CHAPTER IX

Why do minorities rarely report experiences with discrimination?
Exploring qualitatively what inhibits or favours claims of discrimination

Alejandra Alarcon-Henriquez and Assaad Azzi

Introduction

Ethnic discrimination against immigrants and their descendants is a major problem in the labour market. The consequences of such discrimination include higher unemployment rates, precarious employment and lower wages for ethnic minorities which in turn contribute greatly to existing inequalities between “nationals” and “non nationals” (ILO, 2007). Elaboration of anti-discrimination laws by several European governments is an important step in the struggle against inequality but only a few victims actually utilize these tools. Indeed, a recent large-scale survey on discrimination in Europe published by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) revealed that a majority of ethnic minority members do not report the discrimination they experience (FRA, 2009a). According to Hirschman (1970), if dissatisfied individuals do not denounce their dissatisfaction (voice strategy), the structure they live in cannot be changed. Opportunities to express one’s discontent are also a means to prevent these individuals from leaving the structure (exit strategy). Indeed, one way of coping with perceived injustice is to withdraw from broader society (Azzi, 1998), e.g. through separation or marginalization (see Berry, 1997). In order to prevent further exclusion of immigrants and their children who were born and raised in Europe, it is important to tackle the situation and investigate the reasons for reduced reporting of discrimination by vulnerable minorities. The FRA study indicated a lack of knowledge on the part of minorities about organisations offering advice and support on this issue but this is not the only reason. The belief that claims of discrimination would not change the situation or that discrimination is insignificant are the other main reasons provided by the respondents (FRA, 2009b).

We will explore this question further in the present study. Employing qualitative methodology, our main objective is to investigate why minorities will or will not
denounce their experiences with discrimination within the framework of the measures created by the host society to voice individual dissatisfaction. In the FRA study, participant opinion regarding discrimination was sought through closed questions including an initial explanation of what discrimination means to the authorities. Contrary to the FRA study, we relied on open-ended questions in order to understand and utilize the vocabulary and discourses of minorities so as to better understand their perception of unequal treatment in Belgium, the host society in this study. How do members of ethnic minority groups define “discrimination”? Which unequal treatments are defined as just or unjust? According to members of these groups, which unequal treatments must be reported to the authorities? We will also investigate the impact of knowledge of anti-discrimination laws and organisations on the opinion of ethnic minorities. Does awareness of anti-discrimination measures facilitate the tendency to denounce discrimination and what other factors either hinder or encourage discrimination claims?

We use theoretical frameworks from social psychology to shed light on the various discourses held by the participants in our study. Focusing mainly on collective action, social psychologists have investigated the motivations of disadvantaged group members in their struggle against inequalities. Collective action appears when an individual “is acting as a representative of the group and the action is directed at improving the condition of the entire group” (Wright et al., 1990). In general, collective action is represented as a collective movement, involving more than one individual. But following Wright’s definition, filing a complaint of discrimination could be considered a form of collective action if the plaintiff seeks to improve the status of the group as a whole and not only his personal situation. One plaintiff can lead to the creation of case law for example, which in turn can establish – or reinforce – the social norm of equality amongst the population. For example, the case of Brown v. the Board of Education in the US, whereby the Supreme Court decided that racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional, is regarded as a turning point that contributed to paving the way to the civil rights movement (e.g. Kluger, 1976). Thus the use of legal action in the struggle against inequalities could be considered a collective action and a contribution to social change. In this study, we will analyze whether the obstacles to and the factors favouring collective action as mentioned in social psychology literature can also be applied to legal anti-discrimination actions. The use of institutional opportunities to fight inequalities has – to our knowledge – not been studied yet in social psychology; nor has the way in which such institutional provisions may contribute to social change, for instance by modifying social identifications and norms of disadvantaged group members. This qualitative study is a first attempt in this direction.

Methodology

We conducted interviews with 15 individuals, including seven female participants and eight male participants. Our study’s participants were recruited from an association for “social and professional integration” in a neighbourhood with high immigration rates. The association offers diverse career services including information on training opportunities, assistance in writing curriculum vitae and cover letters, advice
on defining clear professional goals, etc. All of the participants are immigrants or
descendants of immigrants and came to the association seeking help in finding a job.
The study’s participants had different foreign origins: Moroccan (N = 7), Turkish (N =
4), Guinean (N = 2), Albanian (N = 1) and Italian (N = 1). Most of them were Muslim
(N = 12). They were asked to participate in a study regarding obstacles encountered
in their job search. The interviewer did not mention the true objective of the study
(representations of discrimination) at that moment but only later on so as not to
influence the participants’ statements. Indeed, we wanted to know if the participants
would spontaneously mention religious or ethnic discrimination as an obstacle in their
job search.

The interviews were semi-structured. We explored the following themes or
questions:
1. What were the obstacles encountered during their job search?
2. What were their experiences with religious or ethnic discrimination?
3. What is their perception of group discrimination?
4. What knowledge or opinion of anti-discrimination laws and organisations do the
respondents have?
5. What is their reaction to a real discrimination case? The actual objective of
the study was also explained at this point. We provided an example of ethnic
discrimination which appeared recently in the news. A young man of Turkish
origin had applied for a job in the security sector and had received a negative
response by e-mail. An earlier e-mail exchange between the secretary and the
employer was accidentally attached to the e-mail in which the latter wrote: “Can
you get rid of this person? A foreigner for a security job, that’s unheard of”.
6. What is their opinion of legal action against incidents of discrimination and
possible outcomes. We explained that the Turkish man later consulted an anti-
discrimination organisation and filed a complaint against the employer for
discrimination. We mentioned the outcome of the procedure whereby the employer
was found guilty by the Court and forced to discontinue all discriminatory action.
7. What would they do if they were in the victim’s shoes?

Results

Representations of religious or ethnic discrimination
For most of the participants (N = 10), religious or ethnic discrimination is defined
as a lack of acceptance, rejection or dislike by the other because of their origins.

“Everybody knows there is racism. But it will always continue. They will always
find an excuse to say: we don’t want you” (participant 11).

“They don’t like us because we are Muslim. They will say they prefer a Belgian
to a foreigner” (participant 12).

Discrimination is sometimes felt as a lack of respect or poor treatment that
diminishes an individual’s sense of worth (N = 5).

“My brother-in-law is from Morocco and they do not want to give him work
because he doesn’t speak French very well. They make fun of him. At the town hall too
they play with him. They ask him to come another day. They play with words because they know he cannot speak French very well. That’s the way it is” (participant 11).

The way individuals are treated by the authorities or by other members of the group gives them information about their status in the group, i.e. – in our study – in Belgian society. If these individuals feel excluded from the distribution of resources (e.g. restricted access to employment) or if they sense a lack of respect, they can perceive themselves as marginalized and devalued by the group. Such treatment sends the message that he or she is not recognized as a member of the group (Tyler and Lind, 1992).

One way to deal with status inferiority is re-categorization at a higher level (Mummendey et al., 1999). For example, seeing themselves as human beings rather than as undesired Belgian immigrants enhances a positive self-image. According to Wenzel (2000), self-categorization is a key component in claims for justice. Individuals feel entitled to demand being treated equally to other members of a group if they perceive themselves as being part of that group. Eight participants perceived discrimination as the failure to respect egalitarian principles whereby everyone deserves equal treatment as human beings. We note that all participants referred to these egalitarian principles after we alluded to anti-discrimination laws, organisations and their possible outcomes. For these participants, only one criterion should be used to judge whether an applicant is the right person for the job: his abilities.

“It’s unjust. If we have the skills, we have origins that are not suitable for… it has nothing to do with it. We are all human beings; we have the same rights as anyone else” (participant 9).

One participant evoked the right to be treated as equal to any other Belgian, since he has Belgian nationality.

“If we have a Belgian identity card, ok they still can see we are Turkish. But if we have an identity card, they have to treat us all the same” (participant 12).

One third of the participants, on the other hand, saw discrimination as normal and trivial despite our mentioning the existence of anti-discrimination measures in Belgium. They accepted the idea that one cannot be forced to hire or to like someone. These were all male participants.

“I had that once with [company X]. I wanted to work with them but he said no immediately. I don’t know why. The employer saw my face and he said he didn’t have time. I knew it was racism (...) I didn’t care. It’s normal. I’ve had that before, often” (participant 11).

“I have the impression that foreigners are discriminated against (…). We cannot say anything. If they don’t want them, they don’t want them. What can we say? Thanks, bye and we move on” (participant 12).

According to three participants, people that discriminate against ethnic minorities are not to blame. For them, discrimination is a result of ignorance or incomprehension of cultural differences.

“I don’t blame anybody, not even the person who discriminates. Maybe he is victim of an ideology? He was indoctrinated to think that people with other origins
are not good. Maybe he didn’t learn otherwise and that’s it. He doesn’t accept others” (participant 7).

As for the example of discrimination provided to the participants, one participant blamed the victim, not the employer, for having been discriminated against. However, this participant changed her opinion once we mentioned the existence of anti-discrimination laws and organisations in Belgium:

“It depends on how people talk too. There are people who ask things in a polite manner and people who are proud and don’t want to be told what to do and get angry. Maybe the young Turk had a problem?

Do you know there are laws in Belgium that condemn discrimination?
No.

And that there are organisations in charge of combating discrimination?
No. It’s wrong to say that then?

Well, discrimination in employment is prohibited by law. The young Turkish man filed a complaint against the employer and went to Court. The company was found guilty. What do you think about this legal option?

It’s not normal to refuse someone on the basis of his nationality. Only his work matters. If he does his work correctly, they cannot attack people like that. It’s not kind anyway. It hurts nevertheless. It’s wrong to say that. It’s racism” (participant 15).

When individuals are uncertain of their judgements, they turn towards others – preferably experts – to seek information and social norms to guide their impressions (Sherif, 1980). We do not know if the attitude change seen above reflected a true internalization of the given injunctive norms (see Cialdini et al., 1990) – the prohibition of discrimination in employment – or merely a sort of public conformity whereby the participant was not actually convinced (Kelman, 1958).

**Personal and group discrimination perceptions**

**Spontaneous evocation of discrimination experiences**

Only four participants mentioned religious or ethnic discrimination as a possible obstacle in their job search before the interviewer introduced these issues. Two participants spontaneously mentioned their origins as an obstacle to finding employment with certitude. For example:

“One obstacle there is my [education] level… sometimes they don’t accept blacks. For examples in a restaurant, certain clients don’t like to be served by blacks” (participant 2).

The two others mentioned their origin as a possible reason for not being called back by the employer:

“I receive negative responses to my letters and they don’t explain why. I don’t know. Maybe [because of] my appearance? (While touching his beard) I don’t have a Belgian face” (participant 10)
Personal experiences with discrimination and perceived group discrimination

When asked directly if they have experienced religious or ethnic discrimination in employment or other sectors, only five participants – i.e. a third of all participants – answered negatively. We note that most of them were female with little experience seeking employment (participants 1, 4 and 9) and/or who sought employment in their own neighbourhood with employers of the same origin (participants 1, 8 and 9). The four female participants had also never heard of discrimination against other members of their ingroup. Two women mentioned the few interactions they experienced with non immigrants. The only male participant who had not experienced discrimination was the participant with Italian origins. He was nevertheless aware that his fellow ingroup members were severely discriminated against in the past and that currently other minorities are targets of discrimination in Belgium.

According to relative deprivation theory, disadvantaged group members do not always perceive the injustice they face as they are unable to compare themselves to members of advantaged groups. They compare themselves to what is accessible to them, namely fellow ingroup members living in the same conditions (Taylor and Moghaddam, 1994, quoted by Taylor and Smith, 1998).

Eight of the ten participants reminiscing about a personal experience with discrimination evoked it with uncertainty and precaution:

“Once I thought about that [discrimination]. We had a job interview and several people had applied. There was a Belgian colleague from my training course. We had a technical questionnaire. They told me I had good results. Then during the interview, they told me that it was good but that my Dutch skills could be a problem. My Belgian colleague succeeded. He didn’t speak Dutch either but he was hired. I don’t accuse them. I don’t say that I was discriminated against, but I thought it was strange: we had the same level, the same training” (participant 5).

These findings confirm the results of Ruggiero and Taylor (1995) which show that disadvantaged group members tend not to attribute their negative outcomes to discrimination. Indeed, even when participants in their study were told there was a good chance (e.g. 75%) that they had been discriminated against by an evaluator, they attributed the failure to their own performance. Only the participants who were told they had definitely been discriminated against (100%) attributed the negative outcome to discrimination. However, if we consider the studies of Crocker et al. (1998), individuals who are aware of their stigma never really discard the possibility of having been discriminated against. On the contrary, compared to individuals without a devalued social identity, members of disadvantaged groups have the tendency to interpret the others’ reactions towards them with ambiguity because they know their social identity can have an effect. As a result, stigmatized individuals may experience difficulties assessing their own abilities which in turn could have consequences on important life choices such as determining their professional career. If, for instance, negative outcomes are attributed to their own skills rather than to discrimination, this can induce negative self-esteem. Other consequences are the anxiety and rumination caused by the analysis of the ambiguous situation and loss of trust in interpersonal relations (see Crocker et al., 1998).

Claims of discrimination were perceived as a sign of weakness for two participants.
“Weak people are the ones who feel discriminated against. They start to think about it, get a headache, don’t feel well. Someone who is 18 years old who is discriminated against will think: oh I’m not lucky. Someone who is older doesn’t get emotional about it” (participant 7).

Previous studies in social psychology show that claims of discrimination have social costs. Independent of the certainty of discrimination, disadvantaged group members who claim discrimination are less valued by advantaged group members (Kaiser and Miller, 2001) and fellow disadvantaged group members (Garcia et al., 2005) than individuals attributing negative outcomes to any other external cause. Indeed, while individuals try to maintain a positive image of their social identity, an admission that ingroup members have been discriminated against implies a devaluation of the ingroup and the possibility that they could experience the same in the future. By rejecting ingroup members whose actions or claims reflect a negative image of the ingroup, individuals preserve a positive social identity.

The social costs of claims of discrimination in advantaged and disadvantaged groups can also be explained by other factors. According to Katz and Hass (1988), certain ideologies influence people’s attitudes towards disadvantaged group members. Protestant work ethic (PWE) values for example suggest the belief that anyone who is willing and able to work hard has a good chance to succeed in life. This in turn strengthens the tendency to blame disadvantaged groups for their unfavourable social position. When disadvantaged group members endorse these values too, it can lead to decreased perceptions of discrimination and increased endorsement of status justifying beliefs (e.g. McCoy and Major, 2007). PWE was evident in the discourses of several participants, including the following quotation:

“No, I don’t think so [that there is discrimination]. If you want a job you can find one. Sometimes you hear from people that they have been discriminated against, but it is rare” (participant 4).

System justification theory (see Jost, 2004 for a review) maintains that individuals tend to legitimize the social system they live in, even if the system is not beneficial for them at an individual or collective level. In societies where individualism and meritocracy are valued, existing social inequalities are deemed justified. From that perspective, advantaged and disadvantaged group members assume responsibility for their economic status and justify social dominance and its reproduction.

Reactions to experiences of discrimination

Various feelings were expressed by the participants when reporting their experiences with discrimination. Sometimes more than one feeling was expressed by the same participant. Eight participants felt powerless when personally confronted with discrimination and were also unwilling to undertake any kind of action regarding the situation. For example, all of the male participants who had personally experienced discrimination employed such expressions as “it’s not worth it”, “it will not change anything”, “we cannot say anything” or “it’s a losing battle”. Only one of the three female participants personally confronted with discrimination made similar statements. The other two felt mainly surprise or hurt (see below).
If attributing negative outcomes to discrimination rather than to our own skills can protect our individual self-esteem, it can undermine self-esteem at the social level, as mentioned above. Moreover, attributing outcomes to external causes such as discrimination diminishes our sense of control over our actions (Ruggiero and Taylor, 1995). Studies in clinical psychology point to the importance of a positive view of ourselves and a sense of control over our life in order to maintain mental health (e.g. Taylor and Brown, 1988). Experiences with discrimination shatter such assumptions of control. The negative effects of such experiences can be minimised through downward comparisons with people in worse situations in order to preserve positive views of ourselves (Taylor and Smith, 1998).

Six male participants did not wish to recollect or talk about the discrimination they had personally experienced for several reasons. One felt it weakened his motivation to search for a job:

“Personally, I leave it there. I look somewhere else. I will not start to focus on that problem and that’s it. Moreover there is a risk that it is confirmed that it is because of that [discrimination]. If employers start to think like that, why search and try to sell myself? Because it’s a losing battle. Sincerely, I don’t think it is worth thinking about it. Otherwise it will impede me in my continued job search” (participant 5).

Another believed that discrimination can be overcome by persevering and doubling his efforts in order to compensate for the stigma, i.e. for the devaluation of his social identity:

“Before, I used to act nervously, but now it leaves me cold. I learned one thing: if I want to have something, I have to put that aside, work harder and not give up” (participant 6).

When combined with feelings of anger or annoyance, some of the participants mentioned that they are afraid of what they might do to the perpetrators:

“A lot of things are felt, but we have nothing to say. What are we going to say? Otherwise we want to hit this kind of people. You want to slap him, that’s all” (participant 12).

Finally, some think that they do not have the right to complain:

“Because when we are not integrated, when we aren’t in our country, we don’t have the right to... You don’t know what to think” (participant 13).

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) assumes that three main factors influence an individual’s perceptions and reactions to their (disadvantaged) position in the societal structure: perceived stability, permeability and legitimacy. If individuals perceive the current situation as stable (that it cannot be changed), they would not engage in actions to challenge the status quo. In our study, seven of the ten participants that experienced discrimination expressed the feeling that the situation could not be changed (see above). The belief that one could move upwards from one (low-status) group to another (high-status) or that the social boundaries between the groups are “permeable”, facilitates engagement in status enhancement at an individual level, but not at a group level. Indeed, improving the status of his group as a whole might not
be necessary if for instance an individual believes he or she can succeed socially and professionally solely through personal efforts (see e.g. participant 6 above). Finally, if differential treatments are perceived as legitimate – e.g. because the individual was not integrated as participant 13 mentioned above – consequent group inequalities will not be challenged.

Two participants who felt powerless also spoke of a loss of self-confidence in their job search:

“I totally lost my self-confidence. I was completely disoriented. With all the refusals and rejections I had, I thought I wasn’t capable of anything, thus that I wasn’t worth anything. It discouraged me” (participant 2).

When personally confronted with unequal treatment because of foreign origins, people do not always have feelings of injustice. While six interviewees clearly felt the wrongness of religious or ethnic discrimination, one participant was in doubt whether to qualify discrimination as just or unjust:

“Is it just, unjust? I don’t know anymore. If there is an injustice, I’m the only one to blame. I’m not going to blame the society or work. I can only blame myself. I didn’t prove myself and that’s it. I can understand them” (participant 7).

As mentioned in this quotation, discrimination can increase the victim’s comprehension of the perpetrator. Four other participants claimed to understand the perpetrator’s perspective:

“I heard people saying they prefer a Belgian but they explain it and I understand” (participant 10).

Three participants were shocked or surprised when confronted with discrimination for the first time. One states that he grew accustomed to it:

“The first time I was insulted, it shocked me, but afterwards not anymore. The second time, third time, fourth, I thought it was normal. We have nothing to say” (participant 11).

According to cognitive dissonance theory, when individuals perceive dissonance between what they think and what they experience, they can adapt their beliefs in order to match reality. Consequently, individuals can justify experiences of deprivation and suffering in order to reduce dissonance (Jost et al., 2004), as illustrated in the following quotation:

“I was a little bit shocked. Afterwards, I asked myself why he talked to me like that. Then I thought that maybe he was right. Maybe someone who wasn’t trustworthy had worked with him previously, a foreigner who didn’t do his job well” (participant 15).

Two participants felt hurt when personally confronted with discrimination. For example:

“When I was pregnant I heard my Italian sister-in-law say: what will your baby look like? I hope he will not look like an Arab. I was shocked. It surprised me and it hurt me. For her it was normal to talk like that. I didn’t think it was possible for people to think like that” (participant 14).
Two other participants of Turkish origin were likewise saddened when thinking of incidents of discrimination towards fellow ingroup members such as the young Turkish man provided in our example:

“It hurts. They don’t have a brain” (participant 4).

Social identities are definitions of the self in terms of membership in one or more social groups. Under certain circumstances, individuals see themselves primarily as members of a group and act in line with this social identity. As a result of this sense of belonging, events relevant to the ingroup will evoke specific emotions in individuals (Mackie et al., 2004).

A sense of common fate is also shared by members of other ethnic minorities when hearing the example of discrimination against the Turkish man:

“All Arabs aren’t thieves. They are Belgians too. I don’t like that. I’m against that. They blame the others. In the past they blamed the Spanish and the Italians here. My grandmother told me. There is always a scapegoat in Belgium” (participant 3).

According to Vollhardt (2009), past group victimizations and shared experiences trigger empathy and solidarity with other victimized groups.

Five participants discussed their experiences of discrimination within their social circle. Consistent with the social comparison theory of Festinger (1954), individuals tend to talk about their experiences with their social circle in order to get comparative information that could help them understand their experiences, but also to be reassured emotionally. In some cases, this social circle does not favour action against discrimination:

“I was told: it’s true. It’s a pity but try to persevere, to find a job and don’t think too much about it” (participant 5).

“In your social circle, some will encourage you and others will think you’re crazy because you are living in their country so you aren’t at home. Some will say that you have the right to be protected and others will say that you are wrong” (participant 2).

Knowledge of the existence of anti-discrimination laws and organisations

One participant did not answer these questions. Of the fourteen remaining participants, seven were unaware of anti-discrimination laws and organisations combating discrimination. One participant knew about anti-discrimination laws but not about anti-discrimination organisations.

Nine participants would have engaged in legal actions similar to those of the victim provided in the example if they had been in his position, mostly because the victim was able to prove that the refusal was a result of discrimination. They also estimated that anti-discrimination laws may limit discriminatory practices.

“Because when there are no laws, generally people believe that they aren’t committing an offence and thus can do just about anything they want. If there is a law and it says: don’t cross that line, maybe it will make them think” (participant 5).

---

1 In Belgium, Turks are often categorized as Arabs even if they are not Arabic-speaking.
Anti-discrimination laws are also seen as an opportunity to denounce such practices and to let everyone know that discrimination exists.

“Nobody has the right to discriminate against people. Discriminated communities should be defended. People should be made to speak out and not leave it like that. Discrimination should be denounced and prevented from happening again in the future” (participant 9).

Anti-discrimination organisations are perceived as offering support to victims of discrimination, providing them with protection and advice, and also as institutions that can facilitate the integration of foreigners.

“It’s a good initiative. It helps people who really feel rejected to move forward and integrate themselves into society. It’s very important. This way victims feel supported, reassured. We have someone who defends and protects us. It is comforting” (participant 2).

Five participants stated that they would not engage in actions similar to those taken by the victim cited in the example. Among the reasons mentioned is the fear of negative consequences when dealing with the justice system (participant 2). Others did not think these actions would prevent discrimination in everyday life. If an employer does not want to hire a foreigner, he can conceal the real reason of his refusal by inventing another reason (participants 3, 7, 11). Furthermore, some felt that this option required too many resources (money, effort) and would waste their time (participants 7, 11, 13). One of the participants believed that, as compared to a public demonstration, going to Court is not visible enough to denounce discriminatory practices to the public (participant 3). And finally, another participant expressed his lack of trust in institutions (participant 11):

“It went to the police headquarters. The policeman in front of me said: dirty Arab. It was a policeman, he works for the law. He has to take the deposition. It’s life, one has to [assume a submissive stance] and move on”.

According to Mummendey et al. (1999), the extent to which individuals expect collective action to be effective, i.e. successful in terms of changing intergroup relations, is the most proximal predictor of whether or not they will undertake collective efforts to improve the status and resources of the ingroup. FRA reports (2009b) state that more than half of North African interviewees in Belgium perceive ethnic discrimination when stopped by the police. If these results are representative for Belgium, the risk that individuals with stigmatized immigration background will lose confidence in the legal authorities looms large.

Discussion and further directions

Through the discourses mentioned in this study, we distinguished a variety of ways to deal with the injustice of religious or ethnic discrimination. Whereas unequal treatment in the labour market based on origin or religion is considered unjust within the framework of the host society, not all the participants of our study perceive it as wrong. Knowledge of social norms seems to influence opinion but not always. Indeed, even if some of our participants knew about the prohibition of discrimination,
they experienced it so often that they considered it to be trivial and normal. Cialdini et al. (1990) make a distinction between “injunctive” and “descriptive” norms. Injunctive norms refer to behaviours (dis)approved by society and descriptive norms refer to behaviours that actually take place in reality. For a third of our participants, discrimination is so pervasive that it becomes a descriptive norm which definitely functions as an obstacle in the struggle against discrimination. It would be interesting to investigate the conditions under which “injunctive” norms have a higher impact than “descriptive” norms.

Nevertheless, the overall majority of respondents perceived the negative dimension of religious or ethnic discrimination, seen as the non-acceptance of minority group members in Belgium. Not all of the respondents were conscious of the stigmatisation of their group of origin, especially women with almost no interaction with outgroup members. If most of the participants are aware of discrimination towards their ingroup, only two participants were sure of having experienced discrimination personally, replicating prior research on this issue. As mentioned in previous studies, we confirm the idea that a facilitating factor in the perception of discrimination is the notion of egalitarianism, according to which every human being has the right to be treated in an equal manner. Reference to the existence of anti-discrimination laws, organisations and possible favourable outcomes tends to reinforce identification with the superordinate category, Belgium or humankind, for some of our participants.

However, it is a huge step between the perception of discrimination and actually claiming discrimination. Certain participants are aware of the negative image they project when denouncing discrimination. One third of our participants do not see the benefits of claiming discrimination. For some of them, the possibility of improving their social position on an individual level – the belief in the existence of a meritocracy – discourages them from engaging in costly actions aimed at enhancing the status of the disadvantaged as a group. For others, on the contrary, nothing can change the current situation. On the other hand, most participants do believe that denouncing such injustice is important, if only to spread awareness amongst the population to prevent future discriminatory practices. Anti-discrimination organisations are seen as attempting to integrate immigrants and their descendents into the host society which is perceived as a benevolent and reassuring action. Awareness of their existence could be a way to favour integration or assimilation into the host society. But institutionalized opportunities to voice dissatisfaction regarding a lack of equal treatment are not always perceived as having been created for immigrants. Some participants did not feel entitled to claim discrimination via the institutions of the host society because they don’t have the impression that the same society considers them as being part of the group. Indeed, their experiences with discrimination leave them with an impression of being disliked and rejected by Belgian society which considers them as outsiders. In this context, why would they have the right to claim equality?

We did not ask our participants if they would engage in anti-discriminatory action to improve the status of their group as a whole or their personal situation, but several spontaneously mentioned that they would do it for collective reasons above all. If this is the case, stressing the collective interests of engaging in legal anti-discrimination actions rather than the individual benefits, e.g. creating case law and preventing
others of being discriminated against in the future, would be a bigger incentive to engage in such actions. Following the present qualitative research, we conducted an experimental quantitative study to test this assumption and the results illustrated that institutional support for collective interests favours legal anti-discrimination actions when participants strongly endorse egalitarianism. Institutional support has less impact when participants endorse more meritocratic ideologies (Alarcon-Henriquez and Azzi, 2010).

In the end, according to our exploratory study, who would engage in legal anti-discrimination actions? First, a third of our participants did not perceive discrimination towards their ethnic or religious ingroup. This was the case mostly because they did not have much contact with advantaged group members. Second, of the two thirds that perceived discrimination, half of them consider it so pervasive that claiming it would not change anything to the current situation. Of the five remaining participants, two did not feel entitled, as immigrants, to claim their rights to be treated as equals. Three participants who perceived group-based discrimination to a lesser extent and were aware of existing opportunities to voice their dissatisfaction provided by the host society might engage in legal anti-discrimination actions. None of them were sure of having been discriminated against. They only had suspicions.

The difficulty of proving that one has been discriminated against has been solved in the Belgian legislation by reversing the burden of proof: the defending party has to prove the non existence of a discriminatory treatment. For the plaintiff, an assumption of discrimination is sufficient. But the participants did not have enough knowledge of these legal measures. Aside from all the other factors, these following factors stand out in our opinion as the main obstacles for immigrants and their descendents to challenge inequalities through legal action: lack of intergroup contact, pervasiveness of discrimination, lack of categorization at a super-ordinate level (host society or humankind) and lack of awareness of anti-discrimination measures. Existing institutionalized opportunities to act against inequality fail to achieve their goal of reaching the most vulnerable groups in Belgium as mentioned in the FRA reports. According to the results of this qualitative study, better informing the public about the existence of anti-discrimination legal options, as recommended in the same reports, does not come close to solving the problem for those who are discriminated against the most often.