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Ethnic harassment, ethnic identity centrality, and well-being

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Abstract

In this study, we examined the direct effect of (positive vs. negative) evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background on impaired well-being as well as the moderating effect of ethnic identity centrality on the relationship between (lower vs. higher) frequency of potentially harassing experiences and impaired well-being. Using a gender-balanced sample with equal proportions of black and minority ethnic and white Undergraduate students (N = 240), we found that, expectedly, ethnic identity centrality intensified the effects of higher frequency of potentially harassing experiences on lower self-esteem and lower positive affect. Unexpectedly, however, gender identity centrality buffered the effects of higher frequency as well as more negative evaluation of potentially harassing experiences on lower self-esteem, indicating that gender identity centrality may be a protective resource, even though it is not specific to ethnic harassment. Exploratory analyses revealed that for black and minority ethnic respondents with high ethnic identity centrality and for white respondents with low ethnic identity centrality, there were associations between more negative evaluation of potentially harassing experiences and lower self-esteem and lower positive affect. This finding might indicate that ethnic identity centrality was a risk factor in black and ethnic minority respondents, but a protective factor in white respondents.

Key words: ethnic harassment; identity centrality; well-being; discrimination

Ethnic harassment, ethnic identity centrality, and well-being

Meta-analytic evidence suggests that the experience of being harassed (i.e., perceived harassment) is associated with lower well-being across a range of measures, including lower self-esteem and lower positive affect (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). Further meta-analytical findings support the assumption that identity centrality, which describes the extent to which a group membership is important to one's sense of self (e.g., Perry, Hardeman, Burke, Cunningham, Burgess, & van Ryn, 2016), may potentially moderate the relationship between perceived harassment and negative consequences of these experiences in various ways (e.g., Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). High identity centrality may either buffer effects of harassment experiences, because group identification can have a protective function (i.e., "providing social and psychological resources": Schmitt et al., 2014, p. 925), or intensify these effects, because group identification may make experiences related to this group more identity-relevant (e.g., McCoy & Major, 2003). Meta-analytic evidence is somewhat mixed in that there is support for both the buffer hypothesis as well as the assumption that effects may be intensified (e.g., Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009).

Studies examining the potential moderating role of ethnic identity centrality on the effects of ethnic harassment (e.g., Burrow & Ong, 2010; Perry et al., 2016) have typically assessed the frequency of potentially harassing experiences using samples of black and minority ethnic respondents. According to Berdahl and Moore (2006), the differentitation between frequency and evaluation of potentially harassing experiences needs to be carefully considered though. Most importantly, ignoring the evaluative component makes it impossible to explicitly account for the sense-making stage of emotion elicitation (Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzano, 1999), which is influenced by both situation variables (e.g.,

experiences of potentially harassing incidents) and person variables (e.g., evaluation of such experiences).

The aim of the present study was, therefore, twofold. We examined the direct effect of the evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background on impaired well-being. Furthermore, we considered ethnic identity centrality as potential moderator of the relationship between frequency of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background and impaired well-being. We additionally accounted for gender identity centrality to examine whether a match between stressor and moderator (i.e., ethnic harassment and ethnic identity centrality) would result in a stronger moderating effect than when the moderator is not specific to the stressor under consideration (i.e., ethnic harassment and gender identity centrality). We used general self-esteem as well as positive affect in recent weeks as indicators of well-being, thereby accounting for both a facet of well-being that is seen as relatively stable over time and an aspect of well-being that is more likely to change over time.

Furthermore, we decided to collect our data at a highly demographically diverse University, which allowed us to explore potential differences between black and ethnic minority repondents and white respondents as well as between female and male respondents. We assumed that in a highly demographically diverse organisation, white respondents would be equally likely as black and minority ethnic respondents to have been exposed to potentially harassing experiences, but the evaluation and effects of such experiences might well differ between advantaged and disadvantaged groups (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2014). Potential gender differences were explored because gender identity centrality might be a more or less important resource for women or men.

Ethnic harassment

According to a broad definition, ethnic harassement describes "threatening verbal conduct or exclusionary behavior", directed at a target because of her or his ethnic background (Schneider, Hitlan, & Radhakrishnan, 2000, p. 3). There is vast empirical evidence that being at the receiving end of such behaviours (i.e., perceived harassment) is associated with impaired well-being. Meta-analytic evidence (Schmitt et al., 2014) suggests that relevant indicators of impaired well-being include, but are not limited to, lower self-esteem, lower positive affect, and mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety, psychological symptoms). Schmitt et al. (2014) reported a correlation between perceived ethnic harassment and well-being of r = -.21, and that associations for negative outcomes were somewhat stronger than for positive outcomes.

When focussing on perceived harassment, as different from, for example, assessing incidents of ethnic harassment through behavioural observation, the distinction between frequency of potentially harassing experiences and evaluation of such experiences has been deemed as important (e.g., Sellers & Shelton, 2003). More specifically, people may have been exposed to potentially harassing experiences rarely or on a frequent basis, and they may evaluate these experience as less or more bothersome (e.g., Harrell, 2000). Conceptually, the differentiation between frequency and evaluation of potentially harassing experiences lends itself to the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and to appraisal theories of emotion elicitation more broadly (e.g., Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzano, 1999). The assumption here is that affective responses are determined by both situational characteristics and person characteristics, and it is through a transaction between situation and person that affective responses get their general direction as well as specific emotional tone.

It has been suggested that potentially harassing experiences may not only be evaluated as less or more bothersome, but, in principle, they might even be evaluated as rather positive

or negative (e.g., Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995). However, to fully qualify as harassment such experiences need to be evaluated negatively (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Magley, 1997). The notion that potentially harassing experiences can be evaluated positively may not appear plausible immediately, but can perhaps be explained using the illustrating example of someone who has been targeted by potential harassment, but this experience was fun or flattering for them (e.g., through being the centre of attention). In a pre-study using interviews with Undergraduate students, we found evidence that potentially harassing incidents (e.g., ethnic slurs) can indeed be experienced as positive. A white, male, 22 year old interviewee, for example, stated that "when there were jokes on 'go back to your country' [on campus], they were done in jest with those it was directed at (…). And it was commonly brought up by people from all racial backgrounds."

In the present study, we, therefore, assessed frequency of potentially harassing experiences and evaluation of these experiences separately. Berdahl and Moore (2006, p. 433) emphasised the importance of this differentiation, and advised researchers to carefully consider whether these two components should be treated as separate variables (e.g., frequency vs. evaluation) or whether they should be integrated into one measure (e.g., by multiplying frequency and evaluation). Many previous studies have looked at harassment frequency, tacitly assuming that these experiences are evaluated negatively, or they confounded harassment frequency with harassment evaluation (Schmitt et al., 2014, p. 926). Such measures, however, do not allow for situation variables (i.e., being exposed to an experience) and person variables (i.e., evaluation of this experience) to be considered separately. Perhaps most importantly, combining harassment frequency and harassment evaluation makes it impossible to explicitly account for the sense-making stage of emotion elicitation (Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzoano, 1999), where contextual information is

considered to derive meaning from what might, otherwise, remain an experience that is only potentially harassing.

We assume that the bare experience of a potentially harassing incident is not directly associated with impaired well-being, but that the negative evaluation of such an experience is important for perceived ethnic harassment to display its negative effects. We hypothesise that *the evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background, but not the frequency of such experiences, is associated with lower well-being (i.e., lower self-esteem and lower positive affect)* (H1).

A further relevant person variable, which may affect the impact of perceived ethnic harassment on well-being, is ethnic identity centrality.

Ethnic identity centrality and ethnic harassment

Ethnic identity centrality is an indicator of group identification (Sellers & Shelton, 2003), and describes the extent to which belonging to one's ethnic group is seen as important to one's sense of self (e.g., Perry et al., 2016). Ethnic identity centrality forms part of the broader concept of social identity (e.g., Turner & Oaks, 1986), and has been referred to as the "significance component" of ethnic identity (Sellers & Shelton, 2003, p. 1080).

In stress research, it has been suggested that the importance of a life domain (e.g., work, home, leisure) to one's self may potentially moderate the effects of stressors originating from this domain in various ways. According to Thoits (1991, p. 101), for example, stressors from an important life domain should be seen as more identity-relevant than stressors from an unimportant domain, and therefore lead to intensified negative emotional responses. Other researchers, however, have suggested that negative emotional responses may be buffered because people might be more vigilant about identity-relevant

domains and potential threats occurring in those domains, resulting in better preparedness to cope with stressors (e.g., Martire, Stephens, & Townsend, 2000, p. 154).

With regards to ethnic identity centrality and perceived ethnic harassment, similar arguments have been brought forward. Sellers and Shelton (2003), for example, argued that ethnic identity centrality may buffer negative effects. When confronted with perceived ethnic harassment, people with high ethnic identity centrality may not experience impaired well-being because they can still focus on "positive aspects of their group" (Sellers & Shelton, 2003, p. 1081), which may provide "social and psychological resources that reduce the costs" of perceived ethnic harassment (Schmitt et al., 2014, p. 925). On the other hand, it has been suggested that ethnic identity centrality may aggravate negative effects of ethnic harassment experiences as these experiences are seen as identity-relevant (McCoy & Major, 2003, p. 1007), and therefore potentially more harmful (Schmitt et al., 2014).

Meta-analyses examining the potential moderating effect of identity centrality on the effects of harassment experiences provided some support for both the buffer hypothesis and the assumption that identity centrality may intensify effects. In their meta-analysis, Schmitt et al. (2014) examined the potential moderating effect of identity centrality more broadly (i.e., including, among others, ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation, mental illnesses, and physical disability) on the association between corresponding types of harassment and impaired well-being. Exluding studies confounding frequency of potentially harassing experiences with harassment evaluation (i.e., focussing on harassment frequency instead), they reported to have found 28 individual tests of the potential moderating role of identity centrality, three (11 %) of which supported the buffering hypothesis, two (7 %) provided evidence for an intensifying effect, and the remaining 23 effects (82 %) did not yield statistical signifiance.

Another meta-analysis (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009) examined the effects of frequency of perceived harassment across multiple forms (e.g., ethnic harassment, gender harassment, harassment due to sexual orientation), including studies in which unfair treatment was assessed, but without specifying the relevant group context of these experiences (e.g., due to ethnic background, gender, or sexual orientation). Pascoe and Smart Richman (2009) found 68 individual tests of the potential moderator effect of identity centrality. Twelve of these analyses (18 %) supported the buffering hypothesis, eight (12 %) revealed an intensifying effect, and the remaining 48 tests (71 %) did not provide significant results.

Focussing specifically on studies about the moderating effect of ethnic identity centrality on the consequences of perceived ethnic harassment provides a slightly different picture. In an experimental study with 24 Latino-American psychology students (McCoy & Major, 2003), ethnic identity centrality was found to be associated with lower well-being when participants had read about prejudice against their ingroup, but not when participants had read about prejudice against an outgroup. According to McCoy and Major (2003, p. 1005), this finding indicates that for people with high ethnic identity centrality, ethnic harassment may be a “threat against the self”.

Using a sample of $N = 174$ African-American doctoral students and graduates, Burrow and Ong (2010) found that ethnic identity centrality intensified the effect of ethnic harassment frequency on impaired well-being. In a more recent study, using a sample of $N = 243$ African-American medical students, ethnic identity centrality was shown to aggravate the negative effect of frequency of any type of harassment (i.e., not exclusively ethnic harassment) on perceived acceptance in medical school, which, in turn, was associated with lower well-being (Perry et al., 2016).

Using an intersectionality framework and studying a sample of *N* = 212 African-American female students, Szymanski and Lewis (2015) examined the potential moderating effect of gendered ethnic identity centrality (i.e., the importance of being an African-American woman for one's self) on the relationship between frequency of gendered ethnic harassment and impaired well-being. Whereas gendered ethnic identity centrality did not qualify as a significant moderator, there was still an association between frequency of gendered ethnic harassment experiences and impaired well-being for respondents scoring high on identity centrality, and at the mean, but not for respondents scoring low on identity centrality. According to Szymanski and Lewis (2015, p. 11), this finding might indicate that African-American women with low gendered ethnic identity centrality are perhaps "less aware of (…) gendered ethnic stressors in their daily lives", and therefore perceive these stressors as less stressful.

Whereas the evidence reported above may suggest that ethnic identity centrality can intensify the negative effects of ethnic harassment experiences on well-being, other studies found support for a buffering effect. For example, Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeek-Cone, and Zimmerman (2003), using a sample of *N* = 555 African-American young adults, found that ethnic harassment frequency was not associated with impaired well-being when respondents reported high ethnic identity centrality, indicating that ethnic identity centrality may be a resource protecting against the negative effects of ethnic harassment experiences. Similar evidence supporting a buffering effect of ethnic identity centrality on the negative effects of ethnic harassment experiences was presented by Seaton (2009), with a sample of *N* = 322 African-American adolescents. Using a measure of ethnic harassment experiences where harassment frequency and harassment evaluation are confounded, Seaton (2009) found buffering effects of high ethnic identity centrality - as well as buffering effects of strong positive feelings about African-Americans and about being an African-American (i.e., high

private regard) and low beliefs that other groups hold positive attitudes towards African-Americans (i.e., low public regard). According to Seaton (2009, p. 142), especially the combination of high identity centrality and high private regard may protect against negative effects of harassment experiences. Low public regard, on the other hand, may increase the preparedness to cope with harassment experiences, or may lead to developing more effective coping strategies over time (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & L'Heureux Lewis, 2006, p. 208).

Other studies, however, examined the potentially moderating role of ethnic identity centrality on the effects of perceived ethnic harassment, but did not find supporting evidence. Using a sample of $N = 267$ African-American college students, emphasising the uniqueness of being African-American (i.e., nationalist ideology), but not ethnic identity centrality, moderated the effect of ethnic harassment frequency on impaired well-being (Sellers & Shelton, 2003). More specifically, the association between ethnic harassment frequency and impaired well-being was weaker when respondents reported high nationalist ideology than when respondents reported low nationalist ideology. According to Sellers and Shelton (2003, p. 1090), this finding indicates that nationalist ideology may buffer the negative effects of ethnic harassment experiences, perhaps because ideology can "help some individuals make meaning of events". In another study with $N = 314$ African-American adolescents (Sellers et al., 2006), beliefs that other groups hold positive attitudes towards African-Americans (i.e., public regard), but not ethnic identity centrality, moderated the relationship between ethnic harassment frequency and impaired well-being in that, for respondents with high public regard, there was a stronger association than for respondents with low public regard. As in Seaton's (2009) study, this finding may indicate that respondents who believe that other groups hold less positive attitudes towards African-Americans may be better prepared to cope

with ethnic harassment - or they may have more effective coping strategies at hand (Sellers et al., 2006, p. 208).

Taken together, the empirical evidence reported above seems to suggest that ethnic identity centrality may potentially intensify the effects of ethnic harassment experiences. Our first hypothesis suggested a direct effect of the evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background on well-being, and we assume that this evaluation component has perhaps driven the direct effect of harassment experiences on impaired well-being that was widely supported by earlier studies. For those people, however, for whom their ethnic background is central to their sense of self, the bare experience of potentially harassing incidents may be sufficient to negatively affect their well-being. This would mean that the frequency of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background may be associated with lower well-being for people scoring high on ethnic identity centrality - irrespective of the evaluation of these experiences.

According to the match principle in stress research (Cohen & Wills, 1985; De Jonge & Dormann, 2006), moderating effects are more likely to occur when the potential moderator is specific to the nature of the stressor under investigation. When type of harassment and identity facet match with each other, this is considered a double match (e.g., ethnic harassment and ethnic identity centrality), whereas a triple match would mean to additionally account for a specific outcome variable (e.g., ethnic self regard). With view to the present study, this would imply that ethnic identity centrality is more likely than gender identity centrality to display an intensifying effect because there is a double match between type of harassment and identity facet. We, therefore, hypothesise that *ethnic identity centrality, but not gender identity centrality, moderates the association between frequency of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background and lower well-being: When ethnic identity centrality is high, the association between frequency of potentially harassing experiences due*

to ethnic background and lower well-being (i.e., lower self-esteem and lower positive affect) is stronger than when ethnic identity centrality is low (H2).

Study overview

The present study has a number of characteristics that make it distinct from previous studies about ethnic harassment experiences, ethnic identity centrality, and well-being. Most previous studies used the frequency of potentially harassing experiences as an indicator of perceived harassment (e.g., Sellers et al., 2006), wheras we assessed frequency and evaluation of potentially harassing experiences separately. This allowed us to distinguish between situation and person variables, and to explicitly consider the sense-making stage of emotion elicitation (Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzoano, 1999). We also made it a priority to account for perceived harassment experiences that are explicitly linked to ethnic background, rather than relying on experimental manipulation to induce ethnic harassment effects (McCoy & Major, 2003), or accounting for any type of harassment that repondents may have experienced due to various individual characteristics (Perry et al., 2016). Furthermore, we accounted for ethnic identity centrality as well as gender identity centrality in order to examine whether a double match (De Jonge & Dormann, 2006) between stressor and moderator (i.e., ethnic harassment and ethnic identity centrality) results in stronger moderation effects than accounting for a moderator that is not specific to the type of harassment under consideration (i.e., gender identity centrality).

Previous studies have not included white respondents, but focussed on black and minority ethnic respondents. This is plausible as the experience of being targeted by ethnic harassment may well differ between black and minority ethnic people and white people who may, or may not, see themselves as part of the dominating mainstream culture (i.e., disadvantaged vs. advantaged groups, e.g., Schmitt et al., 2014). However, not including

white respondents in a study about ethnic harassment experiences does not allow to examine potential differences between people with different ethnic background directly. We decided to collect our data at a University with rather balanced proportions of female and male students as well as black and minority ethnic students and white students. According to census data, 56 % of the students at this University were female, and 52 % were non-white (Asian: 28 %, black: 16 %, other non-white ethnic background: 8 %: Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2013). Whereas the proportion of female students is similar to the sector average, the proportion of non-white students is clearly above the sector average of 23 % (Asian: 10 %, black: 7 %, other non-white ethnic background: 6 %: Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2015).

We found such an organisation, which may arguably be considered a "melting pot", interesting to study because white students, even though they still form a majority, are perhaps more likely to experience ethnic harassment than white students at "predominantly white universities" (Sellers & Shelton, 2003, p. 1082). Furthermore, the demographic composition of the student body made it easier for us to get a study sample that is fully gender-balanced and comprises equal proportions of respondents with black and minority ethnic background and white background. Using such a study sample allowed us to address our exploratory research question: *Are the relationships described in hypotheses one and two different for black and minority ethnic respondents and for white respondents, and for female and male respodents* (Q)*?*

Examining potential differences between black and minority ethnic respondents and white respondents appeared reasonable because the effects of evaluation of potentially harassing experiences on well-being (H1) may differ between disadvantaged and advantaged groups (Schmitt et al., 2014) - although, admittedly, potential mediators of such effects (e.g., perceived acceptance within an organisation, e.g., Perry et al., 2016) were not assessed in the

current study. Exploring potential gender differences, on the other hand, appeared interesting because we accounted for ethnic identity centrality as well as gender identity centrality when examining potential moderating effects of identity centrality on the consequences of frequency of potentially harassing experiences (H2).

Method

Sample and procedure

The sample comprised *N* = 240 Undergraduate students from a University in the U.K. We aimed at this sample size to be clearly above the recommended sample size of 200 respondents for regression analyses with five predictor variables (Maxwell, 2004). As respondents‘ ethnic background and gender were deemed important variables, especially for exploratory analyses, the study sample was fully balanced in terms of ethnic background (i.e., black and minority ethnic vs. white) and gender composition. Among those 120 respondents who classified themselves as non-white, 30 % described themselves as Asian, 26 % as black/African, 15 % as Indian, and the remaining respondents indicated that they were Arabic, Hispanic/Latino, or “mixed”. In terms of nationality, 68 % of respondents described themselves as British or English, whereas the four largest sub-groups among non-British respondents were US-American (3 %), Norwegian (3 %), Portuguese (3 %), and German (3 %). Respondents‘ average age was 22.0 years (*SD* = 5.0). Respondents were rather evenly distributed across the three years of Undergraduate study (i.e., 1st year: 34 %, 2nd year: 30 %, and 3rd year: 36 %), and the majority of respondents studied subjects in the areas science and engineering (43 %) and arts and social sciences (28 %).

All respondents filled in the questionnaire online. E-mails inviting to participate were sent through student support services. The e-mails contained an explanation of the aim of the study, along with the assurance that participation would be voluntary, that respondents could

withdraw from participating at any time, that their responses would be treated confidentially, and that data would be analysed at aggregate level. Potential respondents willing to participate accessed an online questionnaire through a link at the end of the invitation e-mail. Respondents were given the opportunity to participate in a raffle of ten £50 gift vouchers. Once the targeted number of female or male respondents with black and minority ethnic or white ethnic background was reached (i.e., 60 per group), people accessing the online questionnaire were screened out when further respondents with matching demographics were not required. These potential respondents were directed to a webpage, where they were thanked for their willingness to participate, and given the opportunity to participate in the aforementioned raffle.

Instruments

The questionnaire asked respondents to answer questions about frequency and evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background, ethnic identity centrality and gender identity centrality, self-esteem, positive affect and negative affect. Furthermore, respondents were asked to provide information about demographic variables.

Frequency and evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background. These variables were assessed using items developed by Schneider, Hitlan, and Radhakrishnan (2000), which were adapted by Berdahl and Moore (2006). In a first step, respondents were asked to indicate how often they had seven potentially harassing experiences at University (answer categories: 1 = *never*, 2 = *once or twice*, 3 = *a few times*, 4 = *several times*, 5 = *most of the time*) such as "someone told jokes about your ethnic group" or "someone treated you badly because of your ethnicity". Seventy-two per cent of respondents reported that they had any of these experiences at least once. This variable was

dummy-coded (0 = *never had a potentially harassing experience*, 1 = *had a potentially harassing experience at least once*).

When respondents had a potentially harassing experience at least once, they were additionally asked to indicate "how negative or positive this experience was" for them (answer categories ranging from 1 = *very positive* to 5 = *very negative*). This variable was treated as continuous variable (α = .89), with higher values indicating more negative evaluations of potentially harassing experiences.

Ethnic identity centrality and gender identity centrality. Ethnic identity centrality was assessed using an eight-item scale developed by Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, and Smith (1997). Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with statements describing the importance of ethnic background for one's sense of self (e.g., "belonging to my ethnic group is an important part of my self-image", "belonging to my ethnic group is an important reflection of who I am") using answer categories ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. In the current study, this scale had a reliability of α = .83.

The items assessing ethnic identity centrality were adapted (Settles, 2006) in order to capture gender identity centrality (e.g., "belonging to my gender group is an important part of my self-image", "belonging to my gender group is an important reflection of who I am"), and again respondents indicated their degree of agreement using answer categories ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The reliability of this scale was α = .75.

Self-esteem and positive and negative affect. These variables were used as indicators of well-being. Self-esteem was assessed using a one-item measure (i.e., "I have high self-esteem": Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001) with answer categories ranging from 1 = *not very true of me* to 5 = *very true of me*. Robins et al. (2001) demonstrated reliability and validity of this instrument in adult samples, including college students. Positive and negative affect were assessed using twenty items developed by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988).

Respondents were presented with ten positive and ten negative feelings and emotions (e.g., "distressed", "ashamed", "afraid", and "excited", "enthusiastic", "proud" respectively), and asked to indicate the extent to which they "have felt this way during the past few weeks" (answer categories ranging from 1 = *very slightly or not at all* to 5 = *extremely*). Negative feelings were reversely coded, resulting in a bipolar scale with higher values indicating higher positive affect. The scale reliability was $\alpha = .88$.

Demographic variables. Respondents were asked to indicate their ethnic background and their gender. These variables were dummy-coded (i.e., 0 = *white*, 1 = *black and minority ethnic*; 0 = *male*, 1 = *female*). When examining hypotheses, ethnic background and gender were used as control variables, whereas in exploratory analyses, these variables were used as potential additional moderator variables.

Table 1 summarises mean values, standard deviations, intercorrelations and scale reliabilities of the variables assessed in this study.

- Table 1 about here -

Results

Evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background and well-being (H1)

As can be seen from the correlations presented in Table 1, there was some support for the expectation that the evaluation, but not the bare experience, of having been exposed to potential harassment was associated with impaired well-being. More specifically, more negative evaluation of potentially harassing experiences was associated with lower self-esteem ($r = -.18$) and with lower positive affect ($r = -.16$), whereas the corresponding correlations with frequency of potentially harassing experiences did not yield statistical significance ($r = .04$ and $r = -.03$ respectively). However, when additionally controlling for

respondents‘ ethnic background and gender in regression analyses (see Table 2: step 2), evaluation of potentially harassing experiences remained a significant predictor only for self-esteem (β = -.16). Frequency of potentially harassing experiences, on the other hand, was neither a significant predictor of self-esteem nor positive affect. As will be explained in a later section, however, exploratory analyses revealed that the effect of evaluation of potentially harassing experiences on self-esteem was actually qualified by a higher-order interaction involving respondents' ethnic background. Taken together, these findings provide only weak support for hypothesis 1.

- Table 2 about here -

Frequency of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background, ethnic identity centrality, and well-being (H2)

As expected, the interaction term frequency of potentially harassing experiences x ethnic identity centrality was a significant predictor of self-esteem as well as positive affect (β = -.43 and β = -.47 respectively; see Table 2: step 4). As is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, there were negative associations between frequency of potentially harassing experiences and self-esteem as well as positive affect when respondents reported high ethnic identity centrality, whereas these associations were slightly positive when respondents reported low ethnic identity centrality. These findings support hypothesis 2.

- Figures 1 and 2 about here -

Unexpectedly, however, data analyses also revealed that the interaction terms frequency of potentially harassing experiences x gender identity centrality and evaluation of potentially harassing experiences x gender identity centrality were significant predictors of self-esteem (β = .36 and β = .20 respectively; see Table 2: step 4). As can be seen in Figures 3 and 4, there was a negative association between frequency of potentially harassing

experiences as well as more negative evaluation of potentially harassing experiences and self-esteem when gender identity centrality was low, but these associations were slightly positive when gender identity centrality was high.

- Figures 3 and 4 about here -

Lastly, among those respondents who had experienced a potentially harassing incident at least once, there was an association between ethnic identity centrality and lower positive affect (β = -.21; see Table 2: step 3). This association was unexpected and, as will be explained in the following section, exploratory analyses showed that this effect was qualified by a higher-order interaction involving respondents' ethnic background.

Differences between black and ethnic minority respondents and white respondents (Q)

In order to detect potential differences between women and men as well as between black and minority ethnic respondents and white respondents, all the analyses above were repeated, accounting for respondents' gender and ethnic background as potential additional moderator variables. As already briefly mentioned, these analyses showed that two of the findings reported above were actually qualified by interaction effects involving respondents' ethnic background. More specifically, the interaction term evaluation of potentially harassing experiences x ethnic identity centrality x ethnic background was a significant predictor of both self-esteem and positive affect (β = -.29 and β = -.27 respectively; see Table 3: step 4).

- Table 3 about here -

As is illustrated in Figure 5, there were negative associations between more negative evaluation of potentially harassing experiences and self-esteem for black and minority ethnic respondents scoring high on ethnic identity centrality and for white respondents scoring low on ethnic identity centrality (i.e., regression lines (1) and (4) respectively), whereas this did not apply to black and minority ethnic respondents with low ethnic identity centrality and to

white respondents with high ethnic identity centrality (i.e., regression lines (3) and (2) respectively).

- Figure 5 about here -

The same complementary pattern for respondents with different ethnic background applied to the relationship between evaluation of potentially harassing experiences and positive affect. As can be seen in Figure 6, there were negative associations for black and minority ethnic respondents with high ethnic identity centrality and for white respondents with low ethnic identity centrality (i.e., regression lines (1) and (4) respectively), but not for black and minority ethnic respondents with low ethnic identity centrality and for white respondents with high ethnic identity centrality (i.e., regression lines (3) and (2) respectively).

- Figure 6 about here -

Discussion

According to Fiske and Lee (2008, p. 24), even subtly prejudiced behaviours such as belittlement of harassment (Swim, Aiken, Hall, & Hunter, 1995) can be "problematic on a day-to-day basis for most minorities". With our study, we looked into the experience of openly threatening and exclusionary behaviours in a sample comprising black and minority ethnic respondents and white respondents. Our data provided evidence that, even though there were no differences between respondents with different ethnic background with regards to frequency and evaluation of harassment, the emotional responses to these experiences may well differ for black and ethnic minority people and for white people. We found that high ethnic identity centrality intensified the association between more negative evaluation of harassment experiences and impaired well-being in black and minority ethnic respondents. In white respondents, on the other hand, high ethnic identity centrality buffered these negative effects. This asymmetric pattern appears to indicate that ethnic identity centrality is

a risk factor for black and ethnic minority people, but a protective resource for white people. In this context, it may appear somewhat naïve to consider highly demographically diverse organisations as colour-blind 'melting pots' by default. Even highly demographically diverse organisations find themselves embedded in a dominating mainstream culture, and being able to identify with this culture may facilitate access to resources that reduce the costs of ethnic harassment (Schmitt et al., 2014).

The second main finding of our study was that ethnic identity centrality intensified the association between higher frequency of harassment experiences and impaired well-being in black and ethnic minority respondents as well as white respondents. This finding is in line with what previous studies have reported about black and ethnic minority people (e.g., Burrow & Ong, 2010; Perry et al., 2016), but, interestingly, indicates that this effect also applies to white people. We assume that these effects occur because for people with high ethnic identity centrality, ethnic harassment experiences are seen as more identity-relevant (McCoy & Major, 2003), and hence more threatening (Schmitt et al., 2014). Taken together with the asymmetric effect of ethnic identity centrality for people with different ethnic background, our finding points to the fact that black and ethnic minority people with high ethnic identity centrality may be at double risk to suffer from ethnic harassment experiences. For black and ethnic minority people, higher ethnic identity centrality does not only intensify the association between higher frequency of harassment experiences and impaired well-being, but additionally aggravates the association between more negative evaluation of harassment experiences and impaired well-being. These additive negative effects support Fiske and Lee's (2008) notion that being targeted by prejudiced behaviours may be a problematic experience, especially for black and minority ethnic people.

Lastly, we found that gender identity centrality buffered the effects of higher frequency and more negative evaluation of harassment experiences due to ethnic background on lower

self-esteem. Building on the match principle in stress research (Cohen & Wills, 1985; De Jonge & Dormann, 2006), we expected that ethnic identity centrality, but not gender identity centrality, would have a moderating effect because there is congruity between source of stress (i.e., ethnic harassment) and potential moderator (i.e., ethnic identity centrality). Irrespective of respondents' ethnic background, gender identity centrality appeared as a resource that can reduce the negative effects of ethnic harassment experiences on self-esteem. Previous studies have shown that identity centrality can have direct positive effects on well-being, irrespective of harassment experiences (e.g., Mossakowski, 2003), and that identity centrality can moderate the negative effects of harassment experiences on well-being, irrespective of the type of harassment experienced (e.g., Perry et al., 2016). In a study explicitly accounting for gender identity centrality (Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003), there was no evidence that this facet of identity centrality had a moderating effect on the association between gender harassment experiences and impaired well-being. We suggest, however, that gender identity centrality may buffer the negative effects of ethnic harassment experiences because respondents with high gender identity centrality can still focus on other facets of their identity when confronted with ethnic harassment (cf. Sellers & Shelton, 2003), thereby maintaining self-esteem. Furthermore, respondents with high gender identity centrality might perhaps be less vigilant of ethnic harassment (cf. Szymanski & Lewis, 2015) because high gender identity centrality may sensitise them for gender harassment, but not necessarily for ethnic harassment. The latter assumption is perhaps further reflected in the incidental correlational finding that, in our sample, gender identity centrality was associated with lower frequency of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background (r = -.20).

Limitations

Our study has several limitations that could be remedied in future research. In our study, we only accounted for ethnic harassment, but additionally considering gender harassment would have allowed to examine potential moderator effects of ethnic and gender identity centrality on the associations between ethnic and gender harassment and impaired well-being. It would be interesting to analyse whether ethnic identity centrality would show similar cross-domain moderating effects as gender identity centrality in the current study (i.e., buffering effects of harassment experiences in spite of mismatch between stressor and moderator). A further promising extension of the study design would be to account for harassment of an intersectional nature such as gendered ethnic harassment (e.g., Szymanski & Lewis, 2015), and to examine the relative importance of ethnic, gender, and gendered ethnic identity centrality for the association between harassment experiences and impaired well-being, including potential cross-domain effects. The composition of our study sample did not allow to examine differences within repondents that described themselves as black and minority ethnic and between respondents with different nationalities. Preliminary analyses did not reveal significant differences between these various sub-groups with regards to self-esteem and affect. We additionally created a dummy-variable comparing non-U.K. citizens with U.K. citizens, but comparisons using this variable did not detect significant differences either. Nevertheless, a larger sample might perhaps have allowed to systematically examine differences between respondents with different black and minority ethnic background and between respondents with different nationalities.

Similarly, respondents‘ socio-economic classification could be captured in addition to ethnic background and gender, and allow potentially interesting analyses (e.g., Rosenfield, 2012). Furthermore, a future study could perhaps account for respondents‘ appreciation of diversity. We found an association between more negative evaluation of potentially

harassing experiences and impaired well-being in white respondents scoring low on ethnic identity centrality. It might be that these respondents were colour-blind appreciators of diversity, and the effect of more negative evaluations of potentially harassing experiences on impaired well-being was perhaps partly due to the need to reconcile "the inconsistency between their world-view and their experience" (Sellers & Shelton, 2003, p. 1082). With our current data, however, this interesting possibility cannot be explored.

Lastly, data was collected using an online questionnaire, which can have various limitations, including noncoverage, nonresponse, and measurement error (e.g., Couper, 2002). Perhaps most importantly for the current study, the invitation to participate in the study was circulated widely, and it could be that respondents with a genuine interest in the study topic are overrepresented among the sample. Furthermore, potential respondents were screened out when further respondents with matching demographics were not required. Therefore, allowing a larger sample size would not only have offered further comparisons within sub-groups in the study sample, but also to potentially account for respondents with a broader range of attitudes to the study topic.

Conclusions

Our study demonstrated the importance of differentiating between frequency and evaluation of potentially harassing experiences (Berdahl & Moore, 2006). This approach allows to explicitly account for the sense-making stage of emotion elicitation (Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzano, 1999) where people derive meaning from their experiences. If people arrive at negative evaluations of potentially harassing incidents, this qualifies perceived harassment (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Magley, 1997), which is associated with negative effects that are beyond the effects of being exposed to harassment. We assume that the conceptual difference between frequency and evaluation of harassment experiences can partly

explain the inconsistent empirical evidence reported in the literature. More precisely, the fact that harassment experiences have been operationalised and assessed in various ways may perhaps explain why these studies arrived at different findings. Furthermore, we found that using a sample comprising black and minority ethnic respondents as well as white respondents can be worthwhile when examining effects of perceived ethnic harassment. There was an asymmetric pattern in that ethnic identity centrality had additive negative effects for black and minority ethnic people, but partly buffering effects for white people. This indicates that the experience of being exposed to ethnic harassment may well differ for people with different ethnic background.

From a more practical perspective, important implications of our study findings can be highlighted as well. Seventy-two per cent of respondents reported that they had experienced ethnic harassment at least once. This high proportion gives cause for concern in itself. Clearly, such experiences can be associated with lower self-esteem, lower pride and enthusiasm, as well as more intense feelings of shame and anxiety. Such emotions are likely to negatively affect social well-being and potential to thrive. Organisations need to be aware that the bare exposure to ethnic harassment can negatively affect the well-being of people who attach high importance to their ethnic background. In order to protect, and possibly enhance, their members‘ well-being, organisations should have clear procedures for reporting harassment that lead to resolute organisational responses, along with policies designed to keep incidents of potential harassment at a minimum in the first place (i.e., setting clear expectations for civility, e.g., Pearson & Porath, 2005). Furthermore, organisations should be aware that black and minority ethnic members with high ethnic identity centrality are likely to take a ‘double hit’ from being exposed to ethnic harassment. Therefore, organisational support needs to be tailored in a way that takes individual differences into account. Lastly, organisations should appreciate and foster various group identities that their members may

have. Group identities that are unrelated to the type of harassment under consideration may buffer negative effects on well-being. However, it is only in the absence of ethnic harassment experiences that ethnic identity centrality can display its positive effects on well-being in both black and minority ethnic people as well as white people.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Research involving human participants

All procedures in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

All respondents filled in the questionnaire online. E-mails inviting to participate were sent through student support services. The e-mails contained an explanation of the aim of the study, along with the assurance that participation would be voluntary, that respondents could withdraw from participating at any time, that their responses would be treated confidentially, and that data would be analysed at aggregate level. Potential respondents willing to participate accessed an online questionnaire through a link at the end of the invitation e-mail.

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Table 1: *Intercorrelations between study variables.*

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
N = 240 (unless otherwise stated)								
1. EHF	--	--	(--)					
2. EHE (*N* = 174)	3.31	.86	--	(.89)				
3. EIC	2.67	.78	-.05	.14	(.83)			
4. GIC	2.81	.69	-.20**	.01	.48**	(.75)		
5. SE	3.13	1.14	.04	-.18*	.03	-.02	(--)	
6. PA	2.76	.68	-.03	-.16**	-.12	-.11	.51**	(.88)
7. EB	--	--	.06	-.03	.30**	.01	-.04	-.09
8. GEN	--	--	.04	.17*	.04	.18**	-.13*	-.23**

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. EHF: frequency of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background: 0 = *never*, 1 = *at least once*; EHE: evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background: 1 = *very positive*, 5 = *very negative*; EIC: ethnic identity centrality: 1 = *low*, 5 = *high*; GIC: gender identity centrality: 1 = *low*, 5 = *high*; SE: self-esteem (one-item measure): 1 = *low*, 5 = *high*; PA: positive affect (bipolar): 1 = *negative*, 5 = *positive*. EB: Ethnic background: 0 = *white*, 1 = *black and minority ethnic*; GEN: gender: 0 = *male*, 1 = *female*. Scale reliabilities are shown in the principal diagonal.

Table 2: *Moderated regressions on indicators of well-being with identity centrality as moderator.*

	evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background $N = 174$				frequency of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background $N = 240$			
Indicators of well-being	self-esteem		positive affect		self-esteem		positive affect	
	β		β		β		β	
Predictors	Step	Model	Step	Model	Step	Model	Step	Model
Step 1								
ethnic background	-.11	-.09	-.15	-.09	-.05	-.06	-.10	-.07
gender	-.12	-.09	-.22**	-.18*	-.13	-.11	-.22**	-.20**
ΔR^2	.02		.07**		.02		.06**	
Step 2								
ethnic harassment experiences (EHE)	-.16*	-.12	-.14	-.09	.03	.00	-.03	-.06
ΔR^2	.03*		.02		.00		.00	
Step 3								
ethnic identity centrality (EIC)	-.06	.01	-.21*	-.15	.07	.41**	-.06	.31*
gender identity centrality (GIC)	.07	.00	.04	-.01	-.03	-.32	-.05	-.26
ΔR^2	.00		.03		.00		.01	
Step 4								
EHE x EIC	-.15	-.15	-.12	-.12	-.43**	-.43**	-.47**	-.47**
EHE x GIC	.20*	.20*	.11	.11	.36*	.36*	.28	.28
ΔR^2	.03		.01		.05**		.05**	
Total R^2 (adjusted R^2)	.08 (.04)		.12 (.09)		.07 (.04)		.12 (.09)	

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Ethnic background: 0 = *white*, 1 = *black and minority ethnic*; gender: 0 = *male*, 1 = *female*; ethnic harassment experiences (EHE): evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background (left): 1 = *very positive*, 5 = *very negative*; frequency of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background (right): 0 = *never*, 1 = *at least once*; ethnic identity centrality: 1 = *low*, 5 = *high*; gender identity centrality: 1 = *low*, 5 = *high*; self-esteem (one-item measure): 1 = *low*, 5 = *high*; positive affect (bipolar): 1 = *negative*, 5 = *positive*.

Figure 1: Moderated regression on self-esteem with frequency of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background as predictor and ethnic identity centrality as moderator.

Note: *low* = *M* - 1 *SD*, *high* = *M* + 1 *SD*.

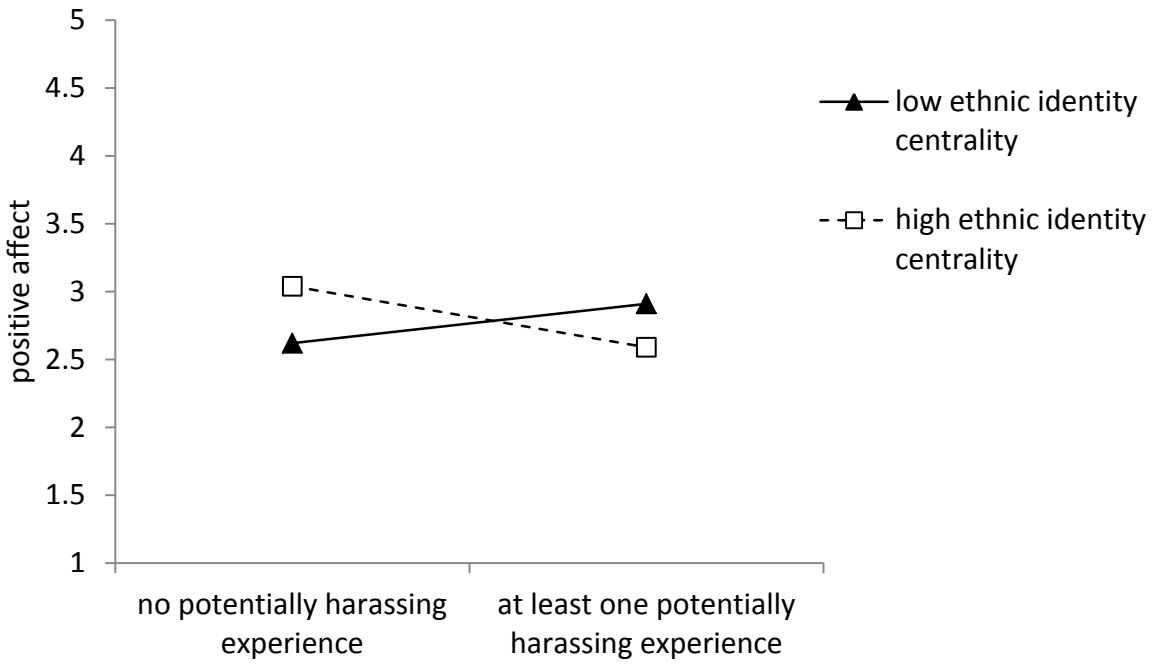

Figure 2: Moderated regression on positive affect with frequency of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background as predictor and ethnic identity centrality as moderator.

Note: *low* = *M* - 1 *SD*, *high* = *M* + 1 *SD*.

Figure 3: Moderated regression on self-esteem with frequency of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background as predictor and gender identity centrality as moderator.

Note: *low* = *M* - 1 *SD*, *high* = *M* + 1 *SD*.

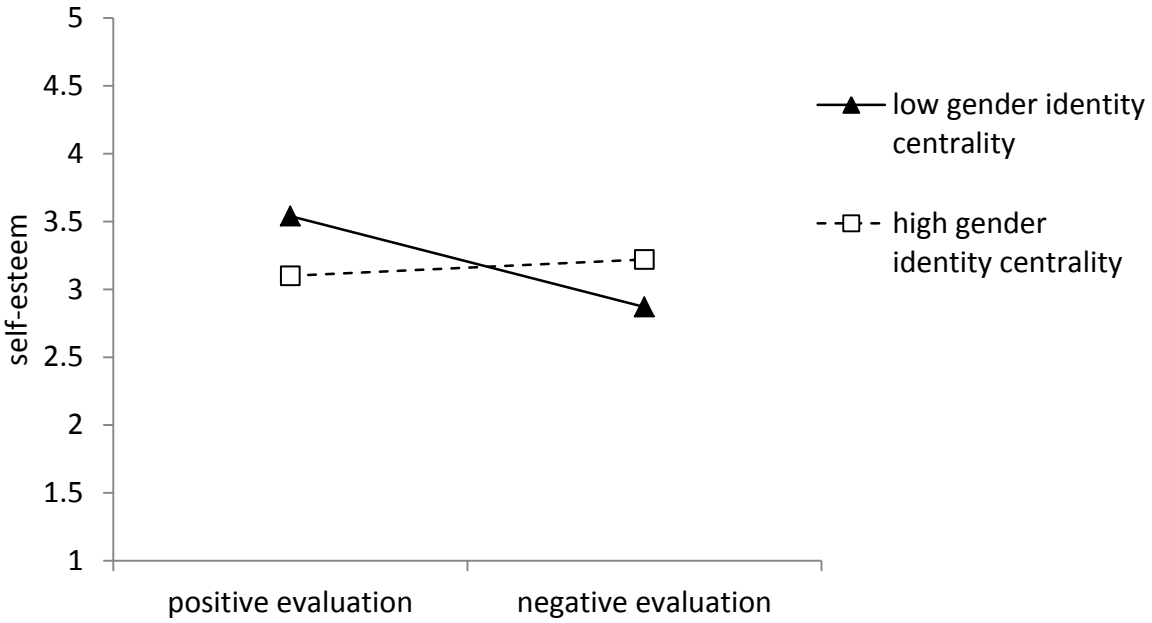

Figure 4: Moderated regression on self-esteem with evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background as predictor and gender identity centrality as moderator.

Note: *positive* = *M* - 1 *SD*, *negative* = *M* + 1 *SD*. *low* = *M* - 1 *SD*, *high* = *M* + 1 *SD*.

Table 3: *Moderated regressions on indicators of well-being with ethnic background as additional moderator.*

	evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background $N = 174$			
Indicators of well-being	self-esteem		positive affect	
	β		β	
Predictors	Step	Model	Step	Model
Step 1				
gender	-.11	-.06	-.21**	-.16*
ΔR^2	.01		.04**	
Step 2				
ethnic harassment experiences (EHE)	-.16*	-.13	-.11	-.18
ethnic identity centrality (EIC)	-.02	.12	-.18*	-.05
ethnic background (EB)	-.11	-.10	-.09	-.09
ΔR^2	.04		.07**	
Step 3				
EHE x EIC	-.05	.19	-.08	.14
EHE x EB	.07	.01	.19	.13
EIC x EB	-.21	-.15	-.19	-.14
ΔR^2	.02		.03	
Step 4				
EHE x EIC x EB	-.29*	-.29*	-.27*	-.27*
ΔR^2	.03*		.02*	
Total R^2 (adjusted R^2)	.10 (.05)		.17 (.12)	

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Gender: 0 = *male*, 1 = *female*; ethnic harassment experiences (EHE): evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background: 1 = *very positive*, 5 = *very negative*; ethnic identity centrality: 1 = *low*, 5 = *high*; ethnic background: 0 = *white*, 1 = *black and minority ethnic*; self-esteem (one-item measure): 1 = *low*, 5 = *high*; positive affect (bipolar): 1 = *negative*, 5 = *positive*.

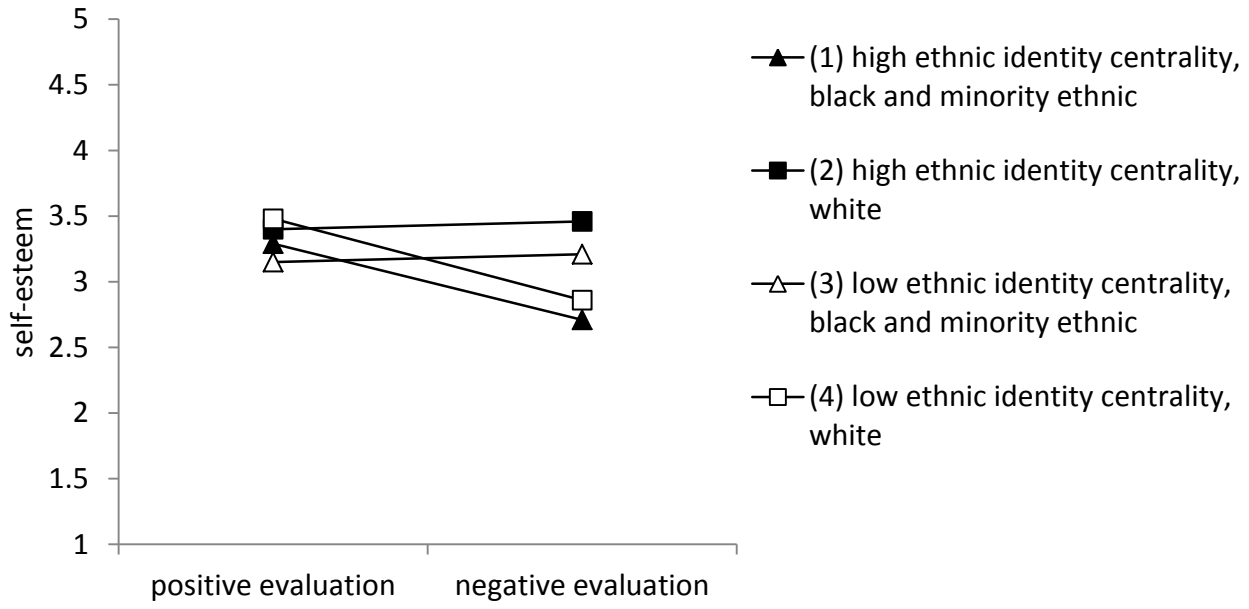

Figure 5: Moderated regression on self-esteem with evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background as predictor and ethnic identity centrality as moderator, accounting for respondents' ethnic background.

Note: *positive* = *M* - 1 *SD*, *negative* = *M* + 1 *SD*. *low* = *M* - 1 *SD*, *high* = *M* + 1 *SD*.

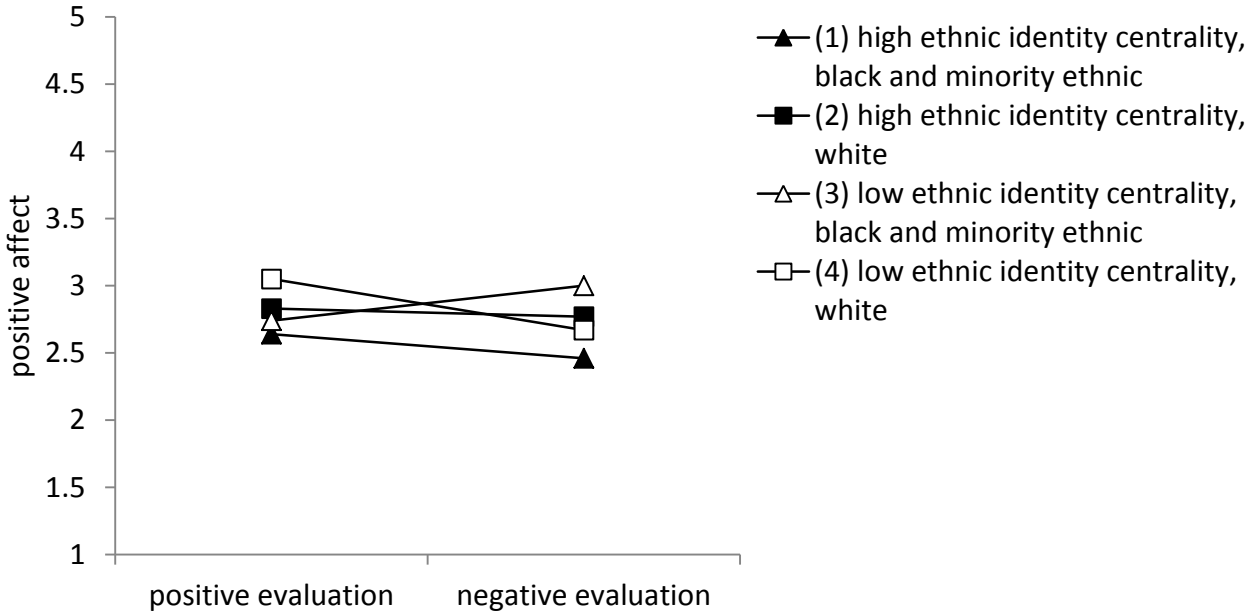

Figure 6: Moderated regression on positive affect with evaluation of potentially harassing experiences due to ethnic background as predictor and ethnic identity centrality as moderator, accounting for respondents' ethnic background.

Note: *positive* = *M* - 1 *SD*, *negative* = *M* + 1 *SD*. *low* = *M* - 1 *SD*, *high* = *M* + 1 *SD*.