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# The Effects of Meritocracy Beliefs on Women's Well-Being after First-Time Gender Discrimination

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The Effects of Meritocracy Beliefs on Women's Well-Being after First-Time Gender  
Discrimination

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### Abstract

This study examined how meritocracy beliefs may buffer women from the negative psychological effects of an acute situation of gender discrimination. Although some research indirectly suggests that believing the meritocracy exists may increase well-being, group consciousness theories (e.g., Bartky, 1977) suggest that disbelieving the meritocracy exists will enhance psychological adjustment to gender discrimination. Women who reported little past experience with discrimination, and either believed or disbelieved the meritocracy exists were exposed to either a laboratory situation of discrimination or a non-discrimination failure (control) condition. Consistent with group consciousness theories, women experiencing discrimination reported greater well-being if they disbelieved the meritocracy exists, than if they were believers. In contrast, women in the control condition reported greater well-being if they believed the meritocracy exists than if they were disbelievers. Implications for coping with discrimination were discussed.

Key words: gender discrimination, meritocracy beliefs, group consciousness, well-being

## The Effects of Meritocracy Beliefs on Women's Well-Being after First-Time Gender Discrimination

The chronic and often ambiguous nature of discrimination (e.g., Allison, 1998; Crocker & Major, 1989; Swim, Cohen & Hyers, 1998) makes it a stressor that is difficult to cope with, and victims show a range of psychological and physical disturbances. These include mood disruptions such as depression (Foster, 2000; Klonoff, Landrine & Campbell, 2000; Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, Manning, & Lund, 1995), anxiety (Foster, 2000; Landrine et al., 1995), posttraumatic stress disorder (Matheson, Ofleh, Kelly & Anisman, 2004), and vulnerability to cardiac disease (Krieger & Sidney, 1996). Thus, in order to facilitate health-risk prevention there is a need to identify and understand factors that not only reduce discrimination, but enhance victims' well-being and quality of life.

Stress and coping models (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1989, 1992; Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Taylor, Lichtman & Wood, 1984) note that an individual's belief system is one factor that can affect the ways in which people respond to a stressful event. For example, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) refer to existential beliefs; Janoff-Bulman (1989) refers to "world assumptions"; cognitive adaptation theory (Taylor 1983) refers to beliefs about control and meaning of the event. While there are indeed a wide variety of beliefs that affect coping, we were interested in beliefs that are explicitly relevant to the experience of discrimination, namely beliefs about the social system. More specifically, we examined beliefs about the meritocracy, because it is referred to by several authors as one of the most persistent ideologies in North America (e.g., Kleugal & Smith, 1986; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Pratto, Sidanius,

Stallworth & Malle, 1994). Meritocracy beliefs have been most commonly defined as a preference for the merit principle, or an endorsement of merit as an appropriate way of distributing goods (e.g., Kleugal & Smith, 1986; Son Hing, Bobocel & Zanna, 2002). Defined this way, meritocracy beliefs reflect what people think *should* happen in society. Yet, although individuals may endorse the meritocracy as a positive goal, this endorsement does not indicate their beliefs about whether such a goal has been achieved. An individual can believe people should be rewarded for merit, but also recognize that there are social barriers which prevent that from happening. Thus, we were interested in how coping with discrimination would be affected by the belief or disbelief that the meritocracy actually exists (Lalonde, Doan & Patterson, 2000; Liss, O'Connor, Morosky & Crawford, 2001), reflecting what people think *does* happen in society. Use of such a definition is consistent with stress and coping theories that focus on how coping is affected by people's assumptions about how the world actually operates (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1989).

To date, there is little research on how beliefs about the social system will affect the well-being of victims of discrimination. Instead, most research examines how beliefs about the social system affect levels of perceived discrimination. For example, high believers in a just world have reported reduced perceptions of group (Birt & Dion, 1987; Dalbert, Fisch & Montada, 1992; Hafer & Olson, 1993) and personal discrimination (Lipkus, & Siegler, 1992). African Americans who believe that the hierarchical system is just ("Differences in status between ethnic groups are fair", p.101) were also less likely to believe that standardized tests were biased against them as individuals (Schmader, Major & Grazmow, 2001). Ethnic minorities who believe that individual mobility is open (e.g., "America is an open society where individuals of

any ethnicity can achieve higher status”, p. 272) reported decreased perceptions of personal discrimination (Study 1; Major, Gramzow, McCoy, Levin, Schmader & Sidanius, 2002). From these findings, we might expect that believing the meritocracy exists would also be positive for the well-being of disadvantaged group members. That is, well-being is likely increased if the perception of the stressor itself (i.e., experience of discrimination) is minimized. However, this does not address the question of whether such beliefs will protect individuals who do recognize that discrimination is occurring. Indeed, there is a need to understand whether beliefs about the system will be protective of well-being in the face of recognizing rather than minimizing the problem.

Once discrimination is recognized, group consciousness theories (e.g., Bartky, 1977; Bowles & Klein, 1983, Driefus, 1973) would argue that believing the social system is fair will decrease psychological adjustment to discrimination. Such theories, which were derived from the grass roots consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s, were founded with the explicit intention to shatter many beliefs about the system that were considered positive by the public, but considered to be detrimental to women and minorities. These groups argued that positive beliefs about the system (e.g., that the system is just; hard work results in success) were actually myths, later referred to by other theories as “legitimizing myths” (e.g., Kleugal & Smith, 1986; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Major, 2001; Pratto, et al., 1994). Maintaining such myths about the social system were considered damaging to women’s well-being because they encouraged women to blame themselves for their lower status (e.g., Bowles & Klein, 1983; Driefus, 1973; Jost & Banaji, 1994). For example, if a woman believes the meritocracy exists, she may attribute pay inequity or a missed promotion to her own inabilities (“I’m just not as qualified”)

rather than to an inequitable system. Consciousness-raising groups sought to discredit these myths, and instead promoted critical, presumably more realistic beliefs about the social system (e.g., that the meritocracy is a myth) so that women would instead blame that system.

Research on the effectiveness of criticizing the system, however, is sparse. Instead, indirect evidence comes from research on the empowering process of consciousness-raising groups and women's studies courses. For example, participation in consciousness-raising groups and women's studies courses, in which criticizing the social system is a key component, have been shown to increase women's self-esteem (Stake & Gerner, 1987; Weitz, 1982; Worell, Stilwell, Oakley, & Robinson, 1999) and independence (Brush, Gold, & White, 1978), and to reduce depression (Weitz, 1982). To begin to examine the effects of beliefs about the social system in a more direct manner, our laboratory has recently assessed how perceptions of personal discrimination and meritocracy beliefs interact to predict psychological and collective well-being (Foster, Sloto & Ruby, 2005). In particular, minority group members (both gender and ethnic groups) completed questionnaires measuring the degree to which they have personally experienced discrimination, their beliefs about whether the meritocracy exists, and individual (self-esteem) and collective (intergroup anxiety, collective action) well-being. Results showed a significant interaction between perceived personal discrimination and meritocracy beliefs, such that those who had experienced personal discrimination, yet also believe the meritocracy exists reported lower self-esteem, increased intergroup anxiety, and less collective action compared to those who disbelieved the meritocracy exists. Thus, consistent with group consciousness theories, being critical of the existence of the meritocracy was more protective than a belief in its existence.

However, our past research was correlational, and therefore only examined perceptions of past discrimination rather than an acute experience of discrimination. Indeed, models of coping with discrimination (Branscombe, Schmitt & Harvey, 1999; Major, Quinton & McCoy, 2002) call attention to the different effects of perceiving discrimination on a regular basis, and confronting an acute experience of discrimination. The present study was therefore designed to examine how beliefs about the social system, namely believing or disbelieving the meritocracy exists will affect women's well-being in the face of an acute situation of gender discrimination.

#### *Design Overview and Hypotheses*

This was a 2(meritocracy beliefs: disbelievers, believers) x 2(condition: discrimination, control) design. Participants were pre-tested on both their perceived discrimination and meritocracy beliefs and then exposed to either an acute situation of gender discrimination or a non-discrimination failure condition (control). Group consciousness theories (e.g., Bowles & Duelli Klein, 1983) suggest that first time discrimination is often the most difficult to cope with, as it is a new way of viewing the world (see also Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Thus, we were interested in women coping with a "first-time" experience of discrimination. As such, only participants who reported little past experience with personal discrimination were included, as their laboratory exposure to discrimination could then be assessed as a first-time, acute situation of gender discrimination.

Consistent with group consciousness theories (e.g., Bartky, 1977), we expected that meritocracy beliefs would interact with condition such that disbelievers facing discrimination would report greater well-being than believers. In our past work (Foster et al., 2005), meritocracy beliefs tended to be unrelated to well-being among those with low personal



discrimination. Thus, we did not expect that meritocracy beliefs would affect well-being in the control condition.

## Method

### *Participants*

Female introductory psychology students ( $N = 739$ ) at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada completed mass-testing questionnaires containing measures of past personal discrimination and meritocracy beliefs at the beginning of fall semester. In order to isolate low perceivers of discrimination, we selected those in the bottom third of the distribution of discrimination scores. We further selected those in the top (believers) and bottom (disbelievers) thirds of the distribution of meritocracy scores. Thus, those who qualified were low perceivers of discrimination who reported belief or disbelief in the meritocracy ( $N = 151$ ). These women were telephoned and asked to participate for course credit. Reported ethnicity for those who participated ( $N = 78$ , Mean age = 18.9,  $SD = 1.0$ ) was 69.1% White European descent, 5.2% East Asian, 3.9% South Asian, 3.9%, Black, 2.6% Latin, 2.6% reported being part of a religious minority and 12.7% did not report their ethnicity.

Men were included in the experiment because past research has shown the discrimination manipulation is more realistic when men are present (Foster, 2001; Foster, Matheson, & Poole, 1994). However, because in the experimental condition men are defined as being advantaged, they leave the experiment before dependent measures are collected. Thus, they were not included in the analyses.

### *Procedure*

Those pre-selected from their mass-testing scores were invited later in the semester to the

lab in groups of six (four female, two male), and a female experimenter (Experimenter 1) gave an overview of what the experiment would entail. In reality, that overview was a cover story designed to conceal the purpose of the study. Specifically, participants were told that this was an experiment in a program of studies investigating test-taking anxiety. To assess how their anxiety might be related to test performance, they would first complete a sample task, similar to that on the Graduate Record Examination, a standardized test used for admittance into graduate school. They would be given five multiple choice questions to complete in five minutes. After completion of the questions, their scores would be assessed by another experimenter. Allegedly, only the highest scoring participants would then be selected to enter what was called the “video group.” The other participants would remain behind to participate in an alleged second part of the experiment.

The purpose of these group delineations was to simulate a hierarchical intergroup situation (Foster, Matheson, & Poole, 1994; Foster, 2001; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). The methodological goal was to establish a group that participants would aspire to be in and where inclusion would reflect personal success and high social value. The second group should represent a relative lack of success and low social value. This differential evaluation of the two groups was achieved by varying the mundaneness of the task and the rewards associated with the work performed. Supposedly, those who performed well on the test would be asked to participate in the development of a video for students, which might help to decrease the anxiety associated with test-taking. They were told they would do this in a different experimental room, where refreshments would be served and that they would be eligible for a \$200 lottery. Thus, their skills

were valued by the experimenter, and they could potentially receive a large reward.

In contrast, those who did not perform well on the test would continue to complete a series of further tests that would assess whether their low performance generalizes to other types of skills such as math. Also, they would only be eligible for a \$10 lottery. Thus, their continuation in the experiment would be tedious, their skills less valued by the experimenter, and only a small reward could potentially be received. The task and scoring were actually bogus, and all participants were eligible for the \$200 lottery.

Participants were also told that a second experimenter (Experimenter 2), chosen as a research assistant because she had previously been a successful participant in this study, would observe their body language while they were completing the sample GRE test. It was explained that various body language indicators of test anxiety would be combined with their GRE test scores to create an overall score, which would determine whether they would proceed to the video group, or remain behind. This observation was also bogus.

*Discrimination manipulation.* The potential for gender discrimination was made salient by Experimenter 1:

I should warn you that this task and the way it is scored could be considered to be discriminatory against women. It seems that women don't do well on this task and so it is very rare that women are allowed into the video group, while men almost always get in. We can talk about this after the experiment if you like, but we do have time limitations for this experiment, so we should continue.

Participants were then given five minutes to complete their sample GRE test, which was

then collected and ostensibly scored. Experimenter 1 then told participants that Experimenter 2 would calculate the overall test anxiety scores. After the scoring, discrimination was perpetrated via false feedback such that Experimenter 2 told participants that only women received a failing score, while all the men received a passing score.

*Control condition.* Participants in the control condition were not given the warning about potential failure due to discrimination. They did receive false feedback such that one woman and one man received a passing score while the others received a failing score. Thus, the control group participants were told they failed (as in the experimental condition), but not due to discrimination. A non-discrimination failure versus a success condition was considered to be the most appropriate comparison group so that the effects of the two types of failures (gender versus individual merit-based) could be assessed.

In both conditions, those who passed were then asked to accompany Experimenter 2 to a different room where they would presumably participate in the video development, but were actually debriefed. As such, it appeared to participants in the discrimination condition that, consistent with the experimenter's previous warning, only men received the necessary passing score. For the control condition, it appeared that gender was unrelated to success.

After the successful participants had left, Experimenter 1 asked the remaining participants to complete a questionnaire and stated that the second part of the experiment would follow the questionnaire. This questionnaire was presumably designed to assess their opinions on the use of the task but actually contained the manipulation checks and dependent measures. Once they had completed the questionnaire, they were told that there was no second part of the experiment, and

were then given an oral and written debriefing. This debriefing was given to both women and men. It included a detailed, four-page description of the purpose of the study, an explanation as to why deception was necessary to examine the purpose, repeated confirmation that their performance was not actually measured, as well as a contact sheet with phone numbers of local resources (e.g., counseling centers). Discussions after debriefing indicated that participants understand the need for deception to obtain spontaneous reactions, and no adverse reactions have been reported (Foster, 1999, 2001; Foster, Matheson, & Poole, 1994).

### *Materials*

*Pre-measures.* At mass-testing, participants completed four items from Lalonde et al.'s (2000) Belief in Meritocracy Ideology scale which were rated using a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (-3) to strongly agree (3). Items were: "Everybody in this country has equal opportunities"; "If you are a member of a "minority group" you can climb the ladder of success only so far"; "Many social barriers prevent people from "minority groups" from getting ahead"; "Our present social system works to the disadvantage of people from visible minorities." Items were recoded so that higher scores represented the belief that the meritocracy exists, while lower scores represented a disbelief in the existence of the meritocracy. The mean of the items was used as the overall score (Cronbach alpha = .79;  $M = .24$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ). Those in the top (cutoff = .75) and bottom (cutoff = -.50) thirds of the distribution were classified as those who believe and disbelieve the meritocracy exists, respectively.

Personal experiences of discrimination were assessed by having participants indicate the extent to which they strongly disagreed (-3) or agreed (3) with nine statements (Foster &

Matheson, 1995). Example items included: “Men have more employment opportunities than I”; “I have to work harder than men in my peer group to reach my goals”. Some items were recoded so that on all items high scores represented high personal discrimination. The mean rating ( $M = -.57$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) across all nine items was used as the overall personal discrimination score (Cronbach alpha = .87). Those in the bottom (cutoff = -1.33) third of the distribution were classified as those reporting low personal experience with discrimination.

*Mood.* To assess how participants felt after their experience, an adjective checklist that had been previously piloted as common post-discrimination feelings was used (Foster & Dion, 2003). Participants rated these adjectives in terms of how they feel at the present moment, using a scale ranging from “not at all like this” (0) to “totally like this” (4). These adjectives were combined to reflect anxiety (distressed, nervous, sad, helpless, hesitant, and uncertain; Cronbach alpha = .77), positive affect (carefree, relaxed, and easy-going; Cronbach alpha = .81) and anger (angry, frustrated, resentful; Cronbach alpha = .80). The means of the items within each affect type were used as the overall scores, whereby higher scores represented greater anxiety, positive affect and anger.

*Life satisfaction.* Participants rated three items, indicating what is true for them right now, using a scale ranging from “not at all” (0) to “extremely” (4) (Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz & Owen, 2002): “I am pleased with my accomplishments in life”; “Although some parts of my life could be improved, overall, I have no complaints”; “I am satisfied with my life”. The mean score across the three items was used as the overall score (Cronbach alpha = .91). Higher scores represented higher life satisfaction.

*Self-esteem.* Using the same rating scale as above, performance and social self-esteem were assessed using the State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). The means within the eight performance (e.g., “I feel confident about my abilities”; “I feel frustrated or rattled about my performance”; Cronbach alpha = .87) and six social self-esteem items (e.g., “I feel self-conscious”; “I am worried about looking foolish”; Cronbach alpha = .89) were used as the overall scores. Higher scores represented higher self-esteem.

*Well-being composite:* Given the intercorrelations among the dependent variables (see Table 1), a well-being composite score was computed. Anxiety and anger were recoded such that higher scores represented lower anxiety and anger. The mean across all six variables was used as the overall well-being score (Cronbach alpha = .87).

*Manipulation check.* To assess whether gender discrimination was adequately portrayed, participants read that “Ethical guidelines require that we ask several questions”. Using a scale ranging from “very slightly or not at all” (0) to “extremely” (4), they indicated “How fair was the task you just completed?” and “How fairly were you personally treated, due to your gender in the present experiment.” Lower scores represented greater perceived unfairness.

## Results

### *Manipulation Check*

To assess the extent to which discrimination was successfully portrayed, a 2(meritocracy belief: disbelievers; believers) x 2(condition: discrimination, control) MANOVA was conducted on the two fairness scores. For the manipulation to have been successful, we expected a main

effect for condition, but no other effects so that unfair treatment would be perceived differently across the discrimination and control conditions, but equally across the meritocracy groups. As expected, there was a significant multivariate main effect for condition,  $F(2,73) = 11.99, p = .0001, \eta^2 = .247$ . Both univariate effects for task fairness,  $F(1, 74) = 5.39, p = .02, \eta^2 = .068$  and personal treatment due to gender,  $F(1,74) = 23.5, p = .0001, \eta^2 = .241$  were significant, such that those in the experimental condition reported more task unfairness ( $M = 2.03, SD = 1.24$ ) and personal unfairness due to gender ( $M = 2.51, SD = 1.48$ ) than those in the control condition ( $M_{\text{task}} = 2.72, SD = 1.09; M_{\text{personal}} = 3.79, SD = .52$ ). No other effects were significant, indicating that the discrimination manipulation was successful.

### *Main Analysis*

A 2(meritocracy beliefs: disbelievers, believers) x 2(condition: discrimination, control) ANOVA was conducted on the well-being composite. There was a significant two-way interaction between meritocracy beliefs and condition,  $F(1,74) = 12.71, p = .001, \eta^2 = .147$  (see Figure 1). Simple effects showed that among those exposed to discrimination, those who disbelieve the meritocracy exists reported greater well-being ( $n = 19, M = 3.23, SD = .49$ ) than those who believe the meritocracy exists ( $n = 20, M = 2.54, SD = .92$ ),  $t(37) = 2.85, \eta^2 = .180, p = .007$ . In the control condition however, those who disbelieve the meritocracy exists reported lower well-being ( $n = 14, M = 2.64, SD = .64$ ) than those who believe the meritocracy exists ( $n = 25, M = 3.08, SD = .56$ ),  $t(37) = -2.18, \eta^2 = .114, p = .036$ .

### *Discussion*

We examined how beliefs about the existence of the meritocracy affected well-being



among those experiencing a first-time, acute situation discrimination. As in our past work (Foster et al., 2005), results showed that women experiencing discrimination reported greater well-being if they disbelieved the meritocracy exists than if they were believers. This finding is consistent with group consciousness (e.g., Bartky, 1977) and women's studies theories (Bowles & Klein, 1983) that promote a critical view of the social system as a means of empowering women. These theories argue that shattering such myths will encourage women to turn their blame for failure onto the system. In the present study, disbelieving the meritocracy exists may have encouraged women to direct the blame of their failure on the presumably biased tests used in the study ("No wonder I failed, given that biased test!"), thereby increasing well-being. In contrast, a belief that the meritocracy exists may encourage women to blame themselves for not being able to overcome the barriers put up by discrimination ("I should have tried harder"), and consequently reduce well-being.

In the control condition, however, the opposite pattern was found; believing the meritocracy exists was more adaptive than disbelief. Individual, merit-based failure may therefore be a condition under which "thinking positively" about the system may be beneficial. This is consistent with cognitive adaptation theory which suggests that responding to threatening events with positive beliefs will increase psychological adjustment (Taylor, 1983). Primarily tested in health-related contexts, research has shown that positive beliefs about the self, one's control, and the ability to find meaning increases adjustment to cancer (Helgeson, 2003a; Wood, Taylor & Lichtman, 1985), AIDS (Updegraff, Taylor, Kemeny, & Wyatt, 2002) and heart disease (Helgeson, 1992, 1999; 2003b; Helgeson & Taylor, 1993). In line with this, the control condition posed an

individual-based (i.e., personal failure) versus group-based threat. Believing the meritocracy exists may have provided these women with a sense of control over their failure by allowing for future attempts at success; if people get rewarded on their merit, then “if I try harder next time, I may succeed.” Thus, for these women, personal failure may not have been as difficult given their belief that the system allows people to improve. In contrast, women who disbelieve the meritocracy exists, would not agree that working harder will necessarily result in ultimate success. They may therefore have felt that future attempts at success would not be fruitful. The combination of doubting not only the system, but also their own competence may have decreased their coping ability.

An alternative explanation for the buffering qualities of meritocracy beliefs may be the degree of consistency between beliefs and experiences. In Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) theory of coping with trauma, she argues that psychological distress is a function of how people assume the world works, combined with their experiences. Those whose positive assumptions about the world are inconsistent with their negative experiences will be most likely to report distress because their assumptions about a fair world would have been violated by their unfair experiences. In contrast, coping would be easier for those whose experiences match their expectations. Indeed, the two conditions under which higher well-being was reported featured beliefs that were consistent with their lab experience. First, believing the meritocracy exists was consistent with women’s experience in the control condition. Those participants entered the lab believing the meritocracy exists, and while in the lab were told they failed because of their own individual ability. This was an experience that matched their assumption that success and failure are a function of individual

efforts and abilities. As such, personal failure may have been perceived as “just one of those things” as opposed to a threatening experience (Taylor, 1983). Second, disbelieving the meritocracy exists was consistent with women’s experience in the discrimination condition. These participants already believed that despite hard work, there are barriers to success. Their experience of discrimination would have supported this belief, and therefore, may not have seemed as threatening.

As Janoff-Bulman (1992) notes then, positive world assumptions that have previously been challenged (e.g., disbelief the meritocracy exists) may serve to inoculate people against future distress (e.g., first-time discrimination). It is, of course, unclear how disbelievers’ assumptions about the world actually became challenged without prior experience with discrimination. Indeed, women were preselected for their low experience with discrimination. Further, consistent with past research (e.g., Schmader et al., 2001), the present study found a relationship between past discrimination and meritocracy beliefs. It was, however, a low correlation with discrimination accounting for only approximately 11% of the variability in meritocracy beliefs. Women who entered the lab with a disbelief the meritocracy exists may therefore have come to that belief for reasons other than past discrimination. Exploring those reasons may ultimately be important in understanding the buffering qualities of disbelief in the existence of the meritocracy.

Limitations of this study include the fact that only one belief about the system was examined, and the majority of the sample was comprised of white women. It remains to be seen how other dominant ideologies may affect coping with discrimination among different groups. Because ethnic minorities often report different forms of and more severe experiences with

discrimination than white women (e.g., Dion & Kawakami, 1996), different beliefs about the system may therefore be more relevant for coping with ethnic minorities' experiences of discrimination. For example, Canada promotes an ideology of "multiculturalism", whereby minority groups are presumably encouraged to maintain their unique culture rather than to completely assimilate. The extent to which minorities believe such an ideology is actually facilitated by the system (e.g., immigration policies, work permits) may affect coping with discrimination. Thus, future research will need to examine an extended set of beliefs about social systems and how they interact with varied forms of discrimination across varied disadvantaged groups.

Despite such limitations, however, this study suggests that encouraging a disbelief in the meritocracy may be a useful educational tool to enhance well-being for those experiencing first-time acute instances of discrimination. If victims of discrimination can be encouraged to have a critical view of the system, perhaps the coping process can begin before the discrimination becomes chronic, and consequences become more severe (e.g., depression; Landrine et al., 1995; high blood pressure; Krieger & Sidney, 1996). Yet, given the maladaptive nature of disbelief when confronting individual failure, promoting such a critical view en masse may not be desirable. It may instead be necessary to encourage a disbelief in the meritocracy's existence in situations where there is a high incidence of discrimination, or to combine disbelief with alternative buffers to individual stressors (e.g., self-affirmation; Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg & Dijksterhuis, 1999; Steele, 1988).

Also notable, is that a disbelief in the existence of the meritocracy served as a buffer

against obvious discrimination. This is important, given the robust tendency for women and other disadvantaged group members to instead minimize their experiences of discrimination (e.g., Crosby, 1984; Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam & Lalonde, 1990). Although minimization of discrimination may be a coping mechanism by which well-being can be increased (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999; Foster & Dion, 2003), it can also have negative social consequences in that women are less likely take action against discrimination if it is perceived as minimal (Foster & Matheson, 1995, 1999) or isolated in its scope (Foster, 2001; Foster & Dion, 2004). Nor is minimization always possible, as in the case of acute or extreme forms of discrimination such as job discrimination, harassment, or even rape. Thus, coping strategies that are protective of well-being in the face of recognizing discrimination, without having to minimize its existence may be the most effective for individual well-being and ultimately, social change. This study suggests that, under such conditions, a disbelief in the meritocracy may be one of these strategies.

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Table 1

*Intercorrelations among variables*

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	<u>1.</u>	<u>2.</u>	<u>3.</u>	<u>4.</u>	<u>5.</u>	<u>6.</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>
1. Past discrimination	--							
2. Meritocracy beliefs	-.34**	--						
3. Anxiety	.04	.05	--					
4. Positive Affect	.03	-.20	-.41**	--				
5. Anger	.04	.11	.54**	-.46**	--			
6. Life Satisfaction	.09	-.27*	-.26*	-.41**	-.16	--		
7. Performance Self-esteem	.05	.01	-.62**	.49**	-.35**	.59**	--	
8. Social Self-esteem	.01	-.03	-.58**	.55**	-.49**	.56**	.83**	--

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*Note:* \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

Figure Caption

Figure 1      *Interaction between meritocracy beliefs and condition on well-being.*