Prejudice and Enforcement of Workforce Homogeneity
as Explanations for Employment Discrimination

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We examined the effects of subtle and blatant prejudice and the enforcement of workforce homogeneity on employment discrimination in an experimental simulation. German participants who were advised to maintain a homogeneous (i.e., German) workforce, as hypothesized, selected fewer foreign applicants for a job interview than did participants who did not receive this advice. An interaction qualified this main effect, such that subtly prejudiced participants reacted to the advice to maintain a homogeneous workforce, but blatantly prejudiced and nonprejudiced individuals did not. The implications of these findings for research and practice are discussed.

Discrimination against minorities is a persistent problem in the workplace. In Europe, a survey of the 100 largest corporations showed that very few had minority employees in senior positions, and none had a chief executive officer who was a member of a minority (Forooihar, 2002). In the United States, African Americans made up only 6.5% of corporate management ranks in 2001 (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2003), although they constituted 14% of the labor force.

Scientists have long studied employment discrimination, but researchers (Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh, & Vaslow, 2000) have only recently begun to examine subtle prejudice, a new prejudice variant, as an antecedent of employment discrimination (Brief, 1998; cf. Wagner, van Dick, & Zick, 2001). The purpose of our study is to examine the effects of subtle and blatant prejudice on employment discrimination in varying organizational contexts: when forces encouraging
workforce homogeneity (cf. Herriot & Pembleton, 1995; Jackson, 1992) are present and when they are not. In the remainder of this introduction, we will first discuss the enforcement of workforce homogeneity and prejudice as antecedents of employment discrimination. Then we turn to the German context of our study, where discrimination against foreigners is a societal dilemma.

Enforcement of Workforce Homogeneity

In today’s Western society, despite social norms that discourage discrimination against minorities (e.g., Frazer & Wiersma, 2001; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995, 2001), employment discrimination remains a pervasive phenomenon. As Brief (1998) noted, discrimination against minorities is often the inevitable outcome in organizations when management enforces workforce homogeneity on the rationale that a homogeneous workforce can increase profitability. For example, the business principle of matching, which refers to the recruitment of applicants who fit the organization’s demographic profile, is seen as an important determinant of organizational success.

Ironically, advocates of both workforce diversity and homogeneity have evoked the matching principle in their arguments. While in demographically diverse organizations matching fosters workforce heterogeneity, such matching increases workforce homogeneity in demographically uniform organizations (Powell, 1998; cf. Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). Laboratory research has shown that, in a homogeneous context, instructions to adhere to the matching principle lead participants to select majority candidates at the expense of minority applicants. For example, Petersen and Dietz (2000) found that West Germans selected fewer East German candidates when their supervisors suggested advantages in maintaining a homogeneous workforce (for U.S. examples, see Brief, Buttram, Elliott, Reizenstein, & McCline, 1995; Brief et al., 2000). We expect to replicate these findings:

Hypothesis 1. German participants who are advised by their supervisors to maintain a homogeneous work group (i.e., German work group) will select fewer foreign applicants than will participants who do not receive such advice (main effect for enforcement of workforce homogeneity).

However, research by Petersen and Dietz and by Brief et al. has also shown that authoritarianism and prejudicial attitudes moderate the extent to which

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3The term foreigner (Ausländer), though commonly used in the German language, is somewhat ill-defined. The stereotype that is commonly associated with the term foreigner is that of people from European Mediterranean countries who represent the vast majority of foreigners in Germany (about 60.7%; cf. Wagner, Hewstone, & Machleit, 1989). We acknowledge that prejudices against these foreigners likely differ from prejudices against other specific foreign groups (e.g., U.S. Americans).
individuals comply with instructions to maintain workforce homogeneity. We will discuss the role of prejudice in detail in the following section.

Prejudice and Employment Discrimination

Prejudices are negative attitudes toward others based on their membership in a social group (e.g., Brigham, 1971). Research (for reviews, see Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995) has documented the emergence of a new, subtle, and covert kind of prejudice over the last 30 years, which is increasingly replacing blatant prejudice. Pettigrew and Meertens (see also Bergmann & Erb, 1986; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995) described the new subtle prejudice as “cool, distant, and indirect” (Pettigrew & Meertens, p. 58) while the old blatant prejudice is “hot, close, and direct” (p. 58).

Subtly prejudiced individuals do not openly endorse the differential treatment of minority members or negative stereotypes about them. They do, however, deny the existence of discrimination and resist demands made by minorities and policies designed to support them. The subtlety of the new prejudice in part lies in the views that subtly prejudiced individuals hold about themselves and prejudice. They see themselves as nonprejudiced (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998), arguing that they reject stereotypes about minority groups and believe that prejudice and discrimination are bad (McConahay, 1986).

The research by Brief et al. (2000) is an application of subtle prejudice ideas to the field of employment discrimination. In two studies, participants who scored high on modern racism (McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981), one variant of subtle prejudice, selected fewer Black applicants and evaluated them more negatively than did participants who scored low on modern racism, when an organizational authority expressed a preference for White applicants. When such a business justification for discrimination was not present, differences in the discriminatory behaviors of high and low scorers on modern racism were not observed. The authors argued that their findings provided support for McConahay’s (1986) modern racism theory, which proposes that subtle prejudice leads to discrimination only in a context that legitimizes it on the basis of non-prejudicial arguments (e.g., when it makes “good business sense”).

A major contribution of Brief et al.’s (2000; see also McConahay, 1983) research is that it provided a subtle prejudice account of employment discrimination. Previously, organizational researchers had largely ignored the role of prejudice in the workplace (cf. James, Brief, Dietz, & Cohen, 2001). Brief et al.’s findings, however, are open to alternative interpretations because, as Dunton and Fazio (1997; see also McConahay, 1986) implied, both subtly and blatantly prejudiced individuals are expected to score high on the Modern Racism scale. The results of Brief et al.’s studies are consistent with subtle prejudice theory, but their studies were an incomplete test of it because isolating subtly prejudiced
from blatantly prejudiced individuals among the high scorers on modern racism was not possible.

To address this gap in Brief et al.’s (2000) research, in our study we will gauge both subtle prejudice and blatant prejudice, allowing for a stronger test of subtle prejudice theory. The simultaneous assessment of subtle and blatant prejudice lets us compare their effects on discriminatory behaviors.

On basis of the reviewed research, we expect that subtly and blatantly prejudiced individuals will discriminate against minority job applicants when an authority figure instructs them to maintain a homogeneous workforce. As Pettigrew and Meertens (2001) noted, “When there exist ostensibly non-prejudicial rationalizations, Subtles [subtly prejudiced individuals] more closely resemble the Bigots [blatantly prejudiced individuals]” (p. 304, brackets added). In the absence of nonprejudicial rationalizations, however, only blatantly prejudiced individuals are expected to victimize minorities, whereas subtly prejudiced individuals are not expected to do so. In other words, for our study of employment discrimination, subtly prejudiced individuals are hypothesized to react to a justification for discrimination, whereas blatantly prejudiced individuals are likely to discriminate against minorities independent of such a justification:

**Hypothesis 2.** Blatantly prejudiced participants will select fewer foreign job applicants than will nonprejudiced participants (main effect for prejudice type).

**Hypothesis 3.** Subtly prejudiced participants will react more strongly to advice from their supervisors to maintain a homogeneous work group than will blatantly prejudiced and nonprejudiced participants (interaction effect).

Before reporting the methods and results of our study, we will briefly describe its German context.

**German Context of Prejudice and Employment Discrimination**

In 2001, 7.3 million foreigners (*Ausländer*; 8.9% of the population), mostly from Turkey, Italy, the former Yugoslavia, and Greece lived in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2003). Comparisons of prejudice levels across Western Europe (Pettigrew, 1998) indicate that German levels of subtle prejudice have been relatively similar to those in other countries. Levels of blatant prejudice, however, have been higher in Germany than in most other European countries during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s (Pettigrew et al., 1998; Wagner et al., 2001). Similarly, attitudes toward immigration and acculturation have been
particularly negative in Germany (Zick, Wagner, van Dick, & Petzel, 2001; cf. Piontkowski, Rohmann, & Florack, 2002).

Klink and Wagner (1999) reported everyday discrimination against foreigners across different settings, such as housing and customer service. Räthzel (1991; cf. Wagner et al., 2001) suggested that these negative attitudes and behaviors might reflect the absence of German immigration policies and laws, making it very difficult if not impossible for foreigners to obtain German citizenship. Germany does not have a law against discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity.

The societal context for the treatment of foreigners is reflected in the workplace. Although Germany has a long history of foreign workers (e.g., Münz, Seifert, & Ulrich, 1999), they are typically referred to as guest-workers (Gastarbeiter). From 1955 until the oil crisis in 1973, the former West Germany recruited 14 million foreigners to overcome labor shortages during its economic expansion. About 3 million of these foreign employees stayed, and often their families followed. Studies of employment discrimination in Germany are rare (cf. Wagner et al., 2001), but Kühne, Oztürk, and West (1994) reported both subtle and structural discrimination. In February 2003, the unemployment rate among foreigners was 21.6%, compared to that of 10.6% among Germans (Bundesanstalt für Arbeit, 2003).

Method

Sample and Design

Participants were 87 German students who attended psychology lectures at the Martin-Luther University of Halle, Germany. Participation was voluntary, and participants were recruited for two supposedly independent studies: a questionnaire study and an in-basket exercise. In-basket exercises, which are commonly used in assessment centers, are realistic simulations of the decision-making environments faced by organizational members (Jansen & de Jongh, 1997). We decided to conduct our research in the laboratory rather than the field to have better control over the ethically sensitive issue of asking participants to discriminate against others.

The research design was a $2 \times 3$ factorial design with two independent variables: homogeneity condition (enforcement of workforce homogeneity vs. no enforcement) and prejudice type (no prejudice, subtle prejudice, or blatant prejudice). The dependent variable was the number of foreign applicants selected for a job interview.

Procedure

Stage 1: Pre-experimental questionnaire. In group sessions, participants completed a questionnaire that included the German versions of Pettigrew and
Meertens’ (1995) subtle prejudice and blatant prejudice scales (adapted for attitudes toward foreigners), as well as a self-monitoring scale (Nowack & Kammer, 1987) that served as a control variable.

**Stage 2: Experiment.** Several weeks later, participants completed an in-basket exercise, which we had adapted from Brief et al. (2000) for a German context. To emphasize the realism of the experimental setting, the experimenter began by explaining that the Department of Psychology was testing components of an assessment center, including the 30-min in-basket exercise the participants would complete.

In this in-basket exercise, participants played the role of a person named Torsten Folger, head of a department of a German fast-food chain. As Torsten Folger, the participants, among other things, were responsible for making personnel decisions.

The in-basket exercise contained 10 memoranda to which participants were to respond. In one memorandum, the president of the company asked participants to screen eight applications for the position of the head of the human resources team and to select three candidates for a job interview. The new head of the human resources team should have experience in the fast-food industry and be competent in solving human resource problems. Then, in the experimental condition, the enforcement of workforce homogeneity manipulation followed (translated):

> While reading the applications, I observed that many foreigners are among the applicants. When selecting an applicant, it is important to keep in mind that our personnel in the headquarters consist almost exclusively of Germans. In the past, homogeneity of the human resources team has contributed very strongly to good teamwork and our company’s success. Hence, the new head of the human resources team must be able to guarantee that the team retains its “great chemistry.”

Participants in the control condition did not receive the manipulation. Applicant descriptions followed the memorandum. After the in-basket exercise, the experimenter debriefed participants.

**Measures**

*Type of prejudice.* To assess the type of prejudice against foreigners, we used the German versions of Pettigrew and Meertens’ (1995) subtle and blatant prejudice scales, which, to our knowledge, are the only validated German scales of such prejudice. We classified participants as *nonprejudiced* (when they scored below the median on both scales), *subtly prejudiced* (when they scored above the median on the subtle prejudice scale and below the median on the blatant
prejudice scale), or **blatantly prejudiced** (when they scored above the median on both scales). This classification, which yielded 30 nonprejudiced, 17 subtly prejudiced, and 27 blatantly prejudiced individuals, serves two purposes: (a) It ensured that 13 participants whose scores were not meaningful (i.e., above the median on the blatant prejudice scale, but below the median on the subtle prejudice scale) were excluded from further analyses, and (b) it ensured that subtly prejudiced participants could be distinguished from blatantly prejudiced participants, who also scored high on the subtle prejudice scale.

The subtle and blatant prejudice scales each have nine items and are scored on Likert-type scales ranging from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating more prejudice. Two sample items (translated) of the subtle prejudice scale are “How often have you felt sympathy for foreigners living here?” and “It is just a matter of some people not trying hard enough. If foreigners would only try harder, they could be as well off as German people.” Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) reported Cronbach’s alphas between .73 and .82. In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha was .66 \( (M = 3.13, SD = 0.54, Mdn = 3.14) \). Two sample items (translated) of the blatant prejudice scale are “German people and foreigners can never be really comfortable with each other, even if they are close friends,” and “I would not mind if a foreign person who shared my economic background joined my close family by marriage” (reverse scored). Cronbach’s alphas ranged from .87 to .90 in Pettigrew and Meertens’ samples. In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha was .77 \( (M = 1.51, SD = 0.56, Mdn = 1.33) \). The correlation of .58 \( (p < .001) \) between the two prejudice scales was consistent with correlations reported in other research (e.g., Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Swim et al., 1995).

**Control variable: Self-monitoring.** To assess the robustness of a subtle prejudice explanation for employment discrimination, we also included a measure of self-monitoring (Nowack & Kammer, 1987). Subtly prejudiced individuals might score high on self-monitoring (for a review, see Gangestad & Snyder, 2000), as they are concerned with the impact of their discriminatory behaviors on their image. Hence, self-monitoring rather than subtle prejudice might lead these individuals to comply with the advice to discriminate against foreigners. High self-monitoring individuals look for outside cues, such as the matching advice by the president in the experimental manipulation, about how to respond to a situation (cf. Cremer, Snyder, & Dewitte, 2001).

Nowack and Kammer’s (1987) self-monitoring scale assesses two self-monitoring components (perceived social skills and perceived inconsistency) on 5-point Likert-type scales. Cronbach’s alphas were .80 and .77 \( (M = 3.11 and 2.40, SD = 0.55 and .53, Mdn = 3.13 and 2.41) \), respectively. These two scales did not correlate significantly with prejudice type \( (r = -.08, ns; \text{and } r = .19, ns, \text{respectively}) \).

**Dependent variable: Number of foreign applicants selected.** This variable ranged from 0 (no foreign applicants selected) to 3 (three foreign applicants selected).
selected), with higher numbers indicating less discrimination. On average, participants selected 1.45 ($SD = 0.55$) foreign applicants.

The descriptions of four foreign and four German applicants followed the memorandum on screening applicants. National origin was obvious from the applicants’ place of birth (well-known cities in Germany or abroad), their education and employment (in Germany or abroad), and their names. Two of the German applicants and two of the foreign applicants had better job qualifications than did the remaining four applicants. The better qualified applicants had experience in the fast-food industry and had already worked successfully in human resources, meeting the professional requirements stated by the president of the company. The four less qualified applicants met only one of the two professional requirements.

Additional measures: Suitability ratings. To check that participants recognized the qualifications of the applicants, participants were also asked to rate the applicants’ suitability on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very well qualified) to 5 (not qualified at all).

Results

Suitability Ratings

A $t$ test showed a significant difference in the evaluation of better qualified and less qualified applicants, $t(86) = 27.70$, $p < .001$. The participants evaluated better qualified applicants ($M = 2.22$) more favorably than they did less qualified applicants ($M = 3.95$). We did not find significant differences in the suitability ratings of qualified German ($M = 2.21$) and qualified foreign applicants ($M = 2.23$), $t(86) = 0.38$, $ns$; and of less qualified German ($M = 3.94$) and less qualified foreign applicants ($M = 3.96$), $t(86) = 0.26$, $ns$. Hence, failure to recognize the applicants’ qualifications could not affect scores on the dependent variable (number of foreign applicants selected).

Main Analyses: Selection of Foreign Applicants

An ANOVA$^4$ with enforcement of workforce homogeneity and type of prejudice as independent variables and number of foreign applicants selected as the

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$^4$ANOVA tests can be liberal in case of unequal cell sizes. Using hierarchical multiple regression analysis that is not affected by unequal cell sizes, we found the same pattern of results. Type of prejudice, entered in Step 1 with two dummy-coded variables, did not predict selection of foreign applicants ($R^2 = .05$, $p = .13$). Enforcement of workforce homogeneity, entered in Step 2 with one dummy variable, predicted selection of foreign applicants ($R^2 = .05$, $p < .05$). The interaction, entered in Step 3, was significant ($R^2 = .08$, $p < .05$).
dependent variable produced, consistent with Hypothesis 1, a main effect for enforcement of workforce homogeneity, $F(1, 68) = 5.64, p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .08$). Participants advised about workforce homogeneity selected fewer foreign applicants ($M = 1.33, SD = 0.53$) than did participants who did not receive such advice ($M = 1.60, SD = 0.56$).

The tests of Hypothesis 2, which suggested differences between blatantly prejudiced and nonprejudiced individuals, produced mixed findings. The ANOVA did not produce an effect for type of prejudice, $F(2, 68) = 1.83, ns$ ($\eta^2 = .05$). We conducted a post hoc test, however, because we had hypothesized a specific contrast (i.e., between blatantly prejudiced and nonprejudiced individuals). Consistent with Hypothesis 2, blatantly prejudiced individuals selected fewer foreign applicants ($M = 1.33, SD = 0.55$) than did nonprejudiced individuals ($M = 1.60, SD = 0.56$), $t(55) = 1.80, p < .05$ (one-tailed). Moreover, the correlation between the blatant prejudice scale and the number of foreign applicants selected was -.21 ($p = .06$), indicating that higher scores on the blatant prejudice scale tended to be associated with lower numbers of foreign applicants selected. Subtly prejudiced individuals selected 1.35 foreign applicants, on average ($SD = 0.49$).

Finally, the ANOVA produced a significant interaction effect, $F(2, 68) = 3.20, p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .09$; see Figure 1 for an interaction plot). Consistent with Hypothesis 3, subtly prejudiced participants advised about workforce homogeneity selected fewer foreign applicants ($M = 1.09, SD = 0.30$) than did subtly prejudiced participants who had not received such advice ($M = 1.83, SD = 0.41$), $t(15) = 4.29, p < .01$. This advice, as expected, did not significantly affect the discriminatory behavior of blatantly prejudiced participants ($M = 1.21, SD = 0.58$, in the experimental condition vs. $M = 1.46, SD = 0.52$, in the control condition, $t[25] = 0.26, ns$) and nonprejudiced participants ($M = 1.64, SD = 0.50$, in the experimental condition vs. $M = 1.56, SD = 0.63$, in the control condition, $t[28] = 0.70, ns$). The pattern of findings did not change when we entered the two self-monitoring scales as covariates. The main effect for enforcement of workforce homogeneity, $F(1, 68) = 5.65, p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .08$), and the Enforcement of Workforce Homogeneity × Prejudice Type interaction effect remained significant, $F(2, 68) = 3.37, p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .09$).

Discussion

In an experimental simulation, German participants, consistent with Hypothesis 1, selected fewer foreign applicants when they had been advised to maintain a homogeneous German workforce. In support of Hypothesis 3, an interaction qualified this main effect, such that subtly prejudiced participants but not blatantly prejudiced and nonprejudiced participants reacted to this advice. The findings for a prejudice main effect (Hypothesis 2) were mixed, although blatantly
prejudiced participants selected fewer foreign job applicants than did nonprejudiced participants. When we included participants’ levels of self-monitoring in the analyses, the pattern of findings did not change.

**Theoretical Implications**

On the basis of these findings, our study makes four contributions to the literature on employment discrimination. First, and most importantly, it validates the viability of a subtle prejudice account of employment discrimination, as subtly prejudiced participants reacted differently to business justifications for discrimination than did blatantly prejudiced individuals. Second, it constructively replicates Brief et al.’s (2000) research with a sample in a different national context (Germany vs. the United States), different prejudice measures (Pettigrew & Meertens’, 1995, subtle and blatant prejudice scales vs. McConahay et al.’s, 1981, Modern Racism scale), and different targets of discrimination (foreigners vs. Blacks). Third, by including self-monitoring as a control variable, our study provides empirical input into the debate on the motivations of subtly prejudiced individuals, particularly whether they merely self-censor their prejudicial attitudes or truly believe that blatant prejudice is unacceptable. Fourth, our study is among the first to demonstrate the predictive validity of Pettigrew and Meertens’ prejudice scales for behaviors, rather than just attitudes.

*Figure 1. Number of foreign applicants selected as a function of type of prejudice and enforcement of workforce homogeneity.*
Brief et al. (2000) proposed that subtle prejudice played an important role in explaining employment discrimination, concluding that in their research subtly prejudiced individuals more readily complied with business justifications for the exclusion of minorities from the workforce than did nonprejudiced individuals. Our findings provide further evidence for the tenability of this proposition, replicating the finding of differences between subtly prejudiced and nonprejudiced individuals.

Importantly, our study extends and strengthens Brief et al.’s (2000) research, showing that subtly prejudiced individuals also differ from blatantly prejudiced individuals. In our study, individuals who had been categorized as blatantly prejudiced selected few foreign applicants independent of a business justification for discrimination. Subtly prejudiced individuals, however, selected lower numbers of foreign applicants only in the presence of a business justification for doing so. Then, but only then, they behaved like blatantly prejudiced individuals. Without a business justification, however, they did not discriminate against minority applicants. Taken together, Brief et al.’s research and our research indicate the important role of subtle prejudice in organizations where, in combination with a context that fosters homogeneity (e.g., because it increases organizational effectiveness), it can lead to the exclusion of minorities. At a societal level, subtle prejudice is one explanation for the continuing existence of employment discrimination despite the evolution of anti-discrimination norms in Western societies over the last 30 years.

Our findings also broaden the empirical basis for the argument that subtle prejudice might underlie employment discrimination across different national contexts. One might speculate whether the national context of our study contributed to the observed differences between subtly prejudiced and blatantly prejudiced individuals. More importantly, though, our study in which the national context, measures, and targets of discrimination differed from Brief et al.’s (2000) research suggests that the subtle prejudice explanation of employment discrimination generalizes across Western nations. Equally important, in both Germany and the United States, participants complied with business justifications for discrimination. Empirical research on the processes that lead to workforce homogeneity is rare, but Brief et al.’s and our findings show that the simple advice to match job candidates to current employees (or customers) on the basis of ethnicity leads to discrimination against minority members in the labor force.

The third contribution of our study is that it speaks to the question of whether subtly prejudiced individuals merely self-censor their prejudicial attitudes or truly believe that blatant prejudice is unacceptable (see Sears, 1988, for a review of this debate; for more recent research, see Dunton & Fazio, 1997; Plant & Devine, 1998). We addressed this question by assessing the extent to which participants engaged in self-monitoring. One possibility is that subtly prejudiced
individuals differ from blatantly prejudiced individuals because they are better able to self-monitor and conceal their negative attitudes toward minorities, not because they have fundamentally different attitudes. Our findings did not indicate a relationship between self-monitoring and prejudice type, and the main results for the selection of foreign applicants did not change when self-monitoring was entered as a covariate, supporting the position that subtly prejudiced individuals genuinely act on their attitudes, rather than on self-monitored versions of them (e.g., Pettigrew & Meertens, 2001).

Finally, our research demonstrates that Pettigrew and Meertens’ (1995) prejudice scales can predict discriminatory behaviors. To date, most research (e.g., Meertens & Pettigrew, 1997) has linked subtle prejudice and blatant prejudice only to attitudes (e.g., toward immigration) or behavioral intentions, but not to behavior. Demonstrating the link between subtle prejudice and behavior is important because it matters more what people do than what they think (cf. Wagner et al., 2001). Moreover, by embedding subtle prejudice and blatant prejudice in a meaningful nomological framework with discriminatory behaviors, our research also speaks to the discriminant validity of these two prejudice types, at least in laboratory settings.

**Practical Implications**

We acknowledge that it is difficult to draw practical implications from laboratory research. If replicated in the field, our findings put managers in a dilemma: Demographic matching might improve an organization’s bottom line, but at the expense of certain demographic groups. However, it is often unclear how and, if at all, to what extent workforce homogeneity impacts the bottom line, leading us to recommend that managers critically examine their rationale for workforce homogeneity. We propose that in most organizations, the demographic profile, compared to other factors (e.g., the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the workforce), at best makes a marginal contribution to organizational effectiveness. Finally, managers are advised that, as Powell (1998) stated, “demographic characteristics do not determine other personal attributes” (p. 54) and “searching for employees who fit the organization’s culture is not equivalent to searching for employees who fit the organization’s demographic profile” (p. 54).

**Limitations**

We studied an organizational phenomenon in a laboratory setting, thus raising issues of external validity. The generalizability of our findings to field settings remains an empirical question, but our intent was to establish the viability of a subtle prejudice explanation of employment discrimination, and a laboratory setting helped us to do so. Moreover, the subtle prejudice and blatant prejudice
scales that we used in our studies have been criticized (e.g., Coenders, Scheepers, Sniderman, & Verberk, 2001) for numerous reasons, and the categorization of participants into nonprejudiced, subtly prejudiced, and blatantly prejudiced individuals on the basis of a median split is arbitrary. While this categorization was associated with the loss of information contained in continuous data, we had justified it on conceptual grounds.

In addition, alternate interpretations of the main effect for enforcement of workforce homogeneity cannot be ruled out. For example, this main effect might be interpreted as mere compliance with a legitimate authority, rather than a seemingly justified reaction to a business necessity. Because this effect was qualified by an interaction with prejudice type, however, this alternate explanation seems less likely. Nonetheless, a study that contrasts a legitimate message with an illegitimate message (as opposed to the absence of a message) can provide a more definitive test of this alternate explanation.

Future Research

As noted earlier, an interesting question is whether the observed differences between subtle prejudice and blatant prejudice in a German sample would also emerge in a U.S. sample. We speculate that tougher U.S. anti-discrimination laws might prevent even blatantly prejudiced individuals from lashing out against minorities. A comparative U.S.–German study could address this question. Research on the processes by which prejudice translates into discriminatory behavior also awaits further refinement. For example, the manipulation in our study was relatively strong, but we would not rule out that considerably weaker manipulations, such as mentioning language proficiency as a selection criterion, might lead subtly prejudiced individuals to eliminate foreign applicants whose mother tongue is not German.

Alternately, even slight changes in organizational values might be sufficient to free prejudiced individuals to act on their negative attitudes against minorities. To test this possibility, future research could simulate organizations whose values vary along the continuum of egalitarianism and then evaluate the selection of majority and minority applicants into these organizations.

Our research demonstrated the viability of a subtle prejudice explanation of employment discrimination. We hope that this study will inspire new research on the role of subtle prejudice in the workplace.

References


