Chapter 3
Better be sorry than safe
How social norms about uncertain attributions can induce self-defeating responses to subtle discrimination

“The erroneous thought is the stuff of freedom”
Ben Pimlott, in the introduction to “Nineteen eighty four” by George Orwell

Imagine that you are a woman applying for promotion at a law firm. The interviewer asks awkward questions that implicitly refer to your gender, instead of your qualifications and achievements. After you hear that you have not been selected for promotion, you wonder whether gender discrimination may have played a role. How will this affect the way you see yourself and respond in future situations? We argue that this is likely to depend on how tolerant others in the firm are of uncertain and potentially erroneous attributions to discrimination. If such attributions are allowed, or even encouraged as an opportunity to improve the organization, it is possible to indicate that the behavior of the interviewer contributed to the rejection. This is likely to make you feel less bad about the rejection experience, and helps you realize that gender stereotypical expectations do not necessarily apply to you. If, however, uncertain attributions are sanctioned because they may be erroneous, this makes it less easy to show such self-protective responses. Instead, you wonder whether you ‘have what it takes’, and think of possible reasons for your failure. In a way you might wish that the discrimination was more blatant, as you would be more certain about the cause of your rejection and depend less on social norms that either tolerate or discourage erroneous attributions. This is what we examine in the present research.

The distinction between subtle and blatant prejudice is well documented in the literature (e.g., Devine, Plant, & Blair, 2001; Dovidio, 2001; McConahay, 1983; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995; Tougas, Brown, Beaton, & Joly, 1995). Research in this area shows that both types of
discrimination continue to exist in modern societies, although they may vary in prevalence across contexts as well as across target groups (see also Dovidio, Kawakami, & Beach, 2001). A central way in which subtle forms of discrimination differ from more blatant discrimination is the ambiguity of the discrimination experience, and the attributional uncertainty this elicits (see Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002 for a review). With the present research we examine how social norms that either tolerate or discourage uncertain attributions impact on the responses people show when they are exposed to subtle or blatant discrimination. We present two studies to compare the impact of subtle vs. blatant discrimination (Study 1), and to examine our central prediction that social norms tolerating or discouraging uncertain (and possibly erroneous) attributions moderate responses to subtle discrimination, but not blatant discrimination (Study 2).

The Experience of Subtle vs. Blatant Discrimination

Being exposed to discrimination is a negative emotional experience (e.g., Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002; Kaiser & Miller, 2001; McCoy & Major, 2002), especially when it is seen as pervasive (Schmitt, Branscombe, & Postmes, 2003). Nevertheless, when the discrimination is blatant, perceiving the illegitimate nature of such treatment can be self-protective in that it helps to direct negative emotional responses away from the self (resulting in anger and hostility towards the perpetrator), and elicits behavioral responses that challenge the treatment received (e.g., protest; for reviews see Major et al., 2002; Major & O’Brien, 2005).

However, when discrimination is expressed in more subtle and ambiguous ways, it is less clear to those who fail to achieve desired outcomes whether or not this is due to discrimination. This is why rejection experiences or negative outcomes that stem from subtle discrimination are relatively more likely to be seen as providing information about the (lack of) deservingness of the self, just as non-discriminatory rejection. This is especially the case in contexts that focus on individual qualities and faults, such as job interviews or romantic dating (e.g., Cihangir, Barreto, & Ellemers, 2007; Crocker et al., 1991; Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003). Accordingly, compared to blatant discrimination which tends to elicit self-protective reactions directed at the source of discrimination (e.g., anger
at the source and protest, Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Ellemers & Barreto, in press) subtle discrimination is more likely to result in negative reactions that can be seen as more self-defeating, such as low self-esteem, anxiety, and depressed well-being (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Cihangir, et al., 2007; Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003). In sum, whereas it is easy to see that negative outcomes are due to factors outside the self in the case of blatant discrimination, people are less certain about this when the discrimination experience is subtle.

The social dimension of responses to discrimination

Prior research shows that claims of discriminatory treatment tend to be evaluated negatively by others (Kaiser & Miller, 2001), that targets of discrimination are concerned with how their discrimination claims will be seen by others (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; 2004; Swim, Hyers, 1999), and that these concerns tend to limit the extent to which targets report the discrimination they encounter (Sechrist, Swim, & Stangor, 2004; Stangor, Swim, van Allen, & Sechrist 2002; Swim & Hyers, 1999). In fact, targets of discrimination worry about how others react to their claims even if their claims of discriminatory treatment appear correct and justified (Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006). Arguably, this concern should be intensified when there is ambiguity as to what would be the correct attribution, such as happens in contexts involving subtle discrimination.

According to Feldman-Barrett and Swim (1998), who applied signal-detection theory to perceptions of discrimination, there are four possible judgmental outcomes in the context of subtle discrimination: a hit (identifying discrimination that is actually present), a correct rejection (indicating that there is no discrimination when it is indeed absent), a false alarm (indicating discrimination while there is none), and a miss (failing to identify discrimination that is present). Although all these judgmental outcomes can have costly consequences for victims of discrimination, false alarms are of particular interest in the context of the present paper, given our interest in erroneous attributions to discrimination. When discrimination is blatant, targets are unlikely to be concerned about false alarms (or any other erroneous attributions) because in this context there is little uncertainty about the correct attribution (i.e., discrimination). However, when discrimination is subtle, attributions are more
uncertain. As a result, those exposed to subtle discrimination can only ensure hits by increasing the risk of making false alarms too. If the (social) costs of making such false alarms seem to outweigh the benefits, they will more easily give up on trying to identify whether or not discrimination has played a role. Thus, the desire to avoid false alarms makes it more likely that people attribute their negative outcomes to some inadequacy of the self, even if discrimination has played a role (resulting in a miss).

Research on error climates within organizational settings illustrates some of the effects this may have. This research shows that organizations that are intolerant of errors (i.e., that adopt an error avoidance strategy; Reason, 1990) induce anxiety and a heightened preoccupation with the avoidance and prevention of errors (Van Dyck, Frese, Baer, & Sonnentag., 2005). This is much less the case in organizations that are tolerant of errors (i.e., that adopt an error management strategy; Sitkin, 1996). In fact, how people in the organization feel is more clearly predicted by the error climate than by the actual number of errors made (Garud, Nayyar, & Shapira, 1999; Reason, 1997, Van Dyck et al., 2005).

We argue that the attributional ambiguity inherent in subtle discrimination implies that targets of such discrimination run a greater risk of making erroneous attributions to discrimination than when they encounter blatant discrimination. Therefore, we examine how the extent to which social environments are tolerant of uncertain (and potentially erroneous) attributions affects people’s responses to blatant and subtle discrimination. Our central prediction is that when uncertain attributions are discouraged, subtle discrimination should elicit more self-defeating responses than blatant discrimination. However, when erroneous attributions to discrimination are tolerated, people who are exposed to subtle discrimination should be more likely to show the self-protective responses that tend to be observed in those who suffer from blatant discrimination.

**Self-defeating vs. Self-protective Behaviors**

So far, research comparing the effects of subtle and blatant discrimination has mainly focused on the self-defeating vs. self-protective attributions made to explain unfavorable outcomes, and has examined how this affects emotions and well-being. In the present research we complement this previous work, by also
examining further behaviors displayed by targets of discrimination after receiving a negative outcome. Thus, in addition to examining attributions and emotions to assess how people interpret and are affected by the discrimination experience, in the present research we also distinguish between self-protective and self-defeating responses at the behavioral level. This is intended to inform us how people present themselves and approach future situations after they have encountered discrimination, which determines their chances of being (more) successful on future occasions. We do this by examining self-defeating vs. self-protective response patterns in general self-descriptions (self-stereotyping in self-presentation), and in relation to future task performance more specifically (prevention orientation in self-regulation).

The literature on self-stereotyping argues that people can either present themselves in terms of stereotypical ingroup traits or distance themselves from the group (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). When exposed to group-based discrimination a self-protective response is to dissociate the self from the group (Long & Spears, 1997; Mlicki & Ellemers, 1996; Doosje, Spears, & Koomen, 1995; see also Branscombe, Ellemers et al., 1999). Group members can show this self-protective response by focusing on intra-group heterogeneity, emphasizing differences between the self and the group, or describing the self in non-stereotypical traits, even when actually leaving the group is not an option (Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995, Spears, Doosje & Ellemers, 1997; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997). For instance, if a female applicant is rejected for a management position on the basis of her gender, a self-protective response would imply that she tries to avoid such unfair treatment in the future by emphasizing that she is just as competitive, decisive, and ambitious as any of her male colleagues. By contrast, a gender stereotypical self-presentation may be seen as self-defeating under such circumstances, as this can be seen to legitimize the prior rejection and will facilitate the use of gender stereotypical judgments on future occasions.

In addition to examining stereotypical self-presentation, we also aim to assess the occurrence of self-defeating (vs. self-protective) responses in relation to future task performance more specifically. Here we connect to Regulatory Focus Theory, which distinguishes between promotion and prevention strategies for self-regulation (Higgins, 1997). While a promotion focus implies a
preoccupation with the achievement of ideals, a prevention focus is characterized by a concern with oughts and obligations, and the avoidance of mistakes (e.g. Roney, Higgins & Shah, 1995; Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998). Even though there are individual differences in self-regulatory focus, people can also adopt one of these foci depending on situational demands such as the nature of the task at hand, or the social context in which they have to perform this task (Faddegon, Scheepers, & Ellemers, in press; Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000; Sassenberg, Kessler, & Mummendey, 2003; Seibt, & Förster, 2004; Shah, Brazy, & Higgins, 2004). Thus, the endorsement of a particular focus indicates which strategy people intend to adopt in upcoming tasks.

In principle, promotion and prevention strategies can both be relevant to members of disadvantaged groups, depending for instance on whether they attempt to improve their current situation (e.g., when applying for a promotion), or wish to avoid unfavorable outcomes in the future (e.g., social exclusion). Nevertheless, recent research suggests that promotion concerns tend to be less salient in a discriminatory context as these have been found to remain unaffected by discrimination manipulations (Oyserman, Uskul, Yoder, Nesse, and Willems, 2007; Sassenberg & Hansen, 2007). Instead, because (discriminatory) rejection is a negative event involving loss, this is likely to induce a prevention orientation – a preoccupation with avoidance of loss in the future (Sassenberg & Hansen, 2007), which is associated with negative well-being (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). The resulting focus on prevention furthermore fits with maintenance goals that are directed at preserving the status quo, while the improvement of current outcomes would require the adoption of achievement goals that are associated with a focus on promotion rather than prevention (Brodscholl, Kober, & Higgins, 2007). Accordingly, recent research has shown that the adoption of a prevention orientation among members of devalued groups indicates a state of threat in which people focus on the possibility of failure – instead of investing in opportunities to achieve success (Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2006). In fact, in performance situations, focusing on the avoidance of failure has been found to undermine actual task performance, compared to those who perform with a focus on the achievement of success (Daron, Harackiewicz, Butera, Mugny, & Quiamzade, 2007). Thus, for people who have been exposed to discrimination, a focus on prevention can be seen as self-defeating in that it places the burden of
preventing future failure (which may result from continued discrimination) on the self (rather than taking into account factors outside the self). At the same time, this focus and the threat it implies harms subjective well-being and can undermine task performance instead of helping achieve improved outcomes - especially in settings where self-promotion is required to be successful (such as in the job interview context examined here).

The present research

Based on relevant theory and research as reviewed above, we suggest that the tolerance of uncertain - and hence potentially erroneous - attributions is an important determinant of how discriminatory treatment impacts upon the self-protective vs. self-defeating responses shown. Specifically, we hypothesize that when discrimination is blatant, there is little attributional uncertainty due to the relatively unambiguous nature of the situation. Hence, the responses shown will not depend on whether or not social norms are tolerant of uncertain attributions. However, when discrimination is subtle and attributions are uncertain, social norms are expected to play a crucial role in determining the likelihood that people show self-protective vs. self-defeating responses to the negative treatment. When norms discourage uncertain (and potentially erroneous) attributions, this increases the social cost of making false alarms. Consequently, targets of subtle discrimination will be more likely to attribute negative outcomes to their own (poor) performance, report more anxiety-related emotions, and will display stereotypical self-presentation and a focus on prevention. By contrast, when social norms are tolerant of uncertain attributions this relieves targets of subtle discrimination from the concern of making erroneous attributions, making it easier to direct their attention towards the source of negative treatment and away from the self, resulting in fewer attributions to individual performance, less anxiety and self-stereotyping, and a decreased focus on prevention.

We present two studies. In Study 1, we examine whether the procedure we developed to induce blatant vs. subtle discrimination works in the intended way by assessing how these relate to a control condition where people are subjected to a non-discriminatory rejection procedure, in terms of procedural evaluations and perceived discrimination. The comparison between subtle and
blatant discrimination is intended to show that subtle discrimination is more ambiguous and raises more attributional uncertainty than blatant discrimination. The control comparison can demonstrate that feelings of discrimination still occur as a result of subtle discrimination compared to non-discriminatory rejection. We also check whether the type of discrimination in itself induces a focus on prevention (see Oyserman et al., 2007; Sassenberg & Hansen, 2007). In the second study, we subsequently manipulate tolerance for erroneous attributions independently of whether participants are exposed to subtle or blatant discrimination. We predict a two-way interaction, in which responses to blatant discrimination are not affected by the social norm manipulation, while in the subtle discrimination condition participants should show more evidence of self-defeating responses when norms discourage erroneous attributions than when norms are tolerant of uncertain and potentially erroneous attributions.

Study 1

Method

Participants: Participants were 91 female students at Leiden University with a mean age of 21. Each session of the experiment lasted approximately 40 minutes, after which all participants were fully debriefed and received 4 Euros (approximately 4.80 USD) for their participation.

Design and Procedure: Participants were randomly allocated to one of 3 conditions: blatant discrimination vs. subtle discrimination vs. control condition. All participants were seated in separate cubicles and were equipped with personal computers. We used a bogus job-interview paradigm developed in Cihangir et al. (2007) in which participants were asked to act as though they were being interviewed for a job position in order to help us to train professional trainees. After the computer made a (simulated) connection with the interviewer but prior to the interview, some personal information about the interviewer was provided to the participant (name: Paul 30 years old). Next, participants in the subtle and blatant discrimination conditions received the same 10 interview questions as used by Cihangir et al., (2007) which indirectly referred to the participants' gender identity (e.g., “Do you think that it will be difficult for you to combine your career
with your family?”). In the control condition, we also used 10 questions which were parallel to those used in the experimental conditions but did not refer to gender identity (e.g., “Do you think you can perform well under high work pressure?”). Once the interview was finished, the interviewer indicated that he needed some time to decide whether he would select the participant in question. After waiting for 3 minutes, participants read that the interviewer had come to a decision and the connection with the interviewer was renewed. In the blatant discrimination condition, participants received the following feedback: “You are not selected, because you were not able to answer the crucial questions properly. By the way, women are generally not suitable candidates for these kinds of jobs. Since you are a woman, it would be very unlikely that you would be found to be a suitable candidate”. In the subtle discrimination condition and in the control condition, the interviewer told participants: “I am sorry to inform you that you are not selected. You did not answer the crucial questions properly”. The association of this ambiguous rejection with the gender-based interview questions in the subtle discrimination condition was meant to cause ambiguity about whether gender discrimination was the cause of the rejection. This should not be the case in the control condition where the same feedback was provided as in the subtle discrimination condition, but unbiased questions were asked during the interview. After this feedback was provided, connection with the interviewer was supposedly terminated and participants were asked to answer a set of questions about the interview procedure (dependent variables). To ensure that answers would be as honest as possible, we explained that the interviewer would not be able to see their answers and to provide a rationale for asking these questions, we explained that their answers could serve to improve the selection procedure.

**Dependent variables**: All responses were made on 7 point rating scales ranging from (1) “not at all” to (7) “very much”, unless otherwise indicated. First, we checked how people evaluated the interview by asking participants to indicate how appropriate they found each interview question for such a job interview procedure. Next, we checked whether participants thought that the rejection was due to gender discrimination. Then, we assessed whether participants attributed their rejection to their individual performance (the selection that was made was due to my own effort). We measured participant’s prevention focus with an adapted short version of the Lockwood scale (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda,
Because we were interested in assessing contextual changes in the adoption of a prevention focus, we asked participants to indicate how they felt at the moment. Five items aimed to measure prevention focus “At the moment, I am focused on preventing negative events in my life”, “At the moment, I am anxious that I will fall short of my responsibilities and obligations”, “At the moment, I think about the person I am afraid I might become in the future”, “At the moment, I imagine myself experiencing bad things that I fear might happen to me”, and “At the moment, I think about how I can prevent failures in my life” ($\alpha = .65$).

**Results**

*Evaluation of interview questions:* A one-way ANOVA revealed a reliable main effect for Type of discrimination $F (1, 90) = 26.10, p < .001, \eta^2 = .37$. Inspections of means by planned comparisons revealed that participants in the subtle and blatant discrimination conditions evaluated the interview questions as equally inappropriate for this kind of interview ($M_{\text{subtle}} = 3.68, SD = 0.69$, and $M_{\text{blatant}} = 3.71, SD = 0.86$), $t < 1, ns$. Also as intended, in the control condition, the interview questions were evaluated as more appropriate for a job interview ($M_{\text{control}} = 5.01, SD = 0.87$) than in the subtle, $t (89) = 1.30, p < .001$, and blatant discrimination $t (89) = 1.33, p < .001$ conditions.

*Perceptions of discrimination:* We subjected perceptions of discrimination to a one-way ANOVA. This analysis revealed a reliable main effect of Type of discrimination, $F (1, 90) = 51.60, p < .001, \eta^2 = .54$. As intended, planned comparisons showed that participants perceived more discrimination in the blatant discrimination condition ($M = 5.94, SD = 1.16$) than in the subtle discrimination condition ($M = 4.47, SD = 1.68$), $F = 16.19, p = < .001$. Importantly, and consistent with our intentions, participants in the control condition ($M = 2.21, SD = 1.45$) perceived reliably less discrimination, compared both with participants in the subtle discrimination condition, $F = 67.81, p = < .001$, and with participants in the blatant discrimination condition, $F = 102.32, p = < .001$.

*Attributions to individual performance:* A one-way ANOVA on this measure revealed a reliable main effect of Type of discrimination, $F (1, 90) = 7.03, p < .005, \eta^2 = .14$. Planned comparisons showed, as expected, that participants were equally likely to attribute their rejection to their own performance in the interview, in the subtle discrimination condition ($M = 2.92, SD = 1.26$) and in
the control condition \((M = 2.98, SD = 1.17), F < 1, ns\). However, and also as intended, participants in the blatant discrimination condition \((M = 1.47, SD = 0.74)\) attributed their rejection less to their own performance compared to participants in the subtle discrimination condition, \(F (1, 88) = 9.88, p < .005\), as well as participants in the control condition, \(F (1, 88) = 10.91, p < .005\).

**Prevention orientation:** No reliable effects of the manipulation were found on the scale used to assess participants' prevention orientation in regulatory focus. This is what we intended to show in this first study before examining the interaction effects of type of discrimination and social norms on regulatory focus (Prevention scale: \(M_{\text{blatant}} = 3.22, SD = 0.15; M_{\text{subtle}} = 3.35, SD = 0.16; M_{\text{control}} = 3.42, SD = 0.16\), \(F < 1, ns\).

**Discussion**

The first goal of this study was to characterize the experience of subtle discrimination by comparing it both with blatant discrimination, and with a rejection that could not be associated with a discriminatory treatment (control). In order to achieve this goal we subjected the participants to the same interview questions in the subtle and blatant discrimination conditions. These interview questions were evaluated as equally inappropriate for these types of selection procedures both by participants who were confronted with subtle discrimination and by those subjected to blatant discrimination. By contrast, and as intended, the interview questions in the control condition - which did not contain gender bias - were evaluated as more appropriate questions for this type of procedures.

The results clearly showed that subtle discrimination is indeed experienced differently from both a blatantly discriminatory and from a non-discriminatory rejection. In concordance with our intentions, in the subtly discriminatory situation people were less likely to perceive discrimination compared to people who faced blatant discrimination, even though there was no difference between their evaluations of interview questions as being inappropriate. As predicted, when discrimination was subtle, people were more likely to attribute their rejection to their own (lack of) performance than when discrimination was blatant. In fact, they were equally likely to attribute their rejection to their own inadequacy as participants in the control rejection, even though subtle discrimination was perceived to be more discriminatory compared
to the control rejection. To conclude, these data demonstrate that the subtly discriminatory rejection we examine is indeed different from a non-discriminatory rejection and also differs from a blatantly discriminatory treatment in the intended ways. That is, subtle discrimination is more ambiguous (as it is perceived as less clearly discriminatory than blatant discrimination but more discriminatory than a non-discriminatory rejection), and – in contrast to blatant discrimination - invites as much self-blame as control rejection.

In this study we also investigated how the type of discrimination affects participants’ prevention orientation. We established an equal focus on prevention in all our experimental conditions including the control rejection.

Study 2

Study 1 unfolded differences between blatant and subtle discrimination in relation to each other and in relation to a control rejection that reflected non-discriminatory treatment. Because Study 1 showed that both subtle and blatant discrimination are perceived as intended, and this was the main aim of adding a non-discriminatory rejection condition in Study 1, no control condition was included in the second study. To examine the role of social norms with regard to tolerance of erroneous attributions in the context of subtle vs. blatant discrimination, in this second study we orthogonally manipulate both the type of discrimination and social norms. We expect social norms to moderate the effects of type of discrimination on the consequences of discriminatory treatment for its victims. More specifically, we predict that when discrimination is blatant, as we argued before, no additional cues are needed to interpret the situation as discriminatory, and similar responses are expected in both norm conditions (Cihangir et al., 2007). However, when discrimination is subtle, social norms are expected to moderate the consequences of discriminatory treatment such that when erroneous attributions are discouraged, the rejection is more likely to be attributed to (lack of) individual performance and will result in more anxiety-related emotions than when social norms are tolerant of erroneous attributions. Furthermore, in subtly discriminatory contexts, people who face social norms that discourage erroneous attributions will be more likely to self-present in ways that
set them up for a further cycle of rejection and self-blame in the future, namely by showing increased self-stereotyping and exhibiting a focus on prevention.

Method

Participants: Participants were 78 female students at Leiden University with a mean age of 20. Each session of the experiment lasted approximately one hour, after which all participants were fully debriefed and received 6 Euros (US $7.20) for their participation.

Design and Procedure: The design crossed Type of discrimination (Blatant vs. Subtle) with social Norm (Tolerant of vs. Discouraging erroneous attributions). The general procedure of this study and the manipulation of subtle and blatant discrimination were identical to Study 1. However, this time we added a manipulation of social norm.

To introduce this manipulation, we told all participants that in this type of selection procedure it is not always possible to specify why particular candidates are chosen and others are rejected. We added that in the absence of an explicit motivation, rejected candidates can easily think that the procedure used may have been inappropriate. We further acknowledged that it sometimes indeed happens that the person who made the decision did not use appropriate criteria, or did not make optimal use of the available information about the candidate. We then indicated that in view of the lack of information candidates have about the decision process it is difficult to be certain whether or not this has been the case. We stated that one of the purposes of the study was to gain more insight into any problems that might occur during a job application.

After this general information, participants in all conditions read that it is not always clear how the final decision is made, so that it is understandable that candidates have doubts about the procedure. Additionally, participants in the Tolerance of erroneous attributions condition were told that it is no problem if people erroneously conclude that the procedure was inappropriate, as any complaints candidates have might still help improve the procedure. By contrast, participants in the Discouraging erroneous attributions condition read that candidates can easily express unjustified doubts about the procedure, and that this can be very damaging, as erroneous complaints do not contribute to the goal of improving the procedure.
After they had received this information we asked participants to answer some questions about the interview procedure, allegedly to help us improve the selection procedure. These questions contained the manipulation checks and dependent variables. We assured participants that the interviewer could not see their answers, and urged them to respond honestly to all questions. All responses were made on 7 point rating scales ranging from (1) “not at all” to (7) “very much”.

**Manipulation checks and dependent measures:** The same item as in Study 1 was used to check for perceived discrimination. We checked for the effectiveness of the norm manipulation with 6 items (e.g., “It is harmful to erroneously conclude that the procedure was not appropriate”; \( \alpha = .61 \)). The same item as in Study 1 was used to measure participants’ attributions to their individual performance. Anxiety-related emotions were measured with 9 items (At the moment I feel: anxious, discouraged, tense, unhappy, uneasy, vulnerable, uncomfortable, nervous, and helpless, alpha = .88). Stereotypical self-descriptions were assessed by asking participants to describe themselves on a range of gender-relevant traits. These traits consisted of 15 self-descriptions consistent with the stereotype of women and were adapted from the Dutch version of the Bem sex role inventory (Bem, 1974; Willemsen & Fischer, 1997). The traits were: dependent, attentive, understanding, modest, indecisive, emotional, sensitive, warmhearted, over-sensitive, curious, romantic, sentimental, spontaneous, tactful, and care-giving (see also Cihangir et al., 2007).

**Results**

All variables were analyzed with a 2 (Type of discrimination: Blatant vs. Subtle) X 2 (Norm: Tolerant of vs. Discouraging erroneous attributions) between participants analysis of variance, unless otherwise indicated.

**Manipulation checks:** An ANOVA on the check for perceived discrimination only revealed a reliable main effect of Type of discrimination. As predicted, participants perceived more discrimination in the Blatant discrimination condition (\( M = 5.87, SD = 1.49 \)) than in the Subtle discrimination condition (\( M = 3.49, SD = 1.57 \)), \( F (1, 74) = 46.08, p < .005, \eta^2 = .38 \). No other effects on this scale were reliable, all \( F \)'s < 1, ns.

The check for the effectiveness of the norm manipulation revealed that participants in the Discouraging erroneous attributions condition reported
perceiving more harm in erroneously doubting the correctness of the procedure \((M = 4.41, SD = 0.67)\) than participants in the Tolerance of erroneous attributions condition \((M = 3.98, SD = 0.68)\), \(F(1, 74) = 8.48, p < .005, \eta^2 = .10\). No other reliable effects were found, all \(F's < 1\), ns. These checks confirm that both manipulations were successful. The fact that no cross-over effects or interactions were found indicates that the two factors were manipulated orthogonally.

**Attributions to individual performance:** We submitted the attributions participants made to a between participants ANOVA. This analysis revealed a reliable main effect of Type of discrimination, \(F(1, 74) = 4.35, p < .05, \eta^2 = .07\), which was qualified by a reliable two-way interaction \(F(1, 74) = 4.35, p < .05, \eta^2 = .07\). As predicted, Norm did not affect the attributions that were made in the Blatant discrimination condition \((M_{discouragement} = 2.35, SD = 1.39, \text{and } M_{tolerance} = 1.90, SD = 1.20)\), \(F < 1\), ns. However, in the Subtle discrimination condition participants were more likely to attribute their rejection to their individual performance when the norm Discouraged erroneous attributions \((M = 3.30, SD = 1.56)\) than when erroneous attributions were Tolerated \((M = 2.63, SD = 1.41, F(1, 75) = 5.57, p < .05)\), consistent with our hypothesis.

**Anxiety-related emotions:** An ANOVA on this measure only revealed a reliable two-way interaction, \(F(1, 74) = 6.23, p < .05, \eta^2 = .08\). As predicted, Norm did not affect anxiety-related emotions in the Blatant discrimination condition \((M_{discouragement} = 2.42, SD = 1.07, \text{and } M_{tolerance} = 2.90, SD = 1.22)\), \(F(1, 75) = 2.04, p > .15\), ns. However, in concordance with our predictions, in the Subtle discrimination condition participants reported more anxiety when the norm Discouraged erroneous attributions \((M = 3.12, SD = 1.02)\) compared to when the norm was Tolerant of erroneous attributions \((M = 2.42, SD = 0.84)\), \(F(1, 75) = 4.50, p < .05\).

**Self-presentation**

**Stereotypical self-descriptions:** An ANOVA on this measure revealed a reliable two-way interaction \(F(1, 74) = 6.82, p < .05, \eta^2 = .08\). Again, the Norm did not affect responses in the Blatant discrimination condition \((M_{discouragement} = 4.65, SD = 0.59, \text{and } M_{tolerance} = 4.79, SD = 0.43)\), \(F(1, 75) < 1\), ns. However, as predicted, participants in the Subtle discrimination condition described themselves more in gender stereotypical terms when the norm Discouraged \((M = 5.01, SD =\)
0.47) compared to when the norm was Tolerant of erroneous attributions ($M = 4.52, SD = 0.64), F (1, 75) = 8.35, p < .005.

Prevention orientation: We performed an ANOVA on the prevention scale which revealed no reliable main effects. The predicted interaction effect was marginally reliable, $F (1, 74) = 3.10, p = .08, \eta^2 = .04$. As predicted, Norm did not affect prevention orientation in the Blatant discrimination condition ($M_{\text{discouragement}} = 3.17, SD = 0.75,$ and $M_{\text{tolerance}} = 3.20, SD = 0.98), F (1, 75) < 1, ns$. However, the predicted effect emerged in the Subtle discrimination condition. Participants reported being significantly more focused on prevention when the norm Discouraged erroneous attributions ($M = 3.83, SD = 0.77$), than when the norm was Tolerant of erroneous attributions ($M = 3.14, SD = 1.09), F (1, 75) = 5.71, p < .05$.

Discussion
Study 2 again confirmed that subtle forms of discrimination are perceived as less clearly discriminatory than blatant discrimination, as individuals who were faced with blatant forms of discrimination were more inclined to attribute their rejection to discrimination. As in Study 1, this confirms that we were successful in inducing different levels of attributional ambiguity, as intended. Study 2 further showed that when discrimination is subtle, social norms guide the interpretation of this ambiguous form of rejection, and hence they moderate the consequences of discrimination for its victims. In line with what we argued on the basis of previous research, when norms discouraged erroneous attributions to discrimination, people who were exposed to subtle discrimination were more likely to see the rejection as reflecting their own inadequacy, as they were more inclined to attribute it to their individual performance than when norms tolerated erroneous attributions. Accordingly, exposure to subtle discrimination under norms that discouraged erroneous attributions led participants to report more anxiety-related emotions. They also described themselves more in terms of gender-stereotypical traits, and indicated having adopted a prevention orientation, which we see as indicating a cycle of self-blame and self-defeating behavior.

By contrast, when discrimination was blatant participants more clearly perceived that illegitimate treatment had played a role and accordingly there was more evidence of self-protective responses. That is, under blatant discrimination
participants were relatively less likely to attribute the rejection to their own performance, they reported less anxiety, and showed less evidence of self-stereotyping or endorsement of a prevention orientation - regardless of the social norms they were exposed to. This further confirms our central hypothesis that when a situation is clearly discriminatory people are quite aware of the illegitimate nature of their rejection and hence are well able to avert self-blame, while in the case of subtle discrimination additional factors bearing on how to deal with uncertain attributions - such as the social norms we examined here – determine whether or not people interpret the ambiguous rejection as reflecting their own shortcomings, or see it as the result of discriminatory treatment.

**General Discussion**

In this research, we first established how subtle discrimination is perceived in comparison to blatantly discriminatory rejection as well as in comparison to non-discriminatory rejection (Study 1). Consistent with our intentions, subtle discrimination was perceived as more discriminatory when compared with a control rejection even though it was perceived as being less discriminatory compared to blatant discrimination. Study 1 also established that our rejection manipulations in themselves did not differentially affect whether participants adopted a focus on prevention (see also Sassenberg & Hansen, 2007).

Study 2 subsequently tested our central hypothesis that social norms prescribing how people should deal with uncertain attributions determine the likelihood that those who are exposed to subtle discrimination will avert self-blame, while (self-protective) responses to blatant discrimination do not depend on these social norms. As predicted, those exposed to subtle discrimination were more inclined to attribute their rejection to their individual (lack of) performance and indicated experiencing more anxiety when social norms discouraged erroneous claims of discrimination, as they tried to avoid ‘false alarms’. Furthermore, when erroneous attributions were discouraged, subtle discrimination led participants to self-present in ways that are likely to justify future discrimination and reiterate feelings of self-blame for rejection, as they provided stereotype-consistent self-descriptions (instead of distancing themselves from the
gender stereotype). Additionally, participants under these circumstances indicated a focus on the prevention of future failure, which is associated with maintenance goals (rather than improvement goals; Brodscholl et al., 2007), indicates a state of threat (Sassenberg & Hansen, 2007), and has been documented as a precursor of suboptimal task performance (Daron et al., 2007). By contrast, when erroneous claims of discriminatory treatment were tolerated, people who were subjected to subtle discrimination showed a more self-protective response pattern, which was similar to responses shown by those who had been exposed to blatant discrimination.

The present research examined the ambiguous nature of subtle discrimination by addressing the social dimension of attributing individual rejection to group-based discrimination. The results of previous research attest to the fact that those who suffer from group-based discrimination tend to fear making unjust claims of discrimination, and has documented the harmful social consequences of falsely making such claims (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; 2004; Sechrist et al., 2004; Stangor et al., 2002; Swim & Hyers, 1999). Furthermore, previous research comparing subtle with blatant discrimination has established the potentially harmful nature of the fact that the presence of discrimination is more ambiguous, compared to blatant discrimination (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Major, Kaiser, et al., 2003). The present research connects and extends these insights by showing that social norms that release people from the concern of making erroneous attributions to discrimination can help them adopt a self-protective strategy when they are exposed to subtle discrimination. By contrast, norms that discourage people from claiming discrimination as a way to avert self-blame, most clearly reveal the pernicious nature of subtle discrimination. That is, when social norms make people reluctant to consider discriminatory treatment as a cause of their rejection – as they increase the fear of making ‘false alarms’, they are less able to detect discrimination when this is ambiguous. Their decreased ability to engage in self-protective responses under these circumstances is not only evident from the attributions they make and the anxiety they experience, but in the present research was also shown to elicit behavioral response patterns that can be seen as self-defeating in that these tend to legitimate and perpetuate the cycle of rejection and self-blame.
In the present studies, we compared the effects of blatant and subtle discrimination and showed that only responses to subtle discrimination depend on whether or not social norms are tolerant of making erroneous attributions. Our results indicate that even though subtle discrimination might seem less objectionable – or precisely because this is the case – this does not imply that it has no negative impact on the self (see also Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). However, this should not be taken to suggest that blatant discrimination is always ‘good’, or that subtle discrimination is necessarily ‘bad’. For instance, previous research has revealed that the attributional ambiguity associated with subtle discrimination can help people cope with personal rejection, compared to situations in which individual lack of ability is the only possible conclusion that can be drawn from the rejection experience (Major et al., 2002) – under these circumstances, subtle discrimination can be ‘good’. Likewise, it has been emphasized that repeated confrontation with blatant discrimination, and the subsequent realization that group-based rejection is likely to be pervasive, can be very damaging to the (social) self (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999, Schmitt et al., 2003), illustrating some of the reasons why blatant discrimination can be ‘bad’.

Thus, the conclusions drawn here depend on the fact that we compared different forms of discrimination (i.e., subtle vs. blatant). Furthermore, the results we obtained emerged because we focused on the personal self and assessed responses that indicate a concern with the protection of the personal self. A different picture may arise when examining how these same conditions affect the collective self, or when addressing the question of how responses that may protect the personal self, can at the same time be harmful for the collective self. For instance, while in the context of the present research we regard self-stereotyping as dysfunctional or self-defeating in the sense that it prevents people from dissociating the individual self from the negative stereotype about the group, we know from previous research that drawing together and merging the self with the group may be quite functional and can be considered self-protective when the collective self is the focus of concern (Branscombe et al., 1999). Even though we do not consider the present focus on the personal self and personal self-protection a weakness of the present research, it certainly represents a limitation. That is, we have focused on one particular aspect of the self (the personal self).
without regard for other – potentially equally important – aspects of the self (the collective self). Clearly, future research should further expand current insights by incorporating the examination of different aspects or levels of self in a single study.

With this research we have established that social norms can determine the likelihood that people who are subjected to subtle discrimination engage either in self-defeating or in self-protective responses patterns, while exposure to blatant discrimination is less ambiguous and hence more easily induces aversion of self-blame, regardless of social norms. Future research should extend these insights by addressing the further consequences of such a negative self-focus. Specifically, connecting research on the effects of discrimination with insights on self-regulatory focus seems to offer a promising avenue where further research and theory development can yield additional insight (Sassenberg & Hansen, 2007; Oyserman et al., 2007). For instance, even though previous research suggests that a prevention orientation can impair task performance (Darnon et al., 2007), it would be important to more explicitly assess how – in the case of discriminatory rejection – the adoption of a prevention focus impacts upon further task behavior and task performance. For instance, it is not self-evident whether in a discrimination context a focus on promotion should always be preferred, as it can make people less concerned with making mistakes, resulting for instance in less accurate decision making which may in turn may be seen as confirming negative stereotypical expectations (see also Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2006).

Thus, whether a focus on prevention actually helps or hinders the achievement of desired outcomes may well depend on the type of task or the situation in which they have to perform. This should be further examined in future research.

We feel the present research advances existing insights into the effects of subtle as compared to blatant discrimination, and think this has important theoretical as well as practical implications. That is, while we established that social norms that discourage uncertain (and potentially erroneous) attributions contribute to the harmful effects of subtle discrimination for the self, we were also able to demonstrate that the tendency for targets of subtle discrimination to show self-defeating responses can be overcome by providing them with social norms that tolerate erroneous attributions. We have shown that the introduction of such a social norm releases targets of subtle discrimination from the concern of making
false alarms and enables them to show a response pattern that is equally self-protective as the responses shown by targets of more blatant discrimination. We think this is an important outcome of the present research, as it shows us how people can be made resilient against the pernicious effects of the more subtle forms of discrimination we tend to encounter in contemporary societies.
Note
1. Both in Study 1 and Study 2, we also assessed the adoption of a promotion focus with items similar to those in the prevention scale (e.g., “At the moment, I focus on the success I hope to achieve in the future”). As anticipated, and consistent with previous research, the adoption of a promotion orientation was not affected by our experimental manipulations.