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Bolstering White American's Ethnic Identity Resiliency: Self-Affirmation, Authentic Best-Self Reflection, and Mindfulness Meditation

Zoe Kinias
INSEAD, zoe.kinias@insead.edu
Corresponding author

Marie-Claire Fennessy

Domestic and international current events have highlighted a need for improved recognition of racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination by dominant groups, such as American Whites. Building upon Adams, Tormala, & O'Brien's (2006) demonstration that self-affirmation increases White American's recognition of discrimination against minorities, we compared the efficacy of self-affirmation, best-self reflection, and mindfulness meditation in increasing White American's recognition of prejudice in everyday events and outcomes. We further investigated potential processes of eudaimonic wellbeing and temporal focus. Results of a study involving 359 White American adults include indirect effects of both self-affirmation and best-self reflection on increased recognition of prejudice against American minorities only through eudaimonic well-being. A brief mindfulness meditation did not facilitate recognition of prejudice against American minorities, through eudaimonic well-being or through focus on the present moment. Implications for intergroup relations and interventions to bolster resiliency against identity threats are discussed.

Keywords: Self-affirmation; Mindfulness; Eudaimonic Wellbeing; Racism; Identity Threat

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Racial and ethnic tensions have been culminating both domestically and internationally, including the Ferguson Unrest following the killing of a black man by a white police officer, Donald Trump's presidential ad campaign involving statements of outright prejudices and plans for discriminatory policies, and growing Islamaphobia in Europe (Ferguson Unrest, 2015; Gorlach, 2015; Graves, 2016). In this context of tension and unrest, it is increasingly critical to empirically investigate methods for bolstering resiliency against racial and ethnic identity threat. This study takes a first step toward comparatively examining three proposed methods for bolstering identity resiliency to increase dominant group members' recognition of prejudice and discrimination. We do this by building and expanding upon Adams, Tormala, and O'Brien's (2006) finding that self-affirmation in the form of values writing attenuated identity threat, facilitating White American's recognition of discrimination against American minorities.

Approaching recognition of prejudice and discrimination from an identity bolstering perspective presupposes that members of dominant groups experience identity threat and that their reactions are influenced by it. There is substantive evidence that this is the case. For example, we know that people feel emotions on behalf of their social identity groups, such as racial, ethnic, and national groups, and group level emotions influence assessments of intergroup behaviors (Maitner, Mackie, & Smith, 2007; Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007). More specifically related to evidence of discrimination being potentially identity threatening for members of dominant groups, White Americans' experience of White guilt is predicted by their beliefs that Black Americans experience discrimination (Swim & Miller, 1999). This suggests that merely acknowledging the existence of discrimination against minority groups

may be identity threatening for members of dominant/majority groups. Consistent with this premise, Miron, Branscombe, and Biernat (2010, PSPB) have shown that White Americans most strongly identified with their ingroup shifted their standards of injustice to minimize perceptions of harm done through the American history of slavery and minimize their collective guilt. Taken together, this prior evidence strongly suggests that White Americans might experience self-threat associated with racial discrimination, and perceive lower levels of prejudice and discrimination than actually occur to reduce threat.

Most closely tied to the current research, Adams et al. (2006) examined if a values based self-affirmation would increase White Americans' perceptions of ethnic prejudice and discrimination in ambiguous situations, and they found that it did. Because this type of self-affirmation attenuates self-threat (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988), Adams and colleagues' findings strongly suggest that interpretations of ambiguous prejudice and discrimination can be colored by self-threat derived from a relevant social identity. We similarly hypothesized that self-affirmation would enable White Americans to recognize prejudice and discrimination against minorities.

Given that White Americans' perceptions of racial and ethnic discrimination can be facilitated through bolstering psychological resiliency in one way (i.e., values based self-affirmation), might other methods for bolstering psychological resiliency operate similarly? There is suggestive evidence from other intergroup threat domains that multiple methods might effectively bolster resiliency and openness to perceiving prejudice. For example, when a stigmatized prospective interaction target asks a question that facilitates self-affirmation (i.e., how have you recently treated someone fairly?), it reduces backlash against his confrontation of prejudice (Stone, Whitehead, Schmader, & Focella, 2011). Stone et al.'s method could be highly practical in dyadic interactions, but we focused on methods that both showed promise for attenuating identity-threat and could be administered more broadly, rather

than from a specific interaction partner. Thus, we explored two novel methods for increasing identity resiliency that were selected for their promise as potentially beneficial and their relative ease of broad implementation.

The first proposed method is through a process of reflecting on the self at its authentic best. Authentic best-self reflection is conceptually similar to self-affirmation in that it involves bolstering the integrity of the self, yet it differs in methodology from the forms of self-affirmation typically used in experimental and intervention contexts (see Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Authentic best-self reflection is borne of a practitioner oriented positive psychology tradition, presented as a means to focus attention on and bring forth the aspects of the self that most facilitate optimal performance and connections to others (Roberts, Spreitzer, Dutton, Quinn, Heaphy, & Barker, 2005). A noteworthy intervention demonstrated that relative to control conditions, authentic best-self writing led to improved work performance and reduced turnover in an Indian call center (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013). Because identity threat is likely one aspect of job stress in Indian call centers, where employees may be required to deny their ethnic identity (feign foreign accents, use foreign names), the benefits of this authentic best-self writing intervention suggest it may attenuate identity threats in a manner similar to other forms of self-affirmation, such as personal values writing (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Kinias & Sim, 2016).

Both values-based self-affirmation and authentic best-self reflection are designed to bolster the resiliency of the self, therefore decreasing self-serving and group-serving biases (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Roberts et al., 2005; Sherman & Kim, 2005). Although resiliency against self-threat can manifest in many ways, one well established construct overlaps almost entirely with these intended types of resiliency. Eudaimonic wellbeing as a construct has a long history in philosophy, religion, and psychology (see Ryan & Deci, 2001), and "… eudaimonia occurs when people's life activities are most congruent or meshing with deeply

held values and are holistically or fully engaged. Under such circumstances people would feel intensely alive and authentic, existing as who they really are…" (p. 146). There is also empirical evidence that both self-affirmation and authentic best-self reflection lead to increases in eudaimonic wellbeing (Cable et al., 2013; Nelson, Fuller, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Thus, to the extent that eudaimonic wellbeing facilitates a reduction in group-serving bias as manifested in underestimating the impact of ethnic prejudice, we would expect that both values-based self-affirmation and authentic best-self reflection facilitate White Americans' perceptions of ethnic discrimination through eudaimonic well-being.

> *Hypothesis 1.* Values based self-affirmations facilitate White Americans' perceptions of prejudice and discrimination against minorities by means of eudaimonic wellbeing.

> *Hypothesis 2.* Authentic best-self reflections facilitate White Americans' perceptions of prejudice and discrimination against minorities by means of eudaimonic wellbeing.

The second proposed method for facilitating recognition of prejudice is mindfulness meditation, which is currently popular in research and applied contexts and has garnered substantial empirical support (see Hyland, Lee, & Mills, 2015). Relevant to identity resiliency, decreased emotional reactivity and openness to self-threatening information are among the demonstrated benefits of mindfulness training, and there are also demonstrated benefits of even brief one-time interventions (Hyland et al., 2015). For example, a one-time brief mindfulness meditation induction in the form of guided focused breathing reduces negative affect and biased decision-making resulting from sunk-cost situations (Hafenbrack, Kinias, & Barsade, 2014). A similar one-time intervention also reduced implicit stereotyping of African Americans by White Americans (Lueke & Gibson, 2014), and another brief manipulation eliminated the detrimental impact of stereotype threat on math performance among women (Weger, Hooper, Meier, & Hopthrow, 2012). Given that sunk cost situations are self-threatening (Sivanathan, Molden, Galinsky & Ku, 2008; Zhang & Baumeister, 2006) and stereotype threat is a form of identity threat (Steele, 1997), these prior brief interventions

strongly suggest that state mindfulness can reduce the experience of self-threat among White Americans resulting from potential evidence of prejudice and discrimination, facilitating recognition of such situations as unjust.

Mindfulness is also both conceptually and empirically related to eudaimonic wellbeing (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Although there is no evidence of which we are aware demonstrating changes in eudaimonic wellbeing resulting from a brief mindfulness intervention, there is evidence that aspects of this construct are positively correlated with state mindfulness. For example, Brown and Ryan (2003) showed that state mindfulness was positively related to five proxies for eudaimonic wellbeing across three participant samples. Thus, to the extent that a brief induction can facilitate this form of resiliency, eudaimonic wellbeing could also be a process through which mindfulness reduces a group-serving bias such as minimizing the presence of prejudice and discrimination among members of a dominant group.

There is also evidence that a brief mindfulness induction shifts attention away from thoughts of the future and past to the present moment, focusing attention on the breath (Hafenbrack et al., 2014). We also know that interactions with minorities can be stressful and self-threatening for members of dominant groups (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998), and people may tend to think forward to concerns about future interactions or recall prior interactions when asked to assess the role of prejudice and discrimination in unpleasant outcomes for minorities. Thus, to the extent that focusing on a current experience, such as the sensations of breathing, reduces potential identity threat for dominant groups related to perceiving mistreatment of disempowered groups, this could also be an important process through which mindfulness increases Whites' perceptions of prejudice.

> *Hypothesis 3:* Mindfulness meditation facilitates White American's perceptions of prejudice and discrimination against minorities by means of eudaimonic wellbeing and focus on present experience.

The Current Study

This experiment was designed to examine all three hypotheses involving bolstering resiliency of White Americans against identity threat regarding the prevalence of prejudice and discrimination against ethnic minorities in America.

Method

Participants and design

Participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011), and 359 White adults (52% female) completed the manipulations and measures and were thus included in the analyzed sample. (Note that we did not screen based on race or ethnicity, but because the group of responding ethnic minorities was both small and heterogeneous, their data are not included in the current analyses.) After consenting to participate in a study on personal writing or listening and social judgments in Qualtrics, participants were automatically randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: mindfulness meditation, authentic best-self, values self-affirmation, or control.

Experimental condition manipulations

The four conditions were designed to be roughly equivalent in terms of time to complete (approximately five to ten minutes). The mindfulness meditation condition manipulation was described as a listening exercise, and the authentic best-self, values self-affirmation, and control condition manipulations were all described as personal writing exercises.

Mindfulness meditation manipulation. In this condition, participants listened to an 8-minute version of the recorded induction developed by Hafenbrack et al. (2014). A professional mindfulness meditation coach created the induction, which leads participants through a focused breathing meditation exercise. The recording instructs them to focus their awareness on the physical sensations of breathing with gentle repeated reminders.

Authentic best-self manipulation. In this condition, participants engaged in a writing exercise modeled after Cable et al. (2013). This writing exercise involved responding to four prompts with open-ended response fields asking them to list three words that best describe them as an individual, describe what about them leads to their happiest times and best performance, reflect on a time when they were acting the way they were "born to act", and share how they can repeat that behavior more regularly.

Values affirmation manipulation. In this condition, participants were asked to select the two values most important to them personally, from a list of ten values adapted from McQueen and Klein (2006). This list was comprised of: living in the moment, sense of humor, music or the arts, relationships with family and friends, creativity, independence, politics, spiritual or religious values, social skills, and financial success. Participants then answered three open-ended prompts to describe why the values are important to them, provide at least one example of something they've done that demonstrates the values' importance, and list the top two reasons the values are important to them. Finally, participants in this condition responded to four Likert-scale items (anchored on 1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree) on the importance of the values. This scale was taken from Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master (2006), and an example item is, "These values are an important part of who I am." The scale was highly reliable in this sample ($\propto$ = .95). Participants in this experimental condition indicated that the values were very important to them (M = 5.62, SD = .64).

Control condition writing. This condition was modeled after McQueen and Klein's least important value control condition (2006), which was also used as the control condition by Adams et al. (2006) and as a control condition in other self-affirmation and identity threat research (e.g., Cohen et al., 2006; Kinias & Sim, 2015). In this condition participants were presented the same value list as in the values affirmation condition, but were asked to select the two values least important to them. They then responded to similar writing prompts

requesting they write about the importance of these least important values to other people. They also completed the same four-item importance Likert scale with respect to the importance of the items to others, and this version of the scale was also reliable ($\propto$ = .87). Participants in the control condition indicated that the values were very important to others (*M* = 5.63, *SD* = .47).

Prejudice ratings

Following Adams et al. (2006), participants rated the extent to which they personally thought prejudice, discrimination, or racism played a role in 10 policies, states of affairs, events, and situations (1 = not at all, 7 = certainly). Some of these items were taken directly from Adams et al. (e.g., "The disproportionate number of African Americans in the justice system."), and others were updated to reflect current American racial events (e.g., "Several US States resisted removal of Confederate flags from government buildings."). They included both institutional and individual forms of racism (e.g., Unzueta & Lowery, 2008), but they are currently analysed in aggregate, as they formed a single reliable scale ($\propto$ = .84).

Eudaimonic well-being

Five items were selected from Waterman et al.'s (2010) eudaimonic well-being scale to assess the extent to which they experienced state level eudaimonic wellbeing during their writing or listening exercise, following Cable et al. (2013). For example, "I felt authentic." and "I felt centered around a set of core of beliefs that give meaning to my life." These items were anchored on a 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree scale, and the scale was reliable in this sample ($\propto$ = .90).

Present moment focus

Two items taken from Hafenbrack et al. (2014) assessed focus on the present moment during the writing or listening exercise ("I felt in touch with my body." and "I was focused on

my breathing.") on the 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree scale. These items also

formed a reliable measure ($\alpha = .88$).

<div align="center">Results</div>

Data were analyzed using Hayes' PROCESS macro (see Hayes, 2013) for SPSS with

experimental condition entered as the independent variable with effects codes (the control

condition was specified as the contrast group), eudaimonic wellbeing and present moment

focus entered as mediators, and prejudice ratings entered as the outcome. See Figure 1 for the

unstandardized regression coefficients from the bootstrapped analysis.

Figure 1
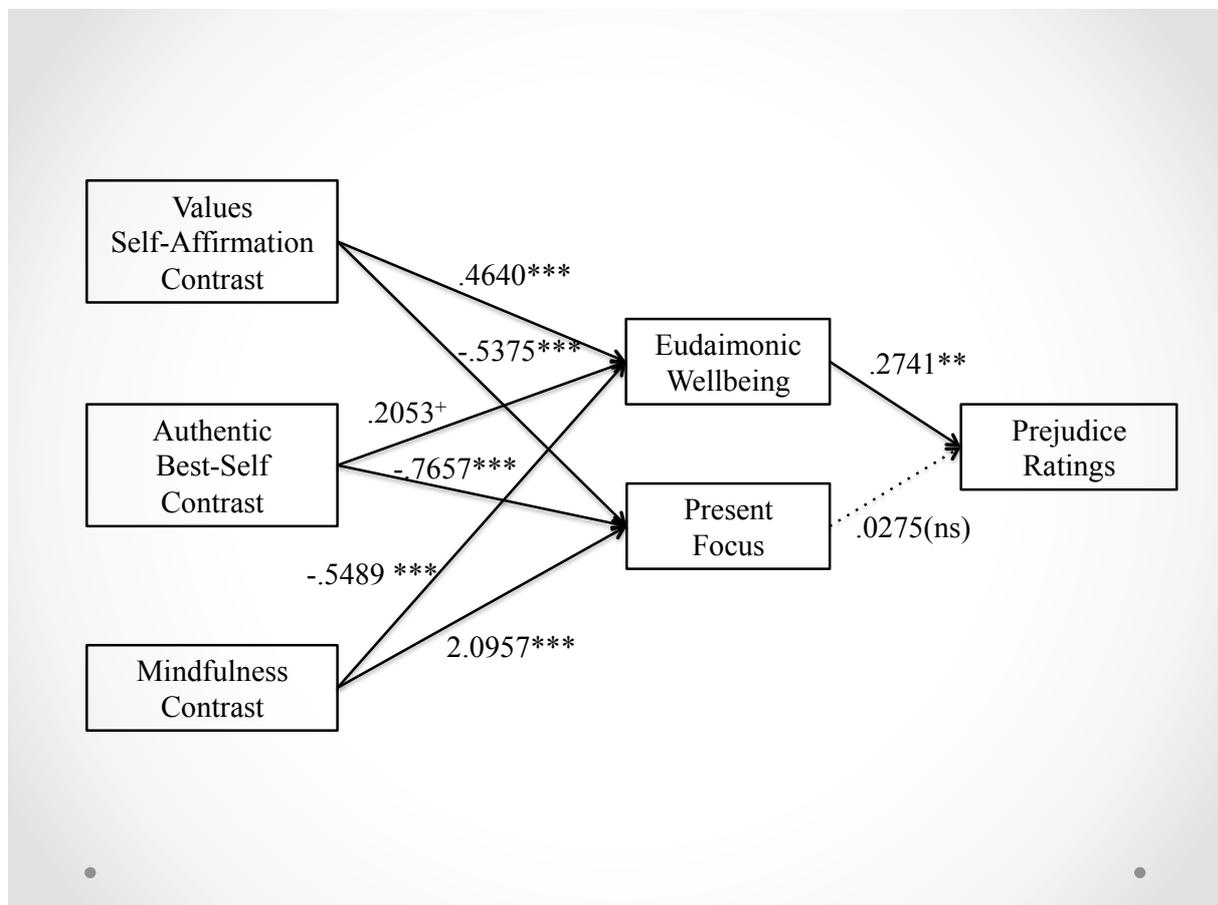
Note: Numbers represent unweighted regression coefficients (*b*) for the effects codes
contrasting experimental conditions against the control condition in the full bootstrapped
regression model using OLS regression. (ns) represents $p = .6878$, [+] represents $p = .0695$,
** represents $p = .0012$, *** represents $p < .0010$

Consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2, there were significant indirect effects showing increased recognition of prejudice and discrimination through eudaimonic wellbeing in the values self-affirmation and authentic best-self experimental conditions. Specifically, the 95% confidence intervals for the values self-affirmation condition (b = .1272, *95% CI: .0522 to .2346*) and the authentic best-self condition (b = .0563, *95% CI: .0010 to .1434*) on prejudice ratings through eudaimonic wellbeing were positive and did not include zero. The omnibus test of indirect effects examining the overall influence of experimental condition on prejudice ratings through eudaimonic wellbeing was also statistically significant, as the 95% confidence interval did not include zero (b = .0209, *95% CI: .0060 to .0458*).

There was, however, no support for Hypothesis 3. In contrast to Hypothesis 3, there was also a significant indirect effect showing decreased recognition of prejudice and discrimination in the mindfulness experimental condition through eudaimonic wellbeing. Specifically, the 95% confidence interval for the effects code comparing the effect of the mindfulness condition relative to the control condition on prejudice ratings through eudaimonic wellbeing was negative and did not include zero (b = -.1505, *95% CI: -.2841 to -.0578*). There was also not a significant indirect effect of mindfulness on prejudice ratings through present moment focus, as the 95% confidence interval for the effects code comparing the effect of the mindfulness condition relative to the control condition on prejudice ratings through present moment focus included zero (b = .0576, *95% CI: -.2246 to .3483*). The omnibus test examining the overall effects of experimental condition on prejudice ratings through focus on the present moment was also non-significant (b = .0105, *95% CI: -.0413 to .0661*).

There were no direct effects of experimental condition on perceptions of prejudice, as evidenced by a non-significant omnibus test of the effects codes for experimental conditions on prejudice ratings, R^2 = .0056, $F(3, 355)$ = .6933, p = .5566.

Discussion

Consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2, both values based self-affirmation and authentic best-self reflection facilitated White Americans' perceptions of ethnic discrimination by means of eudaimonic wellbeing. In contrast to Hypothesis 3, however, a brief mindfulness induction inhibited White American's perceptions of ethnic discrimination by means of eudaimonic wellbeing. These findings contribute to both theory and intervention practice. We discuss these contributions, as well as limitations and directions for future research.

The first theoretical contribution of this work is to self-affirmation and identity resiliency literatures, as values based self-affirmation and authentic best-self reflection similarly bolster psychological resiliency in the face of a potential threat to social identity. Of course this finding is important in its own right, developing understanding of how self-affirmations serve to open White Americans to perceive prejudice and discrimination against minorities (Adams et al., 2006), but it also speaks to several larger literatures. To our knowledge, this is the first study to empirically assess the effectiveness of an authentic best-self writing exercise as a form of self-affirmation in a situation that has been empirically established as identity threatening. Further, the side-by-side comparison of the authentic best-self writing with a well-established values self-affirmation and the measure of eudaimonic wellbeing contribute to our understanding of how these two interventions operate similarly in the face of identity threat (see Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

The fact that these two experimental interventions operated so similarly with respect to increasing eudaimonic wellbeing suggests that they are likely bolstering the resiliency of the self in the face of identity threat in a similar manner. This suggests that when researchers and practitioners are striving to attenuate identity threats in intergroup contexts, authentic best-self writing may be an effective substitute when values writing may be problematic (e.g., Lehmiller, Law, & Tormala, 2010). Given that the impact of values writing was slightly

stronger than the authentic best-self writing, we encourage additional research investigating the relative potency of the two interventions in various identity threat situations.

The present findings also empirically connect the identity-resiliency bolstering benefits of two forms of self-affirmation to an established measure of eudaimonic wellbeing (Waterman et al., 2010), a first step toward integrating literatures with similar focus that developed in parallel. Although the connections among Steele's (1988) self-affirmation theory, authentic best-self writing (Roberts et al., 2005), and eudaimonic wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2001) may seem obvious to those familiar with all three, there is little evidence of prior integration of these literatures (c.f., Cable et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2014). Our study contributes an integrative approach.

We had also aimed to facilitate integration of self-affirming techniques with a mindfulness approach to bolstering identity resiliency, yet our current findings in the brief mindfulness intervention condition may add more confusion than clarity. What conclusions should be drawn from the unexpected negative indirect effect of a brief mindfulness induction on prejudice ratings through eudaimonic wellbeing? In contrast with Weger et al.'s (2012) finding that a brief mindfulness induction buffered against stereotype threat for women taking a mathematics exam, our study did not demonstrate a mindfulness buffer against identity threat. Disentangling the causes of these disparate effects should be a focus of future research. What seems clear from our findings is that a brief breathing exercise does not buffer against identity threat in the same way that self-affirmation (in the form of values writing or authentic best-self writing) does.

Although other research has also shown that brief mindfulness inductions have potential to temporarily induce a state that parallels the effects of long-term mindfulness training and individual differences in trait mindfulness (see Hyland et al., 2015), we acknowledge that the present study does not speak to the potential benefits of longer-term

mindfulness training on identity resiliency. Ortner, Kilner & Zelazo (2007) found that participants with more mindfulness meditation experience showed less emotional interference in a cognitive task and reported higher psychological wellbeing, which could be expected to translate into a positive effect of mindfulness meditation on eudaimonic wellbeing and perceptions of prejudice. In fact, it is still possible that the effects of mindfulness practice would support Hypothesis 3 if the intervention were long-term, facilitating personal growth over time (see Brown & Ryan, 2003).

We must also acknowledge that there were several methodological differences between the brief mindfulness condition and all other conditions (including the control), which suggest caution against concluding that a brief mindfulness intervention can increase vulnerability to identity threat. Most importantly, the mindfulness condition was the only one in which participants took a passive role, listening to an audio recording, rather than an active role, reflecting on and writing about something—either other people's values (control), their own values (values self-affirmation), or them at their best (authentic best-self). The fact that participants reported focusing much more on their breath in the mindfulness condition does strongly suggest that they followed instructions, but they may have been less engaged in the exercise than they were in the writing conditions.

Also, although the least important values writing is a well-established control condition for values affirmation (McQueen & Klein, 2006), understood to not affirm the self at all, it is possible that relative to focusing on one's own breath in the present moment, the control condition was not the best control. Perhaps the least important value condition intended to serve as a control writing activity inadvertently induced perspective taking among these participants who were asked to consider the importance of the values least important to them to others. Because perspective taking can improve intergroup relations (see Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), this control condition may have not been the cleanest comparison for this

type of identity threat. Mind wandering is the established control for a brief mindfulness induction (e.g., Hafenbrack et al., 2014), and would be a preferable control condition for drawing conclusions about potential negative effects of brief mindfulness on perceiving prejudice. We encourage further examination of all these remaining questions about mindfulness effects on eudaimonic wellbeing and resiliency against identity threats.

The attentive reader will have also noted that none of the direct effects of experimental conditions were statistically significant—rather, the full influence was through eudaimonic wellbeing. Although this fact is disappointing from an intervention efficacy perspective, it does not mean that the significant indirect effects should be ignored (see Hayes, 2013, Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011). In particular, Rucker et al. (2011) explain that significant indirect effects in the absence of significant direct effects can be suggestive of a test being underpowered, of a moderating variable, or of a suppressor variable that operates in opposition to the indirect process examined. Given the sample size was reasonably large and the measures acceptably reliable, we suspect there may be a moderating factor or suppressor at play. Scholars interested in the real-world benefits of such interventions should investigate these possibilities further.

We are broadly interested in the potential benefits of interventions for attenuating identity threats to improve intergroup relations and ameliorate social and professional inequalities. In addition to the potential benefits of members of dominant groups recognizing prejudice and discrimination, forms of self-affirmation have been shown to facilitate support for affirmative action (Unzueta, Lowery, & Knowles, 2008), openness to opposing political views (Cohen, Sherman, Bastardi, Hsu, McGoey, & Ross, 2007), and performance in the face of stereotype threat (e.g., Cohen et al., 2006; Kinias & Sim, 2015; Sherman, et al., 2013). As our understanding of the comparative processes resulting from different efforts to bolster identity resiliency grow, we hope this knowledge can inform these interventions and more.

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