

Exploring Cross-Group Discrimination: Measuring the Dimensions of Inferiorization¹

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We describe a theoretical framework that identifies similar themes across the reported experiences of historically stigmatized groups. Inferiorization is a function of the confluence of stigma, context, and associated cultural myths. A self-report measure of inferiorization was applied to college-student samples of African Americans, White women, gay men and lesbians, people with disabilities, and, as a control, a White male comparison group (total $N = 263$). Stigmatizable people tended to report more frequent inferiorizing events than generally nonstigmatizable people. Deviations from this pattern were explained by the contextual and stigma-related specificity of inferiorization and the presence or absence of associated cultural myths. Inferiorization describes a general social process that remains sensitive to the experiences of specific groups and to the contextual nature of stigmatization.

People who feel discriminated against describe a variety of experiences: They may feel less respected in an interaction, less welcomed or prejudged in a classroom, less entitled to job advancement or covert privileges, or less significant because their social group seems invisible or misrepresented in popular media. Reports of such experiences can be found among many diverse groups, including ethnic minorities (Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980), women (Lyness & Thompson, 1997), the obese (Harris, Harris, & Bochner, 1982), and people with physical disabilities (Eisenberg, Griggens, & Duval, 1982).

Discrimination research typically concentrates on group-specific experiences. A group-specific approach is effective for examining the sociohistorical contexts

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of discrimination for particular groups, but it is less effective in addressing the intergroup processes that comprise discrimination. The multiplicity of descriptions of discrimination has stimulated a growing subfield of research that attempts to identify similar themes and patterns across various social groups (Asch & Fine, 1988; Christian, 1990; Fernald, 1995; Lott & Maluso, 1995; McIntosh, 1988).

Cross-group discrimination research, also called *cross-ism* research (Lott & Maluso, 1995), explores which aspects of the discrimination experience relate to general intergroup social processes and which are unique to the specific social and historical contexts of particular groups. To the extent that discrimination is a greater function of a general social process than a group-specific one, its elimination will depend on enhanced understanding of the commonalities existing in discriminatory practices. We need a realistic assessment of how the “-isms” function both independently and in combination for different groups in everyday life. Unfortunately, no one has yet provided a theoretical framework for empirical, cross-group discrimination research that retains sensitivity to the experiences of specific groups and the contextual nature of stigmatization. The present study describes one possible framework and a psychometrically sound, self-report method for this emerging field.

To this end, we introduce Adam's (1978) inferiorization construct as a tool to assess the subjective experience of discriminatory practices and negative group stereotypes. We demonstrate how inferiorization applies to psychology's discrimination literature and delineate its theoretical properties. Finally, we describe an empirical study that demonstrates how inferiorization can be measured and implemented to examine the similarities and differences in reports of discrimination across groups.

Discrimination as an Inferiorizing Social Process

A major aspect of intergroup discriminatory processes is the inferiorization of people's salient differences by ethnicity, gender, or any other culturally stigmatizable characteristic (Adam, 1978). Adam argued that possessing any stigma is associated with experiencing oneself as somehow inferior to a dominant cultural group, cultural image, or community ideal. This is not to say that a stigmatizable individual necessarily feels inferior in an interaction, nor conversely that anyone necessarily feels superior; researchers generally find that members of negatively stereotyped groups do not have lower self-esteem than do members of positively stereotyped groups (for reviews, see Crocker & Major, 1989; Cross, 1985; and Rosenberg, 1989). Rather, inferiorization is an established part of any interaction between a stigmatized group and the mainstream culture in those contexts where a negative group stereotype becomes relevant. Such stereotypes are not simply the negation of something otherwise positive or normal, but rather they

inevitably involve the implication of the inferiority of the target individual. In certain situations, inferiorization is experienced as the direct or indirect implication that a stigmatizable characteristic has disadvantageous meaning with respect to some important cultural ideal. Ethnic minority students in the university classroom, lesbians holding hands in the city park, and women leaders in traditionally male-dominated professions may all experience their stigmatizable characteristic (ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender, respectively) as having disadvantageous meaning in these contexts, where a negative group stereotype can become relevant.

This perspective has several implications for how discrimination is conceptualized. Clearly, discrimination is not group-specific, an idea borne out both by the readiness with which groups identify with the discrimination experiences of others (e.g., the civil-rights movement has become a model of social protest for oppressed groups around the world) and by decades of empirical research. While discrimination may take different forms across social groups, virtually any difference from some community norm or contextual ideal can become the basis for prejudice and subsequent discrimination. According to Adam (1978),

A moment's reflection will reveal the extraordinary triviality of traits per se by which disqualification from social opportunities is achieved. A momentous world of meanings accrues about, for example, gender, skin tone, erotic preference, etc., as these qualities are seized upon as bases for social inequality. (p. 9)

Previous research has demonstrated that many types of salient personal differences can elicit cultural stigmatization, including being overweight (Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993; Larkin & Pines, 1979), having a mental illness (Farina, 1982; Nunnally, 1961; Wakefield, 1992), and even exhibiting any difficulty in "normal" social interactions (Jensema & Shears, 1972; Jones, Gottfried, & Owens, 1966; Shears & Jensema, 1969).

Discrimination is context-specific. Settings that integrate the stereotyped and the generally nonstereotyped can make personal differences more salient (Frible, Blackstone & Scherbaum, 1990), thereby setting the stage for discrimination-related experiences as mythical meanings are applied to the stigmatizable characteristic. The classroom context has special meaning for African Americans' experience to the extent that negative group myths are salient in that specific context more so than in other contexts (Steele, 1992, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Women may be more likely to experience discrimination in the domains of mathematics and science (Eccles-Parsons et al., 1983; Spencer & Steele, 1994). Similarly, the experience of prejudice against women leaders is more likely when they work in male-dominated roles than when they work in mixed or mostly female organizations (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992; Lyness & Thompson, 1997).

Group-specific myths are widely recognized as the foundation for prejudice and subsequent discrimination. They guide the manner in which we are conditioned to react to stigmatizable groups (Gardner, 1994; Snyder & Miene, 1994). Like Goffman (1963), Adam argued that discrimination is as much about relationships between the stigmatized and the dominant cultural group as it is about any particular actions, and these relationships are characterized primarily by the cultural myths groups create about one other. Years and perhaps even generations of success (as women and ethnic minorities have demonstrated in past decades) may be required to contradict such inferior expectations and to completely dispel negative cultural myths (e.g., the once commonly held belief that a woman's place is in the home). As a cross-group experience, the possibility of discrimination is a negative condition that should impact members of any group about whom there exists some generally attributed negative stereotype (cf. stereotype threat; Steele, 1997). While they originate in the history and development of a community, myths are reproduced in its everyday language and symbolic universe. To the extent that they are commonly known and active, they become relevant in social interactions.

The Confluence of Person, Context, and Myth

Inferiorization provides a useful cross-group characterization of the discriminatory relationship between those who are stigmatized and those who are not, and the experiences associated with that relationship. It focuses attention on the inferiorizing aspects of intergroup discriminatory processes. Inferiorization becomes activated as particular *persons* (with membership in some stigmatizable social group) enter particular *contexts* that hold special meaning for others' expectations and interpretations because of the associated negative cultural *myths*. For example, when women enter circumstances requiring physical strength, such as construction work, their inferiority is always an implication—quite apart from their actual abilities—because of cultural myths about the physical capacities of women. Gender also seems to matter in math and science contexts because a negative stereotype is attached to femaleness in these particular contexts, implying a mythical inferiority not attached to maleness (Eccles-Parsons et al., 1983; Spencer & Steele, 1994). Gender seems less likely to matter in literary-studies contexts because there are no associated negative myths. Similarly, African American ethnicity seems to matter in a classroom where a negative stereotype is attached to Blackness, implying an inferiority not associated with Whiteness (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Ethnicity matters less when the context is untainted by such cultural myths. This person-context-myth formulation is supported by previous research concerning (a) the variability of stigmatizable conditions (Frable, 1993), (b) the context-specific nature of discrimination (e.g., women in the workplace; Eagly et al., 1992; Hoiberg, 1982), and (c) the problem of generally known negative group stereotypes (e.g., Gardner, 1994; Steele, 1997).

The Empirical Study of Inferiorization: Overview

Conceptualizing inferiorization as a function of a confluence of person, context, and myth raised interesting operational possibilities for constructing questionnaire items that elaborated the various dimensions of inferiorization. For the present study, we constructed a questionnaire based on the intersections of the thematic characteristics of experienced discrimination (i.e., the confluence of personal stigma and cultural myth) and the specific contexts of everyday life for a college-student sample. In this way, we applied Adam's (1978) inferiorization construct to investigate the experience of inferiorization in college-student samples of White men, White women, African Americans, gay men and lesbians, and people with physical disabilities.

Because inferiorization can exist for any group about whom a negative stereotype exists, we hypothesized that we should first be able to measure this experience as it occurs for any person whenever we see the identified confluence of person, context, and myth. Second, it should be possible to detect patterns of discriminatory experience specific to contexts associated with a group's alleged inferiorities; situations that make a group's stigma salient.

Method

Inasmuch as inferiorization is an idea that could apply to anyone, the design of this study included participants representing men and women varying in ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability status. The overall sample was divided into seven categories, each representing a different stigma (e.g., people with disabilities), plus an eighth comparison group of allegedly nonstigmatizable White men. We constructed a questionnaire to investigate inferiorizing events in the everyday lives of our college-student sample.

Constructing the Inferiorization Questionnaire

Inferiorizing events are defined as experiences of the confluence of a person's salient stigma, a specific context, and a related myth about that stigma in that context. Experientially, they represent the overt and subtle events of everyday life that can make a stigmatizable person feel less respected by others, less welcomed or prejudged in certain contexts, or less significant within a community as evidenced by their group's underrepresentation in the general population or misrepresentation in the manifest culture.

Facet analysis (Shye, Elizur, & Hoffman, 1994) was used to construct questionnaire items representing discrete inferiorizing events. Facet theory provides a series of techniques to conduct meaningful measurements of complex social-science phenomena. It ensures a systematic and comprehensive sampling of the

content domain of situations in which discriminatory events have been reported in research and popular literature about stigmatized groups. We used facet analyses to coordinate two lists: (a) the thematic characteristics of experienced discrimination (i.e., the confluence of personal stigma and cultural myth), and (b) the specific contexts of everyday life for a college-student sample. A review of the literature on stigmatization, prejudice, and discrimination generated a list (List A) of the actual behavior of others, contextual assumptions by others, or cultural implications that manifest one of the various “-isms”—racism, sexism, heterosexism, or ableism. Items on List A were brief thematic descriptions, such as feeling that you are “on” (having to be self-conscious about the impression you are making), rather than specific experiences in specific situations. A second list (List B) was created of the contexts for everyday living for college students, such as the university classroom or social outings. The item-generating procedure consisted of placing List A and List B on virtual axes X and Y, respectively, and then examining the points of intersection of each element on each list in a gridlike pattern—an element from List A occurring in each context from List B. The content of each intersecting point was represented by at least one questionnaire item in the final inferiorization questionnaire.³

These facet analyses produced 143 items for the Inferiorization Questionnaire (Gomez, 1998), a measure composed of two sections that each examined different types of inferiorizing events (see Table 1 for a listing of contexts examined and sample items). The first section, entitled *Generic Items*, consisted of 84 items and assessed generic discriminatory events; that is, the items themselves contained no reference to a specific stigma (e.g., gender), stigmatizable group (e.g., women), or group-ism (e.g., sexism). Contexts examined using generic items included the university classroom, the workplace, social interactions, and the off-campus setting (i.e., experiences not specifically associated with university members or contexts). Respondents indicated the frequency of each experience on a 5-point scale ranging from 5 (*always occurring*) to 1 (*never occurring*).

The second section, entitled *Group-Specific Items*, consisted of 59 items to assess other experiences of the stigmatizable group member, this time specifically as a group member; certain inferiorizing events could not be queried without specific reference to group membership. The group-specific items were

³For more information on facet analysis, see Shye et al. (1994) and Shye (1990). Shye and his colleagues described *facet theory* as a research method for integrating content design with data analysis for use in constructing questionnaires and designing research instruments. One of many techniques developed for formal and comprehensive examination of substantive content is facet analysis. The founder of facet theory, Louis Guttman, argued that a theory about a behavioral concept (e.g., intelligence, social adaptation) is a prior condition for its meaningful measurement. Shye describes concrete tools and procedures to reveal how the structure of a concept determines the intrinsic, logical yardstick for its measurement.

Table 1

The Inferiorization Questionnaire: Contexts Examined and Sample Items

Generic items (no group reference)	
Classroom/school context (29 items)	“How often do your teachers act as if they think you might need help with a challenging task?”
Workplace context (29 items)	“When speaking to a group of co-workers, how often do they act as if they are paying more attention to your personal attributes than to what you are saying?”
Social interactions context (13 items)	“How often do people act as if they are uncomfortable being around you?”
Off-campus context (5 items)	“How often are you treated with less courtesy than other people?”

Group-specific items (samples edited for participant’s self-identified category; e.g., “women” or “people of color”)	
Classroom/school context (6 items)	“When you do well in a challenging situation in your academic work, how often do you worry that some people might be thinking that you are a ‘credit to people of color’?”
Workplace context (10 items)	“When you have thought over your future career options, how often have you asked yourself whether a woman would be accepted or allowed to do what you want to do?”
Social interactions context (5 items)	“When with a group of able-bodied people, how often have you felt that you were being treated differently because you have a disability?”
Off-campus context (11 items)	“When you have asked to talk to ‘the person in charge’ in a place of business, a community office, or an administrator’s office, how often have you found yourself facing a man?”
Media perceptions context (8 items)	“On television or in magazines, how often do you hear people of color referred to by derogatory slang or street names?”
Political/government perceptions context (11 items)	“How satisfied are you that the ideas and concerns of gay men/lesbians are being represented in the legislature at the federal level?”

Note. Generic items, as we use the term *generic* here, contain no reference to a specific stigma, stigmatizable group, or group-ism. In contrast, versions of the group-specific items were edited to address the specific group with which the respondent self-identifies, and all respondents completed approximately the same question content.

edited to address the specific social group with which the respondent self-identified, but all respondents completed approximately the same item content. Contexts examined included the same four as in the first section, plus the respondent's pressure to "fit in" (cf. passing, or concealing one's stigma; Goffman, 1963); perceptions of media treatment of their social group; and perceptions of political leadership opportunities and representation by governing officers. Respondents indicated the frequency of each experience on a 5-point scale ranging from 5 (*always occurring*) to 1 (*never occurring*); for some items, respondents indicated their opinion (e.g., satisfaction with political leaders) on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*very satisfied*) to 4 (*not at all satisfied*).

The face validity of items was informally established by 12 reviewers who were asked to compare item content with their own experiences of racism, sexism, heterosexism, or ableism, respectively. They confirmed that items accurately addressed some of the discrete interpersonal events and perceptions that they believe constitute discrimination in both its overt and subtle forms.

Participants

Participants provided information for social group categorization through self-report demographic measures at the beginning of the questionnaire package, including questions about physical disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and gender. The White male comparison group consisted only of able-bodied, heterosexual, White men; all other participants were fitted to criteria of the seven other categories.

The homogeneity of stigmatizable groups varied based on stigma prevalence in the general population. The goal of our categorization procedure was to examine differences across multiple stigmas, thus we sought to isolate persons possessing targeted characteristics (e.g., physical disability or ethnicity). Generally underrepresented stigmas—in this study, sexual orientation and physical disability—necessitated a hierarchical classification scheme where such persons, regardless of other personal characteristics, were classified to represent that category. For example, a woman with a disability was classified as a person with a disability and a White gay man was classified as a gay man because disability and homosexuality are less prevalent stigmas. As a result, the gay men/lesbians group and the people with disabilities group have greater heterogeneity than do more prevalent stigmatizable groups (White women and ethnic minorities), consisting of men and women with multiple ethnicities. These variations of homogeneity within groups should be taken into account in interpreting group-based results.

The overall sample consisted of 263 undergraduate ($n = 238$) and graduate ($n = 25$) students at a large midwestern university. Approximately two thirds participated as part of their introductory psychology course and received course credit; the remainder were actively recruited with the assistance of university

service agencies. Mean age was 20.4 years. There were 149 women and 114 men, with 143 White/Caucasian, 53 Black/African American, 29 Latino/Latina, 15 Asian American, and 23 participants identified themselves as Other ethnicities. Two hundred thirty-three participants identified themselves as heterosexual, 16 as gay or lesbian, 10 as bisexual, and 4 reported they were "not sure" of their sexual orientation. Two-hundred forty participants reported that they had no physical disability of any kind, and 23 reported a physical disability.

The overall sample included Latinos, bisexuals, and Asian Americans, but only five groups—chosen for their distinctive stigmas and alleged disparate experiences—are described and examined for this study of cross-group discrimination. The *people with disabilities* sample consisted of 23 participants; 15 undergraduate and 8 graduate students. Six students participated as part of their introductory psychology course and received course credit; 17 were actively recruited. Mean age was 26.5 years; with 15 women and 8 men; 15 Whites, 4 African Americans, and 1 Latino; and 20 heterosexuals and 2 gay men. Type of disability was not reported by all subjects, but a varied sample of disabilities was reported by 15 of the 23 participants, including hearing impairment ($n = 6$), visual impairment ($n = 2$), muscular dystrophy ($n = 1$), multiple sclerosis ($n = 1$), closed head injury ($n = 1$), asthma ($n = 1$), ulcerative colitis ($n = 1$), chronic fatigue ($n = 1$), and cerebral palsy ($n = 1$). The *gay men/lesbians* sample consisted of 15 participants; 9 undergraduate and 5 graduate students (1 did not report educational level). Three students participated as part of their introductory psychology course; the remainder were actively recruited. Mean age was 24.3 years; with 4 women and 11 men; 9 Whites, 3 African Americans, and 2 Asian Americans; and all were able-bodied. The *Black/African American* sample consisted of 43 participants; all of whom were undergraduate students. All participated as part of their introductory psychology course. Mean age was 19.6 years; with 32 women and 9 men (2 did not report gender); all endorsing Black/African American as their ethnic background; heterosexual; and able-bodied. The *White women* sample consisted of 62 participants; 57 undergraduate and 5 graduate students. Fifty-seven students participated as part of their introductory psychology course; 5 were actively recruited. Mean age was 19.6 years; all endorsed Caucasian/White as their ethnic background; and all were heterosexual and able-bodied. The *White male* comparison sample consisted of 52 participants; all of whom were undergraduate students participating as part of their introductory psychology course. Mean age was 19.5 years; all endorsed Caucasian/White; and all were heterosexual and able-bodied.

Procedure

Participants received written instructions that this study is examining "the everyday experience of college students on this campus." The questionnaire

packet was self-contained and was completed by most participants without assistance in about 30 min. All participants were debriefed as to the purpose of the study and were solicited for comments or questions.

Results

For the purposes of data reduction, we factor-analyzed items in the Inferiorization Questionnaire. Findings for all factors were too numerous to present for this paper (see Table 2 for a complete listing of the 23 factors yielded).⁴ Seven factors representing the possible disadvantages of personal stigmas are presented in this paper, four factors representing interpersonal treatment and three factors representing institutional implications about group standing (drawn from social information, for example, in popular media). Factors were sampled from several contexts and from both the Generic Items section and the Group-Specific Items section of the questionnaire.

To examine our first contention—inferiorization is measurable whenever we see a confluence of person, context, and myth—we summarized group mean factor scores to look for trends suggesting advantage and disadvantage to group membership. To examine our second contention—patterns of discriminatory experience are specific to contexts associated with alleged group inferiorities (contexts that make salient a group's stigma)—we examined evidence of context-specific cultural myths influencing others' expectations or assumptions.

Factor Analyses of Items in the Inferiorization Questionnaire

Principal-components factor analyses with varimax rotation were executed using item sets for each context in the Generic Items section and for each context in the Group-Specific Items section of the Inferiorization Questionnaire (refer to Table 1 for the number of items per context in each section). Retained items loaded at the .50 level or above on only one factor, unless otherwise noted; such a high factor loading was desired to promote reliability and to foster discrete factor measures of various dimensions of inferiorization. Factor analyses were conducted on the complete study sample (average $N = 236$; see Table 3 for factor item content and loadings).

Interpersonal Treatment Factors

Four factors, two from the social interactions context and two from the classroom context, represented the possible disadvantages of stigmas in interpersonal treatment. First, the Poorly Treated By Others factor (8 items) assessed

⁴A full delineation is available from the authors upon request.

Table 2

Factors in the Inferiorization Questionnaire (by Context)

From generic items	From group-specific items
Social interactions context	
Poorly treated by others ^a	Treated as "different" ^a
Not addressed formally	Pressured to "fit in"
Off-campus context	
Trouble using public facilities	Culture/arts not represented
	Feeling vulnerable ^a
	Hearing derogatory slang
Classroom/school context	
Avoided by others ^a	Treated as a group representative ^a
Capacities less respected	Hearing derogatory slang
Lesser academic expectations	
Media perceptions context	
	Group visibility
	Group misrepresentations ^a
Political/government perceptions context	
	Less group representation
	Less leadership opportunity ^a
Workplace context	
Treated with caution	Treated as a group representative
Capacities less respected	Poorly treated by others
Lower leadership expectations	Lesser career outlook

Note. Factor analyses were conducted independently for generic items and group-specific items and within each context.

^aFactors examined in this study.

respondents' perceptions of others' apparent discomfort in one's presence, emphasizing the degree of related poor or disrespectful treatment (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$). This was the first factor from the 13 generic items in the social interactions context, accounting for 30.1% of the total variance. Second, the Treated As "Different" factor (3 items) assessed respondents' experience of being treated as different because of their social group membership, with the highest loading item involving direct discrimination against the group ($\alpha = .80$). This was the first

Table 3

Factor Item Content and Loadings by Context

Factor names	Factor loading
Interpersonal treatment factors	
Poorly treated by others (social interactions context)	
Others seem afraid of you	.766
Others uncomfortable	.713
Less courtesy	.695
Poorer service (shops)	.646
Others pity you	.634
Mistreated by strangers	.605
Poorer service (dining)	.603
Others speak carefully	.508
Treated as "different" (social interactions context)	
Experienced discrimination	.865
Treated differently (by strangers)	.861
Treated differently (by opposite stigma group)	.809
Avoided by others (classroom context)	
Afraid of you (teachers)	.762
Shy away from you (teachers)	.731
Shy away from you (classmates)	.717
Afraid of you (classmates)	.700
Uncomfortable around you (teachers)	.694
Uncomfortable around you (classmates)	.694
Speak carefully around you (teachers)	.690
Speak carefully around you (classmates)	.652
Pity you (teachers)	.625
Pity you (classmates)	.625
Treated as a group representative (classroom context)	
Asked to speak for group (by classmates)	.942
Opinion taken as group's (by classmates)	.930
Asked to speak for group (by teachers)	.920
Viewed as "credit" to group	.544

(table continues)

Table 3 (Continued)

Factor names	Factor loading
Institutional implications about group standing	
Feeling vulnerable (off-campus context)	
Stigma matters (needing police help)	.859
Stigma matters (during traffic stop)	.836
Feel relatively vulnerable	.636
Group misrepresentation (media perceptions context)	
Images misrepresent group in media	.740
Perceive "-ism" in the media	.733
Hear derogatory slang in media	.640
Fewer leadership opportunities (political/government perceptions context)	
Likelihood elected/city council	.955
Likelihood elected/school board	.938
Likelihood elected/mayor	.913

factor from the five group-specific items in the social interactions context, accounting for 42.8% of the total variance. Third, the Avoided By Others factor (10 items) assessed perceptions of others' apparent discomfort in one's presence, emphasizing the perception of being avoided or marginalized ($\alpha = .90$). This was the first factor from the 29 generic items in the classroom/school context, accounting for 28.6% of the total variance. Finally, the Treated as a Group Representative factor (4 items) assessed respondents' perceptions that others view them as representatives of their entire social group and, for some items, as an especially positive member and perhaps an exception to the assumed norm for that group ($\alpha = .88$). This was the first factor from the six group-specific items in the classroom/school context, accounting for 46.5% of the total variance.

Institutional Implications Factors

Three factors, one each from the off-campus, media perceptions, and political perceptions contexts, represented the possible disadvantages of personal stigmas, detectable from institutional implications about group standing. First, the Feeling Vulnerable factor (3 items) assessed the perception that a stigmatized characteristic had some effect on how off-campus police officers view the respondent ($\alpha = .68$). The police were implicitly offered as representatives of public safety on this factor, and the increased significance of stigma implied decreased personal safety. One item directly addressed feeling vulnerable with regard to personal

rights or physical safety, relative to other social groups. This was the second factor from the 11 group-specific items in the off-campus context, accounting for 19.3% of the total variance. Second, the Group Misrepresentation factor (3 items) assessed respondents' perceptions of how their social group may be misrepresented or mistreated in the popular media ($\alpha = .62$). This was the second factor from the eight group-specific items in the media perceptions context, accounting for 25.5% of the total variance. Finally, items in the Fewer Leadership Opportunities factor (3 items) assessed the perception that social group membership affected access to political leadership opportunities ($\alpha = .94$). This was the second factor from the 11 group-specific items in the political/government perceptions context, accounting for 23.4% of the total variance.

Trends Suggesting Advantage and Disadvantage to Group Membership

To examine our first contention—inferiorization is measurable when we see a confluence of person, context, and myth—we summarized group mean factor scores to look for trends suggesting advantage and disadvantage to group membership. Table 4 shows that each stigmatizable group scored above the overall sample mean on at least three of six measures of inferiorizing experiences. In contrast, the White male comparison group consistently scored at or below the overall means (with the exception of perceived political leadership opportunities), indicating comparatively fewer inferiorizing experiences. Stigmatizable groups did not consistently report a high frequency of inferiorizing experiences across all measures, suggesting a contextual and stigma-related specificity.

Findings regarding interpersonal treatment suggest that disability, ethnic minority status, and homosexuality are disadvantages in social interactions and in the classroom; gender and White ethnicity are generally not disadvantages (Table 5). People with disabilities and African Americans reported the most frequent experiences of poor treatment by others in social interactions, $F(4, 185) = 3.00, p < .05$. Note, however, that the elevations on these frequency reports were not high (i.e., all group mean scores fell in the lower end of the item response scale). This suggests that, among this group of relatively successful minority individuals in a mostly liberal and allegedly supportive environment, inferiorizing experiences continue to exist, albeit infrequently. White men and White women reported generally positive social interactions. The less offensive experience of being avoided or marginalized in the classroom was reported most often by people with disabilities, gay men/lesbians, and African Americans, all greater than reports from White women, $F(4, 187) = 3.89, p < .01$. White men scored at the higher end on this measure, but still near the overall sample mean. White women reported feeling the most approachable in the classroom. Finally, note that being treated as “different” because of one’s personal characteristics occurs to some degree for everyone; however, it clearly is rarer for White men in

Table 4

Summary of Trends Suggesting Advantage or Disadvantage to Group Membership

Factor measure	High	Medium	Low
Poorly treated by others (social interactions)	Disabled African American _a	Gay/lesbian White men	Women _b
Treated as "different"	Gay/lesbian _a Women _a African American		Disabled White men _b
Avoided by others (classroom)	Disabled _a Gay/lesbian African American _a	White men	Women _b
Feeling vulnerable (off-campus)	Women _a African American _a	Gay/lesbian	Disabled White men _b
Group misrepresentation (media perceptions)	Gay/lesbian _a Women _a African American _a		White men _b Disabled
Fewer leadership opportunities (political perceptions)	Gay/lesbian _a White men _a Disabled _a		Women _b African American _b

Note. Column headers indicate where each group scored, relative to other groups and relative to the overall mean, on each factor measures. A *medium* score is considered within .10 (inclusive) of the overall sample mean. Groups with different subscripts are significantly different from each other for each factor measure.

social interactions. Gay men/lesbians, White women, and African Americans reported a greater frequency of these stigma-related events, $F(4, 172) = 3.44$, $p < .01$. It is interesting that people with disabilities scored below the overall mean on this measure because study participants offered anecdotally that some able-bodied people will go to painstaking efforts not to treat them as different in social interactions and, in the process, communicate the opposite message. Consistent with recent discrimination literature, stigmatizable groups reported milder forms of interpersonal inferiorization, such as being treated as different, rather than more overt forms, such as being treated poorly or actively marginalized.

The institutional implication factors results, in the lower portion of Table 5, include an illustration of inferiorization when the confluence of person, context, and myth impacts White men, an alleged nonstigmatizable social group. White men as well as gay men/lesbians and people with disabilities all reported less access to political leadership opportunities than did White women and African Americans, $F(4, 160) = 32.72, p < .01$. This is a compelling finding in an era of political discussion about affirmative action and the advancement of historically oppressed social groups, especially women and ethnic minorities. On one of the secondary inferiorization factors (not presented in this article), which we called Less Government Representation, sampled White men indicated comparatively more representation of their interests and concerns in government, but here indicate that being a White male impedes access to elected office "for the average man"; in contrast, African Americans and White women felt no such impediment because of ethnicity or gender. This pattern of responses was reversed with regard to satisfactory media representation. Gay men/lesbians, White women, and African Americans reported greater misrepresentation of their group than did White men, $F(4, 173) = 12.85, p < .01$. On another of the secondary inferiorization factors (not presented in this article), which we called Group Visibility, sampled African Americans and White women reported highest visibility in the media (of all stigmatizable groups), but here seem to qualify this as misrepresentation. It is interesting that people with disabilities reported the least misrepresentation because, as several respondents indicated in written comments on their questionnaires, they could not make judgments about misrepresentation until they see at least minimal representation of their group.

The final measure of institutional implications, Feeling Vulnerable, drew sharpest contrast about social group standing. If public safety were conceived as a context with associated myths (regarding, for example, vulnerability), present findings suggest that female gender, African American ethnicity, and homosexuality hold enormous disadvantage. White women, African Americans, and gay men/lesbians reported being the most vulnerable with regard to personal safety and preservation of rights; White men felt the least vulnerable, $F(4, 133) = 16.35, p < .01$.

In sum, present findings support our first contention that inferiorization is measurable whenever we see a confluence of person, context, and myth, even for generally nonstigmatizable White men. Further, as Table 4 illustrates, each stigmatizable group scored above the overall sample mean on at least three of six measures of inferiorizing experiences; in contrast, the White male comparison group consistently scored at or below the overall means, indicating comparatively fewer inferiorizing experiences. Deviations from these trends, which suggest advantage and disadvantage to social group membership, indicated a contextual and stigma-related specificity to inferiorizing experience. We explore this specificity in the next section.

Table 5

Group Mean Differences on Factor Measures Suggesting Advantage and Disadvantage to Group Membership

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Interpersonal treatment factors			
Poorly treated by others (social interactions context)			
Overall sample	2.03	0.52	190
People with disabilities	2.18	0.77	23
Blacks/African Americans	2.18 _a	0.65	42
Gay men/lesbians	2.06	0.55	14
White men	2.03	0.34	51
White women	1.86 _b	0.38	60
Avoided by others (classroom context)			
Overall sample	1.63	0.55	192
People with disabilities	1.81 _a	0.68	22
Gay men/lesbians	1.77	0.57	14
Blacks/African Americans	1.72 _a	0.64	43
White men	1.70 _a	0.50	52
White women	1.42 _b	0.38	61
Treated as "different" (social interactions context)			
Overall sample	2.41	0.81	177
Gay men/lesbians	2.86 _a	0.99	13
White women	2.57 _a	0.74	59
Blacks/African Americans	2.48 _a	0.97	39
People with disabilities	2.17	0.81	22
White men	2.14 _b	0.57	44
Institutional implication factors			
Fewer leadership opportunities (political perceptions context)			
Overall sample	2.07	0.88	165
Gay men/lesbians	3.69 _a	0.80	12
White men	2.45 _a	0.55	43
People with disabilities	2.27 _a	0.90	17
White women	1.74 _b	0.59	59
Blacks/African Americans	1.47 _b	0.72	34

(table continues)

Table 5 (Continued)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Group misrepresentation (media perceptions context)			
Overall sample	2.95	0.68	178
Gay men/lesbians	3.36 _a	0.58	13
White women	3.03 _a	0.59	60
Blacks/African American	3.03 _a	0.59	39
White men	2.69 _b	0.55	44
People with disabilities	2.32	0.84	22
Feeling vulnerable (off-campus context)			
Overall sample	2.78	0.71	138
White women	3.14 _a	0.46	52
Blacks/African Americans	3.04 _a	0.82	26
Gay men/lesbians	2.73 _a	0.65	11
People with disabilities	2.53	0.61	12
White men	2.19 _b	0.52	37

Note. Response scale: 4 = *very often*, 3 = *fairly often*, 2 = *not very often*, 1 = *never*. Groups with different subscripts are significantly different from each other for each factor measure.

Inferiorization for Stigmatizable Groups

Our second contention held that inferiorization occurs in a unique way for stigmatizable social groups: We should detect patterns of discriminatory experience specific to contexts associated with alleged group inferiorities; situations that made salient a group's stigma. Results show that when stigmatized groups specifically reported stereotypical assumptions or expectations from others (e.g., others view their achievements as a "credit" to their entire social group), these occurred in contexts that emphasize alleged inferiorities. This suggests that context-specific cultural myths continue to influence how stigmatized group members are treated. Factor measures and individual items demonstrate these patterns.⁵

African American students experienced the greatest discomfort in the university classroom in comparison to other groups, consistent with previous research

⁵These individual items did not acceptably load on any factor measures, as a result of factor loadings less than .50. Examination of pairwise group differences used Scheffé's criteria, a more conservative multiple comparison range test statistic. As a result, only extreme group differences are reported here.

(Howard & Hammond, 1985; Steele, 1992, 1997). They reported most frequently being treated as a group representative in the classroom. $F(3, 127) = 17.08, p < .01$ (African American $M = 2.68$, overall $M = 2.07$). Also, African Americans overall reported greater marginalization than White students, $F(4, 255) = 4.02, p < .01$ (Avoided By Others factor, Table 5). This pattern extended to social interactions related to the classroom stigma of ethnicity. All participants were asked, without reference to their social group, "Away from campus, how often do people act surprised when you tell them that you are going to school at the University of Michigan?" Ethnic minorities ($M = 3.18, n = 72$) reported more surprised reactions than did both the White women's sample ($M = 2.50, n = 76$) and the White men sample ($M = 2.39, n = 70$). These findings suggest the pervasiveness of myths regarding the intellectual capacities of African American students.

People with disabilities also experienced attributions of intellectual deficiency in the university classroom. They reported the most avoidance by others (see Avoided By Others factor, Table 5). Students with disabilities also reported less respect ($M = 2.86, n = 22$) for their intelligence and contribution in the classroom than did able-bodied students ($M = 2.39, n = 240$), $F(1, 261) = 1.88, p < .05$. This appears to be related to how they communicate and are received by classmates, arguably a manifestation of academic prowess: Students with disabilities ($M = 2.61, n = 23$) reported that others appear to struggle to understand them more often than did able-bodied students ($M = 2.06, n = 239$), $F(1, 261) = 2.84, p < .01$; and they ($M = 2.48, n = 23$) reported that others think they don't communicate adequately, as compared to able-bodied students ($M = 2.04, n = 239$), $F(1, 261) = 1.84, p < .05$. (It is unclear from the data how the nature of one's disability may interact with this finding, but at least 15 of 23 students with disabilities reported no trouble with speech production.) These findings suggest the context-specific existence of the myth of corresponding intellectual deficiencies for persons with physical deficits (Murphy, 1987).

White women and gay men/lesbians reported significant, but less pervasive evidence of context-specific cultural myths relating to group stigma. White women did not report major problems with discrimination in the workplace, as we anticipated from earlier research; we attribute this finding to the minimal work experience of our sample (mean age = 19.6 years). However, their more age-appropriate observation was that a woman was less frequently the "person in charge" in businesses or office settings. All groups were asked "When you have asked to talk to 'the person in charge'—in a place of business, a community office, or an administrator's office—how often have you found yourself facing a _____?" This question was completed with a group descriptor of a member of the respondent's self-identified social group (e.g., "a woman" or "a person of color"). Women ($M = 3.66, n = 73$) reported fewer women in charge than did the White male comparison sample ($M = 2.37, n = 60$) reporting on men in charge, $F(4,$

236) = 60.81, $p < .01$. This finding indirectly speaks to pervasive myths about the suitability of women for leadership roles (Lyness & Thompson, 1997).

Gay men/lesbians were most often treated as "different" in social interactions; they scored more than one-half standard deviation above the overall sample mean on this factor measure (see Treated As "Different" factor on Table 5). This reflects the myth of the differentness or alleged "unnaturalness" of homosexual relationships, but fails to help us locate the specific subcontext (e.g., a conversation about one's spouse or one's family life). They also reported the least religious involvement and the least contact with religious persons (for advice seeking or support), arguably a context that inferiorizes homosexuality.

Present findings support our second contention that inferiorization occurs in a unique way for stigmatizable social groups: Beyond the general tendency for stigmatizable groups to report more inferiorizing experiences and nonstigmatizable groups to report less, patterns of inferiorizing experience were concentrated in contexts that emphasized alleged group inferiorities. Evidence is more pervasive for African Americans and people with disabilities than for White women and gay men/lesbians. Note that if it is accurate to attribute these findings to contextual myths, we begin to reassess the scope of the discrimination problem from a massive, overwhelming societal affliction to a context-specific, myth-dependent occurrence (cf. Weick, 1984, on redefining the scale of social problems).

Discussion

Present findings show that inferiorization is measurable whenever we see a confluence of person, context, and myth, even for White men. Across factor measures of inferiorization, stigmatizable people (people with disabilities, gay men/lesbians, African Americans, and White women) tended to report more frequent inferiorizing events than did generally nonstigmatizable people (White men). Deviations from this overall pattern were explained by the contextual and stigma-related specificity of inferiorization and the presence or absence of associated cultural myths. For example, African Americans were marginalized in the university classroom, but did not experience ethnic stigma as an impediment to achieving elected political office; White men reported the opposite experience in each context. We have shown that inferiorization is a theoretical framework for empirical, cross-group discrimination research that retains sensitivity to the experiences of specific groups and the contextual nature of stigmatization. Separate, simultaneous reports of discrimination from various social groups can be interpreted as separate contacts with the same type of interpersonal and cultural inferiorizing processes that Adam (1978) described.

Selected from the larger Inferiorization Questionnaire, the seven factors examined in this article represent the possible disadvantage of stigma in the

domains of interpersonal treatment and institutional implications about group standing.⁶ Other interesting findings that illuminate inferiorizing processes include: People with disabilities and gay men/lesbians reported the least visibility of their groups' culture and arts, while White women and African Americans reported the most visibility; African Americans reported the highest frequency of being treated as a group representative in the workplace context; and White men reported the highest expectations from others that they would take a leadership role in a problem-solving situation.

Results are qualified by some limitations in our study design. The college-student sample was homogeneous, compared to stigma prevalence in the general population. Stigmatizable characteristics outside the scope of this study, such as obesity or a history of mental illness, were not accounted for, nor did we account for the unique experiences of individuals with multiple stigmatizable characteristics. Also, the use of aggregation of effects may have obscured important individual differences; for example, some so-called stigmatizable individuals reported little experience of inferiorization. Finally, our sampling of contexts where discriminatory myths might operate was limited. Future research would benefit by measuring individual differences in the stigmatized characteristic (e.g., skin color, disability) and the prevalence of myth-referencing contexts in daily life. Interests and coping strategies may moderate the impact of inferiorization. For example, Do the participants read group-relevant publications?; live and work in group-specific neighborhoods?; go to group-specific churches or attend functions?; or actively support group-specific rights by belonging to pro-group, civil rights organizations?

It is noteworthy that this study was conducted in a fairly liberal college campus environment, where explicit attention to intergroup relations and the role modeling of cultural sensitivity are common. The fact that inferiorizing processes continue to be experienced, even infrequently, in such a climate suggests the need for studies that examine how certain contexts can elicit "discriminated-against" feelings in stigmatizable groups. A study of how both the stigmatized and the nonstigmatized enter a context and may feel the myth-based hypothesis that "people of this or that sort tend to be like this or that" would provide valuable information about the automatic influence of contextual myths. Further, examination of the significance of varying degrees of differentness in natural and experimental settings would support a broader application of inferiorization.

Advancing Empirical Cross-Group Discrimination Research

We described one possible theoretical framework and a psychometrically sound, self-report method for cross-group discrimination research. With the exception of Lott and Maluso's (1995) empirical work, cross-group examinations

⁶A full delineation of findings for all 23 measures is available from the authors.

of commonalities between African Americans and White women (Christian, 1990; McIntosh, 1988; Myrdal, 1944), African Americans and gay men (Altman, 1971), White women and lesbians (Abbott & Love, 1971), and White women and people with disabilities (Asch & Fine, 1988) have been largely descriptive or autobiographical. The present study lays methodological groundwork for future empirical research.

First, conceptualizing inferiorization as a function of a confluence of person, context, and myth made possible the creation of discrete questionnaire items—and subsequent factor measures—of context-specific discriminatory experiences. The development and initial testing of the Inferiorization Questionnaire was a major outcome of this project because it offers possibilities for creating valid scale measures of cross-group discrimination.

Second, facet theory (Shye et al., 1994) provided a technique for ensuring a comprehensive sampling of the content domain, rather than going about questionnaire item construction based on a less rigorous approach (e.g., anecdotal evidence). As a result, some interesting person–context–myth conjunctions emerged that were previously not examined in the group-specific research literature (e.g., the significance of physical disability in the university classroom). Future research can construct questionnaire items for any population reporting intergroup inferiorizing processes by systematically applying discriminatory themes to their everyday contexts. Examples of possible contexts for the study of inferiorization include women in the military, socially marginalized adolescents, or persons from lower socioeconomic backgrounds interacting with persons from dramatically higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Third, implementing generic questionnaire items—free of group-specific discrimination references—demonstrated empirically how inferiorizing events are experienced, even when framed as personal, rather than group-related, events. By design, participants responded to generic items in the Inferiorization Questionnaire prior to any knowledge that experimenters were interested in stigma and potential discrimination. People with disabilities and African Americans reported the poorest treatment by others in social interactions and the most avoidance by others in the classroom, even when questionnaire items held no reference to disability, ethnicity, or discrimination. One may speculate as to the degree of group membership awareness naturally held by participants as they enter the experimental setting; however, even a high degree of group awareness does not necessarily suggest that participants associated neutral question content (e.g., being treated with less respect) with discrimination against their entire group. Avoiding potentially loaded terminology in questionnaire item construction captured reports of the discrete events that constitute discrimination, while minimizing possible in-group bias.

Finally, approaching discrimination as it occurred in everyday life addressed the fact that stigmatizable people must carry around with them every day the

possibility of being avoided or unwelcomed, something missed in macrostructural and more dramatic discussions of the most visible, quantifiable, and extreme acts of discrimination. Essed (1990, 1991) suggested the need for research on everyday experiences to complement the more typical, descriptive reports on macrostructural variables, such as employment opportunities and college admissions. What takes place throughout the day—in shops or restaurants, from the passing car at the street corner, or in the stairwell of a building—has remained relatively unexplored in any empirical fashion; yet such everyday experiences can have far-reaching effects on stigmatizable people (Essed, 1990).

Implications of the Inferiorization Perspective for Discrimination Research

Inferiorization entails substantial redirection of how we frame discrimination research in psychology, shifting our attention to include historical relationships and subsequent cultural processes in our studies of specific, stigmatizable groups. Traditionally, the term *stigmatization* referred to the situation of individuals or groups who possess some undesired differentness that disqualified them from full social acceptance (Goffman, 1963). Stigma-based research focused on the stigma mark as an attribute of the subject; that is, how ethnicity or gender or sexual orientation or physical ability categorized social groups for comparison of experiences, privileges, and opportunities. Inferiorization redirects us from a sole focus on the comparative situations of those having a stigma versus those not having one to what a culture does with stigma and, more generally, with salient differences from the “normal” or situational mainstream. Goffman recommended such an approach: “While the term ‘stigma’ will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting . . . it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed” (p. 3). Inferiorization offers one such language by focusing on how particular stigmas relate to particular sociocultural myths in particular myth-relevant contexts. In this way, inferiorization clarifies how specific instances of discrimination might be experienced by stigmatized individuals, even in the absence of obvious discriminatory behavior on the part of those in the mainstream. Concepts like this, which bridge between the socially general and the contextually specific, will be useful both to researchers and to applied psychologists in attempting to understand and manage the impacts of discrimination (Stricker & Trierweiler, 1995; Trierweiler & Stricker, 1998).

Inferiorization also implies that some of the negative effects associated with group-isms may be related to a culture’s general assignment of value to some characteristics and diminishment of others. What is valued is “what is good (or better, or best) among objects, actions, ways of life, and social and political institutions and structures” (Schwartz, 1990, p. 8). A social institution embodies individual values (principles for what is valued) when, in the normal course of its operation, it offers people roles that encourage behavior expressing those values

and fosters conditions for their further expression. Generally deviant characteristics have been described as either positively valued, such as being intellectually gifted, or devalued, such as obesity (Frable et al., 1990); and historically stigmatized groups are generally defined as “devalued not only by specific in-groups but by the broader society or culture” (Crocker & Major, 1989, p. 609). If personal characteristics can be culturally valued or devalued, this implies that some of the negative discrimination experienced by ethnic minorities may be a result of information in the milieu (e.g., media stereotypes) suggesting that they are somehow less than the dominant cultural group. Considered in this light, some reported experiences of gender discrimination may refer less to the particulars of the interactions between the genders than to the lesser social value ascribed to women in certain contexts (e.g., high-level corporate leadership).

A related idea is that the milieu contains self-relevant information for minority groups, and thus we might conceptualize some forms of subtle discrimination in terms of nonspecific phenomena, such as a residual climate of discrimination left as the product of the history of a culture. All stigmatized groups live in an environment “that was largely created and defined by the dominant cultural group, with electronic media, major publications, and an educational system continually reproducing the language and symbolic universe of the community” (Adam, 1978, p. 30). These surroundings can imply the devalued status of a minority culture by exclusion or misrepresentation of a particular group. It may be useful to view social climate as separate from treatment when describing events or experiences we label *discriminatory*. Several authors have described a climate-like form of discrimination as *subtle racism* (Pettigrew, 1985), *symbolic racism* (Sears, Lau, Tyler, & Allen, 1980), or *racial ambivalence* (Crosby et al., 1980). The pervasive and transparent nature of a discriminatory climate is similar to how MacKinnon (1989) described sexism as “so much a part of the omnipresent background of [a woman’s] life that a massive effort of collective concentration is required even to discern that it has edges” (p. 90). Conceptualizing a discriminatory climate as separate from discriminatory treatment may contribute to understanding discriminated-against feelings reported by minority groups, even when overt discrimination seems to be absent. Steele and Aronson (1995) and Steele (1990) described an anxiety associated with knowing that one is a potential target of prejudice and stereotypes within a given context (*stereotype threat*).

Adoption of the inferiorization perspective means that putting an end to all overt expressions of discrimination may not diminish the more insidious effects of the inferiorizing processes existing within the history of a culture and its institutions. Social equality requires not a melting away of group categorization or group differences, but institutions that promote respect for group differences without devaluation. Awareness of the challenge of inferiorization may justify our active pursuit of equity in the value we place on the diverse members of our increasingly international and interdependent communities.

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