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Discriminatory, yet socially accepted? Targets' perceptions of subtle and blatant expressions of ethno-racial prejudice

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Introduction: Extant research has studied prejudice expressions mainly from the majority perspective. We examined whether prejudice expressions conceptualized as subtle (vs. blatant) are perceived differently by their targets.

Methods: Participants who self-identified as potential targets of ethno-racial or religious prejudice (e.g., anti-Muslim, anti-Asian, anti-Arab, anti-Slavic, and anti-Black prejudice), answered questions about verbal expressions of prejudice taken from the subtle and blatant prejudice scales in an online survey.

Results: Items of the subtle (vs. blatant) prejudice scale were rated as more socially accepted and less discriminatory, elicited less negative emotions, and were reported to be experienced more often. Subtle expressions of prejudice were not more familiar to participants than blatant ones. Remarkably, blatant prejudice expressions were also perceived as relatively socially accepted and subtle prejudices as relatively discriminatory, as indicated by mean ratings above the scale midpoint. Lower discrimination ratings of subtle (vs. blatant) prejudice expressions were mainly due to perceptions of expressions exaggerating cultural differences. Exploratory analyses indicate that participants who reported more (vs. less) frequent overall exposure to the prejudice expressions perceived subtle and blatant stimuli as similarly discriminatory. This finding is compatible with the idea that individuals factor their personal experiences with prejudice into their assessments of discrimination.

Discussion: We discuss implications for interventions, especially regarding the social acceptability of blatant prejudice and promoting awareness of the discriminatory impact of subtle prejudice.

KEYWORDS

subtle and blatant prejudice, perceived discrimination, forms of prejudice and discrimination, ethno-racial prejudice, target perspective, exposure to prejudice

1 Introduction

According to a common and influential distinction in social psychology, ethno-racial prejudice can be expressed in subtler or more blatant ways. This broad distinction between subtle or covert and blatant or overt forms of prejudice has been proposed using different terms and conceptualizations, including subtle and blatant prejudice (Pettigrew and

Meertens, 1995), modern and old-fashioned racism (e.g., McConahay, 1983), and symbolic racism (e.g., Tarman and Sears, 2005). According to such accounts, the statement "I would mind if a suitably qualified Muslim person was appointed as my boss" would, for example, be considered a blatant expression of prejudice, whereas the statement "Muslims living here teach their children values and skills different from those required to be successful in Germany" would be considered subtle. In these examples, the overt expression directly rejects people because of their (supposed) group membership, whereas the subtle expression rejects them more indirectly because they supposedly do not teach their children "traditional values."

Research has widely investigated the antecedents and psychological processes in non-marginalized group members' different expressions of prejudice. Research on prejudice in general, has traditionally focused on prejudice harbored by members of privileged groups (Dion and Earn, 1975; Shelton and Richeson, 2006; Dixon et al., 2015). This is illustrated by the finding that the majority of participants in social psychological research on race are White (Roberts et al., 2020). However, the complementary aspect, that is, marginalized groups members' perception of and reactions to different forms of prejudice has received relatively less attention. The present study was conducted to investigate how potential targets of prejudice perceive expressions of prejudice commonly considered blatant or subtle.

The concept of subtle prejudice is rooted in the notion that the prevailing anti-blatant prejudice norms in contemporary Western European societies prohibit the direct and blatant expression of prejudice. Hence, prejudice is expressed in subtler, more indirect, and socially accepted ways. Because this form of prejudice is "ostensibly non-prejudiced" (Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995, p. 73), it is less readily perceived as prejudice. For targets of prejudice, being exposed to subtle expressions of prejudice often implies a heightened attributional ambiguity, that is, uncertainty whether specific experiences are due to prejudice or not (Crocker and Major, 1989; Sue et al., 2007). In terms of signal detection, this means that a socially unaccepted, blatant expression of prejudice is more likely to be detected as prejudice, which by common norms should be avoided. Socially accepted prejudices would remain under the radar, and thus be subtle, and expressed more frequently than blatant prejudices. However, are prejudices conceptualized as subtle versus blatant also experienced differently by their targets? The present study addresses this question.

The issue is important for the following reasons. Finding, for instance, that subtle (vs. blatant) prejudice expressions are not perceived as less harmful or as less discriminatory would raise doubts about the validity and utility of a common conceptual distinction in prejudice research. Also, if subtle prejudice expressions are experienced as highly discriminatory, this would highlight the need for more rigorous interventions against this type of prejudice in the present context (Germany). Finally, if the perceived social acceptability of prejudice expressions traditionally assumed to be blatant is high, this would call into question the assumption that presumably blatant prejudice is indeed suppressed due to prevalent egalitarian norms.

Existing prejudice scales have been commonly used as predictor and outcome variable in research on intergroup contact (Wright et al., 1997; Voci and Hewstone, 2003), interracial interaction (Richeson and Shelton, 2003), and interventions to reduce prejudice (Lai et al., 2014). One widely used measure intended to capture prejudicial beliefs that are conceptualized as subtle and blatant are the subtle and blatant prejudice scales by Pettigrew and Meertens (1995). These scholars propose that blatant prejudice includes beliefs that openly reject specific groups and intergroup contact. On the other hand, they propose subtle prejudice takes the form of the defense of traditional values, the exaggeration of cultural differences between groups, and the denial of positive emotions. Critics have argued that it is not clear why specific prejudices are *a priori* classified as subtle or blatant in the subtle and blatant prejudice scales and questioned if "the two types of prejudice are empirically distinguishable," based on factor analytic reanalyses of the original data (Coenders et al., 2001, p. 284). Overall, psychometric analyses have produced mixed results on whether subtle and blatant prejudiced attitudes can be reliably distinguished. Some studies have questioned whether the items designed to measure subtle and blatant prejudiced attitudes (Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995) truly capture those specific dimensions (e.g., Arancibia-Martini et al., 2016). Instead, some research suggests that these items might measure a single underlying dimension (Gattino et al., 2008), or other dimensions that do not correspond to subtle or blatant prejudice (but, e.g., general prejudice and perceived cultural differences; Coenders et al., 2001). However, studies focusing on similar subtle and blatant prejudice scales (Akrami et al., 2000; Anderson, 2018) have confirmed these two dimensions (Gattino et al., 2008; Salvati et al., 2020). In sum, for the actor perspective, extant evidence on the influential subtle-blatant distinction is inconclusive. Therefore, further empirical work is needed to determine whether prejudices conceptualized as subtle are indeed deemed more socially acceptable and less discriminatory than prejudices conceptualized as blatant. Such empirical results may in turn help to refine the conceptualization of subtle and blatant prejudice by shedding light on various aspects of differential perceptions of subtle versus blatant prejudice from the target perspective, enriching our understanding of different types of prejudice.

Previous studies on this issue have focused on non-target student samples and have provided valuable insights. In these samples, perceived social norms regarding prejudice expression toward specific target groups are strongly associated with prejudice endorsement toward these groups (Crandall et al., 2002). Furthermore, previous research suggests that scale items designed to measure subtle forms of prejudice are rated as more socially acceptable (Pettigrew and Meertens, 1996; Manganelli Rattazzi and Volpato, 2003) and less likely to reveal negative attitudes toward Black people (McConahay et al., 1981) than the items designed to measure blatant prejudice. Thus, extant research has provided some support for the conceptual distinction between subtle and blatant prejudice from an actor perspective.

A common feature of social-norm approaches to prejudice is that they focus on the actor perspective, and thus are guided by questions such as "How have anti-prejudice norms changed the way prejudice is expressed?," or "In contexts where anti-prejudice norms are present, do people express their prejudices in ways that would not be considered prejudiced, therefore making it socially acceptable for the person expressing them?". In contrast, the target perspective (e.g., the perceptions and consequences of specific expressions of prejudice by the targets of prejudice) is often neglected. This conceptual asymmetry is also reflected in empirical research on this topic. For instance, the target's perspective is usually not systematically considered in the construction of established and frequently used

measurement scales aiming to assess these different forms of prejudice (e.g., Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995). Instead, the construction of such measures is essentially based on theoretical considerations, building on previous research from the actor perspective.

While targets and non-targets of discrimination seem to rely on similar processes when judging whether an event is due to prejudice, targets have been found to be more likely to attribute an event to prejudice (Inman, 2001). The latter finding indicates that targets (as compared to non-targets) of prejudice might at least partly rely on different processes when deciding whether a specific event is attributable to prejudice or not. Furthermore, a study on prejudice attributions of supporters versus opponents of same-sex marriage suggests that group identity influences understandings of which beliefs constitute prejudice, possibly via different ingroup-norms (Platow et al., 2023). Platow et al. (2022) have further proposed that targets of prejudice might perceive expressions of prejudice differently than non-targets, due to their lived experiences with prejudice and discrimination. Similarly, it has been argued that regarding experiences of prejudice and discrimination, members of societally marginalized (vs. non-marginalized) groups have an epistemic advantage, that is, they have a broader and more elaborate knowledge structure of such experiences (Dror, 2023). Indeed, notwithstanding variance *within* differentially racialized groups (Martinez and Paluck, 2024), several studies indicate that targets of prejudice perceive potentially discriminatory behavior as more discriminatory than non-targets, on average (Carter and Murphy, 2015). Along the same lines, individuals belonging to an ethno-racial minority, on average, have a broader understanding of discrimination (Greenland et al., 2022).[1]

Thus, although there might be reason to conceptually differentiate between subtle and blatant prejudice from an actor perspective, from targets' perspectives this might look different. For example, Freeman and Stewart (2021) have argued that conceptualizing expressions of prejudice merely from an actor perspective is problematic, because targets' and non-targets' assessments of these expressions of prejudice might differ. For example, while making a specific statement might seem trivial from a non-target perspective, from a target perspective it might be "far more significant" (Freeman and Stewart, 2021, p.1012), also due to the cumulative nature of such experiences. Research on racial microaggressions, a form of discrimination commonly conceptualized as subtle, suggests that subtle discrimination does, indeed, not go under the radar of their targets as these perceived it as at least possibly racist (Kanter et al., 2017, 2020). Findings on targets' perceptions of presumably subtle and blatant expressions of prejudice speak to the utility of making this conceptual differentiation on the target side as well. For example, finding that targets of prejudice consensually judge subtle and blatant expressions of prejudice as equally discriminatory, would call into question that this conceptual distinction is of practical importance in their everyday lives (Harter and Schmidt, 2008).

Previous research on targets' experiences of behavioral expressions of prejudice (i.e., discrimination), raises the question of whether expressions of prejudice and discrimination conceptualized as subtle are actually experienced as less discriminatory by their targets than blatant discrimination. Specifically, meta-analytic research with target samples suggests that subtle discrimination has a similarly strong association with a range of adjustment outcomes (e.g., depression, anxiety, and job stress) as blatant discrimination, within the work context (Jones et al., 2016). Experimental research suggests that subtle sexism (Dardenne et al., 2007) and subtle racism (Murphy et al., 2013) might be even worse for targets in terms of cognitive costs. For example, Dardenne et al. (2007) found women to perform worse in a working memory test after being exposed to benevolent, i.e., subtle (vs. hostile, i.e., blatant) sexist statements. In the same vein, a recent study, based on a representative United States-American sample, has found that ethnic minority (i.e., Black and Hispanic vs. ethnic majority) participants experienced more situations in which they were unsure whether they had experienced discrimination, and these experiences were associated with depressive symptoms (Cuevas et al., 2024).

While a robust body of evidence documents that both blatant and subtle discrimination is associated with negative psychological outcomes for targets, such as depression or anxiety (Jones et al., 2016), scholars have argued that there is a lack of research on causes of these associations (e.g., Paradies, 2006; Dhanani et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2022). This has led scholars to articulate the need for a better understanding of perceptions and attributions of discrimination (Paradies, 2006). Against the backdrop of stress and coping models of discrimination, it is plausible that *how* specific expressions of prejudice are perceived influences further downstream effects on psychological outcomes (e.g., Major and Schmader, 2018). For example, in a sample comprising ethnic minority adolescents, Patel et al. (2015) found a data pattern that is consistent with the assumption that the relationship between attributions to discrimination and internalizing symptoms is mediated by perceived severity of (potentially) discriminatory situations. Investigating the different perceptions of specific expressions of prejudice thus potentially contributes to a better understanding of how their negative psychological effects for the target persons can arise. Importantly, the studies reviewed by Jones et al. (2016) focused on the frequency of discrimination experiences rather than on how specific discriminatory events are experienced by targets. Thus, the review was not designed to reveal differences in the type or quality of experience between subtle and blatant discrimination. Overall, relatively little research has investigated lay understandings of prejudice (Platow et al., 2019).

Conceptually, from a target perspective, subtle discrimination has been theorized as being different from blatant discrimination due to its more ambiguous nature (Lui, 2020). In this regard, finding that targets of prejudice differentiate between supposedly subtle and blatant prejudice would suggest that the conceptual distinction is reflected in their assessment. In turn, this would suggest that associations between subtle versus blatant discrimination are at least

1 Such findings make sense in the light of studies regarding racial socialization, which indicate that racial socialization differs between children belonging to an ethno-racial minority and children belonging to an ethno-racial majority (Priest et al., 2014; Simon, 2021). Ethnic minority parents, for example, tend to prepare their children for potential discrimination they may encounter in their daily lives (Hughes et al., 2006). In contrast, ethnic majority parents often do not talk with their children about racial issues (Loyd and Gaither, 2018) or discourage talking about race (Vittrup, 2018; Zucker and Patterson, 2018). This has also been found for White parents in Germany, the context of the present study (Kaiser et al., 2023).

partly explained by different underlying factors. To reiterate, both blatant and subtle forms of discrimination have been found to be associated with negative psychological outcomes. Finding that subtle expressions of prejudice are perceived as less discriminatory than blatant expressions of prejudice, for example, would indicate that negative effects of subtle discrimination may be explained by other processes than mere perceptions of severity. In summary, although discrimination research has provided important evidence on subtle and blatant discrimination, less research has examined how specific prejudice expressions, differing in subtlety, are experienced by their targets. Overall, despite the theoretical relevance of subtlety in prejudice research, research on the perception of specific ethno-racial prejudice expressions is scarce and has focused on non-targets (Fetz and Kroh, 2021).

1.1 The present study

In the present study, we investigated whether targets of ethno-racial prejudice perceive expressions of prejudice, traditionally assumed to be subtle or blatant, differently in terms of how socially acceptable, discriminatory, and emotionally disturbing these prejudice expressions are. Specifically, we pursued two objectives. First, we aimed to investigate whether ethno-racial prejudice expressions conceptualized as subtle (or blatant) are also perceived as subtle (or blatant) from targets' perspectives. In the literature, there is no consensus on what exactly determines whether a prejudice expression or discrimination is subtle or blatant (Jones et al., 2017). Our methodological approach allowed us a fine-grained analysis of expressions of prejudice and provides insights into which features of verbal expressions of prejudice (i.e., their presumed subtlety and content) predict perceptions of their severity (i.e., how discriminatory they are perceived).

To assess target's experience of subtlety, we employed two possible operationalizations. The first possible operationalization refers to perceptions of social acceptability (i.e., how socially acceptable is it to express a specific prejudice?) (e.g., Manganelli Rattazzi and Volpato, 2003). The second possible operationalization refers to perceptions of prejudice/discrimination (i.e., is a prejudice perceived as such or as discriminatory?) (e.g., McConahay et al., 1981). We thus investigated whether prejudice expressions conceptualized as subtle (vs. blatant) are perceived as more socially accepted and as less discriminatory by targets of these prejudices. We also explored whether prejudice expressions conceptualized as subtle (vs. blatant) elicit less responses, specifically emotional reactions. Second, examining both perceived social acceptability and degree of discrimination allows us to examine the relationship between these operationalizations. Specifically, we examined whether perceived social acceptability predicts how discriminatory the targets perceive a specific expression of prejudice. Moreover, we shed light on how social acceptability and discrimination perceptions relate to the targets' emotional experience of these prejudice expressions. Finally, we explored whether variability in targets' prejudice judgments of presumably subtle and blatant expressions of prejudice is predicted by their previous exposure to these expressions of prejudice. Other potential predictors of discrimination ratings were also explored (e.g., the perceived typicality of the presented prejudice expressions for participants' experiences of prejudice in everyday life, and the extent of having consciously dealt with discrimination).

In contrast to previous studies focusing on differential adjustment outcomes (Jones et al., 2016) or cognitive effects (Murphy et al., 2013) of subtle and blatant discrimination or solely focusing on subtle discrimination (Kanter et al., 2017, 2020), we examine how specific prejudice expressions, assumed to differ in their degree of subtlety, are perceived by targets of ethno-racial prejudice. In contrast to recent research addressing how changing the social identity of the person expressing a potentially prejudicial statement and/or this statement's target affects lay people's attributions of prejudice (Platow et al., 2022), we focus on how individuals perceive expressions of prejudice comprising beliefs that have been assumed to be manifestations of subtle versus blatant prejudice. Furthermore, whereas previous prejudice and discrimination research has largely focused on Black individuals (e.g., Sue et al., 2007), we surveyed a diverse sample of (potential) targets of ethno-racial prejudice, including targets of anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Asian prejudice.

1.1.1 Hypotheses and exploratory questions

Our findings have potentially important implications for research on prejudice and research on perceived discrimination. Our findings can contribute to addressing open issues on the concept and measurement of subtle (vs. blatant) forms of discrimination (Mekawi and Todd, 2018; Lui and Quezada, 2019). Furthermore, target perspectives provide insights into the validity of established prejudice scales and whether the beliefs they capture match those that targets of prejudice encounter in their everyday lives.

We pre-registered several hypotheses as well as exploratory questions regarding issues for which existing evidence is inconclusive.[2] When we did not have specific hypotheses before data collection began, we formulated exploratory questions (EQ) rather than hypotheses (H).

We hypothesized that targets would rate prejudices conceptualized as subtle as more socially accepted by society (H1) and as less discriminatory (H2) than prejudices conceptualized as blatant. As theories of contemporary forms of prejudice (e.g., Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995) assume that societal norms no longer permit the expression of blatant prejudices, we further predicted that targets of prejudice would be exposed to subtle prejudices more often than to blatant prejudices (H3). In relation, we examined whether the targets of prejudice are more familiar with subtle prejudices than blatant prejudices (EQ1). Finally, we explored whether prejudice expressions conceptualized as subtle or blatant elicit negative emotions differentially (EQ2). Research comparing emotional consequences of benevolent (rather subtle) and hostile (rather blatant) sexism has provided mixed findings regarding this issue. A study on women's recalls of benevolent and hostile sexist situations suggests that both types of situations are associated with similar levels of anger/disgust and depression/anxiety (Bosson et al., 2010). In contrast, findings from vignette studies suggest that hostile (vs. benevolent) sexism is associated with higher levels of anger and lower levels of anxiety (Barreto and Ellemers, 2005a,b).

2 You can access the preregistration at the following link: https://bit.ly/3Xbekrf

In addition to the dichotomous comparison of stimuli conceptualized as subtle versus blatant, we examined relations between different continuous stimulus ratings. Specifically, we examined whether prejudice expressions perceived as more socially accepted are also perceived as less discriminatory (EQ3), which would be expected if social norm approaches to prejudice also apply to the targets of these prejudices. In addition, we examined which emotional reactions are associated with perceiving a prejudice as discriminatory and/or socially unacceptable. Finally, we explored whether the expected effects of prejudice type (subtle vs. blatant) would be moderated by participants' overall exposure to the expressions of prejudice they responded to in the present study.

Overall, this study sheds light on how ethno-racial and religious prejudices conceptualized as subtle and blatant in the social psychological literature are perceived by their targets and which emotional reactions they elicit. It provides a starting point for further research on differential effects of subtle and blatant prejudice on those experiencing it in their everyday lives.

2 Methods

To investigate our preregistered hypotheses and exploratory questions, we conducted an online study. The study was approved by the local ethics committee (see footnote 2). The data, code, and materials are available at https://bit.ly/3Xbekrf.

2.1 Sample

A power analysis suggested that 403 participants were necessary to detect a small (according to Funder and Ozer, 2019) effect in a paired *t*-test[3] [$d(z) = 0.14$, $\alpha = 0.05$, two-sided test, power = 0.80, see preregistration]. We recruited a convenience sample via word-of-mouth and by advertising the study on social media platforms, mailing lists and posters at the University of Münster. Participants were eligible to win one of six gift cards of their choice worth €25 as compensation. Data collection took 9 months (23/10/2019 to 22/07/2020) and was concluded after the preregistered target sample size of 400 (407 complete data records) was reached. Data from 32 participants were not included in the analysis because they reported an age below 18 ($n = 4$), stated that they did not fill out the survey seriously ($n = 8$), or had a relative speed index above 2.0 ($n = 20$), meaning "that the respondent has completed a page twice as fast as the typical respondent" (Leiner, 2019, p. 236). According to an experimental study (Leiner, 2019), datasets with a relative speed index above 2.0 are likely to contain meaningless data. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 375 participants [$M_{age} = 29.32$, $SD = 8.70$; reported gender: 65.1% ($n = 244$) female, 33.9% ($n = 127$) male, and 0.8% ($n = 3$) non-binary, 0.3% ($n = 1$) trans]. 81.3% ($n = 305$) completed the survey in German and 18.7% ($n = 70$) in English. All participants reported that they currently live in Germany and are (potentially) affected by ethno-racial prejudices or prejudices because of their origin or religious affiliation (inclusion criteria). The prejudices that most participants reported being (potentially) affected by were prejudice against Muslims 13.6% ($n = 51$), prejudice against Turks 13.3% ($n = 50$), prejudice against Asians 12.5% ($n = 47$), prejudice against South Asians 8.3% ($n = 31$), prejudice against Russians 8.0% ($n = 30$), and prejudice against Arabs 6.4% ($n = 24$). For a full overview of the groups, see Supplementary material S1, https://bit.ly/3Xbekrf. One hundred and ninety participants (50.67%) reported that they were born in Germany. The majority of participants reported having a high school diploma (79.5%, $n = 298$) and a university or college degree (55.5%, $n = 208$). Objective socioeconomic status (SES) data regarding all three dimensions (education, occupational situation, and income) was available for $n = 312$ participants. On each dimension, participants could score from 1 to a maximum of 7 points, with higher scores indicating higher education, higher occupational status, and higher income. Values for education, occupational situation and income were added to form a composite score (Lampert et al., 2018) and ranged between 5.6 and 21 ($M = 14.61$, $SD = 3.53$; possible range 3.0–21.0).

2.2 Design

We employed a one-way within-subjects design (stimulus conditions: subtle vs. blatant prejudice expressions) using social acceptability, discrimination, exposure, familiarity, and emotional reaction (anger, fear, sadness, and disgust) ratings as dependent variables. Stimuli were nested in condition and stimuli and participants were fully crossed (i.e., each participant responded to each stimulus).

2.3 Stimuli

Stimuli consisted of the 20 items of the subtle and blatant prejudice scales by Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) (German version see Ganter, 2001) and were partly adapted for the present study (see Table 1). In the present study, we focused on this scale, as it has been widely cited and used in several countries (e.g., Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995; Gattino et al., 2008; Castro, 2010; Ungaretti et al., 2020). The scale's items overlap with items of other influential prejudice scales, such as the old-fashioned and modern prejudice scale (Swim et al., 1995). The subtle prejudice scale covers the themes of *traditional values* (example stimulus: "[members of group…] living here should not push themselves where they are not wanted."), *exaggeration of cultural differences* (example stimulus: "[members of group…] living here are very different to other German people in the values that they teach their children."), and the *negation of positive emotions* (example stimulus: "I have never felt sympathy for [members of group…] living here."). The blatant prejudice scale covers the themes of *threat and rejection* (example stimulus: "Germans and [members of group…] can never be really comfortable with each other, even if they are close friends."), and *intimacy* (example stimulus: "I would mind if a suitably qualified [members of group…] was appointed as my boss.").

3 We acknowledge that the ultimate analyses differed in some respects from those used for the power analysis (especially, paired t-tests). However, the results of the initially planned analyses lead to the same conclusions as the results reported in the manuscript and are reported in the Supplementary material. For an overview and explanation of deviations from the preregistration, see https://bit.ly/3Xbekrf.

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TABLE 1 Mean discrimination (DR) and social acceptability (SA) ratings for the investigated prejudice expressions (stimuli).

Stimulus	Condition	Factor	M_{DR} (SD) [95%CI]	M_{SA} (SD) [95%CI]	Exposure rate
"[Group] have jobs that the German should have." Blatant_01	Blatant	Threat and rejection	6.12 (1.43) [5.98, 6.26]	4.26 (1.89) [4.07, 4.45]	60.3% ($n = 226$)
"Most [group] living here who receive support from welfare could get along without it if they tried." Blatant_02	Blatant	Threat and rejection	5.26 (1.85) [5.07, 5.44]	4.43 (1.88) [4.24, 4.63]	50.7% ($n = 190$)
"Germans and [group] can never be really comfortable with each other, even if they are close friends." Blatant_03	Blatant	Threat and rejection	5.69 (1.64) [5.52, 5.85]	4.25 (1.92) [4.05, 4.44]	50.7% ($n = 190$)
"Most politicians in Germany care too much about [group] and not enough about the average German person." Blatant_04	Blatant	Threat and rejection	4.99 (1.95) [4.79, 5.18]	4.49 (1.81) [4.30, 4.67]	50.4% ($n = 189$)
"[Group] come from less able races and this explains why they are not as well off as most German people." Blatant_05	Blatant	Threat and rejection	6.56 (1.17) [6.45, 6.68]	3.60 (2.05) [3.39, 3.81]	45.9% ($n = 172$)
"[Group] are very different to the average German people in how honest they are."* Blatant_06	Blatant	Threat and rejection	5.51 (1.81) [5.33, 5.69]	4.18 (1.88) [3.99, 4.37]	54.9% ($n = 206$)
"If a child of mine had children with a person of very different color and physical characteristics than my own, I would be very bothered."* Blatant_07	Blatant	Intimacy	5.84 (1.50) [5.68, 5.99]	4.02 (1.94) [3.83, 4.22]	39.2% ($n = 147$)
"I would not be willing to have sexual relationships with a [member of group]."* Blatant_08	Blatant	Intimacy	5.38 (1.95) [5.18, 5.58]	4.53 (1.91) [4.33, 4.72]	53.6% ($n = 201$)
"I would mind if a suitably qualified [member of group] was appointed as my boss."* Blatant_09	Blatant	Intimacy	6.45 (1.15) [6.33, 6.56]	4.03 (1.93) [3.83, 4.22]	41.1% ($n = 154$)
"I would mind if a [member of group] who had a similar economic background as mine joined my close family by marriage."* Blatant_10	Blatant	Intimacy	6.11 (1.43) [5.97, 6.26]	4.36 (1.84) [4.17, 4.54]	47.7% ($n = 179$)
"[Group] living here should not push themselves where they are not wanted." Subtle_01	Subtle	Traditional values	6.17 (1.38) [6.03, 6.31]	4.07 (1.89) [3.88, 4.26]	54.4% ($n = 204$)
"Many other groups have come to Germany and overcome prejudice and worked their way up. [group] should do the same without special favor." Subtle_02	Subtle	Traditional values	4.66 (2.17) [4.44, 4.88]	4.79 (1.86) [4.60, 4.98]	50.9% ($n = 191$)
"It is just a matter of some people not trying hard enough. If [group] would only try harder they could be as well off as German people." Subtle_03	Subtle	Traditional values	5.79 (1.66) [5.62, 5.96]	4.40 (1.92) [4.20, 4.59]	54.9% ($n = 206$)
"[Group] living here teach their children values and skills different from those required to be successful in Germany." Subtle_04	Subtle	Traditional values	5.22 (1.83) [5.04, 5.41]	4.52 (1.76) [4.34, 4.70]	57.6% ($n = 216$)

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Stimulus	Condition	Factor	M_{DR} (SD) [95%CI]	M_{SA} (SD) [95%CI]	Exposure rate
"[Group] living here are very different to other German people in the values that they teach their children."* Subtle_05	Subtle	Cultural differences	3.87 (2.09) [3.66, 4.08]	4.87 (1.83) [4.69, 5.06]	72.5% (n = 272)
"[Group] living here are very different to other German people in their religious beliefs and practices."* Subtle_06	Subtle	Cultural differences	2.81 (1.98) [2.61, 3.01]	5.02 (1.86) [4.84, 5.21]	70.1% (n = 263)
"[Group] living here are very different to other German people in their sexual values or sexual practices."* Subtle_07	Subtle	Cultural differences	3.95 (2.15) [3.73, 4.17]	4.71 (1.78) [4.53, 4.89]	56.8% (n = 213)
"[Group] living here are very different to other German people in the language that they speak."* Subtle_08	Subtle	Cultural differences	3.46 (2.12) [3.25, 3.68]	4.85 (1.84) [4.67, 5.04]	68.0% (n = 255)
"I have never felt sympathy for [group] living here."* Subtle_09	Subtle	Positive emotions	5.64 (1.72) [5.47, 5.82]	4.28 (1.87) [4.09, 4.47]	56.3% (n = 211)
"I have never felt admiration for [Group] living here."* Subtle_10	Subtle	Positive emotions	5.18 (1.85) [4.99, 5.36]	4.23 (1.90) [4.04, 4.43]	42.9% (n = 161)

Stimuli marked with an asterisk have been rephrased from the original items (Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995; Ganter, 2001) so that they express prejudice. For each participant, the stimuli were adapted according to the group selected by the participant in the filter question. The last column (exposure rate) refers to the percentage of participants who reported to have experienced the stimulus at least once, that is, more often than never.

2.4 Procedure

We designed an online questionnaire using the SoSci-Survey software. Participants provided consent and selected which of the 18 listed ethno-racial, or religious prejudices they are most likely affected by. They had to choose one of these options (example options: "Prejudices against Turks/People of Turkish origin/Turkish Germans or similar," "Prejudices against Muslims," and "Prejudices against Russians/People of Russian origin/Russian Germans or similar"). Participants affected by several of the prejudices listed in the response options were asked to select the one that is most relevant to them in their everyday life. The selection of the target groups of prejudices for which the survey could be completed was aimed at reaching as many people as possible who are potentially exposed to ethno-racial and religious prejudices in Germany. The selected target groups therefore largely refer to people from the countries and regions of origin identified by the Federal Statistical Office for people with a history of migration living in Germany in 2019 (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees of Germany, 2019), the year in which the data for this study were collected. The complete list of response options for this filter question is shown in the Supplementary material S1. Then, participants provided information on sociodemographic variables. Next, the 20 stimuli were presented in a randomized order for every participant, one stimulus per page, adapted for the group selected in the filter question. Participants responded to the same questions (dependent variables) in the same order for every stimulus. We decided not to randomize the item order for different stimuli to avoid cognitive strain and potential confusion of the participants. Further, although there is evidence that although small item proximity effects exist, these are often considered too small to be of practical significance (Schimmack and Oishi, 2005). Therefore, we would not expect our results to have been significantly different if we had randomized the order of the items.

2.5 Measures

Social acceptability, discrimination, and emotional reaction measures consisted of items presented on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*).

2.5.1 Social acceptability ratings

Two self-constructed items measured the perceived social acceptability of the stimuli: "In your estimation: Does this statement pretend acceptance (or tolerance) of [group]?"/"How socially accepted is making such a statement in Germany, in general?" Only responses to the latter item were considered in the analyses, as several participants reported that they probably misunderstood and responded to the first item incorrectly. Moreover, the reliability computed as the Spearman-Brown corrected inter-item correlation (Eisinga et al., 2013) was low (between 0.23 and 0.46) for all stimuli.

2.5.2 Discrimination ratings

Three items measured how discriminatory the stimuli were perceived to be: "How [discriminatory/derogatory toward group/racist] do you find this statement?". The second item was taken from Fetz and Müller (2020). For the analyses, we used the mean value of these three items. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were high for all stimuli and ranged between 0.84 and 0.97.

2.5.3 Emotional reaction ratings

Eight items measured emotional reactions to each of the stimuli presented, two items each for anger (Fetz and Müller, 2020), fear (Fetz

and Müller, 2020), sadness (Ebert et al., 2014), and disgust (Russell and Giner-Sorolla, 2011) (e.g., "How [angry/scared/sad/disgusted] does this statement make you?"). For the analyses, we used the mean value of the two items for each emotion. Spearman-Brown corrected inter-item correlations for all emotions were high for all stimuli and ranged between 0.84 and 0.95.

2.5.4 Familiarity ratings

One item measured whether participants were familiar with the prejudices presented: "Were you familiar with this statement in this or a similar form?" (*yes, no*).

2.5.5 Exposure ratings

One item measured exposure to the stimuli: "How often are you confronted with this or a similar statement addressed at you?". Participants responded to this item on a six-point Likert-type scale (*never, less than once a year, a few times a year, a few times a month, once a week or more, almost every day*; Williams et al., 1997).

We collected several variables to investigate hypotheses and exploratory questions that we preregistered but not included in the present manuscript, as well as exploratory variables. For a complete overview of variables, see Supplementary material S2. Additional findings regarding these variables are presented in the Supplementary material S6.

2.6 Analytic strategy

2.6.1 Descriptives

First, we compiled descriptive results regarding the density distributions (social acceptability and discrimination ratings see Figure 1, emotion ratings see Figure 2), and mean levels (social acceptability and discrimination ratings see Figure 3) of the investigated prejudice expressions for all participants.

Second, to examine the extent to which participants are exposed to the presented expressions of prejudice, for each stimulus we computed the number and percentage of participants who reported to have experienced the prejudice expression at least once[4] (see column exposure rate, Table 1). Third, to explore whether participants, who report to be exposed to specific expressions of prejudice more often would perceive them as more discriminatory, we computed correlations between exposure and discrimination ratings for each stimulus.

2.6.2 Preregistered hypotheses and exploratory questions

For the preregistered hypotheses and exploratory questions, we computed linear mixed effects models. To account for the cross-classified structure of the data, both participants and stimuli were modeled as random factors in all models (e.g., Judd et al., 2012). Moreover, all applicable random slopes of predictors were included to ensure appropriate standard errors (e.g., Barr et al., 2013). Frequentist models were implemented using the R package lme4 (Bates et al., 2015) using REML estimation. 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) and *p* values were computed using the confint function and lmerTest package (Kuznetsova et al., 2017), respectively. In the present study, we were interested in the overall pattern of findings rather than in the rejection of a joint null hypothesis (Rubin, 2021) and thus did not correct for multiple testing.

2.6.3 Exploratory analyses of potential moderators of the type of prejudice effects (subtle vs. blatant) on social acceptability and discrimination ratings

There are likely individual differences in how potentially prejudicial statements are perceived by targets of discrimination. For example, stigma consciousness (Wang et al., 2012), group identification (Major et al., 2003), and ethnic identity (Operario and Fiske, 2001) have been found to predict targets' perceptions of and responses to discrimination, especially when it is ambiguous and thus more subtle. These studies suggest that individuals with a higher (vs. lower) stigma consciousness, group identification, and ethnic identity are more likely to attribute ambiguous discriminatory situations to discrimination. We thus explored possible moderating effects for the condition effects (subtle vs. blatant) on social acceptability and discrimination ratings. We explored the following potential moderator variables: social identification (single-item measure: "I identify with the group of [group selected by participant in the beginning of the survey]", adapted from Postmes et al., 2013), conscious dealing with discrimination (single-item measure: "How much have you consciously dealt with discrimination/racism so far? [e.g. via books, videos, and talks, participated in workshops, etc.]"), perceived typicality of the presented stimuli for everyday experiences of prejudice and discrimination (single-item measure: "Thinking back to the statements in this study, would you say that overall they are typical of the prejudice and discrimination you encounter in your life?"), and mean exposure to the presented expressions of prejudice (across all stimuli).[5] To examine potential interaction effects, we computed linear mixed models with the predictors condition, potential moderator variable, and their interaction, accounting for random effects.[6]

3 Results

3.1 Descriptives

3.1.1 Stimulus-level descriptives

Mean discrimination and social acceptability ratings of the subtle and blatant prejudice expressions differed in the expected directions (Figures 1, 3). Descriptively, however, some prejudice

4 That is, the number and percentage of participants who reported being exposed to this expression of prejudice at least less than once a year, but more often than never.

5 We also explored sociodemographic variables (age, gender, and objective and subjective socioeconomic status) as potential moderator variables. Results of these analyses are shown in the Supplementary material S8.

6 The random effects structure was identical to the models testing condition effects: (1|stimulus)+(condition|participant_id).

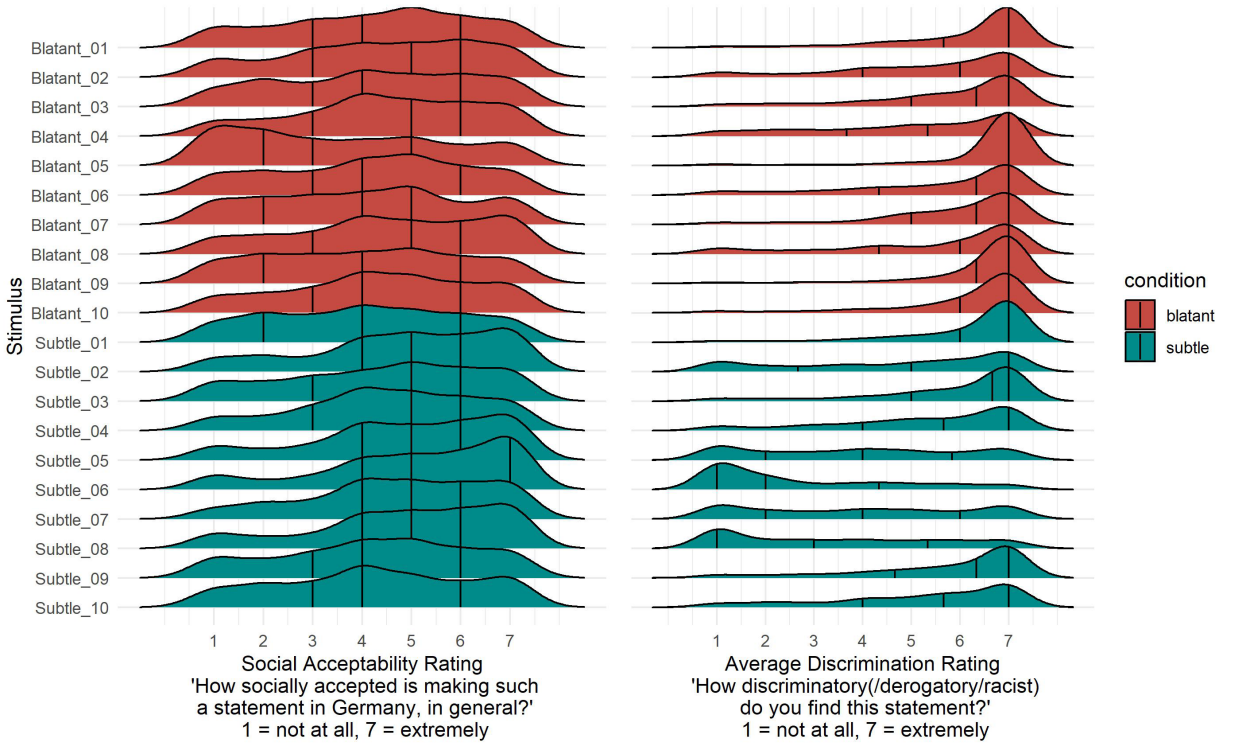

FIGURE 1
Density distributions for participants' responses to the variables social acceptability and discrimination rating for all stimuli. Stimuli (prejudice expressions) conceptualized as subtle (Subtle_01–Subtle_10) are depicted in blue, stimuli conceptualized as blatant (Blatant_01–Blatant_10) in red. The three vertical black lines in each distribution refer to the first, second, and third quartile, respectively. Stimuli are presented in the order in which they appear in the original scale (from top to bottom).

expressions conceptualized as subtle were rated as more discriminatory and less socially accepted on average than some prejudice expressions conceptualized as blatant, and vice versa (Figure 1; Table 1). Similarly, some subtle prejudice expressions elicited comparable negative emotions as some blatant prejudice expressions (Figure 2). Furthermore, both average social acceptability and discrimination ratings were above the scale midpoint for both the subtle and blatant prejudice expressions (Figure 3).

3.1.2 Descriptives regarding the exposure to the presented prejudice expressions

For each stimulus, we report the percentage of the sample who reported to have experienced it at least once in Table 1. These percentages range from 39.2% (stimulus: "If a child of mine had children with a person of very different color and physical characteristics than my own, I would be very bothered" from the blatant scale) to 72.5% (stimulus: "[Members of group…] living here are very different to other German people in the values that they teach their children" from the subtle scale).

Of the total sample, 95.2% experienced at least one of the subtle prejudices and 89.9% of the sample experienced at least one of the blatant prejudices. That is, they reported experiencing at least one subtle (respectively, blatant) stimulus less than once a year, but more often than never.

For 13 out of the 20 stimuli, exposure and discrimination ratings were significantly correlated with $p < 0.01$. These significant correlations ranged between 0.17 and 0.27. In other words, for these stimuli participants who reported being exposed to them more often tended to rate them as more discriminatory. Complete results of these correlation analyses are shown in the Supplementary material S8. Interestingly, the stimuli for which no significant correlations were found were all from the blatant subscale, with the exception of one stimulus. Social acceptability ratings were significantly ($p < 0.01$) correlated with exposure ratings for all stimuli, with correlations ranging between 0.16 and 0.44. This is consistent with the assumption that repeated exposure to a particular behavior in a particular context leads to that behavior being perceived as typical in that context (Morris et al., 2015).

3.2 Stimulus condition (subtle vs. blatant)

3.2.1 Preregistered hypothesis tests

As predicted, the effect of the stimulus condition (subtle vs. blatant) was statistically significant for social acceptability (H1) and discrimination (H2) ratings (Table 2), with a larger effect for discrimination ratings. An inspection of the density distributions (Figure 1) suggested that this effect is primarily driven by responses to the prejudice expressions from the *cultural differences* subscale of

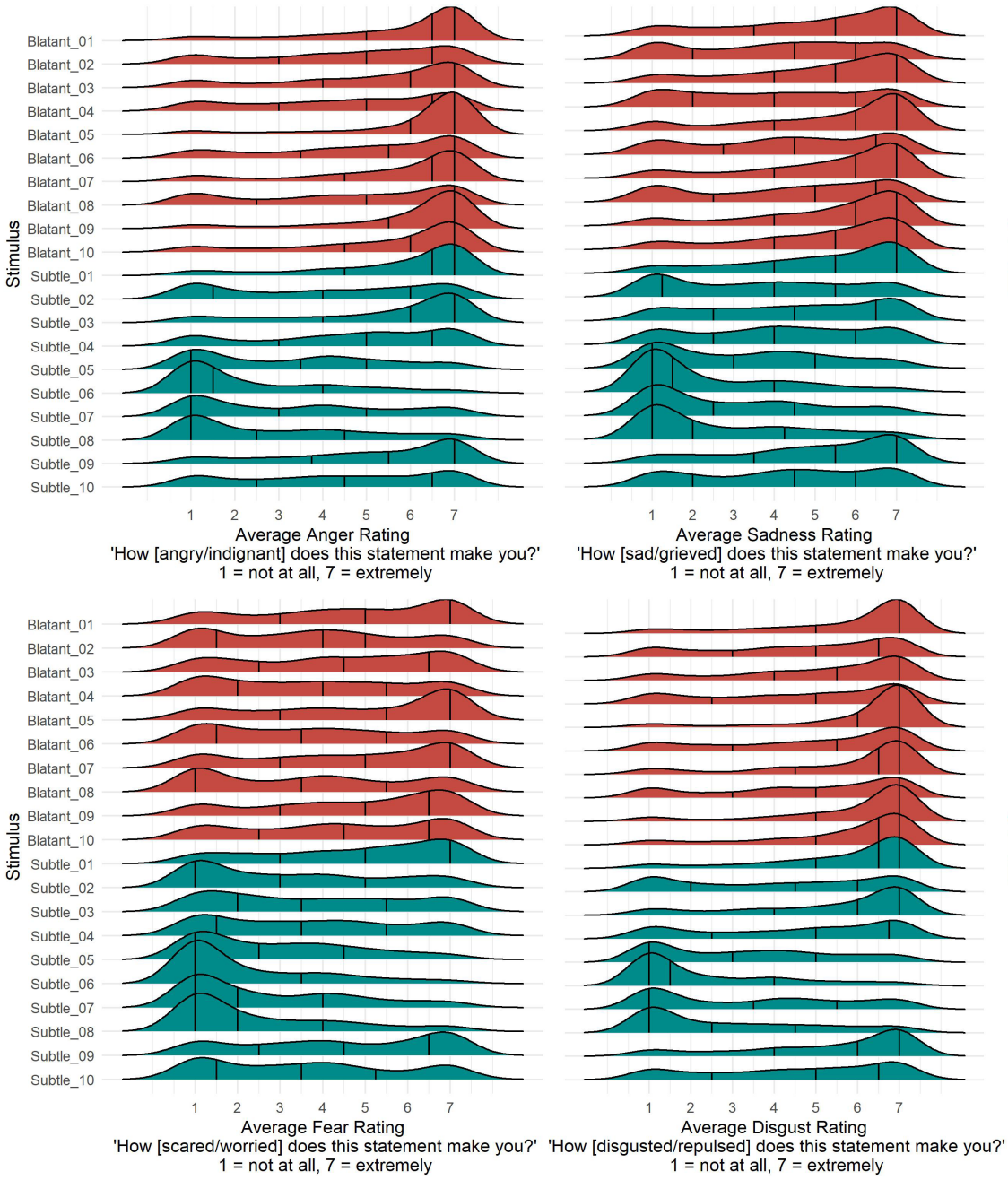

FIGURE 2
Density distributions for participants' responses to the variables anger, fear, sadness, and disgust (emotion ratings). Stimuli (prejudice expressions) conceptualized as subtle (Subtle_01–Subtle_10) are depicted in blue, stimuli conceptualized as blatant (Blatant_01–Blatant_10) in red. The three vertical black lines in each distribution refer to the first, second, and third quartile. Stimuli are presented in the order in which they appear in the original scale (from top to bottom).

the subtle prejudice scale. Also as predicted, exposure ratings were significantly higher in the subtle compared to the blatant condition (Table 2).[7] Mean exposure ratings for the subtle ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.21$) and blatant ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 1.16$) conditions indicate that exposure to verbal expressions of the presented prejudices was rather low overall. This means that, on average, participants reported to be exposed to the subtle stimuli between less than once a year and several times per year, and to the blatant stimuli between never and less than once a year.

3.2.2 Preregistered exploratory questions

Stimulus condition did not predict familiarity ratings (EQ1) (Table 2). Regarding the emotion ratings (EQ2), our analysis suggests that anger, fear, sadness, and disgust ratings were significantly lower in the subtle compared to the blatant condition (Table 2).

7 Results from paired t-tests per subgroup of participants are available in the Supplementary Table S5.

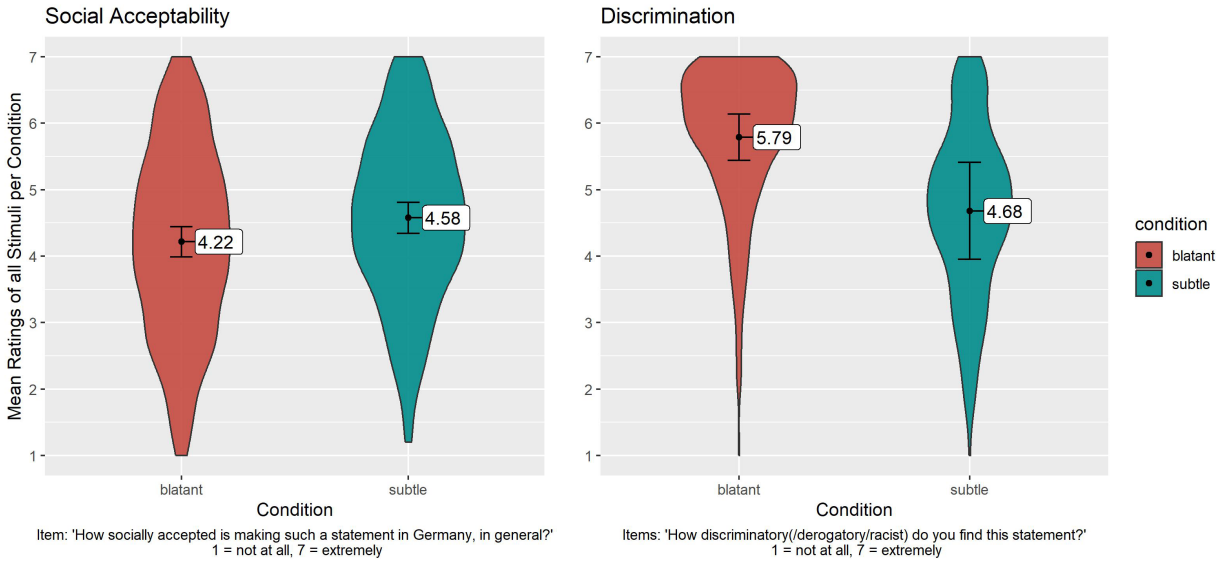

FIGURE 3
This figure shows violin plots for both stimulus conditions (blatant and subtle) for the social acceptability and discrimination ratings (raw data). Black dots represent the mean ratings per condition across all participants. Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals of the intercepts from separate intercept-only models for blatant and subtle prejudices for the social acceptability and discrimination ratings (stimulus-level).

3.3 Exploratory stimulus-level associations between variables

To explore whether targets of prejudice perceive prejudices they rate as less socially accepted as more discriminatory (EQ3) and emotionally disturbing, and emotionally disturbing, we fitted linear mixed models with social acceptability ratings as the predictor and discrimination ratings and emotion ratings as the dependent variables, respectively. To focus specifically on stimulus-level relationships, we used stimulus means in social acceptability ratings as the predictor. Stimuli that were rated as more socially accepted were, indeed, also rated as less discriminatory and elicited less negative emotions (Table 3). Likewise, stimuli that were rated as more discriminatory were rated as eliciting more negative emotions (Table 3).

3.4 Exploratory analyses of potential moderators of the type of prejudice effects (subtle vs. blatant) on social acceptability and discrimination ratings

In the following, we report interaction effects significant with $p < 0.01$, as we examined a wide range of possible interaction models. The complete results of the exploratory interaction analyses and a correlation table of the examined continuous moderator variables are shown in the Supplementary material S9. Four significant interaction effects emerged. The person-level mean exposure ratings moderated the effect of condition (subtle vs. blatant) on both social acceptability [$b = -0.28$, 95% CI [−0.38, −0.18], $t(373) = -5.53$, $p < 0.001$] and discrimination [$b = 0.26$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.36], $t(373) = 5.44$, $p < 0.001$] ratings. Stimulus condition (subtle vs. blatant) predicted social acceptability ratings to a greater extent for participants reporting an overall low (vs. high) exposure to the presented stimuli, such that participants with a low exposure to the stimuli perceived subtle (vs. blatant) stimuli as more socially accepted, whereas the condition effect was not significant for participants who reported being exposed to stimuli at least a few times a month overall. Similarly, stimulus condition predicted discrimination ratings to a greater extent for participants reporting an overall low (vs. high) exposure to the presented stimuli. In other words, for participants who reported high exposure to the presented stimuli, the effect of the presumed subtlety of the stimuli on their ratings of discrimination was diminished (Figure 4).[8] The condition (subtle vs. blatant) effect on discrimination ratings was further moderated by the perceived typicality of the presented stimuli for everyday experiences of prejudice [$b = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.13], $t(373) = 3.45$, $p = 0.001$].[9] Specifically, the condition effect on the discrimination ratings was slightly smaller for participants who

8 Exploratory analyses regarding the emotional responses to the presented expressions of prejudice suggest that this effect was mirrored by a condition x mean exposure rating interaction on anger (b = 0.21, 95% CI [0.11, 0.32], $t(373)$ = 4.15, $p < 0.001$) and disgust ratings (b = 0.22, 95% CI [0.11, 0.32], $t(373)$= 4.06, $p < 0.001$). Participants who reported high (vs. low) exposure to the presented expressions of prejudice, responded with more anger and disgust to them, and especially to stimuli assumed to be subtle.

9 Exploratory analyses regarding the emotional responses to the presented expressions of prejudice suggest that this effect was mirrored by a condition x typicality of presented prejudices interaction on anger ratings (b = 0.07, 95% CI [0.02, 0.12], $t(373)$ = 2.61, p = 0.009). Participants who perceived the presented expressions of prejudice as highly (vs. not very) typical for their everyday experiences of prejudice, responded with more anger to them, and especially to stimuli assumed to be subtle.

TABLE 2 Results for the hyotheses and exploratory questions regarding stimulus condition (subtle vs. blatant).

Hypothesis (H)/exploratory question (EQ)		Predictor	Dependent variable	Result
H1	Participants rate subtle prejudices as subtler than blatant prejudices.	Stimulus condition	Social acceptability rating	$b = 0.360$ [0.088, 0.632], $p = 0.017$
H2	Participants rate subtle prejudices as less discriminatory than blatant prejudices.	Stimulus condition	Discrimination rating	$b = -1.114$ [−1.874, −0.355], $p = 0.010$
H3	Participants report being confronted with subtle prejudices more often than with blatant prejudices.	Stimulus condition	Exposure rating	$b = 0.196$ [0.025, 0.367], $p = 0.035$
EQ1	Do subtle and blatant prejudicial statements elicit different emotional responses (anger, sadness, anxiety/fear, and disgust)?	Stimulus condition	Emotion rating: anger	$b = -1.127$ [−1.870, −0.385], $p = 0.008$
			Emotion rating: fear	$b = -0.819$ [−1.381, −0.258], $p = 0.010$
			Emotion rating: sadness	$b = -0.977$ [−1.620, −0.333], $p = 0.008$
			Emotion rating: disgust	$b = -1.140$ [−1.887, −0.394], $p = 0.008$
EQ2	Are participants more familiar with subtle prejudices than with blatant prejudices?	Stimulus condition	Familiarity rating	$b = 0.150$ [−0.281, 0.582], $p = 0.475$

95% confidence intervals are shown in the square brackets. The model for EQ2 (dependent variable: familiarity rating) was implemented as a logistic model due to the dichotomous response scale.

TABLE 3 Results for exploratory questions regarding stimulus-level associations between variables.

Exploratory question (EQ)		Predictor	Dependent variable	Result
EQ3	Do participants rate the prejudice expressions, which they rate as more blatant, also as more discriminatory?	Social acceptability rating	Discrimination rating	$b = -2.623$ [−3.250, −1.995], $p < 0.001$
Expl	Do the prejudice expressions, which participants rate as more socially accepted, also elicit less negative emotions?	Social acceptability rating	Emotion rating: anger	$b = -2.609$ [−3.213, −2.005], $p < 0.001$
			Emotion rating: fear	$b = -1.938$ [−2.400, −1.477], $p < 0.001$
			Emotion rating: sadness	$b = -2.228$ [−2.783, −1.673], $p < 0.001$
			Emotion rating: disgust	$b = -2.637$ [−3.237, −2.038], $p < 0.001$
Expl	Do the prejudice expressions, which participants perceive as more discriminatory, also elicit more negative emotions?	Discrimination rating	Emotion rating: anger	$b = 0.980$ [0.908, 1.052], $p < 0.001$
			Emotion rating: fear	$b = 0.706$ [0.600, 0.811], $p < 0.001$
			Emotion rating: sadness	$b = 0.831$ [0.727, 0.935], $p < 0.001$
			Emotion rating: disgust	$b = 0.989$ [0.919, 1.058], $p < 0.001$

Expl, Exploratory. 95% confidence intervals are shown in the square brackets.

perceived the presented stimuli as more (vs. less) typical of their everyday experiences of prejudice and discrimination (Figure 4). The effect was in the same direction for conscious dealing with discrimination, but was not significant at $p < 0.01$ [$b = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.10], $t(373) = 2.05$, $p = 0.04$]. At the same time, there were main effects of mean exposure and typicality of the presented prejudices for everyday experiences of prejudice, such that participants, who reported a higher exposure to the presented stimuli [$b = 0.24$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.37], $t(373) = 3.73$, $p < 0.001$] and perceived them as more typical of their everyday experiences of prejudice [$b = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.23], $t(373) = 5.38$, $p < 0.001$], perceived them as more discriminatory overall.

None of the other examined interaction effects was significant at $p < 0.01$. However, there were several significant main effects of the examined moderator variables on social acceptability and discrimination ratings [in addition to the significant main effect of condition (subtle vs. blatant)]. With regard to social acceptability ratings, participants who perceived the presented stimuli as more typical for their everyday experiences of prejudice [$b = 0.28$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.36], $t(373) = 6.99$, $p < 0.001$] and participants with higher levels of consciously dealing with discrimination [$b = 0.21$, 95% CI [0.13, 0.29], $t(373) = 5.09$, $p < 0.001$] perceived the stimuli as more socially accepted overall. With regard to discrimination ratings, participants identifying more strongly with their ethno-racial or religious group [$b = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.13], $t(373) = 2.51$, $p = 0.012$], and participants with higher levels of consciously dealing with discrimination [$b = 0.16$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.22], $t(373) = 5.23$, $p < 0.001$] perceived the presented stimuli as more discriminatory overall.

4 Discussion

Our study examined how potential targets of ethno-racial prejudice in Germany perceive ethno-racially and religiously prejudicial statements developed to measure subtle and blatant forms of prejudice. Overall, we found a fit between how expressions of subtle and blatant ethno-racial prejudice are traditionally conceptualized in the literature and their perceptions by targets. Specifically, a diverse sample of potential targets of ethno-racial prejudice in Germany rated prejudices that have been conceptualized by researchers as subtle (vs.

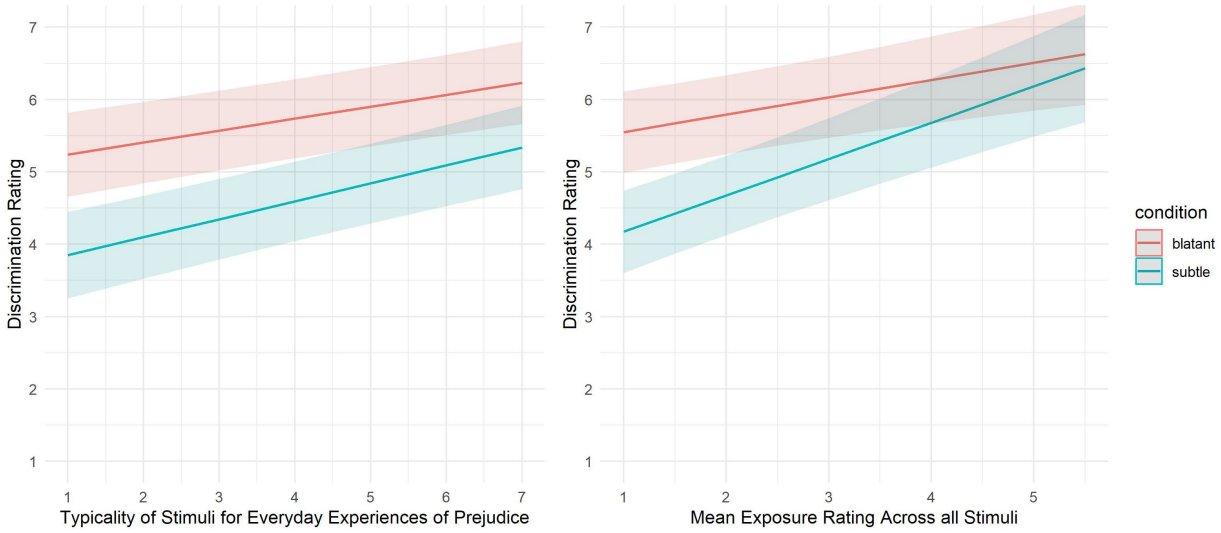

FIGURE 4
Interaction between stimulus condition and perceived typicality of the presented stimuli for everyday experiences of prejudice, and stimulus condition and mean exposure rating across all stimuli on discrimination ratings. Shaded areas around the regression lines represent 95%, confidence intervals.

blatant) as subtler in the sense of more socially accepted and less discriminatory. Furthermore, our results indicate that prejudices conceptualized as subtle are expressed directly more often than blatant prejudices.

Despite the differential perception of subtle and blatant prejudice expressions, blatant prejudice expressions were also rated as relatively socially accepted and subtle prejudices as relatively discriminatory (see mean ratings above the scale midpoint, Figure 3). That is, the subtle prejudices did *not* go "under the radar" of many participants because, more often than not, participants recognized them as discriminatory. Exploratory analyses suggest that prejudice expressions from the subtle (vs. blatant) prejudice scale elicited negative emotions (anger, sadness, fear, and disgust) to a lesser extent in participants. In line with theoretical assumptions, prejudice expressions perceived as more socially accepted were perceived as less discriminatory by their targets and elicited negative emotions to a lesser extent.

Even though the majority of the participants reported having experienced at least one of the prejudice expressions examined, on average, they reported to be exposed to the presented stimuli less than a few times a year. Given this relatively low reported exposure to verbal prejudice expressions in the present study on the one hand, and findings that verbal discrimination is widespread on the other, it seems likely that there are prejudices that are not captured by the subtle and blatant prejudice scales. This raises the question of whether commonly used prejudice measures comprise beliefs representative of the prejudices held in society and experienced by their targets. In this regard, descriptive results (Supplementary material S5) indicate that the presented prejudices are typical of the prejudices experienced in everyday life to different degrees for different subsamples (for example, less typical for participants affected by anti-Asian or anti-Slavic prejudice than for participants affected by anti-Muslim or anti-Turkish prejudice). In the following, we first situate the present study in the context of prejudice research from a non-target perspective, of sexism research, and research on the role of social norms for the perception of discrimination. We then articulate limitations of this study with a focus on constraints on generality. Finally, we discuss implications of this study and directions for future research.

By including the often-neglected target perspective, our findings complement previous research on the perception of prejudice expressions from a non-target perspective, that is, research with participants not targeted by the prejudice studied. Our findings mirror previous research showing that non-targets (white undergraduate students) perceive items from the modern racism scale (subtle measure) as revealing anti-Black attitudes to some extent (McConahay et al., 1981). Similarly, in a recent study, non-target participants perceived presumably subtle expressions of anti-Asian prejudice as prejudicial, on average (Platow et al., 2022). Other studies on the perceived social acceptability of the subtle and blatant prejudice scale's items with non-target samples suggest a slightly different picture. Two studies with student non-target samples found mean social acceptability ratings under the scale midpoint for the blatant and around the scale midpoint for the subtle items (Pettigrew and Meertens, 1996; Manganelli Rattazzi and Volpato, 2003).

Yet, the comparability of these studies might be restricted by different temporal and local contexts, sample characteristics (other than being affected by ethno-racial prejudice) and slight methodological differences. On the other hand, the discrepancy might reflect a real difference in societal norms over time. Several recent studies do indeed suggest that the expression of prejudice may have become more socially accepted again in recent years (e.g., Crandall et al., 2018; Lees, 2018). Indeed, our finding of relatively high perceived social acceptability of those prejudices traditionally assumed to be blatant prejudice expressions (Figure 3) challenges the notion that there is a strict societal norm against blatant prejudices as perceived by potential targets of ethno-racial prejudice in the German context.

Our results further mirror a recent finding that non-targets judge prejudice expressions referring to culture as less xenophobic than prejudice expressions referring to economic utility or danger (Fetz and Kroh, 2021). Specifically, an inspection of the density distributions

(Figure 1) suggests that the subtle versus blatant effect regarding the perception of discrimination is mainly driven by responses to prejudice expressions exaggerating cultural differences. Similarly, psychometric investigations of the subtle and blatant prejudice scales found a broad general prejudice and a small cultural differences factor instead of the initially proposed subscales (Coenders et al., 2001).

Contrary to previous research on sexist prejudice as perceived by female students (Barreto and Ellemers, 2005b), we did not find that targets of ethno-racial prejudice report more anxiety when exposed to subtle (vs. blatant) prejudice expressions and more hostility when exposed to blatant (vs. subtle) prejudice expressions. Rather, our results suggest that the differential emotional reactions to subtle and blatant prejudice expressions are differences of degree and not of kind, which is in line with dimensional conceptualizations of the subtlety of discrimination (e.g., Jones et al., 2017). The comparability with this study is limited, however, because the subtle prejudices Barreto and Ellemers (2005b) studied relate to the denial of discrimination, which is not captured by the subtle prejudice expressions we examined. Moreover, Barreto and Ellemers (2005b) measured participants' emotional reactions after they read that the majority of a putative sample agreed with subtle (or blatant) sexist statements, whereas we measured participants' responses to the statements themselves. It is conceivable that the information that a considerable proportion of the sample of a previous study agrees with the presented prejudiced statements elicits more anxiety than merely reading the prejudiced statements. Extant research on Korean immigrants in Canada also suggests that emotions might play a different role for mediating negative mental health effects of subtle versus blatant discrimination (Noh et al., 2007). Specifically, whereas experiences of blatant discrimination were associated with reduced positive affect in their study, experiences of subtle discrimination were associated with higher depressive symptoms, with only the latter appearing to be mediated by emotional responses. This suggests that subtle versus blatant discrimination might be related to more distal mental health outcomes (i.e., positive affect, depressive symptoms) in unique ways.

Our finding that the perceived social acceptability of prejudice expressions seems to be related to how discriminatory they are perceived, is corroborated by other studies. For instance, both targets and non-targets of racism perceive popular tweets containing racist expressions as slightly less racist than unpopular tweets containing racist expressions (Martinez and Paluck, 2020). Similarly, findings on lay perceptions of potentially prejudicial statements, for which both speakers (Asian vs. Anglo-European) and targets (Asian vs. Anglo-European) were varied, suggest that individuals at least partly base their judgment of the prejudicial nature of these statements on social norms (Platow et al., 2022). These findings are in line with the assumption that targets of prejudice may (partly) rely on perceived norms when interpreting (potentially) discriminatory events (Schmader et al., 2022).

Results from exploratory interaction analyses are in line with the assumption that targets of prejudice also partly rely on their overall lived experiences when interpreting potentially prejudicial statements. Specifically, participants who reported an overall higher (vs. lower) exposure to the presented expressions of prejudice rated them as more discriminatory overall. They also rated the presumably subtle and blatant expressions of prejudice as more similar in terms of how discriminatory they perceived them. These results suggest that some of the variability in targets' judgments of potentially prejudicial statements is based on differential exposure to these statements. The pattern of results is compatible with the assumption that cumulative experiences of prejudice shape perceptions and experiences of individual instances of discrimination, especially when they are ambiguous. For example, Sue et al. (2007, p. 279) have argued that when interpreting ambiguously discriminatory situations "people of color rely heavily on experiential reality that is contextual in nature and involves life experiences from a variety of situations". In this sense, the perceived pervasiveness of prejudice against one's social group might inform prejudice attributions of individual events and reduce the perceived ambiguity of presumably subtle expressions of prejudice. This result is in line with previous research, which has shown that stigma consciousness predicts prejudice judgments of sexist situations, especially when they are ambiguous (Wang et al., 2012). Similarly, the finding that participants who perceived the presented stimuli as more typical of their everyday experiences of prejudice also perceived them as more discriminatory is broadly consistent with the assumption that people compare events to their prototype of discrimination to decide whether they are due to discrimination (Major and Dover, 2016). Prejudicial statements that are typical of one's everyday experiences of prejudice might be attributed to discrimination more readily, because they align with one's prototype of prejudice experiences.

Significant positive associations between exposure and discrimination ratings for individual stimuli, especially for subtle stimuli, are in line with the assumption that potentially prejudicial statements are partly understood by considering the frequency with which they are experienced. For example, stating large group differences (as the subtle stimuli referring to the exaggeration of cultural differences) may not be seen as indicative of prejudice in itself. However, being repeatedly exposed to statements implying large group differences might remind one that one is not considered a (prototypical) member of society and thereby could lead to some sense of exclusion. In the words of the authors of the subtle and blatant prejudice scales, it might be that the "process [of exaggerating cultural differences] sets the outgroup aside as 'a people apart'-wholly unlike the ingroup" (Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995, p. 60).

Taken together, our findings add to previous research, which has revealed similarities in how social psychologists and lay participants understand prejudice (Platow et al., 2019). The present study indicates that, similar to what previous studies including non-targets have shown, targets of ethno-racial prejudice perceive presumably subtle versus blatant expressions of prejudice differently, in terms of how socially accepted and discriminatory they find them, but still perceive subtle expressions of prejudice as discriminatory to a certain degree. Hence, our results suggest that the conceptual distinction between subtle and blatant prejudice is generally consistent with the perceptions of targets of ethno-racial prejudice.

Our results also resonate well with previous work showing that the topic and essentialist phrasing of prejudice statements influence non-targets' attributions of prejudice (Fetz and Kroh, 2021), although we did not independently manipulate these factors. For example, the stimulus participants consensually rated as most discriminatory, refers to a clearly essentialist assumption: "[members of group…] come from less able races and this explains why they are not as well off as most German people." Conversely, statements referring to culture were perceived as least prejudicial by non-targets in the study by Fetz and Kroh (2021). The stimulus participants consensually rated as least discriminatory refers to the theme of exaggeration of cultural differences: "[members of group…] living here are very different to other German people in their religious

beliefs and practices." Our results are in line with the notion that targets also, at least to some extent, base their prejudice judgments on the topic and essentialist nature of potentially prejudicial statements. At the same time, these stimuli were the ones that were perceived as least and most socially accepted, respectively.

Perceptions of the social acceptability of the expressions of particular group-related statements, as measured in the present study, likely reflect the perceived social norm regarding their expression to some degree. By this view, our results, like other recent research (Platow et al., 2022), are consistent with the assumption that lay people, including targets of prejudice, at least partly rely on social norms when deciding whether a statement is attributable to prejudice. When individuals targeted by ethno-racial prejudice and those who are not live in the same society, they are likely exposed to at least partly similar social influences and norms. If discrimination ratings are influenced by these norms, it would thus be reasonable to expect that both targets and non-targets arrive at similar conclusions regarding the discriminatory nature of potentially prejudicial statements. Overall, our findings are consistent with the assumption that targets and non-targets of discrimination seem to rely on similar processes when judging whether an event is due to prejudice (Inman, 2001). However, our additional exploratory analyses suggest that, as commonly assumed (e.g., Sue et al., 2007; Essed, 2008), targets of prejudice seem to also factor in their previous experiences when deciding whether a potential expression of prejudice is discriminatory. Although these exploratory results are consistent with extant theorizing on subtle discrimination, they should be interpreted with caution due to their exploratory nature.

4.1 Limitations and constraints on generality

Although the results presented here provided an important initial overview of how different types of ethno-racial prejudice expressions (subtle and blatant) are experienced from the often-neglected perspective of their targets, several limitations should be noted. Combining people who are subject to prejudice based on different (perceived) ethno-racial backgrounds into one sample of "targets of ethno-racial prejudice" has obvious limitations, as the experiences of prejudice and discrimination will depend on the specific content of the prejudice in relation to the group to which one is perceived as belonging to. At the same time, using a diverse sample can be considered an advantage of our study, given that the bulk of research on ethno-racial prejudice has focused on African American participants (e.g., Swim and Stangor, 1998; Selod and Embrick, 2013).

Further limitations relate to the generalizability of our results. First, we used a relatively highly educated convenience sample, and it remains to be seen whether our results generalize to a more diverse sample in terms of education. As several studies suggest that individuals with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to report discrimination than participants with lower socioeconomic status (e.g., Watson et al., 2002; Borrell et al., 2006, 2011; Dailey et al., 2010), it is possible that the absolute ratings of how discriminatory prejudice expressions are perceived might be lower in a representative sample. However, we would not expect the effect of the stimulus conditions to be different in such a sample. In a similar vein, participants were probably aware that the survey involved the judgment of statements that could potentially be seen as discriminatory. With regard to attributional ambiguity, this could possibly have affected the perception of the stimuli, especially those stimuli referring to subtler, ambiguously prejudicial statements. We cannot rule out that the context of the study may have led participants to rate the subtler, ambiguously prejudicial statements as more discriminatory than if they had been presented in isolation. Again, however, we would not expect the overall pattern of the observed stimulus condition effects to be different if we had presented individual stimuli to individual participants. Similarly, the results of this study are likely to depend on current social norms regarding the expression of prejudice, which are anchored in regional and temporal contexts. For instance, due to increases in awareness, previously assumed to be subtle prejudices may be perceived as more blatant over time, encompassing shifts in social norms regarding their expression (Friedlaender, 2021). Also, as discussed above, findings may differ among prejudice targets in cultural contexts other than Germany.

Second, we used a relatively small sample of stimuli, which limits generalizability to a representative set of prejudice expressions (Judd et al., 2012). The results might have been different if we had relied on more ecologically valid stimuli, such as self-reported past discriminatory situations. We expect the results to generalize to stimuli taken from comparable prejudice scales, especially when prejudice expressions conceptualized as subtle include statements regarding the exaggeration of cultural differences, as these stimuli seemed to primarily drive the condition (subtle vs. blatant) effects in the present study.

Third, prior research (Woodzicka and LaFrance, 2001) showed that participants' emotional reactions to someone actually expressing prejudice toward them are not the same as reactions to reading them. Specifically, they found that women tended to anticipate reacting to situations of sexist harassment with anger but tended to report being afraid when actually exposed to sexist harassment in a laboratory setting. In a similar vein, emotional reactions reported in this study might reflect the emotional reactions after a secondary appraisal of the situation instead of the spontaneous emotional reactions in real-life situations. Therefore, emotional reactions to the examined prejudice expressions might not be the same if they were directly expressed toward participants. Nevertheless, it is plausible that secondary appraisal processes and accompanying more "reflective" emotions after discriminatory events do play a role in real life and could have important mental health implications in the long run.

Finally, our results could be interpreted as contradicting previous research showing comparable negative effects of subtle and blatant discrimination. However, there are several reasons why we do not think this is warranted. It is possible that subtle stimuli would be perceived as more harmful if different indicators of harm were used. Similarly, subtle discrimination might accompany types of harm difficult to capture with self-report measures. Given that subtle prejudice expressions are more socially accepted, it might be especially hard to cope with them. For example, confronting perpetrators of discrimination can go along with secondary harms such as being labeled as complainer or hypersensitive (Johnson et al., 2021), which might be especially likely for subtle prejudice expressions. Furthermore, subtle prejudices might have a greater overall impact in everyday life because of cumulative effects. Indeed, our results and

other research (e.g., Greenfield et al., 2021) suggest that subtle (vs. blatant) prejudice expressions are experienced more frequently. Such cumulative effects are hard to capture in cross-sectional study designs. Longitudinal designs might be better suited to examine such effects.

4.2 Implications

Our results have several implications for future avenues of research. Going beyond previous studies demonstrating negative associations between perceived discrimination and negative health outcomes, we examined how specific prejudice expressions (discriminatory incidents) are experienced by their targets. Our results thereby provide initial evidence as to which types of prejudice are perceived as particularly discriminatory and particularly socially accepted. These findings may inform practitioners when deciding which contents to target in anti-prejudice interventions. Descriptive results indicated that the presented prejudices are more typical of the prejudices experienced in everyday life for some subsamples (for example, participants affected by anti-Muslim or anti-Turkish prejudice) than for others (for example, participants affected by anti-Asian or anti-Slavic prejudice). Therefore, it likely makes more sense to tackle the beliefs captured by the subtle and blatant prejudice scales in prejudice-reduction interventions tailored to reduce anti-Muslim prejudice than, for example, anti-Asian prejudice. Likewise, to evaluate the effectiveness for interventions aimed at reducing, for example, anti-Asian prejudice it might be warranted to develop measures capturing beliefs which are more typical of this subsample.

Our results suggest that expressions of prejudice traditionally assumed to be subtle are not so subtle from targets' perspectives, especially prejudice expressions referring to the themes of *traditional values* and the *denial of positive emotions*. It thus appears sensible to tackle these themes in prejudice reduction interventions and examine how they contribute to maintaining structural inequalities. For instance, previous studies suggest that raising awareness might contribute to reducing discriminatory behavior (Pope et al., 2018; Boring and Philippe, 2021). At the same time, social acceptability ratings of prejudice expressions traditionally assumed to be blatant above the scale midpoint indicate the possibility that blatant forms of prejudice are still quite prevalent in the German context, requiring attention by researchers and policy-makers. In this regard, our study indicates the need for wide-spread interventions regarding majority members' ethno-racial attitudes. When addressing such beliefs in prejudice-reduction interventions, practitioners could provide participants with data on whether being exposed to such beliefs makes targets of prejudice feel disrespected (especially when they are exposed frequently to them). This could possibly enhance participants' perceived legitimacy of addressing such beliefs. With regard to the success of collective action efforts, recent research suggests that it is the communication of members of disadvantaged group members (as opposed to non-marginalized allies) which seems to play the crucial role. This research suggests that decision maker's support of the interests of disadvantaged groups was unaffected by these interests being supported by members of an advantaged group (Hartwich et al., 2023). Future research on prejudice-reduction interventions could test whether providing data on targets' perceptions of ethno-racial attitudes has a positive effect on participants' motivation, and ultimately the outcomes of such interventions. In addition, interventions could, for instance, highlight pro-diversity norms and peers' pro-diversity attitudes. Such measures can improve non-marginalized group members' attitudes toward outgroup members and increase marginalized group members' sense of belonging (Murrar et al., 2020). Our results can further inform the development of novel measures of prejudice and discrimination. The assessment of how discriminatory and socially accepted the presented prejudice expressions were perceived could be used, for example, when making hypotheses regarding the factor structure of measures similar to the Acceptability of Racial Microaggressions Scale (Mekawi and Todd, 2018).

4.3 Directions for future research

Important directions for future research emerge from the limitations discussed. Future research should extend the present study by replicating our results with a larger set of stimuli. Such studies could employ a bottom-up strategy by including prejudicial expressions previously reported by targets, rather than exclusively using expressions constructed by researchers (Winslow et al., 2011). Such an approach could provide researchers with ecologically valid stimuli for differentially racialized groups. In addition, future studies should extend the present study by employing qualitative or experience sampling designs to gain a more precise understanding of targets' experiences of subtle and blatant ethno-racial prejudice. Building on this, future work could further examine which prejudice contents are particularly distressing for the targets of various forms of ethno-racial prejudice. Moreover, future research should examine the role social norms play in targets' experience of prejudice expressions. Finally, the exploratory finding that individuals who reported being frequently exposed to the studied expressions of prejudice perceived subtle and blatant expressions of prejudice as more similar warrants further investigation and should be replicated in independent studies. Although not focus of the present study, considering potential differential understandings of prejudice between target and non-target groups is an important avenue for future research. Different understandings of what counts as prejudice and what does not can plausibly impede political debates (Platow et al., 2023) and intergroup dialogue (Carter and Murphy, 2015). In the long run, this information could inform practitioners when they are deciding which content to target in anti-prejudice interventions and how to target it.

Positionality statement

When this manuscript was drafted, all authors identified as White (and no targets of racism).

Author's note

This work was conducted while the third author was a researcher at the Berlin Institute for Integration and Migration Research, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany. This author is currently working as a psychological counselor. The preliminary results of this study were presented at the 2021 Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP) entitled, "*Subtle or blatant for whom—Do conceptions of prejudice correspond to how prejudice is perceived by its targets?*".

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found in the article (Open Science Framework: https://bit.ly/3Xbekrf).

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology and Sports Sciences at the University of Münster. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

FS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft. NK: Formal Analysis, Validation, Writing – review & editing. KF: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. GE: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frsps.2024.1343514/full#supplementary-material

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