A Closer Look at the Mechanisms of Perceived Job Discrimination:
“How I Think You Think about Us”

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Job discrimination and meta-stereotypes

Abstract

Anderson (this issue) provides a rich conceptual framework describing the factors that may affect perceived job discrimination in selection. Although this framework presents a detailed agenda for future research, it is currently less clear how these factors are assumed to lead to perceived job discrimination. To advance our theoretical understanding of the mechanisms involved, I propose that research on perceived job discrimination might benefit from drawing on the social psychological literature on meta-stereotypes. In the current commentary, I briefly describe the concept of meta-stereotypes, summarize factors that have been found to affect meta-stereotypes and delineate potential counterintuitive implications of activated meta-stereotypes for dealing with perceived job discrimination and complaints in selection.
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In August 2009, a Belgian senator asked the vice-Prime Minister in the Belgian senate to make public a list with the names of all companies that had been mentioned in accusations of discriminatory hiring practices at the Centre of Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism (Belgian Senate, 2009). The request had been made in response to a law case against a temporary employment agency that was accused of using a secret code to identify resumes of applicants from a white, Belgian background and to exclude minority applicants. In the legal case, the agency was acquitted from all charges. However, notwithstanding the acquittal, some politicians and action groups wanted this and other discredited companies to be put in the pillory to prevent others from similarly engaging in the alleged practices.

The meager evidence for the effects of unfavorable applicant reactions on key organizational consequences has been called the Achilles heel of this field (Sackett & Lievens, 2008). The above-described example, however, illustrates that when it comes to perceived job discrimination, negative applicant reactions may have a dramatic effect on organizational image. As a result, recruiters and hiring specialists have become very cautious about being perceived as discriminatory. Even when taking all measures possible to develop a fair selection system, organizations are at risk of being accused of discriminatory practices.

The rich conceptual framework proposed by Anderson (this issue) is an important step forward to increase our understanding of the factors that may affect perceived job discrimination in selection. The framework provides a detailed research agenda that can guide future research on perceived job discrimination and ultimately, may help organizations avoid unsubstantiated legal cases. Although the framework will be most helpful for future research, it is currently less clear how the factors identified are assumed to lead to perceived job discrimination. On the basis of the model developed in Anderson (in press), it might be
difficult to understand how specific perceptions of procedural justice may result in perceived job discrimination for some minority applicants but not for others.

I propose that the activation of meta-stereotypes could be one of the key mechanisms explaining why minority applicants will feel discriminated and may initiate a case. Previous research examining why and how people discriminate in the workplace has highly benefited from insights in social psychology on stereotyping (Goldman, Gutek, Stein, & Lewis, 2006). Similar to this line of research linking stereotypes to job discrimination, social psychological research on meta-stereotypes may strengthen the theoretical underpinnings of research on perceived job discrimination. A better insight in the mechanisms involved in perceived job discrimination is important as it will lead to a better understanding of the motives for litigation and help organizations develop strategies to affect unjustified discrimination perceptions and, thus avoid legal cases.

Meta-stereotypes

Meta-stereotypes refer to the beliefs that a member of group A has about the stereotypes that members of a specific out-group B typically have about members of in-group A (Vorauer, Main, & O’Connell, 1998). Stated differently, people endorsing meta-stereotypes in a specific interaction situation with an out-group have thoughts about “how I think that you think about us”. For instance, Moroccan teenagers in the Netherlands were found to expect that the Dutch majority would characterize them as “criminal”, “aggressive”, and “extreme Muslim” (Kamans, Gordijn, Oldenhuis, & Otten, 2009). Meta-stereotypes are different from self-stereotypes because they have a relational component. For instance, the meta-stereotype that the French have of the Americans is not necessarily the same as the meta-stereotype that the French have of Belgians or the stereotypes the French have of themselves (Vorauer, Hunter, Main, & Roy, 2000). Meta-stereotypes can be negative, neutral or positive (e.g., thinking that an out-group holds a positive stereotype about the in-group). However, most research has looked at negative meta-stereotypes as these have been found to have the most dramatic effects in intergroup contact (Vorauer et al., 1998).
Research suggests that activation of meta-stereotypes can have important effects on attitudes and behavior during interactions. First, endorsing meta-stereotypes has been found to affect behavior in the direction of the stereotypes that people believe the out-group holds about them. For instance, Kamans et al. (2009) found that the same Moroccan teenagers who felt negative about the Dutch and thought that they were personally negatively stereotyped, expressed attitudes in line with this negative meta-stereotype. That is, they acted in line with the out-group’s negative image by legitimizing criminality, aggression, and Muslim extremism. Thus, being confronted with a negative stereotype about one’s group might sometimes lead to a reaction that confirms existing stereotypes and is actually harmful for oneself and the stereotyped group. This process resembles somewhat the process of a self-fulfilling prophecy, but is situated in an intergroup context instead of an interpersonal context.

Second, if people believe someone holds negative thoughts about them or their group, their interactions with that person will be emotionally affected, and will become laden with negative attitudes about that interaction. For instance, in a series of experiments on the effects of meta-stereotyping, White Canadians were found to believe that an individual Aboriginal person would hold extremely negative expectations about them as a function of their racial group (Vorauer et al., 2000). In the context of intergroup interactions, these beliefs were associated with lower anticipated enjoyment of interaction with an out-group member and greater anticipated negative emotion during that interaction. In addition, for individuals feeling stereotyped by an out-group member this constituted a threat to their self-concept, fostering lower-self-esteem and self-concept clarity (Vorauer et al., 1998).

In his model of perceived job discrimination, Anderson (this issue) describes a number of perceived procedural characteristics and selection method/system characteristics as antecedents of perceived job discrimination. The concept of meta-stereotype activation might be one of the crucial mechanisms linking these antecedents to perceptions of job discrimination. When specific situational factors in the selection procedure activate meta-stereotyping in minority applicants, this might set off a circular process wherein minority
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applicants engage in a maladaptive pattern of behavior (e.g., confirming the assumed stereotype, for instance, by being too late for a job interview), cognition (e.g., self-derogatory internal remarks) and emotions (e.g., frustration, negative emotions towards the selecting organization), which might trigger actual stereotyping by the selector. The stereotyping by selectors, in turn, might further reinforce the activation of meta-stereotypes leading to strong feelings of job discrimination in the applicant. An early study on the differential drop-out rates of minority and majority applicants due to time lags in selection procedures (Arvey, Godron, Massengill, & Mussio, 1975) may illustrate how meta-stereotyping can help explain the effects of situational factors on minority group attitudes and behavior in selection. Whereas the authors originally advanced job expectations and competing job offers as possible reasons for the differential effects (see also Ployhart, McFarland, & Ryan, 2002), the observed effects seem also congruent with a meta-stereotype hypothesis. It might be that minority applicants interpret the long waiting period as a sign of the recruiters’ negative stereotypes about them (e.g., “the recruiter probably thinks it is not useful to invite me for an interview because they think I will not show up”). As a result, Blacks’ meta-stereotypes regarding White recruiters might lead to the assimilation of the stereotype and perceptions of discrimination. By not showing up for the first selection procedure, they confirm the assumed stereotype leading to higher drop-out rates among minority applicants vis-à-vis majority applicants. This process, in turn, might strengthen negative stereotyping by selectors and maybe evoke actual discrimination for other minority applicants. Of course, such an explanation needs further empirical testing and merely serves as an illustration of how meta-stereotypes may link situational factors to minority applicant attitudes and behavior.

Thus, I propose that situational factors in the selection context will be associated with perceived job discrimination only if they have the potential to activate meta-stereotypes in minority group applicants. Indeed, meta-stereotypes become activated only when there is some situational cue in an intergroup situation that makes it relevant to determine how one is seen by the out-group (Vorauer et al., 2000). Although research on meta-stereotyping is still developing, several studies have identified individual differences and situational factors that
increase the likelihood that meta-stereotypes will affect people’s thoughts and perceptions. Thus, a better understanding of these activating variables may bring more insight into which components of the selection process can cause perceived job discrimination.

Activating Conditions

A first condition that activates meta-stereotyping is the potential for evaluation of an out-group member (Vorauer et al., 2000). This implies that meta-stereotypes might be easily activated during selection procedures, as the evaluative nature of the interactions in selection is very explicit and might be difficult, if not impossible to ignore. However, this also implies that any strategy or procedure that helps putting less emphasis on evaluation by out-group members may be helpful to avoid meta-stereotype activation in selection. As organizations cannot match interviewers based on the group membership of applicants, one option might be to compose a selection or interview panel representative of all groups involved. The necessary conditions for meta-stereotype activation, however, seem rather minimal. Although being exposed to an insignificant audience – the mere exposure hypothesis – is not enough to invoke this type of outside perspective, even the simple prospect of a conversation with an out-group member might be enough to trigger meta-stereotypes (Vorauer et al., 2000).

A second condition that has been found to activate meta-stereotyping is powerlessness (Lammers, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). Power involves the ability of the powerful party to influence the outcomes of the powerless party. In an intergroup setting in which one is dependent on a powerful out-group that can freely decide about wins and losses, it is important for the powerless to try and predict how powerful group members see members from the other group to anticipate how means might be distributed. Because meta-stereotypes offer this type of information, meta-stereotyping can help obtain this goal. In line with this reasoning, the negative effect of power on meta-stereotyping was mediated by perspective taking (Lammers et al., 2008). In the context of selection, this would mean that techniques or variables that instigate a feeling of powerlessness in comparison to the powerful (e.g., hiring organization) might increase the activation of meta-stereotypes. For
instance, Anderson (this issue) identified beliefs over labor market conditions as a potential moderator in the relation between procedural characteristics and perceived job discrimination. This hypothesis seems congruent with meta-stereotype theory. When minority applicants believe they are in a very weak position in the labor market with little opportunities for employment, this may increase feelings of powerlessness leading to increased activation of meta-stereotypes. This, in turn, might strengthen perceptions of job discrimination.

A third condition found to affect meta-stereotypes is empathy. Vorauer and Sasaki (2009) made participants view a documentary detailing hardships experienced by an out-group, and instructed them to focus on the feelings and perspective of an out-group member featured in the documentary or to adopt an objective stance. When empathy was instantiated during a subsequent intergroup exchange, it failed to exert its usual positive effect on intergroup attitudes and led higher-prejudiced individuals to derogate an out-group member who was an interaction partner. Additional mediation analyses indicated that activation of negative meta-stereotypes regarding the out-group's view of the in-group accounted for these effects. Thus, although it is generally assumed that empathy may facilitate intergroup processes, this study showed that it might also lead to increased meta-stereotyping with its associated maladaptive effects. Although counterintuitive, this would imply that hiring organizations might benefit from decreasing feelings of empathy in minority applicants. For instance, providing specific instructions at the start of the selection process wherein applicants are asked not to try to understand how the recruiters think about the applicants would seem advisable.

A fourth condition that facilitates activation of meta-stereotypes is the presence of high public self-consciousness. Individuals high in public self-consciousness, but not private self-consciousness, were found to report more meta-stereotypes in prospect of interacting with an out-group member (Vorauer et al., 2000). Therefore, any situational factors in the selection process that are potentially related to perceived job discrimination would have stronger effects for applicant high in public self-consciousness.
A fifth factor that might affect meta-stereotyping is *prejudice*. Whereas Vorauer et al. (2000) found that even low-prejudiced individuals activated traits such as “cruel” and “racist” when imagining interaction with an out-group member, Kamans et al. (2009) found that highly prejudiced Moroccans that felt personally stereotyped exhibited more negative cognitions and attitudes (e.g., legitimizing terrorism and Muslim extremism) than low-prejudiced Moroccans. On the one hand, this suggests that the valence of applicants’ own racial attitudes might be unrelated to meta-stereotype activation. Regardless whether one holds positive or negative feelings towards the out-group, applicants will develop meta-stereotypes when concerned about their evaluation. On the other hand, high-prejudiced individuals might assimilate faster with the stereotype and therefore, may act more easily on these meta-stereotypes, for instance, by shifting to more maladaptive behavior (Vorauer et al., 2009).

Sixth, individuals according *high importance to their racial attitudes* were more apt to think about meta-stereotypes in reference to intergroup interaction than individuals for whom these attitudes were less important (Vorauer et al., 1998, 2000).

Seventh, individual *locus of control* may affect activation of meta-stereotypes. For instance, a survey in the Netherlands among 122 people living with HIV revealed that there were positive and significant relations between external locus of control, meta-stereotyping, and loneliness. People with HIV who felt less in control over their lives were more likely to be lonely as a result of negative thoughts that they had about how they were stereotyped as HIV patients by other people (Gordijn & Boven, 2009). In line with this finding, it could be argued that stronger feelings of control will be associated with less activation of meta-stereotypes. Thus, it might be that minority applicants who perceive fewer opportunities for voice, participation or control over selection procedures might be more apt to activate negative meta-stereotypes and thus, might experience more hiring discrimination.

Overall, this brief summary shows that the emerging social-psychological literature on meta-stereotypes has identified a few situational factors and individual difference variables that affect meta-stereotype activation. Whereas situational factors suggest a number of
strategies that organizations may want to adopt to minimize meta-stereotypes, individual differences offer fewer opportunities for organizations in terms of strategies that can be developed to decrease meta-stereotype activation. Although state-like individual differences might be influenced by situational factors, most individual differences seem more dispositional and will not be malleable in the short time of a selection procedure. If meta-stereotypes indeed play a central role in perceptions of job discrimination as is proposed here, this brief overview points to the need for more research into situational factors that might affect the activation of meta-stereotypes (see Vorauer, 2006, for an overview of existing interventions to affect evaluative concerns in intergroup interaction).

Implications for Dealing with Perceived Job Discrimination

The previous section described variables that may activate meta-stereotypes, which may lead to an increased likelihood of perceived job discrimination. The emerging literature on meta-stereotypes, however, may also have implications with regards to how organizations should deal with candidates that effectively experience feelings of discrimination during or after the selection procedure. Anderson (this issue) suggests that organizational feedback given to unsuccessful candidates in particular ways and with varying degrees of informational specificity may mitigate downward any feelings of perceived discrimination in minority applicants. The provision of informative feedback that is more detailed than outcome decision feedback (e.g., hire/reject) might indeed be an important strategy to enhance applicant reactions in selection procedures. Recent research shows that informative feedback might lead to more favorable applicant perceptions (and test performance) when applicants feel that the feedback provided portrays an accurate picture of their personality or competencies (Anseel & Lievens, 2009). This finding is in line with self-verification theory, which posits that people are motivated to maintain consistency between their self-conceptions and new self-relevant information. They want others to see them as they see themselves and will, therefore, prefer information that confirms their existing self-views such as feedback information that they perceive as self-descriptive (Anseel, Lievens, & Levy, 2007; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2002). The more central and important their self-views, the
more people will go out of their way to obtain confirmation of these self-views. For instance, individuals were found to seek more self-verifying feedback when they were highly certain about their work performance in comparison to when they were moderately certain about their work performance (Anseel & Lievens, 2007).

However, the search for self-verifying feedback may have counterintuitive implications for hiring organizations when activated meta-stereotypes come into play. As described above, when people, especially those high in prejudice, are meta-stereotyped they will assimilate with the stereotype and will become more invested in it, identifying more strongly with the stereotypes that the out-group holds about them. For instance, Dutch Moroccans defended criminality, aggression, and Muslim extremism more when they were meta-stereotyped and believed that these were stereotypes that the majority of the Dutch held about them (Kammans et al., 2009). Thus, when meta-stereotypes were activated, they started identifying more with the actual stereotype than without activation of meta-stereotypes. As self-verification research consistently shows that individuals will try to obtain feedback that confirms central aspects of their identity, this implies that people may go out their way to obtain feedback that confirms the stereotypes that are associated with their group. Contrary to common sense, this would mean that the Dutch Moroccans described in the study of Kammans et al. (2009) with high activation of meta-stereotypes might be inclined to seek feedback that confirms their self-views of being aggressive or Muslim extremist. Indeed, previous self-verification studies show that people will invest effort to make others see their collective group attributes as they see their own group attributes (Chen, Chen, & Shaw, 2004; Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004). In an intriguing set of studies, Gomez, Huici, Seyle and Swann (2009) even showed that individuals strive for confirming feedback about their negative in-group identities (e.g., "Americans are loud") even when such identities were not self-descriptive for them personally ("but I am quiet and unassuming"). Thus, if applicants are meta-stereotyped and are aware of the stereotypes that are ascribed to them, they may act to confirm them even when these do not apply to them.
If these findings generalize to discrimination perceptions in selection situations, this may bring selection practitioners into a very tricky “Catch 22” situation. On the one hand, if selection practitioners respond favorably to self-verifying feedback-seeking behavior from minority applicants, this means that they would have to provide feedback information that is congruent with these in-group stereotypes. This should be advisable because verification of the valence and content of in-group stereotypes has positive effects on evaluations of the source of verification, in this case the hiring recruiter or organization (Gomez et al., 2009). However, this would imply that selection practitioners would have to provide explicit stereotypic feedback (e.g., “yes, you seem to be more aggressive than the average applicant”), which would without any doubt lead to accusations of discriminatory practices. Thus, recommending such feedback practices do not seem realistic.

On the other hand, if recruiters try to explicitly disconfirm the stereotypes about the minority group to avoid accusations of discrimination during feedback, the feedback information may be incongruent with the social self-views of the applicant. Self-verification theory predicts that incongruent feedback will lead to a lower acceptance of feedback, which in turn might be lead to unfavorable applicant perceptions (Anseel & Lievens, 2009). Thus, both feedback strategies may be associated with unfavorable perceptions of minority applicants.

Another implication of this line of research for hiring organizations is that complaint initiation and/or litigation after selection procedures should sometimes be understood as a process of self-verification rather than as an instrumental process to ultimately obtain the position the job candidate has applied for. When people are highly invested in their in-group stereotypes or when their personal and social identities become ‘fused’, they may start litigation not so much for their own benefit, but to attain higher order goals such as defending the rights of the entire group. Swann, Gomez, Seyle, Morales, and Hui (2009) found that for fused persons, group membership is intensely personal, for they feel that they care as much about the outcomes of the group as their own outcomes. Recognizing that their level of devotion to the group is quite extraordinary, fused persons develop a feeling of personal
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responsibility to act on behalf of the group and are more willing to fight for the group than non-fused persons, especially when their personal or social identities had been activated, as may be the case in meta-stereotype activation during selection. Thus, due to meta-stereotype activation in selection, it might that minority applicants litigate not for their own benefit, but to defend the rights of the entire minority in-group. If this is the case, some of the moderators and mechanisms (e.g., labor market conditions, perceived gains, organizational attractiveness, alternative employment opportunities) proposed by Anderson (this issue) become less relevant as they seem more related to instrumental individual goals. Therefore, the key to adequate responding and dealing with litigation seems to be a better understanding of the underlying self-verifying motives of case initiation.

Concluding remarks

The aim of this commentary was to further broaden the theoretical underpinnings of perceived job discrimination and the model presented by Anderson (this issue) by considering the implications of research on meta-stereotypes in social psychology. Of course, caution is needed when generalizing findings from social psychology to selection procedures in organizations. The majority of the findings on meta-stereotypes and self-verification are based on experimental lab studies with students as participants. Although we tried to translate some of these findings to the context of selection, it might be that the processes described are activated only in settings without previously existing strong situational cues, as is often the case in lab settings. In contrast, real-world instrumental motives such as acquiring an attractive job and financial gains might be so strong during selection procedures that they dominate the entire process and prevent the previously described motives and processes from becoming activated. For instance, Anseel and Lievens (2006) demonstrated that when giving genuine feedback to actual employees in a meaningful developmental setting, self-verification processes were much less dominant than has typically been documented in social psychology. Still, Seijts and Latham (2003) have argued the benefits of drawing on theories in social psychology to advance investigations in I/O psychology. Although some of the processes described may currently seem
counterintuitive and even somewhat speculative at times, I believe the literature on meta-
sterotypes in social psychology offers at least a broad and theoretical interesting framework
to think about mechanisms of perceived discrimination. In order to better understand how
selection characteristics may affect perceived job discrimination and how organizations
should respond to complaints and litigations, a rigorous examination of meta-stereotype
activation and associated self-verification strivings in selection is warranted.
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References


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