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Transgressing a group value in a transcultural experience: Immigrants' affective response to perceived social identity threats

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ABSTRACT

Individuals want to be seen by others in a positive light, and to portray their group as having high value standards. Thus, when they transgress important in-group values, they experience a threat to their self-image and disrupt the coherence and homogeneity of their in-group. In the current research, using the context of a transcultural experience, we examine Muslim immigrants' emotional reactions when they see themselves transgressing one of their cultural values. We found that they experience a higher negative emotional reaction when an out-group rather than an in-group member witnesses the transgressing behavior. This higher negative emotional reaction is mitigated when the out-group observer behaves in a way to endorse the cultural value related to the transgression. We also found that providing the transgressor with an opportunity to affirm his/her cultural values can further reduce the negative emotional reaction to the transgressing behavior.

1. Introduction

The past two decades have seen enormous shifts in worldwide immigration. For example, the number of international migrants reached 244 million in 2015, up from 173 million in 2000. While two-thirds of immigrants live in Europe or Asia, North America hosts the third largest number of immigrants, with over 47 million in the United States alone. In Europe and North America, international migrants now account for at least 10% of the population (United Nations, 2015). With the number of migrants worldwide now growing at a faster rate than the world population, understanding the manner in which immigrants adjust to their new country of residence is of growing importance to businesses and policy makers alike.

Immigrant populations are said to be among the most vulnerable members of society, facing a multitude of issues such as language barriers, employment problems, and hostility from existing members of society. For example, the rise in anti-immigration sentiment, especially in Europe, has reinforced, rather than reduced, the ethnic and religious divide in that region. Compounding these significant issues is the personal conflict immigrants may face with having to decide whether to continue to comply with their own cultural values or adapt to the more prevalent cultural values of the country they immigrated to. Using the context of such a transcultural experience, this paper explores immigrants' emotional reactions when they see themselves transgressing one of their cultural values in front of either members or non-members of their own culture.

Broadly defined, transculturalism relates to issues that extend through all human cultures, or that involve, encompass, or combine elements of more than one culture. Epstein (2009) argued that transculturalism implies a mutual involvement between cultures, in which one culture becomes open to another through a dispersal of symbolic values, thereby promoting assimilation of new values and habits. In the context of immigration to a new country, many situations arise in which immigrants have to decide between following their own cultural norms/values or incorporating the cultural norms/values of the place they immigrated to.

One important way in which such transcultural experiences might occur relates to the consumption of products and services. For example, Muslim immigrants who move to a Western country have to decide if they want to continue to buy only halal certified products (i.e., products certified to have been prepared according to Islamic law), which are not always easily available at regular local grocery stores, or start buying mainstream (non-halal) products. This kind of transcultural experience is often seen as a threat not only to individuals' own self-image but also to their in-group identity. In this paper, we argue that the negative emotional reaction that occurs as a result of an immigrant transgressing cultural values may be mitigated by other intervening variables, including (1) whether or not the out-group observer endorses the cultural

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values of the transgressor; and (2) whether or not the transgressor engages in a self-affirmation process (i.e., affirming some important aspect of the self). Furthermore, this paper will examine the role of perceived social identity threat as a mediating variable in the proposed relationship.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we review the current literature related to social groups' influences on behavior, and propose a series of hypotheses related to immigrants' negative emotional reactions when they transgress a group value in the context of a purchase decision. Next, we discuss the results of two experimental studies designed to test the hypothesized effects. Finally, we review the implications of these findings for businesses and policy makers, and discuss the limitations and future directions to explore with this research.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Transgressions of social group norms

Any social group has a set of shared values and norms about how members ought to behave, along with means for punishing transgressors. This leads to the expectation that certain behaviors that represent the values and norms of the group should be obvious and respected by other members of the group. Indeed, these expectations are grounded in the very sense of a shared identity (Turner, 1987) and are crucial for the validity of the group (Van de Vyver, Travaglino, Vasiljevic, & Abrams, 2015). Thus, inconsistencies in the behavior of group members threaten the validity of the group's value systems (Haidt, 2003). Further, social psychologists suggest that people care about the image of the social groups they belong to, because that image has direct consequences to their own self-image (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Ellemers & Haslam, 2011; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Toorn, Ellemers, & Doosje, 2015; Turner, 1991). Consequently, when one of the in-group values is transgressed, people are likely to feel negative moral emotions and threats to their self-image (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007).

Researchers have suggested that moral emotions are consequences of evaluating behaviors as being good or bad, right or wrong (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Toorn et al., 2015). Importantly, individuals want to be seen by others as moral, and their group as a moral group (Ellemers & van den Bos, 2012; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007; Toorn et al., 2015). Some researchers even consider morality to be "partly a game of self-promotion" (Haidt, 2007, p. 1001) and suggest that what we do matters less than what others think we do. In other words, in assessing our transgressing behavior, we are much more concerned about how others will see us given our transgression than the fact that we are conscious of our transgression.

2.2. Group member and non-member influences

Subjective group dynamics theory posits that individual behavior is affected by the presence of others (Crano, 2000). It further suggests that social behavior falls within a continuum ranging from behavior occurring *within* a social group (influenced by intragroup dynamics) and behavior occurring *between* social groups (influenced by intergroup dynamics). Within the intragroup dynamics perspective, people strive to preserve a positive self-image. Goffman (1959) suggested that the fear of being seen by others as having negative, undesirable qualities and characteristics is a main motivator for individuals to portray a positive self-presentational image of themselves. He further proposed that in situations where people might be evaluated by others, they will consequently engage in ways to preserve a positive image. Within the intergroup dynamics perspective, people are more concerned with preserving a positive social image. In-group members are motivated to seek positive distinctiveness and positive collective self-esteem for the in-group (Turner, 1981; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). In-group members strive to develop, and to protect, a positive

image for the in-group.

Research on transgressing behavior has largely demonstrated that group members respond negatively to members who do not conform to the group's norms (see Levine & Kerr, 2007, for a review). An important finding from this line of work is that group transgressing behavior can potentially affect the subjective validity of in-group norms (Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Martinez-Taboada, 1998). Consequently, transgressors are perceived as posing a challenge to the value and identity of the in-group and potentially blurring the distinctions between the in-group and out-groups. According to subjective group dynamics theory, derogation of the in-group transgressors is one manner in which group identity and image can be preserved (Abrams, 2013).

However, numerous studies have shown counter-normative behaviors, such that in-group members display inherent biases in favor of group members, whereby behaviors inconsistent with group norms are often excused or justified (see, e.g., Brewer, 1979; Vanbeselaere, 1991). These in-group biases have been shown to be more pronounced when the in-group and out-group are naturally occurring groups, such as those based on race or religion (see, e.g., Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992, for a meta-analysis). For example, recent work showed that an in-group member who witnessed the transgressing behavior of another group member would judge the transgression less harshly when the behavior was perceived as situational as opposed to inherent to the individual (Ortiz & Harwood, 2013). In a situation in which the transgression is only witnessed by an in-group observer, it may be easier to excuse or justify such behavior, because the action does not tarnish the group image in the presence of out-group individuals.

To date, most of the research on transgressing behavior has focused on how members of the in-group react to the transgressing behavior of another in-group member. In the current research, we evaluate how a transgressor reacts to his/her own transgressing behavior when that behavior is witnessed by others who are not members of the group. We propose that, when the transgressing behavior is witnessed by another *in-group* member, the transgressing behavior will be evaluated from an *intragroup* dynamics perspective (i.e., how the in-group observer will see the transgressor after witnessing the transgressing behavior). However, when the transgressing behavior is witnessed by an *out-group* member, the transgressing behavior will be evaluated from an *intergroup* dynamics perspective (i.e., how the out-group observer will see the in-group after witnessing the transgressing behavior). We expect that transgressors will feel more threatened and will react more negatively when their transgressing behavior is witnessed by an out-group than by an in-group member, because they will be potentially affecting not only their own self-image but also the subjective validity of their entire in-group.

An important consideration as to whether or not individual members of the in-group will feel threatened by the out-group member's assessment of the transgression relates to their level of psychological commitment to the in-group (i.e., whether they are high or low identifiers). Previous research has found that high in-group identifiers are more likely to be motivated to maintain a positive view of the in-group than are low in-group identifiers (Brewer & Kramer, 1985). This is particularly important when examining transgressions of cultural values by immigrants, especially Muslims, as research has shown that for Muslims living in Western Europe, religion has great importance in how they live their lives (see Verkuyten, 2007, for a complete review). Therefore, Muslim immigrants in particular are more likely to be classified as high in-group identifiers.

Social identity theory posits that the classification of the social world as consisting of in-groups and out-groups results in discriminatory behavior and negative attitudes towards out-group members. One study of native and immigrant Turkish Cypriots found that both the native and immigrant groups judged the positive traits as more applicable to their own group (in-group bias). However, derogation of the out-group was found to relate to group status, in that native Cypriots (who had a higher social status) denigrated the lower-status