Through the lens of justice: Just world beliefs mediate relationships between perceived discrimination and subjective well-being

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A B S T R A C T

Previous research has found that experiences with discrimination are often associated with lower levels of well-being among ethnic minority members, but hardly any attention has been given to the processes underlying this relationship. Two studies were conducted among ethnic Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands to examine the hypothesis that the belief in a just world for self mediates the association between perceived discrimination and subjective well-being. In both studies, negative relationships were found between perceived blatant and subtle discrimination and subjective well-being. These relationships were, however, fully mediated by people’s belief in a just world for self. The reversed possibility that perceptions of discrimination mediate the relationship between the belief in a just world for self and well-being, was not supported. These findings lend support to the idea that discrimination has a negative effect on ethnic minority members’ well-being because it undermines their belief that the world is just to them.

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1. Introduction

For ethnic minority group members across the world, prejudice and discrimination are likely to be part of their daily experiences. This prejudice and discrimination can take many different forms, varying from more overt behaviors such as verbal or physical harassment, to more subtle behaviors such as being ignored or excluded. Research shows that the impact of these experiences on people’s psychological well-being can be substantial. For example, laboratory and field studies among targets of prejudice and discrimination have found that it is associated with higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, reduced levels of life satisfaction and happiness, and lower levels of self-esteem (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009).

Despite compelling evidence for the harmful effects of perceived discrimination on well-being, scant attention has been given to the underlying mechanisms and processes through which this relationship occurs. The present research was aimed at developing a better understanding of these pathways. More specifically, it examined whether the association between perceived discrimination and well-being is mediated by just world beliefs. Although various reasons can be identified for why discrimination may be psychologically stressful, the current study focused on just world beliefs because these have been found to play an important role in how people respond to stressful events such as disadvantage and discrimination (e.g., Eliezer, Townsend, Sawyer, & Major, 2011; Major, Kaiser, O’Brien, & McCoy, 2007). As will be elaborated below, the
main premise was that perceiving oneself to be victim of discrimination will lead people to believe that the world is unjust to them, which in turn negatively affects their well-being.

Much research has demonstrated that human beings are motivated to believe that they live in a just and fair world, where people generally get what they deserve (Furnham, 2003). This justice motive has been conceptualized as a positive illusion, because it may help people to see the world as orderly and predictable, and this may provide them with a sense of control over their environment and enable them to plan for the future (e.g., Dalbert, 2001; Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978). As such, just world beliefs – and in particular the belief that the world is just to self – may enhance psychological well-being. For example, several studies have found that the belief in a just world for self is associated with lower levels of depression and stress and higher levels of life satisfaction (e.g., Dalbert, 1998; Dzuka & Dalbert, 2002; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996). Lipkus and colleagues (1996) also found that the belief in a just world for self was a more powerful predictor of perceived life satisfaction than other factors such as personality or gender.

It seems plausible, however, that people's justice beliefs are informed by the reality in which they live as well (Rubin & Peplau, 1975; Schmitt, 1998; Stroebe, Dovidio, Barreto, Ellemers, & John, 2011; Sutton et al., 2008). For example, for members of ethnic minority groups who are confronted with prejudice and discrimination on a regular basis, it may be more difficult to uphold the belief that the world is a just place. In this regard, Cubela Adoric and Kvartuc (2007) found that individuals who were exposed to sustained and undeserved negative acts had a weaker belief in the justness of the world. In a similar vein, Sutton and colleagues (2008) found that people's perceptions of justice seem to be less of an illusion and more of an objective perception of the justice that they or others actually receive. Taken together, these findings suggest that experiencing injustice or unfair treatment such as prejudice or discrimination may have the effect that people believe that the world is unjust or unfair to them, and this may result in lower levels of subjective well-being.

To examine the possible mediating role of the belief in a just world for self in the relationship between perceived discrimination and well-being, two studies were conducted. Participants were first and second generation Turkish and Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands. They occupy a relatively low position in the Dutch ethnic hierarchy and surveys show that, compared to other ethnic minority groups in the Netherlands, they feel discriminated against relatively often (e.g., Andriessen, Dagevos, Nievers, & Boog, 2007). In Study 1, it was examined whether the belief in a just world for self mediates the relationship between perceived blatant discrimination and subjective well-being. The aim of Study 2 was to replicate the findings from Study 1 and to examine whether a similar pattern of results would be found for more subtle forms of discrimination. In both studies, an alternative model was considered as well. That is, one could argue that people with a stronger belief in a just world for self may deny or minimize incidences of prejudice or discrimination (e.g., Lipkus & Siegler, 1993), which may help them to maintain relatively high levels of well-being. Therefore, the possibility for reversed mediation was also tested.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

There were 267 participants in this study. Twenty-four participants were excluded because they did not provide their ethnic background, because of excessive missing data or because they were outliers (three standard deviations above the mean), leaving a final sample of 243 persons (110 females).1 Of these participants, 139 were of Moroccan origin and 104 were of Turkish origin (i.e., they or their parents had been born in Morocco or Turkey). Their ages ranged from 17 to 75 years old ($M = 34.7$, $SD = 15.1$). Their mean educational level, with scores ranging from 1 (no diploma) to 4 (university degree) was 2.7 ($SD = 0.95$). Participants were recruited through local contacts and associations, and they completed a questionnaire in Dutch.

2.1.2. Measures

Subjective well-being was assessed using a Dutch version of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). This measure has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure of subjective well-being (e.g., Pavot & Diener, 1993; Pavot, Diener, Colvin, & Sandvik, 1991) and was selected because it was deemed sufficiently accessible to participants in this study (in terms of length and item difficulty). The scale consists of 5 items (e.g., I am satisfied with my life) and participants rated their agreement with each item on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha was .79.

Just world beliefs were measured after participants had completed the well-being measure, using the Lipkus et al. (1996) belief in a just world for self scale. This scale contains eight items (e.g., I feel that the world treats me fairly) and participants responded to each item using a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha was .88.

At the end of the questionnaire, perceived blatant discrimination was measured using five items. Following Noh, Kaspar, and Wickrama (2007), items were included that assessed the occurrence of explicit negative actions such as negative

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1 The overall pattern of results did not change, however, following exclusion of these participants.
Table 1
Means and standard deviations for measures in Study 1 and Study 2.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Study 1</th>
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<th>Study 2</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subtle discrimination</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blatant discrimination</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just world beliefs</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective well-being</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>0.69</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 2
Intercorrelations for measures in Study 1 and Study 2.

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<tr>
<td>Study 1 (N=243)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–21&lt;sup&gt;∗∗&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.60&lt;sup&gt;∗&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>–33&lt;sup&gt;∗∗&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>Study 2 (N=304)</td>
<td>–21&lt;sup&gt;∗∗&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>–20&lt;sup&gt;∗&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.51&lt;sup&gt;∗&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>–34&lt;sup&gt;∗∗&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>–34&lt;sup&gt;∗∗&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.57&lt;sup&gt;∗∗&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<sup>∗</sup> *p* < .05.<br>
<sup>∗∗</sup> *p* < .01.<br>

2.2. Results

2.2.1. Mean scores and intercorrelations

The mean scores and the standard deviations for the measures that were used are presented in Table 1. Given the diversity of the sample, between-group differences in the various measures were examined using ANOVA, with ethnic background, gender, age, and educational level as factors.

For perceptions of blatant discrimination, this analysis yielded a significant effect of gender, *F*(1, 220) = 12.32, *p* = .001. On average, men reported having experienced blatant discrimination more often (M = 1.94) than females (M = 1.59). For just world beliefs, the analysis did not reveal significant differences in gender, ethnic background, age, and educational level. For well-being, however, there was a significant effect of educational level, *F*(3, 228) = 11.95, *p* < .001. People with a medium or high educational level reported higher levels of well-being (M = 3.64 and M = 3.77, respectively) compared to those without a diploma or with a low educational level (M = 3.01 and M = 3.09, respectively). Given these differences, gender and educational level were controlled for in the subsequent analyses.

Table 2 presents the intercorrelations between the measures that were used in Study 1. Perceived blatant discrimination was negatively related with just world beliefs and subjective well-being. Just-world beliefs and subjective well-being were, however, significantly and positively related.

2.2.2. Mediation analysis

To examine whether the belief in a just world for self mediates the relationship between perceived blatant discrimination and subjective well-being, a mediation analysis was conducted using a bootstrapping method for testing multiple mediators (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). This method allowed to control for covariates. The analysis was performed following recommendations by Preacher and Hayes, with 5000 bootstrapping samples, and 95% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals to evaluate indirect effects. Mediation was considered to have occurred if zero was not in the 95% confidence interval. Gender and educational level were included in the model as covariates. Experiences with blatant discrimination and just world beliefs were standardized within each ethnic group prior to the analysis to remove any potential mean differences between them (Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). The analysis revealed a significant total effect of perceived blatant discrimination on subjective well-being (*b* = –.10, *SE* = .04, *p* < .013). The direct effect of perceived blatant discrimination on subjective well-being after controlling for just world beliefs was, however, not significant (*b* = .01, *SE* = .04, *p* = .81). The total indirect effect (i.e., the difference between the total and the direct effect) was significant, with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval that was estimated to lie between –.171 and –.060. Thus, the belief in a just world for self mediated the relationship between perceived blatant discrimination and subjective well-being. See Fig. 1, for the complete mediational model.

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2 Participants also completed a subset of items from the Singelis (1994) self-construal scale. Individual differences in self-construal did not moderate the relationship between perceived discrimination and subjective well-being, although the interaction between blatant discrimination and interdependent self-construal reached conventional levels of significance (*B* = .07, *p* = .063). Individuals who were higher in interdependent self-construal and who also perceived more blatant discrimination tended to report lower levels of well-being compared to those who were lower in interdependent self-construal.
In an additional mediation analysis, the possibility was examined that the relationship between the belief in a just world for self and subjective well-being was mediated by perceived blatant discrimination. In this analysis, gender and educational level were again added as covariates. The total indirect effect was, however, not significant because zero was in the 95% confidence interval (lower bound −.029 and upper bound .024). Thus, these results do not lend support for the reversed model.

2.3. Discussion

The findings confirmed that there was a negative relationship between perceived blatant discrimination and well-being, and that this association was mediated by ethnic minority members’ belief in a just world for self. Individuals who more often perceived themselves to be victim of blatant discrimination, less often believed that the world was just to them and this, in turn, was negatively related to subjective well-being. No evidence was found for the reversed possibility that perceived blatant discrimination mediates the relationship between the belief in a just world for self and subjective well-being.

Nevertheless, it is generally recognized that blatant forms of discrimination are less common nowadays and that prejudice is more often expressed in more subtle ways (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Some have argued that these subtle forms of discrimination may be more difficult to deal with and have a stronger negative impact on ethnic minority members’ well-being than blatant forms of discrimination because it is more ambiguous and hence requires a more active and difficult cognitive appraisal (e.g., Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Noh et al., 2007). At the same time, however, one could argue that – when people do perceive subtle discrimination – it may also result in the belief that the world is unjust or unfair to them, which may negatively affect their well-being. To examine whether the belief in a just world for self mediates the relationship between perceived subtle discrimination and well-being, and to replicate the findings of the present study as well, a second study was conducted.

3. Study 2

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

In this study, 320 persons participated. Sixteen participants did not complete the just world belief measure, leaving a final sample of 304 participants (110 females). Of these participants, 149 were of Moroccan origin and 155 were of Turkish origin. Their age ranged from 17 to 75 years (M = 29.3, SD = 12.6). Their average educational level was, with scores ranging from 1 (no diploma) to 4 (university degree), 2.6 (SD = 0.88). As in Study 1, participants were approached via local contacts and associations, and they completed a questionnaire in Dutch.
3.1. Measures

Belief in just world for self and well-being were measured with the same items as in Study 1. Cronbach’s alpha for the just world beliefs scale was .90 and for well-being .84. Participants also completed several measures concerning their ethnic identity. These measures were, however, not of direct relevance to the expectations in this study and were therefore not included in the analyses.

To measure perceived blatant discrimination, the same five items were used as in Study 1 as well. Perceived subtle discrimination was measured with eight items that referred to the more indirect expression of prejudice (e.g., How often do you have the feeling that you have to prove yourself more than others because of your ethnic background?). The content of these items had been established on the basis of expert interviews (e.g., with representatives of anti-discrimination offices and ethnic minority associations) and on the basis of a literature review. The items had also been pilot tested among 20 individuals of Turkish and Moroccan origin. See the Appendix for an overview of the items. Participants rated each item on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). As in Study 1, participants completed the blatant and subtle discrimination measures after they had completed the well-being en just-world belief measures.

To examine the distinctiveness of the blatant and subtle discrimination scales, a principal components analysis (with Oblimin rotation) was conducted. Prior to this analysis, items were standardized within each ethnic group (Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). The items that were intended to measure perceived subtle discrimination loaded on the first factor (> .74) and this factor explained 53.1% of the variance. The items that were intended to measure perceived blatant discrimination loaded on the second factor (> .53), which explained 12.3% of the variance. Cronbach’s alpha for the blatant discrimination scale was .79 and for the subtle discrimination scale .94. Although the correlation between the blatant and subtle discrimination measure was relatively high (r = .57), the amount of unshared variance is considerable (68%)

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Means and intercorrelations

The means and standard deviations for the various measures are presented in Table 1. Between-group differences in these measures were again examined with a series of ANOVAs, with ethnic background, gender, age, and educational level as factors. For perceived blatant discrimination, the analysis revealed a significant effect of gender, F (1, 287) = 8.48, p = .004. On average, men reported having experienced blatant discrimination more often (M = 1.74) than women (M = 1.52). For just world beliefs, a significant effect was found for educational level, F (3, 285) = 5.71, p = .018. Participants without a diploma and those with a low educational level believed that the world was less just for them (M = 2.93 and M = 3.17, respectively) compared to those with a medium and a high educational level (M = 3.33 and M = 3.59, respectively). For well-being, a significant effect was found for educational level as well, F (3, 290) = 17.60, p < .001. Participants without a diploma reported lower levels of well-being (M = 3.01) than those with a low, medium, and high educational level (M = 3.36). Therefore, gender and educational level were controlled for in the subsequent analyses.

Table 2 presents the intercorrelations between the different measures. Both perceived subtle and blatant discrimination were significantly and negatively related to subjective well-being. Moreover, there were negative relationships between perceived subtle and blatant discrimination and just world beliefs. There was, however, a positive relationship between just world beliefs and subjective well-being.

3.2.2. Mediation analysis

Separate mediation analyses were conducted for each discrimination measure, using a bootstrapping procedure for multiple mediators (with n = 5000 bootstrap resamples). As in Study 1, gender and educational level were included as covariates in the model, and the discrimination measures and just world beliefs were standardized within each ethnic group prior to the analysis.

Fig. 2 displays the results of the two mediation analyses. For perceived blatant discrimination, a significant total effect was found (b = -.13, SE = .04, p < .001). When controlling for the belief in a just world for self, however, the direct effect of perceived blatant discrimination on well-being was not significant (b = -.02, SE = .04, p = .62). The total indirect effect was significant (b = .30, SE = .04, p < .001, lower and upper confidence intervals −.175 and −.070 respectively). A similar pattern was found for perceived subtle discrimination. The total direct effect for this measure was significant (b = −.12, SE = .04, p = .013) and the direct effect of perceived subtle discrimination on well-being was non-significant when just world beliefs were included in the model (b = −.02, SE = .04, p = .61). Moreover, the analyses revealed a significant total indirect effect, with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of −.159 to −.051. Thus, the belief in a just world for self mediated the association between perceived blatant and subjective discrimination and subjective well-being.

The possibility for reversed mediation (i.e., that perceived subtle or blatant discrimination mediates the relationship between just world beliefs and subjective well-being) was examined in an additional set of analyses. No evidence was, however, found for this alternative model. When perceived blatant discrimination was added as a mediator to the model,  

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1 It should be noted that when the analyses were conducted on the full dataset (320 participants), the relationship between discrimination and subjective well-being did not reach conventional levels of significance (r = −.10, p = .09).
the total indirect effect was not significant, with a 95% confidence interval that was estimated to lie between \(-.021\) and \(.035\). A similar pattern was found for perceived subtle discrimination, with a confidence interval of \(-.024\) to \(.037\).

3.3. Discussion

These results replicate and extend the findings of Study 1 by showing that both blatant and subtle discrimination were associated with lower levels of well-being, and by showing that these relationships were mediated by the extent to which ethnic minority members’ believed in a just world for self. Moreover, as in Study 1, no evidence was found for the possibility that perceived discrimination mediated the relationship between just world beliefs and well-being. Taken together, these findings lend support to the idea that perceiving oneself to be a victim of discrimination has a negative effect on ethnic minority members’ well-being because it undermines their belief that the world is just to them.

4. General discussion

Two studies were conducted to examine the pathways through which perceived discrimination affects ethnic minority members’ well-being. It was expected that ethnic minority members who perceived more discrimination would come to think of the world as more unjust or unfair to them, which in turn would negatively affect their well-being. The results
of the two studies confirm this expectation. Consistent with previous research, a negative association was found between perceptions of blatant and subtle discrimination and subjective well-being. In both studies, however, it was also found that these relationships were mediated by the extent to which people believed in a just world for self. Moreover, no evidence was found for the reversed possibility that perceptions of discrimination mediated the association between just world beliefs and subjective well-being.

These findings are important because, even though the negative impact of discrimination on well-being is widely supported, little has been done to understand the mechanisms underlying this effect (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). The present results suggest that, even though people may generally be motivated to see the world as just, their justice beliefs do seem to be informed by the reality in which they live. Perceiving discrimination, whether blatant or more subtle, may lead people to see or expect less justice for themselves. As a result, they may see the world as less orderly and predictable and they may experience less control, which may result in poorer psychological functioning. Moreover, although some studies have found that individuals with a stronger belief in a just world may be motivated to minimize incidences of injustice or discrimination (e.g., Hafer & Olson, 1989; Lipkus & Siegler, 1993), the current findings suggest that they may not be able protect their justice beliefs when such experiences occur on a more regular basis. As such, they lend support to the idea that the belief in a just world for self is a partly experiential construct (e.g., Dalbert, 2009; Dalbert & Stoeber, 2006).

These findings run somewhat counter, however, to the general idea that it may be adaptive for persons in difficult circumstances to deny instances of injustice (e.g., Olson & Hafer, 2001). Nevertheless, most studies in this regard have examined justice beliefs and experiences among members of relatively privileged groups (e.g., students and professionals in wealthy nations). They may be more motivated to see the world as just and fair compared to members from more disadvantaged groups such as the ethnic minority participants in this study, both to explain their own position and the position of less privileged groups (e.g., Hunt, 2000). Furthermore, it is possible that just world beliefs are less stable among ethnic minority group members, particularly when they occupy a low status position in society and are confronted with discrimination (either at a personal or a group level) on a regular basis. It has also been suggested (e.g., Williams & Mohammed, 2009) that unfair treatment based on one’s ethnic group membership may have different effects than other forms of unfair treatment, because it is particularly threatening to a person’s sense of rights and opportunities. In addition, there is evidence that there are cross-cultural differences in terms of what people consider to be just or unjust (e.g., Lee, Ottati, Bornman, & Yang, 2011). As such, future research should examine more carefully how justice beliefs are shaped among ethnic minority group members, and how stable they are over time and across different situations. Such studies should also explicitly compare justice beliefs among ethnic minority members with those of majority group members.

The present research has its limitations as well, however. For example, it only focused on the belief in a just world for self whereas just world beliefs consist of a more general component as well (i.e., the belief in a just world for others). Although it has been found that the extent to which people believe that the world is just to them affects their well-being more than their belief that the world is just to others (e.g., Lipkus et al., 1996), the belief in a just world for others may also vary as a function of the extent to which they perceive discrimination directed against their ingroup. Given that people have been found to report more group discrimination than personal discrimination (e.g., Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997), future studies should also examine how the belief in a just world for others affects how they respond to discrimination against the ingroup.

Furthermore, the present data are cross-sectional and so they need to be replicated using methods that provide a stronger basis for causal inference. It is important to note, however, that the results are consistent with recent insights from laboratory and field studies in the experiential nature of the belief in a just world (e.g., Cubela Adoric & Kvatuc, 2007; Stroebe et al., 2011; Sutton et al., 2008). That being said, it is still unclear why discrimination leads to perceptions of unfairness or injustice: is it for example because ethnic minority members resist being treated in terms of their group membership rather than their personal characteristics, is it because they are being denied full membership of a group they want to belong to (e.g., Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999), or is it perhaps a combination of these or other factors? Thus, more research is needed to examine in more detail what drives the feeling of injustice following perceived discrimination.

Despite these limitations, the current findings are an important first step in understanding how and why discrimination may affect subjective well-being among ethnic minority group members. They suggest that it is the unfairness that is implied in discrimination that results in lower levels of well-being, and they also show that this process is similar for blatant and more subtle forms of discrimination. As such, the findings add to our understanding of the mechanisms that lie beneath the negative effect of different types of discrimination on well-being, and they provide an important stepping stone for further research in this area.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A. Items used to measure blatant and subtle discrimination

**Blatant discrimination**

1. How often in your life have people threatened you because of your ethnic background?
2. How often in your life have people been rude or offensive to you because of your ethnic background?
3. How often in your life have you been teased or made fun of because of your ethnic background?
4. How often in your life have people hit or pushed you because of your ethnic background?
5. How often in your life have you been rejected because of your ethnic background?

**Subtle discrimination**

How often do you have the feeling that:

1. You have to prove yourself more than others because of your ethnic background?
2. People judge you negatively or look at you in an unusual way because of your ethnic background?
3. People distrust you because of your ethnic background?
4. You are not being accepted because of your ethnic background?
5. People do not take you seriously because of your ethnic background?
6. You are being ignored because of your ethnic background?
7. People look down on you because of your ethnic background?
8. You are not welcome because of your ethnic background?

Appendix B. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.04.002.

**References**


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