International Journal of Intercultural Relations 91 (2022) 113–118

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel

Immigrants' intragroup moral exclusion predicts ingroup-directed behavioral intentions: The mediating role of disidentification

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Moral exclusion
Intragroup moral exclusion
Disidentification
Ethic identity

ABSTRACT

Previous research documents the relationship between negative treatments of outgroup members and moral exclusion. In this study, we expect negative treatments of the ingroup members to be also related to a moral exclusionary mechanism. Next, we hypothesize that the relationship between intragroup moral exclusion and behavioral intentions (both positive and negative ones) targeting the ingroup members, to be mediated by immigrants' disidentification with their ethnic identity. Using two samples of Iranians (n = 385) and Tunisians (n = 124) living in Italy, we tested the two hypotheses. Results provided evidence that moral exclusion is negatively associated with positive behavioral intentions (active facilitation) and positively associated with the negative behavioral intentions (passive facilitation and passive harm). Results also suggest that this relationship is mediated by disidentification with immigrants' own ethnic group.

Introduction

Prior research has investigated different cognitive, affective, and behavioral antecedents and consequences of the majority members' negative attitudes towards immigrants (Esses, 2021). We also know that hostility against outgroup members, including immigrants, can involve moral exclusionary mechanisms (Passini & Morselli, 2017). What has not yet been established is whether those processes of moral exclusion are applied to the ingroup members, or more particularly, by immigrants against their own ingroup. We attempt to fill this gap by investigating immigrants' negative and positive ingroup-directed behavioral intentions in connection with moral exclusion. Furthermore, we investigate if this relationship is explained by immigrants' disidentification with their ethnic background.

Moral exclusion

Negative behaviors directed against a target can be regarded as permissible and may not cost a negative self-image to the harm-doer if the target does not fall within the purview of one's ideas of justice and fairness. This psychological mechanism occurs *"when*

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2022.09.006

Available online 27 September 2022

individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply" (Opotow, 1990, p.1). Olson et al. (2011) identify two distinct moral exclusionary processes. One taps into the irrelevance of the target to one's basic moral concerns, so the target is placed outside the scope of justice. That is, the target (an insect for instance) is not even entitled to be treated in accordance with basic moral rules. The other is based on the target's deservingness for negative treatments. Negative treatment of the target is not viewed as morally problematic but justified and fair because the target is perceived to be deserving of it.

How could then either of the above-mentioned processes be applied to one's own ingroup? We argue that moral exclusion can also be directed towards the ingroup members and show that it is strongly associated with behavioral intentions through the mediating effect of disidentification.

Disidentification

Social identification is a psychological process whereby the ingroup becomes an expression of oneself where one's socio-psychological needs, such as belonging, self-efficacy, and self-esteem are satisfied (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see also Breakwell, 1986). Some group memberships, however, do not satisfy these needs and are experienced as painful and threatening (Becker & Tausch, 2014; Breakwell, 1986). A major social change (such as migration) that compromises positive functioning of identification can lead to perceiving the corresponding identity (ethnic background) as a threat (Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000).

Becker and Tausch (2014) define disidentification as "*a psychological phenomenon that occurs when individuals belong to groups they do not wish to belong to* (p.4)". It occurs when the ingroup is not possible to physically escape from, at the same time it is perceived as a threat to the self. Through disidentification, the individual creates a psychological distance from the negative group membership. They distinguish between three dimensions of disidentification: detachment (*which ranges from feelings of alienation to an active separation from one's ingroup*), dissatisfaction (*expressed in feelings of dissatisfaction with one's group membership*), and dissimilarity (*the perception that one is dissimilar to other group members*) (Becker & Tausch, 2014. p. 6).

Intragroup moral exclusion and disidentification

Previous research has investigated the relationship between behavioral intentions and moral exclusion mostly with respect to outgroup members (Hadarics & Kende, 2018; Nariman et al., 2020; Passini & Morselli, 2017). A tendency for negative behavioral intentions directed towards other ingroup members has been previously documented and it has been established that such tendency is influenced by how one copes with the negative group membership (Becker & Tausch, 2014). As mentioned above, an unpleasant identity may be perceived as threatening to the self that is subsequently linked up to disidentification with the ingroup. This highly resonates with the literature proposing perceived threat as one major factor associated with moral exclusion of the "other" (Hadarics, 2020; Olson et al., 2011; Opotow, 1990). One may therefore argue that "other" can also be members of the ingroup, if the very ingroup identity threatens the self. Regarding intergroup moral exclusion what is threatened is the ingroup identity (Hadarics et al., 2020) while in disidentification and our proposed intragroup moral exclusion the ingroup identity itself is perceived as a threat. In the former the threat is the outgroup while in the latter the threatened is the self. However, what is threatened in both cases is the self—the actor's personal identity—and what is morally excluded and negatively treated is the target perceived to be imposing that threat. It is worth mentioning that the position we adopt here avoids a sharp distinction between personal and social identity, since social identity is part of one's personal identity—or as Breakwell (2001) notes: "*seen across the biography, social identity is seen to become personal identity: the dichotomy is purely a temporal artefact*" (p.277).

Based on prior research, considerations of fairness in general (Graham et al., 2013), and moral exclusion in particular (Passini & Morselli, 2017), are intuitive and subtle psychological mechanisms. Disidentification has been suggested to be an *active/cognitive* psychological mechanism through which the subject actively distances themselves from the unpleasant identity impossible to escape from physically (Becker & Tausch, 2014). Thus, the relationship between intuitive considerations of fairness regarding the ingroup members and ingroup-directed behavioral intentions should be explained through a more active mechanism of disidentification.

The current study

We propose two hypotheses. First, intragroup moral exclusion is related to negative ingroup-directed behavioral intentions (H1). Second, disidentification mediates the association between intragroup moral exclusion and behavioral intentions directed against the ingroup (H2).

Procedure

The present study was approved by the ethical committee of Eötvös Loránd University. The information about the items used in the study can be found in the supplementary materials. All the scales were translated (into Farsi for Iranians and Tunisian Arabic for Tunisians), and back-translated by independent translators and pilot tested.

Participants

Data collection was conducted through an online survey from June to August 2020, among Iranians living in Italy. From August to December 2020 a replication sample was collected among Tunisians based also in Italy. A total of 385 Iranians and 124 Tunisians

participated in the online survey.[1] Demographic information of the respondents are presented in Table 1. The Iranian sample was collected by the help of the organization "Unione Degli Studenti Iraniani" (Union of Iranian Students) through a social media group created for Iranian students living in Italy. Tunisian respondents were also recruited using a social media platform dedicated to Tunisian immigrants living in Italy as well as through the help of the organization "movimento dei tunisini in italia" (Tunisian Movement in Italy). To ensure that the respondents of both samples are in Italy and not based in other countries, we explicitly asked them to answer the question at the beginning of the survey.

Measures

Disidentification was measured by 11 items adapted from Becker and Tausch (2014) Disidentification Scale. Four items measured detachment (e.g., "I feel disloyal to other Iranians/Tunisians"), three items measured dissatisfaction (e.g., "I'm unhappy about being an Iranian/Tunisian"), and four items measured dissimilarity (e.g., "I have nothing in common with most Iranians/Tunisians"). The items were measured on a 7-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7).

Intragroup moral exclusion (hereafter, IME[2]) was measured by three 7-point bipolar items adopted from Moral Inclusion/exclusion of Other Groups (MIEG) scale (Passini & Morselli, 2017). MIEG scale was originally designed to capture a form of subtle/implicit intergroup moral exclusion. The items were rephrased in order to measure an *intragroup* mechanism of moral exclusion where + 3 on the left indicates moral exclusion and + 3 on the right indicates moral inclusion ("Most Iranians/Tunisians deserve no respect - Most Iranians/Tunisians deserve utmost respect" "It is necessary for the people of other societies to avoid any kind of contact with most Iranians/Tunisians - It is necessary for the people of other societies to engage in establishing constructive contacts with Iranians/Tunisians" "I think most Iranians/Tunisians are extremely uncivilized - I think that most Iranians/Tunisians are extremely civilized").

To measure behavioral intentions, Behaviors from Intergroup Affect and Stereotypes (BIAS) map was used (Cuddy et al., 2007). BIAS map suggests four types of intergroup behaviors based on two dimensions of intensity (active vs. passive) and valence (facilitation vs. harm). The four types of behavior, therefore, are: active harm (e.g., harassing), passive harm (e.g., neglecting), active facilitation (e.g., helping), and passive facilitation (e.g., associating). Among the four only active facilitation is considered springing from a positive intention. Beneficial outcomes of passive facilitation are only by-products of the actor's intention to "work-with" the outgroup members to reach a specific goal. However, the actor does not intend to build a positive relationship with the outgroup member. In the current study, we rephrased the items to assess the participants' behavioral intentions towards their own group members instead of the outgroup. Moreover, the items tapping into active harm were not asked because they received negative reactions from the respondents during the pilot data collection. Active facilitation was measured by four items (e.g., "I search contact with other Iranians/Tunisians"). Passive facilitation was measured by two items ("I only search for contact with other Iranians/Tunisians if this fulfils a specific goal" "I only search for contact with other Iranians when it serves my own interest"). Passive harm was measured by four items (e.g., "I do not pay attention to other Iranians/Tunisians"). The items were measured by a 7-point scale from *extremely unlikely* (1) to *extremely likely* (7).

Results

Before proceeding to the main analyses, we first checked for the internal consistencies of all the scales and subscales used in the models. All Cronbach's alphas were satisfactory: Active facilitation (α_{Iran} =0.84; $\alpha_{Tunisia}$ =0.74), passive facilitation (α_{Iran} =0.92; $\alpha_{Tunisia}$ =0.89), passive harm (α_{Iran} =0.87; $\alpha_{Tunisia}$ =0.80), disidentification (α_{Iran} =0.90; $\alpha_{Tunisia}$ =0.91), detachment (α_{Iran} =0.91; $\alpha_{Tunisia}$ =0.81), dissatisfaction (α_{Iran} =0.90; $\alpha_{Tunisia}$ =0.93), dissimilarity (α_{Iran} =0.86; $\alpha_{Tunisia}$ =0.89), and intragroup moral exclusion (α_{Iran} =0.81; $\alpha_{Tunisia}$ =0.78).

Two structural equation models were built for each sample. First a direct model was built in which the three forms of behavioral intentions were regressed on IME (H1). Next, a mediation model was built where disidentification was added to the previous model as the mediator (H2). Regarding the Tunisian sample, during model building, we noticed that passive facilitation did not yield significant explained variance. We therefore removed the two passive facilitation items to improve the model fits. In the same manner, to improve the model fits, the analysis of the Iranian sample did not include an item measuring active facilitation and one measuring disidentification (detachment subscale). The models were bootstrapped with 1000 draws to obtain 95% confidence intervals. Demographic characteristics were controlled for in all the four models by regressing the endogenous variables on participants' age, gender, and level of education. Further, disidentification was measured as a second order factor representing its three dimensions: detachment, dissatisfaction, and dissimilarity. Table 2 shows the model fit information for all the four models.

In the direct models (Fig. 1), IME was related to active facilitation and passive harm. Passive facilitation was associated with IME in the Iranian sample. More importantly, the results of the mediation models (Fig. 2) showed that IME and disidentification were strongly interrelated. Disidentification in turn was associated with all the dependent variables in both samples. As presented in Table 3, all the indirect paths were statistically significant as well.

[1] We ran a two-step post hoc Monte Carlo power simulation (Muthén & Muthén, 1998), with 1000 replications to examine if our sample sizes yielded enough power. In both studies, we had at least 80% power for the main estimates.

[2] To show that moral exclusion and disindetification form two different factors, we ran a Confirmatory Factor Analysis showing that fit indices for the two-factor solution are significantly better than the one-factor solution of both samples (see Table S in the supplementals).

Table 1
Demographic Information of the Iranian and Tunisian Participants.

Sample		Women	Age Range			Education		
			18–35	36–45	46 +	Primary	Secondary	University
	n	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Iran	385	46.8	90	9.7	0.3	1.5	6.2	92.4
Tunisia	124	33.3	51	39.2	9.8	6.9	33.3	59.8

Table 2
Model Fit Statistics for the Structural Equation Models.

Models	X^2 (*df*)	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Iran					
Direct	187.88 (71)	0.065	0.953	0.932	0.036
Mediation	483.12 (244)	0.050	0.954	0.944	0.046
Tunisia					
Direct	75.60 (64)	0.038	0.973	0.963	0.053
Mediation	322.81 (253)	0.047	0.950	0.941	0.062

Discussion

The present study sought to empirically test whether moral exclusion holds conceptual relevance when behavior is targeted at fellow group members. We first assumed that IME is linked to the behavioral intentions, and second, disidentification mediates this link. The results generally supported both of our hypotheses. First, our findings suggest that not only mistreatments against outgroup members are subject to moral exclusionary processes, but this also applies when the negative behavior is directed against members of the ingroup. Next, we found that immigrants' disidentification with their ethnic background mediates the relationship between IME and behavioral intentions against the ingroup members.

The only difference between the two samples was that passive facilitation did not function among the Tunisian respondents. The reason may be due to the difference in the demographic characteristics between the two samples. Although we did not directly ask the respondents about their residential status, since the Iranian sample was collected through a student union, we speculate most of them to be students. While, informally, during the data collection among Tunisians we learnt that the Tunisian sample is more heterogenous including students, workers, and asylum seekers. Passive facilitation, as discussed above is a tendency to contact when the actor has a specific goal. Many Tunisians may have already been forced to form closer bonds (in refugee camps for example), with little opportunity to choose whether to contact ingroup members. For Iranian respondents, as international students, contacting other Iranians

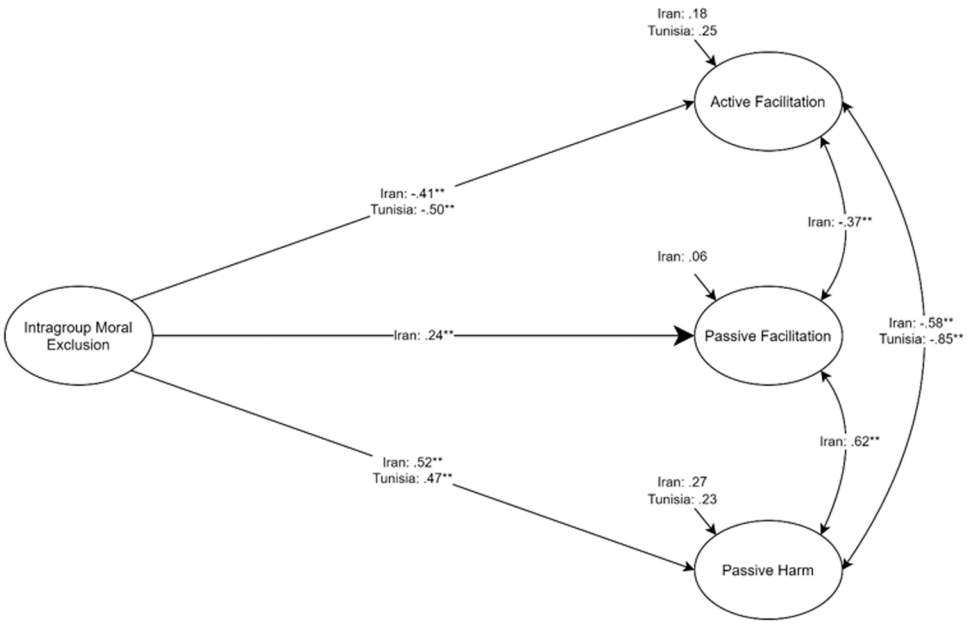

Fig. 1. Path model testing the direct effect of IME on ingroup-directed behavioral intentions. Path coefficients are standardized (** = $p < .01$; * = $p < .05$.).

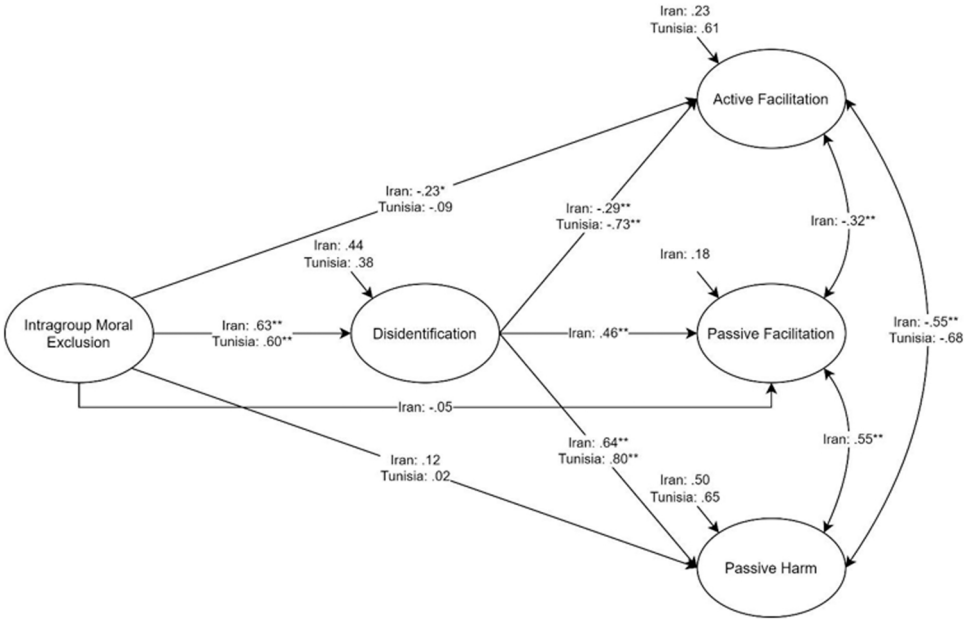

Fig. 2. Path model testing the mediating effect of disidentification on the relationship between IME and ingroup-directed behavioral intentions. Path coefficients are standardized (** = $p < .01$; * = $p < .05$.).

Table 3
Indirect Effects of Ingroup-based Moral Exclusion on Ingroup-directed Behavioral Intentions through Disidentification.

Iran				
Indirect Pathway	Indirect Effect	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
IME → DIS → AF	–0.18	0.009	–0.33	–0.05
IME → DIS → PF	0.29	< 0.001	0.16	0.45
IME → DIS → PH	0.40	< 0.001	0.26	0.57
Tunisia				
Indirect Pathway	Indirect Effect	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
IME → DIS → AF	–0.44	< 0.001	–0.79	–0.24
IME → DIS → PH	0.48	< 0.001	0.28	0.80

Note. IME = Intragroup Moral Exclusion; DIS = Disidentification; AF = Active Facilitation; PF = Passive Facilitation; PH = Passive Harm. The coefficients are standardized.

only occasionally and if necessary, should be more conceivable.

Coping mechanisms against a negative social identity include social creativity, social competition, and individual mobility (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Disidentification is a form of individual mobility where the individuals psychologically distance themselves from the negative identity. Our study contributes to the literature in the field by suggesting that this form of coping mechanism can be expressed in one's considerations of fairness with regards to the ingroup members as well.

Psychological distance is proposed as a vital factor associating with moral exclusion (Olson et al., 2011; Opotow, 1990). In psychological distance, the emphasis is often placed on a lack of identification with the target. On the contrary, disidentification does not refer to a complete absence of identification but the presence of a threatening one. Thus, one theoretical contribution of our study may be that moral exclusion not only relates to non-identification but also to a qualitatively different psychological process namely disidentification. Moral exclusion of the ingroup, hence, may also be qualitatively distinct from other forms of moral exclusionary processes. This can be because although the ingroup members are mistreated, they cannot be completely placed outside one's moral boundary because they are not completely placed outside the boundary of identification. The behavioral expressions of the moral exclusion of the ingroup, therefore, should as well be distinguished from those of intergroup moral exclusion. In the former, one may argue that the behavioral manifestations of moral exclusion should take milder, more subtle, and more passive forms. Further investigations could scrutinize the differences in the nature and intensity of behavioral intentions directed against the ingroup in comparison with those inflicted upon the outgroup.

Future directions

Our argument about disidentification and IME was based on perceived threat as a major factor in both constructs. Future research could thus directly test whether the relationship between disidentification and IME is explained by threat perception (identity threat).

In addition, the nature of that perceived threat can be also further investigated. One possibility is that the ingroup's perceived low status in the host society serves a cause for identity threat perception. On the other hand, perceived negative behaviors of the ingroup members towards the host society can lead to a perception of identity threat. As regards the latter, and as discussed earlier, deservingness has been argued to be related to moral exclusion. Future research could investigate if beyond the effect of disidentification, deservingness also explains the relationship between intragroup moral exclusion and behavioral intentions against the ingroup.

Future investigations can also include system justification (Jost et al., 2004) as a potential factor linked to considerations of fairness regarding one's ingroup members. In other words, one societal consequence of immigrants' disidentification with their ethnic background (and/or its further moral expressions) can be the acceptance of the host society's negative treatments against ingroup members.

Finally, it is also worth noting that we consider the samples in this study not as specific groups but rather as groups in a specific situation. Bearing this in mind, the generalizability of our findings depends on future studies investigating similar mechanisms among different social groups. In this regard, the role of acculturation (in the case of migration) could also be investigated to trace the interplay between different acculturation styles and disidentification.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is its correlational nature, hence, future research is needed to examine the causal order between the variables. Further, for measuring IME and the behavioral intentions, we used validated scales, with satisfactory Cronbach's alphas, yet originally designed to capture intergroup attitudes. However, still this may be considered a limitation of our paper. Accounting for the subtle differences between IME and other forms of moral exclusion as well as between intergroup and intragroup behavioral tendencies requires the construction and validation of new scales.

Conclusion

Finally, in this study the effects of participants' demographic characteristics were *statistically* controlled for. But as a fundamental caveat, such practice, should by no means, preclude one's understanding on the interplay between different forms of social stratification and modes of identification in determining socio-political perceptions and acts and the corresponding moral pronouncements (for an inquiry on this interplay see Sayer, 2005). Thus, future empirical studies could scrutinize this interplay, since different social groups may have different reactions towards social stigma on the basis of social identifications conditioned by concrete social positions (gender, class, ethnicity, etc.).

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2022.09.006.

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