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Group Affirmation and Roma's Willingness to Challenge Discrimination

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Abstract

We examined the influence of a positive group-affirming message, compared to no affirmation, on Roma's identification and willingness to challenge discrimination. Roma from Slovakia were either exposed to a group affirmation message or not prior to completing measures of ingroup identification and desire to challenge discrimination of Roma. The results showed that affirmed Roma rated both identification and willingness to challenge discrimination significantly higher than participants that were not affirmed. Furthermore, mediation analysis showed that Roma identification mediated the relationship between the affirmation manipulation and willingness to challenge discrimination. The results add to the growing body of research on group affirmation and provide a possible method to aid in engendering support for greater activism to reduce the oppression of Roma.

1. Introduction

As the most marginalized and discriminated against group in Europe [1], individuals identifying as Roma face obstacles to overcoming oppression. Despite efforts of the European Union [2, 3], Roma face harassment and threats of violence [3], poorer education [4] and health care [5], and lower life satisfaction [6] compared to non-Roma. In the face of such discrimination, the European Union, various NGOs, and activists have strived to mitigate the oppression of Romani people, but have yet to organize Roma in a single unified movement to challenge discrimination [7]. Social scientific research shows a strong relationship between identification, or felt psychological connection with a group, and entry and sustained participation in social movements [8]. Indeed, recent research [9] shows identification with Roma as a powerful predictor of Roma's willingness to join together to oppose discrimination from the majority. However, Roma also tend to dis-identify with the Roma identity and instead show greater levels of identification with family, nation, and religious identities [10]. In the present research, we test whether a group-affirming message affects Roma's degree of identification and willingness to challenge discrimination.

A wealth of research has examined self-affirmation at the individual level [11], however, much less research has examined affirmation at the group level. A key tenet of social identity theory [12] is that individuals strive to gain or maintain positively distinct social identities. Thus, thinking of the ingroup as positive and distinct should serve as

group affirmation. Past research examining group affirmation shows that individuals favor information that affirms one's identity compared to an outgroup's identity [13] or if no identity affirmation is given [14]. Group members are more supportive of a leader who acts in a manner that is identity affirming compared to one that is identity negating [15], and group members support collective action after group affirmation [16]. Affirming an opponent's group can result in decreasing adversarial perceptions [17]. Sport fans are found to make less group-serving attribution biases after affirming the group compared to no affirmation [18]. Furthermore, group affirmation buffers the self-esteem of women against threats of blatant sexism [19]. Together, prior research suggests that individuals like information and leaders who affirm the group, and that group affirmation may reduce intergroup conflict and buffer ingroup members against threats.

The purpose of the present experiment is to examine Roma's identification and willingness to challenge discrimination after exposure (vs. non-exposure) to a group affirmation message. Slovak Roma were randomly assigned to either reading a group-affirming message or not prior to rating Roma identification and willingness to challenge discrimination. The affirmation message presented was a Romani folktale about God baking clay humans and overcooking one (resulting in Black people), undercooking another (resulting in White people), before baking one perfectly (resulting in Roma people). This story was chosen, following social identity theory's tenet of positive distinctiveness, because it highlights the group in a positive light (i.e., God thought the Roma was the result of perfect baking time) and also highlights distinctions between Roma and both White and Black ethnic groups. We predict that Roma that read the group affirming story will rate both identification and willingness to challenge discrimination higher than participants not exposed to the story. As noted above, Roma identification is a strong predictor of willingness to challenge discrimination [9]. Therefore, we expect the affirmation will result in greater willingness to challenge discrimination because the affirmative message will lead to greater Roma identification. In other words, we predict that ingroup identification will mediate the relationship between the manipulation (group affirmation vs. no affirmation) and willingness to challenge discrimination.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 161$, 52.2% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 32.25$, $SD = 9.89$) included self-identified Roma from Slovakia. Participants were solicited both online through Roma related organizations and in Roma communities in Slovakia by a native Slovak Roma. The survey was back translated to ensure equivalency in meaning prior to distribution. Participants were randomly assigned to receive a group

affirmation message or not prior to rating identification with Roma, desire to challenge discrimination of Roma, and demographic items. All items used a 7-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

2.2. Materials

To positively affirm Roma identity participants in the experimental condition read a Romani folktale in which God bakes clay humans in the oven too long (resulting in Black people), too short a time (resulting in White people), before perfecting Roma [20]. Two items ("I would describe myself as Roma," "I strongly identify with other Roma;" $r = .37$, $p < .001$) were adapted from prior research [21] to assess Roma identification. Two items ("I wish that Roma would work together to stop discrimination from the side of Non-Roma," "I am committed to fighting discrimination of Roma by Non-Roma;" $r = .29$, $p < .001$) were adapted from prior research [9, 22] and combined to assess desire to challenge discrimination of Roma.

3. Results

To examine whether exposure to the affirming story (vs. no story) effected degree of identification and desire to confront discrimination we conducted a MANOVA with the manipulation as the independent variable and identification and desire to challenge discrimination as dependent variables, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.89$, $F(2, 158) = 10.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .113$. Participants in the story condition ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 1.18$) rated their degree of identification higher than those in the control condition ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.16$), $F(1, 159) = 12.24$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .071$. Participants in the story condition ($M = 6.20$, $SD = 1.01$) also rated their degree of Roma identification than those in the control condition ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.16$), $F(1, 159) = 15.98$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .091$.

Next, to examine whether Roma identification would mediate the relationship between the manipulation (no story = 0, story = 1) and desire to confront discrimination, we conducted a mediation using Preacher and Hayes' [23] SPSS macro (bootstrapping with 5,000 iterations, 95% confidence intervals). The manipulation predicted desire to confront discrimination ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$) and Roma identification ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$), and Roma identification predicted desire to confront discrimination ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$). The inclusion of identification reduced the association between the manipulation and desire to challenge discrimination ($\beta = .20$, $p = .007$), showing mediation as indicated by absence of zero in the confidence interval (CI = .088 to .461).

4. Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to examine the effect of group affirmation (vs. no affirmation) on Roma identification and willingness to challenge discrimination. We predicted, and found, greater Roma identification and

desire to challenge discrimination following exposure to group affirmation compared to no exposure. As dis-identification is a likely reason for the lack of a unified Roma activist movement, we predicted, and found, that identification with Roma mediated the relationship between the manipulation of group affirmation and willingness to challenge discrimination. The results highlight the influence of group affirmation on not only identification, but also how group affirmation can rally members of a highly stigmatized minority group to endorse challenging said stigma.

Despite a wealth of research on individual level self-affirmation [11], little research has been conducted at the group level. What research that has been conducted suggests that group affirmation reduces bias [18], buffers against threats [19], promotes collective action [16], and skews the perception of information [14]. The present results add to this growing body of research by showing the influence of group affirmation on both ingroup identification and desire to advance the status of one's ingroup. The present results also support past research concerning the strong association between ingroup identification and activism generally [8], and Roma identification specifically [9]. As dis-identification is a likely explanation for Roma lacking a unified movement [24], the present results suggest that affirmation leads to greater willingness to challenge the discrimination of the ingroup as partly due to the greater degree of identification experienced after an affirming message.

Although novel, the present results are limited for a variety of reasons. First, we only sampled Roma in one country. Roma from other European Union countries may show different patterns. Second, other types of affirming messages may influence participants in a manner that is inconsistent with the present results. We chose the affirmation message for the present study as it was consistent with positive distinctiveness tenet of social identity theory, however, other types of messages may be examined in future research. Third, in the present research we measured willingness to challenge discrimination. Future research may use a behavioral measure to examine if group affirmation leads to actual behavior on behalf of Roma.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, in the present study Roma exposed to a group-affirming message reported greater identification with Roma and willingness to challenge discrimination than non-affirmed Roma. Dis-identification with Roma is a challenge for Roma activist movement [24]. The results of the present research show a potential method for increasing not only identification with Roma, but also the desire to for Roma to join together and challenge the discrimination that remains rampant in Europe. With a general lack of research regarding group affirmation in psychology, greater research in this area may shed light on the benefits of affirming the ingroup.

Footnote

The full story presented to participants in the affirmation condition was: "Our Lord Almighty was alone in this world, and he felt lonely, it is said: It is better to be poor than lonely. God decides he will create a human being. God took dough and formed hands, legs, body, head, brain and heart. God put what he created into the oven. However, God fell asleep. He pulled the human being from the oven and it was overbrowned. Thus, Black people were born. God decided to try again. He formed the dough and put it in the oven. Careful not to over bake the human he took the human out early. The human was under baked and white as snow. Thus, White people were born. God decided to try a third time. He formed the dough and put it in the oven to bake. He made sure that he didn't bake this human for too long or too little. He pulled the human out and the human was not too dark or too white. The human was just right. Thus, Roma were born."

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