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In the aftermath of terrorism: Effects of self versus group affirmation on support for discriminatory policies

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ABSTRACT

An experiment conducted with 240 French undergraduates examined the effectiveness of self-affirmation and group-affirmation procedures for diminishing perceived threat and support for discriminatory policy shortly after terrorist attacks in Paris. (Two pilot studies tested the affirmation procedures before the attacks). We hypothesized that affirmations that are congruent with dominant modes of self-definition should be more effective than incongruent affirmations. That is, we predicted that the self-affirmation manipulation should be most effective at reducing prejudice among people high in individualism, whereas the group-affirmation manipulation may be most effective among people high in collectivism. Results only supported the former hypothesis. The self-affirmation procedure effectively reduced perceptions of threat and support for discriminatory policies among those high in individualism, but the group affirmation had no consistent effects, either among those high in collectivism or otherwise. The findings suggest important practical and theoretical differences in the vulnerabilities of self and social identities in the aftermath of terrorism.

1. Introduction

Ideologically motivated terror attacks are an ongoing problem around the world. The goals of such attacks include affecting the psychology of the targeted populations—to stoke fear, anxiety, and possibly extreme retaliation in response that would further the ideological goals of the attackers (Atran, 2003; Bongar, Brown, Beutler, Breckenridge, & Zimbardo, 2006; Orehek & Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis, 2014). As such, it is imperative to gain a clearer understanding of how people react in the aftermath of terror attacks, particularly with regard to their xenophobia and relevant policy preferences. In the present research, we focus on the reactions of French nationals in aftermath of the November 2015 terror attacks in Paris, which were claimed by first and second generation immigrant followers of extreme religious and political ideologies. Important debates within the political institutions have focused on measures that can be taken against immigrants implicated in terrorist attacks and can be considered discriminatory (e.g., stripping French nationality; *Le Monde*, 2015). Several opinion polls following the attacks showed widespread support among French residents for antiterrorism policies that run counter to democratic and constitutional values (Ifop, 2016).

A variety of evidence from Europe suggests there are important links

between the threat of terrorism from immigrants and negative intergroup attitudes. Dutch adolescents' perception of symbolic threat of Muslims predicted increased prejudice against Muslim immigrants (González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008). Perceptions that immigrants approve of terrorist attacks significantly predicted support for anti-immigration policies, including measures that would violate religious freedom laws and would be nearly impossible to implement (e.g., "At airports, there should be special security checks for Muslims"), (Doosje, Zimmermann, Küpper, Zick, & Meertens, 2010). After the terrorist attacks committed at the headquarters of the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in France, perceptions of symbolic threat and prejudice against Muslims increased (Nugier et al., 2016). Studies have also directly linked terrorist attacks to heightened mortality salience (Das, Bushman, Bezemer, Kerkhof, & Vermeulen, 2009), such that reminding people of terrorist attacks increases the salience of their mortality, which in turn led to higher prejudice toward immigrants and North-Africans (Cohu, Maisonneuve, & Testé, 2016).

According to terror management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997), when mortality is made salient, it can cause existential anxiety, and defense against this existential anxiety can inform extreme policy preferences. Studies run by Pyszczynski and collaborators (Pyszczynski et al., 2006) demonstrated that mortality salience

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increased Americans' support for military interventions in the Middle East, including use of nuclear and chemical weapons (see also Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor, 2009). Participants who thought about terrorist attacks showed strong support for these interventions.

However, research also suggests that such responses are variable, subject to moderation by individual differences and situational factors. People can respond in a less extreme manner, even in circumstances that increase mortality salience. Research on the infectious disease of Ebola shows that xenophobic responses to high degrees of perceived risk are attenuated among people high in collectivism and low in individualism, suggesting the role of individual differences in cultural values at moderating response to mortality threats (Kim, Sherman, & Updegraff, 2016). Research on self affirmation has found that participants who affirmed important personal values before a reminder of death showed reduced accessibility of death-related thoughts and displayed less derogation of out-group members who threatened participants' worldviews (Schmeichel & Martens, 2005). This study hints at the flexible nature of psychological self-defense and to a potential role of self affirmation in managing defensive behaviors when mortality is salient, as it can be after terrorist attacks. Affirming important personal values may help people to view threats from a broadened perspective and thereby reduce the perceived urgency and significance of the threat (Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

In the present research, we argue that support for discriminatory policies in France is partially driven by the desire to protect self and group identities from threat. As such, we seek (1) to examine the utility of affirming self and group identity as a means to attenuate the perceived threat of immigrants and support for discriminatory policy measures; and (2) to investigate individual differences in individualism and collectivism as theoretically important moderators of the effect of self and group affirmation on responses to terrorism. We test whether affirmation procedures that are congruent (e.g., self affirmation among strong individualists) or incongruent (e.g., group affirmation among strong individualists) with dominant modes of self-definition are most effective. As such, we seek to understand not simply *if* affirmation can affect attitudes but also *why* and *for whom* they are likely to be most effective. In doing so, we hope to improve understanding about the psychological roots of responses to the threat of terrorism.

1.1. Terrorism and support for discriminatory policies

Perpetrators of terrorism, to the extent they are not in the majority and have a different cultural worldview from those they are attacking, can be viewed by majority group members as threatening to a national group identity (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). In-group threat can be symbolic (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and realistic (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). Symbolic threats involve perceived group differences in morals, values, standards, beliefs, and attitudes. Realistic threats involve in-group economic and political power, and in-group security and welfare in general (Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald, & Tur-Kaspa, 1998). Both of these threats are important because they may be relevant to individuals' sense of self-integrity (Sherman & Hartson, 2011). To the extent that threats posed by immigrants can target both individual and collective aspects of the self (Asbrock & Fritsche, 2013; González et al., 2008), we argue that affirmation procedures that address each of these aspects have the potential to reduce the perception of threat and consequently negative intergroup attitudes.

Demonstrating such an effect would implicate the self-concept as a source of discriminatory reactions to terrorism, an insight that can help understand terrorism responses more generally. However, simply demonstrating that affirmation affects attitudes toward terrorism would leave significant questions unanswered. The self-concept is multifaceted, consisting of both individual and collective identities (e.g., Oyserman, Coon, & Klemmeier, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). As such, it is also important to consider not only whether affirmations of

different aspects of the self (individual- and collective-identity) are equally effective and but also whether effectiveness depends on how people define the self (i.e., in terms of individualism and collectivism). To bring these two ideas together, we consider the notions of congruent and incongruent affirmation procedures.

1.2. Congruent versus incongruent affirmation procedures

According to self-affirmation theory (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), people can tolerate threats to a specific aspect of their identity if they are able to maintain a global sense of self-integrity. A distinction is drawn in the literature between self affirmation and group affirmation. While *self affirmation* can be accomplished by reflecting on an important value or source of pride for the individual, irrelevant to the threat at hand (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), *group affirmation* can be accomplished by thinking about values and positive actions of one's in-group (Sherman, Kinias, Major, Kim, & Prenovost, 2007). These types of affirmation map onto the two primary modes of self-definition described in social identity and self-categorization theory: the individual and collective self (Ellemers, 2012). They also map onto the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic orientations identified in cultural psychology research. Individualism is a cultural orientation where individuals' needs take priority over those of the group, whereas collectivism is a cultural orientation in which the needs of individuals are subordinate to those of the group (Oyserman et al., 2002; Triandis, 1989). The individualism-collectivism distinction is a sociocultural variable, with Western cultures being considered as more individualistic and Eastern cultures as more collectivistic (Kashima et al., 1995). However, there are also individual differences within each culture (Realo, Koido, Ceulemans, & Allik, 2002; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988), and it is this latter type of variation that the present research addresses.

It has been argued that effective affirmation procedures should be configured as a function of people's individualistic versus collectivistic orientations (Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005). That is, affirmations should be delivered in ways that align or are congruent with the individuals' preferred modes of self-definition. Notably, however, research to date suggests that not all modes of self-definition are equal with respect to their vulnerability to threat and prejudice. Theory and research suggest that people high in individualism (and low in collectivism) may be particularly reactive to threats in their environment. In one study featuring a representative sample of Americans, those who perceived a high risk of contracting Ebola during a 2015 outbreak, and were high in individualism (and low in collectivism), were more supportive of extreme measures, such as enacting a travel ban on West Africa (Kim et al., 2016). In another line of work, White Americans' endorsement of symbolic racism was predicted by an endorsement of individualism as it is applicable to African Americans ("black individualism" as represented by items such as, "If blacks work hard they almost always get what they want."), (Sears & Henry, 2003). In both lines of work, it was those who held highly individualistic values that were most willing to endorse extreme outgroup attitudes and preferences.

One way to explain these findings is that 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, Haslam, & Alexander, 2012; Kim et al., 2016). As such, they may be more psychologically vulnerable to threat and, by extension, more responsive to affirmation (Sherman, Bunyan, Creswell, & Jaremka, 2009). In particular, we hypothesized that among people with a tendency to define themselves as independent and distinct (i.e., those high in individualism), a self-affirmation manipulation would be effective in reducing perceptions of threat and support for discriminatory policies relative to a no-affirmation control condition.

By contrast, it is less clear how group affirmations may affect

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