Casting a Wider Net: Recommendations for the Study of Broad Discrimination Experiences

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> In the end, antiblack, antifemale, and all forms of discrimination are equivalent to the same thing—antihumanism.
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> –Shirley Chisholm (The first African American woman elected to Congress)

Ruggs et al. (2013) have provided an indispensable wake-up call to the organizational sciences as they argue that the field's previous research on employee discrimination experiences has failed to capture the full spectrum of discriminatory behaviors in the workplace. They posit that industrial and organizational psychologists have ''gone fishing'' in the field of discrimination research, a reference to our scholarly ignorance of the discrimination experienced by seven groups of marginalized employees (i.e., non-Black racial minorities, LGBT individuals, older workers, disabled individuals, overweight employees, religious minorities, and workers at risk of marital status discrimination). In doing so, Ruggs et al. have taken what we believe is a critical first step in advancing the field by assembling a discussion of (arguably) all discrimination experiences into a consolidated treatise on discrimination research.

However, we would like to elaborate on and extend Ruggs et al.'s argument for breadth in the study of discriminatory experiences. Specifically, although Ruggs et al. argue that discrimination research should ''cast a wider net'' to investigate each of the seven groups that have been poorly represented in scholarly work on discrimination, we propose that a wider net should be cast as a call for research on the *simultaneous* investigation of multiple, poorly represented groups. In other words, we contend that an individual's experience of discrimination in the workplace may not fall into discrete categories of discrimination (i.e., marital discrimination) and that we may gain a better understanding of workplace discrimination and its outcomes if we ''cast a wider net'' and research multiple discriminatory behaviors in concert (e.g., it is unlikely that a single, overweight, minority female experiences the effects of racial discrimination separate from those of marital, weight, and sex discrimination, and we should be studying these experiences simultaneously rather than separately). In this commentary, we focus on the potential benefits of studying multiple types of discrimination concurrently as broadly defined discrimination experiences, which could take several forms: (a) the investigation of discrimination as a process during which many forms of discrete discrimination may occur (i.e., the measurement of multiple discriminatory behaviors over time), (b) the measurement of multiple discriminatory experiences in a single data collection and

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corresponding empirical tests of interrelationships among the discriminatory experiences and antecedents/outcomes, (c) the examination of discrimination at a higher level of abstraction whereby the measurement of discrimination does not reference a discrete type of discrimination, or (d) an empirical test of a higher-order discrimination factor (i.e., a latent factor representing the shared variance among multiple discrete discriminatory behaviors). Upon proposing the benefits of broad discrimination experience, we first draw on previous research suggesting that the reexamination of a particular construct from a broader vantage point can change the way we think about the relationship between the construct and its consequences. Second, we posit that previous theoretical explanations of discrete discriminatory behaviors often revolve around a common theoretical antecedent (i.e., a threat to one's social status). Third, we discuss the implications that studying discrimination from a broad perspective would have on discrimination training, the measurement of discriminatory experiences, and discrimination theory.

Breadth Versus Specificity

Our argument for the study of broad discriminatory experiences (i.e., the simultaneous investigation of Ruggs' seven categories and other, more well-researched forms of discrimination) naturally raises the question of breadth versus depth, a debate that is quite familiar to organizational science; the arguments between ''lumpers''—those who contend for combining variables to describe a broad construct—and ''splitters''—those who argue for dividing a construct into specific parts—have a long history in psychology that spans across many research areas (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2004; Cronbach, 1956; Edwards, 2001; Johns, 1998; Ones & Viswesvaran, 1996). In discrimination research, there has been a tendency for researchers to be ''splitters'' where only specific types of discrimination are examined (e.g., racial discrimination). An alternative view that we put forth in the current paper is that one could study discrimination from a ''lumper's'' perspective by: (a) measuring and theorizing about the common antecedents and consequences of multiple forms of discrimination within a given paper, (b) examining how discrete types of discrimination unfold as a *process* of discrimination (e.g., in those who experience racial discrimination, it may be the case that gender discrimination is experienced prior to racial discrimination), or (c) investigating the existence of a higher-order discrimination factor (i.e., a broad, high-order factor representing the shared variance among multiple discrete forms of discrimination) and its relationship with work outcomes.

In this paper, we do not comment on whether one *should* ''lump'' or ''split'' discrimination into a broad construct or a set of specific constructs, respectively; instead, we point out that Ruggs et al.'s recommendations set the stage for the study of specific discrimination behaviors and that an equally fruitful avenue of research could be found in the study of a broader set of discrimination behaviors. Specifically, Ruggs et al. summarize research on seven marginalized groups and provide recommendations for the study of *each of these groups, separately*. Although these authors do tangentially mention that ''casting a wider net in the examination of discrimination targets also will allow researchers to examine the influence of multiple stigmatized characteristics'' (p. 56), we feel the issue deserves additional attention. Other authors have echoed our sentiments; Dipboye and Colella (2005, p. 429) argue that ''more than any other single improvement, the research on discrimination could benefit from constructing general models of discrimination in the workplace that capture the dynamics common to the various areas of discrimination.'' Further, Raver and Nishii (2010) have commented on similar issues in harassment research, noting that ''studying different forms of harassment in isolation does not fit with the complexity of many employees' experiences, and it risks leading to erroneous conclusions about the

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combined impact of harassment'' (p. 236). In the same vein, Rospenda and Richman (2004) state that ''there is a dearth of literature on the overall experience of workplace harassment and discrimination, that is whether and how these experiences overlap, what general theories apply to this broad class of workplace stressors, and whether experiences of different kinds of harassment and discrimination lead to similar outcomes'' (p. 149).

What could the study of broadly defined discrimination add to our understanding of discrimination in the workplace? To answer this question, we first draw on other areas of research in organizational sciences that have effectively exploited the ''lumping'' principle. For example, Judge, Locke, and Durham's (1997) core self-evaluations construct has exhibited stronger relationships with performance and job satisfaction than its constituent constructs of locus of control, self-esteem, neuroticism, and generalized self-efficacy (Judge & Bono, 2001a, 2001b). Similarly, Harrison, Newman, and Roth (2006) demonstrated that broadly defined job attitudes (i.e., a higher-order construct consisting of job satisfaction and organizational commitment) predict broadly defined performance (i.e., a higher-order construct consisting of task performance, contextual performance, and withdrawal) better than discrete job attitudes (see also Newman, Joseph, & Hulin, 2010). Finally, Ajzen and Fishbein's (1977) compatibility principle has long suggested that broadly defined constructs may outperform specific constructs when predicting broadly defined outcomes. Although this brief sampling of research does not represent all of the scholarly work on broad constructs, it does illustrate a common theme—when we increase the level of abstraction by broadening our predictors, we can gain a better understanding of the relationship between the predictor and broad work behaviors. With regard to discrimination research, the extent to which discrimination (broadly defined to include multiple types of specific discrimination behaviors) affects global work outcomes (e.g., broadly defined job attitudes and performance) has been based primarily on individual studies of racial and gender-based discrimination separately, despite many years of published research on the topic. Therefore, studying multiple stigmatizing experiences concurrently and/or longitudinally could offer insight on the global effects of all discrimination experiences at work beyond our current knowledge of racial and gender-based discrimination alone. For example, what are the combined effects of multiple types of discrimination? Is the experience of multiple forms of discrimination in a sequential fashion (e.g., racial discrimination followed by gender-based discrimination) different from the experience of multiple forms of discrimination in a single event (e.g., a single discriminatory event involving race and gender)? Is the relationship between broadly defined discrimination and job attitudes/well-being/job performance stronger than the relationship between specific discrimination experiences and workplace outcomes, suggesting that the impacts of discrimination are more detrimental than previously understood?

Interestingly, recent research in the field of workplace harassment (a closely related field to discrimination research) has begun to investigate the effects of broadly defined harassment and how discrete forms of harassment may interact. Berdahl and Moore (2006), for example, investigated the combined effects of sexual and ethnic harassment with results suggesting that the effects of multiple harassment experiences combine additively rather than multiplicatively. Similarly, Raver and Nishii (2010) examined the relationships between sexual harassment, ethnic harassment, and generalized workplace harassment, finding support for the inuring hypothesis (i.e., habituation to the experience of multiple hardships) rather than the additive or multiplicative hypotheses of harassment. Ormerod, Joseph, Weitzman, and Winterrowd 2013 have also investigated the relationship between sexual and racial harassment via meta-analysis, with results showing that the relationship between the

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two constructs is strong ($\rho = .37$), suggesting the behaviors do tend to co-occur. We purport that similar investigations (with additions of weight, LGBT, age, marital status, disability, and religious discrimination, etc.) could advance our understanding of the experience of multiple forms of discrimination in the same way that these works have strengthened the harassment literature.

Theoretical Causes of Workplace Discrimination

In addition to the possible payoff in predictive validity that is gained by increasing the number of stigmatizing characteristics examined in discrimination studies, we also believe the decision to examine a broader spectrum of discriminatory behaviors is supported by theory. In developing a theory of broadly defined workplace discrimination, we draw on a comment from Berdahl (2007) in which she notes that there is a common theoretical antecedent to all harassment behaviors: ''the primary motive underlying all harassment is a desire to protect one's social status when it seems threatened'' (p. 641). A threat to one's social status may also be a common antecedent to all discrimination behaviors, which would suggest that specific discrimination behaviors (e.g., marital status discrimination, sexual discrimination) are merely different types of ammunition a discriminator has in her arsenal to use against the discriminated, and the actual underlying process involves a social status threat, regardless of the form of discrimination. If a threat to one's social status is a common antecedent to all discrimination behaviors, the study of specific discrimination behaviors may only capture a fraction of the actual discriminatory behaviors occurring in the workplace (e.g., a manager who feels threatened by a subordinate may discriminate against the subordinate for his/her age, weight, sex, and/or race, although the measurement of only one of these types would fail to capture the entire process of stigmatization).

Implications of Studying Broad Workplace Discrimination

One of the major implications of studying a broader set of discrimination behaviors concurrently lies in discrimination training—a popular tool among organizations wishing to educate their employees on Title VII and related employee policies. Discrimination trainings typically fall into one of two types: narrow training aimed at reducing a specific type of discrimination/harassment (i.e., sexual harassment training) or a more global program based on diversity management (Arthur & Doverspike, 2005). Although Arthur and Doverspike (2005) reviewed the literature on diversity management and concluded that ''there is no clear consensus on the effectiveness of diversity training'' (p. 317), the study of multiple discrimination behaviors may help inform a more effective diversity management training program (e.g., if findings suggest sexual, racial, and marital discrimination co-occur, diversity management programs should reflect this co-occurrence).

In addition to implications for discrimination training, the study of broad discrimination behaviors could affect both measurement and theory in discrimination research. First, with regards to measurement, we argue that multiple, discrete forms of discrimination should be assessed within a given study in order to determine (a) the interrelationships among the discrete forms of harassment; (b) whether the separate forms of discrimination can be represented by a single, higher-order construct; and (c) to determine whether the results represent all types of discrimination, or if they are, in fact, unique to a certain type of discrimination. From a theoretical standpoint, if investigations of multiple discrimination behaviors suggest that these behaviors tend to co-occur, our theoretical understanding of discrimination may experience a paradigm shift towards the examination of *perpetrators* of discrimination as we attempt to understand whether these stigmatizing experiences are committed by a single perpetrator or multiple perpetrators,

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and whether a person who discriminates on race only, for example, is substantially different from one who discriminates on race, sex, sexual orientation, and weight. In summary, the paucity of research on combined discrimination experiences speaks to a need for a broader theoretical model of discrimination that incorporates multiple forms of stigmatizing experiences in a single model.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although we agree with Ruggs et al. that additional discrimination and harassment experiences should be included in the agenda for future research on the topic, we argue that without an agenda to examine multiple forms of discriminatory behavior simultaneously, researchers may continue to be ''gone fishing''' as we miss the opportunity to better understand the antecedents and consequences of multiple discrimination experiences in the workplace.

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