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## When do women respond against discrimination? Exploring factors of subtlety, form, and focus

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### Abstract

We examined the personal-group discrimination discrepancy (PGDD), the tendency for women to recognize that others encounter sexism while simultaneously minimizing their own personal experiences with sexism, and the degree to which it (a) applies to all manifestations of discrimination, and (b) extends beyond perceptions of discrimination to taking action against it. Our findings replicated the PGDD when it comes to perceptions of discrimination, but this effect was reversed for behavioral action such that women were more likely to take action against discrimination when it was directed at them personally. We also disentangled the factors of subtlety (subtle vs. overt) and form (formal vs. interpersonal) by showing that women can reliably distinguish between these factors when determining their reactions to discrimination.

Despite greater education and workforce participation rates than ever before, women continue to face discrimination at work. Facing such discrimination, women frequently do not communicate their disapproval to the perpetrators of such behaviors (Good, Moss-Racusin, & Sanchez, 2012). One explanation for this lack of action is the personal-group discrimination discrepancy (PGDD), which can be defined as the tendency for women to recognize that other women encounter sexism while simultaneously denying or minimizing their own personal experiences with sexism (Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990). This phenomenon is robust across target groups (Hodson & Esses, 2002), experimental and survey methods (Operario & Fiske, 2001; Taylor, Wright, & Ruggiero, 1991), and student and working adult populations (Quinn & Olson, 2001). However, what remains unclear is the extent to which this discrepancy (a) applies to all manifestations of discrimination, and (b) extends beyond perceptions of discrimination to acting in response to it. Thus, this article will explore factors that predict both the recognition of and behavioral action against discrimination in the workplace.

Specifically, we will consider subtlety (subtle vs. overt), form (formal vs. interpersonal), and focus (self vs. other) of discrimination as predictors of women's willingness to label discriminatory instances in the workplace. We anticipate that the more obvious and legally prohibited forms of discrimina-

tion—those that are overt and formal—will yield smaller personal-group discrepancies than those behaviors that are more subtle or interpersonal in nature. Moreover, we explore the extent to which women take action against unjust treatment (Foster & Matheson, 1998), or the generalizability of the PGDD from perceptions of discrimination to behavioral action taken against it. In this article, we seek to test our hypotheses in two complementary studies. Study 1 examines the PGDD among a sample of women who likely encounter sexism and utilizes an experimental design where different forms of discrimination are manipulated and presented to assess women's reactions to them. Study 2 examines the PGDD in a representative sample of women from a variety of professions and measures their reactions to actual instances of discrimination as they occurred in the workplace.

In conducting these studies, we make three important contributions to extant literature. First, we assess the PGDD in both experimental and “real world” settings, a combination which maximizes both that internal and external validity of our findings. Second, by considering behavioral responses to instances of discrimination, this article asks a novel question: are women more likely to take action against discrimination on behalf of themselves or others? Third and finally, we disentangle overt and formal discrimination as well as subtle and interpersonal discrimination to explore the effects of these factors in a more nuanced way than has been

accomplished by previous research. Indeed, there is a fair amount of construct confusion regarding subtlety and form of discrimination, which we believe our work is uniquely positioned to address. Altogether, this article will integrate findings from PGDD studies and work on bystander intervention (Latane & Darley, 1970) to provide important evidence regarding women's reactions to gender discrimination.

### **The personal-group discrimination discrepancy**

Studies have yet to pinpoint the exact reason behind the presence of the PGDD, but there are three theoretical arguments that may help to clarify this phenomenon. The first explanation for the PGDD is that women may minimize personal experiences of discrimination to protect their self-esteem. By taking notice of personal discrimination, women are acknowledging themselves as victims, which in turn can produce feelings of diminished self-efficacy and self-esteem (Operario & Fiske, 2001). Ignoring or separating themselves from an instance of discrimination provides a shield that allows them to overcome the negative effects of the experience. In contrast to this explanation of the PGDD, some empirical work has shown that it can be beneficial to an individual's self-esteem to attribute negative behavior (e.g., negative feedback) to discrimination as it allows one to externalize the prejudicial behavior rather than internalizing the behavior and blaming oneself (e.g., Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991). Thus, these findings seem to suggest that if women are not recognizing discrimination to protect their self-esteem, their efforts are misguided.

A second explanation for the PGDD lies in the way humans process information. According to the Gestalt Law of Pattern Perception, individuals recognize patterns of stimuli rather than individual stimuli. This law of perception could lead to the PGDD in that it is easier for women to perceive group based than personal discrimination (Foster & Matheson, 1998). Large scale patterns and events are easily identified as being discriminatory, whereas more ambiguous and microforms of prejudice may be left unclassified. A third explanation for the PGDD is a cognitive bias, wherein women discount their own personal experiences as instances of discrimination. According to self-categorization theory, women interpret experiences as discriminatory more readily at the group level because they discount the personal self in favor of their group identity, causing personal discrimination to go unprocessed and unnoticed. This can lead to women perceiving more gender discrimination when directed toward other women (Foster & Matheson, 1998). This cognitive bias may even extend such that women commit the just-world fallacy (see Lerner & Simmons, 1966) by believing that others experience discrimination (and all the negative outcomes associated with it) more than they do themselves. Indeed, by

recognizing gender discrimination only when it is directed toward others, women are able to preserve a sense of security and self-control (Operario & Fiske, 2001). Women that acknowledge personal discriminatory experiences may break down their protective barriers, leaving them vulnerable to the harmful criticisms and comments that may hurt their sense of peace and mental well-being which could then result in anxiety, depression, decrease in work ethic, and other negative consequences.

In the context of the current studies, these theoretical explanations seem to indicate that women will not be very likely to recognize discrimination, when it is directed toward themselves. Somewhat paradoxically, these theoretical explanations seem to produce opposing predictions for behavioral action taken in response to discrimination. For instance, while women may be able to protect their self-esteem by discounting their own personal experiences with prejudice, they also may be able to empower themselves and reduce subsequent experiences of discrimination by choosing to confront it (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006; Swim & Thomas, 2006). We now turn our attention to how the PGDD may apply to taking action against gender discrimination in the workplace.

### **Behavioral action and PGDD**

The degree to which PGDD extends beyond perceiving gender discrimination to engaging in behavioral action against it has not yet been examined. However, there is evidence to suggest that women are more likely to take action if gender discrimination is directed toward them personally than if it is directed at others. In other words, the PGDD may exist in the opposite direction for behavioral action when compared with the recognition of prejudice. There are at least four reasons for this expectation: (1) women personally experiencing discrimination may take action to maintain their sense of security, (2) women may be more likely to diffuse responsibility for responding when discrimination is directed at others, (3) women can avoid backlash by not confronting discrimination when it is directed at others, and (4) women can empower themselves and maintain higher self-esteem if they take action against discrimination directed at them personally. We elaborate on each of these explanations in the text that follows.

First, women may be more likely to respond when discrimination is directed at them personally so that they can maintain a sense of security in the workplace. Indeed, Foster and Matheson (1998) conducted a survey study in which they found that personal experience with discrimination and status discontent interacted in predicting women's action taken against discrimination. This interaction existed such that personal experience with discrimination was positively related to taking action, but this relationship was even stronger when women were content with their organizational status (and,

thus, had a sense of security to maintain). Discrimination experienced by a group of women does not elicit the same level as distress as it does at a personal level. Therefore, it is less likely that women will take action against gender discrimination targeted toward others than themselves.

Second, women may be more likely to diffuse responsibility for responding when discrimination is directed at others. Indeed, previous studies suggest that one reason bystanders do not respond when others are being discriminated against is due to the witness of such behaviors not wanting to get involved in matters that do not directly concern them. Some women may feel that without knowing the nuances of the situation at hand it is best that they stay out of provoking situations. Meanwhile, there are other women that simply believe that it is not their place to respond if the discriminatory incident does not directly involve them (Brinkman, Garcia, & Rickard, 2011). This diffusion of responsibility has been cited as a reason that women and other minorities may not respond to prejudice, especially when it is not personally directed at them (see Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, & Goodwin, 2008).

A third reason for women to respond more when discrimination is directed at themselves when compared to others is that they can avoid backlash by not confronting discrimination when it is directed at others. Women may be particularly unwilling to respond in male-dominated and prejudicial environments out of fear that confrontation may lead to an even more unpleasant work environment (Brinkman et al., 2011). These concerns seem to be justified, given that numerous studies have found that women often experience negative consequences when they attempt to get involved and take behavioral action against gender discrimination. For example, one study in particular found that more confrontational responses lead to retaliation and worse outcomes for women at work. When women chose not to confront, they often listed social norms as a reason for not taking action (Brinkman et al., 2011). These findings are relevant to the current study, given that we study responses to discrimination in the male-dominated construction industry, where norms are likely not in favor of confronting gender discrimination. It is important to remember that women also consider potential interpersonal or social costs related to confronting gender discrimination. For instance, research has shown that women may not be taken seriously and instead be viewed as overacting should they choose to confront discrimination, when it is enacted against them (Czopp & Monteith, 2003). Social role theory (Eagly, 1987) explains that there may be an expectation for women to maintain harmony and prevent or solve conflicts that may arise by behaving in more communal ways. Gender expectations such as these may be able to explain why women avoid responding to discriminatory behaviors when other women are experiencing such prejudice. The risk of seeming overly aggressive and intrusive by

helping other women face discrimination may be too great, especially in an environment that is dominated by males. At least one study has validated these concerns by showing that women who confronted a sexist male were viewed negatively and as complainers (Shelton & Stewart, 2004). These negative outcomes may be particularly pronounced in a male-dominated organization, where confronting gender discrimination is likely not the norm. Indeed, empirical research from the prejudice confrontation literature supports the notion that women may be reluctant to confront discrimination, even when they recognize its presence (Good et al., 2012; Rattan & Dweck, 2010).

Fourth and finally, women who engage in behavioral action when encountering personal discrimination likely do so to regain the feeling of empowerment and maintain their self-esteem, which would not necessarily be gained when confronting discrimination directed at others. Indeed, previous work has shown that minorities feel empowered when confronting prejudice, regardless of the effectiveness of their confrontation behaviors (Swim & Thomas, 2006). When deciding whether or not to act out against prejudice, women engage in a decision-making process wherein they seek to maximize personal benefit while minimizing personal costs. For example, if a woman were to be subjected to gender discrimination by being denied a job due to her sex, then that woman would be more likely to take behavioral action because the costs of not responding outweigh the benefits of responding (Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). This same woman might not be as likely to stand up against discrimination against other women in the workplace, because she would not stand to gain as much by doing so. Thus, extant evidence suggests that the nature of the personal-group discrepancy may in fact be in the opposite direction for perceiving and acting in response to discrimination. That is, women are more likely to engage in behavioral action if discrimination is directed toward them personally as opposed to discrimination directed toward other women, because they feel they have the most to gain when the discrimination was directed at them individually.

Importantly, we do not mean to imply that individuals can take action against discrimination without first recognizing that it has taken place. Previous research has shown that people do not stand up to discrimination as often as they would like to (see Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008), indicating that recognition happens more often than, and in many cases in the absence of, behavioral action. Rather, we assert that, given the same instance of discrimination, women will be more likely to recognize it when directed at others (i.e., replicating findings from PGDD research), but more likely to take action when it is directed at them personally (for the reasons outlined above). This prediction suggests that when an instance of discrimination is targeted toward the self, the person is likely to both simultaneously recognize it as something

other than discrimination, yet still take action against it. We believe this phenomenon occurs as a defense mechanism of sorts. As we mentioned earlier, acknowledging that discrimination has taken place against oneself can diminish self-esteem (Operario & Fiske, 2001). Additionally, women may be hesitant to label an incident as discrimination given that they could suffer negative interpersonal consequences, such as being viewed negatively and labeled as complainers (Shelton & Stewart, 2004), for doing so. Thus, women may be able to avoid these negative outcomes while still reaping the empowering benefits of taking action by labeling the instance as uncivil treatment (which is not necessarily related to gender) as opposed to outright discrimination. This defense mechanism may also serve to externalize the uncivil treatment, making it more about the perpetrators and their behaviors, as opposed to the victims' group membership. Accordingly, we predict that women will be more likely to recognize discrimination directed at others, but more likely to take action when it is directed at them personally. More formally, we propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1.* Women will be more likely to recognize discrimination when it is directed at others compared with themselves, but they will be more likely to take action against discrimination when it is directed at themselves compared with others.

### Subtlety and form of discrimination

In addition to exploring behavioral action as it relates to the PGDD, we make another contribution to the extant literature by examining factors that may affect recognition of and action against gender discrimination. Specifically, we consider two important aspects of contemporary discrimination as potential boundary conditions of the PGDD: subtlety (subtle vs. overt) and form (formal vs. interpersonal). Contemporary discrimination is characterized by more ambiguous, less obvious behaviors that are often in the form of offhand comments, slights, or insults. These descriptions typify subtle and interpersonal discrimination, and serve to demonstrate the importance of studying how these factors may influence the PGDD for women in the workplace.

We conceptualize and compare two levels of subtlety when approaching gender discrimination: subtle and overt. Subtle discrimination can be defined as "discrimination that is enacted unconsciously or unintentionally and that is entrenched in common, everyday interactions, taking the shape of harassment, jokes, incivility, avoidance, and other types of disrespectful treatment" (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011, p. 1205). Overt discrimination is more conspicuous, and can be defined as "a clearly exercised form of unfair treatment with visible structural outcomes" (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011, p. 1205). Additionally, we conceptualize and compare

two forms of discrimination: formal and interpersonal. Interpersonal discrimination manifests itself in the form of disrespect, verbal and nonverbal harassment, general ill-behavior, and hostility in the workplace. Such discrimination toward the targeted individual is likely to occur within social situations (Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002), and has not been formally outlawed. Unlike interpersonal discrimination, formal discrimination has regulations, laws, and sometimes organizational policies in place to prevent this type of discrimination from occurring and to facilitate action when necessary. Formal discrimination in the workplace includes examples such as the decision to not hire or promote an employee due to an unjust cause such as the individual's gender, race, or religion (Hebl et al., 2002).

The distinction between subtlety and form is that while subtlety refers to how obvious it is that an instance of unfair treatment is related to one's gender, form refers to the job-relatedness of the behavior. That is, discrimination can be difficult (overt) or easy (subtle) to detect. It can also be directly related to the job (formal) or related to social dynamics more generally (interpersonal). Overt discrimination is unfair treatment that is obviously attributable to gender, but it does not necessarily deny women job-related opportunities in the way that formal discrimination would. For instance, calling women demeaning terms based on their gender without having any impact on the status of their job status would qualify as an overt manifestation of discrimination that is interpersonal, not formal, in nature (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). However, if obviously sexist reasoning was used to deny women promotions or pay raises (e.g., "Women do not deserve to make as much as men"), then this would qualify as an overt manifestation of discrimination that is formal in nature. Similarly, while subtle discrimination is often assumed to be interpersonal in nature (e.g., general uncivil treatment toward women in a workplace), we argue that subtle discrimination can also be formal. For example, if a man is chosen for a position over a woman, but it is not clear that gender bias was present in the decision-making process, then this would qualify as an instance of discrimination that is subtle yet formal in nature. Thus, while subtle and interpersonal and formal and overt have been used interchangeably in the past, we conceptualize these variables as orthogonal dimensions of discrimination. See Table 1 for more specific scenarios that vary in terms of subtlety, form, and focus.

We reason that women will be more likely to recognize overt discrimination simply because it is more conspicuous and, thus, easier to detect. Indeed, Ashburn-Nardo et al. (2008) Confronting Prejudiced Responses Model posits that being able to detect discrimination is the first barrier to taking action against it. A similar pattern is expected for behavioral responses to overt gender discrimination. Women who face gender discrimination in the workplace likely want to put an end to it. However, subtle

**Table 1** Study 1 Scenarios that Vary in Terms of Subtlety, Form, and Focus

	Self	Other
Subtle interpersonal	Imagine that you are working as a field office manager on a construction job site. Your first task of the day is to ensure that the correct amount of cement has been ordered. You ask a male laborer whether or not the order has been placed. He responds, "I don't know. Isn't that your job?" You decide to ask the male superintendent about the cement order. He does not know whether or not it has been sent, so he asks the same laborer. The laborer tells him that the order has already been processed.	Julia Smith was working as a field office manager on a construction job site. Her first task of the day was to ensure that the correct amount of cement had been ordered. She asked a male laborer whether or not the order had been placed. He responded, "I don't know. Isn't that your job?" She decided to ask the male superintendent about the cement order. He did not know whether or not it had been sent, so he asked the same laborer. The laborer told him that the order had already been processed.
Subtle formal	Imagine that you are the only female superintendent in your construction company. Your current project is almost complete, and you are ready to begin a new project. You know that the project managers will be assigning two new projects: one large, complicated, and lucrative office building project, and one small, basic, cheap store. A male coworker is assigned to the lucrative project and you are assigned to the small store. You both started working for the company at the same time and have had similar rates of success in your previous building projects.	Elaine Roberts was the only female superintendent in her construction company. Her current project was almost completed, and she was ready to begin a new project. She knew that the project managers would be assigning two new projects: one large, complicated, and lucrative office building project, and one small, basic, cheap store. A male coworker was assigned to the lucrative project and she was assigned to the small store. They both started working for the company at the same time and had similar rates of success in their previous building projects.
Overt interpersonal	You are working as an administrative assistant for the president of a construction company. One of the project managers stops at your desk and asks whether the president is available. You respond that he is out of the office, and ask if there is anything that you can help with. The project manager rolls his eyes and says, "I don't think that anyone in a dress can answer a question about construction."	Jennifer Taylor was working as an administrative assistant for the president of a construction company. One of the project managers stopped at her desk and asked whether the president was available. She responded that he was out of the office, and asked if there was anything that she could help with. The project manager rolled his eyes and said, "I don't think that anyone in a dress can answer a question about construction."
Overt formal	Imagine that you overhear your male co-worker discussing his recent pay raise. Although you received higher performance evaluations than he did, you did not receive an increase in pay. You decide to approach your male supervisor to ask for a comparable increase in pay. He refuses, and tells you that, "Women do not deserve to make as much as men."	Sarah Walls overheard her male co-worker discussing his recent pay raise. Although she received higher performance evaluations than he did, Sarah did not receive an increase in pay. She decided to approach her male supervisor to ask for a comparable increase in pay. He refused, and told her that, "Women do not deserve to make as much as men."

discriminatory behaviors are hard to confront due to their covert nature. Indeed, it is difficult to take action with regard to discrimination without solid proof that it has occurred (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008). Overt discriminatory behaviors do not present such an obstacle. Action can be taken against overt behavior due to the indisputable evidence associated with such discriminatory behaviors (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011). Additionally, we reason that instances of overt discrimination are more likely to be deemed by targets as requiring immediate action (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008), making women more likely to

take responsibility for responding. Overall, we predict that women will be more likely to recognize and engage in behavioral action in response to overt discrimination than subtle discrimination because of the nature of the discrimination and the level of difficulty associated with proving that subtle discrimination has actually occurred. More formally, we propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2.* Women will be more likely to recognize and take action against overt when compared to subtle forms of discrimination.

Divergent from the interpersonal form of discrimination, formal discrimination is illegal and there are several nationwide laws in place to help prevent it in an occupational setting. For example, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission exists to protect the rights of individuals within the workplace, so that employees have a way to combat discrimination when encountered if they so desire (Foster & Matheson, 1998). Furthermore, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 allows protection from formal gender discrimination in the workplace. However, there is less clear protection from interpersonal gender discrimination in the workplace. Of the two, we expect that women are more likely to take action against formal discrimination, partly because there is legal precedent for doing so. Additionally, formal discrimination affects the livelihood of the employee in terms of job status, salary, and career opportunities. Due to formal discrimination being illegal and having such serious potential consequences, we think that women will be more likely to take action against this form of injustice (Hebl et al., 2002). Additionally, women may be more likely to take action against this form of discrimination simply because their efforts are more likely to result in organizational changes based on the law. Indeed, Vroom's (1982) expectancy theory posits that individuals are more likely to work for a given outcome (in this case, discrimination reduction) if they believe their behavioral action will actually result in that outcome. While women likely perceive this instrumentality for formal discrimination, which is illegal, we argue that this instrumentality (and thus women's behavioral action) will not be as strong for interpersonal discrimination, which is more difficult to persecute. Previous research has supported this notion by showing that minorities are more likely to confront when they believe their actions will actually change the situation (Good et al., 2012; Rattan & Dweck, 2010).

Importantly, and perhaps somewhat controversially, we do not expect there to be recognition differences between formal and interpersonal manifestations of discrimination. Although many previous authors have referred to interpersonal discrimination as being more subtle and ambiguous in nature (e.g., lack of eye contact, lack of smiling, general negativity in an interaction; Hebl et al., 2002; King, Shapiro, Hebl, Singetary, & Turner, 2006), we would argue that this conceptualization confounds interpersonal and subtle manifestations of discrimination in precisely the way we are trying to avoid. Recall that our conceptual distinction between subtlety and form is that while subtlety refers to how obvious it is that an instance of discrimination refers to one's gender, form refers to how job-related an instance of discrimination is. Thus, all else being equal (i.e., holding subtlety constant), women should be equally able to recognize interpersonal and formal manifestations of discrimination. More formally, we hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 3.* Women will be equally likely to recognize formal and interpersonal discrimination, but they will be more likely to take action against discrimination that is formal than interpersonal.

## Study 1: Method

### Participants

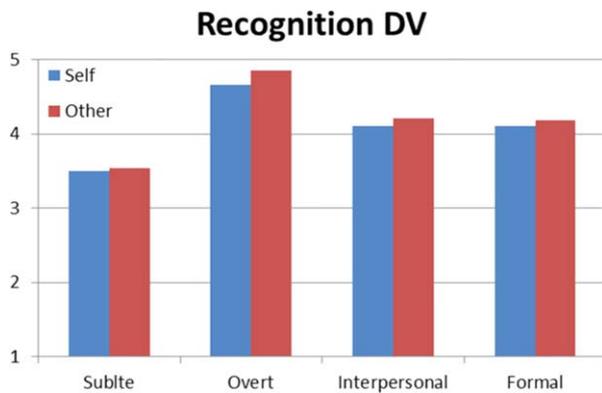
Participants for this study were members of the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC). The NAWIC consists of many organizations, construction company owners, tradeswomen, engineers, architects, and secretaries, all of whom work in the construction industry. The women belonging to the NAWIC total 5,000 members. 3,000 members were selected at random. Of the 3,000 questionnaires that were sent out and issued to the NAWIC members, a total of 657 were returned, yielding a 21.9% response rate. The sample was 92% Caucasian, had an average age of 45 years old, and an average tenure of 16 years.

### Procedure

All participants received an envelope containing a cover letter, a survey to be completed by the employee and a postage paid envelope used to return the materials to the researcher. In the survey, participants responded to fictitious scenario instances of discrimination in the workplace. Participants were each presented with five scenarios that varied in terms of subtlety (subtle vs. overt) and formality (formal vs. interpersonal). Scenarios also varied based on the focus of the discrimination, such that half of the participants were told to imagine themselves in the scenario, and the other half of participants were told to imagine someone else in the scenario. A model of a sample scenario taken from the survey, representing an overt, interpersonal scenario focused on oneself is as follows (see Table 1 for all scenarios used in this study):

You are working as an administrative assistant for the president of a construction company. One of the project managers stops at your desk and asks whether the president is available. You respond that he is out of the office, and ask if there is anything that you can help with. The project manager rolls his eyes and says, "I don't think that anyone in a dress can answer a question about construction."

Following each scenario, participants were asked two questions about the degree to which they recognized the scenario as displaying discrimination (i.e., recognition; "How likely is it that you experienced unfair treatment because of your gender in this scenario?"), and the likelihood that they would take action against such an expression of prejudice (i.e., taking action; "If this actually occurred in your present

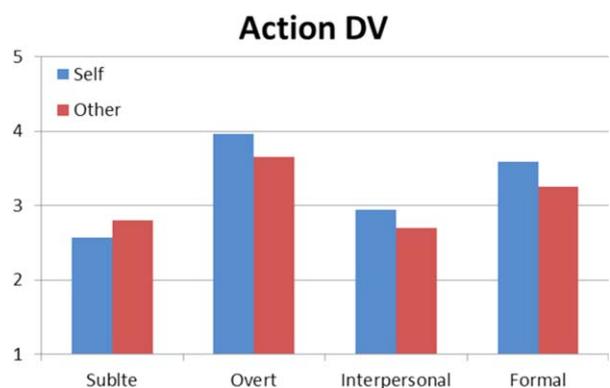


**Figure 1** Results for the recognition dependent variable—Study 1.

organization, how likely is it that you would make a formal complaint about the situation?”). Participants responded using a scale ranging from 1 (not at all likely) to 5 (extremely likely).

## Study 1: Results

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a 2 (subtlety: subtle vs. overt) X 2 (form: formal vs. interpersonal) X 2 (response: recognition vs. action) X 2 (focus: self vs. other) mixed model MANOVA (see Figures 1 and 2 for results as they pertain to the recognition and action dependent variables, respectively). We conducted simple effects tests using the Bonferroni alpha correction to probe all significant interactions. In support of Hypothesis 1, response and focus interacted ( $F(1, 603) = 25.76, p < .01$ ) such that women were more likely to recognize discrimination directed at others ( $M = 4.20$ ) than themselves ( $M = 4.08; F(1, 602) = 2.22, p < .05$ ), but they were more likely to take action when the discrimination was directed at themselves ( $M = 3.27$ ) when compared to others ( $M = 2.98; F(1, 602) = 13.53, p < .01$ ). In support of Hypothesis 2, results revealed a main effect for subtlety of discrimination, such that women were more likely to recognize



**Figure 2** Results for the taking action dependent variable—Study 1.

and take action against overt ( $M = 4.28$ ) forms of discrimination when compared to more subtle ( $M = 2.90$ ) forms ( $F(1, 602) = 1,542.23, p < .01$ ). In support of Hypothesis 3, form and response interacted ( $F(1, 602) = 291.87, p < .01$ ) such that while there was not a difference in recognizing interpersonal ( $M = 4.14$ ) and formal ( $M = 4.13; F(1, 602) = .16, p = .70$ ) discrimination, women were more likely to take action against formal ( $M = 3.42$ ) when compared to interpersonal ( $M = 2.82; F(1, 602) = 282.10, p < .01$ ) discrimination.

## Study 1: Discussion

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine the PGDD and the degree to which it (a) applies to all manifestations of discrimination, and (b) extends beyond perceptions of discrimination to acting in response to it. Our findings replicated the PGDD when it comes to perceptions of discrimination by showing that women were more likely to recognize discrimination directed at others when compared to themselves. However, this effect was reversed for behavioral action such that women were more likely to take action against discrimination when it was directed at them personally. Additionally, we explored boundary conditions of these effects in terms of how different manifestations of discrimination can engender differing responses to these incidents. Specifically, we examined the subtlety and form of discrimination, finding that women were (a) more likely to recognize and take action against overt instances of discrimination, and (b) more likely to take action against formal than interpersonal instances of discrimination.

## Study 2

There are several limitations from Study 1 that we attempt to address in Study 2. First, the first study was based on vignettes, where participants were asked to imagine themselves in hypothetical scenarios. From previous research, we know that people do not always react to prejudice the way that they think they should once they are actually in a discriminatory situation (e.g., Good et al., 2012; Rattan & Dweck, 2010). Second, the sample was based on one male-dominated profession where sexism is likely salient and effects of discrimination may be more pronounced. Third, we used single-item scales to measure both recognition of and action against discrimination, which can have limited reliability and, thus, limited validity estimates. As a result, we sought to replicate the study and retest the same set of hypotheses in a more externally valid context by capturing actual experiences of discrimination with a more representative sample of working women. We further examine women's reports of genuine reactions to these experiences using multi-item scales for recognition of and action taken against different forms of discrimination.

**Table 2** Descriptive Statistics for Focal Variables from Study 2

Subtlety	Form	Focus	N	Recognition		Action	
				M	SD	M	SD
Subtle	Interpersonal	Self	80	3.07	1.03	1.95	1.00
		Other	36	3.63	1.12	2.00	1.09
	Formal	Self	19	3.61	.95	2.30	1.20
		Other	35	3.62	.98	2.51	1.30
Overt	Interpersonal	Self	53	3.88	1.00	2.53	1.27
		Other	45	3.69	1.06	2.29	1.21
	Formal	Self	35	4.08	.84	2.41	1.19
		Other	46	3.99	.87	2.34	1.25

## Study 2: Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited via Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online platform where individuals complete surveys or tasks in exchange for monetary compensation. In recent years, MTurk has enjoyed increasing popularity among social scientists as a data collection tool and past studies have demonstrated MTurk as a reliable method that is comparable to more traditional methods of data collection in terms of behavioral patterns while also having a clear advantage of attracting a more diverse subject pool (Behrend, Sharek, Meade, & Wiebe, 2011; Butler et al., 2012; Polman, 2012). Our overall sample consisted of 246 women working at least 40 hours per week in the United States. A total of 193 respondents provided useable data. The ethnic composition of the final sample was 78.2% Caucasian, 12.1% African American, 4.4% Asian, and 1.6% Hispanic. Mean age of the participants was 41 years and average job tenure in their current position was about 4 years.

### Procedure

Participants responded to an MTurk advertisement to complete our questionnaire in exchange for \$0.50. After providing informed consent, each participant recalled two critical incidents of discrimination, one directed at themselves and another directed at another woman in the organization. Finally, participants answered a series of questions regarding the degree to which they recognized the experience as discriminatory and took action in each scenario.

### Measures

#### Subtlety, Form, and Focus

To encourage participants to report a variety of experiences that varied in terms of subtlety and form, we randomly asked participants to either “Please describe a

situation in which you may have been treated differently than your male coworkers” or “Please describe a situation in which you felt discriminated against because of your gender at work.” The same questions were asked for their observations of another woman who “may have been treated differently than her male coworkers” or who “may have been discriminated against because of her gender.” Participants’ descriptions of these incidents (we asked for four to five sentences describing each instance) were coded by two independent coders for their dichotomous categorization of subtlety, form, and focus of discrimination. That is, two coders categorized 349 incidents into subtle or overt, formal or interpersonal, and self or other forms of discrimination, with an inter-rater agreement of 74.21%. Remaining disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

### Recognition

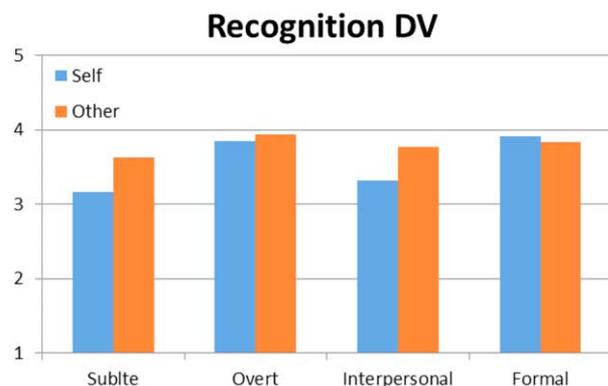
Recognition was measured by a 4-item scale developed for this study on a scale ranging from 1 (to no extent) to 5 (to a very large extent). A sample item is “To what extent did you consider this evidence of discrimination at the time of the situation?” ( $\alpha = .96$ ). See Appendix for the full scale.

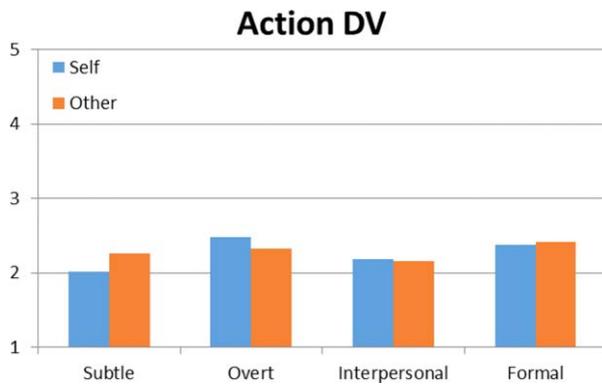
### Action

Action was measured by a 4-item scale developed for this study ranging from 1 (to no extent) to 5 (to a very large extent). A sample item is “To what extent did you confront the unfair treatment in this situation?” ( $\alpha = .91$ ). See Appendix for the full scale.

## Study 2: Results

To test our hypotheses in a manner parallel to Study 1, we conducted a 2 (subtlety: subtle vs. overt) X 2 (form: formal vs. interpersonal) X 2 (response: recognition vs. action) X 2 (focus: self vs. other) mixed model MANOVA. We conducted

**Figure 3** Results for the recognition dependent variable—Study 2.



**Figure 4** Results for the taking action dependent variable—Study 2.

simple effects tests using the Bonferroni alpha correction to probe all significant interactions. Descriptive statistics and frequencies for focal variables can be found in Table 2, while patterns of findings for recognition of and action against discrimination can be found in Figures 3 and 4, respectively.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that focus and response would interact such that women would be more likely to recognize discrimination directed at others than themselves, but they would be more likely to take action when the discrimination was directed at themselves compared to others. Contrary to Study 1, results revealed an insignificant two-way interaction between focus and response ( $F(1, 341) = 1.74, p = .19$ ). Hypothesis 2 predicted a main effect for subtlety of discrimination, such that women would be more likely to recognize and take action against overt forms of discrimination when compared to more subtle forms. Corroborating Study 1 and providing further support for Hypothesis 2, results revealed a significant main effect of subtlety ( $F(1, 341) = 8.64; p < .01$ ) such that women were more likely to recognize overt forms ( $M = 3.89$ ) than subtle forms of discrimination ( $M = 3.36$ ). Women were also more likely to take action against overt discrimination ( $M = 2.40$ ) when compared to subtle discrimination ( $M = 2.12$ ). Hypothesis 3 predicted that form and response would interact such that while there would be no difference in recognizing interpersonal and formal discrimination, women would be more likely to take action against formal when compared to interpersonal discrimination. Inconsistent with Study 1, we found an insignificant two-way interaction between form and response ( $F(1, 341) = .17, p = .68$ ).

Importantly, the insignificant two-way interactions pertaining to hypotheses 1 and 3 were qualified by a 3-way interaction between focus, form, and response ( $F(1, 341) = 4.52; p < .05$ ) such that women were more likely to recognize discrimination directed toward others ( $M = 3.77$ ) than toward themselves ( $M = 3.32; F(1, 341) = 6.71, p < .01$ ) when it was interpersonal in nature. This pattern was reversed for taking action, such that women were more likely to take action

when interpersonal discrimination was directed at themselves ( $M = 2.18$ ) when compared to others ( $M = 2.16$ ), although this mean pattern was not significant ( $F(1, 341) = .32, p = .57$ ). This result provides partial support for Hypothesis 1 by replicating the PGDD for recognition while suggesting that it may not exist in the same direction for behavioral action, but only when discrimination is interpersonal in nature. In contrast, Study 1 demonstrated this interaction regardless of the form of discrimination. In interpreting this interaction with regard to Hypothesis 3, women were shown to be somewhat more likely to take action against formal discrimination ( $M = 2.42$ ) than against interpersonal discrimination ( $M = 2.16; F(1, 341) = 2.32, p = .13$ ) when it was directed at others. Consistent with our expectations, results also showed no difference in the recognition of interpersonal ( $M = 3.77$ ) and formal ( $M = 3.83; F(1, 341) = .09, p = .76$ ) discrimination directed at others. Counter to our expectations, women were shown to be more likely to recognize formal ( $M = 3.91$ ) than interpersonal ( $M = 3.32; F(1, 341) = 7.40, p < .01$ ) discrimination directed at them personally. These results provide partial support for Hypothesis 3 by demonstrating that women may be more likely to take action against formal than interpersonal discrimination (a finding that we predicted and supported in Study 1) when it is directed at others. However, we were unable to fully replicate the other part of this hypothesis (which was supported in Study 1) pertaining to there being no difference in the recognition of formal vs. interpersonal discrimination directed at the self.

## Study 2: Discussion

The purpose of Study 2 was to replicate findings from Study 1 by examining the PGDD in reference to different forms of discrimination (based on subtlety and form) and women's responses to them. Overall, this ecologically valid approach of objectively coding self-generated recollections provided a fair amount of support for our hypotheses and replicated several results from Study 1. In general, women were more likely to recognize and take action against overt forms of discrimination, as opposed to more subtle forms. The PGDD itself was also partially replicated such that women were more likely to recognize the instance as discrimination when it was directed at others as compared to themselves when the discrimination was interpersonal in nature. Importantly, the PGDD was again not replicated when the outcome of interest was behavioral action taken against discrimination.

The finding of Study 2 that departs from Study 1 is the lack of significant 2-way interactions between both response and focus and response and form. However, we did find a significant 3-way interaction between response, form, and focus that served to qualify the lower-order interactions in

a manner that was relatively consistent with our expectations. Indeed, when examining Figure 1 through 4 collectively, our patterns of relationships for reactions to different forms of discrimination in Study 2 are very similar to the findings of Study 1. The exception to this consistency was formal discrimination, where there appeared to be very little difference between women's recognition of and action against discrimination when it is directed to themselves or others. This may be a product of methodological differences between studies 1 and 2. Indeed, while we used experimental vignettes in Study 1, we used self-generated recollections of discrimination in Study 2. Thus, it is possible that formal discrimination, especially when recalled personally, is so consequential that women differentiate less between whether it is directed to themselves or other women because its job-relatedness makes the consequences of such discrimination particularly salient to all women in the workplace. Overall, this study extends the generalizability of several findings from Study 1 and supports the notion that the PGDD manifests itself differentially in various forms of discrimination.

## General discussion

Together, the findings of these two studies have several implications for the phenomenon that is the PGDD and for the study of discrimination more generally. First, it appears as though the PGDD behaves differently (perhaps even in the exact opposite direction) when the outcome of interest is behavioral action toward discrimination as opposed to simple recognition of its existence. This finding sheds some light on the theoretical reasoning for why the PGDD for the recognition of discrimination exists in the first place. In the introduction, we listed three theoretical explanations for why women are more likely to recognize when directed as others as compared to themselves: (1) that they recognize personal experiences of discrimination but discount them to protect their self-esteem, (2) that discrimination against a group of others is simply easier to perceive than discrimination against oneself, and (3) that women discount the personal self in favor of the group when considering instances of discrimination. Our findings seem to indicate that the first explanation fits better than the other two, given that women were more likely to take action against discrimination directed at themselves than they were to actually recognize it as an instance of discrimination. Indeed, previous theoretical work indicates that one must first realize that discrimination has occurred before being able to confront it (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008). Thus, our findings seem to indicate that women actually do recognize instances of discrimination directed at themselves, but perhaps are only willing to report recognizing them as such when they can also take behavioral actions against these instances.

Our findings also have implications for the future conceptualization of differing manifestations of discrimination. There is currently a substantial degree of confusion in the literature regarding construct clarity as it relates to the subtlety and form of varying instances of discrimination. Specifically, researchers often treat subtle and interpersonal forms of discrimination as identical, and they do the same for overt and formal forms of discrimination. Counter to these conflation, our work indicates that targets of discrimination can reliably differentiate between subtle and interpersonal and overt and formal forms of discrimination, respectively. Indeed, our findings show that women respond differently to instances of discrimination both based on its subtlety (subtle vs. overt) and form (formal vs. interpersonal). Additionally, when asking women to report actual instances of discrimination they had experienced in the workplace, coders were able to reliably code such instances based on the separate (if not completely orthogonal) dimensions of subtlety and form. Thus, these should be considered as distinct constructs, as opposed to separate ends of the same spectrum, when being considered in future research. This could lead to a more nuanced understanding of how targets and bystanders react to qualitatively different instances of discrimination in the workplace.

## Practical implications

Practically speaking, our findings have implications for targets of prejudice, their allies, and the organizations in which they are embedded. First, targets of prejudice and their allies need to realize that they are not doing themselves any favors by not responding to instances of prejudice when they witness them in the first place. Indeed, previous research has shown that negative consequences such as emotional discomfort can emerge from witnessing discrimination without acting out against it (Schmader, Croft, Scarnier, Lickel, & Mendes, 2012). Our findings seem to indicate that workplaces are filled with individuals that experience such emotional discomfort, with observers of prejudice likely to recognize occurrences of discrimination directed at others while simultaneously being unwilling to speak up against these discriminatory instances. We view this as a missed opportunity for social change, given that prejudice confrontation has been shown to be an effective method for reducing subsequent expressions of prejudice (Czopp & Monteith, 2003), particularly when it is enacted by observers rather than targets of prejudice (Shelton & Stewart, 2004). Indeed, previous research has shown that confronting prejudice can result in backlash when the confronter is from the stigmatized group being discriminated against, but this backlash is less common when the confronter is a nonstigmatized individual (e.g.,

Kaiser & Miller, 2004; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). Additionally, work has shown that individuals tend to look to authority figures and leaders to act during instances of discrimination (Lindsey, Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, & Goodwin, 2015). Thus, nonstigmatized allies and organizational leaders should be encouraged to detect and take action against discrimination.

Second, organizations should investigate strategies to promote the detection of and behavioral action against all forms of discrimination (see Lindsey, King, McCausland, Jones, & Dunleavy, 2013 for an expansive discussion of discrimination reduction tactics). Such strategies should involve education as to what exactly constitutes discrimination in the first place. This may be particularly important for subtle forms of discrimination, given that our findings show that these forms are the least recognizable and previous work indicates that these subtle forms of discrimination may be even more psychologically damaging than their more overt counterparts (Jones, Peddie, Gilrane, King, & Gray, in press). These strategies should also involve educating employees as to how to appropriately respond to instances of discrimination in the workplace. First, formal policies should be in place to involve supervisors to help deal with the issue when targets or allies do not feel comfortable in responding to instances of discrimination on their own. Second, behavior monitoring training (BMT) could be used to model successful responses to discrimination to employees. BMT is a social learning approach to training that models a given behavior (e.g., responding to discrimination) before giving participants a chance to practice that behavior, which should result in higher transfer to the workplace environment (Taylor, Russ-Eft, & Chan, 2005). Finally, perspective taking—actively considering the psychological experiences of others (Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011)—could be an effective diversity training method to remove the PGDD as it pertains to discrimination recognition. The idea here is that perspective taking could reduce the discrepancy between self and others, thus, producing more behavioral action against discrimination in the workplace. Indeed, recent work has shown that perspective taking can have a positive impact on diversity-related behaviors (Lindsey, King, Hebl, & Levine, 2014).

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## Limitations and future research directions

These provocative findings should be interpreted in light of the studies' limitations. One limitation of Study 2 is that we collected instances of discrimination by asking participants to retrospectively recall their experiences, a process which can be subject to a variety of memory fallacies and does not present the entire picture of the instance. Future research should examine women's responses to different forms of discrimination through high-fidelity laboratory simulations of discrimination or field experiments. Another limitation of these studies is that we somewhat artificially dichotomized subtlety and form of discrimination into subtle vs. overt and interpersonal vs. formal, respectively. In reality, these important constructs are likely continuous. Thus, future research should examine this possibility and the implications that it may have for our results and conclusions. A final limitation is that we used single incidents of discrimination, in the form of vignettes form in Study 1 and critical incidents provided by participants in Study 2, which do not capture the more chronic experience of discrimination by women in the workplace or the environment that surrounds such instances. Other contextual factors such as psychological safety and organizational culture may also influence women's decision to take action against injustice. Future research should examine possible factors that can explain the lack of consistent findings of PGDD in recognition of and behavioral action against different forms of discrimination, especially when discrimination is formal in nature.

## Conclusion

Our studies suggest that the PGDD behaves differently depending on whether our focus is on the recognition of or behavioral action taken toward instances of discrimination in the workplace. Our studies also reveal that reactions to discrimination depend on both the subtlety and form of discrimination. Targets of prejudice, their allies, and organizations should be aware of such findings to guide education as to both the recognition of and behavioral action toward these nuanced experiences of discrimination in the workplace.

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## **Appendix**

### **Measures for Study 2**

#### **Recognition of discrimination**

1. To what extent did you consider this evidence of discrimination at the time of the situation?
2. To what extent did you consider this evidence of unfair treatment at the time of the situation?
3. To what extent did you consider this evidence of injustice at the time of the situation?

4. To what extent did you consider this evidence of inequity at the time of the situation?

#### **Action taken against discrimination**

1. To what extent did you confront the unfair treatment in this situation?
2. To what extent did you take action against unfair treatment in this situation?
3. To what extent did you make a formal complaint to the organization regarding this situation?
4. To what extent did you speak up about unfair treatment in this situation?