Employment discrimination: Authority figures’ demographic preferences and followers’ affective organizational commitment

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The authors used theories of organizational commitment and obedience to authority to explain employment discrimination. In Study 1, employees participated in an experimental simulation of their work. An organizational authority’s demographic preferences led to employment discrimination. As expected, affective organizational commitment moderated this effect, such that it was stronger for more committed employees. In Study 2, another sample of employees completed a survey that included an employment discrimination scenario. A model of linkages from affective organizational commitment to submissiveness to organizational authorities to employment discrimination fit the data well, after controlling for prejudicial attitudes and authoritarianism. Submissiveness to organizational authorities mediated the relationship between affective organizational commitment and employment discrimination. The authors discuss the importance of studying employment discrimination as an organizational and not just an intergroup phenomenon.

Keywords: personnel selection, employment discrimination, organizational commitment, obedience to authority

Employment discrimination, unfair differential treatment on the basis of membership in a social category, continues to be a problem in Western Societies. In a U.S. field study, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) found that resumes that were identical except for racially cued names led to substantially different callback rates. Across occupations, industries, and employer size, fictitious resumes with Black names received 50% fewer callbacks for interviews than did resumes with White names. In the United States, in 2007, 82,792 charges of discrimination on the basis of race, gender, national origin, religion, age, or disability were filed (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2008). In Western Europe, researchers have, for example, documented negative attitudes and biases toward immigrants (e.g., Pettigrew, 1998).

We report two studies in which employment discrimination is examined as a function of an organizational authority’s demographic preferences and followers’ organizational commitment. Our main tenet is that the more employees are committed to their organization, the more they engage in discriminatory behaviors in response to their bosses’ demographic preferences. In the remainder of the introduction, we discuss the importance of an organizational approach to studying employment discrimination and lay out our theoretical rationales.

Industrial and organizational psychologists have accumulated a large literature on employment discrimination, culminating in recent reviews by Dipboye and Colella (2005) and Goldman, Gutek, Stein, and Lewis (2006). For their comprehensive 18-chapter edited volume, Dipboye and Colella noted that most chapters drew on social psychological theories of intergroup relations. These theories include, for example, social identity and social categorization theories (Turner, 1985) as well as prejudice theories (Allport, 1954; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; Dovidio & Hebl, 2005). The psychological intergroup approach has been used to explain employment discrimination at the individual level and higher levels of theory, such as dyads and groups (Riordan, Schaffer, & Stewart, 2005). Despite the advances in understanding employment discrimination through the intergroup lens, Dipboye and Colella called for other approaches to studying employment discrimination, in particular research on its organizational bases. This latter approach recognizes that personnel decision makers are organizational members, who operate in and are constrained by organizational contexts.

Heeding Dipboye and Colella’s (2005) call, we build on Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh, and Vaslow (2000), who studied employment discrimination as an organizational compliance phenomenon. In their research, an authority figure’s preference for a demographic group led organizational members to discriminate against members of another demographic group. Brief et al. related their research back to an intergroup perspective, theorizing that the racial prejudices of organizational members were released by an authority’s instruction to discriminate. We complement Brief et al.’s research, adding that compliant employment discrimination may result not only when organizational members are prejudiced but also when they are committed to the organization.
The potential contribution of viewing employment discrimination as an organizational phenomenon is twofold. First, it increases the scientific knowledge about the processes that underlie employment discrimination. Below, we propose a set of processes that explain why committed organizational members are particularly likely to engage in compliant employment discrimination. These arguments also advance knowledge on organizational commitment, illustrating when it may lead to negative consequences. Second, our research implies that the design of interventions to curb employment discrimination has to become more complex by addressing both the organizational and intergroup bases of discrimination.

Employment Discrimination as a Compliance Behavior

There is a rich body of literature on compliance with instructions from authority figures. Much of this literature has focused on the dark side of compliance with instructions that are unethical. In his seminal research, Milgram (1974) found that participants delivered what they thought were extremely strong electrical shocks to another person when instructed to do so by an experimenter who had the appearance of an authority (e.g., a professor), even when the other person (a confederate) was in apparent pain. In research on organizational compliance, the work of Kelman and Hamilton (1989; see also Hamilton & Sanders, 1992, 1999) stands out. These researchers have argued that employees are role players whose roles include compliance with instructions from organizational authorities.

The processes behind employees’ compliance behaviors involve a transformation during which employees displace responsibility for their actions to the organizations and its agents (i.e., organizational authorities; Hamilton & Sanders, 1992, 1999; cf. Bandura, 1999). The displacement of responsibility largely stems from employee perceptions that organizational authorities have legitimate power to issue directives. The legitimacy of organizational authorities obligates employees to follow authorities’ preferences (Brief, Buttram, & Dukerich, 2001). As a result, in employee–employer relationships, employees tend to develop a submissive attitude toward organizational authorities.

Hence, the appropriate unit of analysis for understanding compliance behaviors is the employee in the context of the organizational system. Especially when the organizational context is conducive to employment discrimination (e.g., when an organizational authority expresses demographic preferences), compliant employment discrimination will result. We hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1a: Participants who receive an organizational authority’s directive to prefer job applicants on the basis of demographic criteria will comply with this directive by evaluating nonpreferred applicants less favorably than preferred applicants.

Hypothesis 1b: Participants who receive an organizational authority’s directive to prefer job applicants on the basis of demographic criteria will comply with this directive by selecting fewer nonpreferred applicants.

In the next section, we justify our main tenet that employees who are committed to their organization are particularly likely to engage in compliant employment discrimination. We start by providing a definition of affective organizational commitment.

Affective Organizational Commitment

Definition of Affective Organizational Commitment

Affective organizational commitment is an attitudinal construct that captures employees’ emotional bonds to their organization. Employees with a strong affective commitment to their organization work for and remain in their organization “because they want to do so” (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 67). These employees are attached to the organization for its own sake (Buchanan, 1974), internalize organizational values and objectives, and derive their gratifications from being involved with the organization (Kanter, 1972). For our research, we adopted the definition by Meyer and Allen (1991): “Affective commitment refers to the employee’s emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization” (p. 67).

Organizational Commitment and Compliance Behaviors

According to reciprocity-based models of employee behavior (e.g., Blau, 1964), employees who feel treated well by their organization return the favorable treatment to the organization. As Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982) stated: “When a man or a woman goes to work for an organization, an exchange relationship is set up in that each party trades or exchanges something in return for receiving something of value from the other party” (p. 3). These researchers also embedded organizational commitment in a model of reciprocal exchange between employees and their organizations. Organizational support theory (e.g., Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), for example, suggests that organizational commitment is a response to favorable perceptions of organizational support. Organizational commitment, in turn, motivates employees to behave in ways that they believe will benefit the organization. Mowday et al. (1982) argued that commitment is associated with “a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization” to a degree that employees “are willing to give something of themselves in order to contribute to the organization’s well-being” (p. 27).

Brief and Motowidlo (1986; cf. O’Reilly & Chatman, 1986, and Kanter, 1972) suggested the link between employee commitment and compliance behaviors. These behaviors include behaving according to the organization’s core values and goals, adhering to policies and procedures, and following the regulations and directives that have been given by organizational authorities. Research has established links between affective organizational commitment and compliance behaviors. Kim and Mauborgne (1993) found that subsidiary managers’ affective commitment was associated with levels of compliance with strategic decisions made at headquarters. In Organ and Ryan’s (1995) meta-analysis, affective organizational commitment had a positive relationship with compliance with organizational rules and norms.

Earlier we had argued that the appropriate unit of analysis for understanding compliance behaviors is the employee in the context of the organizational system. Specifically, Hypotheses 1a and 1b suggest that employees will engage in employment discrimination as a function of an authority’s directives to prefer applicants on a
demographic basis. Integrating this argument of contextualized compliance with the role of organizational commitment for compliance suggests an interaction between an authority’s demographic preferences and organizational commitment: The more committed employees are, they more likely they are to comply with an authority’s demographic preferences because of their willingness to give back to the organization. Stated differently, our arguments and our review of previous research do not suggest that committed employees will generally engage in employment discrimination, but they will do so if an organizational authority demands it on the basis of organizationally relevant arguments:

**Hypothesis 2a:** The more committed participants are, the more they will comply with a directive to prefer job applicants on the basis of demographic criteria by evaluating nonpreferred applicants less favorably than preferred applicants. In the absence of such a directive, organizational commitment will not affect the evaluation of applicants.

**Hypothesis 2b:** The more committed participants are, the more they will comply with a directive to prefer job applicants on the basis of demographic criteria by selecting fewer nonpreferred applicants. In the absence of such a directive, organizational commitment will not affect the selection of applicants.

**Compliant Employment Discrimination and Organizational Commitment**

Hypotheses 2a and 2b imply that the earlier described processes of a transformation toward compliance and submissiveness to organizational authorities are particularly strong among affectively committed employees. We view this transformation as a means of capturing how the relationship between commitment and compliant employment discrimination functions. In other words, submissiveness to organizational authorities is expected to mediate the relationship between affective organizational commitment and compliant employment discrimination.

We define **submissiveness** as a tendency toward accepting an organizational authority’s directives, as long as these directives are viewed as falling within organizational norms and values. Submissiveness may be best explained by referring to Simon’s (1997, see also Barnard, 1938) concept of a subordinate’s “area of acceptance” for behavior “within which the subordinate is willing to accept the decisions made for him by his superior” (p. 185). We argue that the area of acceptance is wider as affective commitment increases. Stated differently, committed employees are willing to accept their superior’s decision for a broader set of behaviors than are less committed employees. Submissiveness to organizational authorities, however, is unlike authoritarian submission (Altmeier, 1988), which yields mindless and unconditional compliance with instructions by authorities. Instead, submissiveness to organizational authorities is dependent on the subordinate’s perception that directives serve organizational values and objectives.

Three interrelated processes explain why affectively committed employees may have a wider area of acceptance than less committed employees. First, organizational authorities represent the organization, and they are the primary shapers of organizational values and objectives (e.g., Schein, 1992). If organizational authorities provide instructions that are framed as serving organizational values and objectives, committed employees will comply because of their internalization of these values and objectives (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Kanter (1972) noted, “When a person is committed, what he wants to do (through internal feeling) is the same as what he has to do (according to external demands)” (p. 66).

Second, affective organizational commitment is reflective of psychological dependence on the organization, in so far that, as noted earlier, committed employees derive their gratification from being involved with the organization (Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, & Mainous, 1988). This psychological dependence implies that committed employees would not like to alienate organizational authorities who are the primary agents of their organization. Otherwise, they would experience psychological tension resulting from the inconsistency of their commitment and their behaviors. Third, affective organizational commitment is associated not only with an emotional bond but also with a long-term interest in a relationship with the organization, as evidenced by the negative relationship between organizational commitment and withdrawal constructs (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002).

Taken together, these rationales imply that strong organizational commitment leads employees to focus on maintaining and fostering the relationship with their organization (cf. Wiesekquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). This focus on the relationship with the organization may come at the expense of considering the potentially negative implications of their work-related behaviors (including employment discrimination) for other stakeholders. Hence, committed employees are sufficiently mindful not to comply with an authority’s instructions that violate organizational values and objectives. If committed employees, however, perceive instructions from authorities as consistent with organizational values and objectives, then they likely do not pay much attention to the impact of the instructions on other stakeholders (cf. Miller, 1997).

Applying the above reasoning to the study of compliant employment discrimination, we hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 3:** Organizational commitment will be related to submissiveness to organizational authorities.

**Hypothesis 4:** Submissiveness to organizational authorities will mediate the relationship between organizational commitment and compliance with an authority’s demographic preference.

In summary, we have proposed an interaction between an organizational authority’s demographic preferences and employees’ commitment, such that commitment leads to employment discrimination only in the presence of an authority’s demographic preferences (Hypotheses 2a and 2b). We have also proposed that submissiveness to organizational authorities mediates the effect of commitment on compliant employment discrimination (Hypotheses 3 and 4). Below we report two studies designed to evaluate these propositions.

**Research Strategy and Research Context**

Heeding calls for studying employment discrimination with multiple methods (e.g., Dipboye & Colella, 2005; Goldman et al., 2006), our research strategy was to conduct experimental research (Study 1) and survey research (Study 2). Study 1, using a sample of employees, provides an experimental test of the above proposed interaction. Study 2, using another sample of employees in a field
survey study, provides an assessment of the mediating role of submissiveness to organizational authorities for the relationship between affective organizational commitment and employment discrimination. The design of Study 1 speaks to the internal validity of the proposed interaction. In a complementary fashion, the field survey methodology of Study 2 addresses the processes behind the interaction and, at least partially, the external validity of the tested model.

Our research was conducted in the former East Germany and deals with discrimination involving East Germans and West Germans. The reunification in 1990 brought together East Germans who were socialized into a socialist republic with a state-controlled economy and West Germans who lived in a democracy with a social-capitalistic market system. People soon recognized the differences in attitudes, expectations, and styles after 40 years of separation. This “culture shock” and the inability to communicate set the stage for stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination (Wagner, 1999). West Germans often describe East Germans as low in initiative and achievement orientation, and East Germans see West Germans as pushy types in a dog-eat-dog society, who are self-righteous and arrogant (Benz, 2005). These stereotypes and prejudices have been assessed with explicit and implicit measures (e.g., Doll & Dick, 1999; Kühnen et al., 2001; Schmitt & Maes, 2002) and have been associated with different outcomes for East Germans and West Germans (Fischer, Maes, & Schmitt, 2007). As the reunification took place only 18 years ago, the categories of East and West remain highly prevalent and salient in Germany: For example, the media consistently refer to these categories, and official statistics in Germany are reported separately for the “old federal states” (former West Germany) and the “new federal states” (former East Germany).

**Study 1: The Interaction Effect Between an Authority’s Demographic Preferences and Organizational Commitment**

Because research has yet to establish an interactive effect of affective organizational commitment and an authority’s demographic preferences on employment discrimination, we used an experimental design to test Hypotheses 1a and 1b (main effects of directives to prefer applicants of a demographic group on applicant evaluation and selection) as well as Hypotheses 2a and 2b (interaction between directives to prefer applicants of a demographic group and affective organizational commitment).

**Method**

**Sample**

The sample consisted of 107 teachers from secondary schools (“Gymnasia”) in Saxony-Anhalt, a federal state in the former East Germany. Eighty-nine (83.2%) of the teachers were women, and 18 (16.8%) were men. The average age was 41.31 (SD = 7.84) years, and the teachers had been raised and trained in former East Germany. They voluntarily participated in the study.

**Procedure**

**Overview.** The study was conducted in two stages. In Stage 1, the participants completed a survey that included a measure of affective organizational commitment. In Stage 2, they completed an in-basket exercise (cf. Brief et al., 2000), in which the experimental manipulation “authority’s demographic preference: yes/no” and the operationalizations of compliance with this directive (i.e., the dependent variables “evaluation of applicants” and “number of West German applicants selected” for a job interview) were embedded. The first author developed the exercise with the support of subject-matter experts, namely teachers who completed professional training in a psychology department.

**Stage 1: The survey.** The cover sheet informed participants that the survey had been designed to investigate their work attitudes. In addition to basic demographic information, the survey included a German version (Schmidt, Hollman, & Sodenkamp, 1998) of the Affective Organizational Commitment Scale (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

**Stage 2: The in-basket exercise.** During the in-basket exercise, the participants role-played teachers, who had 30 min to work on numerous memoranda. These memoranda required the participants to complete tasks that are typical in their profession (e.g., decisions about textbooks and the scheduling of professional training). One memorandum by the principal, described in the next paragraph in more detail, contained the experimental manipulation. The other 9 memoranda served to disguise the focus of the study. The first section of the in-basket exercise contained information about the in-basket exercise. The second section of the in-basket exercise contained the memoranda to which participants had to respond. For each in-basket decision, participants could choose from a number of alternatives, and additional space for comments was provided.

In the memorandum that contained the manipulation, the principal informed participants that they had to make a personnel decision. Specifically, the participants had to assess and select three out of eight applicants for a vacant position as a teacher in mathematics and physics. The memorandum listed two critical criteria: (a) the ability of the applicant to teach mathematics and physics and (b) the teaching experience of the applicant. Then, the experimental manipulation followed, to which participants were randomly assigned. In the demographic preferences condition, the participants additionally read:

While reading the applications, I observed that there are many applicants from the old federal states [former West Germany] among the applicants. When selecting an applicant, it is important to keep in mind that our personnel consist almost exclusively of teachers from the new federal states [former East Germany]. I think, we should maintain this ‘good chemistry’ in our school.

In the control condition, participants only received the information on the two critical criteria, but not the demographic preferences statement. After the principal’s memorandum, short descriptions of eight applicants followed.

**Description of the applicants.** Of the eight female applicants, four were East Germans, and the remaining four applicants were West Germans. Group membership was identified by an applicant’s place of birth (well-known cities in East or West Germany, such as Leipzig or Hamburg) and locations where an applicant was educated (East German or West German universities) and employed (East German or West German schools). Two of the East German applicants and two of the West German applicants were better qualified than the remaining four applicants. The better
qualified applicants had the ability to teach mathematics and physics and had teaching experience. These applicants met the first two criteria mentioned by the principal. The other four applicants met only one of these criteria.

**Pretest of the experimental materials.** A pretest was conducted in a separate sample of 40 secondary school teachers from Saxony-Anhalt to verify that participants (a) recognized the qualifications (qualified vs. unqualified) of the applicants and (b) correctly categorized the applicants as West German or East German.

In the first section, participants read the applicant descriptions and then were asked to evaluate their qualifications. The results showed that participants correctly recognized the differing qualifications of the applicants. On a 5-point Likert-type applicant suitability scale ranging from 1 (not qualified at all) to 5 (very highly qualified), participants evaluated qualified applicants ($M = 4.64, SD = 0.35$) more favorably than less qualified applicants ($M = 2.33, SD = 0.66$), $t(39) = 17.51, p < .001$. Moreover, better qualified West German applicants ($M = 4.68, SD = 0.40$) and East German applicants ($M = 4.61, SD = 0.43$), $t(39) = 0.87, ns$, and less qualified West German applicants ($M = 2.28, SD = 0.69$) and East German applicants ($M = 2.38, SD = 0.72$) were not evaluated differently, $t(39) = 1.28, ns$. In the second section of the pretest, participants were asked to indicate the regional background (West German or East German) for each applicant. The results showed that participants correctly categorized the applicants into West and East Germans in 99.1% of the cases (317 correct categorizations vs. three incorrect categorizations).

**Measures**

**Affective organizational commitment.** A German version (Schmidt et al., 1998) of the Affective Organizational Commitment Scale (AOCS; Allen & Meyer, 1990) was used. The scale contained eight items, which were scored on 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from −2 (strongly disagree) to +2 (strongly agree). The instructions informed the participants that the scale assessed attitudes toward their school, and the items had been adjusted for a school setting. Two example items were “I really feel as if this school’s problems are my own” and “I think that I could easily become as attached to another school as I am to this one” (reverse scored). The scale was formed by averaging the items and scored such that higher values indicated a higher level of organizational commitment. Past research (Schmidt et al., 1998) of the Affective Organizational Commitment Scale ranging from 0 (very low commitment) to 5 (very high commitment) showed that participants could easily become as attached to another school as they are to their own.

**Compliance behaviors: Evaluation of applicants.** To assess the participants’ compliance behaviors, two operationalizations were used, the **evaluation of applicants** and the **selection of West German applicants**. If participants complied with the demographic preferences directive, then they would rate West Germans applicants as less suitable than East German applicants (Hypothesis 1a) and would select fewer West German applicants (Hypothesis 1b) than would participants in the control condition.

For the evaluation of the applicants, after each of the eight applicant descriptions, participants were asked to use the applicant suitability scale, which had already been used in the pretest. For the main analyses reported below, the suitability ratings were coded such that higher numbers indicated more positive evaluations and computed two scores: the average evaluation score for West German applicants and that for East German applicants. For West German applicants, the average evaluation score was 3.55 ($SD = 0.59$), and for East German applicants, the average evaluation score was 3.77 ($SD = 0.56$).

**Compliance behaviors: Number of West German applicants selected.** Regarding the selection of applicants, participants were asked to list their three favorite applicants for follow-up interviews, following the description of all applicants. The criterion was the number of West German applicants selected. It could take on values between 0 (no West German applicants selected) and 3 (3 West German applicants selected), with higher numbers indicating lower levels of compliance in the demographic preferences condition. On average, the participating teachers selected 1.26 ($SD = 0.66$) West German applicants.

**Manipulation check.** Following the in-basket exercise, participants responded to a short survey about the completion of the exercise. The manipulation check item, which was embedded in this survey, asked participants to indicate whether the principal had implied to select applicants from the new federal states (i.e., former East Germany). In their responses, participants chose from one of three options: “correct,” “incorrect,” or “don’t know.” After the completion of the study, the participants were debriefed.

**Results**

**Manipulation Check**

Ninety percent of the participants recalled correctly that the principal had (in the demographic preferences condition) or had not (in the control condition) implied the selection of applicants from the former East Germany, $\chi^2(1, N = 107) = 67.52, p < .001$. Below we report the results for the full sample, as the main analyses produced the same pattern of findings for both the full sample and the sample of those participants who recalled correctly the principal’s preferences.

**Main Analyses**

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the variables. Affective organizational commitment did not have significant zero-order relationships with the evaluations of West and East German applicants and the number of West German applicants selected. In the experimental condition, participants selected fewer West German applicants and evaluated East Germans more positively than did participants in the control condition. The experimental condition did not affect the evaluation of West German applicants. As tests of the hypotheses, we ran a random coefficient model analysis for the criterion evaluation of applicants and a moderated hierarchical regression analysis (e.g., Cohen, West, Cohen, & Aiken, 2003) for the criterion number of West German applicants selected.

**Criterion: Evaluation of applicants.** Table 2 shows the results of a random coefficient model analysis (e.g., Cohen et al., 2003; Nezlek, 2001) used to test Hypotheses 1a and 2a. Random coefficient modeling is a form of multilevel modeling. Specifically, this analysis provided an estimate of within-person variation at Level 1 (evaluation of applicants as a function of applicants’...
regional background) and estimates of between-person terms and cross-level interaction terms at Level 2.

We centered all the predictor variables around the grand mean (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) and used the mixed command function in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 15.0 to run the analyses. The Level 1 parameter applicants’ regional background (East German/West German) was entered as a 0/1-coded dummy variable. At Level 2, we entered the between-person variables age, gender, the experimental variable demographic preferences, and the moderator affective organizational commitment, and the interaction of the latter two variables. These parameters did not affect the variance of the intercepts for the evaluation of applicants. At Level 2, we also entered the three cross-level interaction terms Demographic Preferences: Yes/No × Applicants’ Regional Background, Affective Commitment × Applicants’ Regional Background, and Applicants’ Regional Background × Demographics Preferences: Yes/No × Affective Commitment. In partial support of Hypothesis 1a, the Demographic Preferences: Yes/No × Applicants’ Regional Background interaction marginally predicted the variance of the slope of the evaluation of applicants (γ = .18, p = .066). The findings were in the hypothesized direction, such that the within-person effect was stronger in the demographic preferences condition than it was in the no-demographic preferences condition. In the demographic preferences condition, the average evaluation score for East German applicants was 3.86 (SD = 0.57) compared with 3.57 (SD = 0.67) for West German applicants, t(53) = 3.71, p < .001, γ² = .21. In the no-demographic preferences condition, however, the within-

Table 1
Study 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among the Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Evaluation of West German applicantsa</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Evaluation of East German applicantsa</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Number of West German applicants selectedb</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Independent variable

4. Affective organizational commitmentc | 0.66 | 0.62 | .04  | .16  | —    | —    |      |      |      |
5. Demographic preferences: Yes/no d | 0.52 | 0.50 | .04  | .21* | —    | —    | —    |      |      |
6. Gender (intercept) | .83  | 0.37 | —.11 | .07  | —.05 | .03  | —.03 | —    |      |
7. Agef | 41.32 | 7.84 | —.08 | .15  | —.26**| .03  | .18  | —.07 | —    |

Note. N = 107 (105 for evaluation of West German applicants).

a Values can range from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating more favorable evaluations. b Values can range from 0 (no West German selected) to 3 (3 West Germans selected). c Values can range from −2 to +2, with higher scores indicating higher affective organizational commitment. d 0 = no demographic preference, 1 = demographic preference. e 0 = male, 1 = female. f Age in years. * p < .05. ** p < .01.

Table 2
Study 1: Random Coefficient Model Analysis Predicting the Evaluation of Applicants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model and parameter</th>
<th>Parameter estimate</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>95% CI: Lower bound</th>
<th>95% CI: Upper bound</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>72.54***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicants’ regional background (East/West German)</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>4.41***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (intercept)</td>
<td>−.13</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>−.40</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>−.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (intercept)</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective organizational commitment (intercept)</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Preferences: Yes/no (intercept)</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>−.08</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective Commitment × Demographic Preferences: Yes/No (intercept)</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>−.39</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>−.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicants’ Regional Background × Affective Commitment (slope)</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicants’ Regional Background × Demographic Preferences: Yes/No (slope) (Hypothesis 1a)</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicants’ Regional Background × Demographic Preferences: Yes/No × Affective Commitment (slope) (Hypothesis 2a)</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>3.10**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 105. We centered all parameters. For within-subject terms (applicants’ regional background), df = 208; for between-subject terms (sex, age, affective organizational commitment, demographic preferences: yes/no, and Affective Commitment × Demographic Preferences), df = 99; for cross-level interaction parameters in Level 2 (terms involving applicants’ regional background), df = 205.

CI = confidence interval. *** p < .10. ** p < .01. * p < .001.
subjects effect only approached significance ($M_{\text{East German applicants}} = 3.64, SD_{\text{East German applicants}} = 0.52$ for East German applicants vs. $M_{\text{West German applicants}} = 3.52, SD_{\text{West German applicants}} = 0.51$, for West German applicants), $t(50) = 1.99, p < .10, \eta^2 = .07$.

More important, in support of Hypothesis 2a, that affective commitment would moderate the above-described effect, the Applicants’ Regional Background $\times$ Demographics Preferences: Yes/No $\times$ Affective Commitment interaction term significantly affected the variance of the slope for the evaluation of applicants ($\gamma = .48, p < .01$). Figure 1 shows a bar plot of the interaction. Consistent with Hypothesis 2a, highly committed participants in the demographics preferences condition evaluated East German applicants more favorably and West German applicants less favorably than did highly committed participants in the no-demographics preferences condition and low committed participants across conditions. Follow-up analyses after a median split on affective commitment ($\text{Mdn} = 0.75$) indicated that, when participants’ affective commitment was high, the Demographic Preferences: Yes/No $\times$ Applicants’ Regional Background interaction term was significant, $F(1, 54) = 13.28, p = .001$, but not when participants affective commitment was low, $F(1, 47) = 1.22, ns$.

**Criterion: Number of West German applicants selected.** Table 3 shows the results of the moderated hierarchical regression analysis for this criterion. The control variables age and gender, entered in Step 1, explained 7.0% ($p < .05$) of the variance in the number of West German applicants selected. Whereas the regression weight for age was significant ($\beta = -.26, p < .01$), the regression weight for gender (0 = male, 1 = female) was not ($\beta = -.07, ns$). The moderator variable affective organizational commitment, entered in Step 2, did not explain a significant amount of variance in the criterion ($\Delta R^2 = .00, \beta = -.02, ns$).

Consistent with Hypothesis 1b, the dummy variable for the experimental variable demographic preferences: yes/no, entered in Step 3, predicted the number of West German applicants selected ($\Delta R^2 = .07, \beta = -.27, p < .01$). Participants in the demographics preferences condition selected 1.07 ($SD = 0.63$) West German applicants, whereas participants in the control condition selected 1.47 ($SD = 0.64$) West German applicants, indicating that the experimental manipulation led to compliance among the participants.

Finally, in Step 4, the Affective Organizational Commitment $\times$ Demographic preferences: Yes/No interaction term was entered as the product of the centered moderator variable affective organizational commitment and the dummy variable for the experimental manipulation. The interaction term, consistent with Hypothesis 2b, accounted for a significant 5.7% ($\Delta R^2 = .06, \beta = -.36, p < .01$) of the variance in the criterion number of West German applicants selected. Figure 2 depicts the interaction. Follow-up analyses on the basis of a median split on affective organizational commitment were supportive of Hypothesis 2b: Whereas in the no-demographic preferences condition, the numbers of West German applicants selected differed only marginally significantly between highly and low committed participants ($M = 1.60, SD = 0.50$ vs. $M = 1.29, SD = 0.78$, respectively), $t(49) = -1.75, p = .09$, they differed significantly in the demographics preferences condition ($M = 0.92, SD = 0.69$ vs. $M = 1.29, SD = 0.46$, respectively), $t(52) = 2.29, p < .05$.

**Discussion**

Study 1 is the first to show that employment discrimination can result from the interaction between an authority figure’s demo-
graphic preferences and followers’ affective organizational commitment. When a supervisor directed employees toward the selection of applicants on the basis of demographic criteria, highly committed employees, relatively more so than less committed employees, complied by (a) evaluating West German applicants less favorably than their East German counterparts and (b) recommending fewer West German applicants for job interviews.

The contribution of Study 1 is twofold. First, it indicates the value of studying employment discrimination as an organizational phenomenon, whereas past research has mostly viewed it as an intergroup phenomenon. Second, the reported interaction can be used to reconcile conflicting positions about the positive (e.g., Meyer & Allen, 1997) and negative effects (e.g., Randall, 1987) of strong organizational commitment. Specifically, we interpret the interaction in a person/situation framework, whereby the positivity or negativity of commitment depends on the organizational context (i.e., whether an organizational authority’s directives promote employment discrimination or not).

Study 2: The Mediating Role of Submissiveness to Organizational Authorities

Study 1 showed that organizational commitment can lead to employment discrimination, if organizational authorities favor such discrimination. In Study 2, we expected to replicate this finding. The main purposes of Study 2, however, were twofold: (a) to test Hypothesis 3 that organizational commitment would be associated with submissiveness to organizational authorities and (b) to test Hypothesis 4 that this submissiveness would operate as a mediating mechanism for the effect of commitment on employment discrimination.

Moreover, Study 2 allowed us to distinguish this process from a prejudice-based explanation of employment discrimination. We expected to replicate Brief et al.’s (2000) finding that prejudice would be related to compliant employment discrimination. Study 2 also enabled us to assess our assertion that submissiveness to organizational authority and authoritarianism are different (yet possibly related) concepts (Blass, 1995; Dezoort & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 1997).

For Study 2, we designed a survey that included measures of affective organizational commitment, submissiveness to organizational authorities, prejudice against West Germans, and authoritarianism. The survey also included a scenario like Study 1 participants had experienced in the demographic preferences condition. In the scenario, respondents were asked to assume the role of a teacher whose principal suggested that East German applicants should be preferred for teaching positions, although the most qualified applicant was from West Germany.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 169 teachers (representing a 67.6% response rate) from secondary schools (“Gymnasia”) in Saxony-Anhalt who had not participated in Study 1. One hundred and twenty-five (74%) of the teachers were women, and 44 (26%) were men. The average age was 44.93 (SD = 8.03) years.

Procedure

The study was conducted over a period of 6 months. The responding teachers were recruited through students at the department of psychology at a university in Saxony-Anhalt. Potential respondents received a cover letter signed by the first author. The cover letter invited the respondents to complete a survey entitled “Teachers Today: Attitudes toward Work and Society,” for which they would receive a small financial remuneration of 5 Euros (approximately U.S. $7). After completing the survey, the respondents mailed it to the department of psychology in a prepaid

### Table 3

**Study 1: Regression Analyses With Number of West German Applicants Selected as the Criterion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Step 1: β</th>
<th>Step 2: β</th>
<th>Step 3: β</th>
<th>Step 4: β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.21*</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective organizational commitment</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic preferences: Yes/No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.27**</td>
<td>-.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Commitment (centered) ×</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.36**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Preferences: Yes/No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR²</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔF</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>8.09**</td>
<td>7.18**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall R²</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>3.90*</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>4.10**</td>
<td>4.90***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df (regression, residual)</td>
<td>2, 104</td>
<td>3, 103</td>
<td>4, 102</td>
<td>5, 101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 107.  
*p < .05.  **p < .01.  ***p < .001.
envelope. On a separate form, participants indicated whether they would like to receive the financial remuneration.

**Measures**

Affective organizational commitment. As in Study 1, the German version of the Affective Organizational Commitment Scale was used. Cronbach’s alpha was .73, the scale mean was 0.59 ($SD = 0.67$), and the median was 0.63, with scores ranging from -1.50 to 1.75.

Submissiveness to organizational authorities. A German version of the Submissiveness to Organizational Authority Scale (SOAS) by Dezoort and Roskos-Ewoldsen (1997) was used, which focuses on respondents’ attitudes toward inappropriate instructions from organizational superiors. The scale contained 10 items, which were scored on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from -3 (strongly disagree) to +3 (strongly agree). Two example items were “Employees should do what the boss tells them, even when they can’t see the reason for it” and “An employee should not follow those directions at work that seem unreasonable” (reverse scored). The scale was formed by averaging the items and scored such that higher values indicated a higher level of submissiveness to organizational authorities. Past research (Dezoort & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 1997) with the SOAS reported internal consistency reliabilities between .79 and .83. Cronbach’s alpha in our study was .74, the scale mean was -0.01 ($SD = 0.90$), and the median was -0.10, with scores ranging from -3.00 to 2.50.

Authoritarianism. To measure authoritarianism, seven items from a German authoritarianism scale, developed by Petzel, Wagner, Nicolai, and van Dick (1997), was adopted. The items were scored on 6-point scales ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 6 (very strongly agree). Two example items were “Obedience to and respect for their parents and advisors is the most important virtue that children should learn” and “The death penalty should be banned worldwide” (reversed scored). The scale was formed by averaging the items and scored such that higher values indicated a higher level of authoritarianism. Petzel et al. reported internal consistency reliabilities between .64 and .86 for their Authoritarianism scale. Cronbach’s alpha in our study was .60, the scale mean was 2.95 ($SD = 0.79$), and the median was 3.00, with scores ranging from 1.00 to 5.29.

Prejudicial attitudes against West Germans. Five items from Pettigrew and Meertens’ (1995) prejudice scales were adopted as measures of prejudicial attitudes against West Germans. The items were scored on 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from -2 (strongly disagree) to 2 (strongly agree). Two example items were “There are no West Germans among my friends for good reasons and that will not change” and “I would not mind if a qualified West German person was appointed as my boss” (reverse scored). The scale was formed by averaging the five items and scored such that higher values indicated a higher level of prejudice. Cronbach’s alpha was .70, the scale mean was -1.25 ($SD = 0.59$), and the median was -1.40, with scores ranging from -2.00 to 1.40.

Compliance in a demographic preferences scenario. Toward the end of the survey, a scenario that resembled the situation that participants had encountered in the demographic preferences condition of Study 1 was included. The respondents were asked to take on the role of a teacher who is frequently consulted by the principal for advice on personnel decisions. In this role, they had received four applicant files from the principal, who had expressed a preference for East German applicants in order to not endanger the school’s work climate. After reviewing the four files, the teacher had concluded that the strongest applicant was of West German origin, followed by an East German applicant. After the scenario, a list of questions followed, in which the following item was embedded: “Should you accommodate the principal’s preference?” The response was scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (No, not under any circumstances) to 7 (Yes, absolutely). The mean was 3.21 ($SD = 1.66$), and the median was 3.00, with scores ranging from 1 to 7.

**Results**

Descriptive Statistics

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for the variables. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, affective organizational commitment was positively related to submissiveness to organizational authorities ($r = .31, p < .01$) and, replicating our finding from Study 1, to compliance in the demographic preferences scenario ($r = .17, p < .05$). Submissiveness to organizational authorities correlated positively with authoritarianism ($r = .18, p < .05$) and

---

**Table 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Affective organizational commitment$^a$</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Submissiveness to organizational authorities$^b$</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>.31$^{**}$</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Compliance in demographic preferences scenario$^c$</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>.17$^*$</td>
<td>.37$^{**}$</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Authoritarianism$^d$</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.18$^*$</td>
<td>.26$^{**}$</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Prejudicial attitudes against West Germans$^e$</td>
<td>-1.25</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.27$^{**}$</td>
<td>.20$^*$</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Gender$^f$</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Age$^g$</td>
<td>44.93</td>
<td>8.03</td>
<td>.16$^*$</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 169.*

$^a$ Values can range from -2 to +2, with higher scores indicating more affective organizational commitment.

$^b$ Values can range from -3 to +3, with higher scores indicating a higher level of submissiveness to organizational authorities.

$^c$ Values can range from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating more compliance.

$^d$ Values can range from 1 to 6, with higher scores indicating a higher level of authoritarianism.

$^e$ Values can range from -2 to +2, with higher scores indicating a higher level of prejudicial attitudes.

$^f$ 0 = male, 1 = female.

$^g$ Age in years.

$p < .05$. $^{**} p < .01$. 
with respondents’ compliance in the demographic preferences scenario ($r = .37, p < .05$). Authoritarianism ($r = .26, p < .01$) and prejudicial attitudes ($r = .26, p < .01$) were also positively related to respondents’ compliance in the demographic preferences scenario.

**Main Analyses**

To test Hypotheses 3 and 4, we conducted path analyses, using Amos (Arbuckle & Wothke, 1997). Figure 3 shows a model (and the standardized path coefficients) that, consistent with our theoretical rationales, represented a chain from organizational commitment to submissiveness and, lastly, to compliance in the demographic preferences scenario. Furthermore, authoritarianism served as a control variable for submissiveness to organizational authorities and compliance in the demographic preferences scenario. We included prejudicial attitudes against West Germans as a control variable for compliance in the demographic preferences scenario. Because of the well-established link between authoritarianism and prejudicial attitudes against various outgroups (e.g., Altemeyer, 1988), the model also contained a path from authoritarianism to prejudicial attitudes.

In support of Hypothesis 3, the path coefficient for the link from organizational commitment to submissiveness to organizational authorities was positive and significant ($β = .30, p < .01$), even after controlling for authoritarianism ($β = .18, p < .05$). Furthermore, the path analyses showed that submissiveness to authorities was positively and significantly related to compliance in the demographic preferences scenario ($β = .34, p < .01$), even after controlling for the significant effects of authoritarianism (Petersen & Dietz, 2000) and prejudicial attitudes against West Germans ($β = .15, p < .05$, and $β = .25, p < .01$, respectively). A maximum likelihood estimation showed that the model adequately fit the data, $χ^2(4, N = 169) = 4.50, ns$; root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .03; root-mean-standard residual (RMSR) = .03; goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = .99; comparative fit index (CFI) = .99.

As a test of Hypothesis 4, we evaluated whether Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger’s (1998) conditions for mediation were met. The above-reported significant correlation between affective organizational commitment and compliance in the demographic preferences scenario satisfied the first condition that the exogenous variable be associated with the outcome variable. The path analyses served to examine whether the remaining conditions for mediation were fulfilled. The significant coefficient for the path from affective organizational commitment to submissiveness to organizational authorities (see Figure 3) satisfied Kenny et al.’s second condition that the exogenous variable be related to the mediating variable. Furthermore, the significant coefficient for the path from submissiveness to organizational authorities to compliance in the demographic preferences scenario met the third condition that the mediating variable be associated with the outcome variable even after controlling for the exogenous variable.

In the next step, we evaluated the extent to which the mediating variable, submissiveness to organizational authorities, reduced the relationship between affective organizational commitment and compliance in the demographic preferences scenario. Kenny et al. (1998, p. 260) demonstrated that the indirect effect of the exogenous variable on the outcome variable through the mediating variable equals this reduction. These authors also provided a formula for determining the statistical significance of this indirect effect, whereby the indirect effect is divided by its standard error, yielding a statistic that is approximately distributed like $Z$. We computed the indirect effect as the product of the unstandardized path coefficients for the links between affective organizational commitment and submissiveness to organizational authorities ($b = .39, p < .01; SE = .10$) and between the latter variable and compliance in the demographic preferences scenario ($b = .63, p < .01; SE = .13$). The indirect effect was significant ($b_{ind} = .25; Z = 3.07, p < .01$), indicating that the mediating effect significantly reduced the association between the exogenous variable and the outcome variable.

As a further test of the degree of mediation (i.e., partial vs. full mediation), we compared the model shown in Figure 3 with an alternate model that additionally included a direct path from organizational commitment to compliance in the demographic preferences scenario. The coefficient for this path was not significant ($β = .07, ns$). Furthermore, this alternate model did not fit the data better than did the model shown in Figure 3, $χ^2(1, N = 169) = 1.05, p = .31$. In tandem with the above-established statistical significance of the mediating effect, these analyses showed that submissiveness to organizational authorities fully mediated the effect of affective organizational commitment on compliance in the demographic preferences scenario. In summary, the analyses demonstrated that Kenny et al.’s

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![Figure 3](image-url) Study 2: Path model of affective organizational commitment and compliance in a demographic preferences scenario. $N = 169$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. 

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(1998) four criteria for full mediation were satisfied, providing empirical support for Hypothesis 4.

Discussion

Study 2 constructively replicated and extended Study 1. Again, organizational commitment was associated with compliant employment discrimination. More important, the Study 2 findings speak to the underlying processes, providing support for Hypothesis 3—organizational commitment was positively associated with submissiveness to organizational authorities—and Hypothesis 4—submissiveness mediated the relationship between organizational commitment and compliant employment discrimination. These findings were robust, holding up even after controlling for authoritarianism and prejudice.

The mediation finding uncovers a disconcerting facet of organizational commitment. Although past research has established that committed employees are ready to go the extra mile for their organization (e.g., Organ & Ryan, 1995), the findings are consistent with our reasoning that these employees can be steered toward discriminatory behaviors. Although the cross-sectional nature of Study 2 does not allow for strong causal inferences, it appears that committed employees through their submissive attitudes toward organizational authorities may be at risk of turning from good organizational citizens into cogs, who do as they are told. Organizational commitment, however, is not merely a manifestation of an authoritarian personality. Commitment and submissiveness were associated even after controlling for authoritarianism. Furthermore, although the internal consistency reliability of our authoritarianism measure was low, the lack of an association between organizational commitment and authoritarianism replicated an earlier finding by Hrebiniak and Alutto (1972). Finally, organizational commitment was not related to prejudice against West Germans, indicating that commitment to an East German school could hardly be viewed as an indicator of a general pro-East German and anti-West German bias.

Study 2 also allowed us to compare the intergroup and organizational perspectives of employment discrimination. Both organizational commitment and prejudice were related to compliant employment discrimination. A follow-up analysis, using Steiger’s (1980) test for comparing one-sample correlations that share one variable, indicated that the correlation between organizational commitment and compliance employment discrimination ($r = .17$, $p < .05$) did not differ significantly from the correlation between prejudice against West Germans and compliant employment discrimination ($r = .27$, $p < .01$), $t(168) = 0.93, ns$.

Finally, future research might also integrate the intergroup and organizational perspectives of employment discrimination. Such research might investigate the interesting possibility of an interaction effect between an organizational authority’s preferences, organizational members’ organizational commitment, and their prejudicial attitudes on employment discrimination. For example, when an organizational authority expresses a demographic preference, organizational members’ commitment and prejudicial attitudes might interact such that organizational commitment is related to employment discrimination only for prejudiced employees. The argument for this interaction is that committed employees are more compliant than are their less committed counterparts if they view the organizational authority’s demographic preference as legitimate (as do prejudiced individuals). Our data, however, did not show such an interaction effect.

General Discussion

The purpose of our research was to examine organizational commitment and organizational authorities’ demographic preferences as organizational bases or antecedents of employment discrimination. We theorized and found that organizational commitment, which is commonly valued for its positive consequences (e.g., less turnover, more effort, and more organizational citizenship behavior), can contribute to employment discrimination when an organizational authority expresses a demographic preference.

Implications for Research on Employment Discrimination

Our research adds to and extends employment discrimination research. Our finding adds to others (Brief et al., 2000; Petersen & Dietz, 2005; Ziegert & Hanges, 2005) that establish the negative effects of a biased organizational context. As an extension of past research, we showed that this main effect was qualified by an interaction effect. Only affectively committed organizational members followed their boss’s advice to maintain a homogeneous workforce. Furthermore, the relationship between organizational commitment and employment discrimination was mediated by submissiveness to organizational authorities. Collectively, these findings suggest that employment discrimination can be a phenomenon of organizational compliance.

As a substantive contribution, the present research shows that organizational commitment is a boundary condition for employment discrimination as an organizational compliance phenomenon. Further studies on boundary conditions are needed. For example, in situations in which employees are severely threatened for non-compliance, organizational commitment likely will not differentiate between organizational members who discriminate and those who do not. An interesting question is also whether our findings can be replicated at the organizational level. For example, is employment discrimination more likely in high-commitment organizations for which workforce diversity is not a priority than it is in low-commitment organizations for which diversity is a priority (cf. Gelfand, Nishi, Raver, & Schneider, 2005)?

Research on the organizational bases of employment discrimination should not be limited to an organizational compliance perspective. Dipboye and Colella (2005; cf. Goldman et al., 2006), for example, advocated a fairness lens, noting that few studies examine how perceptions of justice mediate reactions to discriminatory acts. Another lens may be that employment discrimination is a progressively learned behavior. Organizational members may initially learn to engage in more subtle forms of employment discrimination (e.g., not invite a member of another social group for a meeting) and then move toward more severe forms, such as discrediting minority colleagues in front of their superiors. Authorities may play a role in this learning process by exploiting the “foot in the door phenomenon” (Freedman & Fraser, 1966), the tendency to comply with larger requests after having fulfilled a smaller request.
Implications for Research on Organizational Commitment

The vast majority of the organizational commitment literature has emphasized its benefits for employees and organizations (e.g., Meyer & Allen, 1997). Buchanan (1974) stated:

The commitment attitude is reciprocally valuable. It advances the interests of the individual as he develops the patterns of his work life just as surely as it furthers the ends of the organization. This is important, for it is easy to misconceive commitment as an Orwellsian device for subverting individuality in the service of the corporate organization. (pp. 70–71)

In contrast, we found that organizational commitment can contribute to compliant employment discrimination. Although we obtained this finding with both experimental and survey research methods, it must be tempered by the fact that the effects involving organizational commitment were relatively small. These effect sizes indicate that in addition to organizational commitment, other factors (e.g., prejudice and authoritarianism) are important in understanding employment discrimination as a compliance phenomenon.

According to Treviño and Nelson (2003), employment discrimination is “an ethical issue—beyond any legal protections” (p. 63), as it violates the fundamental right of just treatment. Employment discrimination also cuts off organizations from parts of their applicant pools. In the Study 1 pretest, we had also asked participants about the ethicality of the demographic preferences memorandum, and they evaluated the memorandum containing the demographic preference as less ethical than the memorandum without it. A key question for future research is whether our findings extend to other unethical behaviors. Our answer is: It depends. Only when organizational authorities can justify demands for unethical behaviors on seemingly legitimate grounds (e.g., person-organization fit in the case of employment discrimination), employee commitment will predict unethical behaviors. In other words, committed employees or “good soldiers” only do bad things in an unethical organizational context. Our notion of an interactive person/situation framework (cf. Treviño, 1986) for explaining the dark side of organizational commitment provides a conceptual alternative to Randall’s (1987) inverse U model, which suggests the effects of organizational commitment are positive for small to moderate levels of commitment but turn negative as commitment becomes extremely high.

As another substantive contribution, our research illuminates processes that underlie the relationship between organizational commitment and employment discrimination. Study 2 is the first study that introduces submissiveness to organizational authorities as a mediating variable for this relationship. In doing so, Study 2 embeds these constructs into a nomological network, indicating their uniqueness and similarities (e.g., in comparison to each other, authoritarianism, and prejudice). One interesting research question is: Which basis of organizational commitment (e.g., emotional bond, identification with the organization, or internalization of organizational values) primarily influences submissiveness to one’s bosses? For example, a strong emotional bond might lead to a love-makes-blind effect that disenable employees from being critical toward organizational authorities. As a methodological improvement, future research on the link between organizational commitment and unethical behaviors will benefit from more direct data on thought processes that might be collected with protocol analyses or think-aloud procedures.

Implications for Employees and Organizations

Our research holds up a mirror for those who endorse that more commitment is better for employees and organizations. Instead, committed employees can be a latent resource for unethical behavior (e.g., employment discrimination) that organizational authorities can activate. Thus, both employees and employers are obligated to manage high organizational commitment.

Employees need to learn that high commitment may impede their ability for thinking critically about their organization. Hannah Arendt (1964, pp. 36–37), the political philosopher, argued that critical evaluation was a function of retaining the ability to judge for oneself against personal (not organizational) standards. Critical evaluation, according to Arendt, is a “personal responsibility.” Committed employees, however, tend to adopt their organization’s values as their own values. We suggest that committed employees, in part, can retain their ability to think critically through perspective taking, which emphasizes understanding the impact of one’s attitudes and actions on others (e.g., competitors) than on oneself and one’s employer.

Our findings also have two key implications for leaders. First, leaders have to be aware of the ethical implications of their directives. Seemingly harmless statements can lead committed employees to engage in unethical behaviors. Second, the management of commitment requires leaders to pay attention to both noncommitted employees and overcommitted employees who may go overboard in the name of the firm. One tool to manage commitment is the institutionalization of functional disobedience (Brief et al., 2001), whereby, among other things, loyalty is not framed as servitude to one’s boss, but as a broad responsibility to various stakeholders. Framing organizational commitment as a broad responsibility should prevent employees from focusing only on their organization at the expense of others.

Limitations

In both studies, participants did not engage in actual employment discrimination. We decided to conduct our research in controlled settings for two reasons. First, research on employment discrimination is ethically sensitive (Darley, 1999). Second, these settings allowed us to establish the interactive effects of an authority’s demographic preferences and organizational commitment on employment discrimination, and then to examine the processes behind it. Furthermore, as noted by Weick (1965), a simulation “will retain its relevance to natural organizations if the experimental situation retains some properties of the setting, task, and participation associated with natural organizations” (p. 254). In our research, the participants were employees who were asked to make decisions in settings that simulated their work environments. Study 1 was an in-basket exercise about which Bartol and Martin (1990) noted that “evidence exists that such exercises can realistically simulate the actual decision making environments of managers and that managerial behaviors in simulated decisions parallel those ultimately exhibited on the job” (p. 602, see also Jansen & de Jongh, 1997).

Another concern is generalizability. Although German antidiscrimination laws protect people of different national origins, these laws do not identify East German and West German origin as a protected category. Hence, it may be argued that in our research,
participants engaged in unethical, but not illegal, discrimination and that our research cannot be generalized to illegal discrimination. However, a post hoc test in a sample of teachers in training showed that they viewed the instruction to prefer East Germans to be just as illegal as the instruction to prefer Germans over individuals of a different national origin. Thus, although the discrimination against East Germans may de facto not be illegal, it is perceived as violating anti-discrimination laws.

Finally, the sample in our research consisted of German secondary school teachers. From a theoretical point of view, we do not see any reason for why rationales and findings should not hold in other Western countries as well as in other professions. Research on organizational commitment in German settings has also consistently reported findings that parallel those obtained from North American samples (e.g., Schmidt et al., 1998). Finally, although cross-cultural research on organizational commitment is sparse, two studies (Brockner et al., 2001; Pillai, Williams, & Tan, 2001) indicated similarities in the relationship between justice and organizational commitment between Germany and the United States.

Conclusion

Heeding Dipboye and Colella’s (2005) call for research on the organizational bases of discrimination and Meyer and Allen’s (1997) call for more research on the negative consequences of organizational commitment, we hypothesized and showed that when an organizational authority expressed a demographic preference, organizational commitment led employees to engage in employment discrimination. Our research hopefully inspires more studies of (a) employment discrimination through lenses other than intergroup bias and (b) the dark side of organizational commitment. If submissiveness to organizational authorities is the mediating process for unleashing negative consequences of organizational commitment, then it stands to reason that leaders can manipulate committed employees to engage in not only employment discrimination but also other unethical behaviors.

References


Pillai, R., Williams, E. S., & Tan, J. J. (2001). Are the scales tipped in favor of procedural or distributive justice? An investigation of the U.S., India, Germany, and Hong Kong (China). International Journal of Conflict Management, 12, 312–332.


