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Perceived outgroup characteristics as antecedents and consequences of moral exclusion

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ABSTRACT

The literature of group-based moral exclusion emphasizes that the two main reasons for excluding certain groups from the boundaries of moral regard are perceived threat and social distance. Nonetheless, we cannot rule out the possibility that these two variables are not just antecedents but also posterior justifications for moral exclusion. To reveal this possibility, applying a two-wave cross-lagged panel design, we tested the temporal directions of the relationships between group-based moral exclusion on the one hand, and perceived intergroup threat and social distance on the other. Our assumptions were tested in the case of the beliefs about two target groups within Hungary, Muslim immigrants and Roma people. Beliefs about Roma people showed that while perceived outgroup characteristics did not significantly predict moral exclusion over time, the latter showed a significant longitudinal relationship with both perceived outgroup characteristics. Both group characteristics predicted moral exclusion longitudinally in the case of Muslim immigrants, while the latter predicted only perceived threat. These results imply that outgroup characteristics, like perceived intergroup threat and social distance, do not always function as mere antecedents of moral exclusion, but are also potential post-hoc justifications for it.

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1. Introduction

In the last years, numerous global humanitarian crises pointed out the importance of moral responsibility that members of a particular group either feel or lack towards members of other groups. Social psychologists have applied several theoretical constructs to understand this phenomenon, and beyond doubt, one of the most important from these constructs is *moral exclusion*. According to the classic definition of Opatow (1990) moral exclusion happens “when individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply” (Opatow, 1990, p. 1). Research shows that those within this boundary are regarded as entitled to positive treatment and their well-being should be cared for (Beaton & Tougas, 2001; Hadarics & Kende, 2018; Opatow, 1994; Passini & Morselli, 2017), while negative treatment is more acceptable towards those who are excluded from this moral circle (Coryn & Borshuk, 2006; Hadarics & Kende, 2018; Lima-Nunes, Pereira, & Correia, 2013b; Opatow, 1990, 2012; Staub, 1989).

Research shows that moral exclusion is partly based on the perceived characteristics of the target group (e.g. Olson, Cheung, Conway, Hutchison, & Hafer, 2011; Opatow, 1990, 1994), but we know little about the temporal dynamics of the relationship between the moral exclusion of an outgroup and the beliefs about that group’s characteristics. The conventional approach in the moral exclusion literature highlights that it is the perceived outgroup characteristics that facilitates group-based moral exclusion, and in this sense, they could be considered as antecedents and causes for it. On the other hand, several social psychological theories emphasize that people tend to construct

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posterior justifications for their morally questionable conducts (e.g. Bandura, 2016; Barkan, Ayal, & Ariely, 2015), what suggests the possibility that people can also use these perceived outgroup characteristics to rationalize their exclusionary practices or beliefs posteriorly. For this reason, we tried to reveal the temporal dynamics in group-based moral exclusion.

1.1. Outgroup characteristics and moral exclusion

Beside the consequences of moral exclusion, scholars are also interested in the factors that lead people to exclude certain groups from their personal scope of moral regard. The antecedents include some psychological characteristics of the perceiver, like one's adopted mind-set (Laham, 2009), social values and attitudes (Crimston, Bain, Hornsey, & Bastian, 2016; Hadarics & Kende, 2019; Passini & Morselli, 2017; Waytz, Iyer, Young, & Graham, 2016), or empathy (Crimston et al., 2016; Graham, Waytz, Meindl, Iyer, & Young, 2017). Another line of research focuses on the characteristics of the target groups that makes their exclusion appropriate for the perpetrators. This research has shown that moral exclusion of outgroups perceived as either standing psychologically distant from the ingroup and/or behaving in a threatening way is considered appropriate by the perpetrators.

Social distance was typically operationalized as either perceived similarity to the ingroup (Bastian, Laham, Wilson, Haslam, & Koval, 2011; Brockner, 1990; Olson et al., 2011; Opatow, 1994; Wenzel, 2002) or the closeness of the relationship between the actor and the target (Brockner, 1990; Leite, Dhont, & Hodson, 2019; Singer, 1998, 1999). Meanwhile, variables related to *perceived threat* include harmful behavior of the target (Leets, 2001; Olson et al., 2011; Opatow, 1994), conflicts related to group-level goals (Olson et al., 2011; Opatow, 1994), and negative stereotypes about the outgroup emphasizing norm-violating misbehaviors (Hadarics & Kende, 2019; Lima-Nunes et al., 2013b). Related work on general social exclusion and ostracism also shows that targets with antisocial characteristics are at a heightened risk of being ostracized, and those committing the exclusion are likely to be motivated to see the victims in a more negative way (e.g. Hales, Kassner, Williams, & Graziano, 2016; Wirth & Wessellmann, 2018).

1.2. Directions between outgroup characteristics and moral exclusion

The main line of the moral exclusion literature explicitly assumes that perceived outgroup characteristics make people to exclude these targets from the scope of moral regard, since mostly these are mentioned as “precursors” (Hafer & Olson, 2003) or “antecedents” (Lima-Nunes, Pereira, & Correia, 2013a; Olson et al., 2011; Opatow, 1990). This direction of the relationship is also implied by experimental studies that found stronger moral exclusion after manipulating outgroup characteristics related to perceived social distance (Brockner, 1990; Olson et al., 2011; Opatow, 1994) or intergroup threat (Olson et al., 2011; Opatow, 1994). In their longitudinal study, also Leite et al. (2019) found that threat related to vegan ideology and belief in human supremacy had an effect on moral exclusion of animals over time but not the other way around.

Nevertheless, while an experimental study can verify the direction of a relationship in one way, it does not disprove its reversed direction. We argue that it is possible that perceived threat and social distance are not just antecedents of group-based moral exclusion, but they can function as posterior justifications for moral exclusion too, and in this sense, they might be consequences of it.

There is strong empirical evidence showing that people apply different mechanisms to justify their immoral acts after their occurrence (Barkan et al., 2015; Shalvi, Gino, Barkan, & Ayal, 2015). Besides, several theories explaining intergroup oppression claim that dominant groups are continuously applying numerous justifications for their institutionalized oppressive practices. For example, both *social dominance theory* (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius, Cotterill, Sheehy-Skeffington, Kteily, & Carvacho, 2015) and *system justification theory* (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2010) emphasize that – to a certain extent – institutionalized group-based oppression can be observed in every human society, and dominant groups use different sorts of legitimizing and justifying ideologies to maintain their own privileged position over the oppressed. Both of these latter theories highlight that

numerous legitimizing ideologies emphasize the negative characteristics of the oppressed outgroups to justify their unprivileged position within the social hierarchy. Sexism, racism, or any negative social stereotype underlining either the hostile or the incompetent behavior of the underdog group can function as a justification for the unequal intergroup relations.

Nonetheless, as it is the oppressors' rational self-interest to maintain inequality, they are motivated to perceive the oppressed groups in a negative way to gain legitimacy and a morally acceptable base for the institutionalized oppressive practices. If we assume that moral exclusion is an important symptom of intergroup oppression – what is supported by the fact that approval of hierarchical social structures correlates with group-based moral exclusion (Hadarics & Kende, 2019; Passini & Morselli, 2016) – we can also assume that perceived threat and social distance are not just prior bases of moral exclusion, but might also function as posterior justifications for it. We hypothesize that the relationship between these outgroup characteristics and group-based moral exclusion is not unidirectional but circular, which means that they longitudinally strengthen each other.

2. The study

We tested our hypothesis in a two-wave longitudinal study by investigating the longitudinal relationships between perceived intergroup threat and social distance on the one hand, and moral exclusion on the other. We took two real-life intergroup contexts as examples from Hungary, and tested how moral exclusion of the Roma and Muslim immigrants, and the perceived threatening behavior of these groups and social distance from them influence each other longitudinally in the thinking of the members of the Hungarian majority population. We chose two contexts in order to check whether the potential mechanism of posterior justification can be observed in multiple intergroup contexts, what would support its general nature.

The respondents of our study, who were members of the Hungarian majority population, completed an online questionnaire twice (in February 2018 and two months later) in a cross-lagged panel design. The questionnaire was part of an omnibus survey; we report all relevant measures to our study.¹ The sample was randomly split. Half of the respondents (Group 1) completed a questionnaire designed to reveal beliefs about Roma people, and the other half (Group 2) about Muslim immigrants. The specific scales constituting the omnibus survey were presented in a randomized order to the participants to prevent any priming effects.

We chose these two outgroups as target entities for the study because both of these groups have been subjects of strong negative attitudes that are expressed in a blatant way by the majority of the Hungarian society (e.g. Kende, Hadarics, & Lášticová, 2017; Pew Research, 2016; Pew Research, 2017). The Roma have been living in Hungary for centuries, and constitute the most significant ethnic minority group in the country. Despite their long-term relationship with the Hungarian majority population, prejudice and discriminative intentions against them are constantly strong (e.g. Fábíán, 1999; Kende et al., 2017; Pálosi, Sik, & Simonovits, 2007). Muslims and refugees/immigrants from the Middle East have become targets of severe negative attitudes since the beginning of the European Refugee Crisis started in 2015. The official communication of the Hungarian government has been framing them as an important potential source of danger and threat, and in line with that, public evaluation of Muslim immigrants has turned into an utterly unfavorable way (Bíró-Nagy, 2018; Simonovits & Bernát, 2016).

2.1. Participants

Our participants were members of the majority Hungarian population. At the beginning of the study, we relied on a probabilistic sample from an online participant pool that was nationally representative to

¹Other measures of the omnibus questionnaire included: ethnic vs. civic perception of citizenship (International Social Survey Programme, 2014); Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2011); Collective Narcissism Scale (Golec de Zavala, Cichočka, Eidelson, & Jayawickreme, 2009); collective action intentions; political preferences (e.g. left-right scale, liberal-conservative scale, party preference); demographics.

gender, age, level of education, and type of residence ($N = 1,080$). However, the final sample can no longer be considered representative because of the dropout rate (57.32%). We analyzed the data only from those respondents, who completed both rounds, and excluded three participants from Group 2, since they reported a minority (Roma) ethnic background (Group 1: $N = 214$, Group 2: $N = 248$). The most important demographic characteristics of our sample is reported in [Table 1](#).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Social distance

We used two standard items from the Eurobarometer survey (Eurobarometer, 2015), where respondents indicated how comfortable they would feel if they had a Roma/Muslim immigrant colleague or one of their children had a Roma/Muslim immigrant partner (1 = *not at all comfortable*; 10 = *totally comfortable*). Higher scores on this scale indicated a lower level of social distance, however as our predictions were phrased about distance, we reversed the scores of this scale so that higher means indicated higher level of social distance.

2.2.2. Intergroup threat

Threat was measured by 3 items adapted from Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill (2015). (“Roma people/Muslim immigrants pose a health threat to Hungarians”, “The cultural values of Roma people/Muslim immigrants are in opposition with Hungarian values”, “Roma people/Muslim immigrants endanger the physical safety of Hungarians.”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

2.2.3. Moral exclusion

We measured moral exclusion of the Roma and Muslim immigrants with Opatow’s (1993) *Moral Exclusion Scale* (adapted to Hungarian by Hadarics & Kende, 2018, 2019; items: “I believe that considerations of fairness apply to Muslim immigrants/Roma people too.”; “I am willing to make personal sacrifices to help or foster Muslim immigrants/Roma people’s well-being.”; “I am willing to allocate a share of community resources to Muslim immigrants/Roma people.”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Higher scores on this scale indicated a higher level of moral inclusion, however as our predictions were phrased about moral exclusion, we reversed the scores of this scale so that higher means indicated higher level of moral exclusion.

2.3. Analysis and results

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables are reported in [Table 2](#). We applied structural equation modeling (SEM) based cross-lagged correlational analysis to reveal the longitudinal relationships between the measured outgroup characteristics and moral exclusion using the AMOS 25.0

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

	Group 1 (Roma)	Group 2 (Muslim)
N	214 (101 female)	248 (120 female)
Age	48.19 ± 14.57	50.16 ± 14.47
Highest level of education		
Elementary school or less	3.3%	1.6%
Vocational school	15.5%	17.3%
Secondary school diploma	47.9%	42.7%
College or university diploma	33.3%	38.3%
Type of residence		
Capital (Budapest)	14.1%	15.7%
Town	54.5%	55.6%
Village	30.5%	27.8%
Foreign residence	0.9%	0.8%

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	α	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Sample 1 (Target: Roma people)								
1. Social distance T1	4.71	2.54	.80					
2. Social distance T2	4.65	2.45	.81	.70*				
3. Perceived threat T1	3.67	1.45	.87	.62*	.58*			
4. Perceived threat T2	3.48	1.47	.86	.54*	.60*	.73*		
5. Moral exclusion T1	3.80	1.29	.80	.62*	.58*	.62*	.58*	
6. Moral exclusion T2	3.84	1.32	.78	.58*	.66*	.58*	.66*	.79*
Sample 2 (Target: Muslim immigrants)								
1. Social distance T1	3.82	2.67	.87					
2. Social distance T2	3.74	2.81	.89	.80*				
3. Perceived threat T1	4.57	1.83	.93	.77*	.69*			
4. Perceived threat T2	4.55	1.89	.93	.72*	.68*	.83*		
5. Moral exclusion T1	3.27	1.55	.87	.74*	.64*	.75*	.73*	
6. Moral exclusion T2	3.55	1.59	.89	.75*	.71*	.76*	.76*	.85*

Note: T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2.

* $p < .001$.

software (Arbuckle, 2017). In these analyses we checked the cross-lagged correlations in separate models in the case of both outgroups. When building the models, we controlled for the correlations between the variables measured at the same occasion, and we also set up autoregressive paths between Times 1 and 2 for each variable, consequently, two separate saturated models were set up (see Figure 1). We used the bootstrapping method for computing 95% confidence intervals and standard errors for the regression coefficients within the models (Efron & Tibshirani, 1986; Zhu, 1997).

In the case of the model on beliefs about Muslim immigrants we can see that both social distance ($\beta = .19$; SE = .06; $p = .004$; 95% CI [.06, .31]) and threat ($\beta = .17$; SE = .07; $p = .005$; 95% CI [.03, .32]) measured at Time 1 showed a positive relationship with moral exclusion at Time 2. Nonetheless, we can see also that moral exclusion measured at Time 1 had a positive relationship with threat at Time 2 ($\beta = .18$; SE = .06; $p = .001$; 95% CI [.07, .29]). On the other hand, moral exclusion measured at Time 1 was not related to social distance measured at Time 2 ($\beta = .03$; SE = .07; $p = .676$; 95% CI [-.10, .16]).

In the case of the model on beliefs about Roma people we found that the relationships between social distance and threat measured at Time 1 and moral exclusion measured at Time 2 were marginal and non-significant (social distance: $\beta = .10$; SE = .07; $p = .116$; 95% CI [-.03, .23]; threat: $\beta = .09$; SE = .06; $p = .079$; 95% CI [-.02, .20]). Nevertheless, moral exclusion measured at Time 1 showed a moderate positive relationship with both social distance ($\beta = .17$; SE = .07; $p = .014$; 95% CI [.04, .29]) and threat measured at Time 2 ($\beta = .17$; SE = .06; $p = .005$; 95% CI [.05, .29]).

We investigated the importance of the relationships mentioned above also with a model trimming technique. We erased the paths across time between the two kinds of outgroup characteristics and moral exclusion one at a time, and we tested with $\Delta\chi^2$ -tests whether the fit of these trimmed models deteriorate from the perfect fit of their saturated counterparts to a significant extent (see Table 3). In the case of the trimmed models about the Roma, our results show that the drop of the fits were significant if we erased a relationship between moral exclusion measured at Time 1 and any of the outgroup characteristics measured at Time 2, but not the other way around. However, in the case of the models about Muslim immigrants, the drop was significant if we erased the paths between any of the two outgroup characteristics measured at Time 1 and moral exclusion measured at Time 2, furthermore, if we erased the path between moral exclusion at Time 1 and intergroup threat at Time 2. No other drops were significant, so the results of this model trimming procedure supported our prior findings about the longitudinal relationships between moral exclusion and the two outgroup characteristics.

Finally, we conducted a model invariance test across the two groups by constraining the relationships between the variables as being equal within the two groups. As this analysis showed, the fit of such an invariant model dropped significantly compared to the perfect fit of the original saturated models ($\Delta\chi^2 = 30.43$; $\Delta df = 15$; $p = .010$; $\Delta SRMR = .042$; $\Delta RMSEA = .047$; $\Delta CFI = .007$) suggesting that the relationship pattern was non-invariant across the two groups.

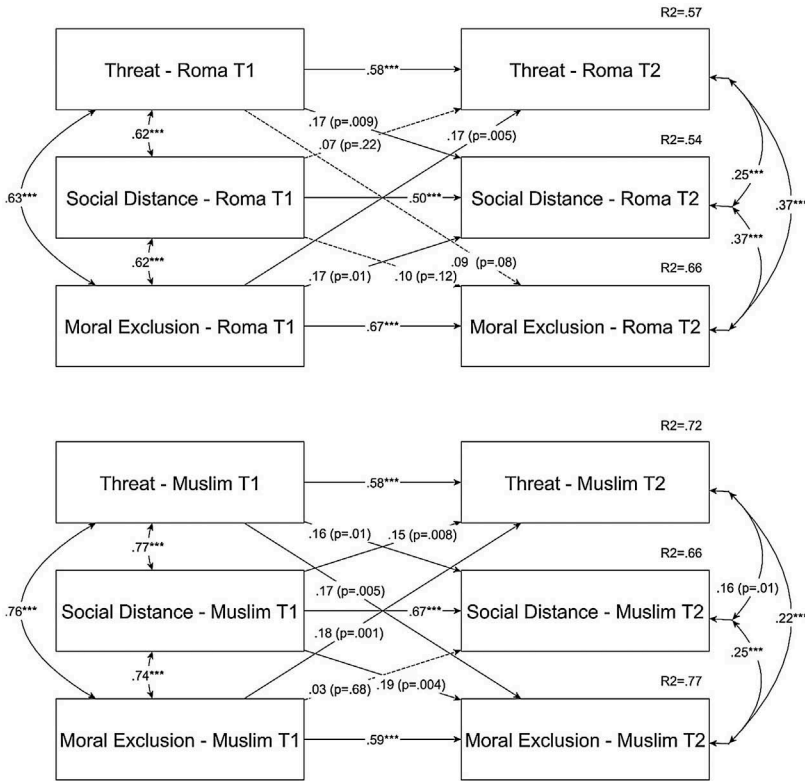


Figure 1. Cross-lagged models showing relationships between moral exclusion, perceived threat, and social distance. Path coefficients are standardized regression coefficients (***) = $p < .001$.

Table 3. Fit indices of the trimmed models and their comparison to the saturated models.

Model	Erased path	χ^2	df	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	p ($\Delta\chi^2$ -tests)
Roma	T-ME	3.12	1	.998	.100	.013	3.12	1	.077
	SD-ME	3.37	1	.997	.106	.014	3.37	1	.067
	ME-T	7.34	1	.993	.173	.023	7.34	1	.007
	ME-SD	6.61	1	.993	.163	.022	6.61	1	.010
Muslim	T-ME	10.57	1	.993	.197	.014	10.57	1	.001
	SD-ME	12.66	1	.992	.217	.016	12.66	1	<.001
	ME-T	9.76	1	.994	.188	.016	9.76	1	.002
	ME-SD	.18	1	1.000	.000	.002	.18	1	.668

Note: T = Threat; SD = Social distance; ME = Moral exclusion.

In sum, we found that perceived threat and social distance predicted moral exclusion significantly over time only in the case of Muslim immigrants, but not in the case of the Roma, while moral exclusion predicted perceived threat in both cases, and also showed a positive longitudinal relationship with social distance in the case of the Roma.

3. Discussion

Our findings indicate that the assumption of the moral exclusion literature that perceived social distance and threat function as antecedents of moral exclusion worked only in the case of Muslim immigrants from the two tested examples in our study. On the other hand, moral exclusion predicted perceived

threat over time in both cases, and social distance in the case of the Roma, indicating that these outgroup characteristics can function as posterior justifications for moral disregard.

Our findings somewhat contradict the results of Leite et al. (2019) longitudinal study, who found that moral exclusion of animals did not strengthen social distance and threat related to vegan ideology, but the reversed longitudinal correlations were significant, just as implied by the moral exclusion literature. Nonetheless, we have to stress that the target groups in this study were different sorts of animal categories, not human groups. As people feel less moral responsibility towards animals than other people (Crimston et al., 2016; Opatow, 1993), it is reasonable to assume that they need less justification for moral disregard towards them, but our results indicate that appropriate post-hoc justifications are more important in case of human targets.

The fact that we found somewhat different temporal relationship patterns in the case of the two outgroups is probably due to the different status of these groups in the Hungarian public thinking. Roma people have lived in Hungary for centuries, and they continue to be treated as second class citizens in mainstream political discourse, resulting in institutional discrimination, social marginalization, and poverty (Feischmidt, Szombati, & Szuhay, 2013). Furthermore, research shows that it is normative to be prejudiced against this group and approve their discrimination (Kende et al., 2017). It seems that within a historical context of intergroup discrimination, where negative treatment and moral exclusion counts as normative, perceived outgroup characteristics are more likely to serve as post-hoc justifications rather than antecedents of moral exclusion.

On the other hand, immigration from Muslim countries have become the central topic of political discourse in Hungary only since the beginning of the 2015 Refugee Crisis. Anti-Muslim attitudes have started to increase since then (Pew Research, 2016; 2017), supposedly, due to the fact that the Hungarian media has framed Muslim immigrants as a serious source of security risk and threat (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Vidra, 2017). In such a newly emerged context, where people are dynamically forming their impressions about an outgroup, it seems that moral judgments are actually based on the perceived outgroup characteristics (as it is described in the moral exclusion literature), but these judgements are also justified subsequently by these characteristics. In this specific case, perceived threat seems to be a more effective or accessible justifying cognitive element than social distance, what is not a surprise, as this is the most emphasized characteristic of Muslim immigrants in media coverage.

Our results indicate that, at least in certain cases, the relationship between exclusionary intentions and perceived outgroup characteristics can be bidirectional. On the one hand, the more negatively an outgroup is perceived, the more likely it becomes that the outgroup will be excluded from the perceiver's personal scope of moral regard. On the other hand, once a tendency for moral disregard has been emerged, it might require continuous posterior justification. To justify immoral practices, the negative perception of the outgroup can strengthen further. Nonetheless, after a point, when moral exclusion of an outgroup becomes widely accepted and approved, as in the case of the Roma in Hungary, it seems that prior justifications might be less important than the posterior ones.

The fact that perceived outgroup characteristics are not just bases but also consequences of moral exclusion brings up some practical concerns. Maybe the most important one is related to the specific types of the applied justifications. If the members of an oppressing group use perceived outgroup characteristics as post-hoc justifications for their otherwise morally questionable practices, then simply trying to modify this perception can have limited effects in mitigating exclusion and indifference. This might be the case because offenders can simply apply other sorts of moral justifications beyond negative outgroup characteristics (e.g. Bandura, 2016). Our findings suggest that a complex strategy can be more effective, which simultaneously handles the way how the potential victim groups are perceived, and also addresses the morally appropriate intergroup behavior in a more direct manner. This latter aspect could be done by highlighting either the self-interested and parochial ways of the offender group or the morally questionable aspects or their practices.

Table 4. Effect sizes of the cross-lagged pathways.

Model	Cross-lagged path	f^2
Muslim	T-ME	.04
	SD-ME	.05
	ME-T	.04
	ME-SD	.00
Roma	T-ME	.01
	SD-ME	.01
	ME-T	.03
	ME-SD	.03

Note: T = Threat; SD = Social distance; ME = Moral exclusion.

4. Limitations

It has to be noted that we used a cross-lagged panel modeling procedure, a statistical method that has been criticized recently, because it might be not completely suitable for handling individual differences that remain stable across data collection waves (Hamaker, Kuiper, & Grasman, 2015). Hamaker et al. (2015) suggested an improved version of the procedure, but as it requires at least three data collection waves, we did not have the opportunity to apply it in this study.

We also have to note that our final samples were not completely representative to the Hungarian society, and because of the dropouts we also had to test the adequacy of our final sample sizes. This latter test was beneficial to run also because there was a slight difference in the sample sizes of our two groups. We conducted this test by calculating exact effect sizes (expressed in Cohen's f^2 values) for the cross-lagged pathways in the two models (see Table 4). These results were in accordance with our previous analyses, as only one effect size was below the .02 minimum threshold suggested by Cohen (1988) for observable effects in the case of the Muslim model, and two were below .02 in the case of the Roma model. These were the same relationships that had been non-significant in our previous analysis. After that, we calculated the minimum required sample size for the conventional .80 statistical power for detecting effect sizes above the .02 threshold for single regression coefficients in our model with the G*Power 3 software (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009), and found that our samples were bigger (Group 1: $N = 214$, Group 2: $N = 248$) than the suggested minimum ($N = 208$).

Furthermore, we also have to note that we tested our hypotheses only in connection with two outgroups, and only within the specific context of Hungary. As the specific occurrence and the symptoms of moral exclusion can vary in time and across different intergroup contexts (Opatow, 2012), further studies should investigate possible posterior justifications in other cultural settings and intergroup contexts too.

5. Conclusion

Our study partly supports the assumption of the moral exclusion literature that perceived outgroup characteristics are important bases of group-based moral exclusion. Nonetheless, we found that they can also serve as post-hoc justifications for moral disregard. More importantly, at least in some cases, post-hoc justifications for moral exclusion are more relevant than preceding ones. It also seems that the relative weight of posterior justifications related to outgroup characteristics is bigger in the case of a historically evolved long-term oppression, where moral disregard towards a particular outgroup is the rule and not the exception.

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