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## Collective victimhood beliefs among majority and minority groups: Links to ingroup and outgroup attitudes and attribution of responsibility for conflict



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## ABSTRACT

We examined perceived ingroup and outgroup victimhood beliefs across group status and how these were uniquely associated with ingroup and outgroup attitudes and attribution of responsibility among majority (Turkish,  $N = 141$ ) and minority (Kurdish,  $N = 86$ ) group members in Turkey. We further explored whether the extent to which collective victimhood beliefs were shared via ingroup and outgroup members predicted our dependent measures beyond the subjective perception of ingroup victimhood. Findings showed that both groups perceived higher ingroup victimhood compared to outgroup victimhood and this difference was more pronounced among the minority group. Perceived outgroup victimhood beliefs, compared to ingroup victimhood beliefs, were more closely related to intergroup outcomes, and led to more positive outgroup and more negative ingroup outcomes. Both groups shared collective victimhood beliefs more with their ingroup friends than their outgroup friends and ingroup sharing of collective victimhood was a stronger predictor of intergroup outcomes, relating to more positive ingroup and more negative outgroup outcomes. Outgroup sharing of collective victimhood was related to more positive outgroup attitudes and lower ingroup responsibility among the Turkish group, whereas it was not related to outgroup attitudes and negatively related to ingroup attribution of responsibility among the Kurdish group. Practical and theoretical implications of the findings were discussed.

**Introduction**

In many societies experiencing longterm intractable conflicts, victimhood beliefs become an essential part of the narratives of both parties involved in the conflict. In such contexts, members of both groups may engage in a subjective process of blaming the outgroup for the harm, considering the ingroup as the only victim and the perpetrating outgroup as the immoral and unjust culpable (e.g., Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009; Nadler & Saguy, 2003; Noor, Vollhardt, Mari, & Nadler, 2017). The sense of self-perceived collective victimhood is often an important aspect of the social identity of group members involved in conflict (Suárez-Orozco & Robben, 2000) and is either experienced through direct exposure to injury, loss, and harm or through witnessing an ingroup member's suffering (Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schamder, 2006; Staub, 2006). Nevertheless, even the indirect exposure to suffering and loss creates a deep sense of victimhood among group members, which is usually transmitted from generation to generation as a powerful collective mechanism in conflict societies (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008).

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Although perceived collective victimhood provides some positive psychological functions for the victims such as increasing ingroup cohesiveness and solidarity, it is often associated with destructive intergroup behaviors such as violent reactions to the outgroup and reduced accountability for the ingroup's acts (Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012). Collective victimhood beliefs have been associated with positive ingroup attitudes such as increased ingroup trust (Rotella, Richeson, Chiao, & Bean, 2013) and negative outgroup attitudes such as lower willingness to forgive the perpetrator group members (Noor, Brown, Prentice, 2008). Although this newly emerging literature is now attracting social psychology researchers' attention, much more empirical research conducted in various conflict settings, especially in non-Western intergroup contexts, is required to fully understand the role of collective victimhood beliefs in intergroup relationships (e.g., Noor et al., 2017; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015). The current study investigated for the first time how perceived victimhood of both ingroup and outgroup would be uniquely related to ingroup and outgroup attitudes and attribution of responsibility within the Turkish-Kurdish intergroup setting in Turkey and more importantly argued that the sharing of collective victimhood beliefs with ingroup and outgroup members would predict intergroup outcomes beyond the subjective perception of ingroup victimhood.

### *The Turkish-Kurdish intergroup setting*

The present study was conducted within the Turkish-Kurdish intergroup setting in Turkey which provides an exceptional milieu for the study of collective victimhood beliefs. Kurdish people, although forming the largest ethnic minority group in Turkey (about 18% of the total population, Konda, 2011), have been an oppressed minority group who have been assimilated through a strong nationalization process by the Turkish government over the years (Bilali, 2012; Yegen, 1996), leading to the glorification of a single unifying Turkish national identity and assimilation of sub-cultures (e.g., Çelebi, Verkuyten, & Smyrnioti, 2016; Keyman, 2012). The conflict has become violent and intractable with increased terrorist attacks from separatist groups and military action from the part of the Turkish State which resulted in the death of 40.000 people from both sides (Çelik & Kantowitz, 2009; Göçek, 2011). Although the violent aspect of the conflict often occurs as rural encounters in the Southeast of Turkey (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011; Çakal, Hewstone, Guler, & Heath, 2016) and the conflict is considered to be mainly between separatist groups and the Turkish Army (Çelik, Bilali, & Iqbal, 2016), today, the political, social, and cultural dimensions of the conflict and the polarization of groups along ethnic lines are reflected on various aspects of lives for both groups. While the period between 2009–2015 was relatively peaceful, the tension has reescalated since the rupture of peace talks in 2015 (Çelik et al., 2016).

Recent social psychological research has shown that social and economic differences between the Turkish and Kurdish groups are often perceived to be large and the Turkish group is seen as the obvious majority who possess the advantageous position in the society (Çakal et al., 2016). However, both Turkish and Kurdish group members show high levels of mistrust and hostility towards each other (Bağcı, Çelebi, & Karaköse, 2017; Çelebi, Verkuyten, Köse, & Maliepaard, 2014) and hold negative stereotypes. For example, it has been found that Turks viewed Kurds as 'rogue', whereas Kurds described Turks as 'barbarian' (Bilali, Çelik, & Ok, 2014). At the same time, the Kurdish group is usually considered one of the most stigmatized and discriminated minority groups in the public sphere with increased anti-Kurdish discourses on various aspects of communication channels (Bora, 2006). In a recent study, Uluğ and Cohrs (2017) have shown that various conflict narratives are likely to shape attitudes towards reconciliation and peace among both Turkish and Kurdish group members. Recent survey studies have indicated that while 28% of the Turkish group members have stated that they were injured due to the Turkish-Kurdish intergroup conflict, 94% of the Kurdish indicated that they were directly harmed by the conflict (Konda, 2011). The same research also showed that 11.4% of the total population experienced the loss of a close one, whereas 6.1% indicated harm due to forced migration, and 16.3% reported being economically harmed. Overall, this literature suggests that the examination of perceived collective victimhood beliefs and how they are shared via ingroup and outgroup members may be critical in the understanding of social psychological mechanisms explaining the ongoing Turkish-Kurdish interethnic relationships in Turkey.

### *Collective victimhood beliefs*

The belief that group members have been collectively victimized is an inseparable aspect of intergroup relationships in societies where conflict has been intractable, long-term, and leading to great losses and suffering (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, Manzi, & Lewis, 2008; Noor et al., 2017; Vollhardt, 2012). Collective victimhood often has its roots in group members' social identities; members of a collective, internalizing past suffering through direct or indirect exposure to intentional harm from the part of the perpetrator, construct a common cultural reality that demonstrates the perpetrator as having the sole illegitimate and immoral responsibility for the harm inflicted and the victim as the undeserved, moral, and injured party of the conflict (Bar-Tal, 2000; Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Noor et al., 2017; Suárez-Orozco & Robben, 2000). Collective victimhood has many psychological effects on victims' emotions and beliefs, functioning as a mechanism for coping with conflict stress and providing support from international community, even when the suffering has not been directly experienced, and even when the conflict has been experienced in the past (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). More importantly, collective victimhood beliefs generally inhibit the process of reconciliation by leading victims to blame the outgroup more and take lower responsibility for their own negative acts, to maintain and activate ethos of conflict and mistrust, to hold negative outgroup attitudes, and to justify further negative intergroup behaviors (e.g., Noor et al., 2012).

Collective victimhood is a critical concept in investigating ways to promote intergroup harmony in conflict societies and its negative effects on reconciliation processes have been tested in various conflict settings. For example, Schori-Eyal, Halperin, and Bar-Tal, 2014 examined collective victimhood beliefs within the Palestinian-Israeli conflict setting and demonstrated that conflict-related collective victimhood increased support for aggressive military action towards the outgroup. In Cyprus, perceived victimhood

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