



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



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## ABSTRACT

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

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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 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).<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> The overall pattern of results did not change, however, following exclusion of these participants.

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