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Changing Prejudice Against Minority Groups: The Role of Self- and Group-Affirmation

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Changing Prejudice Against Minority Groups: The Role of Self- and Group-Affirmation

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Running Head: Self- and Group-Affirmation

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Abstract

According to self-affirmation theory, prejudice towards minority groups represents defensive reactions that individuals may exhibit to cope with threats to their ingroup. Affirming participants' important values and reminding them of important personal or collective successes attenuates defensive reactions such as prejudice and discrimination. A distinction is first made between *self-affirmation*, which is accomplished by recalling values that are meaningful to the individual, and *group-affirmation* which is achieved through the recall of values important to an ingroup (e.g., family, nation). Inconsistent results were obtained in studies using self and group-affirmation manipulations for reducing prejudice. The aim of this article is to examine factors that can increase the efficacy of these interventions. We argue that *individual factors* such as differences in value orientation can influence the effect of self-affirmation on intergroup attitudes. In contrast, the effect of group-affirmation on reducing prejudice may be hampered by *cultural factors* such as the normative context in which the intervention is implemented. Limitations of actual studies and future directions are discussed.

Keywords: self-affirmation, prejudice, social norms

Introduction

Immigration is often the subject of political debate in Western societies. Attitudes towards immigrants seem to play a role in shaping the political scene. For example, anti-immigrant sentiment influenced voting intentions in the Brexit vote (Swami et al., 2017) and negative attitudes against Muslim Americans predicted support for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election in the United States (Lajevardi & Abrajan, 2019). In both cases, anti-immigrant sentiment was mobilized by the concerned campaigns, which suggests a reciprocal influence between the rise of right-wing parties and anti-immigrant prejudice. Beyond the link between anti-immigrant sentiment and political orientation, the question that arises is how to deal with the cultural diversity that results from immigration and that is perceived to pose a threat to national identity. Researchers in social and cultural psychology are trying to understand whether this threat can be part of the explanatory factors of prejudice towards minority groups with an immigrant background. In particular, the implication of perceived threat in the psychological mechanisms of the rejection of immigrants and other individuals belonging to devalued groups in society is studied.

One of the possible explanations of prejudice against minority groups such as immigrants is based on the theory of self-affirmation (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). The basic idea is that when members of the host society feel a threat to some aspect of their identity, such as thinking that their national identity is affected by the significant presence of immigrants (Badea et al., 2018a; Velasco González et al., 2008), they may experience a decrease in self-esteem and have a defensive reaction to this threat. This reaction may take the form of prejudice and discrimination against immigrant minority groups, and subsequently contribute to an increase in self-esteem among members of the host society (Fein & Spencer, 1997). Thus, researchers in social psychology are looking at factors that can enhance self-esteem in the face of identity threat without resorting to the expression of prejudice and discrimination. This led to the idea that self-affirmation, which allows individuals to perceive self-worth and integrity, could be a way to reduce negative intergroup attitudes in the field of immigration (e.g., Badea et al., 2018b). A distinction is made in the literature between self- and group-affirmation (Sherman et al., 2007). We start this review with the distinction between these affirmation interventions and the presentation of their efficacy in reducing prejudice.

Self- and Group-Affirmation Interventions

Self-affirmation may be accomplished by recalling actions or values that are meaningful to the individual, while group-affirmation is obtained through recalling positive events or values that matter to a given ingroup (e.g., family, close friends, the national group, psychology students). Other manipulations of self- and group-affirmation will be detailed later in the manuscript.

Self-affirmation is found to be successful in reducing negative intergroup attitudes (for a review, see Sherman et al., 2017). However, in a recent study, Lesick and Zell (2021) did not find any significant effect of self-affirmation on increasing the perception of racism among European Americans nor on increasing their support for anti-racism policies. In addition, undertaking the self-affirmation procedure did not reduce the gap between European and African Americans' recognition of systematic racism and support for anti-racism policies, as African Americans continued to perceive greater racism and to show higher support for such policies. These inconsistent results could be explained by the use of different self-affirmation manipulations (values' ranking versus positive feedback). Indeed, providing participants with positive feedback about their competence in a valued domain (Unzueta & Lowery, 2008), could more effectively reduce defensiveness and denial of racism. Furthermore, they could be attributed to the different outcomes measured in each study. Self-affirmation might have an effect on reducing prejudice towards immigrants (e.g., Badea et al., 2018a), yet have no consistent effect on increasing the perception of racism and the support for policies aimed at reducing it. In addition, as Lesick and Zell (2021) suggest, "future research is needed to examine the degree to which self-affirmation effects on perceived racism vary across cultures, regions, and demographic groups, including racial-ethnic minority groups that have been less studied in this literature." (Lesick & Zell, 2021, p. 11).

Other research using self-affirmation in different fields and taking the perspective of minority groups, showed contrasting results. In two initial experiments, Leach et al. (2021) found that self-affirmation made participants perceive eating animals as more morally wrong. However, a subsequent pre-registered experiment failed to replicate this effect. In a different study, Bratter et al. (2016) examined the effectiveness of self-affirmation in reducing stereotype threat effects on Black and Hispanic students' performance, in racial mixed schools. The authors administered self-affirmation exercises over the course of an academic year and found no clear evidence that self-affirmation promoted higher scores compared to control. The authors suggest that self-affirmation's efficacy in reducing the negative impact of stereotype threat might depend on the cultural diversity of the academic context. More specifically, this type of intervention might be less efficacious in schools where Black students are the majority.

Results on group-affirmation can also be ambiguous: this technique can attenuate, have no impact on, or even accentuate negative intergroup attitudes. For example, Canadian students who completed a group-affirmation task were more likely to recognize the mistreatment of Inuit people by the Canadian government, compared to those in the control condition (Gunn & Wilson, 2011). However, in a study conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011), the authors examined the acknowledgment of Serbs' responsibility for the genocide committed by in-group members towards Bosnian Muslims. In this study, only self-affirmation increased this responsibility, while group-affirmation had no effect. Finally, a study conducted by Ehrlich and Gramzow (2015) showed a more unfavorable assessment of the opposing political party following a group-affirmation manipulation compared to control. The authors propose that group-affirmation increases the salience of the associated social identity and consequently favoritism biases.

This explanation was tested in one of their studies in which members of two political parties were assigned to self-affirmation, group-affirmation, or control conditions. They completed a word accessibility task that involved choosing words presented on a computer screen as quickly as possible. Results showed that participants choose more words with political connotations in the group-affirmation condition compared to the other conditions, suggesting that their political identity was more salient following a group-affirmation manipulation.

The aim of this article is to examine factors that can increase the potential for self- and group-affirmation procedures to reduce prejudice against minority groups such as immigrants. The paper is structured around a few questions that we try to answer using both theoretical and empirical arguments. What is the psychological mechanism involved in the effect of self- and group-affirmation procedures in reducing prejudice against minority groups? What factors may moderate the effectiveness of these interventions? Finally, we discuss limitations of previous studies and directions for future research.

How Self- and Group-Affirmation Might Reduce Prejudice Against Minority Groups?

An experimental study conducted by Fein and Spencer (1997) could provide some elements that would allow us to identify the underlying psychological mechanism of self- and group-affirmation interventions in reducing prejudice. In their studies, participants were given an “intelligence test” and received positive versus negative feedback about their performance. They then completed a measure of their self-esteem. In the next step, participants evaluated information about a job candidate who belonged to a minority group, and they again completed the items of self-esteem. Results showed that participants who received negative feedback about their performance on the intelligence test had lower self-esteem than participants who received positive feedback. They also evaluated the job candidate more negatively. Surprisingly, this fact increased their self-esteem in the second measure. These results led the authors to think that expressing prejudice against minority groups could be a form of self-affirmation in front of threats. Since individuals strive to maintain a positive self-image (Steele, 1988), they tend to react defensively when perceiving a threat. Poor performance on an intelligence test can be a threat to individuals’ personal identity. This threat lowers individuals’ self-esteem and leads them to devalue others, which in turn, increases their self-esteem. In other words, the expression of prejudice can be a form of self-affirmation. The next question was then whether there were other opportunities to affirm participants in order to reduce the link between threat and negative intergroup attitudes.

According to self-affirmation theory (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988), prejudice and discrimination towards minority groups represent defensive reactions that individuals may exhibit to cope with a threat to a specific aspect of their identity. Affirming participants’ important values or reminding them of important personal or collective successes, attenuates defensive reactions such as negative intergroup attitudes and behaviors.

In social psychology, a distinction is made between threats to the individuals' personal identity, to what makes them unique and special, and threats to their social identity, which refers to their group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In this article, we focus on threats to social identity which can also be divided into two categories: threats that are perceived to come from the ingroup itself, its bad actions, its negative treatment of other groups with the extreme example of genocide, and threats that are perceived to come from the outgroup (Rothgerber, 1997). The threat perceived from minority groups with an immigrant background can be considered as an external threat to national identity (Badea et al., 2018b).

The latest version of intergroup threat theory distinguishes between two main types of threat that can be perceived from the outgroup (Stephan et al., 2016). On the one hand, threat to the national in-group can be based on a perception of pronounced group differences in morals, values, standards, beliefs, and attitudes, this is what is called "symbolic threat". On the other hand, "realistic threat" concerns in-group economic and political power, and in-group security and welfare in general. Previous empirical studies have shown that both threats to the national in-group increased negative attitudes against immigrants (e.g., Badea et al., 2018b). It is then necessary to set up interventions that can reduce these threats and consequently negative attitudes towards immigrant-origin minorities. Self- and group-affirmation procedures can target the feelings of threat to both personal and social identities (Badea et al., 2020).

In a study conducted in France, Badea and collaborators (Badea et al., 2018a) tested whether self-affirmation (compared to group-affirmation and control) decreases the threat to national identity and consequently prejudice against immigrants. Participants were French undergraduates without an immigrant background. There were three experimental conditions: self-affirmation, group-affirmation, and control. The authors measured national identity threats (e.g., "French values and traditions are threatened by the presence of immigrants"; "Because of the large number of immigrants, unemployment may rise in France") and prejudice (e.g., "The number of immigrants must be reduced"). While perceived threat to national identity is a negative feeling concerning the impact of outgroups on the ingroup's cultural and economic resources (Stephan et al., 2016), prejudice is a negative bias towards a social category of people, with cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Paluck et al., 2021).

The results showed that participants in the self-affirmation condition perceived lower symbolic and realistic threats and expressed lower prejudice against immigrants compared to participants from the other two conditions. The effect of self-affirmation on prejudice reduction was mediated by a lower perception of threat coming from immigration. Participants in the self-affirmation condition perceived lower symbolic and realistic threats, and that was why they displayed lower prejudice against immigrants.

In the pilot study conducted by Badea et al. (2018a), prejudice against immigrants was measured using a scale developed by Pehrson et al. (2009) in a cross-cultural study that included France. Symbolic and realistic threats were measured using a scale developed by Velasco González et al. (2008). Items seem close in their meanings, which could explain in part their correlation and the mediation model. However, in the main study

(Badea et al., 2018a), the dependent variable was the support for discriminatory policies undertaken by the French government, and again, the effect of self-affirmation on reducing this support was mediated by threat.

In addition, other studies confirmed the impact of self-affirmation on threatening information processing using different methods. More specifically, Cascio et al. (2016) examined the neural mechanisms of self-affirmation with a task developed for use in a functional magnetic resonance imaging environment (fMRI). Studies in neuroscience show that self-related processing is most often associated with increased activity in the medial prefrontal cortex and posterior cingulate cortex (Denny et al., 2012; Northoff et al., 2006). The authors' reasoning was that if self-affirmation succeeds due to a boost in self-related processing prior to threat exposure, activity in these brain regions should increase during the affirmation procedure.

Cascio and collaborators (2016) used fMRI to examine the neural mechanisms implicated in self-affirmation. They developed a self-affirmation task suitable for fMRI environment and studied its influence on health behavior. The authors first asked participants to rank a list of values from most to least important for them, then they measured their active and sedentary behavior. One week later, participants went through the fMRI scan while undertaking the affirmation task, in which they imagined an event related to that value in the past and one that could happen in the future. After the affirmation task, participants were presented with threatening health messages. One month later, participants' sedentary behavior was measured again. Analysis demonstrated that indeed, participants who were affirmed (compared to non-affirmed participants) showed increased activity in key self-processing regions of the brain (medial prefrontal cortex and posterior cingulate cortex), and that this effect was driven by affirmation focused on the future. This neural activity predicted the successful effect of self-affirmation in changing sedentary behavior. The authors suggest that affirmation activities reduce threat by increasing focus on sources of positive value to individuals, and thus influence behavior. In addition, the study's results propose that future-focused self-affirmation might be more effective.

As far as we know, the mechanism underlying the efficacy of group-affirmation in reducing perceived threat and defensive reactions was not directly examined. However, insofar as an ingroup with which participants strongly identify is an important part of the self (Derks et al., 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the psychological mechanisms that explain the effectiveness of self-affirmation in reducing prejudice should also potentially apply to the group-affirmation technique.

As we mentioned earlier, inconsistent results have been obtained with self- and group-affirmation both in the field of intergroup relations and in other areas. Consequently, it seems essential to examine the role of individual factors, as well as contextual and cultural variables, in the effectiveness of self- and group-affirmation interventions in reducing prejudice.

What Factors can Moderate the Efficacy of Self- and Group-Affirmation Interventions?

Badea and Sherman (2019) considered many potential moderators of the efficacy of self- and group-affirmation interventions in reducing intergroup attitudes, including individual differences in individualism, individuals' political orientation, and discriminatory versus non-discriminatory norms. In a study carried out in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris, in November 2015, claimed by the followers of extreme religious ideologies (Badea et al., 2018a), the authors examined the utility of self- and group-affirmation in attenuating support for discriminatory policy measures, and investigated individual differences in individualism and collectivism as theoretically important moderators. Following the attacks of the 13th of November 2015, the French government proposed to withdraw French nationality from French people of immigrant origin who were alleged to support terrorism. The authors examined the potential for self- and group affirmation to diminish the support for this discriminatory policy and looked at the individualistic versus collectivistic orientation as a potential moderator of the efficacy of the affirmation procedures.

Indeed, people with an individualistic orientation tend to differentiate themselves from their group by highlighting their uniqueness and separateness from others (Kim & Markus, 1999). This tendency leaves individualists lacking the psychological buffer that is known to come from being a member of a tight social network (Jetten et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2016), thus making them more psychologically vulnerable to threat, and more responsive to self-affirmation. In a study conducted in the United States by Sherman and collaborators showed that students who were most afraid of their exam performance (in other words more vulnerable to the threat), were also the most sensitive to self-affirmation (Sherman et al., 2009). Based on these theoretical and empirical arguments, Badea et al. (2018a) hypothesized that among people high in individualism, who will be more afraid of terrorism, a self-affirmation manipulation would be effective in reducing support for discriminatory policies, compared to other conditions. The authors also explored whether group-affirmation would be more efficient among collectivistic individuals.

Participants were French undergraduates without an immigrant origin who first completed a measure of their individualistic orientation (e.g., "It is important to me to develop my own personal style"). Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions: self-affirmation (ranking important values for oneself) versus group-affirmation (ranking important values for participants as French citizens) versus control (ranking important values for someone else). A measure of support for discriminatory policies (e.g., "Monitoring of individuals entering the French soil and coming from high-risk countries"; "Surveillance of the persons who are in contact with people from high-risk countries") was also included. The results showed that participants high in individualism reported significantly lower support for discriminatory policies in the self-affirmation condition compared to the other experimental conditions. For participants low in individualism, there was no significant effect of the self-affirmation intervention. No significant results were noticed with group-affirmation among collectivistic individuals either.

In a different study, Kim and collaborators (Kim et al., 2022) examined the impact of

self- and group-affirmation on the gender performance gap in a Master of Business Administration classroom. Participants varying in their self-construal levels (i.e., independent versus interdependent) were randomly assigned to a self-affirmation versus a group-affirmation versus a control condition. Results showed that the gender performance gap was particularly diminished under conditions of congruent affirmation (when participants high in independent self-construal engaged in self-affirmation and participants high in interdependent self-construal engaged in group-affirmation). We note that, in the group-affirmation condition, participants wrote about a value important to them and to an ingroup with whom they strongly identify, such as family or close friends. The group “family and close friends” can be much more central for participants’ self, compared to the national group used in the study conducted by Badea et al. (2018a).

Another moderator of the effectiveness of the self-affirmation procedure in reducing prejudice, can be the congruence between participants’ political orientation and the type of political values used in the self-affirmation manipulation. A study conducted in France (Badea et al., 2017) focused on the reception of refugees in 2015. Conflicts aroused in the European Union over how best to manage the distribution of refugees. The economic crisis, concerns about national identity, and suspicions of terrorism have contributed to an increased rejection of refugees, leading to the closure of national borders in some countries. The question was whether the self-affirmation process could increase the acceptance of refugee reception, and if so, whether the congruence between participants’ political orientation and the type of political values used in the self-affirmation manipulation plays a moderating role.

Before presenting the study, it is important to discuss the self-affirmation procedure in more detail. Participants in all experimental conditions first ranked a list of values according to their importance. In this study, for half of the participants, the list of values was oriented to the left of the political spectrum (e.g., equality, sharing) and for the other half of the participants, the list of values was oriented to the right (e.g., power, meritocracy). Participants in the self-affirmation condition ranked the importance of the values for them personally, and participants in the group-affirmation condition, ranked the importance of values for them as French citizens. In the control condition, participants ranked the values for another person. By considering both the political values used in the self-affirmation procedure and the political orientation of the participants, there is a case of congruence (e.g., a conservative participant ranking right-wing values) or a case of incongruence (e.g., a conservative participant ranking left-wing values). Affirming the self on incongruent values might create a cognitive conflict between the personal political orientation and the act of self-affirmation, which diminishes the effectiveness of affirmation procedures. Then, the authors assumed that the effect of self-affirmation on intentions to welcome refugees would be stronger when political values used in the affirmation procedure were congruent with an individual’s personal views. Results showed that indeed, when the values used in the affirmation procedure were congruent with participants’ political orientation, behavioral intentions were more favorable in the self-affirmation condition compared to the group-affirmation and control conditions.

Social norms that can also impact the effectiveness of affirmation procedures in

reducing prejudice. In a study conducted in Romania, Badea and collaborators (Badea et al., 2021) examined the efficacy of affirmation procedures in increasing the intention to engage in collective action on behalf of Roma people. Roma people have been historically mistreated, persecuted, and exterminated all over Europe. They are still marginalized and discriminated against in many ways in education, housing, employment, and health care. Whereas negative attitudes against members of the Roma minority are widespread in Europe, there are citizens who defend the rights of this minority group, sometimes by means of engaging in collective action. Pro-Roma collective action can take many forms, such as signing petitions, participating in demonstrations, and responding more directly to humanitarian needs (Wright et al., 1990). Sometimes, collective actions can be negative and take a form of anti-Roma collective action, aiming to maintain the advantageous position of the ingroup by increasing hostility towards Roma people (van Zomeren, 2016).

The specific aim of the research conducted by Badea et al. (2021) was to examine how social norms shape the potential for group-affirmation to increase collective action in favor of the Roma people. In other words, the authors tried to better understand the connection between social norms and collective action by observing what happens to people (do they challenge or conform to descriptive social norms) after experimentally affirming different aspects of the self-concept. It is argued that by focusing on the group-level aspect of the self, the group-affirmation procedure activates the content of social identity related to that group membership and enhances the tendency for people to conform to salient social norms (because norms are part of the social identity). If these norms are discriminatory, group-affirmation will increase the impact of these negative norms on collective action expressing hostility towards the minority group. If these norms are non-discriminatory, group-affirmation will increase the positive impact of social norms on collective action helping a minority group.

In one of the studies (Badea et al., 2021, Study 2), the authors manipulated discriminatory norms to be (or not) cognitively salient by asking Romanian participants to read a short text showing that most Romanians have negative attitudes towards the Roma minority, or that most Romanians have positive attitudes about balanced nutrition. Participants completed a group-affirmation vs control task and completed a measure of their intention to engage in pro-Roma collective action versus in anti-Roma collective action. In the non-salient norm condition, there was no significant effect of group affirmation on pro-Roma or anti-Roma collective action. However, in the salient discriminatory norm condition group-affirmation decreased participants' intention to engage in pro-Roma collective action.

An important question that remains is whether group affirmation can be effective in reducing prejudice when social norms are not discriminatory. In a different study with Romanian psychology students, the authors manipulated non-discriminatory norm to be (or not) cognitively salient (Badea et al., 2021, Study 3). Participants were asked to read a short text showing that most psychology students have positive attitudes towards the Roma minority, versus that most students have positive attitudes about balanced nutrition. This time, in the salient non-discriminatory norm condition, group-affirmation increased participants' intention to engage in pro-Roma collective action.

Limits and Future Research

The studies reviewed in this paper show the potential for self- and group-affirmation procedures to reduce prejudice against minority groups. Nonetheless, the fluctuating results emphasize the need for more research to understand how this technique operates and how to improve it. Several theoretical or methodological elements can be discussed. We will focus here on the question of the procedures used to experimentally manipulate self-affirmation and group-affirmation, and on the inclusion of cultural factors in these interventions.

Which Procedure to Use for Self- and Group-Affirmation?

Future studies should compare different methods of affirmation such as reflecting on core values (e.g., Badea et al., 2021), recalling a past success (e.g., Tavitian-Elmadjian et al., 2020) or imagining a future event related to important values (e.g., Cascio et al., 2016), to test which ones would be more effective in each specific context. In addition, evaluating existing affirmation manipulations (for a review see McQueen & Klein, 2006) or developing new ones is essential to understand by which mechanisms this technique can influence prejudice reduction. In order to assess the effectiveness of self-affirmation manipulations, it is also important to use manipulation checks. In the studies conducted by Lesick and Zell (2021), participants rated the degree to which their assigned value was something that (a) guided their behavior, (b) they liked about themselves, and (c) they were proud of, using 7-point scales (1 not at all, 7 certainly). This would allow for more rigorous experimental protocols, where only truly affirmed individuals are considered in the data analysis. Attention should also be given to the sample size, as that of some experiments can be underpowered to detect significant effects of self- or group-affirmation on prejudice reduction (e.g., Badea et al., 2017). We also mention that studies we present, and their conclusions are drawn using samples that can be classified as WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic people). Non-Western societies and members of minority groups could react differently to self-and group-affirmation, and these aspects should be considered in future studies.

One might also ask, if effect sizes of self-affirmation are highly variable (e.g., Epton et al., 2015) and if specific conditions must be met for self- and group-affirmation to reduce prejudice (Badea & Sherma, 2019), why would these interventions be applied outside the laboratory? Indeed, the inconsistent results concerning the effectiveness of self- and group-affirmation in reducing prejudice, the variable effects and their small magnitude prompt the question of whether the present knowledge concerning these techniques should lead to applications outside the research field.

We agree that self- and group-affirmation procedures need further testing and methodological improvement. However, we maintain that these interventions should be applied to reduce prejudice and discrimination. Firstly, these procedures are less expensive than other types of intervention. Most of the time, self- and group-affirmation require the writing of a short essay to explain value choices or past successes (e.g., Badea et al.,

2018a; Tavitian-Elmadjian et al., 2020). Secondly, interventions in the field enable us to better identify the role played by cultural factors which, by definition, are controlled in the laboratory. Finally, this work outside the academic world allows us to advance knowledge about the conditions under which self- and group-affirmation can be effective in reducing negative intergroup attitudes, or to conclude that there is simply no robust effect.

We believe that it is precisely by leaving the laboratory to be tested in real-life contexts that interventions can be improved. Qualitative research could also help to understand how people naturally self-affirm when they perceive a threat, and what works for them in specific contexts.

How to Include Cultural Factors in Self-Affirmation Procedures?

Prejudice against variant minority groups in different parts of the world should be examined in future research. Whether the minority status is related to race, religion, migrant origin could imply different sources of threat and moderators that can inform us for intervention development. Indeed, members of the majority group in the host society may feel threatened by different minority groups. However, the reasons why a specific group is perceived as threatening may vary and be specific to each group (Meuleman et al., 2019). Some groups are associated with a high realistic and symbolic threat (e.g., North African immigrants, Syrian refugees), while other groups are associated with a low symbolic threat and a high realistic threat (e.g., Eastern European immigrants) (Mahfud et al., 2015). Thus, self-affirmation procedures can vary according to the characteristics of the considered outgroup, by targeting aspects of the self, in members of the majority group, which are not directly associated with the threat.

Research work on self-affirmation, conducted in areas other than intergroup relations (e.g., decision-making) has shown that people who have “affirmed” an aspect of the self, other than that threatened, reduced their cognitive bias, and increased their performance (Derks et al., 2011; Sivanathan et al., 2008). Future research should consider the distinction between the threatened versus the affirmed aspect of the self in the implementation of intervention procedures based on self- and group-affirmation. Generally, an induced affirmation to a different aspect of the self than the one targeted by the threat may be more successful.

Another aspect that can be further investigated is the potential for self-affirmation to be used in the dialogue between minority and majority group members. For example, Stone et al. (2011) found that when a minority member, an Arab American in their study, asks self-affirming questions to highly prejudiced individuals, the latter show a higher desire to meet the Arab American and perceive him as less confrontational. In a different study, combining self-affirmation and perspective taking by a feminist woman also increased empathy in men, particularly highly prejudiced ones (Persson & Hostler, 2021).

Conclusion

The main message of this article is that for self- and group-affirmation procedures to be successful, they need to be adapted to the targeted population and to the context. When implementing an affirmation technique to reduce prejudice, researchers must look deeply at the characteristics of the individuals involved in the intervention, but also at the cultural context, norms, values, and principles that are widely held in the given society. They need to examine, especially when using group-affirmation, the content of the social identity that is used in this technique. Who are the individuals whose negative attitudes are being targeted by the intervention? What values do they share and why?

Self- and group-affirmation are individual-level interventions, even if group-affirmation targets collective aspects of the self. They are not sufficient means to reduce prejudice. The structural antecedents of prejudice, such as inequalities in education, work and housing that lead to wage and achievement gaps, policies and laws that target certain groups to limit their rights, media messages that encourage division and fear of the other, and environments that heighten competition for resources, must also be taken into account.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the proposed psychological mechanism involved in reducing prejudice against minority groups with a self- or a group-affirmation procedure?
2. Is there strong empirical evidence demonstrating that self- and group-affirmation interventions diminish perceived threat from minority groups?
3. What is the classical procedure used in setting up self- vs. group-affirmation interventions and how can it be improved?
4. How can individual factors such as individualism or political orientation of participants influence the effectiveness of self-affirmation in reducing prejudice?
5. How can discriminatory social norms hinder the effectiveness of group-affirmation in reducing intergroup biases?
6. How should cultural factors be taken into account when implementing self- and group-affirmation techniques?

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