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Reducing Discrimination and Fostering Prosociality Towards Ex-Prisoners in Nigeria and the United States

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Fair treatment and social acceptance are paramount to human well-being, yet, society often withholds these crucial needs and discriminates against certain groups, including ex-prisoners. Discrimination and lack of social support by the public reduces ex-prisoners' well-being and threatens successful reintegration into society after release from prison, perpetuating conflict and impeding social justice. Identifying strategies to reduce discrimination against ex-prisoners and to foster prosocial behaviors towards them is therefore of high relevance. Building on past evidence, we assess the viability of a values affirmation intervention given to members of the general public to reduce their discrimination against ex-prisoners and to foster prosocial motivation towards them. Across two studies in two cultural contexts, Nigeria and the United States, we provide evidence that engaging in values affirmation can significantly reduce discriminatory behavioral tendencies, for instance in the employment sector, and motivate prosociality towards ex-prisoners, such as supporting educational rehabilitation programs. These results point towards a potential avenue for shifting the public's discriminatory views and

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behavioral tendencies towards ex-prisoners, in an effort to support reintegration and to further social justice.

How people are viewed and treated by others critically shapes their well-being. Around the globe, marginalized members of society, such as ex-prisoners, often do not enjoy social justice, fair treatment, and equal opportunity. Faced with discrimination, social exclusion, and lack of support, reintegration into society after release from prison and return to a successful civic life is difficult, perpetuating recidivism and conflict. In light of these challenges there is a need to find ways to reduce discrimination and to engender prosociality and social support towards ex-prisoners. In this article, we investigate a novel potential avenue to achieve this goal: a values affirmation intervention given to members of the general public.

Previous Research on Discrimination Reduction

Prior efforts to reduce discrimination have focused on interventions that change people's perception of the targets of discrimination. Such attempts include decreasing perceived outgroup homogeneity and hence proclivity for collective blame and stereotyping (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999; Bruneau, Kteily, & Falk, 2018). Other attempts include perspective taking (Chung & Slater, 2013; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003) and elicitation of empathy towards the outgroup (Batson et al., 1997), the use of positive, counter-stereotypic exemplars to change perceptions of the outgroup and reduce prejudice (Blair, Ma, & Lenton, 2001; Columb & Plant, 2011; Columb & Plant, 2016; Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Plant et al., 2009), as well as training in non-stereotypic responding (Gawronski, Deutsch, Mbirkou, Seibt, & Strack, 2008; Kawakami, Dovidio, & van Kamp, 2007; Kawakami, Dovidio, Moll, Hermsen, & Russin, 2000).

Distinctively different from these listed approaches, here we target the cognitive and emotional capacity of the discriminators via a values affirmation intervention. Schneider (2018) proposed a line of reasoning to explain why a values affirmation intervention can motivate prosociality: Establishing and maintaining a positive self-image has been described as one of the most fundamental human needs (Epstein, 1973; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Schneider (2018) suggested that trying to fulfill this important need takes up cognitive and emotional resources that could otherwise be dedicated to different use, such as concern for others. Therefore, an intervention that allows people to satisfy the need for a positive self-image and reduces worry about the self, such as values affirmation (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988), may free up resources to engage in prosociality.

Across two studies, Schneider (2018) showed that a values affirmation intervention can motivate prosocial behavioral intentions and behavior towards

distant and unknown others. Affirmed participants were significantly more likely to donate to charity and to volunteer personal time for the benefit of others compared to control participants. Supporting the suggested mechanism positive self-regard was identified as a significant mediator of the effect.

Building on these promising findings, here we test whether such prosociality-enhancing effects extend to situations in which those distant and unknown others are specified to be members of certain marginalized or discriminated against societal groups, such as ex-prisoners. We test whether a values affirmation intervention given to members of the general public can decrease discrimination against and motivate social support of ex-prisoners. We focus our investigation on Nigeria and the United States, two countries on different continents with different histories and cultures that both struggle with discrimination against ex-prisoners and their reintegration into society.

Ex-Prisoners' Situation in Nigeria and the United States

The United States has one of the highest rates of imprisonment in the world (Celinska, 2000). Consequently, the sheer number of ex-prisoners returning to society every year poses a challenge and has led to a national debate on how to tackle the “reentry crisis” (Johnson, 2008; Snider & Reysen, 2014; Stafford, 2006; Travis, 2005). In Nigeria, severely inadequate government rehabilitation programs routinely fail to successfully reintegrate ex-prisoners into society (Ogbozor, Odoemena, & Obi, 2006; Otu & Nnam, 2014; Yekini & Salisu, 2013). In the United States, the provision and success of prison rehabilitation programs is also inadequate (Cnaan, Draine, Frazier, & Sinha, 2008; Freeman, 2008). A failure to successfully reintegrate ex-prisoners into society is strongly correlated with recidivism in both Nigeria and the United States, creating a vicious cycle for many offenders (Abrifor, Atere, & Muoghalu, 2012; Bloom, 2006; Durose, Cooper, & Snyder, 2014; Osayi, 2013; Otu & Nnam, 2014). A special report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics within the U.S. Department of Justice in 2014 found that roughly three-quarters (76.6%) of released prisoners were rearrested within 5 years of release (Durose et al., 2014). There is a need for effective reintegration to combat recidivism and lower costs to society (Bloom, 2006).

Discriminatory tendencies of the general public towards ex-prisoners.

Rehabilitation programs geared at ex-prisoners are only one avenue to address this social issue. How ex-prisoners are received and treated by society upon release critically influences reintegration success (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010). Ex-prisoners around the world face stigma and discrimination upon release from prison in many areas of life. In both countries much research highlights the

existence and issue of societal stigmatization, labeling, and discrimination against ex-prisoners (Brown, 2016; Celinska, 2000; Cnaan et al., 2008; Geiger, 2006; Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010; Kethineni & Falcone, 2007; LeBel, 2012; Ogbozor et al., 2006; Osayi, 2013; Pogrebin, West-Smith, Walker, & Unnithan, 2014; Shobola & Ajeigbe, 2015; Snider & Reysen, 2014; Thompson & Cummings, 2010; Ugwuoke, 2010), which exacerbates the reentry challenge. Discrimination elevates psychological stress, deteriorates well-being and self-esteem (Aneshensel, 1992; LeBel, 2012; Thoits, 2010), and can severely impede the motivation and ability to return to a law-abiding life after release from prison (Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon, 2010; Haney, 2001; Obioha, 2011; Ugwuoke, 2010).

Special role of the employment sector. One domain in which discrimination against ex-prisoners is especially prevalent and documented is employment (e.g., Flake, 2015; Freeman, 2008; Ogbozor et al., 2006; Salaam, 2013; Snider & Reysen, 2014). Employers are often reluctant to hire ex-prisoners, impeding job prospects after release from prison in both countries (Brown, 2016; Jonson & Cullen, 2015; Ogbozor et al., 2006; Salaam, 2013; Stafford, 2006). In an influential field experiment in the United States (Pager, 2003), job applications were sent to employers matched on all attributes except criminal history. Results showed that applicants with a criminal record were significantly less likely to receive a positive employer response compared to their matched non-criminal counterparts. These findings highlight the negative effect a criminal record can have on employability. This is a major concern, since having a job constitutes economic security and stability - factors contributing to abstinence from crime (Salaam, 2013; Shivy et al., 2007; Snider & Reysen, 2014).

Attempts from the regulatory side include campaigns like “Ban the Box” in some U.S. states, which removed the question about past criminal record from initial job applications (Henry & Jacobs, 2007). Such regulatory attempts, however, do not address the problem of discrimination against ex-prisoners in the minds of the public and in their behavioral tendencies towards ex-prisoners. Without an overall change towards less discriminatory tendencies and more prosocial motivation to provide support, it is unlikely that the described problems can be solved. Thus, there is a need to involve society and the social environment in successful rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-prisoners (Brown, 2016; Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010; Wright & Cesar, 2013). An intervention that fosters the public’s prosocial motivation and reduces discriminatory tendencies towards ex-prisoners, such as the values affirmation intervention tested here, may support rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-prisoners into society.

Values Affirmation Interventions across Cultures

A large body of research on self-affirmation interventions exists for the U.S. context where the origins of self-affirmation theory lie (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009; Cooke, Trebaczyk, Harris, & Wright, 2014; Epton & Harris, 2008; Logel & Cohen, 2012; Nelson, Fuller, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Outside the North American context (U.S. and Canada), some work has been conducted in Europe, such as the United Kingdom (e.g., Armitage, Harris, Hepton, & Napper, 2008; Armitage & Rowe, 2017; Harris, Harris, & Miles, 2017; Sparks, Jessop, Chapman, & Holmes, 2010; van Prooijen, Sparks, & Jessop, 2012), the Netherlands (e.g., de Jong, Jellesma, Koomen, & de Jong, 2016; Thomaes, Bushman, de Castro, & Reijntjes, 2012), and France (e.g., Taillandier-Schmitt, Esnard, & Mokoukolo, 2012). However, only very sparse research exists that has investigated self-affirmation interventions in non-Western cultures, such as China (e.g., Cai, Sedikides, & Jiang, 2013; Gu et al., 2016) or countries in Africa.

The African context, in particular, has been vastly ignored so far. The only self-affirmation study there that we have been able to identify was conducted in Kenya (McClendon & Riedl, 2015). The study tested the potential of self-affirmative messages in a religious context to motivate political activism through participation in a political text messaging campaign to share views on government performance and policy priorities. However, the study provides only weak statistical evidence and furthermore deviates in significant ways from the essence of a self-affirmation intervention by subjecting participants to external self-affirmative messages rather than engaging them in an internal, self-driven affirmation process. In light of these limitations and the fact that the study was conducted in Kenya, a different African country than the one under investigation in this research, it remains an open question whether a values affirmation intervention could be effective in the cultural context of Nigeria. Furthermore, experimental designs and research questions vary substantially in the above studies from different countries, thus, making it difficult to compare their effects to U.S. results, and hence, to speak to the generalizability of the affirmation effects across countries. It is important to note that even within the United States there has been substantial heterogeneity of self-affirmation intervention effects, predominantly in the educational domain (Bratter, Rowley, & Chukhray, 2016; Hanselman, Rozek, Grigg, & Borman, 2017; Protzko & Aronson, 2016). Differences in study context, designs and measures make it challenging to assess this heterogeneity. Although there is more homogeneity of effects in the prosocial domain (Lindsay & Creswell, 2014; Sparks et al., 2010; Thomaes et al., 2012; van Prooijen et al., 2012), it is important to evaluate any comparisons of effects within their specific domain and in the context of their respective study designs. We address this concern by conducting two studies with identical research questions and experimental design in Nigeria and the United States.

The Present Studies

The goal of the present set of studies was three-fold: We first sought to test a potential intervention that could be applied to change the public's discriminatory behavioral tendencies towards ex-prisoners and promote prosociality towards them. Second, we sought to extend the reach of values affirmation interventions and evaluate their applicability to enhance prosociality in contexts in which members of marginalized societal groups, such as ex-prisoners, are the beneficiaries. Third, we sought to test the generalizability of values affirmation effects in this domain across cultures.

Towards this end, we conducted two studies in two cultural contexts. The first study explored our research questions in Nigeria. A second study tested whether observed effects would extend and generalize to the United States. We started by attempting to replicate findings by Schneider (2018) that showed that values affirmation interventions can foster prosocial motivation towards unknown, distant others. We then tested whether observed effects would extend to situations in which the beneficiary of the prosocial action is an ex-prisoner. Apart from prosocial motivation, we tested whether a values affirmation intervention could reduce discriminatory tendencies. We hypothesized that the affirmation groups would show higher prosocial motivation and lower discrimination against ex-prisoners compared to the control groups. Furthermore, we sought to replicate positive self-regard as a mediator in the affirmation effect on prosociality as shown by Schneider (2018). Additionally, we tested whether positive self-regard also mediates the effect of the values affirmation intervention in the context of ex-prisoners.

Methods

The first study, conducted in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria, surveyed the general Nigerian public. The second study, run on the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) online labor market platform, sampled from the general U.S. population. To be able to assess the generalizability of our intervention, we used the same study design and measures for both samples. Details on the methodology for each study are provided below.

Nigeria Study

Participants ($N = 414$, 44.44% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 27.46$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.33$) for the Nigeria Study were recruited in person in several locations in Abuja, Nigeria, such as in shopping malls, markets, parks, residential and business complexes, ministries, NGOs, churches, on a university campus, or on the streets (a table of the detailed demographic composition is provided in the

Supplementary Materials). After giving informed consent to partake in the study, participants completed the survey in private.

The survey was conducted in English, the official language in Nigeria.¹ Participants were randomly assigned to either the values affirmation treatment condition ($n = 201$) or a control condition ($n = 213$). Both questionnaires were equal in length. Conditions only varied on the content of the intervention component, that is, a thinking and writing task that either engaged participants in a values affirmation or in a control exercise. Participants who did not engage with the intervention task were excluded from the sample. Engaging was defined as answering at least one of the four questions that the affirmation and control prompts asked respectively, as described below. There was no minimum word requirement for answering a question. As long as the participant wrote any amount of characters, the question was counted as answered. We chose this very lenient exclusion criterion to get a conservative estimate of the affirmation effect.² No other data exclusion criteria were used. Based on the described exclusion criterion, 16 respondents were omitted.³

Since we sought to replicate and extend findings from Schneider (2018) regarding the prosociality-enhancing effects of a values affirmation intervention, we used the same intervention, following a standard procedure used in many prior studies employing values affirmation (e.g., Cohen et al., 2006; Harris & Napper, 2005; Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000; Sparks et al., 2010; van Prooijen et al., 2012). Participants were presented with a list of values and were instructed to pick the one that was most important to them. The list of values was adapted from Schneider (2018) to reflect meaningful values for the Nigerian context. Likewise, the affirmation prompt wording was adapted to be appropriate for the cultural context. This was achieved in consultation with the local support team, which consisted of representatives from Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE) Nigeria, a Nigerian civil society organization working on justice system reform by way of conducting surveys that shed light on prison conditions, and other advocacy work to further social justice in the country. The appropriateness of the study design for the Nigerian context was furthermore ensured by drawing on insights gained during interview-style pre-testing of the questionnaire ($n = 53$)

¹All people who were approached to participate in the study understood and spoke English; none declined participation based on not understanding the English language.

²As a robustness check, moderation analyses were conducted to examine potential interaction effects stemming from greater vs. lesser engagement in the intervention exercises (as measured by word count). Results for all dependent measures were non-significant. Please refer to the Supplementary Materials for the full regression tables.

³Omitted participants were balanced across experimental treatment conditions. There was no significant differential attrition by condition ($X^2(1, N = 844) = 0.08, p = .775$).

and from an online pilot surveying Nigerian respondents ($n = 54$).⁴ For the affirmation prompt the word “value,” used in the standard intervention prompt designed in and for the U.S. context, was changed to “behavior.” This change was necessary to preserve the meaning of the word “value” as it is understood in the U.S. context where values affirmation interventions originated. During interviews with participants in the pre-test stages and from conversation with the local support team we learned that for Nigerians “value” was understood in monetary terms, while “behavior” more adequately captured the meaning of value in the self-affirmation context. For the list of values that was presented to participants, the qualitative part of the online pilot with Nigerian respondents ($n = 54$) indicated that some of the original values used by Schneider (2018) were not understood well by Nigerians, interpreted differently, or deemed less important compared to other values which participants felt were missing from the list. Values that were not well understood, interpreted differently, or less important to Nigerians were omitted and replaced by values that participants had suggested to be important to Nigerians, in consultation with the local team.⁵ The final list of values included compassion, forgiveness, kindness, generosity, goodness, mercy, and love. Finally, the list of values, together with all other measures of the questionnaire, were pre-tested in three rounds of pilot interviews ($n = 53$) and a quantitative pilot which we used to refine the survey ($n = 69$).⁶ Results of the quantitative pilot are presented in the Supplementary Materials. They are consistent with the results presented here for the main study.

The affirmation prompt asked participants to reflect on four broad questions and to write down their answers. Questions included, “Please think about the behavior you chose and write what it means to you and why it is important to

⁴The online pilot included a brief affirmation exercise designed to gauge the emotional effect the intervention would have on Nigerian participants. Since self-affirmation interventions were designed in and for the U.S. context and not much work has investigated their applicability for the African, specifically Nigerian context, this rough ‘safety check’ allowed us to ensure that the intervention would not have unexpected adverse emotional effects on Nigerian respondents. Participants indicated to what extent engaging in the affirmation exercise made them feel good about themselves and sad on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all (1)” to “very much (4).” Participants indicated high levels of good feelings about the self ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.44$) and low levels of feelings of sadness ($M = 1.35$, $SD = 0.72$), with the difference being statistically significant, $t(59.44) = 17.42$, $p < .001$.

⁵Values omitted and replaced include altruism, fairness, honesty, loyalty, sincerity, and tolerance. Values added include compassion, generosity, mercy, and love.

⁶The extensive qualitative and quantitative pilot testing was undertaken to ensure that all survey items were appropriate for the local context and understood by the participants. During the pilot interviews, the interviewer elicited feedback from the participants on comprehension and any other difficulties and concerns with each survey item. The quantitative pilot provided further insights. The team then discussed all obtained feedback to refine question wording and decide the final items. This procedure allowed us to ensure that all questions were appropriate for the local context and target population.

you,” “How does the behavior you chose guide your life? How has it influenced things you have done and how do you practice it in your everyday life?,” “Please think about a time when you had the opportunity to really show the behavior you chose towards other people and write about it,” and “Why do you like the behavior you chose in yourself?” The control condition writing prompt likewise was adapted from Schneider (2018) and asked participants to describe different aspects of the markets or grocery stores they most often frequent. Questions included, “Please tell us the names and locations of the markets or stores you go to. Where are they located?,” “What things do you buy from where? Where do you buy your food stuff? Where do you buy other things, like clothes or soap?,” “What is the layout of the market or the store you most often go to, meaning in what section of the market or the store can you find what type of food stuff?,” and “How big is the market or store where you buy your food stuff?” For a complete description of both affirmation and control intervention prompts, please refer to the Supplementary Materials. Completing the intervention component of the questionnaire took participants about 10–15 minutes, which is in line with the common time frame of most values affirmation studies (e.g., Crocker, Niiya, & Mischkowski, 2008; Schneider, 2018; Thomaes et al., 2012).

For the following survey items, answers were recorded on 7-point Likert scales ranging from *none* to *all*, *never* to *always*, or *not at all* to *completely*. We ensured that these answer scales were appropriate for the Nigerian context and correctly understood by participants. The scales were checked against similar questionnaires administered by the local partner organization, CURE Nigeria, and informed by survey measures from Afrobarometer, a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys in more than 35 countries in Africa (afrobarometer.org). Opinion polls in Nigeria by Afrobarometer ranging from 2003 to 2014 were consulted regarding their design and use of various answer scales. Appropriateness of the answer scales for the Nigerian context was also ensured by discussing the scales with the local team in Nigeria and by pre-testing them in the interview-style pilots.

Following the affirmation and control interventions respectively, the mediator measure was collected. Adapted from Schneider (2018), two sub-items probed positive self-regard (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$). Participants were asked to indicate to what extent they felt “at peace with themselves” and “good about themselves” while engaging in the affirmation [control] task.

The following dependent measures were then collected.

General prosociality. First, we probed general prosocial behavioral intent towards non-specified others in order to replicate past findings by Schneider (2018), which investigated prosocial motivation in two domains: monetary donations as well as investment of personal time to help others. In line with

those measures, our dependent variable consisted of four sub-items probing intentions to invest personal free time to assist someone as well as intentions to give available money. Questions included, “How much of your free time over the next three months do you intend to spend helping someone in need?” and “If someone in need approached you right now asking for assistance, how much of your available money would you give?” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .78$). For a full description of all dependent measures and their sub-items used in this research, please refer to the Supplementary Materials.

Prosociality towards ex-prisoners. In order to offer a direct extension to the domain of ex-prisoners, we next probed prosocial motivation using the same items as before, but this time specifying an ex-prisoner as the recipient of the prosocial action. Ex-prisoner was defined as “someone who spent time in prison.” The questions included, “How much of your free time over the next three months do you intend to spend helping an ex-prisoner?” and “If an ex-prisoner approached you right now asking for assistance, how much of your available money would you give?” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$). Apart from these general measures of prosocial motivation, we also probed participants’ motivation to provide concrete prosocial action to assist ex-prisoners: participation in a tutoring program for ex-prisoners. Participants were told that in this tutoring program members of the general public, like themselves, would share their knowledge and skills with ex-prisoners to help them learn and advance their skills. Participants were asked to indicate their willingness to be a tutor for an ex-prisoner and share their knowledge and skills with the ex-prisoner. Support of the program and willingness to participate was measured by two items: Amount of personal free time to spend on tutoring, if any, and amount of free time to invest on recommending the program to friends, if any (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .69$). Participants were told that recommending the tutoring program to friends would include explaining the program to them and trying to get them interested in participating.

Discriminatory behavioral tendencies towards ex-prisoners. We also assessed discriminatory behavioral tendencies towards ex-prisoners and whether the affirmation intervention could reduce discrimination. The discrimination measure consisted of three sub-items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .76$). One item probed discriminatory behavioral tendencies in the work domain (“Imagine you are the CEO of a company. Would you employ an ex-prisoner if he or she had the same qualifications as other candidates?”), another item probed discriminatory tendencies in the private life domain (“Would you feel comfortable having an ex-prisoner as your neighbor?”), and a third item assessed action intent against discriminatory behavior (“If an ex-prisoner approached you for help because he or she is discriminated against by his/her employer, would you help him or her?”). Items were reverse coded to represent a measure of discrimination.

General attitude towards ex-prisoners. Lastly, we assessed whether the values affirmation intervention would have a positive effect on the general attitude people hold towards ex-prisoners. We assessed this by asking participants to what extent they agreed with the statement that ex-prisoners “are people like you and me and deserve a second chance” or “are criminals and always will be and do not deserve a second chance.” Agreement was measured via a two-tiered process adapted from similar measures used by Afrobarometer. Participants picked one of the two statements and then indicated their level of agreement with the statement they had picked on a scale of 1 (*not very strongly*) to 3 (*very strongly*). This question design allowed us to construct a fine grained 6-point answer continuum ranging from 1 (*very strongly agree that they do not deserve a second chance*) to 6 (*very strongly agree that they deserve a second chance*).

U.S. Study

To sample from a wide range of members of the American adult public, we collected survey responses from an online sample ($N = 1,093$; 56.08% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.41$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.24$) using the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) online labor market platform (please refer to the Supplementary Materials for the detailed demographic composition of the sample).

As in the Nigeria Study, all participants were randomly assigned to either the values affirmation ($n = 533$) or the control condition ($n = 560$). The U.S. Study used the same affirmation intervention prompt, including the same list of values, as the Nigeria Study, with one difference: For the U.S. Study, the original values affirmation wording from the literature, using the word “value” (instead of “behavior” as in the Nigeria Study), was retained. The control condition prompt was identical to that of the Nigeria Study with some minor language changes to ensure cultural appropriateness. For instance, while the Nigeria Study had asked participants to think of “markets and grocery stores” when describing their shopping experience, the U.S. Study used the wording “department stores and grocery stores.” For a complete description of both, affirmation and control group writing prompts please refer to the Supplementary Materials.

All measures in the U.S. Study were identical to those of the Nigeria Study. We first assessed the mediator, positive self-regard (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .91$). We then tested general prosocial behavioral intentions (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$), prosocial behavioral intentions towards ex-prisoners (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .9$), interest and intention to engage in the tutoring program for ex-prisoners (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$), discriminatory behavioral tendencies towards ex-prisoners (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .83$), and overall attitude towards ex-prisoners.⁷ We added one measure of actual prosocial

⁷Internal consistency (Cronbach’s α) of our measures was high and comparable for both cultural contexts.

behavior at the end of the study: donation to charity. This measure was taken from Schneider (2018) and implemented in an identical fashion for replication purposes. Specifically, participants were given the opportunity to donate any amount of their choosing of a potential \$10 bonus which one randomly selected participant received through the MTurk platform.⁸ Participants were given the option to choose between three charities, the American Cancer Society, Amnesty International, and the World Wildlife Fund. Participants could also spread the bonus across several charities. As in Schneider (2018), the three possible charities were chosen to offer participants a range of donation options with varying beneficiaries and missions. Giving participants only one donation outlet could bias observed results, as not donating could either be an indicator of low prosocial motivation or reflect a dislike of the chosen donation outlet. For analysis purposes, donations across all three charities per participant were summed and treated as an overall donation measure. For a breakdown of donations by charity, please refer to the Supplementary Materials. For both the Nigeria and the U.S. studies all items measured, including potential mediators, as well as intercorrelation tables are reported in the Supplementary Materials.

Results

In the following, we describe the results of the values affirmation intervention versus control on general prosociality (including donations to charity in the U.S.), prosociality and discriminatory behavioral tendencies towards ex-prisoners, and general attitude towards ex-prisoners in the two countries. Linear regression analysis was used to model all of the effects presented below.

Nigeria Study

General prosociality. As a first step we sought to test findings from Schneider (2018), that showed that a values affirmation intervention can promote prosocial motivation towards distant and unknown others, in the cultural context of Nigeria. Results of our Nigeria sample indicated higher prosocial behavioral intentions in the affirmation group ($M = 5.07$, $SE = .06$) compared to the control group ($M = 4.58$, $SE = .07$). Linear regression results confirm this descriptive pattern, $b = .5$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1, panel A), extending the findings by Schneider (2018) to a nonwestern, African cultural context.⁹

⁸This measure could not be implemented in the Nigeria Study since, in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality for this in-person study, no private information could be collected that would have been needed to follow up with participants after the study to allocate the bonus.

⁹Please note that for all described analyses balance checks were performed on the collected socio-demographics to ensure that there were no significant imbalances between treatment and control

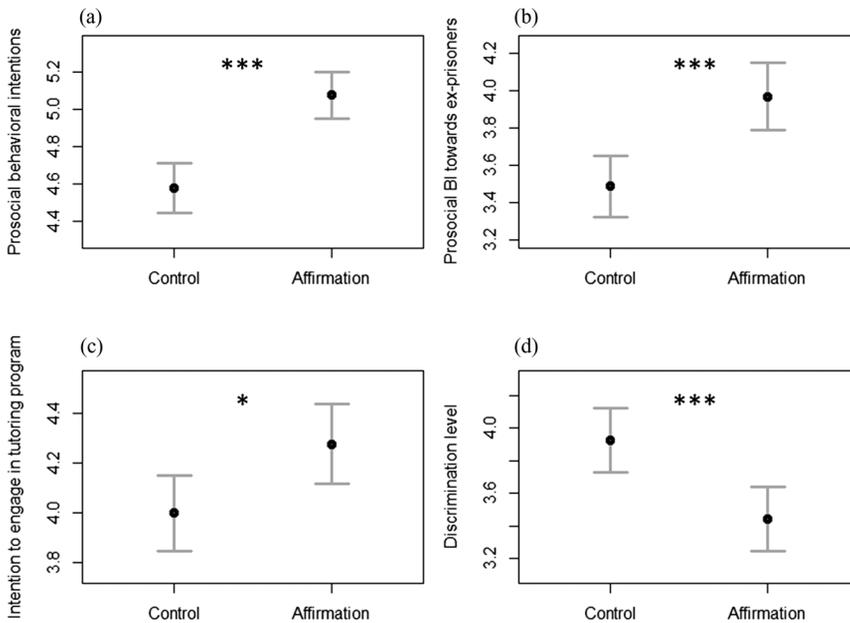


Fig. 1. Prosocial behavioral intentions in general (a) and towards ex-prisoners (b), intentions to engage in tutoring program for ex-prisoners (c), and discrimination levels (d) for control and affirmation groups (Nigeria). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. *Y*-axis ranges 1–7. * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

Prosociality towards ex-prisoners. We next examined prosocial motivation towards ex-prisoners as the beneficiaries. Findings show that affirmed participants exhibited significantly higher prosocial behavioral intentions towards ex-prisoners, including intentions to give money and personal time to assist ex-prisoners ($M = 3.97$, $SE = .09$), compared to control participants ($M = 3.49$, $SE = .08$), $b = .48$, $SE = .12$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1, panel B).

To assess prosociality towards ex-prisoners in more concrete terms, participants were asked to indicate their willingness to engage in a tutoring program for ex-prisoners. We found a significant positive treatment effect of the values affirmation intervention such that affirmed participants indicated significantly higher support of and intention to participate in the tutoring program ($M = 4.28$, $SE = .08$) compared to control participants ($M = 4.0$, $SE = .08$), $b = .28$, $SE = .11$, $p = .015$ (see Figure 1, panel C).

groups. No covariates were included in the regressions. Furthermore, homogeneity of variances, normal distribution of residuals, and the presence of influential outliers were assessed for the regression analyses for all measures.

Discriminatory behavioral tendencies towards ex-prisoners. Our results indicated that the affirmation intervention significantly reduced discriminatory tendencies. Affirmed participants ($M = 3.44$, $SE = .1$) indicated significantly lower discriminatory behavioral tendencies towards ex-prisoners compared to control participants ($M = 3.93$, $SE = .1$), $b = -.48$, $SE = .14$, $p < .001$, which comprised, for example, higher intentions to employ an ex-prisoner or feeling more comfortable having an ex-prisoner as a neighbor (see Figure 1, panel D).

General attitude towards ex-prisoners. Lastly, we examined whether the values affirmation intervention affected general attitude towards ex-prisoners, operationalized via agreement with whether ex-prisoners deserved a second chance. Results showed that independent of treatment assignment, participants gave very high ratings, indicating a strong belief that ex-prisoners deserve a second chance (affirmation group: $M = 5.26$, $SE = .06$, control group: $M = 5.19$, $SE = .06$). We did not find a significant difference between treatment groups, $b = .07$, $SE = .09$, $p = .426$.

U.S. Study

General prosociality. We first examined whether we replicated findings by Schneider (2018) who showed that a values affirmation intervention could promote prosociality towards unknown and distant others. Our results showed that participants in the affirmation group ($M = 4.16$, $SE = .04$) displayed significantly higher prosocial behavioral intentions compared to participants in the control group ($M = 3.73$, $SE = .04$), $b = .43$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 2, panel A). This finding not only replicates effects shown by Schneider (2018) but is also in line with findings of the Nigeria Study. Our measure of actual prosocial behavior, donation to charity, likewise showed a significant treatment effect of values affirmation, therefore, constituting a direct replication of the behavioral effect reported in Schneider (2018). Of the \$10 bonus, affirmed participants donated significantly more ($M = 4.71$, $SE = .16$) than did control participants ($M = 3.97$, $SE = .14$), $b = .75$, $SE = .21$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 2, panel B). We observed that affirmed participants on average donated 74 cents more to charity than did control participants, translating into an 18.64% increase in donations due to the affirmation intervention. The magnitude of the intervention effect in the current study is comparable to that of Schneider (2018) who reported a 19.57% increase.

Prosociality towards ex-prisoners. We next compared whether observed effects of prosociality towards ex-prisoners in Nigeria were also present in a U.S. context. In line with the Nigeria Study, reported prosocial behavioral intentions towards ex-prisoners were significantly higher in the affirmation group

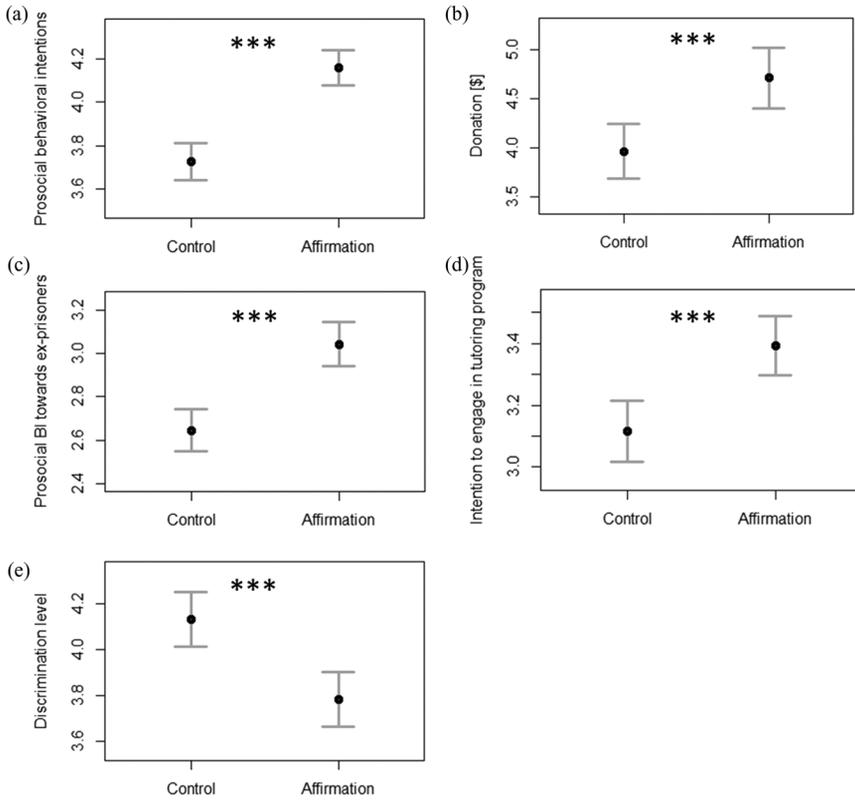


Fig. 2. Prosocial behavioral intentions in general (a) and towards ex-prisoners (c), donation behavior (b), intentions to engage in tutoring program for ex-prisoners (d), and discrimination levels (e) for control and affirmation groups (U.S.). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Y-axis ranges 1–7 (a, c, d, e), 1–10 (b). *** $p < .001$.

($M = 3.04$, $SE = .05$) compared to the control group ($M = 2.65$, $SE = .05$), $b = .4$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 2, panel C).

Furthermore, as in the Nigeria Study, results of the U.S. Study showed a significant treatment effect of the affirmation intervention on interest and intention to engage in the tutoring program for ex-prisoners. Participants in the affirmation group ($M = 3.39$, $SE = .05$) indicated significantly higher interest and intentions to participate in the tutoring program than did those in the control group ($M = 3.12$, $SE = .05$), $b = .28$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 2, panel D).

Discriminatory behavioral tendencies towards ex-prisoners. Replicating results from the Nigeria Study, engaging in the values affirmation exercise significantly reduced discriminatory behavioral tendencies towards ex-prisoners in our

U.S. sample. Compared to control participants ($M = 4.13$, $SE = .06$), affirmed participants reported significantly lower discriminatory tendencies ($M = 3.78$, $SE = .06$), $b = -.35$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 2, panel E).

General attitude towards ex-prisoners. Lastly, in line with findings of the Nigeria Study, participants' ratings of their overall attitudes towards ex-prisoners were high and there was no significant treatment effect, $b = .09$, $SE = .06$, $p = .126$. Independent of treatment assignment, participants reported strong agreement with the sentiment that ex-prisoners deserve a second chance (affirmation group: $M = 4.99$, $SE = .04$; control group: $M = 4.9$, $SE = .04$).

Generalizability of Observed Effects across Countries

The results presented above showed that the values affirmation intervention was effective in both countries in promoting prosociality in general and towards ex-prisoners as well as in reducing discriminatory tendencies. In order to formally evaluate the generalizability of the affirmation effects across the two countries, we tested for treatment by country interactions. We combined the two samples, added country as a dummy variable and conducted interaction analyses for our various dependent measures. No significant interactions emerged across all dependent measures (please refer to Table S3 in the Supplementary Materials for regression results). Thus, the values affirmation intervention not only successfully increased prosociality and decreased discrimination in both countries, but the magnitude of these effects was comparable across both countries. Our study thus provides strong evidence for the generalizability of the observed affirmation effects across Nigeria and the United States.

Mediation Analysis

Based on findings by Schneider (2018), we hypothesized that engaging in the values affirmation exercise would increase feelings of positive self-regard and that positive self-regard would mediate the effect of the affirmation intervention on prosocial motivation in general and specifically towards ex-prisoners as well as on our measure of discrimination. For both the Nigeria and U.S. samples, affirmed participants reported significantly higher positive self-regard compared to control participants, indicating that the values affirmation intervention indeed fostered positive self-directed emotions in both countries (Table 1).

To test our hypothesis that these increased feelings of positive self-regard mediated the effect of the values affirmation intervention on prosocial motivation and reduced discrimination, we conducted formal mediation analyses for our various dependent measures using the *mediation* package in R (Tingley, Yamamoto, Hirose, Keele, & Imai, 2014). Parameter estimates were based on the

Table 1. Levels of Positive Self-Regard for Nigeria and U.S. Samples

	Descriptives				Linear regression		
	Affirmation		Control		<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>			
Nigeria	5.86	.09	5.22	.11	.64	.14	<.001
U.S.	5.43	.05	5.01	.06	.42	.08	<.001

Table 2. Mediation Results for Nigeria and U.S. Samples

	DV	Indirect effect			Prop. mediated
		<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>	
Nigeria	Prosocial BIs	.12	[0.06, 0.19]	<.001	0.24
	Prosocial BIs ex-prisoners	.12	[0.05, 0.21]	<.001	0.25
	Engagement tutoring program	.04	[-0.01, 0.11]	.11	0.14
	Discrimination	-.07	[-0.16, -0.01]	.02	0.15
U.S.	Prosocial BIs	.09	[0.05, 0.13]	<.001	0.2
	Donation behavior	.09	[0.02, 0.18]	<.001	0.12
	Prosocial BIs ex-prisoners	.05	[0.02, 0.08]	<.001	0.12
	Engagement tutoring program	.04	[0.02, 0.07]]	<.001	0.14
	Discrimination	-.04	[-0.08, -0.02]	<.001	0.12

bootstrapping method, which does not assume a particular sampling distribution for the indirect effect, but which generates a data driven sampling distribution. This approach allows for an accurate and statistically powerful test of the significance of the indirect effect (Bolger & Amarel, 2007). All reported results are based on 5,000 bootstrapped samples.

Results overall supported our hypothesis and largely replicated findings by Schneider (2018). In the U.S. sample, positive self-regard mediated the effect of the values affirmation intervention on all five dependent measures for which a significant treatment effect emerged: prosocial behavioral intentions towards unspecific others, donation to charity, prosocial behavioral intentions towards ex-prisoners, including intentions to engage in the tutoring program, and discrimination. In the Nigeria sample, a significant mediation of positive self-regard emerged for three of the four dependent measures for which we observed a significant treatment effect: general prosocial behavioral intentions, prosocial behavioral intentions towards ex-prisoners, and discrimination. The mediation effect on intentions to engage in the tutoring program did not reach statistical significance (see Table 2 for complete mediation statistics).

Discussion

Across two studies in two different cultural contexts we replicated past findings that a values affirmation intervention can promote prosociality. We also replicated findings that identified positive self-regard as a mediator of the effect. Importantly, we extended past work to explore the effectiveness of values affirmation in a new, previously untested domain: situations in which members of marginalized societal groups are the beneficiaries of potential affirmation effects. We provided evidence that a values affirmation intervention can lower discriminatory behavioral tendencies and foster prosocial motivation towards ex-prisoners. Apart from the domain, we extended values affirmation research into a new, previously largely ignored, cultural context, that is, Nigeria, and tested the generalizability of the effects cross-culturally.

Effects on Prosociality and Discriminatory Tendencies

Across our samples in two countries, we found that affirmed participants indicated higher intentions to invest time and personal funds to help others. Participants in the U.S. sample furthermore donated significantly more to charity compared to control participants. The magnitude of the donation effect in the current study is comparable to findings by Schneider (2018). Our work thus strengthens and broadens the empirical evidence base of the reported effect that values affirmation can be effective at enhancing prosociality generally, towards distant and unknown others.

We furthermore showed that values affirmation is not only effective in promoting prosociality towards unknown and distant others but also when geared at members of certain societal groups towards whom the public may express discriminatory tendencies. We found that engaging general members of the public in a values affirmation exercise can significantly enhance prosocial motivation towards ex-prisoners as well as lower discriminatory tendencies. Affirmed participants exhibited higher inclinations to help ex-prisoners, for instance, through participating in a tutoring program for ex-prisoners or through giving money to assist them, compared to members of the public who were not affirmed. Further, discriminatory behavioral tendencies towards ex-prisoners, such as not employing an ex-prisoner solely on the basis of criminal history or not being comfortable with having an ex-prisoner as a neighbor, were significantly lower in affirmed participants compared to non-affirmed ones. We provided strong support for the generalizability of our observed effects across cultural contexts.

Our work is the first to test a values affirmation intervention to reduce discrimination against ex-prisoners and to increase the general public's prosocial motivation towards them. Although values affirmation interventions to benefit individuals have been tested extensively in the U.S. in various domains, such as academic performance (Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen et al., 2009), health

behavior change (Cooke et al., 2014; Epton & Harris, 2008; Logel & Cohen, 2012; Sherman & Cohen, 2006), reduced stress (Sherman, Bunyan, Creswell, & Jaremka, 2009), increased well-being (Nelson et al., 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2001), and more recently with regards to promoting prosocial behavior (Lindsay & Creswell, 2014; Schneider, 2018; Thomaes et al., 2012), no study has assessed effects with regards to marginalized and stigmatized societal groups, such as ex-prisoners. Our work thus crucially extends knowledge on the applicability of values affirmation interventions and underlying theory.

Mediation Effects of Positive Self-Regard

We furthermore replicated reported mediation effects of positive self-directed emotions on prosocial behavioral intentions and donation behavior in the U.S. and extended these findings to a new cultural context, that is, Nigeria. Moreover, we provided evidence that positive self-regard also mediates the affirmation effect in the context of ex-prisoners for five of our six dependent measures of discrimination and prosociality towards ex-prisoners across both countries. While our results support positive self-regard and the presented line of reasoning as a possible explanation of the mechanism at work, it is conceivable that other mediators may additionally play a role. We encourage research to further elucidate the full picture of the mechanism of values affirmation effects in this context.

Attitude Towards Ex-Prisoners

With regards to general attitude towards ex-prisoners, we find that participants from our samples in both countries expressed similarly positive attitudes. Independent of treatment assignment, participants showed high agreement with the notion that ex-prisoners deserve a second chance. With regards to Nigeria, this finding is congruent with work that points out the restorative culture and traditions of Nigeria (Omale, 2011). For the United States as well, our findings fit to accounts that have pointed to a strong belief in redemption within U.S. society (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010). The ideal of opportunity and second chances, consistent with the idea of the American Dream, is also reflected for instance in the wording of laws, such as the “Second Chance Act” which enhanced reentry services for ex-prisoners (Braga, Piehl, & Hureau, 2009). Notably, our findings also show that general positive and non-discriminatory attitudes on a high and abstract level do not necessarily reflect how people behave and act when it touches their lives concretely. Despite the fact that participants overall expressed a positive attitude towards ex-prisoners, non-affirmed participants exhibited higher discriminatory tendencies and less prosocial motivation compared to affirmed participants, as for instance with regards to employment decisions, the investment of personal time and funds to assist ex-prisoners, or personal interactions with

ex-prisoners. For these concrete instances, we find room for our intervention to positively shift discriminatory tendencies and promote prosociality.

Our findings align with construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010; Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). The question of whether ex-prisoners deserve a second chance is very abstract and removed from the participants' lives, not involving a concrete action (Trope et al., 2007). However, when prompting participants to think about what they would do in concrete situations, such as when deciding whether to hire an ex-prisoner or not, the construal level is close to the participants. Participants may evoke considerations of the "here and now" and picture the situation in more context and more vividly (Trope et al., 2007). Kivetz and Tyler (2007) have argued that high-level construal encourages the expression of an idealistic (value-oriented) self, for instance, in our context, one that does not discriminate, while low-level construal encourages the expression of a pragmatic self, for example, practical considerations and challenges associated with hiring an ex-prisoner as in our study.

Social Policy Implications

Our work presents novel insights into a potential avenue for reducing discrimination and promoting prosociality towards ex-prisoners in an applied context with significant potential impacts. Values affirmation interventions could help to foster positive personal contact between the public and ex-prisoners. Our results suggest that values affirmation could be used to encourage the public to engage in a tutoring program for ex-prisoners. Work on the influence of contact in reducing prejudice and discrimination has suggested that personal contact can reduce discriminatory attitudes and foster social acceptance (Allport, 1954; Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003; Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger, & Niens, 2006). Recent work focusing on the Nigerian context suggests that positive intergroup social contact can decrease discrimination towards religious out-group members in Nigeria (Scacco & Warren, 2018). Extrapolating from these findings to the domain of ex-prisoners, this evidence suggests that engaging the public in programs that offer direct social contact, such as the tutoring program we propose, may have beneficial effects on discrimination reduction. Values affirmation interventions could be used to encourage members of the public to participate in such programs. Furthermore, research has highlighted the important role that mentoring plays for ex-prisoners on their path to societal reintegration (Celinska, 2000; Johnson, 2008). Societies are struggling with a shortage of mentors for ex-prisoners (Johnson, 2008). A values affirmation intervention could be used to promote willingness by the general public to engage in volunteer activities and to become a mentor for an ex-prisoner.

Engaging the public in a values affirmation intervention could also support the restorative justice movement by making the public more open and receptive

towards its ideas and principles. It encompasses restorative processes for victims and offenders involving those affected in the justice process. It connects the offender and the community to acknowledge wrongdoings and address them in a meaningful and constructive manner to make peace, reconcile, and prevent reoccurrence (Gavrielides, 2008; Morris, 2002). This process is inhibited by discriminatory attitudes and behaviors towards ex-prisoners. Lowering discriminatory tendencies towards ex-prisoners through values affirmation may assist in breaking down these barriers. A values affirmation intervention may thus help to make the general public more receptive towards restorative justice oriented efforts and programs, thereby contributing to effective reintegration of ex-prisoners into society. Interventions may take place in workplace training programs, educational settings, such as schools and universities, or during sensitization, community engagement, and advocacy campaigns by NGOs. Delivery channels may also include, for instance, phone applications in game-like settings or multimedia campaigns (see Acosta et al., 2014 or Collins, Wong, Cerully, Schultz, & Eberhart, 2012, for a review). Exact strategies will need to be tailored to the economic, social, and cultural environment in which the intervention is to be applied. A suggested next step would be to test our findings in a longitudinal setting in which behavioral intentions as well as behaviors can be monitored over time. For instance, it is conceivable to set up a tutoring program for ex-prisoners in collaboration with a local agency/NGO, such as the one we propose in our study, and measure the public's actual program participation following a values affirmation intervention at the recruitment stage versus a non-self-affirmative recruitment process.

Limitations

Further research should examine the longevity of the observed affirmation effects. Our measures were taken directly following the intervention. We encourage further research to investigate the willingness to engage in prosocial action benefiting ex-prisoners following a time delay between the intervention and being given the opportunity to engage. Results of our robustness check, which did not reveal an influence of engagement in the writing task on intervention effectiveness by treatment, suggest that the affirmation effect is not merely a product of the amount of time people spend completing the task but rather a product of internal reflection. This suggests that even short interventions that encourage people to reflect in a self-affirmative manner, which could more easily be given to people in an applied context, could be helpful in supporting positive behavior change and engagement of the public. Further research should examine the "depth of engagement" with various self-affirmative intervention tasks and ensuing effects to shed further light on this proposition.

We furthermore encourage the replication of our results with representative samples in both countries to further test the generalizability of the observed

affirmation effects. With regards to online samples, such as the one used in the U.S. study, it is important to note that recent research has suggested that such samples are not inferior in data quality to traditional psychological research samples, for example college students, when it comes to diversity and reliability (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013; Kees, Berry, Burton, & Sheehan, 2017; Ramsey, Thompson, McKenzie, & Rosenbaum, 2016). In fact, online samples may even exceed in data quality compared to traditional samples, for instance with regards to attentiveness to instructions (e.g., Hauser & Schwarz, 2016; Ramsey et al., 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, our work points towards a potentially promising avenue for fostering prosociality towards ex-prisoners and reducing discrimination against them. We tested our intervention in two countries that would highly benefit from a strategy to achieve this goal. Our work is thus of high applied potential as it provides insights into a strategy for tackling societal challenges and barriers to social justice faced by countries around the world. Applying values affirmation interventions on a large scale, for instance as part of employer training or campaigns in educational settings, to change how the public perceives and treats ex-prisoners, may hold the potential to positively affect the mental well-being of ex-prisoners and support reintegration into society. Positive downstream effects may include reduced recidivism, conflict, and costs to society, along with more just and non-discriminating social environments. In this sense, values affirmation could help to foster positive social change to tackle an important social challenge nations face. Future research should continue to investigate this promising route further in an effort to promote social justice and peaceful societies.

Supporting information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

S1. Materials Nigeria Study

S2. Materials U.S. Study

S3. Treatment by country interaction analysis

S4. Intervention engagement interaction analysis

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