing discriminatory behavior in the workplace is complex and involves multiple actors. Specifically, they assert that victims, perpetrators, and allies all "play a part in the cycle of subtle discrimination and therefore [everyone] bears responsibility for addressing and remediating it in their workplace" (Jones et al., p. 71). Although research demonstrates that marginalized group members can use identity management techniques (e.g., acknowledgment and individuation) to cope with and combat workplace discrimination (for example see Singletary & Hebl, 2009), we argue that the onus to combat workplace discrimination should primarily rest on the organization. Some organizations may struggle with how to manage subtle and interpersonal discrimination given the

Christopher K. Marshburn, Department of Psychology, University of North Carolina, Charlotte; Nicole T. Harrington, Organizational Science, University of North Carolina, Charlotte; Enrica N. Ruggs, Department of Psychology, University of North Carolina, Charlotte.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Enrica N. Ruggs, Department of Psychology, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, 9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001. E-mail: eruggs@uncc.edu

difficulty in creating formalized policies that can effectively define and manage these types of negative behaviors. We propose that organizations develop processes that help managers to implement micro and informal approaches to police these forms of discrimination. Although people may report subtle discrimination to managers, these individuals may have a difficult time figuring out whether the behavior is indeed discriminatory and how to handle it appropriately (Cortina, 2008). Thus, we outline steps to help managers and organizations combat subtle and interpersonal workplace discrimination. We propose that managers must be able and willing to effectively engage in a three-step process. Specifically, managers should be able to (1) identify, (2) address, and (3) monitor subtle discrimination in order to help reduce the occurrence of behaviors that are often perceived as difficult to confront. In order for managers to properly identify subtle discrimination, organizations must ensure that the meaning and conceptualizations around what constitutes workplace discrimination is clear.

Discriminating Discrimination

Historically, workplace discrimination has roots in systematically excluding individuals based on marginalized identities. Federal laws and early affirmative action efforts relied on using marginalized identities to increase representation and access to employment for oppressed group members (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). In order to effectively redress institutional and systemic group-based inequality and counteract practices that actively excluded women and minorities, it was necessary to use policies aimed at redistributive justice—treating people differently (i.e., discriminating)—to ensure equal outcomes for everyone. Thus, the notion that *all* discrimination is problematic is mostly true; however, in this case, discrimination was viewed as necessary to rectify the historical oppression of marginalized group members.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, affirmative action enforcement by the federal government waned. Despite reduced compliance enforcement, many organizations retained policies and departments dedicated to equal employment opportunities. As a result, workplace discrimination shifted from being mostly overt and formal to being subtle and interpersonal (Ruggs, Martinez, & Hebl, 2011). Furthermore, organizations' dedication to diversity efforts, including reducing discrimination, was recast as a tool to improve organizational effectiveness rather than a moral imperative (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). Thus, the drive for attracting and retaining underrepresented and marginalized group members became divorced from the goal of remediating oppressed group members' historical disadvantage (Mor Barak, 2014). In this way, diversity became an amorphous buzzword that was all encompassing. For instance, research found that in organizations with low racial

diversity, individuals who valued antiegalitarianism expanded their definition of diversity to include nonracial diversity (i.e., occupational heterogeneity; Unzueta, Knowles, & Ho, 2012; also see Embrick, 2011). This research highlights the dangers of diversity not rooted in historical context. Another concern is that this approach to diversity may also limit organizations' ability to identify and combat workplace discrimination.

To illustrate our point, consider two scenarios. In the first, a cisgender (i.e., biological sex conforms to one's expressed gender), heterosexual, White man sees his Black coworker drinking out of a "Black Lives Matter" coffee mug. Unnerved by his coworker's mug, he reports her to his manager claiming that he feels that the work environment is hostile and unsafe for him. In the second scenario, a cisgender, queer, Black woman sees her White coworker drinking from a mug displaying a prohibition symbol over the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rainbow flag accompanied by the caption, "Ban the Flag." She takes offense to the imagery depicted on her coworker's mug and reports him to her manager claiming that she feels that the work environment is hostile and unsafe for her. Should managers consider both of these instances examples of subtle discrimination? Furthermore, should they be handled in the same way? To answer these questions, managers (and more broadly organizations) must draw from an understanding that contextualizes these seemingly ambiguous behaviors in a history of disadvantage and privilege.

Using Context To Understand Workplace Discrimination

In order for organizations to properly identify workplace discrimination, it is important that they understand it in a historical context. Research shows that knowing a social group's history of oppression is an important component for helping people identify examples of contemporary discrimination (Nelson et al., 2013). People also need sufficient motivation to guide their willingness and ability to accurately gauge which social groups experience chronic discrimination. For example, one study revealed that some White Americans believe not only that racism toward Black Americans has decreased over the years but that racism toward Whites has increased and even surpassed the level of racism against Blacks (Norton & Sommers, 2011). In this way, discrimination is reframed without regard to historical disadvantage.

Although it is possible for members of nondisadvantaged groups to experience workplace discrimination, organizations and managers must be discerning in what they consider discrimination. The best understanding of discrimination accounts for how social power and position influence different group members' experiences with discrimination (see Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Tatum, 1997). Specifically, overt and formal discrimination are often tied to a system of disadvantage for particular social groups (e.g., racism,

sexism, and heterosexism). These forms of discrimination are related to but distinguishable from interpersonal discrimination (e.g., hostility, eye aversion), which is not necessarily linked to a system that benefits a social group (see Ruggs et al., 2011). For example, male employees chronically speaking over their female coworkers is consistent with a history of women being excluded or silenced by men in the workplace. Furthermore, this type of discrimination, although subtle, perpetuates a pattern of disadvantage that women have historically faced.

This awareness is vital for accurately assessing subtle discrimination. When organizations' goals for fighting workplace discrimination are not contextualized in an understanding of historical disadvantage, they lose the ability to distinguish between employees from marginalized backgrounds facing workplace discrimination relative to those who are simply uncomfortable with confronting their own social privilege (see DiAngelo, 2011). Although it is important for organizations to be discerning in what does and does not constitute discrimination, this is not to suggest that organizations should prioritize combatting one form of discrimination over the other. We argue, rather, that understanding the links between systemic disadvantage and subtle and interpersonal discrimination will better allow organizations and managers to identify, respond to, and curb all forms of workplace discrimination. Furthermore, when workplace discrimination and diversity are understood in a historical context, organizations can produce environments that foster clarity rather than ambiguity when identifying instances of workplace discrimination.

Managing Subtle Discrimination

After organizations commit to defining subtle discrimination in a historical context, managers can be trained to effectively identify this behavior, which is important because they are often the first responders to workplace discrimination complaints. Once managers understand how to identify subtle discrimination, then they are able to move to the next step: addressing complaints of workplace discrimination.

As noted in the previous section, one reason that subtle discrimination can be difficult to combat is because it may be difficult for managers to recognize what behavior constitutes subtle discrimination. With organizational support, managers can provide clarity when instances of workplace discrimination are seemingly ambiguous. For instance, in the example of the "Black Lives Matter" mug versus the "Ban the Flag" mug, a manager who understands how context influences the nature of the discriminatory action would be well suited to address these situations. In both scenarios, a manager could first acknowledge the identities of the people in conflict (i.e., a queer, Black American and a straight, White American). Next, the manager should

identify whether or not the behavior was discriminatory. By understanding how the employees' identities share different relationships to social status and power, the managers can be better equipped in identifying what types of behaviors may indeed constitute discrimination. This can allow managers to make more informed decisions on dealing with such instances that may not be covered by organizational policies due to the subtle and/or interpersonal nature of the behavior. For example, using the illustration above, the manager may understand that "Black Lives Matter" is a call to end the systemic violence and disadvantage that Black people have historically endured. Therefore, this example is not a form of discrimination but rather an act supporting access to equal rights. In the other instance, the manager may use historical context to recognize how denigrating the LGBT flag—a symbol tied to a marginalized identity—runs counter to the organization's ideals of inclusion as it promotes a climate of hostility and exclusion that members of the LGBT community have faced.

This awareness can inform how the manager should approach the parties to outline a remediation plan. During this stage, attempting to understand the intention behind the behavior, as noted in Jones et al., may be helpful in rectifying the situation. For instance, if it becomes clear that the intention behind the behavior is purposely hostile, then the manager may take a more direct course of action. This may include providing warnings for discriminatory behavior with the potential to lead to consequences. Such plans should be developed with guidance from organizational policies that outline zero tolerance of not only overt discriminatory behaviors but subtle behaviors as well. However, if the intention behind the behavior is not purposely hostile or is unclear, then the manager may have the employees engage in alternative remediation strategies. This may include having the perpetrator engage in education training on workplace discrimination and diversity. It may also be more collaborative in nature where the target and perpetrator agree to work together to resolve the issue. Given the range of potential scenarios, managers may pursue various courses of action to address instances of workplace discrimination.

Finally, after managers address incidents of subtle discrimination, they should monitor the progress of the remediation. This includes checking in with all parties involved. For targets of the discrimination, managers should ensure that they are no longer experiencing subtle discrimination and that they feel comfortable in their work environment. For the perpetrators of discrimination, managers should verify that these individuals completed any necessary remediation interventions. Furthermore, managers should assess and assist these employees' progress toward greater awareness about the negative consequences of subtle discrimination and offer them techniques to identify and limit their own expression of subtle discrimination.

Organizations Can Do the Right Thing

Understanding subtle and interpersonal workplace discrimination in a historical context can offer great benefits for workers and organizations. This framework allows organizations to place in perspective subtle behaviors that may otherwise be ambiguous. Furthermore, by training frontline managers to understand discrimination in this context, organizations can create workplace environments where discrimination is less ambiguous, marginalized workers feel safer, and workers who may perpetrate subtle or interpersonal workplace discrimination can be educated and disciplined as needed.

It is important to note that both marginalized and nonmarginalized workers can experience workplace discrimination. However, given that research demonstrates that marginalized group members are more likely to experience subtle or interpersonal workplace discrimination (Cortina et al., 2013), we chose to highlight efforts aimed at protecting those most likely to be victimized. Furthermore, our suggested approach for understanding diversity and discrimination in the workplace can be applied to all social groups because it is rooted in understanding histories of advantage and disadvantage. Thus, it requires that organizations' analysis of workplace discrimination be intersectional—or considerate of people's multiple social identities (Crenshaw, 1991).

In sum, organizations have seen great success by embracing the economic benefits that diversity bestows. However, organizations should embrace the moral imperative to augment efforts aimed at combatting subtle discrimination, which has traditionally been perceived as difficult to sanction. This is important as subtle and interpersonal discrimination elicits negative consequences for individuals and organizations (King, Shapiro, Hebl, Singletary, & Turner, 2006). If organizations aim to consider workplace discrimination in a historical context, then managers can effectively identify and combat problematic behavior, which can lead to more inclusive environments for all employees. Thus, contextualizing discrimination will not only allow organizations to reap the same benefits they have already seen by embracing diversity but also allow them to prioritize protecting their workers from workplace discrimination in a meaningful way.

References

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2006). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Cortina, L. M. (2008). Unseen injustice: Incivility as modern discrimination in organizations. *Academy of Management Review, 33*, 55–75. doi:10.5465/AMR.2008.27745097

Cortina, L. M., Kabat-Farr, D., Leskinen, E. A., Huerta, M., & Magley, V. J. (2013). Selective incivility as modern discrimination in organizations evidence and impact. *Journal of Management*, *39*, 1579–1605. doi:10.1177/0149206311418835

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*, 1241–1299. doi:10.2307/1229039

DiAngelo, R. (2011). White fragility. *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, 3*, 54–70. Retrieved from http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/view/1027

Dovidio, J. F., & Gaertner, S. L. (2004). Aversive racism. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 36, pp. 1–52). San Diego, CA: Elsevier Academic. doi:10.1016/S0065-2601(04)36001-6

Embrick, D. G. (2011). The diversity ideology in the business world: A new oppression for a new age. *Critical Sociology, 37*, 541–556. doi:10.1177/0896920510380076

Hyers, L. L. (2010). Alternatives to silence in face-to-face encounters with everyday heterosexism: Activism on the interpersonal front. *Journal of Homosexuality, 57*, 539–565. doi:10.1080/00918361003608749

Jones, K. P., Arena, D. F., Nittrouer, C. L., Alonso, N. M., & Lindsey, A. P. (2017). Subtle discrimination in the workplace: A vicious cycle. *Industrial Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 10*(1), 51–76.

Kaiser, C. R., & Major, B. (2006). A social psychological perspective on perceiving and reporting discrimination. *Law & Social Inquiry, 31*, 801–830. doi:10.1111/j.1747-4469.2006.00036.x

Kelly, E., & Dobbin, F. (1998). How affirmative action became diversity management employer response to antidiscrimination law, 1961 to 1996. *American Behavioral Scientist, 41*, 960–984. doi:10.1177/0002764298041007008

King, E. B., Shapiro, J. R., Hebl, M. R., Singletary, S. L., & Turner, S. (2006). The stigma of obesity in customer service: A mechanism for remediation and bottom-line consequences of interpersonal discrimination. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 91*, 579–593. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.91.3.579

Mor Barak, M., E. (2014). *Managing diversity: Toward a globally inclusive workplace*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Nelson, J. C., Adams, G., & Salter, P. S. (2013). The Marley hypothesis: Denial of racism reflects ignorance of history. *Psychological Science, 24*, 213–218. doi:10.1177/0956797612451466

Norton, M. I., & Sommers, S. R. (2011). Whites see racism as a zero-sum game that they are now losing. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 6*, 215–218. doi:10.1177/1745691611406922

Ruggs, E. N., Martinez, L. R., & Hebl, M. R. (2011). How individuals and organizations can reduce interpersonal discrimination. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 5*, 29–42. doi:10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00332.x

Singletary, S. L., & Hebl, M. R. (2009). Compensatory strategies for reducing interpersonal discrimination: The effectiveness of acknowledgments, increased positivity, and individuating information. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 94*, 797–805. doi:10.1037/a0014185

Tatum, B. D. (1997). *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Unzueta, M. M., Knowles, E. D., & Ho, G. C. (2012). Diversity is what you want it to be: How social dominance motives affect construals of diversity. *Psychological Science, 23*, 303–309. doi:10.1177/0956797611426727