



Perceived gender discrimination, belief in a just world, self-esteem, and depression in Korean working women: A moderated mediation model[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Past research has found that perceived gender discrimination is related to women's poor mental health outcomes. However, despite the high prevalence of gender discrimination in South Korea, this relationship, and the mechanism that explains such a relationship remains understudied. The current study investigated married Korean working women's perceptions of gender discrimination, self-esteem, belief in a just world, and depression by testing a moderated mediation model. The results suggest that perceived gender discrimination was negatively related to self-esteem, but only at high levels of belief in a just world. In addition, we found support for a moderated mediation effect in which self-esteem mediated the relationship between perceived gender discrimination and depression, but only at high levels of belief in a just world. These findings contribute to the literature by highlighting the relevance of a belief in a just world to an understanding of women's self-esteem and depression in the context of gender discrimination.

Although South Korea (Korea) is known as a country with a patriarchal and collectivistic past, it has undergone rapid economic growth and social changes over the past several decades. Examples of these changes include Koreans endorsing individualistic values more than collectivistic ones, the traditional extended family being transformed into a nuclear family, and an increasing emphasis on gender equity (Kim & Kim, 2017). As a result, since 2009, Korean women have surpassed men in terms of college entrance, and their participation in the labor force has been up to 52.7%. Moreover, the percentage of female professionals such as doctors, lawyers, college professors, and government employees has shown a steady increase (Korea Statistics Information Service, 2016).

However, gender inequality between men and women still exists. According to the Global Gender Gap Report in 2015, Korea ranked 115th among 145 countries owing to low female-male ratios in labor force participation, political empowerment, and income equality for similar work (World Economic Forum (2015)). A key issue contributing to such gender inequality is Korean society's traditional view of female gender roles, which is rooted strongly in Confucianism. For example, in a response to the survey question, "What do you think about women in the workforce?" more than 80% of male Korean respondents (vs. 23% of female Korean respondents) preferred women to stay home and focus on marriage and childrearing (Korea Women's Department Institute, 2016). Indeed, according to Statistics Korea (2016), only 12.4% of

working Korean wives reported sharing housework and childrearing tasks with their husbands.

Due to such widespread traditional gender roles, coupled with a lack of childcare facilities in Korea, many married working women are overburdened by household and parenting responsibilities, and struggle with work-family balance (Kim & Shim, 2016). In particular, because working late nights and weekends has been the unspoken social norm for Korean workers (Choi, Kim, Lee, Lim, & Park, 2015), many married Korean working women experience a serious dilemma between workplace and family commitments (Kim & McLean, 2008). In addition, Korean working women (regardless of their marital status) experience multiple forms of gender discrimination at work, including, but not limited to such behaviors as paying women inequitably, steering them to "women's jobs," not taking their voices seriously, refusing to promote them, making sexual comments and inappropriate sexual gestures about their appearance, clothing, or body, and telling sexual jokes (Kim & Shin, 2014; Park & Tak, 2008). Moreover, women in certain occupational status (e.g., irregular worker or precarious workers) are at a greater risk for experiencing gender discrimination (Cho, 2008).

Gender discrimination is one of the social stressors of being a woman that negatively impacts mental health (Fischer & Holz, 2010; Klonoff, Landrine, & Ullman, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1997; Okechukwu, Souza, Davis, & Castro, 2014). For example, gender-based comparisons showed that women reported a higher lifetime prevalence

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of anxiety and mood disorders, and that perceived gender discrimination contributed to this pattern (Kessler et al., 2005; Kira, Shuwiekh, & Bujold-Bugeaud, 2017). In addition, sexist events significantly predicted psychological distress even after controlling for the effects of racist events in a sample of African American women (Moradi & Subich, 2003). Similar to the literature that has sampled Western countries, an association between perceived discrimination and negative psychological outcomes has been reported in the Korean population. One investigation revealed that Korean working women reported greater depressive symptoms as they perceived more organizational injustice and gender discrimination (Park, Min, Chang, Kim, & Min, 2009). Other reports have also connected perceived discrimination with psychological distress and poor physical health among Korean working women and Korean married women (Chon, Doyal, Payne, Cho, & Kim, 2006; Chun, Khang, Kim, & Cho, 2008).

In recent years, the focus of research has shifted to understanding the mechanisms and processes by which perceived discrimination may lead to poor mental health (Liang & Borders, 2012; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Schulz et al., 2006) because it would be within this chain of events that the ability to intervene exists (Fischer & Holz, 2007). That is, while we, as clinicians, continue to work toward ending gender discrimination, we should also work toward identifying areas for intervention in which psychological problems can be alleviated for those women who experience gender discrimination. So far, scholars have identified a personal sense of control (Bourguignon, Seron, Yzerbyt, & Herman, 2006; Krumm & Corning, 2008; Moradi & Hasan, 2004), central appraisal (perceiving experiences of discrimination as significant to one's well-being; King, 2005), rumination (Hatzenbuehler, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Dovidio, 2009), and coping strategies (Wei, Ku, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Liao, 2008) as mediators of the discrimination-psychological problems link. However, most of these studies have focused on racial discrimination, and therefore little is known about the variables that account for and influence the association between gender discrimination and psychological consequences. As such, guided by Harrell's (2000) racism-related stress model (discrimination is associated with psychological problems through internal and external mediators), the current study examined whether self-esteem would mediate the relationship between perceived gender discrimination and depression. In addition, based on worldview verification theory (inconsistencies between experiences and worldviews are psychologically threatening), belief in a just world (BJW) was hypothesized to moderate the association between perceived gender discrimination and self-esteem, as well as the mediating effect of self-esteem.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem, defined as one's view of oneself (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), has received substantial attention in the discrimination literature. In particular, two lines of research have been conducted. The first has examined self-esteem as a moderator that buffers the harmful effect of perceived discrimination on mental health outcomes (Corning, 2002; Fisher & Shaw, 1999; Moradi & Subich, 2004; Wei et al., 2008). For instance, Moradi and Subich (2004) found that self-esteem moderated the relationship between perceived discrimination and psychological distress in women, such that psychological distress increased as perceived discrimination increased, but only among women with lower levels of self-esteem. In contrast, another line of research, informed by Harrell's (2000) racism-related stress model, examined whether self-esteem mediated the association between perceived discrimination and mental health outcomes. As an example, Cassidy, O'Connor, Howe, and Warden (2004) demonstrated that self-esteem mediated (but did not moderate) the relationship between perceived discrimination and psychological distress in a sample of Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani males. A further study showed that self-esteem acted as a mediator for the relationship between perceived sexism and psychological distress (Fischer & Holz, 2007).

In the present study, we followed a mediator approach and expanded it to married Korean working women. That is, we hypothesized that self-esteem would mediate the relationship between perceived gender discrimination and depression. There are several conceptual and empirical reasons for this hypothesis. First, research has shown that self-views are, in general, based upon information gathered from explicit or implicit feedback from others (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Therefore, Korean working women who are targets of gender discrimination are likely to internalize social devaluation and develop low self-esteem (Park, Norasakkunkit, & Kashima, 2017). Second, the experience of discrimination may decrease self-esteem through reducing a sense of personal control, because instances of discrimination serve as a constant reminder of one's inability to control one's life (Bourguignon et al., 2006; Liang, Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2007). In addition, attributing negative experiences to discrimination implies that control for outcomes rests with others rather than with oneself; such external attribution threatens a person's sense of control and self-esteem (Every & Perry, 2014). Third, the experience of discrimination denies access to resources necessary for coping with other stressors (Bianchi, Zea, Poppen, Reisen, & Echeverry, 2004), leading to learned helplessness and damaged self-esteem (Wei et al., 2008). Indeed, there is empirical evidence supporting the relationship between perceived discrimination and low self-esteem (Paradies, 2006; Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002) as well as low self-esteem and depression (Ha & Kim, 2016; Sowislo & Orth, 2013).

Belief in a just world

In addition to proposing connections among perceived gender discrimination, self-esteem, and depression, we predicted that married Korean working women's belief in a just world (BJW) would provide the basis for moderating effects on these relationships. BJW is defined as a belief that the world is fair and that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Lerner & Miller, 1978). BJW is divided into two types: personal belief (BJW-self) and general belief (BJW-others; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996). BJW-self refers to one's belief that the world is fair to *oneself* while BJW-others refers to the belief that the world is fair to *others*. Research has suggested that endorsing strong BJW-self is related to indicators of positive mental health (e.g., greater life satisfaction, purpose of life, self-esteem, positive affect; Begue & Bastounis, 2003; Hayes, Lorenz, & Bell, 2013; Lucas, Zhdanova, & Alexander, 2011; Sutton & Douglas, 2005) whereas BJW-others is associated with harsh attitudes toward members of underprivileged groups and victim blaming (Stromwall, Alfredsson, & Landstrom, 2013). Considering the BJW-self is associated with psychological well-being, including low levels of depression, we examined the moderating effect of BJW-self (not BJW-others).

Along these lines, BJW-self has been found to be an effective coping mechanism that buffers the harmful effects of stress against depression (Carifio & Nasser, 2012). Dzuka and Dalbert (2002) explained that BJW aids people to cope with stressful events by increasing feelings of confidence, control, and hope. Indeed, research has shown that these beliefs, as a form of positive illusion, encourage people to see their social environment as more stable and controllable, and therefore lower perceptions of threat and increase the use of adaptive coping strategies (e.g., problem-focused coping, acceptance, cognitive reframing) in the face of stressful events (Dalbert, 1999; Furnham, 2003; Ramos, Correia, & Alves, 2014). In particular, several scholars have pointed out that BJW-self acts as a buffer that decreases the negative relationship between perceived discrimination and depression (Eliezer, Townsend, Sawyer, Major, & Mendes, 2011). For example, Sadiq and Bashir (2015) showed that BJW-self moderated the association between perceived discrimination and depression such that the association was stronger when BJW-self was low and weaker when BJW-self was high.

However, BJW does not necessarily work as a buffer against discrimination (Lucas et al., 2016). According to Major, Kaiser, O'Brien,

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