

**INTERGROUP RELATIONS, RACISM AND ATTRIBUTION  
OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL TRAITS**

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**RESUMEN**

Este trabajo se enmarca dentro de la hipótesis general de que en la actualidad el racismo y la xenofobia se expresan no solo de manera directa sino también indirectamente, evitando con esto último que la gente sea considerada como transgresora de la norma contra-racista. A partir de esta hipótesis general derivamos otras más específicas sobre el favoritismo de grupo y la descalificación del grupo ajeno en función de la atribución de rasgos naturales y culturales. Probamos la hipótesis de que los grupos que son objeto del "racialization" (africanos negros) o "ethnization" (gente clasificada como "de países del este" y como musulmanes) pueden también ser objeto de ontologización. Los resultados demuestran el favoritismo hacia el propio grupo y la descalificación de grupos ajenos o grupos percibidos en una posición social inferior. También muestran que si un grupo ajeno tiene la misma posición social que el propio y supuestos orígenes comunes, entonces no es objeto de discriminación. El único grupo ontologizado es el Africano-negro

**ABSTRACT**

This paper is framed by the general hypothesis according to which racism and xenophobia are today expressed not only in direct ways but also in indirect ways, in ways that protect people from being seen as transgressors of the anti-racist norm. From this general hypothesis we derived specific hypotheses on ingroup favouritism and outgroup derogation at the level of the attribution of natural and cultural traits. We tested the hypothesis that the groups that are object of racialization (black Africans) or ethnization (people classified as "from eastern countries" and as Muslims) can also be object of ontologisation. Our results show an ingroup favouritism and outgroup derogation of devalued outgroups or of outgroups with inferior social status. Results also show that an outgroup with a status equal to the one of the ingroup and with common imagined roots is not object of discrimination. Moreover, black Africans are the only group object of ontologisation.

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**Key words:** prejudice, ontologisation, ingroup, outgroup, natural and cultural traits

**Introduction**

Overt and blatant racism persists in our societies despite its condemnation by legal and social norms. For instance, according to the 1997 and 1999 Eurobarometer on racism and xenophobia, for quite a number of Europeans, the presence of people from *another race, religion or culture* in their country is the object of negative beliefs and evaluations: "there are too

many of them”, “they take advantage of the social system”, they contribute “to insecurity” and “to unemployment” (see Ben Brika, Lemaine and Jackson, 1997; Deschamps and Lemaine, 2004; Thalhammer, Zucha, Enzenhofer, Salfinger and Ogris, 2001). Apart from traditional forms of racist attitudes and behaviours (Allport, 1954), new and more sophisticated forms of racism have emerged and underlie much day-to-day discriminatory behaviour, whether at institutional level or at inter-individual level, in a diffuse and almost imperceptible way, in a way that apparently does not violate the anti-racism norm. These new racial attitudes are manifest in various indirect ways as shown by Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) in a study on *subtle racism* carried out in four European countries. Symbolic racism as analysed by Kinder e Sears (1981); Sears and Henry (2003) and the so called *modern racism* (McConahay, 1986) show a displacement of racism from biological to cultural factors. More recently, Vala, Lopes, Lima and Brito (2002) proposed that, not only did the representation of human groups based on the idea of race become anti-normative but also the idea of cultural hierarchies is now an anti-normative belief. Consequently, the accentuation of cultural differences is now perceived as a legitimate way of implicitly categorizing minorities as inferior groups, especially those who were explicitly racialised until now. It was in this context that those authors defined *hetero-ethnicization* as a process of exclusion and inferiorization based on the imputation to *other* of a different culture. Hetero-ethnicization is not recognised as a violation of the anti-racist norm, and is used as a justification of discrimination.

Besides hetero-ethnicization and implicit prejudice (for a review see Fazio and Olson, 2003), other indirect forms of racism that do not violate the anti-racist norms were studied, forms as the negation of positive traits to black people (e.g. Gaertner and McLaughlin, 1983) or the negation of positive emotion to immigrants (Pettigrew and Mertens, 1995). In the same vein, Leyens, Paladino, Rodríguez-Torres, Vaes, Demoulin, Rodríguez-Pérez and Gaunt (2000) identified an indirect mechanism of discrimination based on the differential attribution of emotions and sentiments (or secondary emotions) and they proposed the concept of *infra-humanisation* to refer the fact that outgroup members, like animals, are seen as less capable of expressing sentiments or secondary emotions than ingroup members.

Recently, Moscovici and Pérez (1999) proposed a distinction between natural traits and cultural traits. In a research on the resistance of gypsies to assimilation, those authors concluded that the more the resistance of gypsies towards assimilation was made salient, the more they were attributed natural traits (like aggressive or spontaneous) and the less they were attri-

buted cultural traits (like civilized or superstitious). The differential attribution of both types of traits would be anchored on an implicit strategy of *ontologisation* (Moscovici and Pérez, 1997; Pérez, Moscovici and Chulvi, 2002), i.e. on the belief that certain human groups are less human than others or, in other words, that some groups remain closer to nature or to the animal than others, a position that would legitimize their fate. In their model, they propose a distinction between *discrimination*, a process based on intergroup relations, and *ontologisation*, a process that consists of the isolation of a group in a specific universe excluded from human kind. Moscovici and Pérez (1997) propose that only some groups are object of ontologisation. According to these authors “each group member sees itself as a prototypical human being and each group defines their own savages” (Pérez et al., in preparation). Parallel to this perspective, Leyens et al. (2000), who proposed the concept of infra-humanization, as referred above, defend that this is anchored on intergroup relations and shows the capacity of all groups (even the dominated ones) to express their value as human beings.

In the frame of the analysis of expressions of racism that don't violate the anti-racist norm, and in the framework of the ontologization process, we analyze the attribution of *natural* traits (e.g. intuitive) and *cultural* traits (e.g. intelligent) to a national ingroup (Swiss in the present case), and to an outgroup, whether of equal status (a West European country: Germany), or belonging to populations of potential immigrants that have been objects of racialization or ethnicisation (black people from Africa, people from Muslim countries, people from Eastern European countries).

We posited the hypothesis that respondents would consider that a greater percentage of ingroup members (Swiss people) would own *cultural traits* than any of the outgroups (*ingroup favoritism*), a hypothesis derived from the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1972, 1979).

We also expected that respondents would attribute a larger percentage of *natural* traits to Muslims, to people from East European countries, and to black Africans than to ingroup members (*devaluation or derogation of outgroups* of inferior status), an hypothesis that comes from the categorical differentiation model (e.g. Deschamps, 1984; Doise, 1978). Moreover, it was expected that participants would attribute more *natural traits* than *cultural traits* to those same outgroups, normally targets of ethnicisation or racialization. This last pattern of response could be an indicator of implicit ontologisation, that is, a process of exclusion of a group from the human species (Moscovici, 2002; Moscovici and Pérez, 1999).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample was a random representative sample of 18 years or older from the Swiss population: 1039 respondents answered the questionnaire. 95 non-Swiss were eliminated and from the remaining 944, 38 are *Tessinois* (Italian language people), 167 are *Romands* (French language people) and 739 are *Alemaniques* (German language people). The Tessinois are weakly represented due to their respectively low numerical weight in Switzerland. Moreover the number of Romands is insufficient to allow the analysis required by the experimental plan. Consequently only 739 *Alemaniques* are considered in this study (360 women, 379 men; age,  $m = 51$ ,  $sd = 17,28$ ).

### **Procedure**

In 2003, the ISSP 2003 (International Social Survey Programme, an international survey research network concentrating on important domains of study in social sciences) was carried out in several countries. Its main issue was National Identity (the questionnaire included a wide number of questions concerning life in society, values, life satisfaction and well-being, trust in institutions, national pride, group identification, etc). The results presented in this paper concern the data collected in Switzerland. The interviews were conducted between the 7<sup>th</sup> May and the 25<sup>th</sup> August 2003; the method was face-to-face interview in the house of the respondent.

Apart from the international module of the ISSP 2003, and the background variables, a specific group of questions on racism and xenophobia was introduced in Switzerland. The trait attribution task was part of this group. From a list of 8 traits, the respondent should indicate: a) the proportion of Swiss people that possesses each of the traits (in a 10 point scale where 1 = 0-10% and 10 = 90-100%); and b) the same task but regarding one of the following target-groups: the Germans; people from Muslim countries; people from Black African countries; or people from East European countries. We have then an experimental design where ingroup/outgroup was a within subject factor and where the type of outgroup (German people, Muslim people, black African people and people from East European countries) was a between subject factor.

### **Measures**

The traits were organized according to the following categorization: *cultural* traits (competent, intelligent, honest and civilized); *natural* traits (intuitive, spontaneous, simple and free).

A pre-test study (Aguilar and Lima, 2001) showed that the traits classified as *natural traits* are more used to describe animals than human beings; are perceived as more hereditary than learned; and are perceived as established very soon in the process of socialization. On the contrary, the traits classified as *cultural traits* are more used to describe human beings than animals, are perceived as more learned than hereditary; and are seen as established later. All traits were evaluated as positive.

The standardized alphas for the cultural traits are good (for the description of Swiss:  $\alpha = .73$ ; for the Germans:  $\alpha = .73$ ; for the black Africans:  $\alpha = .73$ ; for the Muslims:  $\alpha = .81$ ; for the East Europeans:  $\alpha = .78$ ). The analysis of internal consistency of natural traits showed that, in this context, the trait *free* wasn't understood as a natural trait. Instead, it received a political connotation. For that reason the trait *free* was removed from the analysis. The alphas of the remaining 3 natural traits (intuitive, spontaneous, simple) are smaller but acceptable (Swiss:  $\alpha = .56$ ; Germans:  $\alpha = .72$ ; black Africans:  $\alpha = .64$ ; Muslims:  $\alpha = .49$ ; East Europeans:  $\alpha = .47$ ).

## Results

In order to test our hypotheses, a first data analysis contrasted the attribution of *cultural* and *natural* traits to the ingroup (the Swiss) with the attribution of the same traits to all outgroups taken together (Germans, Muslims, East Europeans and black Africans, see table 1).

Table 1  
Attribution of cultural and natural traits to the ingroup and to outgroup

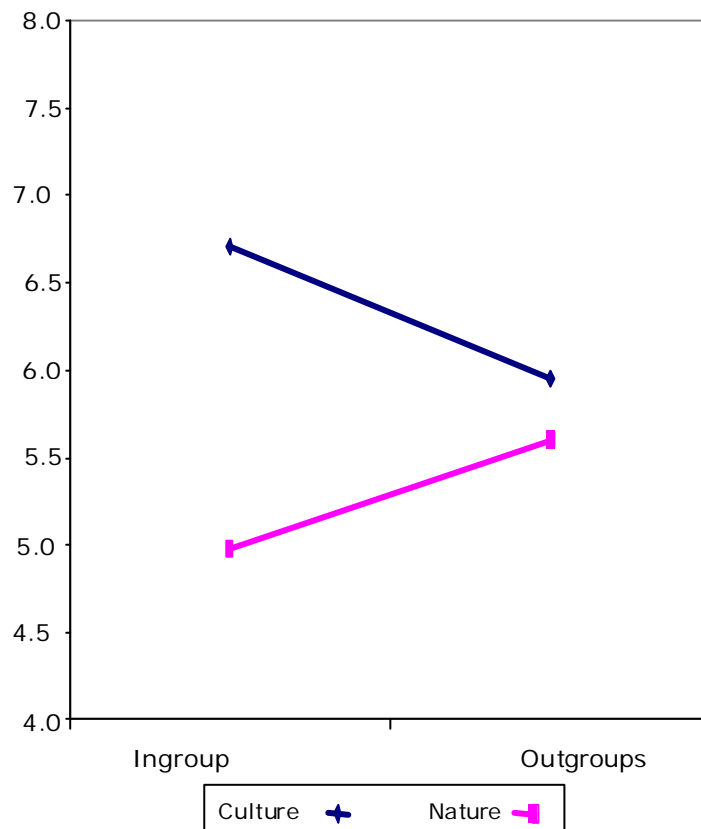
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Culture / outgroups	5,95	1,46	437
Nature / outgroups	5,60	1,41	437
Culture / Swiss	6,71	1,22	437
Nature / Swiss	4,98	1,27	437

Note: The higher the values, the stronger the attribution of a category of traits

An analysis of variance with 2 within factors (ingroup vs. outgroups and *cultural* vs. *natural* traits) enables us to say that respondents attribute a significantly higher number of *cultural* traits than *natural* traits ( $F(1,436) = 325,904$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and that the interaction between type of group (ingroup vs. outgroups) and type of traits (natural vs. cultural) is significant

( $F(1,436) = 301,650; p < .001$ , see figure 1) (analyses consider only participants that answered to all traits). Overall, subjects attribute much more cultural than natural traits, a result that shows the classic positivity bias in person perception (Zajonc, 1980). As expected, we didn't obtain a main effect of the type of group, but the interaction between group and type of traits is significant: subjects represented the ingroup as more cultural than natural, while they represented outgroups as equally *natural* and *cultural*.

**Figure 1**  
Interaction effect between type of group and type of traits



Complementary analyses showed that the representation of the ingroup (Swiss people) was stable and independent of the experimental condition

(Germans vs. Muslims vs. East Europeans vs. black Africans): in all conditions *cultural* and *natural* characteristics were attributed to the Swiss in a similar manner (One-Way ANOVA for *culture* traits:  $F(3,606) = 0,181$ ;  $p = .910$ ; for *nature* traits:  $F(3,564) = 0,381$ ;  $p = .767$ ).

Paired comparisons (*t* tests for paired-samples) were used to compare the attribution of *cultural* and *natural* traits to the ingroup and to the different outgroups (Table 2).

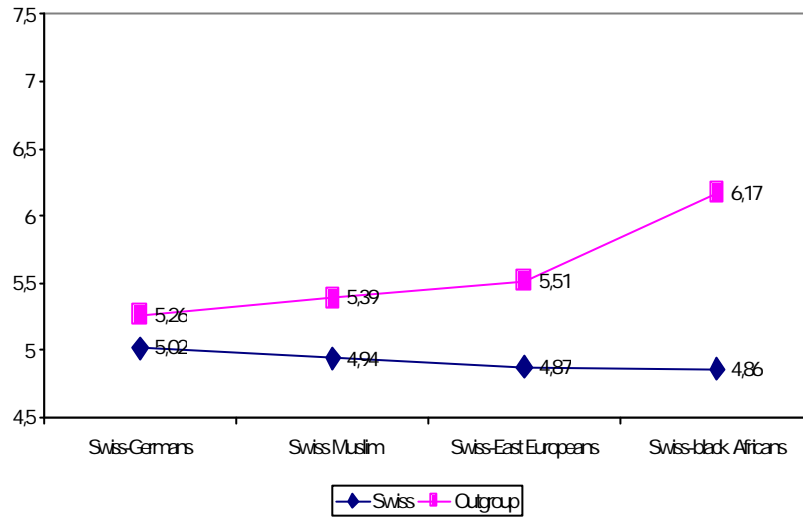
**Table 2**  
Attribution of “culture” and “nature” traits to the ingroup (Swiss) vs. outgroup (Germans, Muslims, East Europeans and black Africans)  
*Paired sample T-test*

	<b>Culture</b>	<b>Nature</b>
Swiss	6,75 (1,19)	5,02 (1,32)
Germans	6,71 (1,29)	5,26 (1,39)
(Paired sample T-test)	$t(144) = 0,811$ ; $p = .419$	$t(139) = -2,85$ ; $p = .005$
Swiss	6,70 (1,27)	4,86 (1,29)
Black Africans	5,41 (1,36)	6,17 (1,49)
(Paired sample T-test)	$t(140) = 10,350$ ; $p < .001$	$t(132) = -7,66$ ; $p < .001$
Swiss	6,82 (1,31)	4,94 (1,21)
Muslims	5,80 (1,57)	5,39 (1,36)
(Paired sample T-test)	$t(99) = 7,122$ ; $p < .001$	$t(101) = -3,001$ ; $p = .003$
Swiss	6,67 (1,21)	4,87 (1,17)
East Europeans	5,60 (1,32)	5,51 (1,11)
(Paired sample T-test)	$t(122) = 11,285$ ; $p < .001$	$t(113) = -5,159$ ; $p < .001$

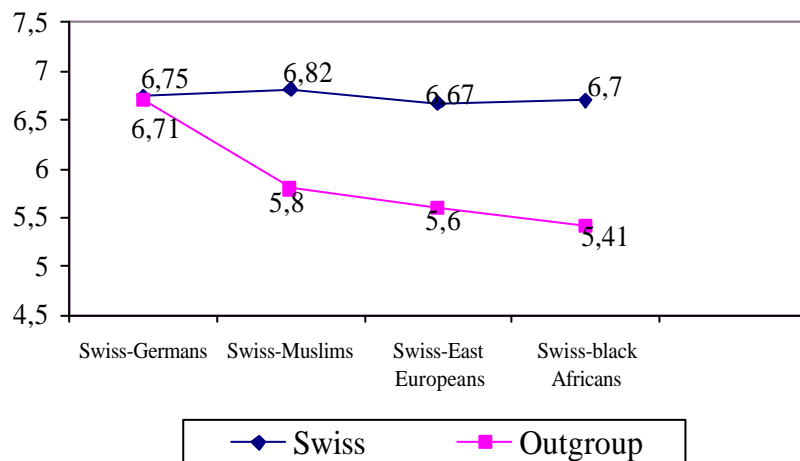
*Note:* The higher the values, the stronger the attribution of a category of traits (standard deviations between brackets)

We can see that subjects attribute systematically less “nature” traits and more “culture” traits to Swiss than to Muslims, East Europeans and black Africans. However, they represent the outgroup Germans as similar to themselves on *cultural* traits but not on *natural* traits (Table 2, figure 2 and 3). In this latter case, Germans are seen more “nature” than the ingroup.

**Figure 2**  
Nature traits: comparisons between the ingroup and the outgroups



**Figure 3**  
Culture traits: comparisons between the ingroup and the outgroups





For each of the target groups (Swiss, Germans, Muslims, East Europeans and black Africans) we have also examined if subjects attributed more *culture* or more *nature* traits (see table 3 – Paired samples T test)

**Table 3**  
Attribution of *culture* and *nature* traits to each target-group (Swiss, Germans, Muslims, East Europeans and black Africans )

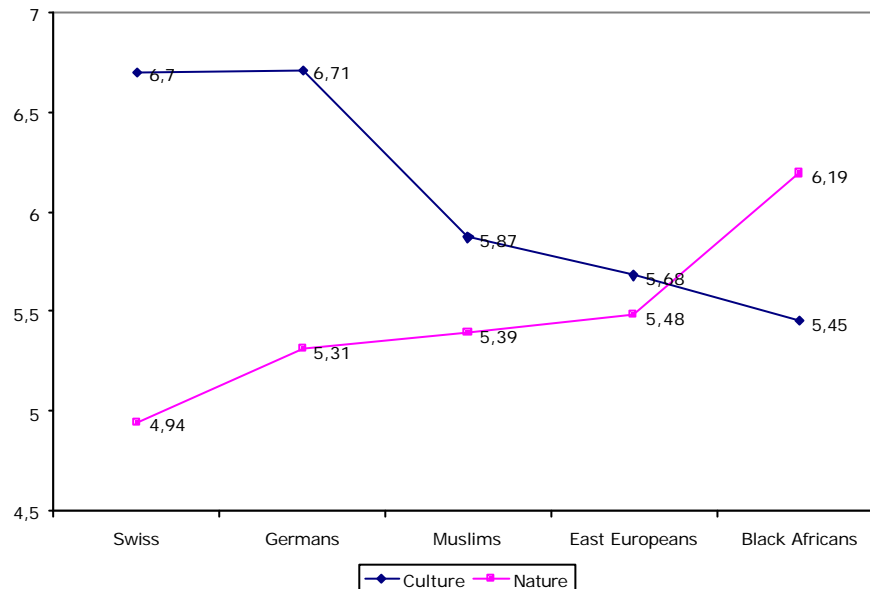
Paired sample T-test			
	Culture	Nature	Paired samples T-Test
<b>Swiss</b>	6,70 (1,25)	4,94 (1,24)	t(561)=31,574;p < .001
<b>Germans</b>	6,71 (1,27)	5,31 (1,39)	t(131)=11,920;p < .001
<b>Muslims</b>	5,87 (1,60)	5,39 (1,41)	t(90)=3,057;p=.003
<b>East Europeans</b>	5,68 (1,27)	5,48 (1,12)	t(107)=1,636;p=.105
<b>Black Africans</b>	5,45 (1,35)	6,19 (1,47)	t(119)=-5,422;p < .001

*Note:* The higher the values, the stronger the attribution of a category of traits (standard deviations in brackets)

Black Africans are the only outgroup that is ontologized. In fact, this group is the only one that receives a significantly higher attribution of natural traits than cultural traits (figure 4) (Swiss, Germans and Muslims received more *culture* traits than *nature* traits and in the case East Europeans differences between the two type of traits are not statistically significant).

Moreover, East Europeans and Muslims are represented in a similar way both at the level of natural and cultural traits; in fact the differences between these two groups are not statistically significant. Black people are more *naturalised* than East Europeans ( $t, 251= 4, 17, p < .001$ ), Muslims ( $t, 241=4.31, p<.001$ ) or Germans ( $t,279=5.29, p<.001$ ), but they are only less *culturalised* than Muslims ( $t, 241 = 2.00, p<.046$ ) and, of course, the Germans ( $t,287=8,30, p<.001$ ).

**Figure 4**  
*Culture and nature traits attributed to each target-group (means)*



## Discussion

This paper is framed by the general hypothesis according to which racism and xenophobia are today expressed not only in direct ways but also in indirect ways, in ways that protect people from being seen as transgressors of the anti-racist norm. From this general hypothesis we derived specific hypotheses on ingroup favouritism and outgroup derogation at the level of the attribution of natural and cultural traits. Moreover, and following Pérez et al. (2002), we tested the hypothesis that the groups that are object of racialization (black Africans) or ethnicization (people classified as *from eastern countries* and as Muslims) can also be object of ontologisation.

Results clearly show the classic ingroup favouritism bias: that is, Swiss people attribute to themselves more cultural traits than to any other group, except to Germans. In fact, Germans can be seen as an outgroup with equal status to the ingroup and, very important, as a special outgroup with perceived common cultural roots. However, participants show a positive dif-

ferentiation of their ingroup attributing themselves less natural traits (*negative* traits) than to German people.

Concerning the other outgroups—outgroups with an inferior social status - results show a derogation effect: Swiss people attributed to these groups more *negative* traits, actually *natural* traits, than to themselves and attributed more cultural traits to themselves than to these outgroups.

Our two first hypotheses received empirical support except for the German target, an outgroup to which participants attributed an equal percentage of cultural traits and more natural traits than that they attributed to their ingroup. So, in this case, contrary to our two first hypotheses, as far as an outgroup of equal status is concerned (Germans), the pro-ingroup bias does not occur at the level of ingroup valorisation (higher attribution of *cultural* traits) but at the level of a relative less devaluation (lower attribution of *natural* traits) of the ingroup.

Concerning our third hypothesis, the expected ontologisation (that is, the attribution to a group of more natural than cultural traits) of Muslims, East European people and black Africans is only observed relatively to this latter group.

In summary, our results show the very well known phenomena derived from social categorization and intergroup relations: ingroup favouritism and outgroup derogation of devalued outgroups or of outgroups with inferior social status (for a review see Brewer and Brown, 1998) They also show that an outgroup with a status equal to the one of the ingroup and with imagined common roots is not object of the same negative evaluation response than other outgroups: Germans are seen as very similar to German Swiss on *cultural* traits (although this is not the case for natural traits)

Moreover, and more important, only black African people are object of ontologization. This differential reaction towards this group puts the hypotheses that our evaluation of outgroups is not determined by a single process: intergroup differentiation, as proposed by the theory of social identity (Tajfel, 1978). As stated by Pérez et al. (2002), outgroup evaluation can also be determined by the process of construction of the human identity of a group. According to these authors (Pérez et al. 2002), some outgroups can represent an important role in the construction of the identity of a group as a prototype of human species and the reactions to these groups can be lead by concerns about the differentiation between humans and non-humans, between humans and animals, between humans and savages. It is in this vein that Pérez et al. (2002) propose that the opposition between *human being* - *animal* could be considered a *temata* (a powerful idea with deep roots in the cultures of a group) that, for instance, organizes prejudice

against gypsies in Spain. Our results suggest that this can also be the case for black people in Swiss. Excluding a group from the human species, even in a non explicit manner, legitimizes, after, the discrimination of these collective entities.

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