

Chapter 15

Variations in Sources of Self-Affirmation: What Can Be Learned from Non-Western Contexts



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Introduction

Being judged, stereotyped, and/or mistreated because of the group to which one belongs is a common experience for many people, particularly those from minority groups, making social identity threat pervasive in everyday life. Individuals react differently to threat, depending on the type of threat and how much they identify with what is threatened. They may increase their identification with the group that is threatened, disidentify with what is threatened, react defensively, derogate an outgroup (Branscombe et al., 1999a, b), or disidentify with the group that has threatened them (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009). Self-affirmation is an adaptive mechanism of protecting the self from threats to social identity (Badea & Sherman, 2019; Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Steele, 1988). When faced with a threat (e.g., derogation of ethnic group), people who reflect upon a valued unthreatened domain of their identity (e.g., being a good parent) may buffer against the negative effect of such threats and affirm an overall sense of being competent and worthy (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2002). In other words, individuals can put the threat into perspective—and evade it. Some groups are more prone to experience social identity threat, for instance, because they are high identifiers (Steele et al., 2002), because their status is lower relative to an outgroup (O’Higgins, 2010), or because their social identity is salient (Turner et al., 1987).

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Less is known about how self-affirmation interventions operate in a non-Western context in which specifics such as cultural value orientation (e.g., familial self-affirmation; Cai et al., 2013), acculturation status (e.g., Armenians in Lebanon), or lack of common ingroup identity (e.g., Lebanese youth; Tavitian-Elmadjian et al., 2019) may nuance responses to social identity threat and the efficacy of self-affirmation interventions. In the present chapter, we set out to clarify how different groups may be more prone to be subjected to identity threat (see, e.g., the rejection-identification model; Branscombe et al., 1999a, b). We describe the variety of self-affirmation techniques and the usefulness of inspecting underlying psychological mechanisms (e.g., self-esteem maintenance, increased self-concept clarity). We further highlight that previous research has focused on mainly Western (mainstream) participants and non-Western minority groups in the United States and Europe. This is relevant because it is not clear whether individuated affirmation procedures would be useful in non-Western contexts (see, e.g., Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005)—focusing on the self may not be a generally acceptable manner of problem solving (for the general argument, see Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Finally, we highlight that most of the affirmation literature evaluates threat within contexts with a clearly identified majority (usually the national mainstream) pitted against a minority group (usually with a recent migration background). In such contexts, the national group is at the top of the hierarchy (language, laws, norms), and the threatened minority group is lower in the hierarchy (see, e.g., Hagendoorn, 1995, on ethnic hierarchy). While hierarchies are arguably relevant everywhere, the dynamics may be different, for instance, when there is no clear and dominant majority and the context is multicultural (e.g., Lebanon, see Tavitian et al., 2019; or Indonesia, see Sari et al., 2018).

What Is Identity Threat in Intergroup Contexts?

Identity threat includes realistic (e.g., actual threats to an ingroup's power, overall well-being or resources) or symbolic threats (e.g., threats to an ingroup's values and identity) and has received much attention as a determinant of intergroup attitudes and behaviors (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Both social identity theory and social categorization theory have explained the nature and likelihood of experiencing social identity threat. According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), social identities are built within a social system and reflect the classifications of people within societies on the basis of race, religion, nation, and gender, among others. Social identities are represented in terms of prototypes that reflect characteristics of a typical group member (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Classifying the self as part of a social group provides an individual with a basis for positive self-evaluation and ingroup belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In addition to providing an evaluative component, social identities direct beliefs, emotions, and behaviors of group members, specifically when the identity is salient (Stets & Burke, 2000).

The salience of a social identity category is defined in terms of *fit* and *accessibility* (Turner et al., 1987). When people come into continuous contact with one

another, groups start to form on the basis of perceived similarity and dissimilarity among interacting members. In a multiracial context, for example, people may use their race as the point of similarity juxtaposed against a background of an outgroup that includes other races (comparative fit). Fit is determined through establishing differences between groups of people and through an understanding of the direction of these differences as adhering to the group's norms and stereotypic characteristics (normative fit; Oakes, 1987). The accessibility of a social identity category is the extent to which information in the environment will be readily perceived and interpreted in terms of the given social category (Bruner, 1957). A social identity's accessibility may vary based on contextual cues (temporary accessibility), or it may be chronically accessible if considered important to the self-concept and used frequently (Hogg & Terry, 2000), for example, sex and race (Mackie et al., 1996). Social identity threat may therefore be triggered by knowledge that certain social categories (e.g., females) are viewed unfavorably by members of the outgroup (e.g., males) or more subtly through social cues (e.g., an aptitude test administered to African American students) that point to the possibility of being devalued (Steele et al., 2002).

Social Identity Threat Types and Responses

Different types of threat can be experienced at the level of one's social identity with different implications in terms of response (Branscombe et al., 1999a, b). Along with types of threat, responses vary with the intensity of threat-activating cues (ranging from blatant, through moderately explicit, to implicit; Nguyen & Ryan, 2008). When an individual is stereotyped and treated accordingly, specifically when the categorization is illegitimate and irrelevant, self-esteem is threatened. People may then stress their unique attributes (away from stereotypes) to shift the perception of the other onto an interpersonal basis: They may stress that the ingroup is, in fact, heterogeneous, or they may disidentify with the ingroup. People are also threatened when their group distinctiveness is undermined or prevented. In such situations, the threatened individual may stress ingroup homogeneity, increase self-stereotyping (even on negative group characteristics), or engage in outgroup derogation. In terms of value threats, they can be outgroup based, involving either an explicit devaluation of the ingroup (e.g., systemic discrimination against the ingroup or explicit attacks on valued elements of the ingroup's identity) or a more subtle instance, suggesting the ingroup is devalued based on the ingroup's behavior itself (e.g., losing a sports match against an outgroup). Both can increase ingroup identification and outgroup derogation. Individuals can also be threatened if they are made to feel that they are not accepted by the ingroup and, as a result, may display outgroup derogation and alignment with characteristics of the group to gain acceptance. These responses have been consistently associated with strong identifiers as the threatened social identity is more central to their sense of self and hence esteem, when compared to low identifiers (Branscombe et al., 1999a, b). Threats also vary

in intensity: Blatant cues may yield the largest stereotype threat effects in the expected direction (e.g., academic underperformance; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Stone & McWhinnie, 2008), but they can also elicit reactance and consequently behaviors inconsistent with the stereotype (e.g., Hoyt et al., 2010). Moderately explicit cues—for instance, stating that there are gender differences in math performance without clarifying the direction—have been associated with stereotype-consistent outcomes, while subtle or implicit cues have been associated with the weakest stereotype threat effects (Nguyen & Ryan, 2008).

Who Experiences Threats to Their Identity?

Experiencing social identity threat is quite common, but not everyone experiences such threats with the same intensity, frequency, and implications. One source of differences is dispositional, as experiencing social identity threat may vary based on personal self-esteem and group identification. Steele et al. (2002) clarify that these differences are, however, not the basis for the experience of identity threat. It is rather the culturally shared knowledge of how certain groups of people are normatively regarded and how a society's hierarchies are organized (cf. Hagendoorn, 1995). Social identity threat may be triggered when an individual fears negative evaluation based on a commonly held stereotype of their group (stereotype threat; Nguyen & Ryan, 2008; Steele & Aronson, 1995), by differences in numbers of people from minority groups present (representativeness threat; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008), the extent to which the setting is organized based on certain social identities (glass ceiling effect; Baxter & Wright, 2000; Cook & Glass, 2014), the social identity ideology of the setting (e.g., assimilation to multiculturalism), and cues of intergroup sensitivity norms (Steele et al., 2002).

In short, the extent to which one experiences social identity threat can be determined by what group they belong to and the context within which that group is being evaluated. For example, a Caucasian male college student would not necessarily feel at risk of underperforming on a math test relative to a female African American student. For the latter, both her sex and her racial identity have been grounds for consistent discrimination and stereotyping by the outgroup, of which she would be conscious. However, we need to exercise particular caution when interpreting results on stereotype threat and math performance among females in Western contexts, as a recent replication study in a large-scale sample of Dutch students did not support such an effect (Flore et al., 2018). While a previous meta-analytic study found overall support for the effect, it also called attention to evidence for publication bias (Flore & Wicherts, 2015) bringing into question the long-standing purported effect. At least two interpretations are possible. First, these inconsistencies point toward a general problem surrounding studies of stereotype threat, particularly when considering publication bias. Second, we argue that this calls for renewed attention to the applicability of threat (and experienced threat levels) across groups and settings, as the pattern may point toward non-effects among samples that are (relatively) more privileged and thus less easily threatened,

whereas for other groups, threat may be a part of everyday life—and they may thus respond with more ecologically relevant responses to threat stimuli than samples for whom threat may not be a common experience. In other words, while the experience of adversity and threat may clearly be ubiquitous among many groups, some groups may more habitually engage in threat management.

Another reason for finding (and expecting) inconsistencies related to the applicability of threat may be circumstances in which threat is omnipresent and can hardly be avoided. In such cases, it may not be feasible to find and engage in activities that can minimize threat. An example of such intense social identity threat would be the Roma population in Southeast Europe (see Buzea, this volume), who find themselves under continuous threat (Dimitrova et al., 2017) and are considered one of the most vulnerable minorities in Europe (European Commission, 2011). This is a group that endures marked discrimination and intolerance on a daily basis, which has implications in terms of reduced educational attainment and employment wages (O'Higgins, 2010). Heightened experiences of identity threat can also be observed among immigrant populations who face challenges to their sense of identity in a majority context (Berry et al., 1987). This may include the experience of culture shock and identity loss as a new classification of immigrant or refugee is imposed by the majority (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). This sense of identity loss can be understood in terms of a symbolic threat (identity, values, and overall lifestyle) brought about by interactions with a mainstream community.

The type and intensity of a given threat can therefore vary, based on contextual cues, such that certain groups may experience elevated levels (intensity and frequency) of threat that render their social identities chronically salient and hence accessible (Hogg & Terry, 2000). For instance, a minority group ranking high on cultural distance—the perceived differences in physical and social characteristics between host and heritage cultures (distinctiveness; Bender & Sleegers, 2020)—relative to a majority, with a history of perceived stereotyping (categorization threat) from the outgroup, may become continually aware of their minority status and may therefore be hypervigilant of contextual cues that may signal threat. This is exacerbated if the group perceives its social identity's very existence as actually endangered. This is akin to the concept of continuity threat, which has been studied in the majority context with concerns at the national identity level in Western countries host to immigrant communities (see, e.g., Badea et al., 2019; Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2013). Therefore, it would be valuable to examine the process of social identity threat in different groups and across different contexts to gain a better understanding of how the threat is experienced and managed, for example, via self-affirmation interventions.

How Do People Self-Affirm in the Face of Social Identity Threat?

As a consequence of social identity threat and depending on the type of threat and level of identification with the social group, individuals may respond by increased identification or disidentification, defensive reactions, and outgroup derogation

(Branscombe et al., 1999a). Increased identification with the minority group has been elaborated by the rejection–identification model as a buffer against experiences of prejudice and discrimination from the majority (Branscombe et al., 1999b). This has been supported empirically with different groups, such as African Americans (Branscombe et al., 1999b), international students (Ramos et al., 2012), and multiracial people (Giamo et al., 2012). Ingroup identification does not seem to be the only outcome of perceived majority discrimination. Verkuyten and Yildiz (2007) found both increased ethnic and Muslim identification among Turkish Dutch, paired with decreased Dutch identification.

Self-Affirmation

Increased (dis)identification is a spontaneous means of identity management, but self-affirmation has been investigated primarily as an intervention in social evaluative environments where risks of negative, stereotypical evaluations due to group belonging are high (Cook et al., 2012). Self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) posits that individuals are in a constant state of striving to conserve and maintain their self-integrity and their positive, moral, and adaptive self-image. When our self-integrity is threatened (e.g., by being stereotyped), we can reestablish our self-worth by focusing on an unthreatened domain of the self (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). For instance, reflecting upon core and important values such as religion, family, or achievements is important avenues for self-affirmation (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). Focusing on them places a threatening message in a larger context and renders it less psychologically distressing (Bursos et al., 2012; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). The efficacy of self-affirmation interventions has been well documented through value affirmation exercises in the educational context, in specifically targeting the achievement gap among Latino Americans and African Americans (Cohen & Garcia, 2008), purported to be a function of stereotypes pertaining to their intellectual ability and success (Cook et al., 2012; Guyll et al., 2010; Protzko & Aronson, 2016; Sherman et al., 2013). Similar gains of self-affirmation interventions also appear in counteracting the effects of gender stereotypes in relation to the performance of women in tasks related to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) in both educational and professional settings (Bancroft et al., 2017; Derks et al., 2009; Miyake et al., 2010; Taillandier-Schmitt et al., 2012), but in light of evidence of publication bias, more research is needed to draw such a conclusion (Flore & Wicherts, 2015). Self-affirmation has also been used in the health setting (Sherman & Cohen, 2006) as an intervention that promotes positive response to health risk information. Self-affirmed individuals have been found to display greater message acceptance, stronger motivation for change, and healthier post-intervention behavior (Epton et al., 2015).

Self-Affirmation Interventions Experimental manipulations of self-affirmation vary but center upon a valued aspect of the self. In most studies, participants are

provided with a list of values (e.g., family, humor, etc.; see Cohen et al., 2000) and asked to rank them from most to least important and then elaborate on why the selected value is important to them. Similar interventions include asking participants to list a few positive aspects of the self and spend a few minutes reflecting upon them (e.g., Van Den Bos, 2001) or providing participants with a list of affirmations (e.g., good-hearted, kind, intelligent) and asking them to indicate whether and when they have felt as such (e.g., Dillard et al., 2005). Other studies apply a more open-ended approach in which participants are asked to write about a positive experience that made them feel proud (e.g., Klein et al., 2001) or an aspect of themselves of which they are proud (e.g., Blanton et al., 2001). The main impetus behind these affirmations is allowing the individual to process subsequent information (e.g., a threat) from a non-defensive angle.

The exact mechanism underlying the success of these interventions is not clear. Reduction of negative affect may be one of the mechanisms such that self-affirmation may lower negative emotions that arise as a function of threatening self-relevant information (Ferrer et al., 2012). This is in line with the self-evaluation maintenance model, in which the transference of positive affect is a main mechanism within attempts at restoring self-esteem (Tesser, 2000). However, if only affect were responsible, message strength (e.g., persuasive message following affirmation) should have no effect (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Implicit mechanisms have also been proposed at the affective and cognitive levels, such that self-affirmation increases implicit positive affect (Koole et al., 1999) and accessibility of threat-related cognitions among participants (Van Koningsbruggen et al., 2009). State self-esteem has been found to mediate the effect of self-affirmation interventions (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), but the lack of distinction between state and trait self-esteem renders conclusions difficult. One more mechanism that has been proposed in driving the effects of self-affirmation interventions is increase in self-certainty and self-concept clarity (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). In one study (a dissertation), a small but significant effect of self-affirmation on self-concept clarity was noted (Cerully, 2011), and similar findings have been reported in a short report on consumer behavior, in which self-affirmation reduced fantasy shopping (i.e., the tendency to buy things that the individual knows they will not make use of) through an interaction with self-concept clarity (Noguti & Bokeyar, 2011). There is little other research at present, which means that the robustness of this mechanism needs to be examined.

Self-Affirmation Through Mastery Recall The recall of mastery events where one reports on a difficult personal experience and how they overcame it is another means of self-affirmation (Tavitian-Elmadjian et al., 2020). To that effect, we used a stereotype threat targeting the US national identity and found that recalling a memory of having overcome a challenge enhanced the collective self-esteem of American participants when they were faced with an identity-related threat. We focused on the narrative content, which is in line with efforts aimed at examining the value narratives to identify the mechanism underlying the observed effects of value affirmations (Creswell et al., 2007; Shnabel et al., 2013). We (2020) argue that

memories, particularly directive memories, can play a self-affirmative role: They are recalled for the purpose of serving a current or future course of action (Bluck et al., 2005; Pillemer, 2003). When faced with difficulties, such memories provide reassurance that one has overcome similar obstacles before (e.g., drawing strength from prior instances of doing well in exam situations when facing an assessment situation). The recall of such a mastery event could instill a sense of competence and efficacy (Bandura, 1977), which is particularly relevant in the face of social identity threat.

Group Affirmation

Research has also looked into the efficacy of group affirmation in addressing social identity threat (as opposed to personal identity threat), whereby tapping into valued elements of the collective can reinstate a sense of group esteem (Gunn & Wilson, 2011) as group level identities (e.g., ethnic, gender, sectarian, sports clubs, etc.) are an important aspect of one's self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Given the link between personal and social identities (Smith & Henry, 1996), individuals are equally motivated to maintain group and self-worth, and while self-affirmation supports this mechanism, tapping into valued characteristics of the group to which one belongs can also buffer against threats to social identity, in line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the rejection–identification model (Branscombe et al., 1999b).

Research findings on the effects of group affirmation have not been uniform. Some studies point to its efficacy in enhancing group esteem and reducing defensiveness (e.g., Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2016; Derks et al., 2006; Gunn & Wilson, 2011), but others show increased ingroup favoritism (Ehrlich & Gramzow, 2015), or even no effect of group affirmation on acceptance of group-level transgressions against others (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011). Badea and Sherman (2019) explain these inconsistencies in terms of the normative context within which the affirmation intervention is applied. That is, the outcome depends on whether the object of prejudice is viewed positively or negatively within the sample context. For instance, the Roma population is severely discriminated against in Southeast Europe (O'Higgins, 2010), and affirming ethnic group values may carry adverse effects and further strengthen the negative treatment Roma experience. Yet another explanation for the inconsistent findings relates to differences in sociocultural orientation. Perhaps in a more collectivist context, group affirmation is a more appropriate source of affirmation than personal affirmation. Evidence comes from a French study finding that group affirmation was beneficial for those who scored high on collectivism and self-affirmation for those high on individualism (Badea et al., 2018). When applying affirmations within minority groups, the evaluation (positive or negative) of the group by the affirming individual may be an important element underlying the efficacy of the intervention. If a group affirmation intervention is applied to buffer against identity threat in a sample of participants who are low identifiers, then group affirmation may not be as effective as perhaps self-affirmation.

In the following section, we elaborate on self- and group affirmation in non-Western contexts and minority groups in Western contexts that lean toward collectivism. We also refer to contexts that do not have a clearly demarcated majority group (e.g., Lebanon) and discuss how this might influence the outcome of social identity threat interventions and subsequent affirmation attempts.

Self-Affirmation in Non-Western Contexts

The majority of work on self- and group affirmation comes from Western contexts, with significantly fewer studies examining their utility in non-Western contexts that are characterized less by individuated sources of self-worth. Given that self-affirmation theory is built upon the need for people to maintain a positive view of the self (self-esteem motive; Steele, 1988), the conceptualization of sources of self-esteem maintenance is important to consider. For example, the examination of the self-enhancement motive, which has been proposed to be more relevant in independent Western contexts (Heine et al. 2001), has also been found in contexts where self-construals are characterized as interdependent. The difference lies in the sources of self-enhancement that are beneficial. In contexts in which interdependent self-construals are prototypically endorsed, people may capitalize on values such as family orientation and community as sources of self-enhancement, whereas in contexts in which an independent self-construal is commonly endorsed, self-enhancement sources may shift to personal achievements, for instance (Sedikides et al., 2003, 2005). Similar patterns may also apply to self-affirmation; where the underlying construct and its utility may be universal, its expression is colored by the cultural context within which it is tested.

It would follow that the core values that are normatively emphasized in a cultural context are important to consider when considering which affirmation interventions might be most effective. In a prototypically more collectivistic context such as China (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), affirming an aspect of the self that is defined in terms of relationships with close others such as friends and family, termed *relational self* (Chen et al., 2006), has been shown to be beneficial across different outcomes, such as displaying openness to feedback following failure information, increased performance on a mental rotation task (Cai et al., 2013), rejection of unfair offers (Gu et al., 2016), and reduced engagement in post-decisional justifications (Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005). In a series of experiments, Cai et al. (2013) aimed to evaluate the efficacy of relational and specifically familial self-affirmation relative to close-other-affirmation and individual self-affirmation. These were evaluated against a low affirmation (stranger affirmation) and no affirmation conditions. Results showed that familial self-affirmation was the most effective in all three experiments across varied threat manipulations and outcomes (mortality salience threat and support of birth control policy, gender stereotype threat and spatial rotation performance, failure feedback, and openness to liability focused information). In another study in which familial self-affirmation was applied, affirmed Chinese

students were more likely to reject an unfair ultimatum game offer (Gu et al., 2016). In other words, in a context in which maintaining social harmony is valued, familial self-affirmation may reduce the likelihood of yielding to situations that one perceives as unfair.

In a series of experiments, Hoshino-Browne et al. (2005) demonstrated how self-construal could influence the potency of an independent versus interdependent self-affirmation intervention in a cross-cultural context. In general and relative to European Canadians, Asian Canadians benefited the most from engaging in an interdependent self-affirmation, as evidenced by a reduced tendency to engage in post-decisional justification following making a decision for a valued ingroup member. In a second experiment, the degree of identification with Canadian culture was taken into account. Results showed that bicultural Asian Canadians were able to draw from *both* independent and interdependent self-affirmations as a buffer against the threat of having made an incorrect decision on behalf of an ingroup member. More monocultural (Asian, in this case) Asian Canadian participants, however, benefited from affirming their interdependent self, which is more consistent with their cultural value of collectivism. This does not mean that self-affirmation cannot be successfully applied in non-Western contexts, per se. For example, in a cross-cultural study applying a survey design, self-affirmation was found to be a predictor of well-being for both South Korean and US American participants (Nelson et al., 2014). Given the wide application of self-affirmation interventions, inconsistent findings and variations are likely the outcome of the measures of interest (e.g., collective self-esteem, overall well-being, prejudice, and message acceptance), as well as the overall context in which the intervention is applied. To our knowledge, these are the only studies examining the efficacy of self-affirmation in non-Western contexts, and they mostly focus on Asian contexts. Given that context and group variations are a potential reason for the inconsistencies in prior findings, there is a clear need to expand research on self-affirmation to include more diverse non-Western contexts.

Toward Investigating More Diverse Populations: Lebanon

There is some work on self-affirmation interventions within the context of social identity threat from non-Western contexts, but again, it is typically on Asian samples. This can be a drawback, as it is not possible to draw generalizations on how all cultures that vary along the collectivism continuum would respond to self-, group, and familial affirmations, which resonate with results from work on bicultural participants (Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005).

We have focused on investigating identity threat in Lebanon, a context that differs in many regards from previously studied contexts but also shares some similarities. Lebanon is an Arab country in the Middle East with a GDP per capita of 7784 USD (World Bank, 2019) and an HDI of 0.73 (UNDP, 2019). With a population of 6.9 million (UNDP, 2019), it is characterized by sectarian and ethnic diversity, with

18 religious groups divided across four Muslim sects, 12 Christian sects, the Druze sect, and a Jewish group (Saseen, 1990). While there are other contexts with many ethnic groups (e.g., China is home to 56 ethnic minorities; Dincer & Wang, 2011), the difference lies in the absence of a clear dominant majority group (such as the Han in China)—similar to other historically multicultural contexts such as Indonesia (Sari et al., 2018). The absence of a dominant group has implications for national identity and how national identity threats are perceived and managed. While a strong national identity has been cultivated and is endorsed in China (Tang & Darr, 2012), a history of intergroup conflict and long-standing external interference in Lebanon render inhabitants' sectarian identity salient, simultaneously weakening a unified definition of the Lebanese national identity (see Tavitian et al., 2019).

Lebanon is not only different in its composition from Western settings but also in its dominant societal values, as it has been characterized as scoring high on collectivism (Hofstede, 1983). In Hofstede's classification, however, Lebanon was pooled with Egypt, Libya, Kuwait, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, rendering this score unlikely to be an accurate classification. Lebanon has been subject to Western influence throughout its history, through, for instance, the introduction of new educational systems in the 1930s by French, American, Italian, and German missionaries; a rise in foreign language schools and universities marking standards for higher education; and the French Mandate, lasting from 1920 to 1943. This has exposed the Lebanese population, especially inhabitants of the Mount Lebanon and Beirut regions, to Western sociocultural values. These values have been maintained, long after the Lebanese gained independence in 1943, through governmental legislations regarding political reform, communications media, foreign consultants, and growth in business enterprises (Salem, 1973). Therefore, Lebanon seems to have been affected by Westernization more so than other Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Hallaq, 2001).

Although in general there is a dearth of research from the Middle Eastern region on self-construals and cultural value orientations, existing data seem to support a more nuanced understanding of individualism–collectivism in Lebanon. For instance, in a cross-cultural study assessing values of individualism and collectivism among managers across seven countries in the Greater Middle East (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Pakistan, Turkey, and the UAE), with the exception of Israel, Lebanon scored lowest on collectivism, as well as highest on individualism and universalism. These values may reflect the religiously diverse context and Westernization of Lebanon, quite unlike other Arab nations (Ralston et al., 2012). It could be argued that these values are specific to the occupational context and may emerge differently within the educational or familial spheres, but in another cross-cultural comparison of interdependence, self-reliance, and competitiveness in a sample of university students, Lebanon fell under a cluster of high self-reliance and competitiveness, which seem to go against what would be typically expected of a collectivist context (Green et al., 2005).

The religious and ethnic diversity found in Lebanon also contributes to within-country variations in cultural values of individualism and collectivism. For instance, in her study, Ayyash-Abdo (2001) noted that Lebanese university students who

responded to her study survey in Arabic also scored higher on collectivism. She also found that Muslim students scored significantly higher on collectivism compared to the Christian and Druze respondents, with no significant differences emerging between religious groups on individualism. In another cross-cultural study aimed at refining the conceptualizing of self-construals, university student samples from three Arab countries—namely Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria—and the United Kingdom were tested. One relevant finding was that the United Kingdom and Lebanon did not significantly differ on horizontal collectivism, while Syria and Jordan were significantly higher than Lebanon on this dimension (Harb & Smith, 2008). Two conclusions may be drawn from these studies: First, and specific to Lebanon, is the need for researchers to take sectarian diversity into account. Variations in findings of studies could be explained by the diversity in samples studied (e.g., Ayyash-Abdo, 2001; Ralston et al., 2012). This is specifically relevant when studying identity threat and its management. For instance, a stereotype that is perceived as threatening by one religious group may not be perceived similarly by another. Second, and more generally, it is important to consider samples outside of the typically evaluated non-Western contexts as specifics within each context may contribute to variations on the understanding of psychological processes and, specific to this chapter, identity threat management through self-affirmation. For instance, if Lebanon is considered collectivist, then group affirmation should be applied as evidenced from other collectivistic settings. However, given findings in which Lebanon is evaluated against other Arab countries and a Western context, such an assumption may be inaccurate.

Managing Threat in Lebanon

Given the sectarian and ethnic diversity and inconsistent findings on cultural values, Lebanon seems to be a good candidate to evaluate variations in self-affirmation as a function of context. Lebanon does not have a clear cohesive majority group due to sectarian division (similar to Indonesia; Sari et al., 2018). The most recent official population census dates back to 1932, when Christians were shown to outnumber Muslims by a small margin (Maktabi, 1999), which is a testament to the fragile coexistence of groups: The population distribution has since then changed in favor of Muslims (Ramadan, 2019), but no official reports exist to avoid potential sources of conflict, given that the census formed the basis for consociationalism in Lebanon post the civil war era (1975–1990; see Krayem, 1997) and, in turn, the division of power across different sects. Against this backdrop, the Lebanese national identity is rendered rather inconsequential and irrelevant as a target of identity threat in Lebanon (Bahout, 2016; Traboulsi, 2007). This does not apply, however, to the various Lebanese minorities, such as the sizeable naturalized Armenian ethnic minority. The conditions for such a minority group in Lebanon may be quite different from minorities in Western contexts, specifically in terms of the lack of a cohesive majority group, the history of intergroup conflict, and the consociational system of

governance as detailed above (for a detailed account, see Tavitian et al., 2019). In a study aimed at assessing how Lebanese and Lebanese Armenians responded to identity-relevant threats, we proposed that the Lebanese context deviates from typically studied Western (immigration) contexts due to its sectarian division and high intergroup conflict. We constructed vignettes featuring stereotypes targeting the Lebanese national identity (Study 1) and the Armenian ethnic identity (Study 2) to investigate identity threat management via individuals' recalling mastery experiences as a method of self-affirmation (see Tavitian et al., 2019). We found—as expected—that self-affirmation through mastery recall was not effective in managing identity threat among Lebanese. In fact, the threat itself was not applicable and thus successful in exerting an effect, which, along with timeliness and availability for change resources, is one of the central elements in rendering an affirmation intervention successful, as postulated by the trigger-and-channel framework (Ferrer & Cohen, 2019). In the Lebanese context, sectarian identity overrides a unified national identity (Gürçan, 2007), rendering a threat to the national identity ineffective. Accordingly, mastery recall was unnecessary for helping individuals bounce back from a negative depiction of a national group to which they do not feel particularly connected. This would be a highly untypical finding for nationals in Western contexts who are confronted with a threat directed at their national identity, irrespective of how many subgroups to which they may belong. Upon examining the narrative themes from the recall tasks, we found that Armenian participants made references to their collective identity spontaneously—not only in the threat condition but even in the neutral condition in which they were asked to recall their morning routine. The Armenian identity is clearly salient and accessible, as opposed to the irrelevant Lebanese identity. It is noteworthy that examining mastery and routine morning recalls from the mainstream Lebanese sample did not reveal a similar pattern. We then also reanalyzed the narrative themes of a previous study in which US Americans were exposed to a national identity threat (Tavitian-Elmadjian et al., 2020), and a similar pattern did not emerge. The specific pattern revolving around the Armenian ethnic identity can be explained in terms of (a) the history of settlement of the group itself, in which continuity threat is quite high, and this may, in turn, prompt increased identification with the collective (see Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2013), and (b) the Lebanese context characterized by a lack of a clear majority and intergroup hostility, making integration into a host culture arguably next to impossible. It is highly problematic to envisage avenues for an ethnic minority group to integrate into a society that is divided by a history of civil war, the ensuing political, ideological conflicts, and even geographical separation such that different sects reside within their own areas with little sectarian diversity apart from certain areas in Beirut (Nucho, 2016). Some examples from the recall task responses of Armenian participants illustrate the salience of the Armenian ethnic identity. For instance, when asked to recall a personally difficult event, one participant stated, “The following is a problem, that I face very often. The concept of being treated in a different way, because of being very Armenian ... By the way, [I am] proud to be Armenian.” Of all the personally significant difficult moments, he made reference to the subjective experience of being treated differently because of his social

belonging. What is more, this salience was even present when we asked participants to recall a typical morning routine (which rarely prompts personally relevant themes): One participant stated that after waking up, he thought of Armenians in Lebanon and the diaspora in the hope that they would all have a good day. This also emerged in the no-threat condition:

“I’m an Armenian person and am attached to the heritage; however, I’m the type who’s open to other cultures as well. I do not treat Armenians better than others, but I cannot reject the fact that being surrounded by Armenians gives me some sort of comfort; it feels like home most of the time. Being open to people different from us is essential” (25-year-old male in Tavitian et al., 2019).

We explain these in terms of salience such that the Armenian identity is pervasive in everyday interactions, thus readily accessible. We also found a sense of pride in the collective expressed in such narratives. It is as though ethnic Armenians in Lebanon are constantly affirming their collective by referring to their collective identities.

Conclusion and Perspective

The need to maintain positive self-worth is a basic need that drives individuals (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). When encountering information that may threaten the view of oneself as good and worthy, self-affirmation can help maintain self-worth without resorting to maladaptive means of self-esteem maintenance such as denial, disidentification, and dismissal of the threatening message (Sherman & Cohen, 2002, 2006). Self-affirmation has been shown to be effective in triggering behavioral change when a relevant psychological threat is administered: The affirmation is exacted in a timely manner (that is in close proximity to the threat) and resources for change are readily available (Ferrer & Cohen, 2019). The threat should not be overwhelming as that may result in reactance (Nguyen & Ryan, 2008), even when resources aimed at attenuating the threat are present. This is in line with our finding that even subtle hints at one’s identity being devalued invite threat-related (collective) responses (Tavitian et al., 2019). Therefore, in addition to the three conditions by Ferrer and Cohen (2019), we propose taking into account the context within which the threat is administered. The exact vessel for self-affirmation may vary based on variations of the samples studied and be specifically nuanced as a function of the cultural context of the interventions applied. To that effect, research has examined the utility of self- (e.g., Cohen et al., 2007; Sherman et al., 2013; Shnabel et al., 2013), group (e.g., Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2016), familial (interdependent; e.g., Cai et al., 2013), and mastery recall affirmations (e.g., Tavitian et al., 2019). Evidence from the utility of affirmation interventions are predominantly from the West, with the bulk of non-Western studies coming from Asian contexts (e.g., Gu et al., 2016; Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005). In the present chapter, we highlight the need to take into account contextual variations when interpreting findings on identity affirmation. We also stress the need to move beyond the typically evaluated Western contexts and their juxtaposition with the non-Western Asian contexts

that are typically studied. Even if certain countries score similarly on cultural value constructs such as individualism and collectivism, it does not necessarily mean that the way these constructs manifest themselves in each context are qualitatively similar. For instance, the use of mastery recall as a self-affirmation tool, while successful in addressing national identity threat in a US American sample (Tavitian-Elmadjian et al., 2020), was not effective in establishing group worth when used in a Lebanese sample for which the national Lebanese identity was threatened. In this sample, a threat to the national identity was irrelevant, given that one's sect is a better source of esteem than one's national group. Similarly, self-affirmation was not successful when applied to Lebanese Armenians, who appeared to be in a constant mode of self-affirmation by referencing their collective identity (Tavitian, et al., 2019). This resonates with the need to adopt more rigorous approaches to studying cultural phenomena (Bender & Adams, 2021), such as the consilience approach (van de Vijver & Leung, 2008). In cross-cultural research, the experimental can inadvertently become quasi-experimental. Consequently, conclusions drawn on cross-cultural differences are particularly affected by threats to internal validity (e.g., selection bias, cross-cultural differences in response styles), construct validity (e.g., nonequivalence at the level of operational definition), and statistical conclusion validity (e.g., inadequate testing for equivalence at the structural and scalar levels; Leung & van de Vijver, 2008; see Bender & Adams, 2021, for an overview). Most of the threat and self-affirmation literature draws heavily on experimental findings, as of yet with little insight available to assess the cross-cultural appropriateness of the applied procedures and the conclusions drawn. Consistent with our recommendation of studying multiple contexts prior to drawing conclusions on variations, adopting a consilience framework also notes the need to address confounds, for methodological diversity and for a grounding in theory in posing precise and complex predictions that could be tested (Leung & van de Vijver, 2008). Fischer and Poortinga (2018) note that much of cross-cultural research has been exploratory and should move into the realm of verification if it is to yield a more solid understanding of psychological phenomena and how they unfold across contexts as a function of those contexts.

Last, there are some lessons to be extracted from studying contexts in which diversity cannot be equated with multiculturalism. Multiculturalism has been used in two ways: It represents an ideological attitude promoting the recognition and acceptance of group differences as a precursor to equality and the creation of a just society; it also describes the demographic composition of a society (Tiryakian, 2003). Ideologically then, multiculturalism is something that one can choose to endorse or not, but some suggest that multiculturalism is a fact of life in lieu of globalization in the modern world and should be conceptualized as a process that also takes into account how diversity is managed at the level of social and political policies endorsed in a given context (Nye, 2007; see also Morris et al., 2015). For instance, researchers from Lebanon note that variation in their study outcomes, such as cultural value orientations, may be a function of the social diversity within Lebanon (Ayyash-Abdo, 2001; Ralston et al., 2012). The term "diversity," however, does not depict the fragmented fabric of the Lebanese society, where sectarian

identity trumps a unified national identity. The sectarian division in Lebanon is clearly reflected in its consociational system of governance, which is also mirrored in the division of residential areas in Lebanon, where each sect/ethnic group has claimed an area, albeit unofficially, as their own (Nucho, 2016). So, while Lebanon is multicultural in terms of its demographic distribution, this does not automatically suggest that people hold positive attitudes toward this diverse societal composition (i.e., whether it is seen as an opportunity or a problem). Therefore, studying a context in which diversity does not necessarily imply plurality and in which there may not be a clear dominant group may provide a window into demographic and cultural changes in typical Western immigration contexts that are changing. The United States, for instance, is projected to have a non-White majority by 2060 (United States Census Bureau, 2015). What are implications of a multicultural demographic composition for an ideology of multiculturalism? And would an ideology of multiculturalism be beneficial in promoting intergroup relations and a sense of unity? Lebanon may not present itself as a context to examine this question, given the history of conflicts, yet its failed consociationalism in particular may provide critical insights. The initial aim of Lebanon's system was to preserve the right of each sect to just participation in governance. However, it appears that this compartmentalization may have weakened the superordinate, national identification of group members. Consociationalism is not the only or even most important factor in explaining the current state of the Lebanese national identity; it is worth considering how a policy aimed at accommodating all minorities to engage in their heritage culture, with little work on cultivating a superordinate identity, may backfire.

In short, demographic diversity does not equal positive attitudes toward diversity or a well-functioning, inclusive societal composition. How a society negotiates its diverse makeup is relevant. In a recent study, Verkuyten et al. (2020) discuss interculturalism, an ideology that proposes intergroup dialogue, identity flexibility, and sense of belonging as precursors to a just, plural society. This conceptualization is distinct from multiculturalism in its emphasis on similarities across groups, as opposed to differences (thus reducing distinctiveness threat), and its wider definition of identities beyond the duality of minorities and majorities, which they argue may weaken national identification. Across two Western contexts (the Netherlands and the United States), they point to positive associations between both interculturalism and multiculturalism, on the one hand, and intergroup attitudes, on the other, but only interculturalism was associated with the endorsement of civic nationhood and equality. Multiculturalism has been associated with positive outcomes among minority groups, particularly when a strong, multiculturally inclusive superordinate identity is present—for instance, in Canada, where ethnocultural groups exhibit strong ethnic and national identification (Berry, 2013). Taking into account the mixed finding in intergroup relations (Verkuyten & Yogeewaran, 2020) in how societies organize intergroup contact points to the need to reevaluate policies aimed at promoting it, including a shift toward focusing on fostering unity and finding similarities in differences, we propose that this can only be successful when taking into account the larger cultural context in which individuals deal with threat and form their identities.

Recommendations for Future Research

To better understand how identity threat and affirmation procedures aimed at addressing it operate across cultures, the specific cultural context in which the threat is applied needs to be taken explicitly into account. It is particularly relevant to develop a thorough understanding of the psychological experience of threat of the target groups (e.g., intergroup conflict, country level integration policies) for two reasons. First, this directly informs threat relevance (Ferrer & Cohen, 2019), ensuring in studies that an appropriate threat pertinent to the target group is applied. Second, this will also inform how to tailor the threat level (implicit to moderately implicit to blatant) to ensure efficacy while avoiding reactance, which is specifically relevant when the targeted identity is chronically accessible and perceived as endangered (see Tavitian, et al., 2019). Assessing the interplay between threat content, level, and context will also inform which affirmation procedures are most beneficial when selecting self or group affirmation (See Badea & Sherman, 2019), or more specific forms of affirmation, such as mastery recall (See Tavitian-Elmadjian et al., 2020) in order to buffer the effects of threat. In line with recommendations by Fischer and Poortinga (2018) as well as Leung and van de Vijver (2008), we propose a methodological focus on (a) replication studies of experiments on identity threat and self-, group, and mastery recall affirmation to draw more robust conclusions as to whether these phenomena are stable and relevant in non-Western contexts and (b) to explore at the same time how threat management may occur from a non-Western perspective (e.g., for more group-related coping strategies, see Badea et al., 2018).

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