

Rui Costa Lopes (ICS-ULisboa), Ana Filipa Madeira (ICS-ULisboa), Wilson Moreira (FPUL), Mariana Miranda (ICS-ULisboa) | *Socially critical decisions towards low status: The role of meritocracy*

We face trivial decisions everyday but every once in a while we face decisions with a deep impact on others as they may imply serious harm or unequal distribution of relevant material or symbolic resources. These socially critical decisions (SCD) constitute the core of this chapter and its main goal is to describe the literature on these SCD and present empirical research testing how the contextual salience of a meritocratic norm impacts on these decisions towards low status group members.

The first part of this chapter will describe the existing research on SCD within asymmetric social relations which has mostly focused on different examples such as “shoot vs. not-shoot” police decisions as a function of different ethnic target groups, medical decisions, moral dilemmas and legal decisions. A consistent result across these different decisional contexts indicates that low status group members (e.g. blacks, gypsies, homeless) are targeted with more unfavorable decisions and that implicit prejudice (e.g. stereotypes about these groups) may partially explain these discriminatory decisions. However, research has been more focused in showing this group-based discrimination in SCD than in explaining it. Importantly, a significant factor that has been consistently shown to impact on group-based distinctions has been neglected by SCD research: that is, the salience of a meritocratic norm. Although seen as an important social norm that regulates society, descriptive meritocracy, i.e. the belief that people are rewarded based on their efforts is however associated with intolerance and dislike of members of low status groups and may therefore be logically associated with more unfavorable decisions towards low status groups. In the second part of this chapter we will present our own research developed around this hypothesis.

We will end the chapter with a discussion on how this bias in SCD hinders a full integration of low status group members in society.