

# **SELF- AND GROUP-AFFIRMATION AS MEANS FOR REDUCING DEFENSIVENESS AMONG THE ARMENIAN COMMUNITY AND FACILITATING CONTACT WITH OUT-GROUP MEMBERS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Self- and group-affirmation, where individuals are prompted to reflect upon either central personal or collective values, have been proposed as social psychological mechanisms to reduce defensive reactions and promote intergroup relations in the context of intergroup conflict. Lebanon, with its 18 officially recognized sects, presents a unique site to explore intergroup relations, specifically among Armenians as they are one of the very few ethnic minority groups in Lebanon who have high vitality and have maintained their distinct Armenian ethnic identity, language, and culture.

The purpose of the present study is to assess the effects of self- and group-affirmation in reducing defensiveness<sup>1</sup> in a sample of Armenian adolescent high school students when presented with an implicit identity threat and to subsequently examine their willingness to engage in contact with the Lebanese mainstream. The study employed a 3 x 2 between groups factorial design with three affirmations (self, group and no affirmation) and two threat (implicit identity threat and no threat) manipulations. In addition, strength of identification with ethnic identity as well as attitudes towards and frequency of contact with non-Armenians were measured. The study was administered online via Qualtrics with a sample of 121 Armenian adolescent high school students from seven Armenian high schools. The current sample highly endorsed their Armenian ethnic identity; females were more willing to engage in contact with and had higher positive attitudes towards non-Armenians. A possible explanation for this finding might be the notion that Armenian culture and Armenian men endorse patriarchal traditional roles and values associated with an Eastern influence. Accordingly, in a minority setting males may be motivated to protect the self and, thus, the collective shared identity, through abstaining from or engaging less in contact with non-Armenians. In addition, participants with ethnically non-Armenian parents were more willing to engage in contact with non-Armenians perhaps due to the fact that they encounter non-Armenians frequently in their setting. While participants who are members of scouts or socio-cultural institutions or are affiliated with a political party had

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<sup>1</sup> Defensiveness is a feeling aroused when one's identity is threatened. Thus this thesis explores self- and group-affirmation as possible tools to reduce defensiveness when one's Armenian ethnic identity is threatened.

higher positive attitudes towards and more frequent contact with non-Armenians, possibly also as a consequence of meeting with non-Armenians frequently in these settings, they were, however, less willing to pick non-Armenians in the team building exercise. Furthermore, the analysis of participants' responses in the team building scenario demonstrated that participants employed their Armenian ethnic identity in making decisions, indicating the collective identity as an important part of their self-concept.

#### GROUP- AND SELF-AFFIRMATION AS MEANS FOR REDUCING DEFENSIVENESS AND FACILITATING WILLINGNESS TO ENGAGE IN CONTACT WITH OUT-GROUP MEMBERS

Self-affirmation theory, advanced by Steele (1988), centers on how individuals adapt to information or events that are threatening to their self-concept. Self-affirmation theory proposes that individuals are driven to protect their perceived sense of self, mainly their sense of self-worth and self-integrity (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Sherman et al., 2017; Sherman, 2013; Steele, 1988). According to Steele (1988), the self is composed of several elements: roles, values and belief systems. These roles, values and belief systems are directly related to an individual's perceived worth and integrity (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele 1988). Furthermore, self-affirmation theory proposes that people have a flexible sense of self-integrity (Sherman et al., 2017). Therefore, when one of the aforementioned domains is threatened, individuals are motivated to protect their perceived sense of self-worth and self-integrity by affirming another aspect of the self from another domain (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Sherman et al., 2017; Sherman, 2013; Steele, 1988).

In addition to roles, values and belief systems, the social identity of an individual constitutes an integral part of their self-concept (Hogg, 2006). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) assumes that individuals' self-concept is derived from their perceived membership in a social group. Social identity theory has been widely used in research to explain intergroup relations and intergroup comparisons (Hogg, 2006). Comparisons between groups highlight their differences and create disparities; all the while individuals strive to maintain a positive perception of their groups (Turner & Tajfel, 1986). If these positive perceptions are challenged, individuals experience a sense of threat leading to negative emotional and physiological reactions, negative attitudes and prejudices, negative verbal and nonverbal behaviors, and possibly overt hostile behavior (Badea & Sherman, 2019; Stephan & Stephan, 2017; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Thus, in-group identification precedes out-group hostility and intergroup conflict (Brewer, 2001). Since conflicts have been associated with intergroup biases and prejudice, research has examined ways to reduce

intergroup conflicts and one such strategy is self-affirmation (Sherman et al., 2017). For instance, a study has demonstrated that, indeed, self-affirmation increases one's willingness to acknowledge in-group responsibility for wrongdoing of others, express feelings of group-based guilt, and consequently be willing to provide greater support for material compensation for victimized out-groups (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011).

Research studies have also suggested that Group-Affirmation or Collective Self-Affirmation, although far less studied than self-affirmation, have similar effects of buffering stress and defensiveness when individuals are presented with a threat to their collective identity (Sherman et al., 2007; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2016). For instance, Sherman et al., (2007) demonstrated that engaging in group affirmation boosts psychological resources and reduces defensive responses to social identity threat. Group-affirmation of values may have enduring benefits, especially for people who habitually define themselves via their group membership (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2016).

### ***The Present Study***

Lebanon, for many Armenians, is referred to as “our second homeland” and for some “our first homeland” (Abramson, 2013). This is hardly surprising as nowhere else in the diaspora have Armenians been offered the economic freedom to achieve prosperity, the political freedom to pursue their interests and the collective autonomy to preserve their identity (Abramson, 2013). As it happens, Armenians' social integration, too, marks their community off as distinctive (Abramson, 2013).

The present study seeks to better understand the role of self- and group-affirmation interventions in reducing defensiveness in the presence of identity threat among Armenian high school students and in facilitating interaction with out-group members. Accordingly, the following research question was asked: Will collective- and self-affirmation reduce defensiveness in a sample of adolescent Armenian high school students when presented with an implicit identity threat, and subsequently facilitate interaction between Armenians and the Lebanese mainstream?

### ***Rationale and Significance***

Self-affirmation has been shown to reduce individuals' stress response and defensiveness in the context of identity threat and intergroup conflict (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011; Sherman et al., 2017; Sherman, 2013). While self-affirmation increases an individual's willingness to acknowledge their group's wrongdoings towards others and to provide support for compensation, group-affirmation failed to do so because boosting the group's self-esteem may have

led individuals to link their own identities more closely to their group membership (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011).

When one's value system is challenged by exposure to out-group members with discrepant worldviews, this leads to intergroup comparisons and hostile intergroup behaviors (Sherman et al., 2017; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Accordingly, when an ethnic group's social identity is challenged with assimilation by exposure to the host community, such as in the case of Lebanese-Armenians, this may be perceived as a threat to the group's continuity and may result in further retention of the Armenian ethnic identity through derogating the out-group. Being in a constant state of fear regarding the preservation of one's own collective ethnic identity might prompt Armenians to engage in behaviors that serve to maintain a more isolated community.

While data on the acculturation status of Armenians in Lebanon is not yet available, many studies have pointed to the saliency of the Armenian collective ethnic identity, the importance to maintain this identity, and its role in hindering the integration of the Armenians in the Lebanese mainstream context (Kazarian & Boyadjian, 2008; Kazarian, 1997; Tavitian et al., 2019).

Both social psychological and developmental approaches suggest that a strong, secure ethnic identity contributes to psychological well-being (Phinney et al., 2001). Theory and research on acculturation determine the importance of adaptation to the host society (Phinney et al., 2001). In the efforts of addressing this matter and eventually promoting a healthy interaction between Armenians and the larger Lebanese community, the present study proposes self- and group-affirmation as means for reducing defensiveness and facilitating contact with out-group members.

### ***Hypotheses***

*Hypothesis 1: Main Effect of Affirmation.* It is expected that participants who engage in self- or group-affirmation without receiving an implicit identity threat will be more willing to engage in contact with and have higher positive attitudes towards non-Armenians.

*Hypothesis 2: Interaction Effect of Affirmation and Threat.* It is expected that participants in the self- and group-affirmation conditions who receive an implicit identity threat will be more willing to engage in contact with and have higher positive attitudes towards non-Armenians as compared to participants who will not engage in an affirmation manipulation yet receive an identity threat.

*Hypothesis 3: Self-Affirmation versus Group-Affirmation.* Bearing in mind the saliency of Armenian ethnic identity, the recent altercations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the ongoing aggressions of Azerbaijan on Armenia, and the

constant social media attacks on Armenians (Kazarian & Boyadjian, 2008; Kazarian, 1997; Simmons & Gauthier-Villars, 2021; Tavitian et al., 2019), the Armenian collective identity is currently under stress, and Armenians are experiencing heightened levels of threat. Therefore, by asking Armenians to think about their group's identity, it is expected that group-affirmation might create a reactance effect and, thus, self-affirmation compared to group-affirmation will likely reduce defensiveness and facilitate participants' willingness to engage in contact with and have higher positive attitudes towards non-Armenians.

## METHODS

The sample of the study was calculated using G\*Power version 3.1.9.4 (Faul et al., 2007). The *F* statistic, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), was used to be able to detect fixed, main and interaction effects with an *a priori* type of power analysis where statistical power and effect size were determined. The following parameters were set: A medium size effect ( $d = 0.5$ ;  $p < 0.5$ ), degrees of freedom ( $df = 2$ ), 6 groups and 1 moderator. The calculation yielded a total sample size of  $N = 246$ , with  $n = 41$  participants in each experimental condition. Bearing in mind the sample size generated by G\*Power, the study aimed to collect data from  $N = 300$ , with  $n = 50$  in each experimental group.

### ***Research Design & Procedure***

Thus, the variables of the study were the following: Affirmation manipulation (self, group, and no affirmation); implicit identity threat (threat and no threat condition), willingness to engage in contact with non-Armenians (attitudes towards non-Armenians and team building scenario), ethnic identity identification, and frequency of contact with non-Armenians.

To monitor the possible effects of self- and group- affirmation on reducing defensiveness and facilitating willingness to interact with out-group members, the study employed a 3 (self-affirmation, group-affirmation and no affirmation)  $\times$  2 (identity threat and no threat) between groups factorial design. This study design produced six experimental groups. Groups received either a self-affirmation, group-affirmation or no affirmation manipulation coupled with either an implicit identity threat manipulation or no threat manipulation. The various interactions of these variables and their effects were observed on the outcome variables: attitudes towards non-Armenians and team building scenario. In addition, ethnic identity was considered as a moderator, and its effects on the relationship between affirmation, threat and willingness to engage in contact with non-Armenians was observed. Moreover, the study included a control variable: frequency of contact with non-Armenians.

Students who agreed to participate in the study were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions and, based on their assignment, completed an automated questionnaire. In addition, all students completed a demographic form, answered questions checking the validity of the experimental manipulation, and completed scales regarding ethnic identity, attitudes towards and frequency of contact with non-Armenians.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Instruments***

Participants indicated the importance of their ethnic identity, and they either engaged in a self-affirmation manipulation by ranking “personal values” from most important to least important and wrote about the three most important “personal values”, or engaged in a group affirmation manipulation where they ranked “group values” from most important to least important and wrote about the three most important “group values”, or engaged in a no affirmation control condition where they recalled their morning routine. In addition, participants either received a subtle identity threat, specifically a representative threat, by engaging in a “population estimation” exercise, or they did not receive a threat. The effects of these different manipulations were observed upon the dependent variables, attitudes towards the mainstream Lebanese and team building scenario while the frequency of contact with the mainstream Lebanese was controlled for. The questionnaire was administered both in English and Armenian based on the preference of each participant.

### ***Psychometric Properties of the Scales***

**Self-Affirmation.** When an individual’s self-concept is threatened, they experience a psychological discomfort that they are motivated to reduce (McQueen & Klein, 2006). Several strategies for reducing this discomfort have been proposed, for instance, Tesser’s self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model (1988) derived from his self-evaluation maintenance theory. The SEM model is based upon two main broad assumptions: people want to maintain a positive evaluation of the self, and the way they evaluate themselves is partially determined by the accomplishments of people around them, especially those to whom they are close (Tesser, 1988). The most prominent self-affirmation manipulations in experimental studies are based upon Steele’s (1988) self-affirmation theory, which states that to maintain and restore one’s global

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed description of the procedure as well as other details concerning the research, literature review, appendix, etc. kindly refer to the original thesis: Sevana Topalian, “Self- and group-affirmation as means for reducing defensiveness and facilitating contact with out-group members”, Haigazian University Barsumian Library, Shelfmark: T:0237.

positive self-image affected by threats, requires affirmation of some important aspects of one's self unrelated to the threatened domain.

**Group-Affirmation.** Social identities, including being part of groups such as sports teams or other organizations, and memberships in gender, ethnic, and nationality groups are important sources of a person's identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). There exists a direct link between representations of one's self and representations of one's group; hence, people are motivated to protect and maintain the integrity not only of the individual self but also of their social identities (Sherman et al., 2007). Group affirmation allows participants to affirm values or resources central to a collective identity (Sherman et al., 2007).

### ***Willingness to Engage in Contact with Out-Group Members***

To measure participants' willingness to engage in contact with the mainstream Lebanese a team-building exercise was created coupled with evaluating participants' attitudes towards non-Armenians.

To further assess participants' attitudes towards the mainstream Lebanese, the Attitudes Towards Out-Group Members scale (Winer et al., 1981) was used. Participants indicated the extent to which they would engage in the following behaviors: meeting a non-Armenian Lebanese, sitting next to a non-Armenian Lebanese on a 3-hour bus trip, willingness to go to school with a non-Armenian Lebanese, willingness to have a non-Armenian person eating lunch with them, inviting a non-Armenian Lebanese to their home, asking a non-Armenian Lebanese for advice, and having a non-Armenian Lebanese teacher (Winer et al., 1981).

To obtain a baseline level measure of previous contact between participants and non-Armenians and to statistically control for its effects that might influence the outcome variables, the Frequency of Intergroup Contact scale (Merrilees et al., 2018) was used. Participants responded to four questions measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1= never" to "5 = very often" that assess frequency of contact with non-Armenians across four domains: home, school, neighborhoods, and through extracurricular activities such as sports or community service (Merrilees et al., 2018).

## **RESULTS**

### ***Preliminary Analysis: Missing Value Analysis***

#### ***Outliers***

No outliers were found on the attitudes towards non-Armenians scale. Only one extreme outlier was found in the team building scenario; only one participant from the total sample picked 3 non-Armenians to include in the team building exercise.

#### ***Normality***

The dependent variable, attitudes towards non-Armenians, was normally distributed for the groups ( $p < .05$ ) while, the dependent variable team building scenario indicated a significant departure from normality ( $p > .05$ ).

### ***Descriptive Statistics***

The results indicated that participants regard their Armenian ethnic identity as very important. In addition, they do not seem to engage in contact with non-Armenians frequently, yet they present with a slightly positive attitude towards non-Armenians.

## **MAIN ANALYSIS**

### ***Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA)***

To assess the main research question of the study and to detect if collective or self-affirmation helped reduce defensiveness in a sample of adolescent Armenian high school students when presented with an implicit identity threat, and if this subsequently facilitated the intent of Armenians to interact with non-Armenians, a two-way Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) with Bonferroni corrections was conducted. Bootstrapping was used for a more robust interpretation of the data.

In line with expectations, as participants' frequency of contact with non-Armenians increased so did their positive attitudes towards non-Armenians. Higher scores on the attitudes towards non-Armenians scale is indicative of positive and favorable attitudes towards non-Armenians. Conversely, the covariate frequency of contact with non-Armenians did not have a significant main effect on the team building scenario.

To test for threat buffering effects of self- and group-affirmation relative to the control condition, specifically as it relates to attitudes and willingness to interact with the Lebanese mainstream, the multivariate main and interaction effects were examined. Contrary to the hypotheses of the current study, results showed that the affirmation manipulation had no significant effect on the outcome measures as indicated by the non-significant main effect.

### ***Exploratory Analysis***

In light of the non-significant null findings in the main analysis, exploratory analyses including correlational analyses, one-sample t-tests and independent samples t-tests were conducted to better understand the characteristics of the sample and further provide some insights in relation to the results obtained. Pearson's correlation was first calculated between the two dependent variables: attitudes towards non-Armenians and team building scenario. A small, positive, significant correlation was found meaning that as participants positive attitudes towards non-Armenians increased so did their willingness to pick non-Armenians in the team building scenario.



A second Pearson's bivariate correlation was calculated between the dependent variables attitudes towards non-Armenians and team building scenario, and importance of one's ethnic identity within each experimental condition. One positive, moderate and significant correlation was evident in the self-affirmation and no-threat condition. This suggests that in this particular experimental group, where participants did not receive an implicit identity threat, more favorable attitudes towards non-Armenians was associated with an increased tendency to include a higher number of non-Armenians in the team building scenario. This may possibly suggest that when participants were not threatened, and their core self-values were highlighted, the saliency of their ethnic identity decreased as they focused on the self rather than the group. Therefore, interacting with a non-Armenian might not seem an anxiety provoking situation, and hence, participants demonstrated more positive attitudes towards non-Armenians and were more willing to interact with non-Armenians.

### ***Independent Samples T-Test***

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to assess differences across the study outcomes and covariation across the demographic factors such as sex, scouts membership, socio-cultural and political institution membership, and parental ethnic identity.

**Sex:** In general, females scored higher on attitudes towards non-Armenians and picked more non-Armenians in the team building exercise than males. The difference in the means of females versus males on attitudes towards non-Armenians was marginally significant while it did not reach statistical significance for the team building scenario. This indicates that females as compared to males displayed more positive attitudes towards non-Armenians and they were more willing to engage in contact with non-Armenians. For the frequency of contact with non-Armenians there was no significant noticeable difference between the mean of males and females.

**Being a Scouts Member:** There was a slight difference between the means of those who are scouts members on attitudes towards non-Armenians and frequency of contact with non-Armenians and the means of those who are not scouts members. However, scouts' members scored lower on the team building scenario compared to non-scouts' members, suggesting that those who belong to a scouts group are less willing to engage in contact with non-Armenians. The differences in the means on attitudes towards non-Armenians and the team building scenario were not significant. Whereas, the differences in the means on frequency of contact with non-Armenians was marginally significant.

**Being a Member of a Socio-Cultural Institution or a Political Party:** The means of participants who are members of socio-cultural institutions or affiliated with a political party on attitudes towards non-Armenians and

frequency of contact with non-Armenians were slightly higher than those participants who are not members of socio-cultural institutions or a political party. While the means of those who are not members of a socio-cultural institution or a political party was higher on the team building scenario than participants who are members of a socio-cultural institution or a political party. These differences were not significant.

**Ethnic Identity of Mother:** Participants with ethnically Arab mothers scored higher on all three measures as compared to participants with ethnically Armenian mothers. This suggests that those participants who have ethnically Arab mothers have higher positive attitudes towards non-Armenians and they are willing to and frequently do engage in contact with non-Armenians. However, these differences were not significant.

**Ethnic Identity of Father:** Participants with ethnically Arab fathers scored higher on all three measures as compared to participants with ethnically Armenian fathers. This finding suggests that participants with ethnically Arab fathers have higher positive attitudes towards non-Armenians, they also seem to be engaging frequently in contact with non-Armenians, and are more willing to engage in contact with non-Armenians. These differences were not significant.

## DISCUSSION

This research study was interested in better understanding the role of self- and group-affirmation in reducing defensiveness in a sample of adolescent Armenian high school students when presented with an implicit identity threat, and examined whether these interventions facilitated the intent to interact with the Lebanese mainstream. The two-way MANCOVA resulted in null findings; no significant main or interaction effects were detected. Further exploratory analyses were conducted to better understand the results obtained and bring to light the characteristics of the sample and what might have contributed to the absence of significant findings. However, prior to interpreting the results obtained from the main and exploratory analyses it is of utmost importance to address the small sample size of the study.

### ***Saliency of the Armenian Ethnic Identity***

Many research studies conducted among Armenians and Lebanese-Armenians have discussed the distinctiveness and the saliency of Armenian ethnic identity (Abramson, 2013; Goetcherian, 2014; Kazarian, 1997; Melikian & de Karapetian, 1977; Migliorini, 2008; Tavitian et al., 2019). Moreover, one of these studies examining collective references and identity threat among Lebanese and Lebanese-Armenians in the context of intergroup conflict demonstrated that Lebanese-Armenians employ their ethnic identity as a buffer

to guard or protect themselves against identity threat (Tavitian et al., 2019). This same study encountered similar circumstances of low participation during data collection (Tavitian et al., 2019). The authors suggested that the absence of findings may very likely be attributed to the small sample size of the study and proposed that Armenians may have chosen not to participate because they may have been apprehensive and defensive about being singled out as Armenians, which are common responses to perceived identity threat (Steele 1988; Tavitian et al., 2019). Even though, the Tavitian study attempted to reach participants in several different ways, first through an electronic link, then through paper and pencil and lastly by contacting and soliciting approval from prominent Armenian parties and other Armenian organizations, it managed to collect data from only  $N = 252$  adult Lebanese-Armenians (Tavitian et al., 2019). Likewise, in the current study, of 431 students who showed initial interest in participation, only 121 actually participated. This reflects a common pattern in these studies and demonstrates Lebanese-Armenian participants' potential reluctance to participate in research studies (Tavitian et al., 2019).

Previous research has shown that individuals from vulnerable minority groups or indigenous cultures are hesitant to participate in studies, especially in research studies that investigate sensitive topics (Alexander et al., 2018; Kawulich, 2011). In these studies, the term "gatekeeper" has been coined to indicate any person or institution that acts as an intermediary between a researcher and participants (Kawulich, 2011). A "gatekeeper" may also have the power to grant or deny permission for access to potential research participants (Kawulich, 2011). In the present study, there were no physical "gatekeepers" per se; in fact, all principals of participating schools welcomed the invitation and readily agreed to participate in the research study. However, the topic of the research itself, centering on ethnic identity, or participants' reluctance to take part in the study may have acted as "gatekeepers" which in turn resulted in a low participation rate, discontinuation and denial of access to data.

It is important to note that, the one-item measure of ethnic identity importance (Cohen & Garcia, 2005) was the first question that participants answered regardless of their assignment to the experimental conditions. Perhaps administering such a question at the beginning of the experiment primed participants to think about their ethnic identity and possibly adopt a tense and guarded attitude. It may have also awakened the fear of annihilation or ceasing to exist, as this has been a prominent source of worry and fear for Armenians (Tavitian et al., 2019). Previous research has shown that perceived discontinuity in a group's past can contribute to an increase in efforts to maintain identity, particularly as that perceived discontinuity undermines or threatens a group's future survival. (Jetten & Wohl, 2012 as cited in Tavitian et

al., 2019). Thus, it is important to also highlight that eight months prior to data collection an armed conflict occurred between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Simmons & Gauthier-Villars, 2021). The consequences of this conflict were dire for Armenians and have had a lasting effect (Simmons & Gauthier-Villars, 2021). Although discussing political turmoil and war is beyond the scope of this paper, the conflict, which seemed like a normal territorial conflict for non-Armenians, represented to Armenians an existential threat in a long line of existential threats that have loomed over Armenians in the diaspora and specifically in Lebanon, where the community has been bleeding in terms of members and organizations. Therefore, the participants in the current study may have felt threatened and were hesitant to participate in a research study that is examining affirmation and identity threat in the context of intergroup relations, specifically willingness to engage in contact with non-Armenians.

Lastly, it is important to keep in mind that by employing purposive convenience sampling, the current study collected data from Armenian students in Armenian high schools in Lebanon. As such, students in these schools are continuously exposed to the Armenian ethnic identity since the educational role and mission of these schools is not only to prepare the students for the world they live in, but also to teach, develop, and preserve Armenian ethnic identity while aspiring to ensure the healthy integration of Armenian identity with Lebanese identity (Kandaharian-Hudaverdian, 2021). Therefore, a conclusion regarding Armenian ethnic identity acting as a potential gatekeeper that obstructed students' participation in the current study would be too simplistic as Armenian schools have a direct and continuous connection with the young community with regard to exposure, formation and maintenance of this ethnic identity (Kandaharian-Hudaverdian, 2021).

## INTERPRETATION OF MAIN ANALYSIS

In the present study, it was expected that participants who were given the chance to affirm self- or group values, would feel less defensive when faced with an identity threat and thus, would be more willing to engage in contact with out-group members. The main analysis resulted in null findings. The absence of findings is likely attributable to the small sample size of the study. Statistically significant mean differences among groups were not detected nor any main or interaction effects. Similarly, a study examining the relationship between threat, affirmation and collective self-esteem among Lebanese-Armenians found null findings due to small sample size (Tavitian et al., 2019). As mentioned before, the absence of findings may be attributable to the low participation rate, discontinuation and refusal of access to data, which may have been, potentially, the result of the reluctant nature of the participants (Tavitian et al., 2019). For this reason, additional exploratory analyses including

correlational analyses, one samples t-tests and independent samples t-tests were performed to take a closer look at the participants' characteristics.

### ***Team Building Scenario***

In this exercise, which was designed to behaviorally measure willingness to engage in contact with out-group members, participants were asked to build a team of four including themselves, and pick three individuals to carry out a community service task. Pearson's Correlation coefficient demonstrated a small, positive and significant correlation between the two dependent variables, attitudes towards non-Armenians and team building scenario. Suggesting that as participants' positive attitudes towards non-Armenians increased so did their willingness to include non-Armenians in the team building scenario.

Upon a closer examination of the team building scenario, it became evident that the majority of participants chose one to two non-Armenians to include in their team. The answers of participants justifying their choice of picking the three individuals out of eight (Hadi, Kevork, Leila, Talar, Kareem, Hagop, Nisrine, Nanor) were visually analyzed. The most common reason for including Armenians versus non-Armenians was the individual bearing an Armenian name, indicating that they are Armenian. Only one student picked three non-Armenians. While justifying their choice, the participant provided the same reason for all team members:

Because I want to meet an Arab person.

Female, 16 years old (11<sup>th</sup> grade)

Moreover, there was no specific technique that participants adopted to decide which individual to pick. Mainly, participants picked individuals based on:

(1) Familiarity, such as having a parent, a sibling or a close friend with the same name:

Hagop because my best friend's name is Hagop and I like this name.

Male, 17 years old (12<sup>th</sup> grade)

(2) Communication, for example, one prominent reason for including Armenians in the group was language:

He's Armenian, we won't have trouble in communication (I'm not good at Arabic).

Female, 18 years old (12<sup>th</sup> grade)

(3) Gender and ethnic identity. Some participants included an equal number of females and males, and an equal number of Armenians and Arabs in their group:

I'm a girl so my team would be consisted by 2 boys and 2 girls / 2 Armenians and 2 Arabs because we could learn stuff from each other. I think Hadi is an Arab guy so I chose him.

Female, 16 years old (10<sup>th</sup> grade)

In general, other responses given by participants were divided into two categories:

(1) Those who stated that they would like to include non-Armenians in their group for diversity and because they are interested in learning the language and the culture of the non-Armenians.

It's interesting to work with people from different entourages, genders and cultures.

Female, 16 years old (10<sup>th</sup> grade)

I chose Hadi in order to get familiar with the Arab community, with their culture, traditions and their perspective at looking and analyzing situations; moreover, I chose Hadi so as to have colleagues with different backgrounds.

Male, 15 years old (10<sup>th</sup> grade)

Because she is Arab. There will be a good mix in the group.

Female, 17 years old (12<sup>th</sup> grade)

(2) Those who mentioned that they believe Armenians would be more fit to accomplish the task; they would feel more comfortable, safe and secure by having Armenians in their group, and this would be an opportunity for the non-Armenians to learn about Armenians and their history.

We live in Lebanon and I believe that there is no difference between us and we must include some Lebanese people in our community ...

Male, 15 years old (10<sup>th</sup> grade)

Because he has an Armenian name, which probably means that he's Armenian. It feels better to work with someone who's of the same race as me.

Female, 17 years old (12<sup>th</sup> grade)

Kevork is Armenian and I believe Armenians are more efficient when it comes to matters like this.

Male, 16 years old (11<sup>th</sup> grade)

The name seems familiar. I am unconsciously programmed to feel safer when the name of the person is found a lot in my surrounding.

Female, 17 years old (11<sup>th</sup> grade)

The responses of participants in the team building scenario demonstrate that Armenians employed their salient ethnic identity in deciding to include Armenians versus non-Armenians in their team. While there was a tendency towards wanting to get to know the Lebanese mainstream and learn more about their language and culture; there was also a need to acquaint them with Armenians, indicating a need to think about the self through the collective shared Armenian identity. Furthermore, this collective identity seemed to provide a sense of safety and security to the individual. This exhibits the Armenian ethnic identity as an integral part of the self and as central in providing feelings of safety and security (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In addition, it is worth mentioning that the sample as a whole highly rated the importance of their ethnic identity, demonstrated by the one-item ethnic identity measure, further exhibiting that Armenian ethnic identity is indeed a salient part of the self. Furthermore, Armenian ethnic identity seemed to be constantly accessible, especially since it was directly tied to the self-concept of the

individual, a finding consistent with a previous study (Tavitian et al., 2019). Lebanese-Armenians tend to constantly 'employ their ethnic identity or make frequent references to it in their daily interactions, particularly in a context characterized by intergroup conflict (Tavitian et al., 2019).

## INTERPRETATION OF EXPLORATORY ANALYSES

In light of the absence of any significant findings resulting from the main analysis, further exploratory analyses were conducted to better understand the characteristics of the sample.

### ***Correlational Analysis***

Pearson's correlation was calculated between the dependent variables attitudes towards non-Armenians and team building scenario, and ethnic identity with each experimental condition. A positive, moderate and significant correlation was found in the self-affirmation / no-threat condition ( $r = .480$ ,  $p = .013$ ), suggesting that in this particular experimental group, more positive attitudes towards the Lebanese mainstream were associated with an increased instance of including non-Armenians in the team building scenario. This finding is not unusual as participants in this condition were not threatened, so it is expected of them to have more positive attitudes towards non-Armenians and to pick more non-Armenians than Armenians in the team building scenario. Nonetheless, it is an important finding as it may also suggest that in this condition participants focused on core values pertaining to the self which, in turn, attenuated their group's identity – an essential part of the self as demonstrated in the team building scenario and the ethnic identification measure – and thus, interacting with members from the out-group no longer presented as an anxiety provoking situation. Therefore, participants were more willing to engage in contact with and had higher positive attitudes towards non-Armenians. Furthermore, this may indicate self-affirmation as a possible tool for reducing defensiveness in the presence of identity threat and promoting interaction with out-group members. However, this would be difficult to accomplish in the Armenian ethnic group since the Armenian collective identity constitutes an integral part of the self as demonstrated in the current and a previous study (Tavitian et al., 2019).

### ***Self-Affirmation and Cultural Relevance of Values.***

The majority of research on values affirmation has been carried out in Western contexts (Tavitian-Eldmajian & Bender, 2020). Typically, self-affirmation is studied through value-affirmation, which allows the individual to reflect upon an unthreatened, valued element of the self as a means to restore or preserve global self-worth (Tavitian-Eldmajian & Bender, 2020). However, affirming standard values about the self may not be applicable in non-Western contexts (Tavitian-Eldmajian & Bender, 2020). A study examining

autobiographical recall of mastery experiences – where one reflects upon a personally relevant memory about overcoming obstacles – as a mechanism of self-affirmation under social identity threat in the United States, it was found that autobiographical recall can be a possible self-affirming tool under identity threat (Tavitian et al., 2019). However, the same mechanism employed with Lebanese-Armenians was not as successful, and, in fact, it backfired (Tavitian et al., 2019). When Lebanese-Armenians were given the opportunity to reflect upon a personal memory regarding overcoming obstacles, the majority referred to their group's identity and thought about themselves through their group's ethnic identity (Tavitian et al., 2019). This suggests the collective identity is an important part of the self, thus making the self and the group inseparable. This is not uncommon, as the history pertaining to the Armenian group's continuity has instilled fears of being scattered in Armenians (Tavitian et al., 2019).

In the present study, participants were asked to engage in a self-affirmation exercise composed of 11 values: being good at art, being good at sports, being smart or getting good grades, having a sense of humor, being creative, being religious, being independent, being with friends or family, having good social skills, being physically attractive, listening to music or playing music (Cohen et al., 2000; Sherman et al., 2013; Sherman et al., 2007). In the self-affirmation / no threat condition, participants demonstrated positive attitudes towards and an increased willingness to engage in contact with non-Armenians. However, such a significant finding was not shown in other experimental conditions. This suggests that, as the threat is removed and participants focus on the self, the group's identity is diminished and, thus, interacting with out-group members becomes less anxiety provoking. This does not necessarily signify that the values list in the self-affirmation manipulation promoted interaction with non-Armenians. Nonetheless, it may suggest that the self and the group can be distanced from each other in non-threatening situations where the individual is given the opportunity to reflect about core self-values. Perhaps, employing a values-affirmation manipulation with culturally relevant values may be the key in developing an affirmation exercise suitable to use with a group characterized by a distinct ethnic identity. One possible way of ascertaining culturally relevant values is to conduct a detailed study, to identify culturally appropriate values (Scheider & Weber, 2020). However, in doing so researchers might risk selecting culturally relevant values that are associated with the Armenian culture and, so, prompt Armenians to affirm core collective values rather than self-core values. This conundrum demonstrates the difficulties of using affirmation exercises with a group of individuals that are highly attached to their ethnic identity and where, inherently, the self and the collective are merged into one.



### ***One Sample T-Test***

The one sample t-test showed that the means of the six experimental conditions on the one-item ethnic identity importance measure (Cohen & Garcia, 2005) were significantly higher from the midpoint of the scale. This demonstrates the saliency and the importance of the Armenian ethnic identity, and indicates that the sample of the study highly endorses their Armenian ethnic identity.

### ***Independent Samples T-Tests***

Independent samples t-tests were conducted for the following socio-demographic factors: sex, being a scouts member or a member of a socio-cultural institution or a political party, and ethnic identity of parents.

Females as compared to males displayed higher positive attitudes towards non-Armenians, and they were more willing to engage in contact with non-Armenians. This finding may likely be attributable to the notion that the Armenian culture and Armenian men endorse patriarchal traditional roles and values associated with an Eastern influence (Gevorgyan, 2001). This makes Armenian men less likely to be willing to engage in contact with non-Armenians, perhaps as a way to preserve or guard the self and the Armenian ethnic identity. A gender assessment conducted in Armenia has shown that men have comfortably adopted patriarchal features while Armenian women have generally been quicker to accept Western values, concepts and ideas (Gevorgyan, 2001). They have also demonstrated flexibility and openness to learning new skills and languages (Gevorgyan, 2001). Although there are no studies conducted on the patriarchal roles and values of Lebanese-Armenian men in Lebanon as studies on Lebanese-Armenians in general are scarce, Lebanese-Armenian males may be influenced by the Middle Eastern male-led and male-dominated patriarchal culture. The preceding explanation may be a potential reason why females had higher more positive attitudes towards non-Armenians and were more willing to engage in contact with non-Armenians than males.

The pattern of findings in participants who are members of scouts or socio-cultural institutions or are affiliated with a political party were similar, as members of such groups displayed positive attitudes towards non-Armenians and reported frequent contact with non-Armenians as compared to participants who are not members of such groups. On the other hand, the contrary was evident in the team building scenario. Participants who are members of these groups were less likely to choose non-Armenians as compared to participants who are not members of these groups. A possible explanation for this finding might be that members of scouts or socio-cultural organizations or those who are affiliated with a political party engage in contact with non-Armenians in

these settings; hence they have a higher frequency of contact and positive attitudes towards non-Armenians. It is difficult to tell whether these scouts groups, socio-cultural institutions or political parties are those that are associated with or belong to Armenians, as the question in the experiment did not specify this matter. However, it is also interesting to note that when given the choice to pick between Armenians and non-Armenians, members of scouts groups, of socio-cultural and political institutions, chose to include more Armenians in their team.

With regards to participants' parents' ethnic identity, those participants who had ethnically Arab parents reported engaging more in contact with non-Armenians, having positive attitudes towards non-Armenians, and chose non-Armenians in the team building scenario, as opposed to participants with ethnically Armenian parents. A study examining the relationship between adolescents' perceptions of parental racial attitudes and their intergroup contact and cross-race relationships found that adolescents' intergroup contact and parental racial attitudes are significantly associated with their cross-race relationships and experiences (Edmonds & Killen, 2009). Perhaps a similar interpretation can be made here, as participants with ethnically non-Armenians parents frequently engage in contact with their familial surrounding with non-Armenians, and so they displayed more positive attitudes towards non-Armenians and were more willing to engage in contact with non-Armenians.

## CLINICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The examination of the qualitative entries in the team building exercise along with the findings from the exploratory analyses confirmed that Armenian ethnic identity is an integral part of the self, and it may be in a state of constant affirmation and threat due to the group's discontinuity in the past (Tavitian et al., 2019). Such chronic affirmation and a state of continuous perceived threat, regardless of the situational demands, may be maladaptive (Tavitian et al., 2019). This sensitivity to threat could possibly be evaluated as a defensive reaction to an underlying fear and concern of preserving the Armenian ethnic identity (Tavitian et al., 2019). Accordingly, this raises several questions regarding the repercussions of persistently employing the collective identity even when thinking about the self, and being in a state of threat: is this adaptive to the psychological wellbeing of the individual? How does this translate into the teaching of the values and beliefs of the Armenian ethnic identity to future generations?

Affirmation is viewed as one aspect of a psychological immune system which reminds people of their psychological resources, helps them to keep the threat in proper perspective, and dissociates the threat from the self (Sherman & Hartson 2011 as cited in Howell, 2017). However, this may not be applicable

when the group's identity constitutes an important part of the self and the group is in a constant state of fear and worry regarding their identity. Previous research has shown that minority individuals who identify strongly with their minority group report greater psychological wellbeing (Phinney, 1989). A study testing a model of minority identity achievement, identity affirmation, and psychological wellbeing among ethnic minorities in the United States found that the process of identity achievement can serve as an important basis for developing positive feelings about and a sense of belonging to one's minority identity, which in turn contributes to psychological well-being (Ghavami et al., 2011). The findings of the present study indicate that participating adolescents highly rated the importance of their Armenian ethnic identity. However, it is difficult to tell whether this signifies that these adolescents have adaptively attained ethnic identity achievement and, more importantly, whether they did so through questioning, exploring and finally committing to their ethnic identity. This is not to say that students will surely fit into one of the categories proposed by Phinney (1989), as the unique context of the study may dictate otherwise. That said, assessment of the stages of ethnic identity formation that students are in is beyond the scope and aim of the current study.

A study in progress examining the role of Armenian history and social studies teachers in Armenian high schools in Lebanon regarding ethnic identity development and how this role is translated into operational educational practices found that students assign high significance to their teachers' role in their ethnic identity development (Kandaharian-Hudaverdian, 2021). This suggests that students perceive this role as a dominant aspect of their development (Kandaharian-Hudaverdian, 2021). Teachers evaluating their own role and practices indicated that they do believe in the implementation of value-effective curricular and educational approaches; however, they do not actually connect these intentions to their already adopted practices, which largely rely on the sole belief they should transmit to and educate the student about their ethnic identity (Kandaharian-Hudaverdian, 2021). Accordingly, if the students regard the role of their teachers as highly important, and if teachers focus exclusively on transmitting the Armenian ethnic identity, then students might not be given the chance to freely question, review failures and successes, explore, and understand this identity. Possibly, also, leading students to believe and grow in a mindset that highly focuses on the continuity of the Armenian ethnic identity and the associated fears of losing this identity may evoke feelings of guilt and treason when the students attempt to engage in a critical evaluation of the history of the Armenian collective ethnic identity.

## LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Multiple limitations and internal validity threats that could influence the results of the present study were foreseen.

**Sample Size:** A major limitation to the current study was its small sample size. In general, online surveys are much less likely to achieve response rates as high as surveys administered on paper (Nulty, 2008). In addition, there are several approaches to boost response rate, such as sending frequent reminders, offering incentives, and persuading respondents that their answers will be used (Nulty, 2008). In the present study, all three approaches were used. Despite these many efforts, the number of participants remained small. Another potential reason for low participation in online studies might be the lack of familiarity with electronic surveys (Nulty, 2008). Keeping this in mind, perhaps future research should aim to collect data from this specific sample through paper and pencil with the aim of increasing the participation rate.

Furthermore, future researchers could employ snowball sampling, for instance, through identifying key figures in the Lebanese-Armenian community as data collectors in hopes of increasing the number of participants. However, results would have to be carefully interpreted as this would bias the data collection and would influence the results.

A replication of the current study with a much larger sample size is essential to be able to determine whether affirmation is an effective intervention in identity threat situations and to examine the effects on willingness to engage in contact with out-group members. In addition, a conclusion regarding the reluctance of participants to take part in the current study based on their high endorsement of Armenian ethnic identity is too simplistic and cannot be made. It should be acknowledged that the sample of the study consisted of Armenian students from Armenian high schools where they are consistently exposed to the many facets of Armenian ethnic identity. Thus, it is not possible to come to a clear conclusion about Armenian ethnic identity being a possible gatekeeper obstructing participants' participation in research studies examining ethnic identity. Perhaps future research should compare the responses of Armenian students from Armenian schools with Armenian students from non-Armenians schools. Future follow-up studies could also benefit from qualitatively evaluating narratives on identity development and social identity complexity, especially with Lebanese-Armenians (Tavitian et al., 2019). Perhaps such studies would help researchers and scholars understand in depth how this particular group views their ethnic identity, how this perception is translated in its transmission to future generations, and if affirmation manipulations are effective interventions.

**Other Internal Validity Threats:** Other internal validity threats related to the participation rate in the study that might have affected the results are maturation and attrition. In the current study, maturation was not controlled for, and the questionnaires of participants who took longer than 30 minutes to finish were not removed from analysis. One rationale for including these responses in the analysis is attrition. Many participants did not continue beyond the first click on the link or after answering the first few questions of the experiment. Another reason is that some participants may have clicked on the link when it was sent to them; however, they did not complete the questionnaire until a day or two later when the main researcher sent a reminder of the experiment. Limiting access to the questionnaire via Qualtrics (<https://www.qualtrics.com>) through the option “Allow Respondents to Finish Later” is a possible way to control for maturation.

Since non-random sampling was applied, selection presented as a threat. Nevertheless, participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions. A replication of the current study is a must to confirm current findings or elucidate new ones. Furthermore, there are many important **external factors**, like **Stress & Online Learning**, that should be mentioned as they might have influenced participation and the responses of the participants in the study. Other **Situational Factors**, like the ongoing armed conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan even more than the dire Lebanese economic, security and political circumstances, may have contributed to a reluctance to participate in the sample of the current study.

## CONCLUSION

The current study aimed to assess self- and group-affirmation as possible mechanisms to reduce defensiveness in a sample of adolescent Armenian high school students when presented with an implicit identity threat, and to evaluate its effects on their willingness to interact with non-Armenians. The main analysis yielded null findings, most likely attributable to the small sample size and low statistical power of the study. Further exploratory analyses were carried out to better understand the characteristics of the sample. It was found that the sample highly endorses their Armenian ethnic identity. In addition, being a female, having an ethnically non-Armenian parent, and being a scouts' member or a member of a socio-cultural or political institution were associated with having frequent contact with and positive attitudes towards non-Armenians. A replication of the present study with a larger sample is paramount to corroborate current or bring forward new findings. Along with external factors and the method of data collection being online and electronic, the saliency and the distinctiveness of Armenian ethnic identity was proposed as a potential gatekeeper that might have obstructed participation. Moreover, the current

study builds on existing research regarding the saliency of the Armenian ethnic identity and further confirms that Armenian ethnic identity might be perceived as endangered and, in turn, in need of constant affirmation irrespective of situational demands (Badea & Sherman, 2019; Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman et al., 2017; Sherman, 2013; Sherman & Cohen, 2006, Tavitian et al., 2019). Since research on Lebanese-Armenians in general is scarce, the present study only serves as a basis for future social psychological research. Perhaps future research studies can be directed towards qualitatively exploring the Armenian ethnic identity, to capture Lebanese-Armenians' understanding of their ethnic identity and how, and if, this understanding could be targeted and used in experimental studies investigating affirmation and threat in the context of willingness to interact with the Lebanese mainstream.

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**ԼԻՔԱՆԱՀԱՅԵՐՈՒ ՀԱՒԱՔԱԿԱՆ ԵՒ ԱՆՀԱՏԱԿԱՆ ԻՆՔՆԱՀԱՍՏԱՏՈՒՄԸ  
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(ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ)**

ՍԵՒԱՆԱ ԹՈՓԱԼԵԱՆ ([sevana.topalian@gmail.com](mailto:sevana.topalian@gmail.com))

Հետազոտության նիւթ դարձնելով լիքանահայ վարժարաններու աշակերտներ՝ յօդուածը կ'ուսումնասիրէ անոնց՝ ոչ-հայերու հետ հաղորդակցութիւնը, երբ անոնք ա) հաւաքական եւ անհատական ինքնութեանական հաստատում կատարած են կամ չեն կատարած եւ՝ բ) ինքնութեանական սպառնալիքի ենթակայ են կամ չեն:

Ուսումնասիրութիւնը քննութեան կ'առնէ նաեւ ոչ-հայ մօր/հօր զաւակ, իգական կամ արական, ընկերային-միութեանական-սկառուական շարժումներու անդամ ըլլալու/չըլլալու գործօններու տարբերակուած ազդեցութիւնը՝ կատարուած փորձագիտական հետազոտութեան մէջ:

