

Subtle discrimination is easier to acknowledge when self-esteem is high, according to new study

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Science.

The study focused on Asian-Americans as targets of [racial prejudice](#) and discrimination, an understudied group in the scientific literature. The authors say the power of targets of prejudice uniting to confront discriminatory treatment can be viewed through historical movements, such as the American Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, action on behalf of legalizing same-sex marriage and, most recently, the protests in Ferguson, Missouri.

"The perpetrator is very unlikely to admit to discriminating against someone," says Quinton. "It's unfortunate, but if targets don't call attention to discrimination it's unlikely that anyone else will."

Identifying discrimination is a necessary first step toward confronting and ultimately eliminating the stain of prejudice, yet victims may be unlikely to recognize some types of discrimination unless they have higher self-esteem, according to the results of a new study by two University at Buffalo psychologists.

Quinton says the difficulty of coming forward is compounded by previous research findings showing how people who identify themselves as victims of discrimination can be viewed negatively by others, who often see targets as complainers, even when there is clear and indisputable evidence of unfair treatment.

The study's results highlight the density of the discrimination target's burden, faced first with bigotry and then with the onus of pointing out that behavior.

And though this type of overt racism is still present in society, a more subtle discrimination exists as well.

Attributing personal fate to another person's [prejudice](#), however, is not easy and significant personal and social costs accompany the individual's action.

"Most of the discrimination people face in modern society is ambiguous," says Seery. "It's a situation that is important to address because it's easy for observers to miss. So again, the responsibility of attribution is on the target. And that's when [self-esteem](#) really matters."

Yet acknowledging the existence and effects of prejudice and overcoming the costs of doing so can later initiate more collective types of action that contribute to correcting the problem, says Wendy Quinton, whose study with Mark Seery appears in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality*

"We found that self-esteem is a personal resource for recognizing this kind of ambiguous prejudice," adds Quinton. "When prejudice is obvious, people are likely to make an attribution regardless of their

level of self-esteem. When it's less clear, those with higher self-esteem are more likely to make an attribution than those with lower self-esteem."

In the context of discrimination, it's a novel way of approaching the role of self-esteem, which is often examined as a consequence: for instance, does making an attribution to discrimination protect a target's self-esteem.

"We flipped that question in this study and looked at self-esteem as a coping resource that might help people make the kind of attribution that's necessary in order to address prejudice and discrimination in society."

Participants for the study were pre-tested for self-esteem and later evaluated for what was ostensibly presented as a creativity test. All participants were debriefed afterwards and asked for permission to use their data.

Everyone was intentionally given low creativity scores from a white evaluator whose comments fell into one of three categories: a non-specific "poor quality" with no specter of prejudice; a blatantly prejudiced response that explicitly used insensitive language as the reason for poor quality; and a response that was less clear, only hinting at prejudice.

Those participants with high self-esteem had a lower threshold for acknowledging the veiled suggestions of discrimination, such that the difference in self-esteem emerged only when prejudicial cues were ambiguous.

"Among Asian cultures in general, there is a norm of self-criticism. After experiencing failure, it's desirable to focus on what the individual can do better," says Seery. "That might be an adaptive response that motivates self-improvement, but in the context of potentially being discriminated against, it works precisely against the very thing people need to do in order to identify that discrimination has happened and do something about it."

Though the results of this study can only be interpreted in terms of Asian-Americans and looked

at a specific event rather than general perceptions of discrimination in daily life, Quinton says the basic idea that if you don't call attention to [discrimination](#) it is never going to be addressed is something that remains valid and works for all groups.

"Attributions must come first," she says.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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