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Beyond Comparisons: The Complexity and Context-Dependency of Collective Victim Beliefs

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Beyond Comparisons: The Complexity and Context-Dependency of Collective Victim Beliefs

Author Note

[Author names and affiliations redacted for blind review].

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BEYOND COMPARISONS IN COLLECTIVE VICTIM BELIEFS

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Abstract

Social psychological research on collective victimhood has focused on just a few ways in which people think about the ingroup's victimization that imply certain assumptions and limit our understanding of collective victim beliefs. Additionally, different historical and socio-political contexts may make different collective victim beliefs relevant. This paper examines collective victim beliefs expressed in open-ended survey responses among six different groups: Northern Irish participants, Greek Cypriots, Hungarians, Poles, Jewish Americans, and Armenian Americans ($N = 638$). Qualitative content analysis revealed five broader categories with several collective victim beliefs each. General appraisals of the ingroup's collective victimization entailed centrality of ingroup victimization versus defocusing victimhood. More specific appraisals included context-specific characteristics of the ingroup's victimization, perceptions of the perpetrator group (attributions of blame), and of other victim groups (comparative victim beliefs, including rejecting comparisons). The findings extend and challenge commonly studied collective victim beliefs, and propose novel theoretical directions.

Keywords: Collective victimhood, collective violence, comparative victim beliefs, genocide, ethnic conflict, war

Beyond Comparison: The Complexity and Context-Dependency of Collective Victim Beliefs

There is growing interest in the social psychology of collective victimhood, that is, how people subjectively experience and interpret their group’s victimization (Noor, Vollhardt, Mari, & Nadler, 2017; Vollhardt, 2020). This research builds on Bar-Tal and Antebi’s (1992) seminal work on siege mentality, influential research on competitive victimhood (Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008; Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012), and initial studies showing detrimental effects of reminders of historical ingroup victimization on intergroup relations (e.g., Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). Responding to the focus on seemingly negative effects of collective victimhood—such as distrust, unwillingness to forgive, or legitimization of harmdoing—, another body of work has examined seemingly positive intergroup outcomes of inclusive victim beliefs, such as reconciliation or intra-minority solidarity (e.g., Craig & Richeson, 2016; Shnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013; Vollhardt, 2013, 2015). Taken together, this research shows that the effects of collective victimization on intergroup outcomes depend on how people think about their group’s collective victimization (i.e., collective victim beliefs; Vollhardt, 2012). However, this literature is often based on certain assumptions and limited to specific collective victim beliefs that may not always match each context or individual’s construals. The present paper explores how people in six different contexts of historical victimization or ongoing conflict respond to the assumptions implied in commonly studied collective victim beliefs, and how they challenge and extend what we know about how people think about their group’s victimization.

Much of the social psychological literature on collective victimhood is characterized by certain assumptions: First, this literature has focused mostly on comparative victim beliefs (Noor et al., 2017)—that is, comparisons of the ingroup’s victimization to outgroups’ experiences with an emphasis on similarities (i.e., inclusive victim consciousness; Vollhardt, 2015) or differences

(i.e., competitive victimhood: Noor et al., 2012; exclusive victim consciousness: Vollhardt, 2012). This focus implies that comparisons are central to peoples' meaning-making of collective victimization, and that groups perceive the victim status as a resource to compete over or as a basis for alliances (e.g., Craig & Richeson, 2016; Noor et al., 2012; SimanTov-Nachlieli, Shnabel, & Halabi, 2015; Vollhardt, 2015). Second, work on collective victim beliefs (and other work on collective victimhood we briefly mention below, such as on acknowledgment, collective memories of violence and their transmission, or master narratives of conflict) often implies that it is important to group members to "win the victim status" (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2015), or in other words, that the ingroup's collective victimization is central to all (at least highly identified) group members (see Leach, 2020, for a critique).

These assumptions are presumably shaped by the contexts in which collective victimhood has been studied: Because this literature originated in concerns with conflict resolution and reconciliation, it focuses on consequences for intergroup relations, while often neglecting individual and intragroup aspects of collective victimhood (Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2020; Vollhardt & Nair, 2018). Moreover, a lot of the research on collective victimhood has been situated in a few specific contexts of protracted intergroup conflict, such as in Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland (Szabó, 2020). This may help explain both the assumed centrality of the ingroup's victimization—which is also discussed as central to master narratives of conflict (Bartal, 2000; Hammack, 2010; Psaltis, Franc, Smeekes, Ioannou, & Žeželj, 2017) and many collective memories of groups' histories (Bilali & Ross, 2012; Carretero, 2011, 2017)—and the focus on comparisons with other groups' victimization. However, the sociopolitical and historical context is often not considered when generalizing these constructs or findings to other

contexts where these assumptions may not make as much sense (e.g., in the absence of ongoing conflict; Szabó, 2020).

Another, methodological reason for these limited conceptualizations of collective victim beliefs is that much of this work is quantitative, assessing the constructs researchers deem relevant a priori. This has narrowed the scope of commonly studied collective victim beliefs. Conversely, qualitative studies have illustrated greater complexity in how people think about collective victimization (e.g., Ferguson, Burgess, & Hollywood, 2010; McNeill, Pehrson, & Stevenson, 2017; Nair & Vollhardt, 2019; Twali, 2019; Vollhardt & Nair, 2018). Accordingly, the present study analyzed open-ended responses to commonly used collective victim beliefs measures, to examine the relevance of their underlying assumptions and capture greater complexity of collective victim beliefs expressed in different contexts of collective victimization.

Common Foci in Social Psychological Research on Collective Victim Beliefs

In the following, we briefly characterize which collective victim beliefs are prevalent in the social psychological literature (for reviews see Noor et al., 2017; Szabó, 2020; Vollhardt, 2012, 2020), and raise some questions about their underlying assumptions and external validity across contexts.

Comparative victim beliefs. In social psychology to date, comparative victim beliefs—that is, comparisons between the ingroup’s and outgroups’ collective victimization—are the most studied ways in which people may think about their group’s victimization¹ (Noor et al., 2017; Szabó, 2020). Perhaps most commonly assessed within this category is competitive victimhood: the belief that the ingroup suffered more than the outgroup (Noor et al., 2012). In fact, competitive victimhood is sometimes used interchangeably (e.g., in article titles, theoretical discussions, and construct measures) with collective victimhood, without specifying that it is just

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one specific way of construing collective victimization (e.g., Bağcı, Piyale, Karaköse, & Şen, 2018; Rotella, Richeson, Chiao, & Bean, 2013). Competitive victimhood is usually studied in relation to an adversary in a conflict, but may also involve believing that the ingroup suffered more than other groups in the world (Rotella et al., 2013; Vollhardt et al., 2016). In addition to this quantitative comparison of suffering, exclusive victim beliefs can also entail perceived qualitative differences in groups' victimization (Nair & Vollhardt, 2019). Conversely, inclusive victim beliefs (also referred to as common victimhood or stigma-based solidarity) capture perceived similarities between the ingroup's and outgroups' suffering—within a conflict or more generally in society or the world (e.g., Cortland et al., 2017; Shnabel et al., 2013; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015; Vollhardt et al., 2016). Additionally, though scarcely researched so far, people also may perceive that their group suffered less than another group (downward comparisons of suffering: Nair & Vollhardt, 2020; Twali, 2019). And finally, in addition to these measures that focus exclusively on comparative victim beliefs, several other collective victim belief measures such as that of siege mentality (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992) and perpetual ingroup victimhood orientation (PIVO; Schori-Eyal et al., 2017) also include several comparative victim belief items (usually exclusive victim beliefs).

Comparisons of different groups' experiences of collective victimization may be particularly salient in contexts of ongoing conflict (Noor et al., 2012) or in the aftermath of genocide (e.g., Levy & Sznaider, 2006), and less relevant in other contexts of collective violence. For example, an analysis of Korean media discourse about Korea's historical colonization by Japan revealed an absence of comparative victim beliefs, while intragroup issues related to the group's collective victimization and the perpetrator group's denial were central (Jeong & Vollhardt, 2021). Additionally, even where comparisons of the ingroup's and other groups'

suffering are common, some group members may push back against such analogies, whether due to distinctiveness threat or because they are seen as problematic (e.g., Marrus, 2016; Ratskoff, 2020). Therefore, the assumed prevalence of comparative victim beliefs needs to be interrogated.

Other, context-dependent collective victim beliefs. In addition to comparative victim beliefs, several other construals of ingroup victimization have been proposed, though there is less research on these constructs (see Footnote 1). These collective victim beliefs were conceptualized based on specific historical and sociopolitical contexts. For example, among Jewish Israelis, researchers have assessed the perceived temporal and geographical scope of collective victimization: the historical nature of the group’s victimization (Schori-Eyal, Halperin, & Bar-Tal, 2014), or that it is a perpetual, ongoing experience that occurred in different parts of the world through different perpetrators (Schori-Eyal, Klar, Roccas, & McNeill, 2017). Additionally, in this context that is also characterized by ongoing occupation of Palestinian land and asymmetric violence against Palestinians in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, researchers have studied the moral lessons of the Holocaust in relation to the present that Israeli and North American Jews may endorse, such as perceived entitlement to self-defense versus the obligation to help others in need and support peace (Klar, Schori, & Klar, 2013; Rosler & Branscombe, 2019; Warner, Wohl, & Branscombe, 2014).

And finally, in several contexts of historical genocides and mass atrocities, which are often denied by the perpetrator groups and ignored by third parties, victim groups’ desire for acknowledgment and the psychological effects of acknowledgment versus denial of ingroup victimization have been examined (Hameiri & Nadler, 2017; Iqbal & Bilali, 2017; Vollhardt, Mazur, & Lemahieu, 2014). However, these studies are comparatively scarce, and perceived acknowledgment is not typically included in studies of collective victim beliefs more generally.

Centrality of collective victimization. A lot of the research on collective victim beliefs we described—whether it is on victim groups’ desire for acknowledgment of the ingroup’s victimization, how collective victimization features centrally in many groups’ collective memories and master narratives of conflict, or on the commonly studied claims of competitive victimhood and desire to “be crowned as the ‘true’ victim” (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2015, p. 144)—is based on the assumption that the ingroup’s victimization is central to group members, without assessing whether this is actually the case (see also Leach, 2020). Experimental studies on the effects of collective victimization on intergroup relations often make collective violence against the ingroup situationally salient, compared to a neutral control condition (e.g., Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). However, whether or not collective victimization of the ingroup is *chronically* salient, that is, whether people generally perceive the ingroup’s victimization as relevant and central to the self and to the ingroup, is rarely studied. Perceived centrality of the ingroup’s victimization can entail whether people think or talk about it, and consider it to be a crucial aspect of their group identity (Vollhardt & Nair, 2018). Group members may disagree about how much importance should be placed on the group’s history of victimization, and some may not appraise it as relevant to current ingroup concerns at all (Leach, 2020). Moreover, some may focus on the ingroup’s resistance and strength, rather than on victimization (hooks, 1995; Mosley et al., 2020; Vollhardt & Nair, 2018). Yet, perceived centrality of ingroup victimization is usually not explicitly assessed (but see Vollhardt, Nair, & Tropp, 2016; Szabó et al., 2020; Vollhardt et al., 2021 for exceptions where perceived centrality of victimhood is used as a control variable).

The construct of historical closure, which captures the desire to move on from historical victimization, is relevant to the perceived (lack of) centrality of historical victimization but is not

often assessed among victim groups (Hanke et al., 2013). Overall, the assumption of centrality of the ingroup’s victimization is important to examine, along with whether and why some group members may “repudiate the centrality of a focus on victimization” (hooks, 1995, p. 56).

Complexity and Context: Intragroup and Context-specific Variations in Collective Victim Beliefs

The arguments discussed so far suggest that there is presumably much more variation in collective victim beliefs than the current social psychological literature on collective victimization indicates, owing both to differences in contexts and individual differences within groups. The appraisal theory approach to group victimization (Leach, 2020), however, provides a general framework that accounts for variation within and across groups concerning *how* exactly collective victimization is construed and *whether* it is perceived as relevant as relevant at all. Specifically, the appraisal theory approach to collective victimization emphasizes the dynamic nature of how people make sense of the ingroup’s collective victimization in any given moment: shaped by the individual’s primary appraisal of the relevance of collective victimization to the group’s (or person’s) current concerns and goals and their secondary appraisal of the ingroup’s collective victimization considering their psychological and material resources available for coping with it (Leach, 2020).

These appraisals may vary individually, but different sociopolitical and historical contexts may also make certain collective victim beliefs more relevant than others. For example, history education and other means of transmitting collective memories often emphasize particular narratives of the ingroup’s victimization (Bilali & Ross, 2012; Carretero, 2011, 2017; Szabó, 2020). Consequently, it is important to consider the context and a wide range of collective victim beliefs, rather than assuming the universality of specific, limited collective victim beliefs.

Overall, the present paper aims to address this variability and extend the scope of commonly assessed collective victim beliefs as well as examine their assumed prevalence and relevance. To achieve this aim, we qualitatively analyzed open-ended responses to a question inviting participants to comment on comparative victim belief items, and examined different sociopolitical and historical contexts of collective victimization to consider how the context may shape the relevance, meaning, and prevalence of collective victim beliefs people express.

Contexts of the Present Study

We studied six different contexts, representing three general types of collective victimization experiences.

Historical genocide and its aftermath. Our sample included two groups with collective memories of historical genocide against their group: Armenian Americans and Jewish Americans.

The Armenian Genocide took place between 1915 and 1923 in the Ottoman Empire or what is today Turkey. Around 1.5 million people were killed, and many others were displaced (Akçam, 2006). The Turkish government and many of its allies still deny the genocide, which is a central concern for the Armenian diaspora and perpetuates the sense of injustice and ongoing collective victimization (Kalayjian, Shahinian, Gergerian, & Saraydarian, 1996; Mangassarian, 2016; Vollhardt & Nair, 2018). The Holocaust in Nazi-occupied European countries during World War II, during which around six million Jews were killed and many others were displaced or subjected to forced labor, is central to Jewish American identity today (PEW Research Center, 2021). Unlike the Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust has been widely acknowledged (with some exceptions). However, collective memories of Jewish victimization also entail the century-long persecution of Jews prior to the Holocaust, and anti-semitism in its aftermath in different parts of

the world (Schori-Eyal et al., 2017). In the U.S., an additional layer is the status shift for many (Ashkenazi) Jewish Americans who over time were included in the privileged White racial majority group², which may make comparisons with disadvantaged racial minority groups in the U.S. salient (Brodkin, 1998). Similar dynamics are discussed in the Armenian American community (Cass, 2020).

Historical victimization through occupation, war, and political regimes. Our study also included participants from two Central Eastern European countries whose histories of collective victimization are sometimes discussed alongside each other (Szabó, 2020): Hungarians and Poles. Hungary has a long history of occupations by powerful entities such as the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union (Laszló, 2013). The most influential collective trauma of Hungary’s history was the Treaty of Trianon, a peace agreement after WWI that resulted in Hungary losing most of its population and land. Similarly, Poland lost its independence at the end of the 18th century for 123 years and was divided between three neighboring empires. During WWII, Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia occupied Poland and committed war crimes against the Polish population, resulting in over 6 million deaths (including Polish Jews). Hungary has a mixed record of victimization through but also official collaboration with Nazi Germany, resulting in defensive representations of Hungarians history (Hirschberger et al., 2016). After WWII, both Poland and Hungary were brought into the communist block. Many Poles perceive this as a second Soviet occupation (Davies, 2005), and mistrust towards Russia persists to this day (Bilewicz, Witkowska, Pantazi, Gkinopoulos, & Klein, 2019). In Hungary, the 1956 uprising was crushed by the Soviets and resulted in a large number of Hungarian refugees, which is remembered and compared to the present-day refugee crisis in Europe (Szabó, Vollhardt, & Mészáros, 2020).

Overall, in both Hungary and Poland there is a strong collective memory and national self-concept of historical suffering (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Bilewicz & Stefaniak, 2013; Szabó, 2020; Vollhardt, Bilewicz, & Olechowski, 2015). At the same time, there is an emphasis on and pride in having overcome and survived wars and occupation (Szabó, 2020), which may result in distancing from a focus on victimization. Additionally, these countries did not experience armed conflict in recent decades, which may make competitive victimhood less salient (Szabó, 2020).

Collective victimization through intractable conflicts. Our study also included two groups living in the context of a recent or ongoing conflict, Northern Irish people and Greek Cypriots. The conflict in Northern Ireland between Irish Nationalists and British Unionists over the status of Northern Ireland was most intense between the late 1960s and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, when hostilities officially ceased. However, the fundamental issue has never been resolved and dissident groups periodically continue to engage in violence (Morrison & Horgan, 2016). Following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, victimhood became prominent in public discourse, perhaps even “the dominant cultural icon in Northern Ireland” (Gilligan, 2003, p. 29) focused on the legitimacy of various types of victims and victimhood as an important means of gaining attention and moral authority (Lynch & Joyce, 2018). These debates were less about a whole community being victims (e.g., Unionists versus Nationalists) and more often about whether people injured while engaged in violence (e.g., members of the Irish Republican Army, or of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, a predominantly-Unionist police force in Northern Ireland until 2001) could be considered as victims (Ferguson et al., 2010).

Conflict between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots intensified in the 1960s, shortly after Cyprus gained independence, and culminated in the Turkish invasion and war of 1974. Since then, Cyprus has been divided into the southern part, governed and inhabited by the

majority group, the Greek Cypriots, and the northern part, governed and inhabited by the minority group, the Turkish Cypriots. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) has only been recognized by Turkey and is condemned by the Republic of Cyprus as a “pseudo-state” (Papadakis, 2005; Smeeke, McKeown, & Psaltis, 2017). In 2004, the “Green Line” that divided the two parts was opened for both sides to cross; and a few initiatives engaging youth from both sides were started with the aim of peaceful contact and reconciliation. However, a UN-proposed solution to the conflict that was accepted by a majority of Turkish Cypriots was rejected by the majority of Greek Cypriots in a national referendum. There is a pervasive societal narrative of victimization among Greek Cypriots regarding the Turkish invasion of 1974 and continued occupation by the Turkish army, expressed in various political and cultural realms (Roudometof & Christou, 2011).

We also examined Jewish Americans’ perception of victimization in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While they do not live in the context of this conflict, the U.S. gives military aid to Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a central issue and identity concern for many Jewish Americans (Hagai, Zurbriggen, Hammack, & Ziman, 2013; PEW Research Center, 2021).

Overview of Study and Summary of Research Questions

In these diverse contexts of collective victimization, the present study examines how people respond to the commonly assessed intergroup comparisons of groups’ victimization and the often assumed centrality of the ingroup’s collective victimization. We explore whether people endorse, refine, or reject these notions, and which other construals participants discuss that researchers have not focused on in studies on collective victimhood. We deem a qualitative approach—specifically, qualitative content analysis of open-ended survey questions (Schreier,

2012; Terry & Braun, 2017)—suitable for answering our research questions. Additionally, by examining these questions in different contexts, we consider how the specific context—such as the nature of the group’s victimization, its timescale, and power relations—shapes collective victim beliefs.

Method

Sample

Participants were recruited for a larger survey study on collective victim beliefs and intergroup attitudes (Authors, 2021). In the present paper we analyze participants’ responses to an open-ended question asking if they wished to elaborate on the collective victim beliefs assessed in the survey (see below). The subsamples of those who provided an open-ended answer included 80 Armenian Americans (29.3% of the larger study’s sample), 88 and 100 Jewish Americans, respectively, in two separate studies on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and on the Holocaust (26.87% and 34.13% of the samples), 139 Hungarians (14.94% of the sample), 89 Poles (19.39% of the sample), 90 Northern Irish participants (24.66% of the sample), and 52 Greek Cypriots (15.70% of the sample)³. Participants’ demographic characteristics are reported in Table 1.

Procedure

Ethics approval for the studies was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the first author’s university, and we followed ethical principles outlined by the U.S. Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. All participants volunteered and gave informed consent. They were also debriefed and provided with our contact information for questions or complaints. Due to the qualitative nature of the data that includes potentially identifying information, we did not make the data available in a public repository.

We used several strategies, mostly convenience sampling, to recruit participants. Armenian American and Jewish American participants were recruited online, by asking religious and cultural organizations across the U.S. to disseminate the survey to their members. The Northern Irish and Hungarian samples were recruited among students and through snowball sampling. We also contacted organizations (Northern Ireland) and recruited through social media (Hungary). The Greek Cypriot sample was recruited among community members and through NGOs in public spaces, as well as through online snowball sampling. The Polish sample included randomly selected participants from an online panel (<http://researchonline.pl>). The Greek Cypriot and Northern Irish data included both a paper-pencil and online version of the survey that were combined for analysis; all other surveys were online.

The larger study was described as being about the ingroup’s experiences of collective victimization (specifying, e.g., the Armenian Genocide) and about current social and political issues. After providing demographic information, participants completed 28 items assessing exclusive victim consciousness, inclusive victim consciousness, downward comparisons of suffering, and centrality of the ingroup’s victimization⁴. Participants were then given the option to elaborate on their responses: “If you would like to write more about your views on these issues, or explain your answers above, please use the following text box to do so.”

Analytic Procedure

Open-ended survey questions are a source of rich, qualitative data with multiple advantages such as ease of data collection and allowing for anonymity and broader recruitment (Terry & Braun, 2017). We chose qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) to analyze the data, because we wanted to reduce the larger amount of data we collected across seven samples (total $N = 638$) to examine frequencies of each code. Qualitative content analysis combines

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3 qualitative and quantitative procedures and consists of two stages. In the first stage, the coding
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5 scheme is developed. Initial categories are based deductively on theoretical frameworks and
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7 constructs that inform the anticipated codes. Our initial codes were based on the collective victim
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9 beliefs from the literature reviewed above. The data is then read to inductively expand the initial
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11 codes and ensure that the coding scheme fits the data and captures most of its content related to
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13 the research question. The coding scheme was developed by several of the authors, and refined
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15 after a trial coding of the data (see below). We added categories we developed inductively for
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17 one sample to all other coding manuals. The coding manuals are provided in the online
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19 supplementary materials.
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24 In the second stage, the data was coded by two coders (different teams of authors and
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26 research assistants), at least one of whom was familiar with the context. We first conducted a
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28 trial coding of 10% of each dataset (Schreier, 2012) to train coders and identify codes that
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30 needed modifications. Then, the remaining data was coded and interrater reliabilities were
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32 computed for each sample. The interrater reliability was, on average, .81 (see Table 2), with most
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34 Cohen's Kappas indicating "substantial" agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). All discrepancies
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36 were resolved through discussion between the first author and other coders. We then computed
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38 frequencies of each code for each sample (see Table 2). In line with the qualitative approach, and
39
40 considering that the samples were not comparable due to their different recruitment strategies,
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42 we did not statistically compare the frequencies across samples.
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47 In the interest of more concise reporting, we only present codes that were mentioned by
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49 at least 10% of one of the samples. For the sake of completeness and transparency, we provide
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51 the list of codes mentioned by less than 10% of each sample in the online supplementary
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materials. We provide one sample quote for each code in the text and additional proof quotes (Goldberg & Allen, 2015) in Table 3.

Results

The analysis revealed five sets of collective victim beliefs, each containing several codes and subcodes (see Figure 1). The first two sets of collective victim beliefs we discuss address our research question about the presumed centrality or personal relevance of collective victimization, which can be thought of as general appraisals of collective victimization (Leach, 2020). Specifically, participants discussed the (1) *centrality of ingroup victimization*, or (2) *defocused collective victimhood* in several ways. The second layer of collective victim beliefs involve more specific appraisals of collective victimization, addressing various aspects of and questions about this experience (Leach, 2020). Specifically, one set of codes concern comparisons with other victim groups, (3) *comparative victim beliefs*. This addresses our research question regarding their presumed importance. Other codes addressed our research question about which other aspects of collective victimization people in different contexts emphasize. Specifically, the final two sets of collective victim beliefs relate to (4) *characteristics of collective victimization* such as its historical nature and lack of acknowledgment, and (5) *attributions of blame* for the ingroup’s victimization. In the following we present the codes within each of these sets. We highlight which codes were common across or specific to certain contexts, and interpret these differences through the lens of the historical and current sociopolitical context.

How Relevant is the Ingroup’s Victimization? Centrality of Ingroup Victimization

Responses focusing on centrality of the ingroup’s collective victimization were prompted by the survey items measuring this construct that participants had completed. Overall, perceived centrality of the ingroup’s victimization was expressed more frequently (by approximately one

tenth to one fifth of the sample) among the samples commenting on historical genocide or wars, but by no more than 5% of the samples experiencing ongoing or recent intractable conflicts. The most common way of discussing centrality of ingroup victimization—above all in the Hungarian, Polish, and Armenian American samples—was the perceived importance of remembering and commemorating the ingroup’s (historical) victimization. For example, a Polish participant noted:

We have to remember not only about the persecution by the Germans, but also remember the crimes of the Russians, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians. I am not a supporter of the thesis that modern relationships should be considered through the prism of experienced harm, but you cannot forget about the historic truth and you have to suppress any attempts of lying about it... (PL, 82)

This subcode is in line with social psychological literature on collective memory (Bilali & Ross, 2012), which suggests that commemorating the ingroup’s victimization is often a collective (e.g., national) project that is not only relevant to those who experienced the harm directly, but also to other group members without such direct experiences, due to ingroup identification and vicarious experience. This code relates to research in the Hungarian (e.g., Szabó et al., 2020) and Polish (e.g., Bilewicz & Stefaniak, 2013) context, where remembrance of historical suffering is part of the national narrative and identity. Similarly, for Jewish Americans, remembrance of historical victimization during the Holocaust is often seen as a central obligation for ingroup members, captured in the common phrase to “Never Forget” (e.g., Bender, 2004). As indicated in the participant quote above that discusses the “truth” and “lying” about the ingroup’s suffering, remembrance of the ingroup’s collective victimization is also considered important because it counters the common occurrence of denial. As discussed in more detail below,

achieving recognition of the ingroup’s victimization is particularly central for the Armenian diaspora, who face widespread denial of the Armenian Genocide (Kalagian Blunt, 2014).

Defocusing Collective Victimhood

Conversely, many participants criticized the assumed centrality of the ingroup’s victimization and described several ways in which they thought this focus was either irrelevant or problematic. Especially in the samples that included many student participants (Hungary and Northern Ireland), a substantial number (over 40%) rejected the idea that the ingroup’s victimization was central to their identities or to their group. This code was least frequent among the two Jewish American samples and the Greek Cypriot sample, but even in these cases it was mentioned by over 10%. Moreover, in each of the seven samples, the defocusing collective victimhood codes were more frequent than codes indicating perceived centrality of the ingroup’s victimization. There were four different ways in which participants defocused the ingroup’s collective victimization in their responses.

Lack of relevance. Lack of relevance of the ingroup’s victimization was expressed most in the Northern Irish sample. Conversely, this code was virtually absent from the two samples discussing the aftermath of a genocide against their group (Armenian and Jewish Americans) and the Greek Cypriot sample.

Answers in this category included participants describing a lack of interest in the topics, even expressing that they were “fed up”, ‘bored,’ and it’s tiresome as it is a constant topic, a negative one” (NI, 73). Some participants also commented on their lack of personal experience with the violent events, such as due to their age, or direct effects of the ingroup’s victimization on the self. Additionally, some participants—again mostly in the Northern Irish sample—commented on their lack of identification with the conflict categories, for example: “The survey

assumes my protestant identity is the primary frame through which I make judgements about the above issues. Being protestant is only one facet of my identity and not a particularly strong one.” (NI, 214)

This finding is in line with the appraisal theory approach to understanding responses to collective victimization, which does not assume its relevance for every group member (Leach, 2020). The sample quotes presented here show that time and distance from the events can play a role, and generational differences in perceptions of collective victimization need to be considered (Rimé, Bouchat, Klein, & Licata, 2015). However, this is not the only factor, and as the previous code shows, in some cases of historical victimization such as genocide its perceived centrality may remain or even increase over time (see also Marrus, 2016; Steiner, 2014). Another plausible explanation, suggested in the first quote and backed by the high number of students in the samples where this code was most common, is that in contexts where societal discourse about collective victimization is widespread or where participants have been exposed to repeated research projects or education about these issues, a certain fatigue with the topic may set in (e.g., Clark, 2008) and result in the sentiments described here.

Moving on. A substantial number of participants—again, primarily in the Northern Irish sample (almost one quarter) and Hungarian sample (over one quarter)—expressed that it was important to leave the past behind and move on, instead of focusing on the group’s historical collective victimization. This response was almost absent in the two Jewish American samples.

For example, a Northern Irish participant stated: “The conflict is outdated and should be left behind in older generations” (NI, 66). This response was very rare among other samples, even where the ingroup’s victimization was more distant than in Northern Ireland (where a peace agreement was signed in 1998). Other responses captured in this code highlighted more

explicitly the concern that the ingroup was too preoccupied with the past and should focus on the future instead. This was most often expressed by Hungarian participants, stating for example:

People like to complain in Hungary. In my opinion, we shouldn't mourn over the past things, sufferings, instead we should focus on the present and the future, we should approach the world positively, and look for opportunities. We shouldn't forget, but we should make peace with certain past events. (H, 17)

Generally, these responses indicate historical closure, which predicts forgiveness in several contexts (Hanke et al., 2013) and is often lower among victim than perpetrator groups (Imhoff et al., 2017; see also Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019) but was mentioned by a considerable proportion of some of the samples here. Notably, it was not common or not mentioned at all among the samples discussing the aftermath of genocide against their group. Like in the previous code, answers in this subcode reflected the role of temporal distance from the event and the perceived focus on the ingroup's victimization in present-day societal discourse that participants were reacting against (e.g., "Hungarians like to complain..."). Thus, distancing from collective victimization can be based not only on appraisals of the relevance of the events, but also on an appraisal of the ingroup's response to its collective victimization.

Harmful consequences. Going one step further, some participants were concerned with negative consequences of focusing on the ingroup's victimization. This was most frequently expressed in the Hungarian sample, and, to a lesser extent, in the Northern Irish and Armenian American samples. Two main concerns were discussed. Some participants worried that focusing on the ingroup's victimization would prevent societal progress and take away group members' energy from dealing with current social issues, which were appraised as more urgent goals. For example, one Hungarian participant wrote: "It is a much bigger problem that the economy, the

education and the health care system is in ruins. Instead of crying about the past, we should do something about the present” (H, 14). This quote exemplifies the appraisal theory approach to collective victimization (Leach, 2020), which posits that the ingroup’s collective victimization will only be perceived as relevant when it aligns with the individual’s or group’s current concerns and goals.

Another concern participants expressed was that focusing on the ingroup’s victimization caused negative affect such as anger or sadness, and therefore was detrimental to ingroup members’ well-being. This implies avoidance coping, which is a common response across different contexts of collective victimization and particularly among direct survivors of violence who may not want to think or talk about the events to avoid traumatic memories and negative affect (Steiner, 2014; Vollhardt & Nair, 2018). These responses also can be understood within the appraisal-coping approach to collective victimization, according to which distinct emotional responses result from specific appraisals of collective victimization (Leach, 2020).

Alternatives to focusing on collective victimhood. Finally, some participants argued for the need to defocus the ingroup’s collective victimization by discussing the importance of instead focusing on other aspects of the group’s history and identity, beyond their collective victimization. This response was most commonly discussed by Armenian and Jewish American participants regarding the genocide against their group. Specifically, some participants emphasized the importance of acknowledging the ingroup’s survival and strength considering the adversity they experienced, instead of only focusing on their victimization and vulnerability. This is in line with previous qualitative work in different contexts as well as theoretical models of oppression and historical trauma that are rooted in liberation psychology and other decolonial approaches (e.g., Denham, 2008; Mosley et al., 2020; Quayle & Sonn, 2019; Vollhardt & Nair,

2018). Similarly, participants asserted that their ingroup was not just defined by their victimization. For example, one Armenian American participant noted:

There is so much more to Armenian culture and history than the victimization. People who focus on victimization miss the big picture, and miss out on the richness of the Armenian culture and people. They also miss out on some happiness. (AA, 226)

As this quote illustrates, motivations for defocusing the ingroup’s victimization cannot necessarily be explained by low levels of ingroup identification. Instead, they may reflect different ideas about the group’s identity content (Livingstone & Haslam, 2008)—as well as the desire to capture the multifaceted nature of group identities and collective experiences of groups targeted by violence instead of reducing the experience to the group’s suffering. Accordingly, some participants clarified that while it was important to commemorate the group’s historical victimization, this should not be the focus of the group’s identity— as expressed in this quote: “We should not forget the Armenian Genocide, but it should not define us as a people.” (AA, 31).

It makes sense that concerns about collective victimization taking over the ingroup’s identity were discussed most in the two samples reflecting on genocide against their group—that is, the intent to destroy the group in part or in whole (United Nations, 1948)—given the pervasive and existential nature of this form of collective victimization. Like in the previous codes, participants seem to be responding not just to the collective victimization itself but also to common discourse about the centrality of the genocide to the ingroup’s identity, which exists both in Armenian American (e.g., Azarian-Ceccato, 2010) and in Jewish American communities (e.g., PEW Research Center, 2021). The refusal to be defined by the violence imposed by the perpetrator can be understood as psychological resistance (Leach & Livingstone, 2015).

Comparative Victim Beliefs

Also prompted by the items participants completed before the open-ended question analyzed here, many answers focused on comparative victim beliefs. These answers affirmed, challenged, or further complicated the assessed constructs (exclusive and inclusive victim beliefs, downward comparisons of suffering). Addressing our second research question, these findings give insight into whether and which comparative victim beliefs are deemed relevant in different contexts. Additionally, one of the inductive codes we identified entailed rejecting comparisons of collective victimization altogether.

Exclusive victim consciousness. The survey items included exclusive victim beliefs focused on whether the ingroup has suffered more than other groups (i.e., competitive victimhood, Noor et al., 2012), and on the perceived distinctiveness and uniqueness of the ingroup's suffering (i.e., qualitative differences, Nair & Vollhardt, 2019, 2020). These distinctions are also reflected in participants' answers.

Competitive victimhood. While competitive victimhood is one of the most commonly studied collective victim beliefs in social psychology (Noor et al., 2017), participants did not discuss competitive victimhood as much in their open-ended answers. Additionally, there were interesting context differences: Competitive victimhood was most frequently expressed by Greek Cypriot and Jewish American participants—that is, in contexts where participants are concerned with an ongoing intergroup conflict (for the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for many Jewish American participants, see Ben Hagai et al., 2013; PEW Research Center, 2021). Conversely, competitive victimhood was not expressed at all in the Polish and Hungarian samples, where there are no recent armed conflicts (Szabó, 2020). These findings are in line with a qualitative study on collective victim beliefs in Korea, where comparative victim beliefs were

also not expressed (Jeong & Vollhardt, 2021). These findings also support the argument that competitive victimhood may not be as widespread as often assumed, and in general may be more relevant for contexts of ongoing intergroup conflict than for contexts of historical victimization (Szabó, 2020).

Unique and distinct victimization. Responses focusing on the perceived distinctiveness of the ingroup's suffering compared to other groups were somewhat more common than claims that the ingroup had suffered more. This code was most frequent among the two samples reflecting on their group's genocide. For example, one participant noted: "I do think the Armenian genocide was unique in that it was the archetype for which the word was created and the Turks pioneered the use of several modern methods and techniques used later by others." (AA, 59). There have been numerous claims of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, subject to much historical and philosophical debate (e.g., Blatman, 2015; Margalit & Motzkin, 1996). The commonality of the code among both the Armenian and Jewish American samples suggests that perceived uniqueness and distinctiveness of the ingroup's suffering may be relevant to contexts of genocide and its aftermath more generally. The existential nature of genocide and its centrality to group identities for many group members (Azarian-Ceccato, 2010; PEW Research Center, 2021) may increase this distinctiveness need among highly identified group members who perceive the genocide as central to their group identity (see Jetten & Spears, 2003); this could be tested in future research.

Inclusive victim consciousness. Compared to exclusive victim beliefs, inclusive victim beliefs were discussed more frequently across contexts. Each sample had a substantial number of responses in this category, with frequencies often between one fifth and one fourth of the sample. In line with the survey items that entailed inclusive comparisons of suffering in the same or in

similar ways, two codes were differentiated: inclusive comparisons that acknowledge or ignore differences. This corresponds to the social recategorization literature, which distinguishes between making only superordinate identities salient or also subgroup differences (Dovidio, et al., 2009; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). It also speaks to the idea that inclusive victim beliefs sometimes mask power differences between groups (McNeill & Vollhardt, 2020; Nair & Vollhardt, 2020; Vollhardt, 2015).

No acknowledgment of differences. Inclusive victim beliefs that discussed similarities of suffering between the ingroup and other groups without acknowledging differences in experiences or power between these groups were common across most samples. This response was most frequent in the Greek Cypriot sample and in the Jewish American sample responding to the Holocaust. In addition to discussing similarities in specific experiences of collective victimization, some participants talked about suffering as a universal human experience. For example, one participant described: “The pain of the people is the same regardless of religion and ethnicity. The same applies to all forms of oppression, loss of property, civil rights, freedom, etc.” (CY, 7). While there are positive effects of inclusive construals of ingroup victimization (e.g., Shnabel et al., 2013; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015), there are also potentially problematic effects of overly inclusive construals of collective violence that ignore differences in power or other experiences and can demobilize collective action among members of victim groups (Greenaway, Quinn, & Louis, 2011) or legitimize inequality and violence in some contexts (McNeill & Vollhardt, 2020). In future research, it will be important to identify conditions under which these opposite outcomes of inclusive victim beliefs occur.

Acknowledgment of differences and similarities. Conversely, people may recognize both similarities and differences in experiences of collective victimization. This response was slightly

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less frequent than the previous code, though overall still fairly common across all samples (except for the Polish sample, where it was hardly mentioned). For example, a Northern Irish participant noted:

Both Catholics and Protestants have suffered but to different degrees, within different areas. Also locations are important with regards to conflict, for example within Belfast many Catholic people would feel threatened to enter more Protestant areas. The same however can be said for Protestant people. (NI, 270)

Acknowledging both similarities and differences in groups' experiences of collective victimization takes the context more into account and can help avoid the risks inherent in overly inclusive construals. This version of inclusive victim beliefs also reminds of tenets of intersectionality (Cole, 2009) and intersectional consciousness of collective victimization (Nair & Vollhardt, 2019) that considers power differences within social categories and the resulting differences in experiences. Based on general work on dual recategorization (e.g., Hornsey & Hogg, 2000) we would expect these construals of similarities with other victim groups that also acknowledge subgroup differences to have more positive effects on intergroup outcomes. However, differences were also sometimes discussed in terms of competitive victimhood or perceived uniqueness of their group's suffering, along with acknowledging similarities between their own and other groups' experiences. For example, one participant noted: "Though I have no doubt that other groups have suffered the same victimization as the Jews, I think that the victimization experienced by the Jewish people has perhaps been repeated more frequently" (JA-G, 133). This example shows the need to consider rhetorical functions of statements about collective victimhood (McNeill et al., 2017). For instance, it may seem more normative and polite to first acknowledge similarities between groups' suffering, as a way to then license

competitive victimhood. Overall, this code also counters the notion that inclusive and exclusive victim beliefs are mutually exclusive—which is how they are often presented in the literature, for example by contrasting them in experimental manipulations. A more nuanced assessment of different comparative victim beliefs that considers how they may work together or depend on the context is needed instead (Cohrs, McNeill, & Vollhardt, 2015).

Downward comparisons of suffering. A more nuanced assessment of comparative victim beliefs should also include the perception that the ingroup suffered *less*, and not more than other victim groups. Although this polar opposite of competitive victimhood makes sense in many contexts, downward comparisons of suffering have not received much research attention so far (but see Nair & Vollhardt, 2019, 2020; Twali, 2019). Downward comparisons of collective victimization seem particularly important among high power groups in asymmetric conflicts, as these comparisons acknowledge the outgroup's collective victimization as well as power differences. Accordingly, this sentiment was expressed by a substantial number of Jewish American participants responding to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while it was hardly represented in the other samples where power relations in the conflict and in the broader regional context are more ambiguous. For example, a Jewish American participant noted: "The data on this is clear. Palestinian causality and death counts are far higher. There's no room for debate." (JA-C, 186). Of course, this acknowledgment is not inevitable among high power groups in the conflict, and claims of equal suffering or competitive victimhood are also common (McNeill & Vollhardt, 2020; Noor et al., 2012). In future studies, it will therefore be important to understand which individual differences and conditions motivate downward comparisons of victimization.

Rejecting comparisons of suffering. Finally, across all samples a substantial number of participants rejected the assumption underlying all comparative victim beliefs, asserting that

suffering cannot be compared. In most contexts, at least one tenth of the sample rejected this view, for various reasons: stating that it was difficult to do, morally problematic, or even distasteful. For example, one Armenian American participant explained:

I cannot claim that one person or peoples’ suffering is better or worse than another. All victimization and suffering, through genocide or other means, is bad. Their experiences are hardly comparable, though (apart from methods of causing suffering). Not only is it wrong to compare them, statements of comparison of suffering cannot be objective. For instance, I have experienced no form of suffering like that of my ancestors, I am therefore incapable of even understanding what that suffering is like, and have no basis for comparison. How can I compare two experiences, both of which I have never had? (AA, 98)

These statements clearly take issue with the focus of the survey items, representing commonly assessed constructs in social psychological research on collective victimhood (Noor et al., 2017). The rejection of the assumptions underlying these constructs has important theoretical, methodological, and ethical considerations for research on collective victim beliefs. It suggests that, at least for some participants, we may be assessing reactance to the construals, and potentially upsetting participants with this focus. It also suggests that if we limit our measures (or interview questions) to comparative victim beliefs we may fail to capture the aspects and construals of collective victimization that participants find most meaningful. Therefore, it is crucial to examine what people emphasize in addition to or beyond comparative victim beliefs, and to include additional collective victim beliefs in our research and theorizing. The following, final codes present examples of other collective victim beliefs participants deemed relevant.

Characteristics of Collective Victimization

One set of codes that was unprompted by the collective victim belief items included in the survey address specific characteristics and aspects of the ingroup's collective victimization that participants chose to emphasize. Both were context-specific.

Historical victimization. Some participants—especially in the Hungarian and in the Jewish American sample responding to the Holocaust—discussed the historical nature of their group's victimization. A Jewish American participant noted: "These questions missed the key component for many Jews. The timescale of 3000 years of victimization" (JA-G, 208). This suggests that at least in some contexts, temporal construals of the ingroup's victimization may be important to examine, including the perceived perpetual nature of victimization (which was also discussed by some participants, though less frequently—see online supplementary materials). These perceptions have been studied mostly among Jewish Israelis (Schori-Eyal et al., 2014, 2017) but can be relevant for other contexts as well (e.g., László, 2013).

Unacknowledged victimhood. Over one fourth of the Armenian American sample, but no other sample, addressed the denial of their group's victimization as a central aspect of their experience. As one participant explained: "For me, it is the denial of the Armenian genocide that has been most hurtful" (AA, 197). This focus makes sense, given the widespread denial of the genocide by the Turkish state and their allies (Akçam, 2006; Bilali, 2013). Among Armenians, this denial is often viewed as perpetuating the injustice, giving rise to strong negative emotions and the sense that closure is not possible (Kalayjian et al., 1996; Vollhardt & Nair, 2018). In several contexts it has been shown that denial or insufficient acknowledgment of the ingroup's victimization decreases ingroup members' psychological well-being (Vollhardt et al., 2014), further deteriorates trust and intergroup attitudes towards the perpetrator group (Hameiri &

Nadler, 2017), and predicts negative attitudes towards victim groups that receive more acknowledgement than the ingroup (De Guismé & Licata, 2017). Therefore, perceived acknowledgment versus denial of the ingroup’s victimization is important to consider alongside other collective victim beliefs—especially in contexts of widespread denial, which may be a greater concern than, for example, comparisons with other groups’ experiences of collective victimization.

Attributions of Blame for Ingroup Victimization

Among the main questions in making sense of collective victimization is why it happened, and who is responsible for the harmdoing (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Leach, 2020). Accordingly, another set of codes we identified addressed attributions for the violence to different sources. Previous research in the context of the Holocaust shows differences in attributions of its causes between victim and perpetrator groups, focusing on external, situational attributions versus attributions to internal causes such as the perpetrator group’s “evil essence” (Imhoff et al., 2017). In the present study, some participants discussed more generally who is to blame for their group’s victimization. This was mostly mentioned in the samples discussing an ongoing, unresolved conflict (including due to denial by the perpetrator group). Conversely, the question of responsibility was not brought up in contexts where there has been a formal peace process (Northern Irish sample), successful reconciliation after a genocide (Jewish American sample responding to the Holocaust; see Vollhardt et al., 2014), and the two cases of historical victimization without recent armed conflict (Polish and Hungarian sample; see Szabó, 2020). In these cases, there may be closure on the question of responsibility, whereas it is a central question for ongoing conflicts and injustices that needs to be resolved to determine conflict resolutions and reparations (e.g., Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011).

The enemy or perpetrator group is to blame. Some participants focused on the perpetrator or enemy group's responsibility for the ingroup's victimization. This answer was most common among Jewish Americans responding to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and among Armenian Americans discussing the Armenian Genocide and lack of justice in its aftermath. For example, one participant wrote: "All those responsible need to be held accountable. Turkey committed the Armenian Genocide (Greek, Assyrian), Turkey supported Germany (Nazi), now they support Daesh and again Christians are being murdered" (AA, 261).

Governments are to blame but not the people. Conversely, a few participants, mostly in the Greek Cypriot sample, emphasized that one should not blame the entire group for the violence but only the group's leaders. This may be due to narratives advanced mostly by progressive Greek Cypriots about the peaceful co-existence of Greek and Turkish Cypriots during most of the country's history, and the attribution of blame for the 1974 invasion to the political interests of Turkey, as opposed to Turkish-Cypriots.

In some cases, these attributions of responsibility included the ingroup's leaders. For example, a Northern Irish participant noted:

Personally, being raised in a strongly loyalist area made me extremely angry at how paramilitaries abused their communities. I am Irish and proud. I am very cynical about former terrorists/paramilitaries and feel the government pander to their needs too much to the detriment of honest hardworking non-violent citizens. (NI, 230)

Overall, different attributions of responsibility for the ingroup's victimization likely affect willingness to reconcile with the perpetrator group. Previous research shows that people who attributed the reason for the ingroup's victimization to the "evil essence" of the perpetrator group were least likely to support historical closure, while external attributions increased positive

attitudes towards the perpetrator group (Imhoff et al., 2017). Similarly, future research should examine the important distinction between ordinary citizens and leaders of the group who were/are responsible for the ingroup’s victimization, and examine its effects on attitudes towards members of this group. And more generally, different attributions for the ingroup’s victimization should be included in studies of the complex web of collective victim beliefs that help understand peoples’ appraisals of the group’s collective victimization more fully (Leach, 2020).

Discussion

Overall, this qualitative content analysis of open-ended responses following survey items that assessed commonly studied conceptualizations of collective victimhood in six different contexts shows how participants respond to collective victim beliefs deemed relevant by researchers. The findings reveal that participants’ construals are more complex than the constructs typically examined in the collective victimhood literature. Participants’ responses *extend* these established constructs by providing more nuance (e.g., distinguishing between different kinds of inclusive victim beliefs). They also *echo* calls in the literature to examine other construals that are not often considered (e.g., centrality of victimization, downward comparisons). Furthermore, the findings reveal that many participants *reject the assumptions* of much of the collective victimhood literature—above all, questioning whether victimhood can be compared, and whether collective victimization is as relevant to group members as researchers assume. Finally, the findings *introduce* collective victim beliefs that have not been studied so far, such as defocusing collective victimhood. These findings suggest several promising directions for future theorizing and research on collective victimhood.

First, the finding that various ways of defocusing collective victimhood were among the most frequent codes among all samples shows that the assumption of collective victimization as

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a central concern to group members is problematic (Leach, 2020). As suggested by the code “alternatives of victimhood,” research on collective victim beliefs should also address the group’s resilience and strength, resistance and survival (Jeong & Vollhardt, 2021; Mosley et al., 2020; Vollhardt & Nair, 2018; Quayle & Sonn, 2019). Some participants criticized the ingroup’s or researchers’ preoccupation with its victimization, urging us to also consider other aspects of their history and culture. This suggests that centrality of collective victimhood is not merely linked to identity strength, but indicates different identity content. Accordingly, future research should include questions about the perceived centrality of the group’s victimization rather than assuming it, and examine its relation to different facets of ingroup identification. Another interesting research question is how defocusing collective victimhood relates to mobilizing versus demobilizing collective action demanding justice and reparations, attitudes towards the perpetrator group, and psychological well-being.

Second, our findings demonstrate that it is crucial to examine—among those who do perceive the group’s victimization as relevant— a variety of collective victim beliefs and which are endorsed by different group members. This is in line with the appraisal theory approach to collective victimization, which posits that people first decide whether or not the group’s victimization is relevant to the individual’s or group’s concerns and goals and then appraise it in different ways depending on these concerns and goals (Leach, 2020). The focus so far on just a few specific construals deemed relevant by researchers—such as competitive victimhood and/or inclusive victim consciousness—is too narrow, and does not capture the variety of ways in which people think about their group’s victimization. Moreover, it may even backlash when researchers assess collective victim beliefs that do not match participants’ own beliefs, that they reject, or even find offensive. This is illustrated in the code “rejecting comparisons” and quotes by

participants (see also Table 3) who indicate their indignation about the comparative victim belief items that are commonly assessed. If we limit our assessment of collective victim beliefs to this narrow and contested set, we risk not only alienating participants, but also merely assessing backlash to the construal.

Another noteworthy finding is that inclusive victim beliefs were discussed more than competitive victimhood—even though the latter is often considered to be the default (e.g., Klar et al., 2013; Shnabel et al., 2013). Inclusive victim beliefs may seem more socially desirable than competitive victimhood, which might explain why it was expressed more frequently in our study. However, even if this is the reason, perceived normativity of intergroup attitudes plays a crucial role in shaping peoples’ beliefs and behaviors (e.g., Paluck, 2009), and this finding is therefore informative.

Additionally, the findings on inclusive victim consciousness revealed a crucial distinction that future research should examine more: namely, the degree to which differences are also acknowledged while perceiving a general degree of similarity in experiences—in contrast to glossing over such differences and claiming “sameness” (Nair & Vollhardt, 2020). Perceived sameness often implies ignoring power differences between groups in asymmetric conflicts, or different minority groups in society. However, research on inclusive victim beliefs so far has failed to address this (McNeill & Vollhardt, 2020). Differences in experiences of victimization and current power relations are also acknowledged in the understudied downward comparisons of suffering that were identified in the present study and should receive more research attention.

This leads to a final, crucial theoretical implication of the present findings: the central role that the historical and sociopolitical context plays in shaping collective victim beliefs. Throughout our findings, we identified and discussed context differences regarding which

collective victim beliefs were discussed and to what degree. This shows the importance of considering the historical and present-day context when choosing which collective victim beliefs are most meaningful to assess in a given population, and that not all collective victim beliefs can be generalized to all contexts (Szabó, 2020). Based on our findings we cannot conclude which collective victim beliefs are truly relevant for all contexts, because those that were discussed in all samples (e.g., centrality of or defocusing collective victimhood; inclusive and exclusive victim beliefs) were prompted by the survey items participants completed before responding to the open-ended question. More systematic cross-cultural comparisons are needed to determine which collective victim beliefs are context-specific and which more generalizable.

Future studies should also address several other limitations of the present study. First, we used different sampling methods to recruit participants in the different settings, and the findings are therefore not readily comparable. For example, two samples included many student participants, while another was from a panel representative of the general population's characteristics. Additionally, varying percentages of the overall sample responded to the open-ended question, and the response rates to the open-ended questions were overall low, which is common for survey research (Reja et al., 2003). Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire group, although a comparison of demographic characteristics and several social psychological variables related to group identity and collective victim beliefs only showed very few statistically significant differences between responders and non-responders (see Footnote 3 and online supplementary materials). Nevertheless, future research would benefit from representative samples, where feasible. This would also address another limitation of the study, which is that most participants had high levels of education, which could influence exposure to certain types of collective victim beliefs. Future research should examine the influence of

education and social class more generally on collective victim beliefs—as well as take into account intersecting social identities such as of class and gender that likely shape peoples’ experience of collective victimization (Nair & Vollhardt, 2019, 2020) but that we were unable to analyze within the scope of the present paper.

Additionally, the contexts we studied were limited to European countries and two relatively advantaged minority groups in the U.S. The collective victim beliefs we identified here therefore cannot be considered exhaustive. Studies in other countries, continents, and among disadvantaged minority groups could yield different findings and collective victim beliefs. Finally, the responses were preceded and therefore prompted by specific collective victim beliefs assessed in the quantitative survey. While this was part of our study design, to examine participants’ reactions to commonly assessed collective victim beliefs, the findings may have differed if participants had answered unprompted, or to different collective victim beliefs items.

Strengths of the present study include the range of different contexts included in our study, several of which are underrepresented in social psychological research on this topic (see Szabó, 2020). By drawing on a diverse range of contexts we were able to identify a broader range of perspectives on collective victimization and challenge some of the assumptions in this literature. Additionally, our samples include community members of different age groups and backgrounds and not just student samples or crowdsourced participants; and we examined several underrepresented contexts representing different forms of collective victimization. The qualitative nature of this study is also a strength. It allows us to see the greater complexity and nuance with which participants respond to the constructs used in many collective victimhood studies, including their rejection of some of these constructs and the additional ways in which participants make sense of the ingroup’s collective victimization that are understudied so far.

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To conclude, this study shows the importance of conceptualizing collective victim beliefs in a more complex way. Rather than limiting ourselves to particular collective victim beliefs rooted in specific concerns and contexts—but then generalizing them to contexts where they may not be as relevant—we need to consider a broader range of collective victim beliefs and determine which are most relevant for a given context. This can include, for example, downward comparisons in contexts of strong power differentials, or perceived centrality or acknowledgment of the ingroup's victimization in contexts where it is often denied or silenced. Generally, we should avoid assuming the relevance of collective victimization for all group members, and consider alternative appraisals. Overall, a richer description of the phenomenon is crucial for developing theoretical models of collective victimhood (see Pettigrew, 1996). The present paper contributes a step towards this goal.

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Footnotes

1. As part of a larger review of the psychological literature on collective victimhood (Authors, in preparation), we analyzed how many of the empirical manuscripts on this topic in social psychology (i.e., published in social psychological journals, or journals in other subdisciplines such as political psychology or community psychology but using social psychological frameworks) until 2019 (including a few papers that were in press first at the time) assessed comparative victim beliefs, versus not. More than half (53%) of the 75 papers identified through a search in PsychInfo with the keywords “collective victimhood [victimization, trauma]”, “historical victimhood [victimization, trauma]”, “national victimhood [victimization, trauma]”, “cultural trauma”, “racial trauma” and “collective victim beliefs” assessed comparative victim beliefs (any kind of comparison between the ingroup’s and outgroups’ suffering, regardless of what it was labeled as) as a central focus. The remaining papers (47%) addressed many different topics related to collective victimhood (e.g., acknowledgment, narratives, temporal scope of victimhood) with just a few papers each. The review materials are available from the authors upon request.
2. According to a representative survey of Jewish Americans conducted in 2020, 92% identified as White (Pew Research Center, 2021).
3. While the percentage of respondents may seem low, this is not surprising given that the open-ended question was optional and responses to open-ended questions are usually much lower compared to close-ended questions (Reja et al., 2003). A comparison of the demographic characteristics of participants who responded versus did not respond to the open-ended questions, and of their mean scores on several relevant social psychological

constructs, only revealed very few significant differences that were not consistent across samples. Most variables showed no significant differences between participants who did versus did not respond. The findings are reported in detail in the online supplementary materials.

4. There were approximately equal numbers of items assessing inclusive and exclusive victim beliefs and centrality of collective victimization, and three items assessing downward comparisons of suffering. The centrality items also included an equal number of reverse-coded items. Depending on the context, we assessed the comparative victim beliefs with a global (Armenian and Jewish American samples), regional (Hungarian and Polish samples), or conflict-specific (Northern Irish, Greek Cypriot, and Jewish American sample asked about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) reference group. For more details see Authors, 2021.

Table 1

Overview of Sample Characteristics

	Northern Ireland (<i>N</i> = 90)	Jewish American (I-P conflict) (<i>N</i> = 100)	Greek Cypriot (<i>N</i> = 52)	Hungarian (<i>N</i> = 139)	Polish (<i>N</i> = 89)	Armenian American (<i>N</i> = 80)	Jewish American (Holocaust) (<i>N</i> = 88)
Age	18 – 68 <i>M</i> = 28.47 <i>SD</i> = 12.01	18 – 90 <i>M</i> = 49.02 <i>SD</i> = 19.65	18 – 75 <i>M</i> = 34.08 <i>SD</i> = 16.90	18 – 78 <i>M</i> = 27.70 <i>SD</i> = 10.61	19 – 69 <i>M</i> = 38.51 <i>SD</i> = 13.44	17 – 86 <i>M</i> = 48.98 <i>SD</i> = 17.79	18 – 87 <i>M</i> = 51.61 <i>SD</i> = 20.06
Gender	67% female 33% male	42% female 57% male	49% female 51% male	57.6% female 42.4% male	54.4% female 44.4% male 1.1% other	53.8% female 46.3% male	55.8% female 39.5% male 2.2% other
Education	2.2% no GCSEs or equivalent. 3.3% GCSEs or equiv. 59.3% A- Levels or equiv. 9.9% HNC, HND or equiv. 9.9% BA degree. 15.4% MA degree	3% high school degree/GED 14% some college 25% 4-year college degree 28% MA degree 30% doctoral degree (incl. MD, JD)	27.5% high school degree/GED 47.1% 4-year college degree 21.6 % MA degree 2% doctoral degree (incl. MD, JD)	7.7% no high school degree 41.7% high school (incl. current university students) 25.7% BA degree 22.2% MA degree 2.8% doctoral degree	2.2% no high school degree 20% high school degree/GED 15.6% some college 13.3% 4-year college degree 43.3% MA degree 12.2% doctoral degree (incl. MD, JD)	1.3% no high school degree 2.5% high school degree/GED 8.8% some college 35% 4-year college degree 33.8% MA degree 18.8% doctoral degree (incl. MD, JD)	2.3% high school degree/GED 17.5% some college 20.9% 4-year college degree 33.7% MA degree 24.4% doctoral degree (incl. MD, JD)

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Table 2

Overview of Codes and Frequencies (Above 10%)

		Northern Ireland	Jewish American	Greek Cypriot	Hungarian	Polish	Armenian American	Jewish American
Average Kappa		.85	.74	.79	.78	.97	.78	.74
I. Centrality of Ingroup Victimization								
I.1. Centrality of Ingroup Victimization		3.3%	5%	5.8%	15.8%	16.9%	18.8%	11.4%
I.1.1	Importance of remembrance and commemoration	1.1%	1%	5.8%	12.2%	15.7%	13.8%	6.8%
I.2. Defocusing Victimhood		41.1%	11%	11.5%	48.2%	28.1%	22.3%	14.8%
I.2.1	Lack of relevance	17.8%	3%	1.9%	7.9%	6.7%	0%	2.3%
I.2.2	Moving on	24.4%	1%	9.6%	28.8%	15.7%	7.5%	0%
I.2.3	Harmful consequences of focusing on victimization	7.8%	2%	3.8%	15.1%	4.5%	8.8%	3.4%
I.2.4	Alternatives to focusing on victimhood	4.4%	8%	0%	8.6%	5.6%	15%	11.4%
II. Comparative Victim Beliefs								
II.1. Exclusive victim consciousness								
II.1.1	Competitive victimhood	4.4%	8%	9.6%	0%	0%	6.3%	11.4%

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II.1.2	Unique and distinct victimization	2.2%	0%	0%	2.9%	5.6%	15%	17%
<u>II.2. Inclusive Victim Consciousness</u>								
II.2.1	No acknowledgement of differences	20%	12%	30.8%	17.3%	16.9%	17.5%	22.7%
II.2.2	Acknowledgement of differences & similarities	14.4%	16%	9.6%	11.5%	1.1%	17.5%	18.2%
<u>II.3. Downward Comparisons of Suffering</u>								
		0%	15%	0%	4.3%	2.2%	0%	1.1%
<u>II.4. Rejecting Comparisons of Suffering</u>								
		4.4%	16%	9.6%	10.1%	10.1%	10%	14.8%
III. Characteristics of Collective Victimization								
III.1	Historical victimization	0%	5%	0%	9%	0%	5%	12.5%
III.2	Unacknowledged victimhood	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	28.8%	0%
IV. Attributions of Blame for Ingroup Victimization								
IV.1	The enemy/perpetrator group is to blame for our victimization	1.1%	11%	0%	1.4%	0%	8.8%	0%
IV.2	Governments are to blame but not the people	3.3%	4%	13.5%	0.7%	0%	1.3%	0%

Table 3

Sample Proof Quotes for Each Code

Theme	Sample Quotes
I.1. Centrality of Ingroup Victimization	
I. 1.1 Importance of remembrance and commemoration	<p>As a Jew it is important to remember our history and remember how we were treated so as to understand our responsibility is to treat all with a spirit of making the world a better place for all. (JA-G, 2)</p> <p>The history of my nation is important to me, that's why I remember it and I respect the history of my ancestors. (PL, 60)</p>
I.2. Defocusing Collective Victimhood	
I.2.1 Lack of relevance	<p>While the history of persecution of Jews is a major element of my Jewish consciousness, it's not something I dwell on day to day. When I reflect on my Judaism, the first things that come to mind are its millennia-old traditions, the emphasis on family and continuity, and love of Erez Yisrael. The Holocaust and similar events of the past come to the front of my mind mainly when I am faced with current instances of discrimination against or persecution of Jews. (JA-G, 332)</p>
I.2.2 Moving on	<p>The importance of moving beyond identities as victims to affirming our lives is most important otherwise we continue to transfer genocide trauma and identity as victims. (AA, 12)</p> <p>We have to remember our history, but mostly live in the present and the future, not in continuous clearing of the past and erecting monuments. (PL, 54)</p>
I.2.3 Harmful consequences of focusing on victimization	<p>Knowing all one's history is important, yet I feel Armenians have over-emphasized their victimization and suffering to the detriment of their self-understanding and future prospects. (AA, 89)</p> <p>I feel it is not healthy to live life always in the perspective of being victimized. It is important not to let such feelings overwhelm the positive aspects of being Jewish. (JA-G, 97)</p>
I.2.4 Alternatives to focusing on	<p>I have been a student and teacher of Jewish history for over 50 years. (...) I prefer to focus on Jewish survival, strength, success, etc., than on Jewish victimhood. (JA-CS, 273)</p>

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victimhood	Of course the knowledge of our history – including our sufferings – is important. I mean the national days, commemorations are important, because they can strengthen our common identity. On the other hand, for me to be a Hungarian does not equal to the constant adducing to our national tragedies (e.g. Trianon, communist era). My national identity primarily consists of the knowledge and care of our colorful cultural heritage. [...] (HU, 28)
II. Comparative Victim Beliefs	
II.1. Exclusive victim consciousness	
II.1.1 Competitive victimhood	<p>The Greek-Cypriots suffered more than the Turkish-Cypriots, since the Ottoman rule (1570) and later during the British rule (1878). At the same time during the Ottoman rule, the other communities minus the Turkish-Cypriots, suffered but to a lesser degree. (CY, 52)</p> <p>However, I do believe that my community has suffered quite more due to the constant oppression. Faced by Catholics daily regarding various civil and human rights issues and constantly being seen as the "second citizen" to Protestants/Unionists by the British government in their discrimination. (NI, 60)</p>
II.1.2 Unique and distinct victimization	<p>While we can say that no nation has suffered more than the others, but the Hungarians' suffering is unique as there have been no closure. While the Czech, Slovakian, and Polish are now able to live in their own countries and speak their own languages, practice their civil rights and the right of their national sovereignty, millions of Hungarians have to live outside of their homeland, thanks to the decisions which were made in Trianon and Paris. (HU, 30)</p> <p>The Armenian suffering is similar to other ethnic group's suffering. However, the Armenian genocide is unique because it was the first and our "genocide" has not been acknowledged by the Turkish or the US Government. (AA, 199)</p>
II.2. Inclusive victim consciousness	
II.2.1 No acknowledgment of differences	<p>Suffering is a universal human experience. (JA-CS, 4)</p> <p>It is important to understand the history for the suffering that Greek Cypriots have gone through, but there must be information for those that Turkish Cypriots have gone through. This however does not usually happen and therefore we focus on our own problems. But in a war both sides suffer, both have dead as well as refugees.</p>

	(Cypriot)
II.2.2 Acknowledgment of differences and similarities	<p>I think both groups Greek and Turkish Cypriots have been affected by the Cyprus problem. But simply each group in its own issues. The Greek Cypriots want to return to their villages, to their homes to get their property back, those that belong to them. The Turkish Cypriots on the other hand live in houses they know that are not their own (...) so they feel that it is not theirs, and they have not changed anything from the house. (CY, 11)</p> <p>The Armenian suffering is similar to other ethnic group's suffering. However, the Armenian genocide is unique because it was the first and our "genocide" has not been acknowledged by the Turkish or the US Government. (AA, 199)</p>
II.3 Downward comparisons of suffering	<p>I believe Palestinians have suffered more, not less. (JA-CS, 22)</p> <p>I think the Hungarians' history of suffering is overdramatic, e.g. the history of the Poles, Bosnians, and Jewish people have much more negative (...) (HU, 109)</p>
II.4 Rejecting comparisons of suffering	<p>It is distasteful to rank the severity of tragedies. (HU, 85)</p> <p>Comparative suffering of Jews vs Palestinians does not factor greatly into how I think of these issues or of this conflict. Suffering is not a competitive sport. (JA-CS, 32)</p> <p>As someone who has experienced more than my share of very serious suffering, I don't think suffering can be compared in terms of amount, like in asking "who suffered more." The different types of suffering, the different focuses they have, the different responses they arise and characters they possess, make such comparisons not only irrelevant but inappropriate. (JA-CS, 44)</p>
III. Characteristics of Collective Victimization	
III.1 Unacknowledged victimhood	<p>The denial of genocide and historical revisionism are to me also very significant elements in my understanding and experience of the Armenian Genocide. Those elements may be unparalleled, not so much the acts of cruelty and the suffering. (AA, 25)</p> <p>Until this year, the Armenian Genocide has been swept under the rug politically. The more we speak, the more real it becomes to those who do not believe it happened. (AA, 87)</p>

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III.2 Historical victimization	<p>The founding of the State of Israel has ameliorated age-old Jewish suffering. However, there has been a price for the founding of the State of Israel, and it has been paid by the Palestinians. However, Palestinian suffering is of fairly recent vintage. Jewish suffering is thousands of years old. [...] (JA-CS, 234)</p> <p>[...] Armenians were massacred repeatedly in their ancestral homeland in historic Armenia and Anatolia, unlike the Jewish people who were subjected to genocide in Europe. Women and children were abducted by Turks and Kurds for several centuries culminating in the massacres of the 1890's, and the Genocide in 1915-1923. Our numbers gradually dwindled in our own homeland. [...] (AA, 265)</p>
IV. Attributions for Ingroup Victimization	
IV.1 The enemy/perpetrator group is to blame	<p>I am not a person who is biased towards Protestants and as a whole I am not very religious - I have not practiced Catholicism since primary school when I was forced to. However, from my own experience growing up and my study of History during GCSE and A Levels, I have formed my own opinions of how the Catholic people of Northern Ireland were made to suffer far beyond the troubles of Protestant peoples. (...) I feel that Protestantism as a whole is an antagonistic faction of Christianity, determined to perform their 12th of July parades up and down areas of Northern Ireland known to be overwhelmingly Catholic, and building up their bonfires each year with images of hatred that they simply cannot seem to move past. It is deeply saddening for me, someone who did not grow up during the height of the Troubles. (NI, 297)</p> <p>I think more in terms of blame than suffering. Palestinians have suffered a great deal, to be sure, but their suffering is mainly the result of the decisions they and their leaders (elected and unelected) have made over the last century. They (and the Arab states) are responsible for both Palestinian and Israeli suffering. (JA-CS, 260)</p>
IV.2 Governments are to blame but not the people	<p>It is a serious issue and we need to understand that not an entire people is to blame for the mistakes of the old governments of each country. Additionally, we should not assign blame on one side but on both because there were and there are on both sides patriots and traitors. The time has come for a reunification to bring peace and tranquility to our souls. (CY, 23)</p> <p>When mentioning Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is vague on which time period since some groups suffer more during different politics happening between the two governments, depending on the attitude of the leader towards their people as well as the other country/territory. (JA-CS, 8)</p>

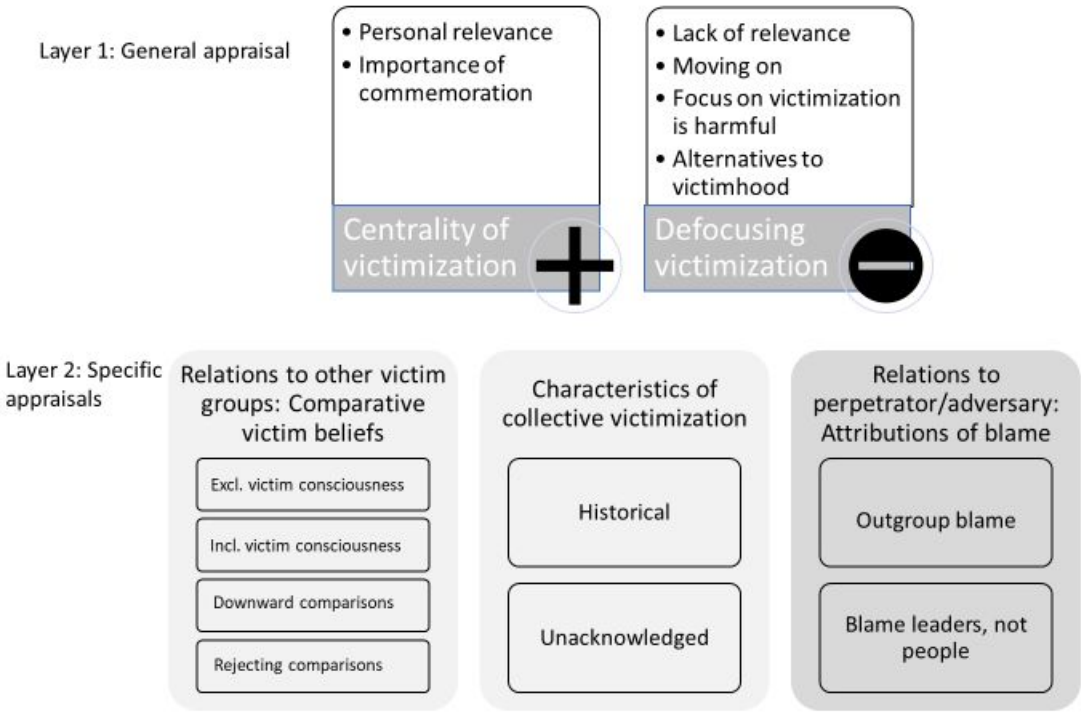


Figure 1. Overview and theoretical structure of collective victim beliefs identified in the data.