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The role of social identification, intergroup threat, and out-group derogation in explaining belief in conspiracy theory about terrorism in Indonesia

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Abstract

This current research was to give new insight into group-based variables that frame belief in conspiracy about terrorism in Indonesia. Results (N = 201) showed that social identification with Moslem was positively related to out-group derogation to the Western people and to the belief that these people have conspired to instigate terrorism in Indonesia. We also demonstrated that, in line with prediction, the effect of social identification on out-group derogation and belief in conspiracy theory held only when participants perceived the Western people as highly threatening Islamic identity. This perceived intergroup threat also structured the mediation role of out-group derogation. More specifically, we hypothesized and found that out-group derogation mediated the effect of social identification on belief in the conspiracy theory, only when Moslem participants perceived the Western people as highly threatening their Islamic identity. We discussed these findings in terms of theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: social identification; intergroup threat; out-group derogation; belief in conspiracy theory; terrorism in Indonesia

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1. Introduction

Indonesia has been entering a new political transformation that is popularly called 'reformation era' since the fall of Soeharto's military authoritarian regime in 1998, which has brought an ambivalent result. On one side, this reformation era has widely opened the door of democracy, improving political and economic system in Indonesia (Kimura, 2011). On another side, the new democratic system has otherwise triggered multifarious forms of social instabilities in Indonesia, with terrorism by Islamist radicals signifying the most phenomenal (Sarwono, 2004; Honna, 2012). As noted by Fealy and Borgu (2005), Islamic extremist groups in Indonesia are not a recent instability problem since these groups have existed for more than two hundred years, where they use violence to legitimize their faith. However, Islamic terrorism in Indonesia in this recent decade has undoubtedly demonstrated a mounting, unprecedented scale than ever before. Terrorism in Indonesia intensified in 2000 with the *Jakarta Stock Exchange bombing*, followed with the deadliest *Bali bombings* in 2002 that killed 202 people, mostly international tourists (Asthana & Nirmal, 2009; Tyson, 2011). Since 2011, the target of terrorist attack has proved to change, from foreign Western interests and residents to Indonesian police officers (Hui, 2012).

Indonesian authorities in recent years have demonstrated several successes on the counterterrorism front. They have detained more than 700 suspected terrorists and killed more than 60 of them since the tragedy of the Bali bombings (Afrida & Pramudatama, 2012). More recently, the special counterterrorism unit of the Indonesian national police *Densus 88* arrested 11 suspected terrorists across four provinces in a coordinated raid on October 2012 (Clarke, 2012). Yet despite such tremendous successes in counterterrorism, the Indonesian authorities still have much more effort to win the hearts and minds of Indonesians. This is the case, as argued by Hui (2012), because community hostility and distrust towards the police is historically ingrained among Indonesian people. In addition, there are still many Indonesian people who deny that domestic radical Islamist groups indeed acted terrorism in Indonesia. Rather, they believe that a conspiracy plot of foreign intelligence agencies such as *CIA* (the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency) and *the Mossad* (Israel's Intelligence Agency) thus far has catalyzed terrorism in Indonesia (Fealy, 2003; Huisken & Thatcher, 2007; Smith 2005). This belief has also been shared and propagated through articles and opinions in some websites and mailing-lists as well as Islamic newspapers and magazines in Indonesia (Lim, 2005).

In the current research, we aimed to explain belief in conspiracy theories in the context of terrorism in Indonesia from a new angle. Voluminous previous studies have heavily focused on the personality correlates of belief in conspiracy theories (e.g., Darwin, Neave, & Holmes, 2011; Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2011). As a result, studies on intergroup nature and dynamics of belief in conspiracy theories are relatively scarce. Our point of departure was the question how strong social identification with Moslems impacts on negative intergroup attitudes in terms of derogation toward Western people and the belief that the Western people have conspired to perpetrate terrorism in Indonesia. More specifically, we tested the notion that the extent to which Moslem participants perceives Western people as threatening their Islamic identity moderates the effect of social identification with Moslem on out-group derogation and belief in conspiracy theory. Furthermore, we also tested the notion that out-group derogation mediates the effect of social identification with Moslems on belief in conspiracy theories, but this mediation effect holds only among Moslem participants who highly perceives that Western people are threatening their Islamic identity.

2. Literature review

2.1 Belief in conspiracy theory: An intergroup perspective

Belief in the conspiracy theory is widespread across the globe, from the Middle East (Zonis & Joseph, 1994), South East Asia (Swami, 2012) to even modern Western societies (Goertzel, 1994; McHoskey, 1995; Pipes, 1997; Southwell & Twist, 2004; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). As argued by Swami (2012), some scholars (e.g., Hellinger, 2003) contend that conspiracy theory should be viewed in a positive light, as cultural practices that give citizens opportunities to criticize the credibility of governance. On the contrary, due to its simple nature, other scholars consider that conspiracy theory instead causes the supports for racism and group exclusion (Miller, 2002; Räikkä, 2008) as well as discrimination (Bilewizs & Krzemiński, 2010). Moreover, belief in a conspiracy theory has the negative potential to instigate collective action and riots, especially after the events that endanger the social order such as terrorist attacks, wars, and economic crises (van Prooijen, 2012; van Prooijen & Jostman, 2013).

In a general term, belief in the conspiracy theory is false narratives in which cause of an event is believed to be ultimately due to a malevolent plot perpetrated by multiple actors who are working together (Bale, 2007; Swami & Furnham, 2012; Swami, 2012). These multiple conspiring actors are so often particularly connected to legitimate power holders or institutions in society (Robins & Post, 1997; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). On one side, in explaining belief in conspiracy theory, there are well-documented literatures that have examined the effect of personal factors such as political powerlessness, attribution, and self-esteem (Crocker, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999), big five personality (Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010), right-wing authoritarianism (Grzesiak-Feldman & Irzycka, 2009), anomie, locus of control, and hostility (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999). On another side, however, empirical studies on inter-group factors of conspiracy theory are still relatively unexplored.

In the lens of intergroup perspective, belief in the conspiracy theory harbors intergroup categorization. More specifically, people who believe in conspiracy theories are categorized as in-group whereas the actors of the conspiracies are categorized as out-group, which is portrayed as collective enemies with malicious hidden activities to harm in-group (Bilewics & Krzemiński, 2010; Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, & Wójcik, 2013; Kofta & Slawuta, 2013). Kofta and Sedek in 2005 first developed this new approach of group-based belief in the conspiracy theory, which is specifically termed a conspiracy stereotype, defined as a holistic representation of the whole out-group as collective enemies (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013).

As noted by Kofta and Sedek (2005), conspiracy stereotype comprises three negative characterizations toward suspected out-group. That is, the out-group is believed to have an obsessive striving for power and domination, to involve in the conspiracy, and to have an excessive level of group egoism in terms of high in-group solidarity with disregard for out-group's well-being. As a result, belief in conspiracy theories in intergroup relations is often characterized with a complete derogation by members of in-group towards suspected members of out-group (Kofta, 1995; Kofta & Sedek, 2005). For example, as reported by Putra and Sukabdi (2013), due to their conviction that The West has invaded Muslim countries, some Indonesian terror activists derogate the West as the representative of evil. This derogation is so often accompanied with those radical Islamist groups' acceptance of the conspiracy theory that the series of terror attacks in Indonesia was created by the United States' and Zionist plots to enervate Islam (Hasan, 2007).

2.2 The role of social identification and intergroup threat

Out-group derogation in intergroup relation in part originates from high social identification (Crisp, Stone, & Hall, 2006; Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004). Social identification is the extent to which people feel psychologically attached to the group they belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This argumentation is in line with a central tenet of Social Identity Theory (SIT: Tajfel & Turner, 1986) which postulates that group members tend to

be motivated to maintain a positive image for their own group. As a consequence, group members who highly identify with the in-group is more likely driven to establish in-group favoring behaviors (i.e., Evaluating in-group more positively than out-group), compared to lower identifiers (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Brown, 2000). This theoretical rationale is in accordance with the observation by van Bruinessen (2003) that many Indonesian Muslims, especially those who strongly identify with Islam, believe in the existence of an international conspiracy mobilized by assorted entities that they labeled enemies of Islam such as Zionists, Christian missionaries, or imperialist politicians, to destroy and weaken Islam in Indonesia.

Although some studies (see Ashmore, Wilder, & Jussim, 2001 for study reviews) have challenged the generalization that in-group love (i.e., High in-group identification) contributes directly to out-group hate (i.e., out-group derogation), religious social identification may be of exceptional case. This is the case since religious groups are more typical than other groups in one fundamental way, in that they implant the believers prescriptive moral guidance for behavioral choices, sacred rituals and quests, and daily life to make existence significant (Kimball, 2002). Moreover, religion is of very importance to people's life and religious groups are among the most salient buttresses of identity (Verkuyten, 2007). People who strongly identify with their religious groups consider their religion a pivotal part of whom they are (Silberman, 2005). Strong religious identification can lead to the belief that the in-group's worldview and associated practices are entirely more superior to those of out-groups, which in turn generates profound ethnocentrism associated with in-group protective intergroup behaviors (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). Based on this rationale, we argue that strong religious identification can be directly contributing to instigate out-group hate in terms of out-group derogation and belief in conspiracy theory.

Out-group derogation serves as a tactical, defensive strategy by high in-group identifiers to secure their positive identity, especially under the condition in which their group is perceived as under threat (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). Social psychological literature on intergroup relation has well documented some types of group threats. Stephen and Mealy (2012) classified two types of group threats: realistic and symbolic. Realistic group threat is a threat to the continuity of in-group's economic and political existence. Based on some empirical studies, Putra and Sukabdi (2013) argued that situational factors such as a striking economic disparity between the Western countries and Moslem countries, supremacy of democracy as a secular political system worldwide, and occupation of Palestine by Israel that is backed up by the US and its allies have cultivated a sense of realistic threat among people from Moslem countries.

Symbolic threat refers to a threat stemming from perceived intergroup differences in norms, values, and beliefs. Symbolic threat is parallel with value threat (Branscombe et al., 1999) that denotes a threat due to perceived out-group's rejection to the nature and importance of in-group's shared attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and practices. Indeed, Fair and Shepherd (2006) found that the supremacy of national and secular identity over Muslim identity in the realms of technology and culture have contributed to the perceived experience that Islamic value is under threat. Among some radical Islamic groups in Indonesia, this perceived threat in turn gives rise to the pervasive sense of global Islamic weakness and defeat, leading those groups to believe that the West has conspired to surreptitiously create terrorism in Indonesia (Reid, 2010).

2.3 The present study

We examined in this present study how three intergroup-based variables (i.e., social identification with Moslems, out-group derogation, and perceived intergroup threat) explain belief in conspiracy theories in the context of terrorism in Indonesia. Designed as a correlation study, in this study all these variables were measured. As said by Steg, Buunk, and Rothengatter (2007), correlation study can be a good stepping-stone to conduct an experimental study in which causative effects can be directly assessed. Participants in this study were drawn from Moslem students of the Islamic State University (STAIN) who are acknowledged by Indonesian society in general as having an inclusive, tolerant view of Islam (Azra, 2003). Employing moderate Moslems instead of

radical Moslems as participants serve as a baseline, preliminary study to shed light on an answer how and why religious social identification with Moslem can be translated into radicalism or extremism in terms of derogation toward the Western people and the belief that these people have conspired to create terrorism in Indonesia. We specified 'Western Worlds' in this study as the object of measures of perceived identity threat, out-group derogation, and belief in conspiracy theory. We operationalized the term specifically as countries and their people and culture that include Europe and many countries of European colonial origin with majority European populations in the Americas and Oceania, such as the USA, Canada, Argentina, Australia, and New Zealand (Thompson & Hickey, 2005). Before being asked to answer items on each measure, participants therefore were provided with information about the operationalization and the meaning of 'the Western Worlds'. Finally, we focused the concept of intergroup threat in this study on a symbolic threat (Stephan & Stephan, 1996) or a value threat (Branscombe et al., 1999), operationalized as the extent to which participants perceive the norms, values, and culture of the Western Worlds as threatening the Islamic / Moslem identity.

Based on theoretical and empirical explanations stated above, we proposed several hypotheses. First, we predicted that the level of social identification with Moslem would be positively associated with out-group derogation toward Western people such that the higher participants identified with Moslem the more likely it was that they derogated the Western people (*Hypothesis 1*). Second, we predicted that the higher participants identified with Moslems the more they would derogate Western people, more prominently when they perceived the Western people as highly threatening their Islamic identity (*Hypothesis 2*). Third, we predicted that the level of social identification with Moslem would be positively associated with belief in conspiracy theories such that the higher participants identified with Moslem the more likely it was that they believed in the conspiracy theory (*Hypothesis 3*). Fourth, we predicted that the higher participants identified with Moslems the more they would believe in conspiracy theory, more prominently when they perceived the Western people as highly threatening their Islamic identity (*Hypothesis 4*). Fifth, we predicted that out-group derogation would mediate the effect of social identification on belief in conspiracy theories (*Hypothesis 5*). Sixth, we predicted that out-group derogation would mediate the effect of social identification on belief in the conspiracy theory, only when participants perceived the Western people as highly threatening their Islamic identity (*Hypothesis 6*).

3. Methods

3.1 Participants and design

Participants were 201 Moslem students from the Islamic State University of Pekalongan, Indonesia (*Male* = 56, *Female* = 139; ten participants did not mention their gender; M_{age} = 20, *SD age* = 2.03), who voluntarily took part in this study. Participants were selected on the basis of a convenient sampling. Using a correlation design, all variables in this study, unless otherwise indicated, were measured through scales compiled in a questionnaire.

3.2 Procedure and Measures

This study was conducted in a classroom setting in which participants, after filling inform consent, were distributed with a questionnaire consisting of all scales. Participants' answers were scored on the basis of a 5-points *Likert* scale (*1* = Strongly Disagree – *5* = Strongly Agree), and scale was created by averaging the scores on the items. In the first part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to show to the extent they agree to four statements to measure Social Identification with Moslem, which was created by the authors (e.g., "The fact that I am a Moslem is an important part of my identity"; "I feel connected and attached to other Moslems"; α=.64; corrected item-total correlations ranged between .28 and .55). An inspection of Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with VARIMAX rotation revealed one factor for this scale, which explained 50.22% of total variance. Participants were then presented with two items to measure perceived Intergroup Threat, created by the authors (i.e., "The tendency of the Western worlds in threatening Islamic identities has been increasing years from years to years"; "In the future, the Western worlds will have continued to threaten Islamic identities";

α=.78).

In the second part of the questionnaire, participants were presented with five traits [Traitorous; Inconsistent; Mysterious; Likes opposing one side against the other side (*Adu-Domba*); Inciting; α=.91; corrected item-total correlations ranged from .70 to .83] to measure Out-group Derogation, and they were asked to indicate to the extent they agree that each trait applies to Western people. PCA with VARIMAX rotation resulted in one factor for this scale, which explained 73.89% of total variance. Subsequently following this scale was four items to measure Belief in Conspiracy Theory about Terrorism in Indonesia, created by the authors (e.g., "Terrorism in Indonesia thus far has been catalyzed by the Western Worlds' conspiracy to enervate the existence of Islamic Worlds"; "Terrorism in Indonesia was ignited by the creation of the Western Worlds' intelligence"; α=.85; corrected item-total correlations ranged from .64 to .71). PCA with VARIMAX rotation yielded one factor for this scale, which explained 68.58% of total variance. At the end of the questionnaire, we asked participants to inform their gender and age. After completing the questionnaire, participants were thanked and debriefed.

4. Results

4.1 Preliminary Analyses

An analysis of *independent-samples t-test* revealed that demographic variable of gender did not show significant effect on Out-group Derogation (mediator) and Belief in Conspiracy Theory (dependent variables)—for the effect of gender on Out-group Derogation, $M_{\text{male}} = 3.97$ (SD = .70), $M_{\text{female}} = 4.03$ (SD = .57), $t(189) = -.593$, p = .554; for the effect of gender on Belief in Conspiracy Theory, $M_{\text{male}} = 3.26$ (SD = 1.33), M_{female} = 3.21 (SD = 1.34), $t(189) = .225$, p = .822. A *simple regression analysis* revealed that age also did not have a significant effect on Out-group Derogation and Belief in Conspiracy Theory—for the effect of age on Out-group Derogation, β = .05, t = .64, p = .524; for the effect of age on Belief in Conspiracy Theory, β = -. 02, t = -. 27, p = .787. All these findings meant that both gender and age were collapsed across subsequent analyses to test the hypotheses.

Following a procedure by Wohl, Branscombe, and Reysen (2010), using *LISREL 8.80* software (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2007) we carried out Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to evaluate whether or not the items tapping each of the measured variables consisted of distinct factors as expected. This step is of very importance for assessing both convergent and discriminant validity of theoretical constructs. Convergent validity refers to evidence that different indicator of theoretically similar constructs are strongly correlated while discriminant validity is shown with evidence demonstrating that indicators of theoretically different constructs are not highly correlated. Overall, convergent and discriminant validity hold when CFA results in model fits (Brown, 2006). Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) as an absolute fit index and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) as well as Normed Fit Index (NFI) as comparative fir indexes were examined. The RMSEA value less than .08 and a CFI and NFI values of .09 or greater indicate good fits to the data (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kelloway, 1998). The proposed four-factor structure of Social Identification with Moslem, Perceived Intergroup Threat, Out-group Derogation, and Belief in Conspiracy Theory demonstrated either a good absolute fit, (RMSEA = .0370) or comparative fits (CFI = .99; NFI = .96) to the data.

4.2 Interaction effect analyses

The first interaction effect was assessed using a multiple regression analysis in which Social Identification with Moslem (transformed into z-scores), Intergroup Threat (*mean centered*), and their cross product (i.e., the Interaction terminals) were entered as predictors, whereas Out-group Derogation was specified as the dependent variable. Overall, the regression equation was significant, R^2 = .12, F (3, 197) = 9.03, p = .00. Social Identification was found to have a significant effect on Out-group Derogation, β = .26, t = 3.68, p = .00, *squared partial correlation* = .06. Thus, in line with Hypothesis 1, the more participants identified with Moslems the higher they derogated Western people. The regression analysis also yielded a significant interaction of Social

Identification and Intergroup Threat on Out-group Derogation, β = .21, *t* = 2.98, *p* = .00, *squared partial correlation* = .04. A simple slope analysis revealed (see Figure 1) that Social Identification was positively related to Out-group Derogation in high Intergroup Threat, β = .36, *t* = 3.96, *p* = .00, *squared partial correlation* = .13, but unrelated to Out-group Derogation in low Intergroup Threat, β = .05, *t* = .51, *p* = .62. This finding thus corroborated Hypothesis 2.

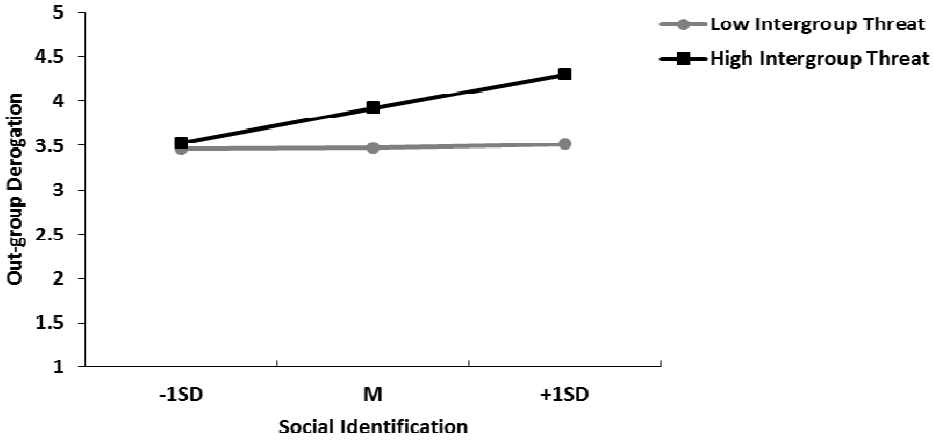

Figure 1. The effect of Social Identification on Out-group Derogation among participants with high Intergroup Threat and low Intergroup Threat

The second interaction effect was assessed using a multiple regression analysis, with Social Identification with Moslem (transformed into *z*-scores), Intergroup Threat (*mean centered*), and their cross product (i.e., the Interaction term) entered as predictors and Belief in Conspiracy Theory as the dependent variable. This analysis resulted in a significant regression equation, R^2 = .08, *F* (3, 197) = 5.42, *p* = .00. Belief in Conspiracy Theory was affected by Social Identification, β = .24, *t* = 3.35, *p* = .00, *squared partial correlation* = .05, meaning that in support of Hypothesis 3, the more participants identified with Moslems the higher they believed in conspiracy theories. The interaction effect of Social Identification and Intergroup Threat was also significant, β = .16, *t* = 2.25, *p* = .026, *squared partial correlation* = .03. As shown in Figure 2, a simple slope analysis revealed that Social Identification was positively related to Belief in Conspiracy Theory only when the participants' degree of Intergroup Threat was high, β = .32, *t* = 3.50, *p* = .00, *squared partial correlation* = .10. When the participants' degree of Intergroup Threat was low, Social identification was unrelated to Belief in Conspiracy Theory, β = .07, *t* = .64, *p* = .52. This finding was as in line with Hypothesis 4.

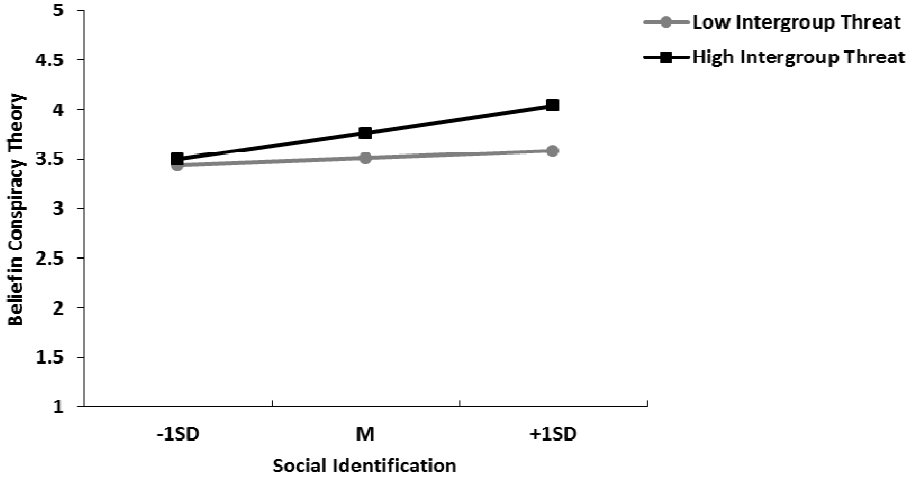

Figure 2. The effect of Social Identification on Belief in Conspiracy Theory among participants with high Intergroup Threat and low Intergroup Threat

4.3 Mediation Analysis

To test the role of Out-group Derogation in mediating the effect of Social Identification on Belief in Conspiracy Theory, we followed the procedure as recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). As shown in Figure 3, the effect of Out-group Derogation on Belief in Conspiracy Theory was significant, controlling for the effect of Social Identification on the Belief. This analysis then resulted in the reduction of the effect of Social Identification on Belief in Conspiracy Theory, from β = .215, t = 3.113, p = .002 to β = .071, t = 1.252, p = .212 (see number in parenthesis). Overall, the Zobel z-test revealed that Out-group Derogation significantly mediated the effect of Social Identification on Belief in Conspiracy Theory, z = 4.01, p = .000.

To check the susceptibility of mediation effect to Type I Error (false positive), we conducted a probing, post-hoc mediation analysis using a bootstrap procedure (Holmbeck, 2002; Mallinckrodt, Abraham, Wei, & Russell, 2006; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Following recommendations by Preacher and Hayes (2004), we resampled the data 5,000 times. Results demonstrated that out-group derogation mediated the effect of social identification on the belief in conspiracy theories (boot indirect effect = .19, *SE* = .06, 95% *CI* = .0737, .2965, z = 3.26, p = .0011). Hypothesis 5 therefore was also supported.

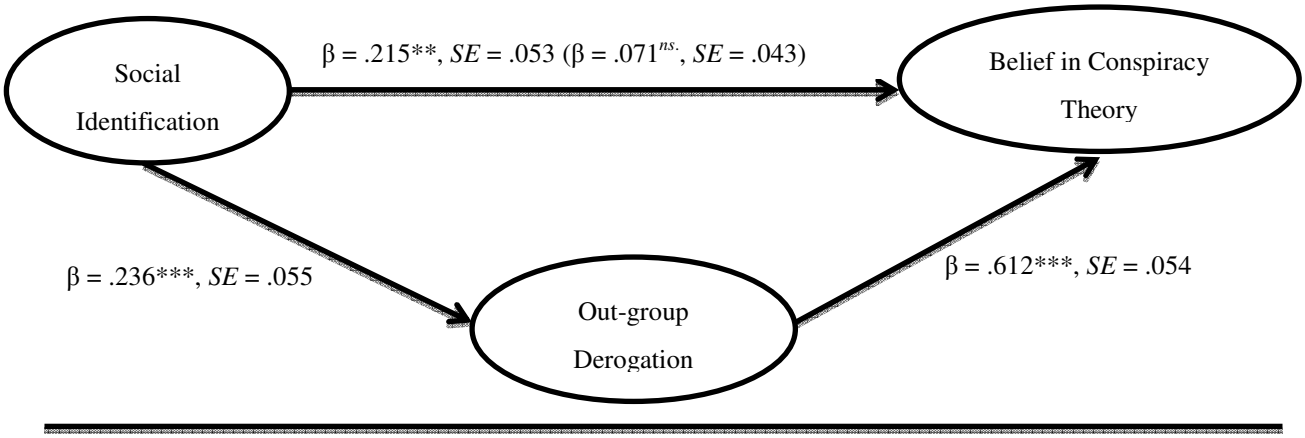

Figure 3. The role of Out-group Derogation in mediating the effect of Social Identification on Belief in Conspiracy Theory

Note: β is a standardized regression coefficient, *SE* is Standard Error. The path from Out-group Derogation to Belief in Conspiracy Theory is the effect of Out-group Derogation on Belief in Conspiracy Theory by controlling for Social Identification. The number in parenthesis is the effect of Social Identification on Belief in Conspiracy Theory while controlling for Out-group Derogation. ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001, n.s. = not significant

4.4 Moderated mediation analysis

To conduct a moderated mediation analysis, we divided the mediation effect separately into low Intergroup Threat and high Intergroup Threat. As demonstrated in Figure 4A, among participants with high Intergroup Threat, the effect of Out-group Derogation on Belief in Conspiracy Theory was significant, controlling for the effect of Social Identification on the Belief. This analysis, however, then reduced the effect of Social Identification on the Belief from β = .318, t = 3.50, p = .00 to β = .042, t = .671, p = .504 (see number in parenthesis). Overall, the Zobel z-test revealed that Out-group Derogation significantly mediated the effect of Social Identification on Belief in Conspiracy Theory, z = 4.069, p = .000. On the contrary, among participants with low Intergroup Threat, the Zobel z-test demonstrated that Out-group Derogation did not significantly mediate the effect of Social Identification on Belief in Conspiracy Theory, z = .0436, p = .663 (see figure 4B).

In the moderated mediation analysis, bootstrapping procedure allows us to ascertain that the strength of the hypothesized mediation effect is contingent on specific values of the moderator, which is technically termed 'conditional indirect effect' by Preacher and Hayes (2008) and Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007). Following recommendations by Preacher and Hayes (2008), we resampled the data 5,000 times. Results demonstrated that out-group derogation did not mediate the effect of social identification on belief in conspiracy theories among participants with low intergroup threat (i.e., 1 *SD* below *M*; boot indirect effect = 0.02, *SE* = .03, 95% *CI* = -. 0446, .0740, *z* = .49, *p* = .627.). Nevertheless, significant evidence for mediation was obtained for participants with the high intergroup threat (1 *SD* above *M*; boot indirect effect = 0.24, *SE* = .06, 95% *CI* = .1153, .3660, z = 3.762, *p* = .0002.). These findings support Hypothesis 6.

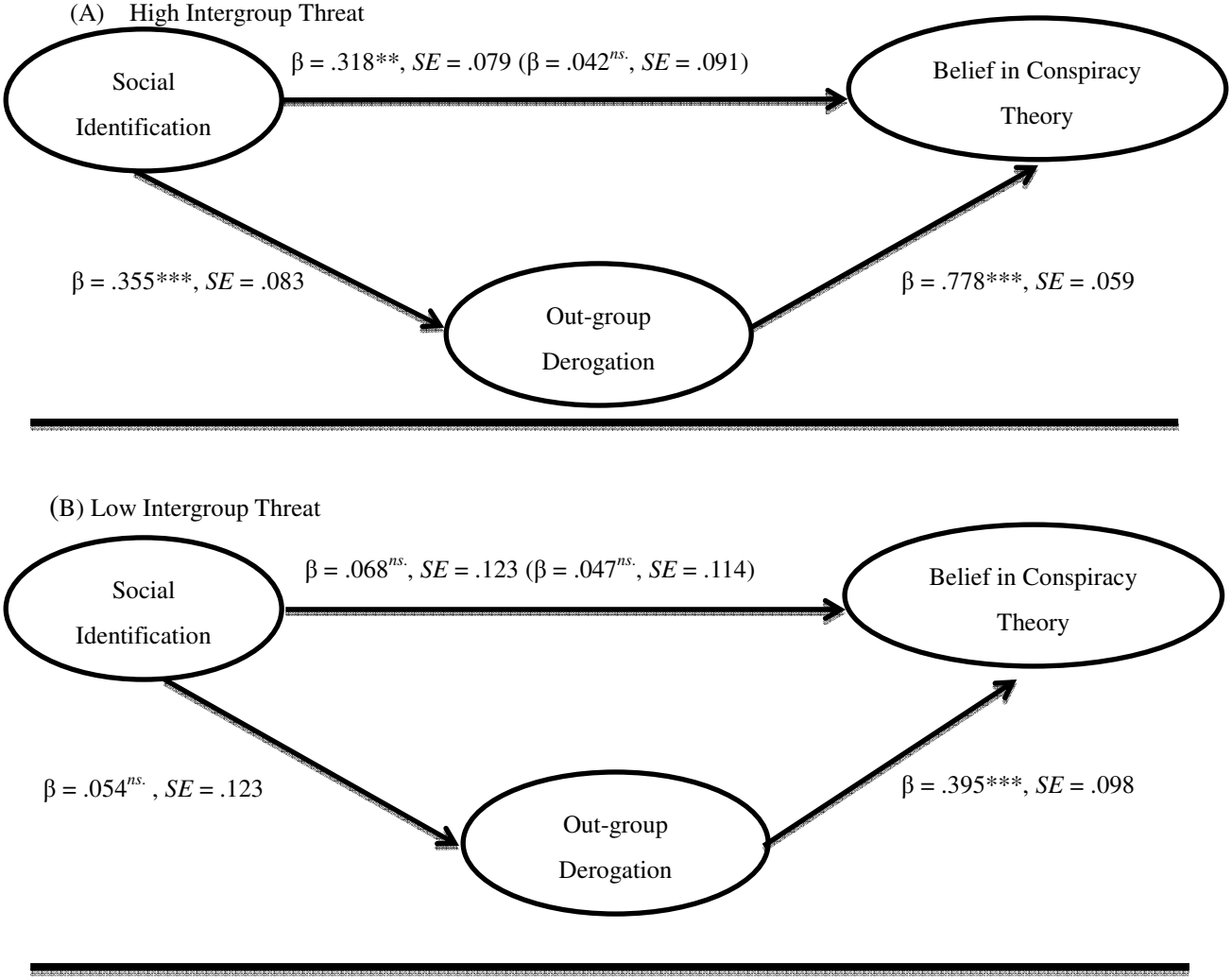

Figure 4. (A) The role of Out-group Derogation in mediating the effect of Social Identification on Belief in Conspiracy Theory among participants with high Intergroup Threat, (B) The role of Out-group Derogation in mediating the effect of Social Identification on Belief in Conspiracy Theory among participants with low Intergroup Threat

Note: β is a standardized regression coefficient, *SE* is Standard Error. The path from Out-group Derogation to Belief in Conspiracy Theory is the effect of Out-group Derogation on Belief in Conspiracy Theory by controlling for Social Identification. The numbers in parenthesis are the effect of Social Identification on Belief in Conspiracy Theory while controlling for Out-group Derogation. ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$, n.s. = not significant

5. Discussion

Supporting all hypotheses specified, we found in this current study that the higher the participants identified

with Moslems the more they derogated the Western people and the more they believed that terrorism in Indonesia has been triggered by Western people's conspiracy. However, we observed that the effect of social identification on both out-group derogation and belief in conspiracy theory was contingent on the degree of perceived intergroup threat. More specifically, only when the Western people were perceived as highly threatening the Islamic identity that such effect of social identification on out-group derogation and belief in conspiracy theory were significant. Out-group derogation also turned out to mediate the effect of social identification on belief in conspiracy theories. However, in line with prediction, this mediation effect of out-group derogation held only when the Western people were considered as highly threatening Islamic identity.

Among moderate Moslems, this study found that strong religious social identification significantly explained out-group derogation and belief in conspiracy theory. This outcome can be due to two factors. The first factor is the characteristic of religious group identification. Triandis (1992) points out that in some collectivist cultures group identification is more of a nominal rather than a continuous variable, a result of which group identification is normative and total, not optional and differing in strength. Religious group identification can be similar, more particularly in the case of Islam since this religion provides strict guidelines, which is more technically termed the Five Pillars of Islam (Verkuyten, 2007). The second factor is identity salience. As argued by Vryan, Adler, and Adler (2003), the salient identity boosts people's commitment to that identity, which in turn increases a probability that such identity will be enacted in a given situation. Islam and Moslem today have attained salience as a social category, especially following the tragedy of 11 September 2001 (Ahmad & Evergeti, 2010; Modood & Ahmad, 2007). We argue that it may be stemming from the combination of a nominal religious identification and identity salience that strong religious identification in this study related positively to out-group derogation and belief in conspiracy even among moderate Moslems.

The finding in this study that strong identification with Moslem gives rise to the derogation towards Western people and the belief in these people's conspiracies in creating terrorism in Indonesia, more prominently when the Western people are perceived as highly threatening the Islamic identity corroborates some theories. According to uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2000, 2007, 2011), any uncertain event can be aversive for individuals, and social identification with highly entitative groups that are distinctive and clearly defined can be a very effective way to reduce such uncertainty. Multidisciplinary scholars (e.g., Bale, 2007; Clarke, 2002; Miller, 2002) have pointed-out that the primary motive of people to believe in the conspiracy theory is their desire to explain events that are uncertain and complicated to comprehend. Thus, belief in a conspiracy theory is a mental sense-making processes aimed at seeing the world as simple and predictable (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013; Park, 2010). Religious groups are very entitative compared to other groups in that they provide structures such as distinctive dress, religious rituals, and collective prayer routines that permeate life and validate social identity (Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010). However, as evidenced in the study by Hogg, Meehan, and Farquharson (2010), strong religious identification can instead radicalize people's worldview especially when they faced a toxic and socially dangerous mix of uncertainty combined with a threat to their precious attitudes, values, and practices.

Blascovich's biopsychosocial model of challenge and threat (Blascovich, 2008; Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996) posits that perceived threat in conjunction with inadequate resources (i.e., Powerlessness) to face it promotes destructive avoidance behaviors. On one side, as reported by El-Shibiny (2005), some Moslems consider that globalization in the current era, which is juxtaposed as the representation of the Western World and more particularly the U.S., has been perceived as a form of neocolonialism, an evil that undermines Moslem's religious and cultural identity. This perceived value threat is seen as an attempt to homogenize the world that supplants Moslem identity, arousing anxiety, suspicion, and opposition in the Moslem world (Moten, 2005). On another side, Moslem countries have the comparative lack of advanced technological and economic resources compared to Western countries (Hunter & Malik, 2005), and many people from Moslem countries tend to respond to such situation with fatalism, simply as a feeling of powerlessness (Acevedo, 2008). Powerlessness itself has been found as a significant determinant of conspiracy belief and thinking (Crocker et al., 1999). Taken together, it may be due to the combination of perceived intergroup threat and powerlessness or lack of resources

that strong identification with Moslem as revealed in this study is accounted for thrusting destructive avoidance behaviors in terms of derogating Western people and believing in the involvement of these people in causing terrorism in Indonesia.

Some limitations of this study should be addressed. First, causative effects in this study cannot be directly claimed since religious social identification (i.e., Independent variable) and perceived intergroup threat (i.e., moderating variable) is measured. Next studies thus can solve this shortcoming by manipulating instead of measuring social identification and intergroup threats, to directly assess causative effects of these variables on out-group derogation and belief in conspiracy theory. Second, this study focused only on examination of symbolic threat or value identity threat. In intergroup relation literature, there are multifaceted types of threats, including realistic threat, symbolic threat, intergroup anxiety, negative stereotypes, group esteem threat, and distinctiveness threat. A meta-analysis conducted by Riek, Mania, and Gaertner (2006) which employed 95 samples revealed that those five different threats were positively related to negative out-group attitudes.

Accordingly, this study can be extended in the next study by investigating the role of each threat on moderating the effect of religious social identification on out-group derogation and belief in conspiracy theory. Third, to observe stronger effects, next study may employ Moslem participants from more radical Islamist groups in Indonesia. Finally, because participants in this study are limited to Javanese Moslem, next studies need to involve respondents from multifarious minority ethnic groups in Indonesia. The reason is that, as emphasized by Jones (2002), minority ethnic groups in Indonesian who live in conflict areas tend to believe that it is the Indonesian National Military (Tentara Nasional Indonesia: TNI) who must be responsible for provoking terrorism in Indonesia in an attempt to reconsolidate its role in government.

6. Conclusion

Using a novel intergroup-based approach, the present study aimed to analyze belief in conspiracy theories regarding the actors of terrorism in Indonesia based on religious social identification, perceived intergroup threat, and out-group derogation. One of our primary findings revealed the moderating role of intergroup threat: social identification leads to out-group derogation, which subsequently influences belief in conspiracy theory, more prominently when the Western people are deemed as highly threatening Islamic identity.

As stated in the previous session, voluminous existing studies have a one-sided emphasis on individual factors in explaining belief in conspiracy theory. By proposing and examining intergroup variables (i.e., intergroup threat, social identification, out-group derogation), this study thereby potentially provides a significant contribution regarding a new insight into collective factors that may explain belief in conspiracy theory. Moreover, this study is the first to investigate belief in conspiracy theory in the context of Islamic terrorism, which especially occurs in Indonesia.

We propose some practical implications of this current study. First, the Indonesian government needs to conduct an integrated, not just a partial, counterterrorism strategy. This way, the Indonesian government should not just prioritize a hardcore counterterrorism by detaining and killing terrorists, which proves to be not one-hundred percent effective. A soft-core counterterrorism should also be an important agenda, which can take form in an extensive and intensive campaign to illuminate Indonesian publics regarding the real existence of domestic radical Islamist groups responsible for perpetrating terrorism in Indonesia and the danger of their radical and extreme ideology. This campaign should be conducted through synergistic cooperation between the Indonesian government and multifarious legitimate stakeholders in Indonesia such as *Ulama* (i.e., The body of scholars who are authorities on Muslim religion and law), community or local leaders, and scientists to reduce the belief in conspiracy theories. Second, the Indonesian government should continuously encourage inclusive culture and religion in schools, which is empirically admitted as a pivotal factor in reducing intergroup prejudice (Dessel, 2010). Bearing in mind that belief in conspiracy theory implies negative evaluations and attitudes toward the targeted groups, the cultivation of inclusive culture and religion in schools could be a strategic way to

protect students and teachers from easily and haphazardly believing in conspiracy theories.

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