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# Working to Reduce the Effects of Discrimination

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## *Identity Management Strategies in Organizations*

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*Despite efforts to dispel discrimination, workplace discrimination still occurs. We introduce two classes of identity management strategies individuals use to mitigate the negative consequences of discrimination: identity switching (i.e., deemphasizing target identities and recategorizing to a more positively valued identity) and identity redefinition (i.e., stereotype reassociation and regeneration). Organizations adopting a color-blind approach may make it more difficult for individuals to use identity switching because the policies deemphasize differences in social identities. In contrast, organizations adopting a multicultural approach may make it more difficult for individuals to use identity redefinition. Multicultural approaches, applied superficially, may celebrate group differences that might actually reinforce culturally dominant stereotypes. We explore the likelihood that individuals will adopt each strategy given these organizational approaches to diversity. We outline steps organizations can take to reduce the need for identity management strategies and to facilitate identity management when necessary.*

**Keywords:** social identity, identity management, discrimination

**D**espite efforts to increase equal access and opportunities for socially devalued groups in employment, workplace discrimination still occurs. Discrimination is prejudicial treatment that unfairly places current or prospective employees at a disadvantage based on their group membership. Federal laws prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, disability, veteran status, family status, or genetic information, and laws in several states include sexual orientation. Even without going to trial, mere allegations of discrimination can be costly for organizations. Dillard's Inc., for instance, recently agreed to pay \$2 million to settle a class-action lawsuit claiming that the organization discriminated against employees with disabilities (U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission, 2012). Carrol's Corporation, a Burger King franchisee, recently paid \$2.5 million in a settlement for allegedly discriminating against female employees (U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, 2013). Clearly, organizational leaders must create practices that are free from prejudice to comply with federal and state laws and to avoid financial losses of these kinds. Yet despite their efforts, minority group members continue to face discrimination in the workplace. For example, formal requests for support are less likely to be

approved when they are submitted by female employees than by male employees (Rosen, Templeton, & Kirchline, 1981), and the average tenure of women CEOs is approximately half that of men (Blanton, 2005). In addition, employees who are members of ethnic minority groups report experiencing more race-related bullying in the workplace than White employees (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Thus, despite organizational efforts to dispel it, discrimination continues to occur.

While organizations are attempting to stop perpetrators of discrimination, what can the targeted individuals do to cope in the meantime? People who experience discrimination are not just passive targets of prejudiced decisions; they are also active agents who make choices and manage the experiences that they encounter (Button, 2004). Researchers have begun to examine the impact of discrimination on work organizations and the ways targets of discrimination manage their experiences at work (e.g., Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998; Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002; Petriglieri, 2011).

In this article, we explore how employees who have been discriminated against may proactively manage their social identities and stereotypes to mitigate the negative effects of prejudicial treatment and how organizational diversity policies affect the use of these strategies. Specifically, we introduce two classes of identity management strategies individuals use to alleviate the negative consequences of discrimination: identity switching (i.e., deemphasizing target identities and recategorizing to a more positively valued identity) and identity redefinition (i.e., stereotype reassociating and stereotype regeneration). Organizations adopting a color-blind approach to diversity make it more difficult for individuals to use identity switching because their policies deemphasize differences in social identities. In contrast, organizations adopting a multicultural approach may make it more difficult for individuals to

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use identity redefinition because there is a stronger focus on stereotypes.

## **Why Is It Important to Examine Discrimination in the Workplace?**

Examining discrimination in the workplace is of utmost importance for several reasons. First, workplace discrimination is common and difficult to combat because it is often subtle. Second, there are significant costs associated with workplace discrimination. Finally, workplace discrimination affects almost everybody. Individuals who are not targets of discrimination in one context, perhaps because they are in the majority in that context, may face discrimination as minority group members in another context. We discuss these three reasons below.

### **Workplace Discrimination Is Common and Difficult to Combat Because of Its Subtlety**

A survey of 833 women working in large public-sector organizations found that 22% reported experiencing gender-based harassment (Lim & Cortina, 2005). Likewise, a study of 1,202 Black, Latino/a, and White low-income union workers in Boston found that 37% of the workers of color and 10% of White workers experienced racial discrimination (Krieger et al., 2006). A review of 80 studies surveying lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) employees found that one in five experience discrimination based on their sexual orientation (Sears, Hunter, & Malloy, 2009). Ageism is also prevalent in organizations: Older workers are more likely to be laid off (McMullin & Marshall, 2001) and have a more difficult time finding employment afterward (Berger, 2009). Likewise, stigmas associated with disabilities lead employers to have lower performance expectations of individuals with disabilities

(Ren, Paetzold, & Colella, 2008) and individuals who are overweight (Shapiro, King, & Quinones, 2007).

One reason that workplace discrimination continues is that it does not always manifest in overtly hostile behaviors. Discriminatory behaviors are often enacted through subtle behaviors that are ambiguous in their intent to harm (Cortina & Magley, 2009; Hebl et al., 2002) and through microaggression (D. W. Sue, 2010). Examples of *incivility* could include speaking with a condescending tone of voice or interrupting the other person (Cortina & Magley, 2009). Whereas incivility is mistreatment that may or may not be related to group membership, *microaggressions* are discriminatory behaviors based directly on group membership. Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults” (D. W. Sue et al., 2007, p. 271) targeting a person or group. Examples of microaggression may be mistaking a person of color for a service worker, implying that people of color are servants, or telling an Asian or Latino/a person to speak up more, which implies that Asians’ and Latino/as’ communication styles are inferior to those of the dominant culture (D. W. Sue et al., 2007). It is often unclear whether biased treatment is the result of prejudice based on group membership (Crocker & Major, 1989), making legal action or policy intervention impossible.

### **Significant Costs Are Associated With Workplace Discrimination**

Targets of discrimination at work often have a difficult time escaping the context in which the discrimination occurs because they perceive that the costs of claiming discrimination may be high (Stangor, Swim, Van Allen, & Sechrist, 2002). They may fear losing their jobs or experiencing retaliation for fighting back against discriminatory behavior (Leslie & Gelfand, 2008). Individuals who claim discrimination are often viewed as troublemakers, and they do not receive sympathy from coworkers (Kaiser & Miller, 2003). Targets of discrimination are aware of the social costs associated with claiming discrimination and thus are reluctant to fight discrimination (Major & Sawyer, 2009).

Although addressing discrimination is difficult and costly, failing to address it has negative consequences that are just as—if not more—harmful. In addition to the practical consequences, such as being denied important resources (e.g., pay increases related to promotions) and loss of employment, discrimination also carries important psychological and health costs (Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). De Castro, Gee, and Takeuchi (2008) found that racial discrimination in the workplace positively predicts an increased number of physical health problems among Filipino Americans. Jackson, Thoits, and Taylor (1995) found that workplace discrimination due to being the token minority member in the organization predicts higher rates of depression among African Americans. Age-based discrimination at work harms self-esteem and satisfaction among older workers (Grima, 2011).

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Moreover, discrimination harms not only the individuals experiencing the discrimination but the witnesses to the discrimination as well. Male and female employees who vicariously witnessed gender-based hostility expressed greater organizational withdrawal and lower well-being (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007). White and Black study participants suffered impaired cognitive performance after being exposed to a hiring manager who discriminated against a Black job applicant (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007).

Not addressing discrimination can also have negative consequences for the organization. First, organizations are vulnerable to legal action and associated financial consequences because discrimination against individuals of protected classes, such as racial, religious, or gender-based classes, is illegal. Second, not addressing discrimination has consequences for employee productivity. Discrimination in the workplace leads to greater absenteeism and withdrawal (Jones, Ni, & Wilson, 2009) and employee turnover (Madera, King, & Hebl, 2012). Finally, discriminatory practices can lead organizations to pass up or alienate productive workers, hurting the “bottom line” (King, Shapiro, Hebl, Singletary, & Turner, 2006). An understanding of the processes through which individuals successfully cope with discrimination may have far-reaching benefits.

### **Workplace Discrimination Can Affect Almost Everyone**

Although individuals in the numerical minority are more likely to experience discrimination than individuals in the majority, context often determines majority or minority status (Kanter, 1977a; Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2003). Thus, an individual who is a majority group member in one context might be a minority group member in another

context. Because of the potential for any person to be the target of discrimination, this article explores strategies to deal with discrimination in general and does not focus on specific groups. Each individual contending with discrimination may encounter the denial of resources, the experience of being devalued, hostile interactions, and frustration owing to feelings of injustice. In this article, we focus on general strategies and processes that all individuals experiencing discrimination might be able to use.

However, it is important to acknowledge that members of each identity group encounter experiences that are unique to their group. For instance, African American men contend with negative stereotypes surrounding violence; African American boys often cite the need to engage in certain behaviors to counteract these stereotypes in their immediate environment (Oglesby, 2012). In contrast, Asian Americans contend with the model minority stereotype, a stereotype that may appear positive and flattering on the surface but that can ultimately lead to harmful consequences such as becoming targets of bullying (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006), lower psychological well-being (S. Sue & Okazaki, 1990), and impaired cognitive performance (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Shih, Ambady, Richeson, Fujita, & Gray, 2002). Individuals with identities that are not readily visible, such as sexual minorities or multiracial individuals, contend with identity disclosure and awkward social interactions in which their interaction partners make derogatory comments while being unaware of their identity (Gaskins, 1999). Because there are also significant and important differences between groups, the identity management strategies discussed in this article may play out in different ways for different groups. Although an in-depth examination of how the strategies are adopted by and applied among each population is beyond the scope of this article, we point out potential differences in the application of these processes when possible.

We use the terms *target individual* and *target group* to indicate people or groups who are treated prejudicially by others. It is important to note that our sole focus is on the strategies that targets can adopt to cope with discrimination. However, this focus on the targets' strategies is not meant to imply that the responsibility of dealing with discrimination rests solely on the shoulders of the target; the burden should also fall on the organization and the majority group. Discrimination might manifest in many different forms, and there are also many things that nontargets and organizations can do to reduce prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 1999; Oskamp, 2000), but these topics are beyond the scope of this article. However, until people can experience workplaces free from bias, it is important to give targets of discrimination tools to handle prejudice and discrimination. To promote resilience among targets of discrimination, we must first understand how they experience and psychologically cope with discrimination by managing their social identity.

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## How Do Targets Cope With Discrimination in Organizations?

Targets can use identity management strategies to minimize the effects of damaging identities (e.g., Berger, 2009; Button, 2004; Croteau, Anderson, & VanderWal, 2008) such as shifting identity salience (Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000) or shifting comparison standards (Cash, Cash, & Butters, 1983).

We build on this work by identifying two classes of identity management strategies that focus on how individuals can use their multiple identities and stereotypes to help them cope with discrimination (see Pittinsky, Shih, & Trahan, 2006). Individuals can manage their identities by changing (a) their identification with a particular group (i.e., identity switching) or (b) the stereotypes associated with the identities (i.e., identity redefinition). Identity switching changes the emphasis among an individual's multiple social identities while keeping the stereotypes associated with those identities constant. Identity redefinition keeps the identity constant but attempts to change the stereotypes.

These two intra-individual strategies can be contrasted with inter-individual strategies derived from *social identity theory* (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which asserts that individuals enhance their self-esteem by elevating their own group's standing relative to an outgroup (see reviews by Brewer, 1979, and Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992). Individuals may leave their own group and join the more desired group (a technique called *social mobility*; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) or change comparison standards between groups, such as increasing the distinctiveness of their own group to improve the status of their own group relative to others (a technique called *social creativity*; Jetten, Schmitt,

Branscombe, & McKimmie, 2005). Thus, the strategies identified in social identity theory involve comparing the standing of one's own group to that of an outgroup. In contrast, the strategies identified in this article pertain to emphasizing or switching identities that already reside inside a person. In identity switching, individuals compare the value of the multiple identities they possess and choose to emphasize the one that is most valued in the situation. In identity redefinition, the individuals compare the value of the various stereotypes associated with their own identities and choose the stereotypes that are most valued in the situation. Both of these processes occur independently of the identities of others in the situation.

In addition, rather than focusing on how an individual evaluates a *single* identity relative to outgroups, we take a multiple identities and stereotypes perspective and focus on how an individual negotiates among multiple identities and multiple stereotypes across different contexts. Because individuals can adopt different roles and identities (e.g., gender, race, occupation, school, age), individuals can emphasize the identities that would be most advantageous in a social context (Pittinsky et al., 2006). Likewise, because each identity can be associated with multiple stereotypes, individuals can choose to emphasize characteristics or create new associations that are more valued in a social context.

These identity management strategies also differ from impression management or identity construction techniques (e.g., Roberts, 2005; Schlenker & Leary, 1982) in several ways. The primary goal of impression management is "to steer others' opinions in the service of personal or social goals" (Dunn & Forrin, 2007, p. 467) or to create an image of the self that is acceptable to others around a person, especially those with social or economic power (Goffman, 1959). Thus, the goal of impression management is focused on the "other," whereas the main goal of the identity management strategies is to cope with the stigma and discrimination associated with a specific identity. Moreover, these strategies apply to situations specifically associated with managing discrimination and stigma and not just to the creation of professional images in general (e.g., Roberts, 2005).

This article applies the psychological literature on group-based discrimination, stereotyping, and identity management to the experience of targets of discrimination. First, we identify two identity management strategies that individuals may use to deal with discrimination in work contexts. We explore how organizational diversity policies may moderate the way these strategies are used in an organization. Finally, we discuss implications for organizations trying to help individuals coping with discrimination. A summary of our main arguments may be found in Table 1.

### **Identity Switching: Changing the Emphasis Among Multiple Social Identities**

One strategy that targets may use to mitigate many negative consequences of workplace discrimination is to switch among their many social identities. Previous research has

**Table 1**  
*Identity Management Strategies*

Strategy attributes	Identity switching	Identity redefinition
Component processes	Deemphasizing target identity Recategorizing to a more positively valued identity	Stereotype reassociation Stereotype regeneration
Mechanism by which targets minimize negative consequences of discrimination	Allows individuals to emphasize advantageous identities to avoid negative consequences of discrimination in the short term	Allows individuals to create more positive associations with an identity to avoid negative consequences of discrimination in the short term
Organizational context	Hindered in organizations that implement color-blind policies Not hindered in organizations that implement multicultural policies	Hindered in organizations that implement multicultural policies Limited in organizations that implement color-blind policies to identities recognized by the organization
Individual factors	Likely among individuals who identify strongly with the task Difficult with a highly visible target identity	Likely among individuals who strongly identify with the target group
Possible negative consequences of utilizing this strategy	Exposes individuals to negative consequences associated with identity concealment Decreases cognitive resources Creates unstable self-concept in the long term	Allows individuals to dismiss negative feedback and overlook opportunities for improvement Makes targets vulnerable to disidentification with their social identity group and loss of social support

demonstrated that individuals place different emphases on their distinct identities across social situations, depending on how beneficial each identity is in a particular situation (Pittinsky, Shih, & Ambady, 1999). Identity switching consists of two component processes: deemphasizing a negatively valued identity and emphasizing or replacing a negatively valued identity with a positively regarded identity.

**Deemphasizing target identities.** To switch one's identity, one must first deemphasize a negatively valued target identity. Deemphasizing a target identity can make the identity less prominent in a number of ways, including concealment, discretion, and use of "disidentifiers" (i.e., identity cues). Concealment hides the disadvantaged identity. For example, when concerned about discrimination, sexual minorities often conceal their sexual orientation by not talking about their personal lives at work (Button, 2004; DeJordy, 2008).

When a disadvantaged identity cannot be hidden, individuals can also use the strategy of discretion, working to keep the disadvantaged identity in the background (for a detailed review, see Clair, Beatty, & Maclean, 2005). Finally, individuals can also use disidentifiers to distance themselves from the stigmatized or negatively perceived group (Goffman, 1963). For instance, Berger (2009) found that older workers use "youth-oriented" language to avoid appearing outdated. Although disidentifiers do not necessarily deny membership in a target group, they differentiate

individuals from the negative stereotypes associated with their groups.

**Recategorizing with a positively valued identity.** The second component process in the identity switching strategy, identity recategorization, is to replace the negatively valued identity with a more positively valued one. Within any organization, some identities will carry more positive expectations than others, and thus a person who faces discrimination for one identity may emphasize another, more advantageous identity through the management of identity cues. For instance, an interview of undergraduate medical students found that dressing more formally helped them to think of themselves as professionals rather than as students (Finn, Garner, & Sawdon, 2010).

Similarly, targets could emphasize identities that they hold in common with others in the organization. The common ingroup identity model finds that an individual may switch to an identity that is shared with the perpetrator of biased acts and thus might avoid discrimination by being seen as a member of a more inclusive category (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). For example, White football fans were shown to be more receptive to being interviewed by a Black interviewer who was wearing a hat with the home team logo than by a Black interviewer wearing a hat with a different team's logo (Nier, Gaertner, Dovidio, Banker, & Ward, 2001). However, identity recategorization also differs from the strategies identified in the common ingroup identity model in that while the goal of those strategies is

to shift the perpetrator's perception, targets using identity recategorization may be able to cope simply by thinking of themselves as having a different identity and not by changing the perpetrator's perception.

One note to make about identity recategorization is that it is different from identity counterfeiting, which is identified in the LGBT identity management literature (Button, 2004). *Identity counterfeiting* entails a target adopting an identity that he or she does not actually possess. For example, some gay and lesbian employees actively adopt a false heterosexual identity (Button, 2004). Sometimes identity counterfeiting entails identity deemphasis, such as when gay and lesbian workers conceal their minority sexual orientation in order to allow their coworkers to assume (incorrectly) that they are heterosexual (Croteau et al., 2008). In contrast, identity recategorization involves switching among the target's identities.

**Group-based differences in the use of identity switching.** Two factors, task identification and identity visibility, may affect how members of different groups use identity switching. The individuals who will most likely use identity switching are not those who are highly identified with the group but rather those who are highly identified with the task. For instance, the theory of racelessness proposes that African Americans who are highly accomplished academically cope with negative academic stereotypes associated with their racial identity by not strongly identifying with their race; instead, they highly identify with the domain of academic performance (Ogbu, 2003).

It is worth noting, however, that identifying with the task rather than the stereotyped group in order to avoid discrimination may introduce other problems. Stereotype threat research finds that negative stereotypes harm the performance of the individuals being stereotyped (Steele, 1997) and that it is the individuals who are most identified with a task who are most vulnerable to stereotype threat (Aronson et al., 1999). Moreover, identifying with a task rather than the group can deprive individuals of the benefits associated with strong group identification, such as protecting one's psychological well-being from discrimination (Outten, Schmitt, Garcia, & Branscombe, 2009).

*Identity visibility* may also affect the feasibility of identity switching. An individual whose target identity is not visible may be more likely to deemphasize that identity. Multiracial individuals whose phenotypic appearance is similar to that of the majority race may choose not to disclose their minority racial identities (Nakashima, 1996). Likewise, LGBT individuals who perceive more stigma based on sexual orientation are more likely to choose not to disclose their sexual orientations (Frable, Wortman, & Joseph, 1997). Although identity deemphasis may help individuals avoid certain types of discrimination, it also comes with negative consequences such as low self-esteem and lack of social support (Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998).

### **Consequences of identity switching.**

Individuals experience both positive and negative consequences from identity switching. It can allow the individual to avoid many negative outcomes associated with the dis-

advantaged identity, such as avoiding blows to their self-esteem in the short term. According to Mussweiler et al. (2000), women who are negatively compared with other women reconceptualize themselves in terms of their ethnic identities, thereby making the other women into inappropriate comparison standards. Of course, some criticisms and negative comparisons might indicate an actual need to improve performance (Heine et al., 2001). Target individuals must balance their need to maintain self-esteem with the possibility that negative evaluations contain some truth and provide opportunities for improvement.

Identity switching may also affect performance at work. Although members of negatively stereotyped groups often suffer performance decrements in testing situations when their group membership becomes salient (Steele, 1997), they also experience performance boosts when other, advantageous identities are emphasized (Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999).

### **Limitations and negative consequences.**

Identity switching has several drawbacks, most of which are associated with deemphasizing a target identity. First, deemphasizing a target identity decreases cognitive resources, because people focus on the very features they are trying to hide (Smart & Wegner, 1999). In an organizational context, this type of cognitive load leads to a variety of performance decrements, such as difficulty in remembering pertinent information about coworkers and subordinates (Overbeck & Park, 2001), increased reliance on stereotypes when assessing situations (Gilbert & Hixon, 1991), biased attributions of others' actions (Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988), and difficulty in generating novel problem-solving strategies (Quinn & Spencer, 2001).

Individuals may also find their ability to use identity switching limited in certain contexts. One such context may be when an individual is a token member of his or her group. Individuals who are tokens are highly visible, making it difficult for them to deemphasize the token identity (Kanter, 1977b). A second context that may limit an individual's ability to use identity switching may be one in which there are strong norms that externally determine which identity an individual should hold. Organizations that adopt a color-blind policy often press individuals to embrace a superordinate identity over other identities that they may possess. In such a situation, individuals may find that switching identities is discouraged and that alternate identities are not acknowledged.

Identity deemphasis may also expose the individual to many of the negative consequences associated with identity concealment. For instance, gay men who conceal their sexual identities show higher levels of depression (King & Cortina, 2010), a higher incidence of cancer and infectious diseases such as pneumonia or bronchitis (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, & Visscher, 1996), and lower cognitive performance (Madera, 2010) than do gay men who do not conceal their sexual identities.

Long-term use of identity switching can also elicit an unstable sense of self. Individuals with a less stable sense of self tend to experience poor psychological well-being (Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003) and collective

self-esteem (Downie, Mageau, Koestner, & Liodden, 2006). Likewise, among multiracial individuals with a low tolerance for inconsistency (i.e., low in dialecticism), Sanchez, Shih, and Garcia (2009) found a positive relationship between malleability with regard to racial identification and depressive symptoms.

### **Identity Redefinition: Changing Emphasis Among Stereotypes**

A second strategy that target individuals can use is to redefine the target identity itself. Older workers may counteract age discrimination by emphasizing loyalty and having more experience, positive traits associated with older workers (Berger, 2009). Members of “dirty work” professions, such as garbage collectors or funeral directors, are stigmatized by the public because their jobs entail physical, social, or moral taint; to cope with the stigma, they are likely to emphasize the benefits associated with their jobs (Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006). For example, meat cutters downplay their proximity to animal carcasses while taking pride in their ability to handle knives and tolerate the cold temperatures of the meat lockers (Meara, 1974). Funeral directors think of themselves as specialists in helping people deal with grief rather than as profiting from others’ losses (Thompson, 1991). Individuals can also use this strategy to redefine the meaning of an identity within an organization through *stereotype reassociation* and *stereotype regeneration*.

**Stereotype reassociation.** Individuals may disassociate their identities from negative stereotypes and strengthen their association with positive stereotypes. For example, women have been shown to underperform in mathematics relative to men in part because of negative stereotypes about women’s math abilities (e.g., Quinn & Spencer, 2001; Schmader, 2002; Shih et al., 1999; Steele, 1997). At the same time, women are thought to excel in verbal performance (Pittinsky et al., 1999; Shih et al., 1999) and social interaction (Eagly, 1987). Thus, women could deemphasize the quantitative aspects of a task and emphasize the need for social skills and verbal talent to complete the same task.

**Stereotype regeneration.** Individuals might also redefine the traits or behaviors associated with a negatively stereotyped identity. Women who were asked to think of women as skilled negotiators were able to outperform men on a negotiation task, even though women are traditionally not thought of as strong negotiators (Kray, Galinsky, & Thompson, 2002). Moreover, research on implicit associations has found that changing one’s beliefs about a stereotype (or the strength of one’s belief in the stereotype) can directly affect the association between the attribute and the identity (Greenwald et al., 2002). Thus, redefining the meaning of an identity, either through direct alteration or by reconsidering the meaning of opposing identities, can improve performance outcomes. Stereotype regeneration

may be especially effective when an identity has not been firmly stereotyped within a particular context.

**Group-based differences in the use of identity redefinition.** Individuals who are highly identified with the target group, or psychologically invested in the group, are especially likely to use identity redefinition. First, highly identified individuals are less likely to disidentify from the target identity. Second, highly identified individuals are more vulnerable to the harmful performance effects of negative stereotypes (Schmader, 2002). Moreover, higher levels of group identification lead to a greater reliance on group-relevant domains for establishing self-esteem, making it even more important to the individual that his or her group is perceived positively (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Taken together, these findings indicate that it should be especially important to people who are highly identified with a negatively perceived group that they not reject group membership; they would rather redefine group membership in a positive light.

**Consequences of identity redefinition.** Redefining the target identity can protect the individual’s self-esteem from the harmful effects of discrimination. Self-affirmation theory suggests that following negative feedback, people downplay their failures while emphasizing their successes in other domains (Steele, 1988). This strategy allows highly identified target individuals to protect their self-esteem by focusing on strengths associated with the group. By consistently redefining the negatively viewed group in terms of its advantages and skills, the highly identified individual both downplays the negative aspects of the group and alerts others to the strengths of the group. This can lead to better psychological outcomes (Steele, 1988) and performance (Shih et al., 1999, 2002) for the individual.

**Limitations and negative consequences.** Even if employees are able to successfully redefine the discriminated identity at the individual level and appear more competent, they may be penalized on other dimensions such as warmth (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005), thus putting themselves in a double bind. For instance, highly successful women who behave in assertive, agentic, and self-promotional ways may be perceived as more competent but also as less likeable (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Rudman & Glick, 2001).

In addition, an employee may suffer backlash from being a counterstereotypical group member (Phelan & Rudman, 2010). White rappers experience more prejudice and discrimination than Black rappers, and Black men and women experience penalties for excelling academically (Phelan & Rudman, 2010).

Another negative consequence of identity redefinition is that it may allow targets to ignore important information. For example, a successful therapy program for overweight people includes refocusing attention from the negative aspects of being overweight to more positive ones (e.g., voluptuousness or sturdiness; Robinson & Bacon, 1996). However, redefinition in this case can lead the targets to overlook critical truths about the health risks of being overweight.

There may be long-term harmful consequences associated with identity redefinition, such as disidentification with one's social identity group. As individuals try to redefine the negative stereotypes associated with their identities, they may choose to avoid activities or locations that are stereotype consistent. This avoidance may also deprive targets of the positive effects related to social identification, such as access to social support networks, which have been found to alleviate negative affect and low self-esteem (Frable et al., 1998), or to positive role models, which have been related to greater resilience (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003) and positive health outcomes (Bird, Kuhns, & Garofalo, 2012). Strong identification with one's ethnic group has also been found to buffer individuals from the negative effects of discrimination on health outcomes (Yip, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2008).

## When Can Targets Use Identity Switching and Identity Redefinition? Organizational Diversity Policy: A Contextual Moderator

Individuals belonging to traditionally disadvantaged identity groups are known to pay particular attention to organizational cues to determine whether the environment is identity safe (i.e., one in which their social identity will be valued). Diversity policies are key tools in communicating how much emphasis organizations place on minimizing discrimination. These policies can be stated in an organization's mission statement, letters to the board of directors, and communications from management (see Riggins & Cornwell, 2001), and they convey the organization's values (Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008).

Two common ideologies conveyed by organizations are *multiculturalism* and *color-blindness*. Multiculturalism recognizes and celebrates differences among groups of people, whereas color-blindness ignores group differences and instead highlights an overarching identity, such as being human.

Because the assumptions underlying the two ideologies differ, the color-blind and multicultural policies handle group identity in different ways. These differences affect how easy or difficult it is for targets to use identity management strategies. Color-blind policies make it more difficult for targets of discrimination to use identity-switching strategies because color-blind organizations do not recognize different social identities. Conversely, multicultural policies may make it more difficult for targets of discrimination to use identity redefinition strategies because multicultural policies emphasize group membership, which may affect perceptions and behaviors by activating stereotypes (Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 2001), restricting the extent to which individuals can see themselves in a new light. In the following sections, we examine diversity policies as contextual moderators of identity management strategies.

## Color-Blind Approaches

Color-blind policies focus on ignoring different group identities and emphasize an overarching organizational identity (Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Because this approach stresses individual accomplishment (Stevens et al., 2008), it is favored by those who believe in individual merit and meritocracy (Thomas, Mack, & Montagliani, 2004).

Because different social identities are not recognized in the color-blind approach, targets in organizations using a color-blind approach may have a difficult time engaging in identity management switching. Color-blind organizations stress an overarching identity, such as emphasizing the overarching organizational identity, a task identity, or a superordinate identity (e.g., being a human being) over other group identities that are not shared by all the members of an organization (Stevens et al., 2008). Because the goal of this approach is to treat everybody equally as individuals (Plaut, 2002), traits, abilities, or characteristics closely associated with individual group identities (e.g., different cultural norms or languages spoken) are deemphasized. Thus, by externally defining an identity for their members (e.g., "You are all human beings," "You are all members of our organization") and discouraging recognition of different social identities among their members, organizations using a color-blind approach make it difficult for targets to switch and maneuver among their many social identities and deflect negative consequences through this strategy.

As a consequence, targets of discrimination in color-blind organizations may need to rely more heavily on identity redefinition strategies. Color-blind organizations may be receptive to identity redefinition strategies, as research has found that counterstereotypical minority members are viewed positively in color-blind contexts (Gutiérrez & Unzueta, 2010). However, because social identities are not explicitly recognized in color-blind organizations, only implicit methods for redefining disadvantaged identities (e.g., subtle use of identity cues) may be effective. Explicit attempts to redefine identities (e.g., loudly declaring a stereotype to be false) may be met with resistance.

Indeed, research has found that there are negative consequences associated with color-blind approaches for organizations. Although color-blind approaches try to eliminate explicit, deliberate biases against individuals from disadvantaged groups, color-blind approaches do not address implicit, unintentional biases. A color-blind approach is associated with greater racial bias than multicultural approaches (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). The color-blind approach is regarded with distrust by minority members, who perceive color-blind approaches as exclusionary (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008), which results in lower engagement by minority employees (Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009).

In addition to the negative outcomes associated with color-blind approaches, leaders who adopt color-blind policies may mistakenly believe that treating everyone equally is fair. However, equal treatment is in fact discriminatory if



the organization uses majority norms as the criteria for evaluation (D. W. Sue, 2010). For example, to make promotion decisions, an organization might rely on scores from a test that favors high socioeconomic status (SES) individuals. Although all employees are being treated equally because they are required to take the same test, the process is discriminatory because individuals who are not high SES are at a disadvantage when taking the test. In this way, equal treatment may perpetuate group inequities. Moreover, the problems associated with these inequities, such as resentment and strained intergroup relations, cannot be explicitly addressed in color-blind organizations because group identities are not recognized (Ely & Thomas, 2001).

### **Multicultural Approaches**

In contrast to color-blind approaches, multicultural approaches celebrate group differences and identities (Gutiérrez & Unzueta, 2010), encouraging individuals to learn about and accept differences among groups (Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007). Multicultural initiatives include activities such as having mentoring groups, seminars, fairs, or workshops for underrepresented minorities (Stevens et al., 2008). Minorities tend to be more receptive to multicultural initiatives than do nonminorities as a way to promote intergroup harmony (Ryan et al., 2007).

An individual's success at coping with discrimination through identity management strategies may depend on the particular multicultural strategies that are implemented. Although organizations adopting a multicultural approach strive to include many groups and to value differences equally, they meet resistance when implementing the policies. Nonminorities who feel excluded by multicultural initiatives (Stevens et al., 2008), and believe that they threaten unity (Plaut et al., 2009), may object to their implementation. Some nonminorities may view multicultural outreach as preferential treatment for minorities, rather than as efforts to level the playing field. For instance, Whites are more threatened when racial inequities are framed as White privilege than when they are framed as anti-Black discrimination (Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007). This backlash toward multicultural efforts leads nonminorities to discredit policies and practices aimed at reducing inequities (Thomas & Plaut, 2008). In fact, in conflicting environments, exposure to multiculturalism increases hostile behaviors to outgroups (Vorauer & Sasaki, 2011).

A multicultural approach that emphasizes only the superficial characteristics of groups might make it more difficult for targets to use identity redefinition. Because multicultural approaches celebrate group differences, multicultural approaches that focus only on superficial characteristics carry the danger of reinforcing group stereotypes and expecting individuals to act as representatives of their groups (Gutiérrez & Unzueta, 2010). Nonminorities who read multicultural statements engage in more stereotyping and group-based judgments (Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000), and they dislike minorities who do not possess stereotypical traits (Stevens et al., 2008). Thus,

targets in an organization that adopts a multicultural policy may need to rely more heavily on identity switching. Multicultural policies recognize different identities and thus will not hinder the use of identity switching strategies.

Scholars have identified several elements involved in successfully adopting a multicultural approach (i.e., one in which the organization acknowledges and values differences equally). One factor that contributes to success is for individuals to use their differences as a resource for learning about all aspects of their work (Ely & Thomas, 2001). A second factor involved in successful adoption of such an approach is for the organization to include nonminorities when communicating that differences are acknowledged and valued equally by the organization (Stevens et al., 2008). Of course, it may be possible that discrimination is minimized in this environment, and minorities may not need to use identity management strategies at all if they feel that others acknowledge and value their identity.

In sum, the type of diversity policy an organization adopts and how the policy is implemented can have a tremendous impact on the ability of targets of discrimination to use identity management strategies.

### **What Are the Implications of These Strategies for Practice, Research, and Theory?**

In this article, we have examined how targets of discrimination use multiple identities and stereotypes to cope with discrimination. We introduced two identity management strategies (identity switching and identity redefinition) that targets can use to cope with discrimination and the consequences associated with using these strategies. Although these strategies can help targets cope with discrimination in the short term, they also have the potential for harmful consequences if used in the long term. Because of this, it is important to recognize that although individuals can use strategies to cope with discrimination, the responsibility of addressing prejudice and discrimination should not rest only on targets' shoulders. Organizations should also take steps to reduce the potential for harm associated with the use of these strategies. For instance, organizations might offset the social isolation resulting from identity de-emphasis by implementing mentoring programs or social support networks (Frable et al., 1998).

We also examined the effects diversity policies in organizations have on the use of these identity management strategies. Color-blind policies can hinder the use of identity switching, while multicultural policies, if implemented superficially, can hinder the use of identity redefinition. Thus, the social context plays an important role in the use of these strategies. As a result, organizations, whether they adopt color-blind or multicultural policies, can take steps that help targets to use the two identity management strategies we have identified in this articles. For example, organizations could increase the heterogeneity of their workforce, lowering the likelihood of targets finding themselves as the token, a situation that may inhibit identity switching. Similarly, identity redefinition may be more

effective when targets find themselves interacting with co-workers in a positive, open-minded context. Organizations could facilitate positive intergroup interactions by nurturing a more cooperative culture (Chatman et al., 1998) and greater perceived control (Miller & Major, 2000). Future research work could examine how these factors affect identity management strategies.

The timing of identity management is another avenue for research. Individuals may engage in management behaviors following discriminatory treatment, but they also may anticipate discrimination and try to manage their identities as a preventative measure (e.g., Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1998). We do not predict whether the particular strategies we identify are more likely to be used proactively or reactively. However, we urge researchers to consider the timing of identity management in future work.

Finally, it is important to take a step back and consider the broader sociocultural implications of the issues. Although targets can use identity management strategies to avoid the negative consequences associated with discrimination, these strategies may be a healthy response to an unhealthy environment. We conclude that these strategies are temporary tools targets can draw on to cope with discrimination in the short term until the larger question of how to eliminate discrimination is answered. In other words, these strategies may help the individual in the short term (e.g., to avoid performance decrements, to protect self-esteem) but may create harmful effects in the long term. Thus, individuals who use these strategies must determine whether the benefits of the strategies outweigh the costs—a difficult task when the consequences are unknown. More research on identity management strategies can bring to light the positive and negative consequences associated with the use of identity management strategies and allow individuals to make more informed decisions to best cope with discrimination.

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