

Observing Discrimination: Implications for Group-Based Respect and Organizational
Morality

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The damage discrimination causes in educational and employment contexts extends beyond the direct targets of discrimination and impacts those who observe it. An organizational representative or authority who discriminates against a target who shares a relevant group membership with observers communicates the extent to which the larger organization values and respects that group. For example, a supervisor who discriminates against a female employee indicates to all female employees who witness the event how the organization treats women. Similarly, a university instructor's racist comment to one student can indicate to all students who share the same ethnic background how the university treats members of their group.

An organizational representative or authority who discriminates also implicates the organization's shared values and norms (e.g., equality). When an organization's representative discriminates against another member, it violates the assumption that all members of the organization deserve equal rights and fair treatment. This threat to the organization's shared values or morality affects all observers, even those who do not share a social category with the target. For example, male employees who witness a supervisor discriminate against a female employee may not fear that they will be the next target, but they may question their membership in an organization that would allow such behavior. Similarly, ethnic majority students who

witness a university instructor make a racist comment may not worry about their own situation, but feel the moral code of the university is threatened.

For all observers, whether one is a member of the target group or not, to witness an organizational authority clearly discriminate against an organizational group member is distressing. As is the case for anyone confronted with a clear injustice, observers tend to withdraw. They become less invested in the organization, reduce their effort and consider leaving.

Therefore, it is crucial for organizations to adopt decision-making structures that minimize the opportunity for personal acts of bias to prevent discrimination before it occurs. For example, if organizational authorities are publicly accountable for their decisions, they are less susceptible to irrelevant societal stereotypes. Organizations also can adopt transparent decision-making processes that constrain authorities' subjective judgments and offer opportunities for correction. In addition, organizations and their representatives can encourage people to view respectful, inclusive, and moral treatment as an aspiration, not an obligation. If organizations remind people that their behavior displays their moral values and that striving toward diversity and inclusiveness is the moral thing to do, people support cultural diversity. Finally, all organization members can become more sensitive to more subtle forms of bias and their own privileges and disadvantages through a variety of empirically supported interventions.

It is equally important to offer those who witness discrimination avenues for addressing it to minimize its destructive consequences. If organization members, especially organizational authorities, confront discrimination, it offsets the informative value of a single group representative's poor behavior. In addition, organizations that reinforce shared egalitarian norms (through selection, training, and public communication) foster a sense of inclusiveness that can

prompt all members to take any mistreatment of others seriously. However, the presence of diversity structures (e.g., a mission statement, hiring policies, training requirements) can lead some organization members to assume prejudice and discrimination have been addressed. Therefore, it is critical that organizations offer those who witness (or experience) discrimination clear, safe, formal, and informal avenues for challenging it.

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