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The Indifference that Makes a Difference: Why Unconcern for Minorities Disguises  
Prejudicial Attitudes

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### **Abstract**

Studies on historical episodes of intergroup violence and conflicts have underlined the complicit role of bystanders in extreme intergroup dynamics. In regard to contemporary multicultural societies, the concept of intergroup indifference has recently been introduced, defined as being uncaring vis-à-vis arbitrary policies affecting other social groups. In the present manuscript, the reasons why an indifferent position towards minorities may imply some prejudicial attitudes towards them will be analyzed. In particular, moral disengagement and lack of social responsibility are considered to be variables that could explain why indifference might mask prejudicial attitudes and a lack of altruism for out-groups. The results show that moral disengagement and social responsibility are indeed significant mediators of the prediction of intergroup indifference to racism and altruism. In particular, the mediation model shows that moral disengagement partially mediates the path from indifference to racism, while social responsibility partially mediates that from indifference and altruism.

**Keywords:** intergroup indifference; prejudice; altruism; moral disengagement; social responsibility

### **The Indifference that Makes a Difference: Why Unconcern for Minorities Disguises Prejudicial Attitudes**

Although mostly independent of each other, the coincidental overlapping of two worldwide circumstances such as the 2008 financial crisis and the exponential increment in immigration towards Western countries has had some serious consequences as concerns intergroup relations (Becker, Wagner, & Christ, 2011; Butz & Yogeeswaran, 2011; Passini, 2015), especially in terms of attitudes towards social minorities. As some scholars (e.g. Author, 2018; Becker et al., 2011; Bukowski, de Lemus, Rodriguez-Bailón, & Willis, 2016; Valentova & Callens, 2017; Werts, Scheepers, & Lubbers, 2013) have pointed out, the use of immigration as a scapegoat for the economic crisis promoted by some political parties and movements to gain votes has indeed fueled prejudicial and exclusionary attitudes towards certain out-groups.

Alongside the increase in such open and direct manifestations of hostility, the present age is also marked by the increasing attitudes of indifference towards the situation of social minorities. As Passini (2017b, 2017a) has recently pointed out, both uncertainties deriving from the financial crisis and fears triggered by immigration have indeed led many people to focus on their own group difficulties and to look away from and feel indifferent to the restriction of the rights to other social groups. Such feelings of unconcern towards members of the out-groups lead them to be invisible for the in-group and support a lowering of the sense of moral salience towards them, that is the feeling that others are suffering and an action to help them is necessary (Monroe, 2008). Various studies on past episodes of intergroup violence (see Bauman, 1989; Monroe, 2008; Staub, 2013b) have underlined the complicit role of passive bystanders in not obstructing or even justifying perpetrators, allowing for the advancement of intergroup

conflicts. These studies have suggested that the gradual restriction of minorities' rights is not only fostered by being compliant with the majority in power, but it is supported by individual attitudes of indifference towards them. As Monroe (2008) has pointed out in her analysis of the Holocaust, by avoiding moral implications and dodging their responsibility towards the out-groups, bystanders enhance in-group/out-group distinctions and certify the legitimacy of the restriction of their rights.

In the present manuscript, the relationship between attitudes of indifference towards the derogation of minorities' rights and racism and altruism will be analyzed. In particular, moral disengagement and deresponsibilization will be considered as two mechanisms that could explain why indifference might mask prejudicial attitudes and a lack of altruism for out-groups. In the following paragraph, the notion of intergroup indifference will be outlined. Lastly, moral disengagement and social responsibility will be briefly presented.

### **Indifference as a Prejudice**

Various studies on the racial policy of Nazi Germany and on other historical periods marked by intergroup violence and repression (see Monroe, 2008; Staub, 2014) have underlined that, rather than being passive, bystanders often had an active and complicit role in non-obstructing or even supporting these extreme measures. As Staub (2014) has pointed out, bystanders are indeed in a position to know what is happening and to take action as a consequence. That is, they may decide to pretend nothing is happening (indirectly encouraging the perpetrators) or they may define that situation as a restriction of rights and intervene, refusing to cooperate.

Starting from these studies and in reference to the contemporary multicultural societies in which we live nowadays, Passini (2017b) has introduced the concept of

*intergroup indifference*, defined as being uncaring in regard to arbitrary policies affecting other social groups. Such indifference may be revealed by attitudes of explicit total unconcern for such rights restrictions or by more implicit positions such as those in which in-group needs are prioritized over those of out-groups to the point that the latter are not considered. As Dovidio and Gaertner (2004) have pointed out, a certain invisibility of immigrants and minorities has indeed been strengthened by masking the denial of minorities' rights underlying declarations such as "there are other priorities for this country" or "we can do nothing to resolve these problems."

In line with the literature on bystanders and their complicit role in evildoing, Passini (2017b) has analyzed intergroup indifference and its connection with prejudicial attitudes. These were measured in their negative specification as unfavorable evaluations of social groups or individuals because of their group membership in the context of in-group vs. out-group categorization (Brown, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Considering those people who declared themselves "indifferent" concerning some Parliamentary bills related to derogatory policies towards out-groups, results have shown that indifferent citizens had similar scores on scales of prejudicial attitudes to those people who openly support such policies. These results were confirmed by Author (2017b): higher levels of intergroup indifference (measured on a four-item scale) were associated with higher levels of prejudice, even after controlling for agreement to such rights restrictions.

### **Moral Disengagement and Social Responsibility**

In the classic experiment by Latané and Darley (1970), the authors mainly identified three psychological processes to explain the bystander effect. First, people do not intervene because of *social influence*: that is, the inactive behavior of the other

bystanders was interpreted as an indication that no help was required. Second, a certain *diffusion of responsibility* took over, by which people felt less personally responsible as they ascribe the responsibility to intervene and the blame for inaction to the other bystanders. Third, there is a *transformation in morality* (Staub, 2014), by which bystanders suspend their moral principles by dehumanizing and morally excluding the victims. As already pointed out by studies on historical events, in those circumstances in which an event should be unequivocally interpreted as a restriction of rights (as in the case of intergroup violence), diffusion of responsibility and moral transformation are the two main psychological processes for explaining the bystander effect. Indeed, delegitimization (Oren, Nets-Zehngut, & Bar-Tal, 2015) and moral exclusion of the out-groups (Opotow, 2011) by the incumbent political system and people's disengagement from moral beliefs (Bandura, 1999, 2016) are fundamental psychological processes for both perpetrators and bystanders to sustain violent events (see Monroe, 2008; Staub, 2014). "Many passive bystanders, in order to reduce their own empathic distress, may over time further distance themselves from victims" (Staub, 2013b, p. 578). As Basaran (2015) has pointed out discussing the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean, indifference and collective disengagement from particular populations are produced in liberal societies by the use and the increase in intergroup social distance and by the progressive invisibility of minorities.

In line with the studies by Latané and Darley (1970), in the present research moral disengagement and social responsibility are analyzed as two mediators between intergroup indifference, and prejudicial and altruistic attitudes towards minorities. Moral disengagement is defined as a psychosocial process by which individuals mitigate the moral consequences of harmful behaviors (Bandura, 1999). In particular,



moral self-sanctions can be disengaged from violations by eight mechanisms operating on four levels (see Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Tramontano, & Barbaranelli, 2009). At the behavioral level, people depict immoral conducts in moral terms by means of moral justification, euphemistic language, or advantageous comparison. At the agency level, people may attenuate the link between their actions and their consequences by a displacement or diffusion of responsibility. At the outcome level, people may avoid the blameful effects of their actions by distorting their consequences. Finally, at the recipient level people may remove empathetic feelings for the victims by attribution of blame or dehumanization. Previous research has found that moral disengagement is positively related to racism (Faulkner & Bliuc, 2016) and aggression (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014) and negatively to altruism (Paciello, Fida, Cerniglia, Tramontano, & Cole, 2013).

As concerns social responsibility, as Milgram (1974) had already pointed out in his famous experiment on destructive obedience, the shift of responsibility outside one's own accountability is a powerful way to act immorally without feeling guilt. Contrariwise, the assumption of social responsibility leads people to help others and not to act against their wellbeing. Social responsibility is defined as the propensity to show concern for the welfare of others, the perception that other people depend on us and an attitude that results in behaviors that support the common good (Berkowitz & Lutterman, 1968; see also Trnka & Trundle, 2017). As various studies (e.g., Ruci, van Allen, & Zelenski, 2018) have pointed out, people who score high on social responsibility are more likely to engage in pro-social behaviors and to feel a certain altruism towards strangers.

### **Hypotheses**

The aim of the present research was to analyze the relationship of intergroup indifference with racism and altruism, and the mediation effects of moral disengagement and social responsibility on these relationships. Specifically, it was hypothesized that intergroup indifference will be positively correlated with moral disengagement and modern racism, while negatively correlated with social responsibility and altruism (Hypothesis 1). Second, it was hypothesized that moral disengagement and social responsibility will mediate the relationship between indifference on the one side, and racism and altruism on the other (Hypothesis 2).

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants were contacted online, using an internet questionnaire constructed using Limesurvey, a survey-generating tool (<http://www.limesurvey.org>). The questionnaire was publicly accessible and an invitation with the link to the questionnaire was emailed to the potential participants by various methods (e.g., mailing lists, newsgroups, social networking services). In particular, a university mailing list was used. Respondents were advised that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. No fee was offered. The questionnaire was drafted in Italian. In order to check and prevent a person from re-entering the survey site, the subject's IP address was monitored. The data were collected in 2017.

A total of 335 Italian citizens (68.1% women) responded by accessing the website and filling out the questionnaire. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 73 years ( $M = 27.63$ ,  $SD = 11.82$ ). They were mainly born in the north of Italy (81%), while 11.5% and 6% came from the center and the south, respectively, and 1.5% were born abroad.

As regards their level of education, 6.6% declared they had finished middle school, 65.2% declared they had completed a high school diploma, 25.5% had a university degree and 2.7% a masters or Ph.D. qualification. Job-wise, 59.5% stated they were university students, 14.7% white collar workers, 4.9% factory workers/craftsmen, 4.5% self-employed, 3.3% teachers, 4.6% unemployed, 2.3% retired, and 6.3% chose *other*.

## Measures

**Intergroup indifference.** Participants were asked to answer to items concerning indifference towards social groups and minorities. The scale was developed by Author (2017b) and was composed of four items on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): “I am quite indifferent to the news about the Navy’s actions to send back migrants’ boats from our country,” “The fact that doctors have an obligation to report illegal (i.e., without a permit) immigrant patients leaves me quite indifferent,” “I think that Parliament has other priorities than dealing with the rights of certain minorities” and “I am not very interested in news about civil rights denied to homosexuals”. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .62.

**Civic moral disengagement.** The scale validated by Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Tramontano, & Barbaranelli (2009) was used. Participants responded to 32 items on a 7-point scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree*, to 5 = *strongly agree*) that identify eight mechanisms of moral disengagement with four items for each mechanism. As suggested by the author, an overall moral disengagement score was calculated by averaging all the items ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Moreover, each mechanism was measured as a separate dimension as well: *moral justification* (“In order to keep family cohesion, its members should always be defended, even when they are guilty of serious crimes,”  $\alpha = .56$ ), *advantageous comparison* (“Given the widespread corruption in society, one cannot disapprove of

those who pay for favors,”  $\alpha = .77$ ), *displacement of responsibility* (“It is not the fault of drivers if they exceed the speed limit since cars are made to go at high speeds,”  $\alpha = .61$ ), *diffusion of responsibility* (“There is no sense in blaming individuals who evade a rule when everybody else does the same thing,”  $\alpha = .61$ ), *attribution of blame* (“Victims generally have trouble staying out of harm’s way,”  $\alpha = .60$ ), *distorting consequences* (“Thefts in large department stores are irrelevant compared to the stores’ earnings,”  $\alpha = .67$ ), *dehumanization* (“In order to force some people to work, they have to be treated like beasts of burden,”  $\alpha = .63$ )<sup>1</sup>.

**Social responsibility.** Four items on a 7-point scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree*, to 5 = *strongly agree*) from the Social Responsibility Scale (Berkowitz & Lutterman, 1968) were used to measure individual likelihood of contributing to the greater good of one’s own society. A sample item is “I think we should all try to enhance the welfare of others through our actions.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .71.

**Modern racism.** To measure modern racism, four items on a 7-point scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) from the modern sexism scale were adapted to fit racism toward immigrants (see Wohl & Branscombe, 2009). A sample item is “Discrimination against immigrants is no longer a problem in Italy.” An overall anti-immigrant racism score was calculated by averaging the four items ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

**Altruism.** To measure altruism, the Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (Hwang, Plante, & Lackey, 2008) was used. The scale is composed of five items (e.g., “I tend to feel compassion for people, even if I do not know them” on a 7-point scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*)). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .83.

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<sup>1</sup> The mechanism “euphemistic language” was removed due to a low Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ .

**Demographics and politics.** Participants stated their age, gender, level of education, job, and ideological affiliation (from 1 = *extreme left* to 10 = *extreme right*).

### Results

As can be seen in Table 1 (left part), the means showed that in general participants gave low scores to intergroup indifference, moral disengagement, while they gave high scores to social responsibility. They gave low-medium scores on attitudes of modern racism and medium high scores on the altruism scale. Finally, they tended to be politically situated in the moderate area.

Bivariate correlations (see Table 1, right part) showed that intergroup indifference, as hypothesized, was positively correlated with moral disengagement and with modern racism, while negatively correlated with social responsibility and altruism. Moreover, the more people were politically situated on the right-wing, the more they tended to be indifferent towards minorities. As concerns the other variables, moral disengagement was positively correlated with modern racism and negatively correlated with social responsibility and altruism. Social responsibility was correlated with all the same variables in the opposite direction.

-----INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE-----

The mediation of moral disengagement and social responsibility on the path from indifference to modern racism and altruism was carried out using Mplus 7.4 (Muthen & Muthen, 2012). A latent variable of moral disengagement was created using the seven mechanisms scores. As suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999), model fit was assessed using the Comparative Fit Index (CFI, cutoff value close to .95), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI, cutoff value close to .95), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

(RMSEA, cutoff value close to .06), and Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR, cutoff value close to .08).

The mediation model fit the data well:  $\chi^2(2) = 77.46$ ,  $CFI = .97$ ,  $TLI = .96$ ,  $RMSEA = .06$ ,  $SRMR = .04$ . As can be seen in Figure 1, intergroup indifference positively predicted moral disengagement, modern racism, and negatively predicted social responsibility and altruism. The effect of intergroup indifference on racism ( $R^2 = .45$ ) was partially mediated by moral disengagement (indirect effect:  $B = .20$ ,  $t = 5.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while the one on altruism ( $R^2 = .44$ ) was partially mediated by social responsibility (indirect effect:  $B = -.20$ ,  $t = -6.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

-----INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE-----

### Discussion

Starting from the literature on the bystander effect, the aim of the present research was to deepen the concept of intergroup indifference. In particular, the effects of this variable on racism and altruism was analyzed, considering two psychosocial mechanisms as intervening variables: i.e., moral disengagement and the lack of social responsibility.

Firstly, participants in the present research generally have low scores on both intergroup indifference and moral disengagement and high scores on social responsibility. These results underline that the majority of participants do not feel indifferent to minorities and feel morally engaged and responsible for the consequences of their conduct. However, it is worth noting that scores on modern racism are not so correspondingly low. In line with recent studies on intergroup relationships (Dovidio, Gaertner, Ufkes, Saguy, & Pearson, 2016), these results are not self-contradictory, given that people often openly express prejudicial attitudes against some groups of minorities,

especially immigrants, without feeling any sense of guilt for such positions. Moreover, as shown by the literature on moral exclusion, people may feel morally engaged and responsible towards certain social groups but not others, depending on their inclusion or exclusion from the moral community within which moral values and rules of justice apply (Passini & Morselli, 2016).

Secondly, notwithstanding the fact that participants are generally not unconcerned about the restriction of minorities rights, intergroup indifference is correlated to all the variables considered and moral disengagement and social responsibility are significant mediators of the prediction of indifference to racism and altruism. In particular, the mediation model shows that moral disengagement partially mediates the path from indifference to racism, while social responsibility partially mediates the path from indifference and altruism. Therefore, as hypothesized, the results show the effect of intergroup indifference on both racism and altruism, in terms of which most people declare they are indifferent as concerns institutional policies curbing minority rights, while the more they share biased attitudes, the less they are liable to be altruistic towards strangers. These effects are differently mediated by the two variables considered. In this sense, we can assume that indifferent people are biased because they morally disengage from the consequence of their actions, while they are not altruistic because of a lack of social responsibility. Thus, by way of confirmation of bystander literature, the results of the mediation suggest the involvement of distinct – albeit interrelated – psycho-social mechanisms in explaining the relationship between indifference on the one side, and racism and altruism on the other. A lack of moral engagement explains an indifference connected to prejudicial attitudes and it lies behind the transition from uncaring to derogatory and aversive attitudes towards other social

groups. Instead, a lack of social responsibility describes an indifference marked more by selfishness and unhelpfulness, and it underlies the shift from uncaring to indifference in helping others. It should be noted, however, that indirect effects are only partial, suggesting a role of other intervening variables.

These results have some implications for the analysis of intergroup relationships and for understanding and reducing those dynamics that lead to prejudice and discrimination of minorities or the lack of altruism towards them. First of all, in agreement with bystander studies (see Staub, 2014) and with those focusing on passive obedience or active implication in evil-doing (see Haslam & Reicher, 2007), disengagement from moral norms and self-sanctions might be used as a conscious or unconscious strategy for participating or simply observing a restriction of rights without feeling guilt or remorse. “The struggle over moral issues never takes place, as the moral aspects of actions are not immediately obvious or are deliberately prevented from discovery and discussion. In other words, the moral character of action is either invisible or purposefully concealed” (Bauman, 1989, p. 24). If these strategies were mainly studied in regard to their frequent use during dictatorial regimes, they are often being applied to so-called democracies. As both moral disengagement (see Bandura, 1999) and moral exclusion (see Passini, 2010) literatures have pointed out, moral disengagement operates through various strategies that are frequently used nowadays also in the political, economic and broadcasting domains to disguise some facts and events under a different light (see Lazar & Lazar, 2004; Passini, Palareti, & Battistelli, 2010). The use of euphemistic language, advantageous comparison or distortion of the consequences of one’s own actions, are all strategies used by political systems to justify the restriction of rights of minorities and out-groups (e.g., Oren et al., 2015). Moreover,



people often use strategies that shift one's own responsibility outside or that remove any empathetic feelings for the victims by attributing blame or dehumanizing them. In this sense, dehumanization of people is associated with less support for their rights (Drolet, Hafer, & Heuer, 2016; Staerklé & Clémence, 2004) and the moral exclusion of social groups (see Passini, 2014, 2016) fosters their invisibility, promoting a certain indifference to the undermining of their rights (Passini, 2017a).

Second, the negative effect of indifference on altruism is instead mediated by social responsibility. As the analysis of the holocaust by Monroe (2008) has shown, bystanders frequently feign ignorance to dodge responsibility while rescuers name social responsibility as one of their core values. There is "a critical difference between rescuers and bystanders. It is not enough merely to do no wrong. You have to do what is right." (p. 720). Oliner and Oliner (1992) describes the "altruistic personality" as effectively characterized by higher levels of morality and inclusivity, as well as higher standards of social responsibility. In this sense, moral inclusion, as opposed to moral disengagement and exclusion, and social responsibility are interconnected and mutually reinforce each other (see Morselli & Passini, 2010), as the concept of "vertical responsibility" (Jonas, 1984) already has suggested.

All these considerations have a practical implication as well. Indeed, in order to reduce the negative impact of prejudice on the integration of cultures in contemporary societies, it is relevant to break the chain of indifference and turn indifference into attention to the other (Short, 1999). Some scholars talk about moral courage (Staub, 2013a) and moral inclusion (Passini, 2011) as qualities to be developed in children and youngsters by encouraging them, for instance, to express what they think and actively participate in decision-making both at home and in schools (e.g., Applebaum, 2005). In

this sense, it may be relevant to implement interventions related to the development of civic engagement and critical consciousness in society (see Freire, 1970), focusing on the notion of social responsibility and moral engagement. As Lynch, Swartz, and Isaacs (2017) have pointed out, moral education can help people to no longer be just passive bystanders of racial injustice, and to recognize it and dismantle those structures, inequalities and institutions that keep it in place. “A focus on anti-racist education as a clear goal of moral education helps to relocate moral education in a progressive framework concerned with achieving social justice” (Lynch et al., 2017, p. 130). As anti-racist education considers racism as operating not only just by way of personal bias, but in its connection with a system that marginalizes and excludes some groups while privileging others (Hassouneh, 2006), a reflection on the topic of indifference towards the restriction of minority rights should be part of the basis of such a moral education.

This research has some limitations which should be borne in mind for future research. First of all, the mediation of both moral disengagement and responsibility is just partial. Other variables should be considered in the future. As Staub (2013a) has pointed out, moral disengagement is just the first step towards that moral transformation that allows indifference to support wrongdoings. Secondly, future studies may use an indifference scenario to deepen what people might really do in an everyday situation of a restriction of out-group rights. Similarly, it may be interesting to include some behavioral measures of intergroup indifference to evaluate the unwillingness to intervene in a situation.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the results presented in this article are promising. In particular, they underline how relevant it is to consider the role of

indifferent people, and not just perpetrators or victims of such dynamics, for understanding intergroup conflicts. This is particularly applicable to the analysis of the recent opposition to immigration, which is a “hot topic” on the agenda of political parties and where the enforcement of security often requires collective indifference toward securitized populations. “By limiting third-party assistance to undesired populations, to the extent that humanitarian acts and even rescue are questioned, penalized, and criminalized, public compassion is discouraged, while collective disengagement and even indifference are encouraged” (Basaran, 2015, p. 215).

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Table 1.

*Means, Standard Deviations and Pearson Correlation Coefficients among all the**Variables.*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Intergroup indifference	2.57	1.25	—				
2. Moral disengagement	2.19	0.82	.51***	—			
3. Social responsibility	5.27	1.15	-.35***	-.33***	—		
4. Modern racism	2.91	1.58	.61***	.53***	-.34***	—	
5. Altruism	4.76	1.24	-.35***	-.29***	.65***	-.30***	—
6. Ideological affiliation	4.96	1.98	.35***	.21***	-.26***	.50***	-.10

*Note.* All the variables extended from 1 to 7, except for ideological affiliation from 1 to 10.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Figure Caption

*Figure 1.* Mediation model of intergroup indifference on racism and altruism, mediated by moral disengagement and social responsibility. *Note.* Advantag. = Advantageous comparison. Conseq. = Consequences. Dehuman. = Dehumanization. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

