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### **Subtle Discrimination in the Workplace: Individual-Level Factors and Processes**

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### **Abstract and Keywords**

Despite the laws that protect employee rights, discrimination still persists in the workplace. This chapter examines individual-level factors that may influence subtle discrimination in the workplace. More specifically, it examines how social categories tend to perpetuate the use of stereotypes and reviews contemporary theories of subtle prejudice and discrimination. In addition, the chapter divides discrimination in the workplace along two dimensions, gateways and pathways, and examines the extent to which stereotypes, prejudice, and social categorization processes influence subtle discrimination at these critical junctures in an individual's career. Finally, it considers the extent to which individual differences may influence a person's propensity toward prejudice and discrimination.

Keywords: discrimination, stereotype, prejudice, social, categorization, gateway, pathway, workplace

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Over 50 years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and proclaimed, "I Have a Dream." His speech was one of the most influential of the 20th century and called for an end to discrimination in the United States. Since that time, laws that endorse brazen discrimination have mostly been erased from the books of local, state, and federal legislatures, and the apparent barriers that prevent equal access to schooling, housing, and career opportunities have been demolished. Nevertheless, one would be remiss not to recognize that discrimination still permeates our society and influences the lives of US workers. Racial minorities still have far fewer career opportunities than do Whites (e.g., Heslin, Bell, & Fletcher, 2012; Reskin, 2012), women earn only 78 cents for each dollar earned by men (DeNavas-Walt & Procter, 2014), individuals are still denied jobs based on religious affiliation (e.g., Chi-Chen & Kleiner, 2001; Ghumman, Ryan, Barclay, & Markel, 2013; E. B. King & Ahmad, 2010), LGBT individuals are continuing to fight for employment rights and benefits (e.g., Denissen & Saguy, 2014; Ryniker, 2008), and ageism remains a critical factor in hiring and promotion decisions within many organizations (e.g., Ahmed, Andersson, & Hammarstedt, 2012; J. B. James, McKechnie, Swanberg, & Besen, 2013; Roscigno, Mong, Byron, & Tester, 2007). Discrimination is still present in work environments and, thus, continues to warrant scholarly consideration.

In the most simplistic terms, discrimination refers to the unequal treatment of individuals or groups of individuals (Allport, 1954). Although most frequently considered a negative behavior, discrimination also can result in some groups being treated more favorably than others (Rosette, 2006). By definition, if one group is treated less favorably, a different group is treated in a more advantageous manner. For example, legacy applicants to universities often receive preferential treatment due to their familial ties to alumni. A potential student who indicates that her grandfather attended the university to which she is applying may have a greater likelihood of acceptance than does the applicant who does not have comparable familial connections. Although advantageous treatment is an important component of discrimination, it is generally not the focus when discriminatory behaviors are considered. There is far less uproar when discriminatory behaviors and patterns are recognized and identified as beneficial rather than as detrimental. Hence, most discrimination research focuses on its negative effects, which is also the focus of this chapter.

Discrimination can accrue at varying levels, including interpersonal (Lott & Maluso, 1995), institutional (Ward & Riveria, 2014), and cultural (J. Jones, 1997); across an array of settings, such as housing (DeSilva & Elmelech, 2012), education (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003), voting (Garrett, 2010), and criminal justice (C. Jones, 2012); and in varying forms, including blatant, covert, and subtle (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995). The focus of this chapter is individual-level predictors of subtle discrimination in the workplace. Blatant discrimination is obvious and easily documented (e.g., sexist jokes in the workplace), and covert discrimination necessitates malicious intent (e.g., purposely placing racial minorities in jobs that set them up for failure), but subtle discrimination is less obvious, even unintentional, usually examined at the interpersonal level, and is arguably the most prevalent type of discrimination in today's work environments. For

these reasons, subtle discrimination is the focus of this chapter. In addition, because much of the research on subtle discrimination in the workplace focuses on racial minorities and women, we focus heavily on these groups. In doing so, however, we do not suggest that these social groups are more important than are others. Rather, our emphasis merely reflects the trends in this area of research.

We first discuss the fundamental concepts that serve as a basis for understanding individual-level factors that may influence subtle discrimination in the workplace: *stereotypes* and *prejudice*. Second, we explore how social categories (i.e., in-groups, out-groups, subtypes, and prototypes) tend to perpetuate the use of stereotypes and the development of stereotype content and frequently provide the basis for subtle prejudice and discrimination. Third, we present contemporary theories of subtle prejudice and discrimination and examine the various mechanisms that are proposed to influence these processes. Fourth, we divide subtle discrimination in the workplace along two dimensions, gateways (evaluative decisions that provide access to the organization or a specified position) and pathways (processes that influence the degree to which a gateway is accessible), and examine the extent to which stereotypes, prejudice, and social categorization processes may influence subtle discrimination at these critical junctures. Fifth, we consider the extent to which individual beliefs, ideologies, and personal characteristics may positively and negatively relate to prejudice and discrimination.

## Fundamental Concepts: Stereotype and Prejudice

Two concepts that are particularly important for enhancing our understanding of individual-level factors that influence subtle discrimination are stereotypes and prejudice. Although there are many definitions of stereotypes, the consensus is that they are beliefs about the traits, attributes, and characteristics ascribed to various social groups (Hilton & vonHippel, 1996). Stereotypes make information processing simpler because they allow individuals to rely on stored information as opposed to evaluating each particular stimulus in the context of each new and distinct experience (Fiske, 1998). Stereotypes derive from shared beliefs that are representative of one's societal and cultural experiences (J. Jones, 1997). That is, they are socially transmitted via institutions, peers, mass media, literature, and family. Although many stereotypes are indeed inaccurate or false, those that are based on personal experiences and social observations can be considered, in part, to rely on ostensibly legitimate perceptions. Therefore, a stereotype's content may include some accurate, although flawed, assumptions and justifications. Stereotypes also can arise based on conflict (Duckitt, 1994), differing levels of power (Fiske, 1993), or distinct social roles (Eagly, 1987) or as a way of justifying social hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Whereas stereotypes represent the *cognitive* component of intergroup relations, prejudice represents the *affective* component (Fiske, 1998). Prejudice is usually marked by the emotion that is aroused when interacting with people of distinct social groups. Prejudice is a biased evaluation of a group, based on actual or perceived characteristics (Brewer & Brown, 1998). Prejudice also can be an affective response to a social group or to a single individual who is a member of that social group. For example, people may view a group of police officers as bad or view one individual officer in a particularly negative manner because she is a member of the collective police force. Although prejudice-related feelings (i.e., anxiety, fear, envy, anger, or hostility) can derive from myriad experiences, one of the more common sources of prejudice is the perception of threat. The types of threats that can elicit prejudice include threats to valued resources (Sherif, 1966), to self-preservation (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997), and to personal value systems (Crandall, 1994).

The relationship between stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination is multifaceted and complicated. For example, awareness of the content of a particular stereotype does not necessarily imply that an individual is prejudiced. Both high- and low-prejudiced individuals can be equally aware of the content of a particular stereotype (Devine, 1989). Moreover, individuals may even activate implicit stereotypes and attitudes without conscious awareness (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), and these nonconscious beliefs can unintentionally bias treatment toward social groups. For example, Kubota, Li, Bar-David, Banaji, and Phelps (2013) showed that people with higher as opposed to lower implicit racial bias toward Blacks were more likely to discriminate against Black partners than White partners in negotiations, even at the expense of their own monetary gain. Further, prejudice is not always adequately perceived. Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, and Trawalter (2005) showed that Blacks perceived high-prejudiced Whites as less prejudiced than low-prejudiced Whites, as the former group deliberately made an effort to control the outward manifestations of their feelings. Moreover, even when prejudice is adequately perceived, the negative consequences may manifest themselves in uncontrollable, nonconscious ways that are not easily observable. Research that uses physiological measures to study prejudice and discrimination has shown that individuals who even anticipate interacting with a prejudiced partner of a different race show heightened stress responses (i.e., elevated diastolic and systolic blood pressure and heart rate, and greater sympathetic activation) relative to individuals who anticipate interacting with a nonprejudiced different-race partner (Sawyer, Major, Casad, Townsend, & Mendes, 2012).

Given that stereotypes and prejudices may be implicit or explicit, controlled or uncontrolled, and that these aspects may or may not be indicative of discrimination, our goal in this chapter is not to reconcile the intricacies of these relationships but, rather, to highlight important individual-level factors related to stereotypes and prejudice that may influence subtle discrimination in organizations. To better understand the individual-level factors that are key drivers of stereotypes and prejudice, we explore the process of social

categorization and describe the types of categories (e.g., in-groups/out-groups, subtypes, prototypes) that may be relevant to subtle discrimination in the workplace.

## **Social Categorization**

Traditional categorization theory depicts how people create categories to help them to organize information and to process it more expeditiously (Rosch, 1978). Social categories contain discernable features (Crocker, Fiske, & Taylor, 1984), encapsulate imagery by people in the environment (Cantor & Mischel, 1979), and consist of members who are comparable in some way (Lakoff, 1987). Based on the principles of traditional categorization theory, social scientists suggest that people are sorted into social categories due to a compilation of shared, distinct traits and behaviors (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Members who are included do not need to interact with one another or even know each other; they are bound together simply by their common features. When these social groups are developed, people establish beliefs about the particular members. These beliefs then play an important part in the way in which people respond to and communicate with individuals from various social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

## **In-Groups and Out-Groups**

Social groups can be categorized on a host of dimensions, including those that are readily apparent or mostly visible, such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, physical ability, and those that may not be so obvious and perhaps even invisible, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, religious affiliation, and mental illness. People use these types and other types of categories to distinguish themselves as members of in-groups and out-groups. One need only look to sports teams, social clubs, volunteer organizations, neighborhood associations, religious communities, national patriotism, politics, school systems, familial ties, and work groups to see the many ways that this basic distinction permeates our everyday existence. There is probably no distinction that is more relevant to understanding stereotypes and prejudice than the categorization of social groups as in-groups and out-groups. In his now classic experiments, Henri Tajfel (1970) demonstrated how easily in-groups and out-groups can be created by seemingly arbitrary and all but meaningless differences between groups.

The content of people's stereotypic beliefs is particularly relevant for developing a comprehensive understanding of the treatment of in-groups and out-groups. Stereotype content refers to the attributes that people believe characterize or represent a particular social group. In their classic study of stereotype content, D. Katz and Braly (1933) suggested that stereotypic content leads to prejudice when people emotionally react to the social group, ascribe traits to the social group, and then evaluate those traits. They argued that racial and ethnic stereotypes were mostly negative. Subsequent replications of their study, however, have documented that the content of stereotypes has changed over time, becoming more favorable toward racial and ethnic minorities as well as more varied (Gilbert, 1951; Karlins, Coffman, & Walters, 1969; Madon et al., 2001). Similarly, stereotypes about gender roles have lessened over time (Twenge, 1997), and negative attitudes toward LGBT individuals have also weakened (Yang, 1997).

A more recent stereotype content model proposes that stereotypes are ambivalent in nature and can be captured by two dimensions, warmth and competence, that then evoke an emotional response toward a particular group (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Warmth is determined by intergroup competition, but competence is predicted by status. Social groups who are not in competition with the in-group are identified as warm, whereas those groups denoted by high status are assessed as competent. The particular attitude toward out-groups within each of the four constructed domains (high competence/high warmth; high competence/low warmth; low competence/high warmth; and low competence/low warmth) is argued to be the same as are the emotions that are provoked. For example, groups low in competence and high in warmth are deemed not capable of harming in-group members and thus evoke pity and sympathy (e.g., the elderly). Groups high in competence and high in warmth (e.g., close allies) elicit pride and admiration. Groups low in competence and low in warmth (e.g., poor Blacks) elicit

anger and resentment, whereas groups high in competence and low in warmth (e.g., Asians, Jews) are associated with envy and jealousy.

Similar to the research by D. Katz and Braly (1933), the stereotype content model makes an explicit link between stereotypes and prejudice. Although prejudice and discrimination do not necessarily follow an awareness of stereotype content (after all, merely knowing of a stereotype does not mean a corresponding endorsement; Devine & Elliot, 1995), it is the knowledge of the stereotype followed by the belief in or endorsement of the stereotype that then can lead to its activation and application toward a social group, in general, or an out-group, specifically (Kunda & Spencer, 2003).

### Subtypes and Prototypes

In addition to varying by in-group and out-group, social categories can vary by subcategories, such as subtypes and prototypes. Subtypes are categories that are subordinate to the usual superordinate social groups (e.g., race, gender, religion, age).<sup>1</sup> For example, the stereotype content model shows a clear distinction between how poor Blacks and professional Blacks are perceived. Poor Blacks are rated as having low warmth and low competence and thus elicit emotions such as anger and resentment, whereas Black professionals are perceived as having high competence and a moderate level of warmth and thus engender a level of admiration (Fiske et al., 2002).

Further, a large body of evidence shows that subtypes are quite common for gender-related categorization, as dozens of gender-related subtypes have been identified (Eckes, 1994; Vonk & Ashmore, 2003). Common subtypes include housewife, businesswoman, vixen, and feminist for women and breadwinner, stud, wimp, and workaholic for men. Gender subtypes can be grouped by familial roles, career, and sexuality, to name a few, and can be further demarcated by race. For example, common subtypes for Black women include matriarchal (strong, self-reliant); Jezebel (sexually uncontrollable), mammy (asexual domestic), welfare queen (lazy, unintelligent), and Sapphire (angry, disrespectful; Rosette, Koval, & Ma, 2015). Asian women are subtyped as dragon lady (conniving, predatory), model minority (intelligent, hard-working), lotus blossom (submissive, docile), and Suzy Wong (hypersexual, promiscuous; Rosette, Koval, et al., 2015). Hence, the extent to which a social group may experience prejudice and the corresponding type of prejudice elicited may be contingent on the subtype to which they have been categorized (Richards & Hewstone, 2001).

Similar to subtypes, prototypes evolve from categories, but, unlike subtypes, they are a typical example or standard of elements in the same category (Rosch & Mervis, 1975). In particular, a prototype corresponds to a primary disposition or essential features of the members of a category (Rosch, 1978; Smith & Medin, 1981). A person is said to be prototypical of a particular social category to the extent to which he or she matches the social category's core features. For example, the prototypical East Asian has dark hair, narrow or slanted eyes, and light or yellowish-toned skin. These characteristics help to

distinguish East Asians from non-East Asians and are said to be prototypical characteristics. That is, such characteristics provide a cognitive cue to the evaluator as to the likelihood that a target person falls into this particular category. Further, prototypicality may facilitate the ease with which a target person is evaluated negatively or positively. Using implicit measures, Livingston and Brewer (2002) found that White participants associated negative traits with a prototypical Black person (determined by physical features, such as skin color, eye color, and hair texture). Similarly, Black persons who were deemed as prototypically Black were more likely to have negative behaviors attributed to them than was a person who appeared to be less prototypically Black (Blair, Judd, Sadler, & Jenkins, 2002).

### Leadership Categorization

In organizational settings, an important prototype to consider in the context of subtle prejudice and discrimination is the leader prototype. According to leadership categorization theory (Lord, 1985; Lord, Foti, & Phillips, 1982; Lord & Maher, 1991), social perceivers compare a target person with leadership prototypes, which represent the seminal attributes of leaders. The comparison of a target person to a leader prototype is a recognition-based process (the extent to which the target is recognized as a leader). This process leads to a match when the target shares traits with the leader prototype but results in a mismatch when there is minimal or no overlap. With a match, the target individual is categorized as a leader, but, with a mismatch, the target is not categorized as a leader. As a consequence, when a match occurs, target individuals are perceived to be more prototypical leaders and are evaluated more favorably (Phillips, 1984; Phillips & Lord, 1982). Eagly and Karau (2002) proposed that these categorization processes would apply to women being successfully evaluated in the leader role and as potential leaders, and Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips (2008) used a similar paradigm when considering race.

Role congruity theory argues that the female gender role is at odds with the leader role because the communal characteristics (e.g., helpful, kind, sensitive, affectionate, sympathetic) that constitute the female gender role conflict with the agentic characteristics (e.g., aggressive, ambitious, dominant, independent, self-sufficient) that represent the leadership role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Because the female and leadership roles are considered largely incompatible, female targets are perceived as lacking leadership potential and are not easily categorized as leaders (Nye & Forsyth, 1991; Scott & Brown, 2006). Moreover, when women do occupy leader roles and engage in agentic behaviors (e.g., prototypical leader behavior), they are perceived as breaching their gender role and experience prejudice for doing so. Because agentic behaviors, such as dominance and assertiveness, are explicitly proscribed for women (Prentice & Carranza, 2002), when they try to lead in this manner, prejudice can ensue.

Rosette and colleagues (2008) considered how leadership categorization also may have racial implications. In a paradigm that they characterize as the White Standard of Leadership, they showed that being White was a prototypical attribute of leadership in US business settings. Participants were more apt to perceive that leaders were White, regardless of the base rates of the racial groups in the organization or of the type of business industry in which the leaders were housed. They demonstrated that White leaders were evaluated as being more effective and as having more leadership potential than were racial minority leaders, as being White was more consistent with the business leader prototype, and being a racial minority leader was inconsistent with this prototype. In addition, Rosette and Livingston (2012) went beyond a consideration of leader prototypes as dependent only on race or only on gender to consider how social perceivers may use the intersection of both race and gender to recognize and categorize leadership. They showed that race (being White), gender (being male), and performance (performing successfully) were all consistent, leading to the most favorable evaluations for successful White men. They also showed that Black women who performed unsuccessfully were evaluated the most negatively.

In short, social categorization processes can pave the way for stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Once various types of social categories are formed and stereotypes are established, prejudice toward social groups follows, and subtle discrimination may ensue. In the next section, we focus on some contemporary theories of prejudice that have been developed to explain how subtle prejudice may lead to subtle discrimination.

## Contemporary Theories of Prejudice and Discrimination

Numerous theoretical perspectives, from scientific to evolutionary, have been proposed to explain why people exhibit prejudice and discrimination (for reviews see Duckitt, 1994; Whitley & Kite, 2006). In this section, we review recent theories that focus on explaining the persistence of subtle prejudices and discrimination in the United States. Although equality is purported to be the standard in the United States, negative stereotypes persist, and Americans are constantly exposed to the negative emotions and reactions on which the negative stereotypes are based. These negative emotions can then form the basis of subtle prejudice, prejudices that can be assessed indirectly but that people are not aware of or do not readily acknowledge. It is the attempt to understand and explain these subtle types of prejudices and how they influence subtle discrimination, unequal treatment that is less apparent than blatant discrimination, that is at the core of contemporary theories of prejudice and discrimination. Many of these current theories were developed to examine anti-Black prejudice and bias against women, and this section reflects that focus.

## **Symbolic Racism**

Symbolic racism (or prejudice) is a systemic set of negative beliefs about Black people in the United States that is associated with the broad social category of Blacks as opposed to a singular experience or a distinct individual (Sears, 1988). These beliefs are driven by the notion that (1) racial discrimination is a thing of the past, (2) Blacks are morally inferior to Whites, and (3) Blacks disregard conventional White American values, such as hard work, self-determination, and autonomy. According to the symbolic theory of racism, these beliefs can cause people to discriminate by opposing social policies designed to promote equality and then to rationalize their behavior as preservation of fairness, as Whites are more deserving of varying resources than are Blacks (Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sears & Henry, 2003; Tarman & Sears, 2005).

## **Aversive Racism**

Aversive racism (or prejudice) is comparable to the underlying structure from which symbolic racism derives, as the people who engage in this subtle prejudice maintain a purported norm of equality and egalitarianism (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Aversive racists, however, diverge from symbolic racists because aversive racists will frequently espouse support for social policies that are put into place to rectify inequity and inequality, such as affirmative action programs. Another important factor that distinguishes them from symbolic racists is that, due to their egalitarian beliefs, they are strongly motivated to view themselves as nonprejudiced. Nonetheless, according to the theoretical framework, White people who ascribe (implicitly) to aversive racism prefer to avoid interaction with other racial and ethnic groups because the contact arouses negative emotions and heightened feelings of discomfort. The negative feelings that accompany the discomfort can manifest themselves in behaviors and discriminatory decisions that may ultimately disadvantage racial and ethnic minorities, resulting in subtle discrimination (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Saucier, Miller, & Doucet, 2005).

## **Ambivalent Prejudice**

Similar to the two aforementioned theories of prejudice, ambivalent prejudice is predicated on an inherent belief in equality. In contrast to symbolic and aversive prejudice, the theory of ambivalent prejudice explicitly acknowledges that not all stereotypes are negative but, rather, that some stereotypes about racial groups also can be positive (I. Katz & Haas, 1988). When people become aware of these conflicting prejudices about an out-group, they then experience cognitive dissonance, which is stress or anxiety experienced by someone who holds competing beliefs that are fundamentally at odds with each other (Festinger, 1957). One set of values is categorized as individualism, which is comparable to symbolic racism, as it emphasizes hard work, personal responsibility, and autonomy. Another set of values, however, centers on

humanitarianism-type virtues, such as helping those in need. The humanitarianism focus indirectly acknowledges that Blacks are systematically disadvantaged in the United States and that sometimes their subordinated state is not self-inflicted. The dissonance experienced due to these competing values can cause Whites to exhibit positive or negative behaviors toward Blacks. The valence of the behavior is contingent on the circumstance (McConahay, 1983).

### **Ambivalent Sexism**

The consideration of ambivalent prejudice is not limited to the study of racial groups. It also has been extended to gender differences. Ambivalent sexism posits that prejudice toward women can be divided into two types: hostile prejudice and benevolent prejudice (Glick & Fiske, 1997). Hostile prejudice is conventional in that it is expressed in terms of negative beliefs and negative emotional responses toward women (e.g., women are incompetent, overly emotional). Benevolent prejudice represents attitudes that, on the surface, appear positive (e.g., women should be cherished and possess a purity quality that men do not) but are actually destructive to the advancement of women and, ultimately, have the same absolute outcome of discrimination toward women as does hostile prejudice. Hostile sexism predictably leads to prejudice toward the career woman subtype, whereas benevolent sexism can lead to a less apparent type of prejudice toward the homemaker subtype (Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner, & Zhu, 1997).

### **Status Incongruity Hypothesis**

The status incongruity hypothesis (SIH) offers another route by which women will incur prejudice. According to this hypothesis (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012), men are inextricably linked to high status, whereas women are generally seen as of lower status. The theory proffers that women who exhibit dominance are status incongruent because such portrayals are proscribed for women but not for men (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Women ought not display behaviors that convey dominance because such behaviors are high in status and incongruent with the gender hierarchy. Because motives to maintain functioning social hierarchies are generally high (Jost & Banaji, 1994), people may inherently oppose women who are perceived as dominant. Hence, motivational factors may result in negative perceptions of dominant women that may, in turn, result in prejudice and discrimination. The SIH also contends that just as dominance is proscribed for women, behaviors that constitute weakness are proscribed for men (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). When men exhibit behaviors that convey weakness, the behavioral displays are perceived as status incongruent and can result in negative evaluations. Indeed, existing studies show that men are evaluated negatively when exhibiting behaviors or displaying traits that may be interpreted as weak (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Rosette, Lebel, & Mueller, 2015; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004).

A common theme among the racial theories of subtle prejudice is an ostensible promotion of equality. That is, in contrast to the early studies by D. Katz and Braly (1933) in which individuals explicitly supported prejudices through the endorsement of negative stereotypes toward racial and ethnic minorities, those with symbolic, aversive, or ambivalent prejudices abhor inequality. Because blatant prejudices are no longer accepted, they are motivated to view themselves as nonprejudiced. Hence, the road from prejudice to racial discrimination is frequently tenuous and less obvious than it may have been in the past. However, the theories of gender prejudice are not predicated on equality at all but, instead, are founded on the very idea that men are superior to women or have higher status than women, both of which can lead to subtle gender discrimination. Next, we consider the numerous ways in which subtle discrimination derived from subtle prejudices toward social groups based on race, gender, and other social categories may occur in the workplace.

## **Subtle Discrimination in the Workplace**

An extensive amount of research has provided evidence of how stereotypes, prejudice, and corresponding categorization processes can result in subtle discrimination in the workplace. A useful way of organizing this enormous amount of research is by distinguishing subtle discrimination that occurs at “gateways” from subtle discrimination that derives from “pathways” (Chugh & Brief, 2008; Milkman, Akinola, & Chugh, 2012). Gateways refer to opportunities in which a “yes” or “no” decision is made in the employment process, whereas pathways refer to processes that influence the extent to which one even has access to a specified gateway.

### **Subtle Discrimination at Gateways**

A critical feature of gateways is that they offer access to the organization or to a specified position in the organizational hierarchy. Gateway opportunities are evaluative in nature and have significant implications for the organization and the decision-maker. Gateway decisions provide a unique context to demonstrate how subtle prejudices can influence perceptions of target characteristics that then influence the extent to which individuals gain access to organizations (e.g., hiring) and attain beneficial resources within the organization (e.g., promotion). Hiring and promotion audit studies are especially insightful, as they highlight how individuals are evaluated in stereotypical and prejudiced ways in the absence of individuating information.

### Hiring

Numerous studies have shown that stereotypes and prejudices can influence subtle discrimination in organizational settings. In a seminal audit study on racial discrimination in labor markets, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) demonstrated that White candidates who applied for jobs in Boston and Chicago received a 50% higher interview callback rate than did identically qualified Black candidates. The researchers responded to help-wanted ads in newspapers in the target cities using fictitious resumes in which they varied the perceived race of the name such that each resume was assigned either a White sounding name (e.g., Emily, Greg) or a Black sounding name (e.g., Lakisha, Jamal). The results indicated significant discrimination against Black names, and the discrimination was shown to be uniform across occupations and industries. Using a similar methodology, but employing trained testers to apply for entry-level jobs, Pager, Western, and Bonikowski (2009) found that Black and Latino job applicants who were matched with White job applicants on demographic characteristics and interpersonal skills were half as likely to receive a callback or job offer. Moreover, Black and Latino applicants with no prison records and clean backgrounds fared no better than White applicants recently released from prison.

This evidence of subtle discrimination in hiring extends beyond race to other social categories, including gender, obesity, sexual orientation, and pregnancy. Women who apply for jobs in high-priced restaurants are less likely to receive interviews and job offers than are men (Neumark, Bank, & VanNort, 1996). Openly gay men are 40% less likely than are equally qualified heterosexual men to be invited to interview, particularly for jobs that emphasize the importance of stereotypically male traits (e.g., aggressiveness, assertiveness, decisiveness; Tilcsik, 2011). Further, pregnant women experience more interpersonal hostility from hiring managers than do nonpregnant women (Morgan, Walker, Hebl, & King, 2013), overweight individuals are rated as less employable than are average-weight individuals (Agerstrom & Rooth, 2011; Grant & Mizzi, 2014), and there is significant ageism in particular labor markets such that younger applicants are more likely to receive callbacks from employers than are older applicants (Ahmed et al., 2012).

### Promotions

Subtle discrimination can occur once individuals enter firms and attempt to ascend to higher ranks. There is evidence that, in promotion decisions and performance evaluations, racial minorities and women are perceived less favorably than are Whites and males, respectively. An examination of the promotion potential in a racially and gender diverse sample of 1,268 professional and managerial employees revealed that females were rated lower than were males and that Asians and Blacks were rated lower than were Whites, when controlling for characteristics that included age, education, tenure, salary grade, functional area, and satisfaction with career support (Landau, 1995). Further, less authority is given to women (Lyness & Thompson, 1997; Reskin & Ross, 1995) and women are promoted less frequently than are their male counterparts (Lyness & Judiesch, 1999; Yap & Konrad, 2009). Additionally, archival, qualitative, and

survey studies have revealed that, relative to White managers, racial minorities and women are treated less favorably in promotion processes, which can dramatically influence career outcomes (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Olson & Becker, 1983; Yap & Konrad, 2009).

The presumed mechanism underlying the subtle discrimination that occurs in gateway processes, such as hiring and promotion, is that stereotypes and subtle prejudice can influence decision-makers' perceptions of the target's (e.g., job applicant's) competence, which can exacerbate or minimize subtle discrimination. Among these are stereotypes about intelligence, work ethic, English language proficiency, and education for racial minorities; rationality, competence, and performance for women; self-control and greed for the overweight; and the assumed lack of traits that are stereotypically ascribed to males, including aggressiveness, assertiveness, and even decisiveness, for homosexuals. Taken together, this large and growing body of research offers robust empirical evidence that subtle prejudice that results in subtle discrimination can occur at gateways in the workplace. It is important to note, however, that the experiences that lead up to gateways and that follow entry at gateways also provide opportunities for subtle discrimination to manifest itself. We therefore turn to research that examines how and why subtle prejudices that facilitate subtle discrimination can occur along pathways that precede gateways.

### Subtle Discrimination Along Pathways

Pathways refer to the set of processes that influence whether one is given access to a gateway (Chugh & Brief, 2008; Milkman et al., 2012). A key feature of pathway processes is that they are mostly social in nature and thus are dependent on the successful development of interpersonal relationships. For instance, when seeking a promotion (i.e., along the pathway to a promotion), an individual needs to know the promotion criteria, have a clear understanding of how he or she is performing relative to those criteria, get feedback on ways to strengthen his or her performance, and receive input from key decision-makers about potential pitfalls. Thus, although gateway discrimination focuses mainly on how subtle prejudices can influence perceptions of target characteristics, pathway characteristics emphasize the social context in which the target may find him or herself. Because pathway processes are less structured and frequently lack clear, discrete time frames, they can produce a context in which subtle prejudices and discrimination can thrive. Some examples of pathway processes include access to social networks, guidance from mentors and sponsors, and feedback from those with whom one is working.

## **Social Networks**

Given that pathway processes are predominantly relational in nature, one obvious aspect of the organization that may be susceptible to subtle prejudice and, consequently, subtle discrimination is in the formation of social networks between individuals. Informal networks are a critical component for career success because they facilitate one's ability to get work done by providing instrumental resources (e.g., advice, sponsorship) as well as socioemotional resources (e.g., friendship; Brass, 1985; Burt, 1992; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 1998; Podolny & Baron, 1997). However, social categorization processes that lead individuals to prefer in-group members relative to out-group members can create differences in the nature of social network ties across individuals, depending on the social category to which they belong. These differential network structures can create inequality in organizations (Ibarra, 1992, 1995, 1997; Seidel, Polzer, & Stewart, 2000).

Ibarra (1992) demonstrated compelling evidence of this concept in a study of men's and women's interaction patterns in an advertising firm. She tested the hypothesis that gender differences in homophily, the tendency to interact with those who share a similar identity or organizational group affiliation with oneself (e.g., McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Rogers & Kincaid, 1981), create and reinforce gender inequality in organizations. Specifically, in her network analytic study she found that men tended to have strong homophilous ties across both psychosocial and instrumental networks (Ibarra, 1992). In contrast, women obtained more psychosocial support from network ties to other women and instrumental support from network ties to men. Further, greater benefits accrued to men from these differing network structures than to women, and men appeared to benefit more from similar individual and positional resources as well as from homophilous relationships relative to women. These findings imply that, along pathways to gateway opportunities, men and women can have very different experiences and outcomes. These differing experiences can stem from subtle prejudices that lead individuals to feel more comfortable interacting with those with whom they share group membership (in this case, gender), but this preference can have negative repercussions, benefiting some groups relative to others. While it is unclear from this work whether the differing network structures between men and women are the result of discriminatory behavior against women in the formation of social networks, the key implication of this research is that network mechanisms such as homophily can create conditions that increase the likelihood that subtle discrimination may occur.

Not only do women's network structures differ from men's, but the network structures and the benefits of these structures for racial minority managers differ from those of White managers (Ibarra, 1995). An investigation of the informal networks of racial minority and White managers in four Fortune 500 companies found that Black, Hispanic, and Asian managers had fewer intimate network relationships and more racially heterogeneous ties than did their White counterparts (Ibarra, 1995). Further, the composition of the network ties had implications for advancement potential for racial minorities such that high-potential minorities tended to have a greater balance between cross-race and same-race contacts, while those with less advancement potential tended to

have networks with more White ties. In addition, high-potential racial minorities had a wider set of contacts outside of their group, fewer high-status ties, and less overlap between networks that fulfilled psychosocial functions and those that fulfilled purely instrumental functions.

Again, in the case of racial minorities, we see differences in network structures that have the potential to create conditions that increase the likelihood that subtle discrimination may occur along pathways. This is not surprising, given the large body of research that indicates that cross-race interactions can engender feelings of anxiety and discomfort relative to same-race interactions (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Plant & Devine, 2003; Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Toosi, Babbitt, Ambady, & Sommers, 2012), which presumably influences with whom racial minorities choose to interact in organizational settings. Further, because experiences with prejudice can magnify a racial minority group member's perception of threat in his or her environment and heighten vigilance to signs of prejudice and discrimination (Allport, 1954; Barrett & Swim, 1998), the individual may be more sensitive to the race of the contacts that develop. These factors, combined with the propensity for homophily among minorities' White counterparts, can create inequality in career advancement opportunities between racial minority and majority group members.

### **Mentorship and Coaching**

A recent field experiment set in academia of over 6,500 professors at top US universities offers evidence of subtle prejudice and discrimination when individuals seek encouragement and mentorship. Milkman and colleagues (2012) hypothesized that subtle discrimination would appear at the informal pathway that precedes entry to academia and would vary by discipline and university as a function of faculty representation and pay. The researchers tested this hypothesis by sending e-mails identical in content to professors from fictional prospective students who sought to discuss research opportunities prior to applying to a doctoral program. They varied the names of students to signal gender and race (Caucasian, Black, Hispanic, Indian, and Chinese). The researchers found that faculty ignored requests from women and racial minorities, collectively, at a higher rate than requests from Caucasian males, particularly in higher paying disciplines and private institutions. Moreover, the researchers observed no benefits to women for contacting female faculty, consistent with prior research (Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman, 2012), and only Chinese students experienced significant benefits from contacting same-race faculty, while other groups did not benefit at all. These findings suggest that negative stereotypes and prejudices (e.g., work ethic for Black prospects, competence for women prospects, English fluency for Chinese and Indian prospects) shaped faculty members' responsiveness to the meeting requests. This research highlights that subtle discrimination in the form of differential treatment when seeking mentorship can be particularly harmful for women and racial minorities.

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In addition to academia, pathway discrimination is prevalent in other organizational contexts. Blacks and Hispanics who make preapplication mortgage inquiries receive less coaching, are told about fewer products, and are denied critical financing information relative to Whites (Turner, Ross, Galster, & Yinger, 2002). In addition, Black managers are thought to receive less psychosocial support along pathways from their supervisors than do their White peers, which affects career progression (E. H. James, 2000). Likewise, relative to their male counterparts, female managers receive less sponsorship along pathways, which affects promotion rates (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010; McGinn & Milkman, 2013). Thus, women and racial minorities are at a disadvantage in terms of the mentorship that they receive relative to males and Whites, respectively, along pathways that lead to gateways.

### Feedback

One critical component of achieving success at a gateway is receiving feedback about performance from mentors and others along pathways (Podolny & Baron, 1997). Yet, as with sponsorship, mentorship, and social network development, there is evidence that subtle prejudices toward target characteristics can influence whether inequalities between social groups exist in feedback processes. While the majority of this research has been conducted in the laboratory and focuses on differences in feedback that compares racial minorities to Whites, given that the subtle discrimination effects we highlight rely on stereotyping and prejudice, we would expect to see similar treatment of any social category for which stereotypes about performance exist. We next turn to this evidence of subtle discrimination in feedback processes for racial minorities relative to Whites.

In research that examined feedback processes among peers, Harber (1998) tested the hypothesis that White peers give more lenient feedback to Blacks relative to Whites. In two studies, the race of the feedback target was manipulated such that White undergraduates were led to believe that they were giving feedback on essays about violence on TV and interest in the environment to either a White or Black fellow student. An examination of the written editorial feedback demonstrated that feedback was more lenient to supposedly Black feedback recipients relative to White recipients (Harber, 1998). This differential feedback extends to asymmetrical relationships. There is evidence that teacher-trainees who believe that they are giving feedback to Black versus White students show greater leniency in their evaluations of written essays (Harber, Stafford, & Kennedy, 2010), and academic student advisors are less likely to give warnings of course load difficulty to Black students as compared with White students (Crosby & Monin, 2007). It is also the case that, when lower criteria of success are set by evaluators for stigmatized relative to nonstigmatized students, the stigmatized students' average work is viewed more positively than the same caliber work completed by White students (Biernat & Manis, 1994; Croft & Schmader, 2012).

While it may appear counterintuitive that feedback is more *positive* to minorities, as negative stereotypes about the abilities and competence of minorities relative to Whites would suggest that feedback should be more *negative*, this positivity bias has been found to stem from evaluators' desires to appear egalitarian (Harber et al., 2010), their motivation to control their appearance of prejudice (Croft & Schmader, 2012), and their potential fear that overly negative feedback could reduce engagement and lead to distrust among racial minority students (Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999). Ironically, this praise and positivity in the pathway process of feedback giving can hinder racial minorities from learning and improving their performance, which can result in differential outcomes at gateways.

It is also important to note the physiological responses that can be engendered during pathway feedback processes for racial minorities and majority group members, as these responses can affect subsequent performance. In a study that examined the consequences of discrimination, Mendes, Major, McCoy, and Blascovich (2008) measured

the cardiovascular reactivity of both Black and White individuals who had been instructed to give a speech, after which they received unambiguously negative or positive social feedback from either a same-race (White-White; Black-Black) or a different-race (White-Black) partner. Not only were participants who received negative feedback from an out-group member more likely to attribute this feedback to racial discrimination but also, in a subsequent interaction with the feedback giver, participants who received negative feedback from an out-group member exhibited anger and strong cardiac reactions, consistent with avoidance motivation.

In contrast, receiving positive feedback from an out-group member produced a more nuanced picture. White participants who received positive feedback from Black feedback givers experienced an increase in self-reported positive emotion and exhibited adaptive physiological responses, while Black participants who received positive feedback from White partners showed behavioral signs of vigilance and exhibited maladaptive cardiovascular responses. Additionally, an examination of performance on a subsequent cooperative word-finding task indicated that those who experienced maladaptive physiological responses performed worse on the task. Specifically, Black participants paired with White feedback givers performed worse than did White participants paired with Black feedback givers. Importantly, these findings indicate that receiving negative feedback in intergroup contexts can have negative repercussions. Both majority group members (in this case, Whites) and minority group members (in this case, Blacks) were angered when receiving negative feedback from a different-race relative to a same-race other. But, ironically, even receiving positive feedback had a negative effect, engendering maladaptive physiological reactivity and impaired performance for racial minorities. The performance decrements that can ensue just from receiving feedback from a dissimilar other can potentially perpetuate stereotypes that fuel inequality.

It is clear from the research presented in this section that stereotypes, prejudice, and accompanying categorization processes can result in differential treatment for some groups relative to others. Moreover, it should be somewhat obvious that the identified disparate treatment may be unintentional, even nonconscious, and hence, subtle rather than blatant or covert in nature. One's beliefs about the traits of certain groups, coupled with the affective and physiological reactions that can ensue when interacting with members of different social groups, can shape relational patterns in organizations, fostering subtle discriminatory behavior. Success along pathways can hinge on strong interpersonal relationships, robust social networks, mentoring and coaching, and accurate and constructive feedback, and these factors can dictate whether an individual even reaches a gateway or an opportunity for advancement. We have highlighted research that shows that racial minorities and women tend to have network structures that differ from White men and that do not accrue the same benefits. Racial minorities and women relative to White men receive less mentorship and coaching and tend to receive more lenient feedback that can hinder them from developing professionally.

Moreover, it is prejudice and stereotypes, be they based on race, gender, age, weight, sexual orientation, or other salient characteristics, that then can influence outcomes at gateways. The differential treatment for minorities, women, and stigmatized individuals relative to White males that has been demonstrated in numerous research paradigms at the critical gateways of hiring and promotion is consistent with statistics that highlight the paucity of racial minorities, women, and LGBT individuals, as well as many other groups in organizations, and suggests that subtle discrimination remains prevalent in contemporary organizations. We would be negligent, however, to not recognize that some people are more susceptible to prejudice and discrimination than are others. In the next section, we consider the beliefs and personality characteristics of those individuals who may be more inclined than others to become prejudiced and thus exhibit discriminatory behavior in the workplace.

## Individual Differences

Peoples' propensity toward prejudice and discrimination is not universal but, instead, is contingent on an array of individual factors, such as personality, belief systems, values, and other personal characteristics. We first explore some individual differences that are likely to positively correlate with prejudice and increase the likelihood of subtle discrimination occurring: right wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and conservatism. Then, we consider some individual-level factors that may weaken expressions of prejudice and dampen subtle discrimination: empathy, egalitarianism, and privilege recognition.

### Right Wing Authoritarianism

Right wing authoritarianism (RWA) encompasses three distinct characteristics (1) a high degree of willingness to submit to authorities who are perceived as legitimate (authoritarian submission), (2) hostility directed toward people who do not adhere to authority (authoritarian aggression), and (3) a high adherence toward societal norms and traditions (conventionalism; Altemeyer, 1981). Right wing authoritarianism represents a more fine-grained consideration of authoritarian personality (an unwavering obedience to authority), which was introduced by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) to explain perplexing events that pertained to the Holocaust. Individuals with high RWA have been shown to be prejudiced toward an array of differing social groups ranging from Native Americans (Altemeyer, 1998) to feminists (Altemeyer, 1998) to obese individuals (Crandall, 1994). In addition, people with high RWA tend to adhere to the same beliefs about out-groups as do authority figures, and these beliefs have been shown to result in discriminatory behavior (Petersen & Dietz, 2000).

## **Social Dominance Orientation**

Social dominance orientation (SDO) pertains to one's preference for inequality between social groups and thus represents "the desire for generalized, hierarchical relationships between social groups, and in-group dominance over out-groups" (Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1994, p. 999). Also, SDO has been shown to strongly correlate with measures of racism toward Blacks and Arabs, sexism, and cultural elitism (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Moreover, organizational research on SDO has shown positive relationships between SDO and (1) perceptions of employees of color as having low competence and low potential for career advancement (Aquino, Stewart, & Reed, 2005) and (2) a propensity to discriminate against high-performing individuals from subordinate racial and gender groups "even when doing so would adversely affect their team's performance and ultimately harm their chance for a reward" (Umphress, Simmons, Boswella, & Triana, 2008, p. 991). The research suggests that individuals with a high SDO may be more susceptible to subtle discrimination and engage in discriminatory behaviors; in contrast, individuals with a lower SDO will have a lower tolerance for the disparate treatment of various social groups. For example, Rosette, Carton, Bowes-Sperry, and Hewlin (2013) showed that individuals with a high SDO were more likely to remain silent when overhearing racial slurs in work settings, whereas those with a low SDO were more likely to speak out when such disparate treatment was observed.

## **Conservatism**

Conservatism, a political orientation that promotes the perception of traditional institutions and cultures, also may influence subtle prejudice and discrimination. The endorsement of conservative values and beliefs has been shown to positively correlate with racial and ethnic prejudice (Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996) and prejudice toward homosexuality (Morrison & Morrison, 2002). Lambert and Chasteen (1997) believe that heightened prejudice occurs among conservatives because they are more likely to blame the victim for their circumstances than are liberals. For example, Blacks are perceived as being responsible for their own economic disadvantage due to a poor work ethic. In a field setting, conservatives were less likely than liberals to help Black rather than White victims in apparent need of assistance (Gaertner, 1975).

## **Empathy**

Empathy, "an other-oriented emotional response congruent with another's perceived welfare" (Batson et al., 1997; p. 105), has been shown to negatively correlate with prejudice (M. E. Johnson, Brems, & Alford-Keating, 1997) and enhance the likelihood of prosocial behaviors (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). In a meta-analysis that included more than 500 studies, Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) showed that, in addition to increased knowledge about the out-group and decreased anxiety, feelings of empathy mediated the relationship

between intergroup contact and weakened feelings of prejudice. One of the ways that empathy engenders lowered prejudice is through perspective taking. The purposeful consideration of another's point of view can induce an empathic concern that may then reduce subtle prejudice. For example, Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000) showed that perspective-taking reduced bias toward and increased positive evaluations of the elderly.

### **Egalitarianism**

Egalitarianism is a belief system that emphasizes equality and equal treatment regardless of the social group to which one belongs. Individuals with high egalitarian beliefs are purported to have fewer endorsements of prejudice toward Blacks, obese individuals, and homosexuals (Biernat, Vescio, Theno, & Crandall, 1996). In addition, anti-egalitarianism has been shown to be associated with greater racism (Sidanius, 1993). People with high egalitarian beliefs are less likely to activate stereotypes about out-groups (Moskowitz, Gollwitzer, Wasel, & Schaal, 1999) and less likely to discriminate (D. W. King & King, 1983).

### **Privilege Recognition**

Privilege recognition is the degree to which people acknowledge unearned privilege, advantages bestowed on individuals and organizational members based on their ascribed status (e.g., gender, family lineage) as opposed to their achieved status (occupation, education; Rosette, 2006). Privilege recognition can influence the extent to which individuals exhibit prejudice toward out-groups (A. Johnson, 2001; Wildman, 1996). When privilege is acknowledged by those who benefit from it, derogation toward out-groups has been shown to decrease (Rosette & Koval, 2016). Privilege recognition is important because it has been shown to enhance support for policies aimed at mitigating discrimination (Iyer, Colin, & Crosby, 2003; Lowery, Chow, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2012).

The individual differences and ideologies discussed here are by no means an exhaustive list of those factors that may influence a person's propensity toward prejudice and discrimination. Moreover, these differences do not only impact subtle discrimination but also may influence discrimination that is blatant and covert. This discussion of individual differences simply highlights some factors most prominently considered in traditional (e.g., RWA, SDO) and burgeoning research (e.g., privilege recognition) on prejudice and discrimination. In addition, it is highly important to consider the complexities in the relationship between the concepts considered here and subtle prejudice and discrimination. For example, a high score on RWA does not mean that a person is prejudiced. Similarly, a low score on SDO does not mean that a person is without prejudice.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a review of certain individual-level factors and processes that influence subtle discrimination in the workplace. We have considered how social categorization can enhance the use of stereotypes and prejudice and have highlighted the manner in which contemporary theories propose that these processes can influence subtle discrimination. We have also shown how subtle discrimination can manifest along pathways and at gateways in the organization. In addition, we have emphasized the extent to which individual differences and beliefs can facilitate or attenuate these processes. Taken together, much of this research paints a grim picture of the perpetuation of discrimination in work settings. Nevertheless, we are hopeful that, through an enhanced understanding of these processes and earnest efforts to understand each others' perspectives, we can indeed one day truly realize Dr. King's dream that people are not evaluated merely by the social categories to which they belong but, instead, are valued for their individual strengths and talents.

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**Notes:**

(<sup>1</sup>) Richards and Hewstone (2001) distinguish subtyping, a sectioning off of atypical individuals, from subgrouping, an inclusion of distinct members in the superordinate group. Such differentiations, they argue, are important for understanding stereotype change.

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