

## Subtle and blatant perceived discrimination and well-being in lesbians and gay men in Spain: The role of social support

Fernando Molero, Prado Silván-Ferrero, María José Fuster-Ruiz de Apodaca, Encarnación Nouvilas-Pallejá and Daniel Pérez-Garín  
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)

### Abstract

**Background:** The situation of lesbians and gay men (LGs) in Spain has improved significantly in recent decades. However, Spanish society still exhibits prejudice and discrimination. The current study pursues three main goals: 1) to analyse the extent to which LGs perceive blatant and subtle discrimination, 2) to explore the relationship between perceived discrimination and LGs' psychological and subjective well-being, and 3) to analyse the possible mediational role of social support in reducing the negative influence of perceived discrimination on well-being. **Method:** The sample comprised 237 lesbians and 232 gay men. **Results:** The results show higher perceived subtle than blatant discrimination, and that subtle discrimination affects LGs' well-being more negatively than blatant discrimination. Results show that social support helps to alleviate the negative effects of discrimination on well-being. **Conclusions:** These results are important and may contribute to the design of interventions to improve the well-being of lesbians and gay men.

**Keywords:** Lesbians and gay men, perceived discrimination, well-being, social support.

### Resumen

**Discriminación percibida sutil y manifiesta y bienestar en personas lesbianas y gays en España: el papel del apoyo social. Antecedentes:** la situación de las personas lesbianas y gays (LG) en España ha mejorado mucho en las últimas décadas. Sin embargo, el prejuicio y la discriminación todavía están presentes en la sociedad española. El presente estudio persigue tres objetivos principales: 1) analizar hasta qué punto las personas LG perciben la existencia de discriminación manifiesta y sutil; 2) explorar la relación existente entre la discriminación percibida y el bienestar psicológico y subjetivo de las personas LG; y 3) analizar el papel mediador que el apoyo social puede jugar a la hora de reducir la influencia negativa de la discriminación percibida en el bienestar. **Método:** la muestra incluía 237 mujeres lesbianas y 232 hombres gays. **Resultados:** los resultados muestran que la discriminación sutil percibida es mayor que la manifiesta y que además dicha discriminación sutil, comparada con la manifiesta, tiene efectos más negativos en el bienestar de las personas LG. Los resultados muestran que el apoyo social contribuye a aliviar los efectos negativos de la discriminación en el bienestar. **Conclusiones:** estos resultados son relevantes y pueden contribuir a diseñar intervenciones para mejorar el bienestar de las personas LG.

**Palabras clave:** personas lesbianas y gays, discriminación percibida, bienestar, apoyo social.

The situation of lesbians and gay men (LGs) in Spain has improved very much in the last few decades. During the Franco dictatorship (1939-1977), being a gay man or a lesbian was severely persecuted. With the arrival of democracy in 1978, the rights of LGs began to be recognized and, in 2005, marriage between people of the same sex was legalized. Spain was the third country in the world after the Netherlands and Belgium to approve a law of this type. Ten years later, in 2015, more than 31.600 marriages had been celebrated between persons of the same sex (El Mundo, 2015). A report from the Pew Research Center (2013) shows that 88% of Spaniards think that society should accept homosexuality

(this is the highest rate of acceptance among the 39 analysed countries).

However, despite the existence of advanced legislation in acknowledging the rights of LG people and apparent social tolerance, there is also ample evidence that Spanish society still exhibits prejudice and discrimination. For example, according to the newspaper El País (Duva, 2014), in Spain, there were 452 acts of aggression toward people due to their sexual orientation in 2013. and in a study published by the Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gays, Transsexuales y Bisexuales (State Federation of Lesbians, Gays, Transsexuals and Bisexuals; FELGTB/COGAM, 2012), it was found that a large part of young LG people had suffered bullying due to their sexual orientation, and among them, 43% had thought about suicide, 35% had planned it and 17% had attempted it on various occasions.

The current study presents three main objectives: 1) to analyse the extent to which LGs perceive the existence of blatant and subtle discrimination towards them, 2) to explore the relationship

between blatant and subtle perceived discrimination and LGs' psychological and subjective well-being and 3) to analyse the role that social support plays in reducing the influence of perceived discrimination on well-being. We believe that studying these variables and their relationships from a psychological point of view can help to understand the reality of lesbians and gay men and also provide strategies to improve their quality of life.

### *Perceived discrimination and well-being*

Two recent meta-analyses (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & García, 2014) have confirmed that perceived discrimination has negative consequences on the well-being of various stigmatized groups. The study by Schmitt et al. also shows that the size of the negative effect was higher when discrimination is based on sexual orientation than when it is based on racism or sexism.

However, perceived discrimination is not a unidimensional construct. According to Molero, Recio, García-Ael, Fuster and Sanjuán (2013), two dimensions can be distinguished: blatant (direct) and subtle (indirect).

Currently, discrimination or rejection is not justified due to a supposed inferiority of the other group but because it is believed that the minority "do not want to accept the traditional values of society". Ever since the 1980s, several authors have shown interest in these forms of prejudice, focusing mainly on racial or ethnic prejudice, which have received various names, such as "modern racism" (McConahay, 1986), "aversive racism" (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986) or "subtle" prejudice (Meertens & Pettigrew, 1992). However, these new forms of prejudice are still very harmful for minorities because, as noted by Gaertner and Dovidio (2000, p. 4), "like a virus that has mutated, racism (or heterosexism, in the case of the current study) may have evolved into different forms that are more difficult not only to recognize but also to combat". Based on the reviewed literature, we expected that LGs would perceive more subtle than blatant discrimination.

As stated above, many studies show that perceived discrimination is negatively associated with different aspects of stigmatized groups' well-being (i.e., Schmitt et al., 2014). However, there is little research comparing the effects of subtle and blatant rejection on discriminated groups. To make this comparison is one of the objectives of this study.

### *The role of social support*

Traditionally, social support has been considered a moderating variable of the negative effects of discrimination on health and well-being. Social network support and a good quality of interpersonal relationships are considered essential to reduce the effects of stress produced by discrimination. Basabe, Zlobina and Páez (2004) found that social support alleviated the negative consequences of cultural stress in immigrants. In the same vein, Beals, Peplau and Gable (2009) found that perceived social support in a sample of LGs was a consistent predictor of well-being and a mediator between disclosing one's sexual orientation and well-being. In the same line, Spencer and Patrick (2009) found that social support together with environmental mastery explained the variations in psychological well-being in LG people participating in their study. In a study carried out in Spain with gay men, Domínguez-Fuentes, Hombrados-Mendieta and García-Leiva (2012) found

that social support was positively related to life satisfaction. In the above-mentioned meta-analysis carried out by Pascoe and Smart Richman (2009), it was found that social support was a moderating variable between perceived discrimination and the negative effects on mental health in various discriminated groups. However, this meta-analysis showed that the protective effects are not found in every case and depend on several variables, such as level of perceived discrimination, the kind of well-being evaluated and the type of social support. In this research, we will analyse the mediator role that social support plays in gay men and lesbians when reducing negative effects of perceived stigma. We expect that social support will contribute to ease the negative effects of stigma on LGs' well-being.

## Method

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 481 participants (50.5 % women and 49.4 % men). The participants' age ranged from 18 to 77 years ( $M = 32.36$ ,  $SD = 9.60$ ). Regarding educational level, 54.6% of the participants had a university degree, 20% had high school studies, 7.4% had studied Vocational Training, and 6.6% had studied General Elementary Education or Compulsory Secondary Education.

### *Instruments*

*Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Discrimination* (Molero et al., 2013). This scale is made up of 20 items that measure four aspects of perceived discrimination: blatant group discrimination, subtle group discrimination, blatant individual discrimination, and subtle individual discrimination. For the purposes of this study, we combined blatant group and individual discrimination, creating the variable blatant discrimination (BD,  $\alpha = .85$ ; i.e. "In Spanish society LG people are visibly rejected"). Likewise, we combined subtle group and individual discrimination, creating the variable subtle discrimination (SD,  $\alpha = .77$ ; i.e. "Even when people seem to accept LG people, I think that, deep down, they have some misgivings").

Participants were requested to respond on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating their degree of agreement with the statements presented.

*Psychological Well-Being Questionnaire* (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). We used two sub-scales of the Spanish adaptation of Díaz et al. (2006), which measure two dimensions of psychological well-being: the ability to manage life and one's surroundings called *environmental mastery* (5-items subscale,  $\alpha = .70$ ; i.e., "In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live") and a positive attitude towards oneself and one's past life called, *self-acceptance* (4-items subscale,  $\alpha = .82$ ; i.e. "I like most of aspects of my personality"). Responses ranged from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*), where higher scores indicated greater well-being.

*Quality of life questionnaire* (Ruiz & Baca, 1993). We use the subscale of Social Support from this scale. It is composed of 8 items ( $\alpha = .89$ ) with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*), evaluating the perceived support, (i.e. "Do you think you have someone to accompany or support you when you need it?").

*The positive and negative affect Schedule (PANAS)* (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988; adapted to Spanish and validated by

Sandín et al., 1999). This scale consists of 20 items that evaluate positive affect ( $\alpha = .90$ ; i.e., “I generally feel enthusiastic, determined”) and negative affect ( $\alpha = .87$ ; i.e., “I generally feel distressed, upset”). Response options range from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*), where higher scores indicate greater positive or negative affect.

**Procedure**

The sample was recruited through the FELGTB. The procedure was as follows. First, we contacted the organization and explained the goals of the research and the method. A website with the questionnaire was designed by means of the Frontpage tool, so that the data could be collected online. The organization then provided the link through its own website, so that any person who accessed the site could complete the questionnaire, regardless of whether or not they were members of the association. Participants read a brief instruction describing the research and agreed to participate before answering the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary and the confidentiality of the participants’ data was guaranteed. The data were obtained in the spring of 2012.

**Data analysis**

After calculating descriptive statistics for the variables of the study and the correlation coefficients of blatant and subtle discrimination with the rest of the variables (Lee & Preacher, 2013), four stepwise regression analyses were conducted, with self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive affect and negative affect, respectively, as the outcome variables. In order to control for the effect of sex and age, these variables were introduced in the first step. In the second step, we added perceived discrimination variables (blatant and subtle) and finally, in the third step, we included perceived social support. If, when social support is introduced into the equations, the association between discrimination variables and well-being decreases, this would suggest that social support could be acting as a mediator.

Finally, mediation analyses were conducted for those outcome variables for which the results of the regressions indicated a possible mediation of social support. These were conducted using Hayes’s (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS, which uses bootstrapping to generate confidence intervals for the total and indirect effects of one variable on another through one or more

mediator variables. 10,000 re-samples were generated, twice the minimum recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008) for final reporting.

**Results**

In Table 1, the descriptive statistics of the variables used in the study are shown separately for gay men and lesbians.

As shown in Table 1, there were no differences between lesbians and gay men in the perception of blatant and subtle discrimination. On another hand, in variables related to well-being, we found that lesbians had higher self-acceptance, higher environmental mastery, less negative affect and more social support. There were no differences in the scores obtained in positive affect.

Consistent with our prediction, perceived subtle discrimination was higher than perceived blatant discrimination,  $t(480) = 8.53, p < .0001$ , and this was the case both for gay men,  $t(231) = 7.54, p < .0001$ , and lesbians,  $t(236) = 4.22, p < .0001$ .

As expected, the relationship between perceived discrimination and well-being was negative in most cases. However, although we did not formulate “a priori” predictions, one important objective of this study was to compare the effects of blatant and subtle discrimination on well-being variables. Table 2 shows the correlations between all the variables in the study. The correlations between subtle discrimination and the rest of the variables were significantly higher than those of blatant discrimination, except for positive affect. The correlations followed the expected directions, that is, higher perceived subtle discrimination was related to lower self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and social support, whereas negative affect was higher. No difference was found regarding positive affect, whose relationship with perceived discrimination was near 0.

Lastly, we analysed the extent to which sociodemographic variables, discrimination variables, and social support predicted self-acceptance and environmental mastery (psychological well-being) (Table 3) and positive and negative affect (subjective well-being) (Table 4).

As shown in Table 3, the variables included in the model explained 26% of self-acceptance. Age had a positive effect in the first two steps (the greater the age, the greater self-acceptance). In the second step, there were no significant effects of perceived discrimination on self-acceptance. Finally, in the third step, we observed that social support was highly related to self-acceptance.

*Table 1*  
Descriptive statistics for the entire sample and for gay men and lesbians

	Entire sample M (SD) (N = 469)	Gay men (n = 232) M (SD)	Lesbians (n = 237) M (SD)	Signif. Dif. t(467)
Blatant discrimination	3.09 (0.74)	3.04 (0.75)	3.15 (0.73)	-1.61
Subtle discrimination	3.34 (0.81)	3.36 (0.80)	3.32 (0.84)	0.41
Self-acceptance	3.91 (0.74)	3.85 (0.74)	3.98 (0.72)	-1.83*
Environmental mastery	3.69 (0.69)	3.63 (0.68)	3.77 (0.70)	-2.12**
Positive affect	3.32 (0.75)	3.33 (0.74)	3.33 (0.75)	0.10
Negative affect	2.01 (0.64)	2.10 (0.64)	1.93 (0.63)	3.02 ***
Social support	4.31(0.73)	4.23 (0.76)	4.40 (0.69)	-2.50**

*Note:* All scores range from 1 to 5.  
\*  $p < .10$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .01$

*Table 2*  
Correlations for the entire sample between types of discrimination and outcome variables

	Blatant discrimination	Subtle discrimination	Self-acceptance	Environmental mastery	Positive affect	Negative affect
Subtle discrimination	.68**					
Self-acceptance	-.04					
Environmental mastery	-.06	-.17**	.72**			
Positive affect	.02	.05	.59**	.54**		
Negative affect	.13**	.25**	-.46**	-.45**	-.20**	
Social support	-.13**	-.21**	.53**	.52**	.40**	-.37**

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

*Table 3*  
Stepwise regression analysis predicting self-acceptance and environmental mastery by age, sex, discrimination, and social support

Predictors	Self-acceptance			Environmental mastery		
	$\beta$	t	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	t	$\Delta R^2$
<b>Step 1</b>			.017**			.02**
Age	.10	2.20 *		.11	2.41 *	
Sex	.08	1.85		.10	2.30 *	
<b>Step 2</b>			.009			.03***
Age	.10	2.15*		.10	2.32 *	
Sex	.08	1.78		.09	2.12 *	
Blatant discrimination	.01	0.23		.06	1.07	
Subtle discrimination	-.10	-1.67		-.22	-3.54 ***	
<b>Step 3</b>			.24***			.21***
Age	.07	1.71		.07	1.92	
Sex	.02	0.61		.04	1.05	
Blatant discrimination	.02	0.38		.07	1.33	
Subtle discrimination	.01	0.18		-.11	-2.00*	
Social support	.51	12.22***		.48	11.49***	
Total $R^2$			.26			.26

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

*Table 4*  
Stepwise regression analysis predicting positive affect and negative affect by age, sex, discrimination, and social support

Predictors	Positive affect			Negative affect		
	$\beta$	t	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	t	$\Delta R^2$
<b>Step 1</b>			.002			.05***
Age	-.04	-1.02		-.19	-4.12***	
Sex	-.01	-0.13		-.13	-3.01**	
<b>Step 2</b>			.01			.06***
Age	-.05	-1.09		-.18	-4.14***	
Sex	-.01	-0.34		-.13	-2.92**	
Blatant Discrimination	.09	1.50		-.03	-0.58	
Subtle Discrimination	-.14	-2.21*		.27	4.55**	
<b>Step 3</b>			.14***			.08***
Age	-.07	-1.78		-.16	-3.86***	
Sex	-.06	-1.38		-.09	-2.26*	
Blatant Discrimination	.10	1.72		-.04	-0.68	
Subtle Discrimination	-.05	-0.85		.20	3.54***	
Social Support	.39	8.81***		-.30	-6.81***	
Total $R^2$			.15			.19

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Considering that perceived discrimination (blatant or subtle) was not significantly associated with self-acceptance, it cannot be stated that social support mediated the relationship between perceived discrimination and self-acceptance.

Regarding environmental mastery, the variables explained approximately 26% of the variance. The positive effect of age remained in the two first steps of the equation. In the second step, we observed that subtle discrimination was negatively related to environmental mastery. However, this association decreased when social support was included in the equation.

Table 4 shows that the variables included in the equation explained 15% of the variance of positive affect. No important effects of age or sex were noted. There was a negative relationship between subtle discrimination and positive affect, although this effect disappeared when social support was introduced in the equation.

Regarding negative affect, the variables included in the equation explained about 19% of its variance. Age and sex had a negative association with negative affect. That is, the greater the age, the less negative affect, and this effect was stronger among lesbians. There was a positive relationship between subtle discrimination and negative affect, although this association decreased when social support was introduced in the equation.

Regression models suggest the possible mediation of social support between perceived subtle discrimination and three of the criteria variables: environmental mastery, positive affect, and negative affect. In order to confirm that social support behaved as a mediator for these three outcome variables, we ran mediation analyses.

Results were consistent with full mediation for environmental mastery, as the total effect ( $c$  path) of subtle discrimination on environmental mastery was significant but the direct effect ( $c'$  path) became non-significant when the effect of social support was taken into account. Although the total and direct effect of subtle discrimination on positive affect was not significant, there seemed to be some (negative) indirect effect through social support. The results for negative affect were consistent with partial mediation, as the effect of subtle discrimination on negative affect decreased, although it remained significant, when the mediation of social support was accounted for.

## Discussion

In spite of Spain's recent progress (i.e., approval of same sex marriage), due to domination of heterosexism, lesbians and gay men still suffer rejection and discrimination (FELGTB/COGAM,

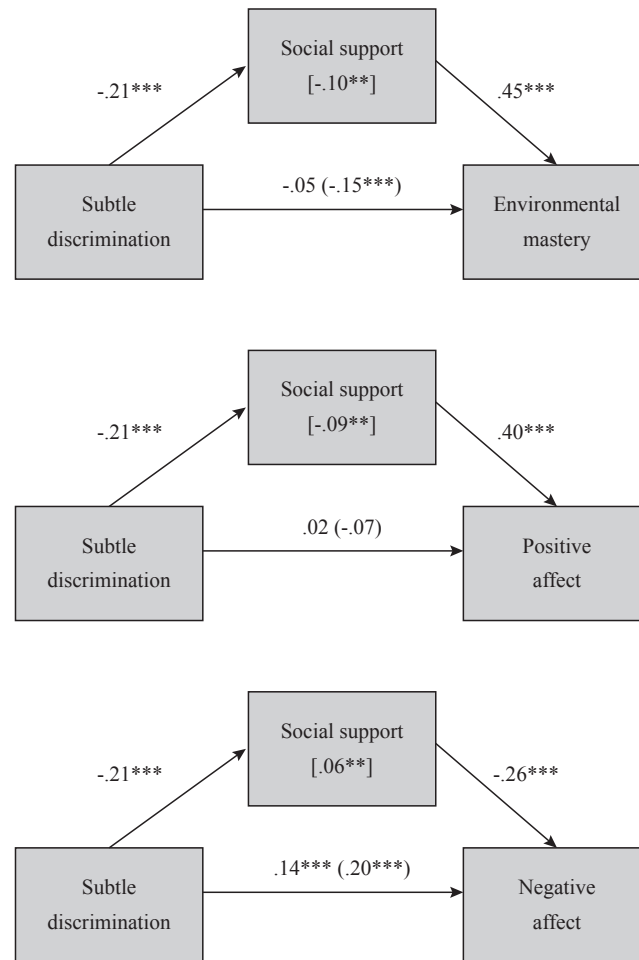


Figure 1. Mediation models for environmental mastery, positive affect, and negative affect (based on Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Standardized regression coefficients. Total effect (c path) in parentheses. Indirect effect (ab path) in brackets.  $** p < .01$ ;  $*** p < .001$

2012). In this research, we analysed two different types of perceived discrimination towards LGs in Spain in relation to well-being. At the same time, we explored the mediator role that social support may play. The results show that, in accordance with the modern prejudice theories (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Meertens & Pettigrew, 1992), subtle discrimination is greater than blatant discrimination. A specific contribution of this study is the finding that compared to blatant discrimination subtle discrimination is more negatively linked to the well-being variables. Thus, higher perceived subtle discrimination is related to lower self-acceptance, environmental mastery and social support, and to higher negative affect. The meta-analysis performed by Jones, Peddie, Gilrane and Gray (2015) made it clear that subtle discrimination might be as harmful as blatant discrimination. In our case, in the four aforementioned variables, subtle discrimination is more harmful than blatant discrimination. A possible explanation could be that subtle discrimination, which is often concealed in “nonheterosexist” arguments, is more difficult to detect and creates a feeling of helplessness in LGs because, for example, they do not know whether they were rejected for a job for “objective” reasons or because of their group membership. As indicated by Dovidio, Gaertner and Bachman (2001), this produces a feeling of mistrust and loss of control among the members of the minority

group, which can affect their psychological well-being. Most of the research carried out in this sphere has focused on verifying the existence of subtle or aversive prejudice (although it is hard to detect) in the majority population, and the scarcity of studies aimed at verifying the influence of this type of prejudice on the members of the stigmatized collectives is striking.

On another hand, the results of the regression analyses show the important role that social support plays in the reduction of the negative effects of perceived discrimination. When social support is included in the third step of the equation, the discrimination effect on environmental mastery and both positive and negative affect are significantly reduced. Furthermore, mediation analyses show that our results are consistent with full mediation, with environmental mastery as criterion variable, and they are also consistent with partial mediation for negative affect. For positive affect, however, although there might be some degree of mediation, the total effect is not significant. This suggests that subtle discrimination has a negative impact on social support, and this in turn increases negative affect and reduces environmental mastery. It also suggests that improving social support could help prevent the negative effect of discrimination in these areas.

Regression equations also show that age is positively related to self-acceptance and environmental mastery and inversely to

negative affect. In other words, it seems that LGs become resilient to discrimination as they get older.

Our results are consistent with those of Beals et al. (2009) and Domínguez-Fuentes et al. (2012) when pointing out the positive effects of social support in gay men and lesbians. They indicate that social network support and a good quality of interpersonal relationships play a protective role to reduce the effects of stress produced by discrimination. These results support the theory that the indirect effect of social support is important when protecting and softening the effects of minority stress. We can also see that age plays a positive role in well-being. These results are in line with the work carried out by Vanden Berghe, Dewaele, Cox and Vincke (2010), pointing out that adolescence and youth are especially problematic for young LGs, which is why, as people get older, at least those who participated in the investigation, they are capable of managing the effects of belonging to a discriminated minority, and their psychological well-being improves.

Some limitations were also found that should be overcome in future studies. First, the sample should be expanded to improve the generalizability of the results. We must not forget that the

information was obtained through LGTB association websites, and this could bias the results, leaving out of the study the people who are the most vulnerable to discrimination either because they have no Internet access or because they are not involved in the associative sector. On another hand, although the regression equations show a protective role of social support in discrimination effects, the explained variance (between 15% and 26%) indicates the existence of other variables influencing LGs' well-being, in addition to those analysed in this study. In future investigations, we recommend considering variables such as concealment, identity, or other individual variables (i.e., self-esteem) or coping strategies that may also be related to LGs' well-being.

In sum, this research provides at least two contributions worth mentioning. First, it provides a better understanding of perceived discrimination of LGs in Spain. We have found that subtle perceived discrimination is higher and more harmful than blatant perceived discrimination for the well-being of LGs. Second, we have analysed the role that social support plays in the reduction of the negative effects of discrimination, suggesting some guidelines that can contribute to reduce stigma effects.

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