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At the heart of egalitarianism : how morality framing shapes whites' responses to social inequality

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Social inequality breeds suffering. Who people are, as defined by the social groups they belong to (e.g., men, women, Whites or Blacks), partly determines their social status and access to important resources such as education and income, thereby affecting wellbeing and quality of life (Western, Dwan, & Kebonang, 2005). For example, if you live in Australia, and you are of indigenous descent, on average you will live about 18 years shorter than a non-indigenous Australian (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, n.d.). If you live in the US, and you are gay, you are prohibited from marrying your partner in a vast majority of the fifty states. And if you are a woman, working anywhere on the planet, you are likely being paid less than a male colleague doing the same work. Thus, structural factors that lie beyond an individual's control, such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender, determine access to valued social resources resulting in social inequality (Dwan & Western, 2003). From this perspective, social inequality is at odds with principles of justice and fairness. The central goal of the research outlined in the pages that follow is to identify an effective psychological intervention to increase people's commitment to social change toward a more equal society.

Social Change

The reduction of inequality requires social change; it requires support for, and the implementation of, actions and

policies aimed at ‘leveling the playing field’ between social groups in important areas such as health, education, and employment. Members of dominant groups (e.g., Whites) may oppose social change because the allocation of social status is often viewed as a zero-sum situation, in which improvement of one group implies relative losses for the other group (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) posits that people are motivated to protect the relative status of their ingroup because they derive part of their self-esteem from the groups with which they identify. Members of dominant groups experience social identity threat when their group’s relatively high status is at stake (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005). Such threat may result in resisting the advancement of minority groups.

Indeed, previous research has shown that threats to social identity lead members of high status groups to derogate outgroup members (Ellemers & Bos, 1998), for example through sexual harassment (Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, & Grasselli, 2003). Members of dominant groups also tend to oppose policies designed to increase equal opportunities between groups, such as affirmative action (Lowery, Unzueta, Knowles, & Goff, 2006; O’Brien, Garcia, Crandall, & Kordys, 2010; Wilson, 2006). At the same time, the fact that majority groups often have more power than minority groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) makes members

of the former group potentially valuable allies in the struggle toward more equality.

I argue that dominant group members' opposition to increased equality can be mitigated by presenting the fair and equal treatment of subordinate outgroups as a strategy toward enhancing the identity of the ingroup – in terms of morality. I theorize that if redressing inequality becomes a way for dominant group members to boost their group's value, resistance to social change among these group members will decrease.

The Morality of Equality

Appeals to morality are used in everyday life to emphasize the importance of specific actions, situations or attitudes. In politics for example, when a given issue is explicitly labeled as a 'moral issue', this indicates that one's attitude toward the issue is not a matter of personal preference, but instead either moral or immoral. For instance, in recent years, there has been a heated debate in the US between Democrats and Republicans about the extent of Federal government's required involvement with regard to health care. To emphasize the need for health care reform, US President Barack Obama pointed out that providing universal health care is the Nation's moral obligation (Zeleny & Hulse, 2009). In doing so, President Obama communicates that it is *immoral* not to provide such care. Most recently, during the first 2012 US presidential debate,

governor Mitt Romney indicated that reducing the deficit of the US is “not just an economic issue”, but “a moral issue”, and that spending more than you take in is “simply not moral” (First Obama-Romney Debate, 2012). As illustrated by these two examples, appeals to morality are often focused on obligation and/or avoiding immorality. Such appeals communicate not only the importance of a certain stance or action, but also, and perhaps most importantly, communicate that alternative, opposing stances or actions are *immoral*.

Research in moral psychology indeed suggests that framing an issue as a moral one might be an effective strategy to render support and/or compliance. Morality has been identified as one of the most important regulators of human behavior (Shavell, 2002; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005), and cross-cultural inquiry has demonstrated that moral values are among the most important principles that guide individuals’ lives (Schwartz, 1992). Furthermore, attitudes that are held with moral conviction (i.e., the strong and absolute belief that something is wrong or right) compared to otherwise strong but nonmoral attitudes are more potent in predicting behavior (Skitka et al., 2005). What is more, the comparative importance and weight given by people to morality generalize to the group level. Namely, a group’s perceived morality has been found to be more important than its perceived competence or sociability for group members’ positive evaluation of and level of identification with that group (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto,

2007). In a related vein, it has been demonstrated that a norm pertaining to morality has greater impact than a norm pertaining to competence on group members' decision to work for group rather than individual status improvement (Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that people greatly value morality at the personal as well as at the group level, and are more motivated by appeals to morality than appeals to competence or sociability. Does it follow then that presenting equality as the dominant group's moral obligation is an effective way to motivate dominant group members to redress inequality?

The answer to this question is yes and no. Indeed, the more members of dominant groups perceive their ingroup as relatively advantaged compared to other groups, the more they consider the ingroup to be *unjustly* privileged (Leach, Iyer, & Pedersen, 2006). In addition, when dominant group members are confronted with the fact that inequality benefits their group, they report experiencing guilt (Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005), which is a moral emotion. Experiences of group-based guilt have been found to predict support for compensatory policies and financial restitution for perceived harm done by the ingroup (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998; Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003; Swim & Miller, 1999). However, there are also limitations to focusing dominant group members' on their group's unjustly privileged position.

First, guilt has been characterized as a self-focused emotion that triggers action primarily aimed at relieving one's own negative state of feeling guilty rather than at helping the ones who have been harmed. As such, group-based guilt predicts dominant group members' support for restitution by means of compensatory policy, but it does not predict support for equal opportunity policy (Iyer et al., 2003). Whereas the former serves to alleviate the negative psychological state of guilt, the latter does not, which is why experiences of guilt are unlikely to result in social change beyond restoration.

Second, for dominant group members, the acknowledgment that the ingroup benefits from a system that oppresses other groups, may undermine the ingroup's identity as moral (Branscombe, Doosje, & McGarty, 2002). To avoid feelings of collective guilt and threats to (moral) self-esteem, members of dominant groups may deny inequality (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002), deny the existence of racism (Applebaum, 1997), or justify their group's privileges (Harth, Kessler, & Leach, 2008). Such reactions may be aimed at perpetuating the ingroup's privilege and power, but may also reflect dominant group members' genuine desire to perceive the self as a moral agent (Applebaum, 1997). Thus, it is important to consider these types of reactions, and ways to circumvent them, when thinking about interventions that stress dominant group members' moral responsibility with regard to social change.

Morality Framing

In contrast to prior work focusing primarily on the antecedents and consequences of collective guilt in members of dominant groups, I aim to examine the effect of a moral frame of equality that does not stress obligation or immorality – i.e., a moral ideal frame. Framing equality as a moral obligation versus a moral ideal is in line with regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) which distinguishes between desired end-states pertaining to responsibilities (prevention focus) and those pertaining to aspirations (promotion focus). Furthermore, recent work has identified two distinct forms of moral regulation: *Prescriptive* and *proscriptive* morality (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009). Whereas proscriptive morality is associated with concerns about what one *should not* do, prescriptive morality is associated with concerns pertaining to what one *should* do. Furthermore, proscriptive morality has been characterized as mandatory, focused on transgressions, and based in duty. In contrast, prescriptive morality has been characterized as more discretionary, focused on good deeds, and aside from duty, it can also be based in *desire* (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2009).

Based on the knowledge that individuals are not only motivated to avoid doing the “wrong thing”, but are also driven to do the “right thing”, the research outlined in this dissertation is aimed at delineating the effect of such distinct moral frames on advantaged group members’ attitudes and

motivation toward equality. Namely, I predict that framing social equality as a *moral ideal* (in line with promotion focus; Higgins, 1997, and prescriptive morality; Janoff-Bulman et al., 2009) will be more effective in eliciting support for social change than when it is framed as a *moral obligation* (in line with prevention focus; Higgins, 1997, and proscriptive morality; Janoff-Bulman, et al. 2009).

With respect to motivating dominant group members, research suggests that it is critical to frame the implications of equality in terms of the outcomes of the dominant *ingroup* (rather than subordinate *outgroups*). Prior research on inequality framing suggests that in order for dominant group members to be affected by a confrontation with inequality, they have to perceive inequality as pertaining to the ingroup (e.g., Lowery & Wout, 2010). For example, it has been shown that academic inequality framed as disadvantaging the minority group (i.e., women and ethnic minorities) causes disengagement from academic outcomes among minorities, but inequality framed as advantaging the majority group (i.e., men and Whites) does not. Namely, it was found that minorities (i.e., ethnic minorities and women) who were exposed to a minority disadvantage frame of academic inequality indicated that they cared less about performing well academically compared to minorities who were exposed to a majority advantage frame. The opposite was found among majority group members. Namely, among majorities (i.e., men and Whites) academic disengagement

was observed when academic inequality was framed as advantaging the majority group, but not when it was framed as disadvantaging the minority group (Lowery & Wout, 2010). Furthermore, framing racial inequality as White advantage rather than Black disadvantage triggers self-regard concerns in Whites, thereby increasing their support for redistributive policies (Lowery, Chow, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2012). Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals' responses to inequality are shaped by whether or not inequality is framed with regard to the ingroup.

Considered in tandem with the work delineating the comparative importance of morality, it follows that framing social equality in terms of the dominant group's morality will be more effective in motivating dominant group members than when it is framed in terms of competence or sociability (Leach et al., 2007; Ellemers et al., 2008). However, as I outlined above, framing inequality in terms of morality can also have suboptimal effects, such as when dominant group members become defensive or merely concerned with restitution rather than social change, more broadly. Based on the self-regulation literature (e.g., Higgins, 1997) and prior work distinguishing between two different types of morality (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2009), I propose that presenting equality as the *ingroup's moral ideal* rather than *obligation* will improve dominant group members' attitudes and motivation toward social change. I hypothesize that presenting equality as a moral ideal versus

obligation can render social change more likely, because it poses less threat to dominant group members' social identity and inspires more positive intergroup attitudes and behavior. To test this prediction, I examine the effect of morality framing on dominant group members in three research lines, in which I focus on: (1) Intergroup attitudes, (2) Physiological responses and goal attainment strategies, and (3) Physiological and behavioral responses during intergroup contact. I will now outline the examination of morality framing within each of these lines, and indicate how these areas pertain to social change.

Intergroup Attitudes

In this first research line, I examine whether the moral ideal frame is indeed less threatening to dominant group members' social identity than the moral obligation frame. I also aim to shed light on how morality framing shapes dominant group members' attitudes toward different aspects of social change, such as positive attitudes toward cultural diversity and support for affirmative action targeting subordinate group members. For social change research, there are at least two reasons to focus on the intergroup attitudes of dominant group members.

First, increasing social equality between minority and majority groups includes advancing the number of minorities in important areas of society - such as politics and academia - resulting in more cultural diversity in these areas. If

dominant group members hold negative attitudes toward cultural diversity, it seems plausible to assume that they will not be motivated to increase social equality. Thus, creating more positive attitudes toward diversity may facilitate support for social change among dominant group members. I expect that presenting a culturally diverse environment as offering opportunities to attain moral ideals, such as tolerance and equal treatment of minorities, will induce more positive attitudes toward diversity in dominant group members than when the focus lies on meeting moral obligations (e.g., of non-discrimination). I base this prediction on regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997), which posits that when a goal is construed as an ideal (promotion focus) individuals become sensitive to the presence/absence of positive outcomes. In contrast, when a goal is construed as an obligation (prevention focus) individuals become sensitive to the presence/absence of negative outcomes. It follows that the moral ideal rather than obligation frame will inspire advantaged group members to focus on the benefits of cultural diversity, thereby potentially increasing their commitment to redress inequality.

Secondly, social change becomes more likely if dominant group members endorse policies that are designed to proactively reduce inequality, such as affirmative action. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines affirmative action as “voluntary and mandatory efforts undertaken by federal, state, and local governments; private

employers; and schools to combat discrimination and to promote equal opportunity in education and employment for all” (APA, 1996, p. 2; as cited in Crosby, Iyer, Clayton, & Downing, 2003). For example, in 2004 the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (i.e., NWO) launched the “Mosaic program”, an academically highly selective program targeting ethnic minority candidates aspiring to scientific careers. Up until its termination in 2012, the Mosaic program provided ethnic minority laureates with funding for a four-year period of doctorate research at a Dutch University. Thus, the Mosaic program served as a corrective step toward leveling the playing field for ethnic minorities in Dutch academia. The justification for affirmative action is based on two main premises: a) subtle and not-so-subtle forms of discrimination and prejudice persist and hamper minorities’ societal advancement, and b) compared to other practices, affirmative action is the most efficient and effective means for reducing discrimination at the aggregate level (Crosby et al., 2003; Crosby, Iyer, & Sincharoen, 2006).

Dominant group members generally tend to oppose affirmative action (Crosby et al., 2006; O’Brien et al., 2010). In addition, it has been demonstrated that dominant group members’ attitudes toward affirmative action depend not on whether the policy helps disadvantaged outgroups, but on whether the policy is perceived to harm the advantaged ingroup (Lowery et al., 2006). For example, when the Dutch

magazine *Elsevier* published a news item about the Mosaic program on its website, many reactions were posted by the magazine's readers opposing the program. One such reader posted that the Mosaic program is a form of "very malicious discrimination on the basis of race", adding that "all those hard studying, White Dutch students who do not receive 180.000 euro for free can't help it that nonnatives are so uninterested in studying" (Elsevier, 2008). Indeed, opposition toward affirmative action can result in the stigmatization of beneficiaries of affirmative action. Namely, it has been found that negative attitudes toward affirmative action predict negative evaluations of affirmative action beneficiaries' qualifications, *regardless* of their actual qualifications (Resendez, 2002).

Although opposition to affirmative action has been linked to individual-level factors such as higher degrees of sexism, racism, and political conservatism (for a review see Iyer et al., 2003), research has also shown that framing can have powerful effects on attitudes toward affirmative action (Fine, 1992; Gamliel, 2007; Lowery et al., 2006; 2012). I will examine the effect of morality framing on dominant group members' attitudes toward affirmative action, as their endorsement is a critical step toward the broad implementation of such policies, thereby facilitating social change. I predict that the moral ideal frame of equality will elicit more support for affirmative action in dominant group members than the moral obligation frame. This research,

consisting of four experimental studies among both student and employee populations, is outlined in Chapter 2.

Motivation toward Equality

Beyond examining intergroup attitudes, the aim of this second research line is to examine the effect of morality framing on dominant group members' motivation to increase equality. When presenting equality as a moral ideal rather than an obligation, does this shape dominant group members' perceptions of and motivation toward equality? Inspired by the literature on self-regulation and coping, I examine whether morality framing predicts distinct motivational and behavioral responses in dominant group members when they consider actions they can take to increase equality. Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) posits that whether people perceive a goal (promoting equality) as an ideal or as an "ought" determines the way they pursue the goal: With either eagerness or vigilance, respectively. Furthermore, outcome framing has been found to affect people's motivational states during potentially stressful situations, indicated by distinct patterns of cardiovascular reactivity (Seery, Weisbuch, & Blascovich, 2009). Namely, when a task is framed as holding potential gains (versus losses) and as something which one can take on (versus must do), this induces cardiovascular reactivity consistent with psychological "challenge" rather than "threat" (Seery et al., 2009; Tomaka, Blascovich, Kibler, &

Ernst, 1997). In light of the distinct motivational strategies associated with the ideal/ought distinction (Higgins, 1997) and physiological responses induced by gain/loss framing (Seery et al., 2009) outlined above, I predict that morality framing of equality will shape dominant group members' motivational responses in similar ways. To test this prediction, I examine dominant group members' behavior in terms of vigilance relative to eagerness (Higgins, 1997), and their cardiovascular (CV) reactivity in terms of relative "threat" and "challenge" responses (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996; Blascovich, Mendes, Tomaka, Salomon, & Seery, 2003).

I am interested in examining if morality framing shapes the extent to which Whites feel they can cope with the demands of redressing inequality, as prior work has demonstrated that perceived efficacy is an important predictor of improved intergroup attitudes and antidiscrimination behavior (Stewart, Latu, Branscombe, & Denney, 2010). The biopsychosocial model (BPS model) posits that individuals' motivational states result from their evaluations of situational demands (e.g., perceived effort, uncertainty, danger) compared to their personal resources (e.g., skills, support). When appraised resources outweigh the demands, "challenge" arises, but when the appraised demands outweigh the resources this results in "threat". The psychological states of challenge and threat are associated with distinct patterns of cardiovascular responses, indexed

by four cardiovascular markers. The BPS model posits that in a goal-relevant situation - such as when one has to give a speech about equality in moral terms - heart rate (HR), and ventricular contractility (VC) increase. Significant increases in these markers indicate engagement and goal relevance, which are the prerequisites for distinguishing CV reactivity in line with threat and challenge. Cardiac output (CO; the amount of blood in liters pumped by the heart per minute), and total peripheral resistance (TPR; an index of net constriction versus dilation in the vascular system) are the two CV markers indexing threat versus challenge responses. Namely, higher CO and lower TPR reveal relatively greater challenge, and thus lesser threat.

I predict that having to give a speech about increasing equality in terms of moral ideals rather than obligations will decrease the perceived situational demands, in terms of less psychological danger, in Whites. Consequently, the moral ideal frame will induce in Whites cardiovascular responses associated with greater relative challenge than the moral obligation frame. In addition, I expect that when redressing inequality is appraised as more challenging and less threatening, dominant group members will exhibit a goal attainment strategy indicative of greater eagerness. Assessing CV reactivity allows me to reliably examine the effect of morality framing unobtrusively and in real-time. Because the cardiovascular markers outlined above are measured continuously, and unobtrusively, I will be able to

determine the online process of motivation in dominant group members while they are considering equality in moral terms. More specifically, in the study that is outlined in Chapter 3, I examine CV reactivity and speech rates of Whites while they talk about ways in which they can contribute to attaining the moral ideal versus meeting the moral obligation of tolerance, fairness, and equal treatment of non-Whites.

Intergroup Contact

In the previous research line, I was interested in examining the effect of morality framing on dominant group members' motivational responses when they consider equality in an abstract sense - i.e., giving a speech about equality as a moral ideal versus obligation. In the current research line, I examine how morality framing impacts on dominant group members' motivational states when they are faced with equality in a concrete sense: During interaction with a subordinate group member. Does morality framing shape dominant group members' motivational states and behavior during intergroup contact? How do Whites' intergroup attitudes, such as their attitudes toward cultural diversity, relate to their CV reactivity in terms of threat and challenge, when they interact with Blacks? These are the questions I aim to answer in this third line of research.

I am interested in studying intergroup interactions because, in line with intergroup contact theory (Allport,

1954), it has been argued that more positive intergroup interactions may result in prejudice reduction, thereby promoting social change over time. At the same time, research shows that intergroup contact is often anxiety-provoking, threatening, and depleting (Mendes, Blascovich, Lickel, & Hunter, 2002; Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009). Indeed, it has been argued that compared to an *intragroup* interaction, the perceived demands of an *intergroup* interaction in terms of uncertainty, danger and/or required effort may be higher (Mendes et al., 2002). According to the biopsychosocial model (BPS model; Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996), such an increase in perceived demands may result in a “threat” response if individuals perceive them to outweigh their personal resources (e.g., knowledge and abilities). Indeed, prior research has shown that Whites who interacted with a Black (vs. White) confederate exhibited CV reactivity consistent with threat rather than challenge. This supports the argument that the perceived demands of an *intergroup* interaction are higher than those of an *intragroup* interaction (Mendes et al., 2002). In the current research line, I examine if morality framing shapes the extent to which Whites appraise intergroup contact as threatening.

Whereas prior work has examined the effect of positive experiences during intergroup contact on individuals’ attitudes toward redressing inequality (Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009), I aim to shed light on how

attitudes toward equality affect experiences during intergroup contact. I examine this by considering the interplay between morality framing, intergroup attitudes, and CV reactivity of Whites during an interaction with a Black confederate. Do more positive intergroup attitudes lower the perceived demands of intergroup contact for dominant group members, resulting in greater relative challenge responses and/or more positive nonverbal expressions? Or, alternatively, do more positive attitudes ‘raise the stakes’ during contact with subordinate group members, resulting in greater relative threat and more negative nonverbal expressions in dominant group members? In Chapter 4, I examine these processes in two studies containing an *intergroup* interaction, and one study containing an *intragroup* interaction.

