

## Fast track report

# When does it hurt? Intergroup permeability moderates the link between discrimination and self-esteem

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### Abstract

*Research shows that personal discrimination and group discrimination have distinct effects on personal self-esteem. Specifically, whereas personal discrimination negatively impacts self-esteem, group discrimination increases it. We suggest that this pattern is dependent on the socio-structural context in which individuals experience discrimination. To test this hypothesis, we manipulate intergroup permeability and examine its impact on the link between personal/group discrimination and personal self-esteem. Results show that a control condition replicates previous research, that is, a positive association between group discrimination and self-esteem and a negative association for personal discrimination. The positive association of group discrimination disappeared in a permeable context and reversed when the context was presented as impermeable. Moreover, the deleterious effect of personal discrimination on self-esteem vanished in impermeable contexts. Results are discussed in light of the literature on stigmatization. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

For stigmatized group members, discrimination is a severe and frequent experience occurring across a wide variety of life events (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). Discrimination obstructs stigmatized people's professional access and progression and is associated with poverty and housing problems (Belle & Doucet, 2003; Massay & Kanaiaupuni, 1993). All these difficulties affect the sense of control of stigmatized people and deteriorate their psychological well-being (Verkuyten, 1998). A recent meta-analysis by Pascoe and Richman using 134 samples and a large variety of discrimination experiences confirms that discriminatory experience has a significant negative effect on both mental and physical health. More precisely, repeated exposure to discrimination triggers stress responses and unhealthy behaviours (e.g. alcohol use and smoking) that, in turn, deteriorate mental and physical health (Pascoe & Richman, 2009).

The vast majority of the studies investigating the relation between perceived discrimination and well-being conceptualize discrimination as a one-dimensional construct. However, a distinction has been made between group and personal levels of discrimination (Crosby, 1982). The relevance of this distinction is twofold. First, people generally perceive lower levels of personal discrimination than group discrimination (Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990). Second, the two facets of discrimination have opposite effects on personal self-esteem. Indeed, in two studies conducted on women and African immigrants living in Belgium, Bourguignon, Seron, Yzerbyt, and Herman (2006) have shown that personal

discrimination is negatively related to personal self-esteem whereas group discrimination is positively related to it. This pattern of results has since been replicated for different stigmatized group such as women in Chile (Bourguignon, Bry, & Estrada-Goic, 2014), Latino students (Armenta, & Hunt, 2009) and Arab immigrant students (Bourguignon, van Cleempoel, Collange, & Herman, 2013).

Although the negative link between personal discrimination and personal self-esteem is empirically well supported (Schmitt et al., 2014; Pascoe & Richman, 2009) and theoretically grounded (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the positive link between group discrimination and personal self-esteem is less obvious. Two main mechanisms have been proposed by Bourguignon et al. (2006) to account for the positive impact of group discrimination on self-esteem. The first one has its origin the so-called discounting hypothesis (Crocker & Major, 1989) and suggests that group discrimination is somewhat protective of people's self-esteem because it offers an external attribution to stigmatized people's misfortunes. More precisely, the fact that the whole group is seen as a victim of discrimination allows stigmatized people to dismiss any personal responsibility for the negative conditions in which they find themselves.

The second explanation for the positive link between perceived group discrimination and self-esteem finds its roots in social comparison processes. Indeed, downward intragroup comparisons have been shown to be particularly protective for personal self-esteem of stigmatized people (Harter, 1986; Martinot, Redersdorff, Guimond, & Dif, 2002; Wills, 1981).

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Building upon this mechanism, scholars have suggested that the personal–group discrimination discrepancy phenomenon (Taylor et al., 1990) can be explained by the fact that people use different standards of comparison when assessing personal versus group discrimination (Postmes, Branscombe, Spears, & Young, 1999). Whereas the evaluation of personal discrimination would be based on intragroup comparisons, intergroup comparisons would be at the heart of perceptions of group discrimination (see also Kessler, Mummendey, & Leisse, 2000; Quinn, Roesse, Pennington, & Olson, 1999). From this viewpoint, Bourguignon et al. (2006) have proposed that high levels of perceived group discrimination (built on intergroup comparisons, e.g. *my ingroup* is more disadvantaged than other groups) combined with low levels of personal discrimination (built on intragroup comparisons, e.g. *I am less discriminated against than other ingroup members*) lead people to a positive contrast with other group members. This positive contrast triggers positive individual distinctiveness, which, in turn, enhances personal self-esteem.

Besides the question of the processes accounting for the distinct effects of perceived personal and group discrimination on personal self-esteem, recent work examined the conditions of emergence of these distinct effects. A study by Bourguignon et al. (2013) showed that these links are moderated by the type of group. These authors found that for Arab students in Belgium, personal self-esteem was negatively related to perceived personal discrimination and positively related to group discrimination. In contrast, for Belgian students in Belgium, personal self-esteem was unrelated to any of the two dimensions of discrimination. One account for this result is that perceived discrimination does not affect the personal self-esteem of high status group's members, whereas perceived personal discrimination is particularly damaging to personal self-esteem of low-status ones (see also Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002). Furthermore, the pervasiveness of experiences of discrimination is higher for minority groups (e.g. Arabs in Belgium) than for majority ones (e.g. Belgians in Belgium) (Martens et al., 2005). As a matter of fact, the repeated exposure to discrimination is harder to dismiss and therefore more threatening for one's self-esteem because it acts as a constant reminder of the individual's membership to a disadvantaged group (Schmitt, Branscombe, & Postmes, 2003; McCoy & Major, 2007).

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals confronted with this kind of threat will try to escape their low-status group membership in order to join a higher status group. This strategy, known as social mobility, is commonly used by stigmatized people. Unfortunately, it is not always possible for low-status stigmatized people to get rid of the stigmatizing label. Social mobility is constrained by the permeability of intergroup boundaries (Ellemers, 1993). Only when group boundaries are perceived as permeable will disadvantaged people focus their attention on personal identities and self-interest. As a result, they will be more likely to distance themselves from their threatening group and to engage in individual actions aimed at improving their own position (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 1999). In contrast, when intergroup boundaries are closed, disadvantaged people will increase their commitment to their group and focus on collective strategies to enhance the group's position.

Interestingly enough, a study conducted by Garstka, Schmitt, Branscombe, and Hummert (2004) seems to suggest that the permeability of intergroup boundaries moderates the relation between perceived discrimination and well-being. When group boundaries are open, perceived discrimination is less likely to affect individual well-being. This is because such a situation encourages members of low-status groups to rely on individual mobility. Quite a different pattern emerges when people believe that group boundaries are impermeable. In this context, members of low-status groups are more likely to see discrimination as an unavoidable and pervasive experience harming their well-being (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002).

Unfortunately, two features of the study of Garstka et al. (2004) limit the validity of their conclusions. First, the authors did not manipulate impermeability of intergroup boundaries but used two naturalistic groups varying on this dimension (young people vs. older people). It might be that the differences found are due to the same phenomenon that Bourguignon et al. (2013) found using Arabs and Belgians, given that old people belong to a more stigmatized (low-status) group than young people (as the growing literature on ageism seems to suggest, Nelson, 2009). Also, and in line with this idea, the pervasiveness of discriminatory experiences is likely to be higher for older (vs. younger) people. In other words, the use of two different groups varying on several dimensions other than permeability leads us to be cautious about the exact role of this variable. Clearly, it is important to examine the impact of impermeability in a more controlled setting. Second, this study measured perceived discrimination as a one-dimensional construct. However, previous research showing a deleterious and protective effect on self-esteem of personal and group discrimination, respectively, leads to hypothesize that the impact of permeability is likely to be different on these two dimensions.

## The Present Research

The ambition of this study was to examine the moderating role of permeability of intergroup boundaries on the relation between the two forms of perceived discrimination and personal self-esteem. In light of this, we made two important and related methodological choices. First, we cannot dismiss the possibility that intergroup permeability perceptions might be dependent on previous experiences of discrimination of individuals. In other words, it may be that group status or levels of person and group discrimination perceptions affect perceptions of permeability, making it difficult to understand the specific effect of this variable. In order to make valid conclusions on the causal role of intergroup permeability, we decided to rely on an experimental design in which permeability was manipulated.

Second, given that associations between the two dimensions of discrimination and self-esteem have been shown to depend on the type of group being studied (Bourguignon et al., 2013), we decided to focus on a single group for which there was no strong *a priori* conception regarding its level of permeability. In other words, we chose unemployed people because a manipulation of permeability regarding this groups is realistic, increasing the study's ecological validity (as opposed to more naturalistic categories such as gender or ethnic

origin). As a matter of fact, the present study reflects the reality experienced by unemployed people who are constantly exposed to contradictory messages, some claiming that the labour market is inaccessible, and others contending that, if people really want to, they can find a job (Furåker & Blomsterberg, 2003). Although the socio-economical context portrays a perception of a closed labour market, the governments of western countries behave as if the labour market is in fact open. Under the aegis of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (1994), the vast majority of governments have implemented social public policies restricting access to unemployment benefits and programs supposed to 'motivate' unemployed people to join the work force. These programs take the form of training schemes for unemployed people and specific controls of job search activities with possible sanctions (temporary sanctions or benefits exclusion) in case of an insufficient level of job search activities (Bourguignon & Herman, 2013).

Our participants, all unemployed at the time of the study, were confronted with one of three permeability conditions. In the permeable condition, it was stressed that upward mobility was possible and that many unemployed people eventually found a job. In the impermeable condition, unemployed people were told that upward mobility was very difficult and that few unemployed people were able to find a job. The third condition left permeability unspecified and served as our control condition.

## Hypotheses

We expected our control condition to replicate the pattern obtained by Bourguignon et al. (2006). Specifically, we predicted that perceived group discrimination would be positively related to personal self-esteem and perceived personal discrimination negatively to it. Indeed, on the basis of the social comparison explanation developed earlier, one should not necessarily expect a 'control context' to trigger more one comparison context (intra- vs. intergroup) than the other. In contrast, we suggest that systematic modifications of the perception of intergroup boundaries will change the reference of comparison of participants (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) and, as a consequence, the link between personal and group discrimination and self-esteem. More precisely, a context underlining impermeability of group boundaries should lead to a stronger emphasis on group identity and encourage participants to see themselves primarily as ingroup members. They will therefore be more sensitive to their group's hardships, individually endorsing the fate of their group (Ellemers, 1993). As a result, we hypothesized that *both* perceived group and personal discrimination would be negatively related to personal self-esteem in the low permeability condition.

In sharp contrast, when the context accentuates permeability of intergroup boundaries, this should trigger an individuation process leading participants to focus on their personal identity. As a consequence, personal discrimination should be especially determinant for self-esteem perceptions. The other side of this coin is that individuation should render information about group discrimination less relevant for perceptions of personal self-esteem. We therefore expected no

link between group discrimination and personal self-esteem in permeable contexts. In short, we expected *only* perceived personal discrimination (and not group discrimination) to have an (negative) impact on personal self-esteem in permeable contexts.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 267 unemployed people (177 women) took part in the study ( $M$  age = 31, range 18–56). Two hundred and twenty-two were Belgian, and 24 came from another European country and 22 from outside Europe. The mean of unemployment time was 23 months (ranging from 0 to 183), and 179 participants had a job with a contract of employment before becoming unemployed people (57 have never got a job with a contract of employment). All participants were contacted during activities that were organized by the office of social and professional integration during a 1-year period. The study was presented as pertaining to the well-being of unemployed people. Participants were invited to individually fill in a questionnaire during the training activity.

### Procedure

All participants received the same questionnaire except for a specific comment that accompanied the presentation of a photograph on the first page. The photograph showed a group of adults having allegedly taken the training classes of the office of social and professional integration. A majority (60%) of the faces were circled.<sup>1</sup> In the low permeability condition, the comment underneath the photograph indicated that the people whose face was circled had later failed to find a job. In the high permeability condition, the comment underneath the photograph indicated that the people whose face was circled eventually found a job. In the control condition, the comment underneath the photograph indicated that the people whose face was circled remained in touch with each other after the training program. In sum, all participants received the same photo and saw the same set of people with their face being circled. Only the comment underneath the photograph varied. After having seen the photograph and read the comment, participants were asked to respond to our dependent measures. All participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions and thoroughly debriefed at the end of the study.

### Measures

Participants' perception of discrimination was measured by means of eight items pertaining to group and personal discrimination in general and on the job market specifically. For each item, participants had to indicate their degree of approval on a

<sup>1</sup>Despite the fact that we talk about 'impermeability', we decide hereafter to refer to our experimental conditions as high versus low permeability conditions. As a matter of fact, in the low permeability condition, we did not tell participants that none of the people on the photograph had found a job. We did this for ecological validity and credibility of our manipulation. We also chose not to show participants only one person who had actually found a job so as to avoid having our results explained in terms of tokenism.

7-point scale ranging from  $-3$  (*I don't agree at all*) to  $+3$  (*I totally agree*). A principal component analysis with an oblimin rotation confirmed the presence of two factors. The first factor comprised the four items of personal discrimination (e.g. 'As an unemployed person, I have been personally victim of discrimination'). These items were combined into a single score of personal discrimination ( $\alpha=.80$ ). The second factor comprised the remaining four items relative to group discrimination (e.g. 'In the job market, there is discrimination against unemployed people'). An index of group discrimination was created with those four items ( $\alpha=.78$ ). In line with the personal-group discrimination discrepancy literature (Taylor et al., 1990), personal discrimination was lower ( $M=-0.07$ , standard deviation [ $SD$ ]=1.61) than group discrimination ( $M=0.98$ ,  $SD=1.34$ ),  $F(1,263)=148.76$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.36$ .

Personal self-esteem was measured with the State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991), a measure that includes 20 items evaluating short-lived changes in self-esteem. Again, a 7-point scale ranging from  $-3$  (*I don't agree at all*) to  $+3$  (*I totally agree*) was used. The 20 items were collapsed into an index of state self-esteem ( $\alpha=.88$ ).

As a manipulation check, we used four items. For the first three items (e.g. 'When I think about the photograph, I find that the job market is currently closed for unemployed people'), we used a 7-point scale ranging from  $-3$  (*I don't agree at all*) to  $+3$  (*I totally agree*), whereas for the fourth item ('The percentage of people on the photograph who found a job is:'), we asked participants to answer on a 10-point scale ranging from 10% to 100%. These four items were standardized and combined in order to create an index of perceived group permeability ( $\alpha=.72$ ).

## RESULTS

### Manipulation Check

A significant analysis of variance (ANOVA) confirmed the success of our manipulation,  $F(2, 263)=32.06$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.20$ . Participants in the low permeability condition indicated that the labour market was less open ( $M=-0.37$ ,  $SD=0.69$ ) than those in the control condition ( $M=-0.03$ ,  $SD=0.62$ ),  $t(161)=3.58$ ,  $p<.001$ , who themselves responded that the labour market was less open than participants in the high permeability condition ( $M=0.38$ ,  $SD=0.68$ ),  $t(156)=3.14$ ,  $p<.005$ .<sup>2</sup>

### Preliminary Analyses

We controlled for the administrative status of our sample by distinguishing participants who categorized themselves as a person benefiting from social welfare from the other participants. We decided to control for this variable because a study by Cassidy

<sup>2</sup>The questionnaire also included a measure of group identification towards unemployed people which comprised 11 items (e.g. 'I identify as unemployed' and 'it pleases me to be unemployed'). We conducted a univariate ANOVA with 'condition' as criterion on the identification index. No differences emerged,  $F<1$ . We should however be cautious when interpreting this absence of differences given that the reliability of the scale was very low ( $\alpha=.53$ ). As a matter of fact, there are reasons to expect higher levels of identification in the impermeable condition. Future research should address this issue.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlation coefficients of the variables

	1	2	3
1. Personal discrimination	—	.56***	-.29***
2. Group discrimination		—	-.26***
4. Personal self-esteem			—
Mean (standard deviation)	-0.07 (1.61)	0.98 (1.34)	0.27 (1.00)

Note: <sup>†</sup> $p<.1$ ; \* $p<.05$ ; \*\* $p<.01$ ; \*\*\* $p<.001$ .

(2001) showed that administrative categorizations have an impact on well-being. A total of 231 (vs. 36) participants indicated that they were (vs. were not) benefiting from social welfare. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and the correlations for our three variables across the three conditions (controlling for administrative status).

We also conducted a multivariate ANOVA in order to test effects of our manipulation on perceived personal and group discrimination. None of these effects reached significance ( $F_{\text{personal discrimination}}<1$ ;  $F_{\text{group discrimination}}(2, 263)=1.297$ ,  $p=.275$ ) (Table 2).

### Main Analyses

In order to test our hypothesis, we first conducted a one-way ANOVA model,  $F(2, 264)=4.46$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.18$ , in which we included permeability, personal and group discrimination (centred) and all interactions among these variables as predictors and controlled for the administrative status of the participant (as it correlated with self-esteem). Results show main effects of administrative status,  $F(2, 264)=6.50$ ,  $p=.011$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.025$ , and personal discrimination,  $F(2, 264)=12.59$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.048$ . Importantly, these effects were qualified by the predicted two-way interactions between permeability and personal discrimination,  $F(2, 264)=4.42$ ,  $p=.013$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.034$ , and between permeability and group discrimination,  $F(2, 264)=7.20$ ,  $p=.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.054$ .<sup>3</sup> No other effects reached significance.

To further probe these interactions, we conducted a series of simple slope analyses using contrast codes (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Turning to the control condition first, our data replicated earlier work by Bourguignon et al. (2006) in that perceived personal discrimination was negatively related to personal self-esteem,  $B=-0.38$ ,  $p=.001$ , 95% confidence interval (CI)  $[-0.604, -0.158]$ , whereas perceived group discrimination was positively related to it,  $B=0.29$ ,  $p=.035$ , 95% CI  $[0.021, 0.551]$ . As far as the high permeability condition was concerned, perceived personal discrimination was negatively

<sup>3</sup>Results remain unchanged when not controlling for administrative status,  $F(2, 264)=4.18$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.15$ , that is, the two predicted interactions proved significant,  $F(2, 264)=4.36$ ,  $p=.014$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.033$ , and  $F(2, 264)=7.07$ ,  $p=.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.053$ , for interactions with personal and group discrimination, respectively.

<sup>4</sup>Specifically, in order to test the significance of the links between personal/group discrimination and self-esteem, we conducted three sets of regression analyses. To examine the effects on the different conditions (i.e. having each condition as a reference group at a time), we entered in our regression models 2 contrast-coded variables, the two continuous predictors, and their interactions.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviations of perceptions of permeability, perceived personal discrimination, perceived group discrimination and personal self-esteem as a function of experimental condition

	Condition		
	Low permeability	Control	High permeability
Perception of permeability	-0.37 (0.69) a	-0.03 (0.62) b	0.38 (0.68) c
Personal discrimination	3.89 (1.62) a	3.94 (1.43) a	3.96 (1.70) a
Group discrimination	5.02 (1.39) a	4.73 (1.22) a	5.07 (1.34) a
Personal self-esteem	4.26 (1.02) a	4.25 (1.00) a	4.30 (1.00) a

We use the same letters in order to indicate that the means are not statistically different. For example, the three a's associated to the three means of personal discrimination indicate that the three means do not differ from each other. At the inverse, there are three different letters (a, b, and c) that indicate statistical differences between the three means. For example, for perceived permeability, the three means are associated to a, b, and c because these means differ from each other.

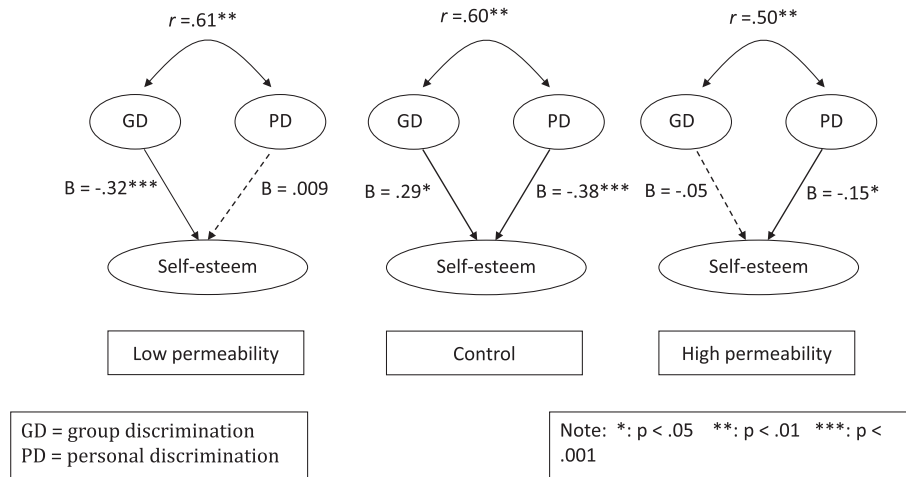


Figure 1. Moderating role of permeability on the links between perceived group and personal discrimination on personal self-esteem

related to personal self-esteem,  $B = -0.15$ ,  $p = .016$ , 95% CI [-0.276, -0.028], whereas perceived group discrimination was not linked to it,  $B = -0.05$ ,  $p = .51$ , 95% CI [-0.210, 0.105]. Finally, as predicted, in the low permeability condition, perceived group discrimination was negatively related to it,  $B = -0.32$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-0.501, -0.141]. Somewhat surprisingly, personal discrimination had no impact on personal self-esteem,  $B = 0.009$ ,  $p = .99$ , 95% CI [-0.131, 0.149].

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to investigate the moderating role of group permeability on the link between perceived personal and group discrimination on personal self-esteem. Using an experimental manipulation of intergroup permeability, we replicated previous research (Bourguignon et al., 2006), and we went further by showing that the effects of personal and group discrimination on personal self-esteem depend on the features of the socio-structural context.

First, in the control condition, perceived personal and group discrimination had opposite effects on personal self-esteem. As was the case in the Bourguignon et al. (2006) studies, personal self-esteem was negatively related to personal discrimination and positively to group discrimination. These results not only support the rejection-identification model (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999) by underlining that personal discrimination is deleterious for stigmatized people, but they also offer new evidence that,

for stigmatized people, group discrimination may constitute a protective cognition against the ill effect of personal discrimination.

Second, adding to previous research (Garstka et al., 2004), we provide a more precise picture of the specific contributions of each dimensions of discrimination to personal self-esteem depending on perceived intergroup permeability. Results found in our high permeability condition nuance the Garska et al. (2004) conclusions in an important way. These authors found no relation between a global index of perceived discrimination and personal self-esteem when borders were permeable. According to our results, the absence of link between discrimination and self-esteem found by Garstka et al. (2004) only seems to be true for perceptions of *group* discrimination. Indeed, when intergroup borders are permeable, *personal* discrimination has a negative effect on self-esteem. This additional informational is not without importance in our view. As a matter of fact, the Garstka et al. (2004) results might suggest that one way to prevent perceived discrimination from tainting the well-being of stigmatized people is to create a setting in which people envision individual mobility as a possibility and are therefore less focused on their group membership. As it happens, this solution is very much in line with what is fostered in ideologies such as meritocracy (Foster & Tsarfati, 2005; Son Hing, Bobocel, & Zanna, 2002), individualism (Crocker & Quinn, 2000) or colour blindness (Crosby, Iyer, & Sincharoen, 2006).

Our data show that the possibility to escape discrimination thanks to intergroup permeability does not stop personal

discrimination from having a negative impact on personal self-esteem and, worse, that group discrimination no longer protects individuals from 'themselves'. In other words, in line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), it seems that stigmatized people tend to focus on their personal identity when group boundaries are perceived as permeable. However, the stigmatized group membership is *still* there, and people *still* perceive themselves as being personally discriminated as a result of their stigma, and this *still* affects their personal self-esteem. As a matter of fact, and quite logically, our participants' answers show that the negative treatment resulting from their stigmatized membership (personal discrimination) was negatively related to personal self-esteem. In all likelihood, this focus on personal interest prevented participants from turning to a group-level cognition and group discrimination became irrelevant altogether. In line with this reasoning, group discrimination was unrelated to personal self-esteem.

Finally, when permeability was low, the picture was again different. Although we predicted a negative relation between both forms of discrimination and self-esteem when boundaries are perceived as closed, we only found a negative link between perceived group discrimination and self-esteem. Mirroring the argument presented earlier, it stands to reason that people in an impermeable situation are indeed functioning more at the group level. It is therefore possible that in impermeable contexts the effect of group-level variables becomes stronger than the effect of personal variables eliminating the negative effect of personal discrimination on personal self-esteem.

One interesting question that emerges from our results concerns the mechanism by which permeability exerts its impact. Interestingly enough, we did not find any effects of our manipulation be it on perceptions of personal or on group discrimination or even on self-esteem. Only the predicted two-way interactions were significant. In other words, permeability affected self-esteem by triggering differences in the *quality* of the relations between personal and group discrimination and self-esteem and not *quantitative differences* (i.e. differences at the mean level) among the variables.

It is important to take this absence of direct impact into account when thinking about the mechanisms underlying our effects. For example, one could wonder to what extent an open job market may influence individuals' well-being by making them more optimistic about their future chances of finding a job.<sup>5</sup> Although this reasoning is logical, the lack of direct effect of permeability on self-esteem seems to point to another direction. In our opinion, at this point, two complementary mechanisms can be envisaged as responsible for our effects. A cognitive explanation appears fully congruent with self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987). As we reasoned earlier, it can be that impermeability triggers a group-level categorization and that individuals depersonalize, seeing themselves, above anything else, as group members. This would explain why the effect of personal discrimination disappears as well as why the effect of group discrimination becomes negative compared with the control condition (Ellemers, 1993). In contrast, permeability opens the door for people's self-categorization as an individual, explaining why group discrimination no longer has a protective

function whereas personal discrimination continues to exert a negative impact.

Next to this cognitive explanation, a more motivational account would predict that when borders are permeable, people perceive themselves as a sort of small (worthless) fish in a (very) big pond. Intergroup comparisons should then recede and individuals would tend to feel rather unsuccessful in a context where other (former) group members are possibly doing better. This should increase internal attributions for personal discrimination and by way of consequence decrease personal self-esteem (Smith & Tyler, 1997). In an impermeable situation, the pond would more easily be perceived as full of similarly unsuccessful fish. Both explanations may be true, as the level of categorization ought to influence social comparison targets as well as motivations and behaviour.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research funded by the Institut wallon de l'Evaluation, de la Prospective et de la Statistique (IWEPS) and the European Social Funds (ESF) for 'Objectif 1-Hainaut'. We are grateful to Georges Liénard, Claudia Toma and Nicolas Kervyn for earlier comments on this line of work.

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<sup>5</sup>We would like to thank one of the reviewers of a previous version of this manuscript for putting forward this alternative view.

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