



## Cultural threat and perceived realistic group conflict as dual predictors of prejudice

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### Abstract

Recent research has focused on how perceived intergroup similarity influences stereotyping and prejudice. Very little is known, however, regarding how the *quality* or type of similarity influences intergroup relations. Presented is a methodology that allows one to manipulate the quality of perceived intergroup similarity. This methodology is used to test contrasting predictions about how perceptions of intergroup similarity on self-stereotyped interpersonal and work-related traits predict attitudes towards immigrants. Predictions were derived from cultural threat and perceived realistic group conflict theories. Some participants were asked to rate how similar they perceived their in-group was to Mexican immigrants, whereas others were asked to evaluate how the groups differed on the given traits. Control participants evaluated themselves on the given traits. Participants were presented with either interpersonal traits or work related traits as stimuli. The main dependent measures were a perceived realistic conflict scale, a prejudice scale, and a stereotyping scale. All three scales used Mexican immigrants as the target category. When interpersonal traits were made salient, contrast comparisons led to more negative attitudes towards immigrants, supporting a cultural threat hypothesis. When work-related traits were made salient, similarity comparisons led to more prejudice and more negative attitudes towards immigrants, supporting a perceived realistic conflict hypothesis. Thus, a perceived threat to either the cultural norm or economic well being led to more negative attitudes towards immigrants. Results are discussed for their relevance to models of intergroup relations.

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Recent events have highlighted various important social and political conflicts regarding race relations, immigration, and often, attitudes towards immigrants. The 1994 events in California regarding proposition 187 to limit immigration and former President Clinton's initiative on race provide evidence that race and ethnicity are highly salient policy issues within the USA. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks further highlight ethnic and cultural tensions. Similarly, multiple states and municipalities have either recently adopted or are attempting to adopt "English only" laws, providing further evidence of the current import of the topic. Thus, intergroup relations, particularly as they relate to

the infusion of new groups to an existing population, are an important topic throughout the world. At issue is how cultures interact as groups move from one locale to another.

One can identify multiple news polls regarding attitudes towards immigrants, but there has been little experimental research on the topic (Esses, Dovidio, & Dion, 2001; Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998). Presented here is one investigation of border resident attitudes towards immigrants. This research contrasts cultural threat hypotheses with perceived intergroup competition models, and experimental tests of the two theories are presented. Outlined first, however, is a review of the relevant literatures.

What psychological factors drive negative attitudes towards other groups? Recently, researchers have

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begun to recognize the importance of perceived intergroup similarity as a predictor of prejudice. Hornsey and Hogg (2000a, 2000b) have identified a number of relevant factors including the types of categorizations made salient with any given context (subordinate vs. superordinate, etc.), leadership factors, cross cutting memberships, etc., all of which are important. In a similar manner, Jetten, Spears, and Manstead (1998) demonstrate that the degree of intergroup similarity also influences prejudicial reactions. Groups that are either too similar or too different are evaluated more negatively than are moderately different groups. Thus, consistent with an optimal distinctiveness approach to prejudice, one must balance similarity and distinctiveness within an intergroup situation (Brewer, 1991, 1993).

Our focus, however, is on the *quality* of the similarity. Being similar on some important traits (e.g., believing it is important to be humble) might lead to more positive interactions. Being similar on other important traits, for instance job skills, might in fact lead to more negative evaluations. Whereas some models predict that differences on important interpersonal dimensions are threatening, other models predict that differences on important economic variables are threatening. Thus, one must go beyond investigating if intergroup similarity impacts prejudice to also investigate how the *quality* of those differences impacts prejudice.

### *Cultural threat*

One popular response to immigrants is the belief that immigrants will change the existing cultural structure. Threat to one's cultural identity is consistent with an integrated threat theory posited by Stephan and colleagues (Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald, & Tur-Kaspa, 1998). Stephan et al. identify four distinct types of threat including realistic threat (described later), cultural or symbolic threat, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes. Cultural threat is the most relevant for the current approach. Stephan et al. define cultural threat as the perceived harm caused by immigrants with distinct morals, norms, and values. When an individual feels that his or her culture is threatened by the potential integration of a particular set of immigrants, that person responds more negatively towards that group. On an interpersonal level, this means that the potential integration of immigrants with a different language and interpersonal style will provoke more negative reactions than the potential integration of immigrants from the respondents' "home country" (Hitlan, 2002). Here, cultural threat is defined as the perception of between group distinctiveness on social or interpersonal traits. Cultural threat models predict that as one perceives greater differences between the in-group and potential immigrants on important interpersonal traits, one

should feel greater threat and exhibit greater prejudice towards that group.

### *Realistic group conflict theory*

The perceived realistic group conflict theory suggests that competition for access to limited resources leads to conflict between groups (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). As groups compete with other groups for limited resources, they learn to view the out-group as the competition, which leads to prejudice. The original realistic group conflict theory has been expanded to include the mere perception of conflict (Esses et al., 1998). In order for potential competitors to take resources, they must be perceived as similar to the in-group on the relevant dimensions. For instance, if people believe immigrants take away jobs that would have otherwise gone to local citizens, they would be expected to have more negative attitudes towards those immigrants. Immigrants can take away jobs from the local citizens only if they have competitive job skills. We hypothesize that this perceived threat is greater when the host country persons believe the immigrants are similar to them on important work-related dimensions.

### *Overview*

In the present study, University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) students were asked about their perceptions of the similarity between US citizens and Mexican immigrants. UTEP is situated directly on the US/Mexico border. Ten percent of the student population is Mexican National. As such, immigration represents a salient and important local issue. The perceived intergroup similarities of stereotyped interpersonal and work-related traits were manipulated to test the previously described competing hypotheses. Cultural threat theories predict that differences regarding important interpersonal traits and norms should prove more threatening than work-related differences. In contrast, realistic conflict theories suggest that similarities on economic or work-related traits should be more threatening than similarities on interpersonal traits. As such, the first step was to identify traits that describe both dimensions. A strict interpretation of cultural threat hypotheses might contend that one should identify important morals or values rather than important interpersonal traits. In this study, however, traits were used for both operationalizations to keep the level of comparisons equivalent across conditions.

Pretest participants were asked to complete two questionnaires that asked them to describe their own ethnic group and to identify which characteristics are work-related vs. interpersonally related. The results from this pretest were used for the experiment. In the

experiment, the perceived intergroup similarities between the groups were manipulated via the use of one of two scales. Some participants were asked to rate how similar their in-group was to an out-group, whereas others were asked to rate how different their in-group is to an out-group. Logically, the similarity and difference comparisons should produce the same outcome. Nevertheless, it is proposed that the framing of the question produces distinct temporary norms (Kahneman & Miller, 1986). It is argued that the type of question recruits a different mental representation of the between group similarities (cf., Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). By asking about the similarities between the groups, it should recruit from memory known similar exemplars. Questions regarding the differences, however, should recruit from memory known distinct exemplars. As such, the ensuing group representations differ, even though existing group stereotypes are used. This methodology assumes that individuals have at their disposal multiple exemplars or known instances of similar and dissimilar others, and that the cue question recruits the associated exemplars (Smith & Zárate, 1992) to produce a new norm for between group similarity (Kahneman & Miller, 1986). The effect is to produce a new representation of the between group similarities based on the participants' actual experience. This methodology is useful because it allows one to utilize existing groups (and the associated identification with those groups) while also manipulating the perceptions of between group similarity (Zárate & Garza, 2002).

Some participants were given the work-related traits, whereas others were given the interpersonal traits. Within our paradigm, that means that completing the similarity scale should make groups seem more similar on the given traits, while completing the difference scale should work to make the groups appear more distinct. Through this model, one should be able to experimentally manipulate perceptions of intergroup similarity using well known existing groups. Thus, one can derive clear tests of competing predictions.

### Pretest

For the pretest, 40 UTEP students (24 introduction to psychology students and 16 volunteers) participated. The pretest participants were asked to rate how descriptive 47 traits were of their own ethnic group. The ratings were completed on a 7 point scale with 1 "Not at all Descriptive" to 7 "Extremely Descriptive." They were then asked to rate the degree to which each trait is related to interpersonal skills or to work-related success. The characteristics were listed and participants were instructed to rate them on a 7-point scale, from 1 "Very Interpersonal" to 7 "Very Work Related." Sixteen traits (8 interpersonal and 8 work-related) were selected that differed significantly from the midpoint on the self-descriptiveness scale

and were rated as either interpersonal or work-related. Interpersonal traits included, affectionate, friendly, generous, humble, kind, loving, passionate, and traditional. The interpersonal traits had an aggregate rating of 5.47 for self-descriptiveness, and 2.66 on the interpersonal scale. The work-related traits included ambitious, competitive, disciplined, hard working, motivated, organized, punctual, and systematic. The aggregate mean was 4.72 on the self-descriptiveness scale and 5.29 on the work-related scale.

In a second study, 33 participants completed further ratings of the 47 traits used in the original pretest. Participants were asked to make three sets of ratings. Participants were asked to "indicate the degree to which each characteristic is important within a "work setting" or in a "social setting" (separately). Participants were also asked to "indicate the degree to which each characteristic is positive or negative." The importance ratings were made on a 1 (not at all important) to a 7 (extremely important) scale. The valence evaluations were made on a 1 (extremely positive) to 7 (extremely negative) scale, with 4 (neutral) as a midpoint value. All participants made all three sets of ratings. Scales were given in a random order, and order was used as a factor in the ANOVA.

The importance ratings of the work traits in a work setting ( $M = 5.85$ ,  $SD = .97$ , Cronbach  $\alpha = .89$ ) were significantly higher ( $F(1, 30) = 9.99$ ,  $p < .003$ ) than the importance of the interpersonal traits in a social setting ( $M = 5.31$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ , Cronbach  $\alpha = .86$ ). On the other hand, both mean ratings were above the scale marker "moderately important," which marked the 5 on the scale. Analyses of the trait positivity evaluations revealed a similar effect. The interpersonal traits ( $M = 1.87$ ,  $SD = .79$ , Cronbach  $\alpha = .89$ ) were evaluated more positively ( $F(1, 32) = 4.71$ ,  $p = .038$ ) than the work-related traits ( $M = 2.09$ ,  $SD = .68$ , Cronbach  $\alpha = .74$ ) (the positive end of the scale was 1). Separate  $t$  tests comparing the evaluations to the neutral midpoint revealed that the interpersonal ( $t = 15.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and work traits ( $t = 16.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were significantly different from the midpoint, indicating both were evaluated very positively. In addition, analyses of the each trait individually revealed that all 16 traits were positively evaluated and all items had positive item to total correlations. In sum, both sets of traits are very important and also very positive. These trait terms were used as the content manipulation for the following experiment.

## Methods

### Participants

Complete data was collected from 122 participants. Fourteen participants responded "0" on all the

prejudice items and were dropped from the analyses because of that response set. Three participants were dropped because they were Mexican Nationals. The final sample included 105 participants. Of that sample, 66 were Latino, 24 were Anglo, 5 were African–American, and 10 were unidentified. All participants volunteered their time to this project or received course credit for their participation. Not all participants, however, completed all three scales.

### Measures

Questionnaire packets consisted of an informed consent sheet (which was separated from the rest of the package before the data were recorded), a comparison page, a collective self-esteem scale, the perceived realistic conflict scale, a stereotyping scale, and a prejudice scale, in that order.<sup>1</sup> The perceived realistic conflict, stereotyping, and prejudice scales are three related dependent measures that assess favorability towards Mexican immigrants. The final page included demographic information. We were most interested in ethnicity. Latino and Anglo participants, however, did not differ across conditions, and comparisons using other groups are inappropriate given their small sample sizes. Each scale is described below.

The first manipulation included the comparison page. Some participants were given the work-related traits, while others were given the interpersonal traits. Within each of those conditions, some participants were asked to rate, on a 1 (not at all similar) to 7 (very similar) scale how similar their in-group is to Mexican immigrants. Others were asked to rate how different their in-group is to Mexican immigrants on a 1 (not at all different) to 7 (very different) scale. Finally, control participants were asked to evaluate themselves on the given list of traits using a 1 (not at all descriptive) to 7 (very descriptive) scale.

### Perceived realistic conflict

Perceived realistic conflict was measured using a 12 item scale (Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999). Responses were collected on a 10-point scale ranging from A (strongly disagree) to J (strongly agree). One-half of

the items are reverse scored. Sample items included “Mexican immigrants get more from this country than they contribute.” An example of a reverse scored items is “Mexican immigrants should be eligible for the same health care benefits received by Americans who cannot pay for their health care.” The scale had adequate internal consistency (Cronbach  $\alpha = .85$ ).

### Stereotyping measure

The stereotyping scale included the following 12 items: “hard-working,” “ignorant,” “friendly,” “aggressive,” “reliable,” “undisciplined,” “proud,” “dishonest,” “respectful,” “unintelligent,” “clean,” and “clannish.” The original word “cliquish” was replaced with “clannish” because many participants in a prior study did not understand the word cliquish (Stephan et al., 1998). Participants were asked to respond to the following question: What percentages of Mexican immigrants possess each of the following traits? Responses were made on a 10-point scale where A was “0–10%,” B was “10–20%”... and J was “90–100%.” Positive items were reverse scored and a total aggregate was derived with higher numbers more indicative of a negative stereotype (Cronbach  $\alpha = .76$ ).

### Prejudice measure

To measure prejudice towards immigrants, the attitudes towards immigrants scale designed by Stephan et al. (1998) was utilized. The scale consists of 12 items with 6 negative adjective descriptors (hostility, dislike, disregard, rejection, hatred, and superiority) and 6 positive adjective descriptors (acceptance, approval, warmth, admiration, affection, and sympathy). Responses were indicated on a 10-point scale ranging from A indicating no \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g., hostility) and J indicating extreme \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g., hostility). Scores were appropriately reversed score when examined (Cronbach  $\alpha = .85$ ).

### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions within a 2 (Trait Type: Interpersonal vs. Work-related) by 3 (Type of Comparison: Similar vs. Different vs. Self) factorial design. Participants were given either the eight interpersonal traits or the 8 work-related traits. They were asked to compare their in-group to Mexican immigrants, contrast their in-group to Mexican immigrants, or rate themselves on the given traits. Separate random assignment procedures were used for Mexican Americans, White Americans, and other Americans. Dependent measures included the realistic conflict scale, the stereotyping scale, and the prejudice scale, in that order. Finally, demographic information was collected. Participants were run individually or in

<sup>1</sup> In addition we were interested in collective self-esteem and income because hypotheses can be generated regarding their potential influence on prejudice. Collective self-esteem was included immediately following the comparison page. It was predicted that participants high in collective self-esteem would produce stronger in-group bias effects, particularly under cultural threat conditions. Those predictions were not supported. Income was focused upon because one can predict that lower income individuals will feel more economically threatened by Mexican immigrants. That hypothesis was not supported. Duration of residence in the USA, age, and gender demographic data were also collected. None of those variables influenced the results.

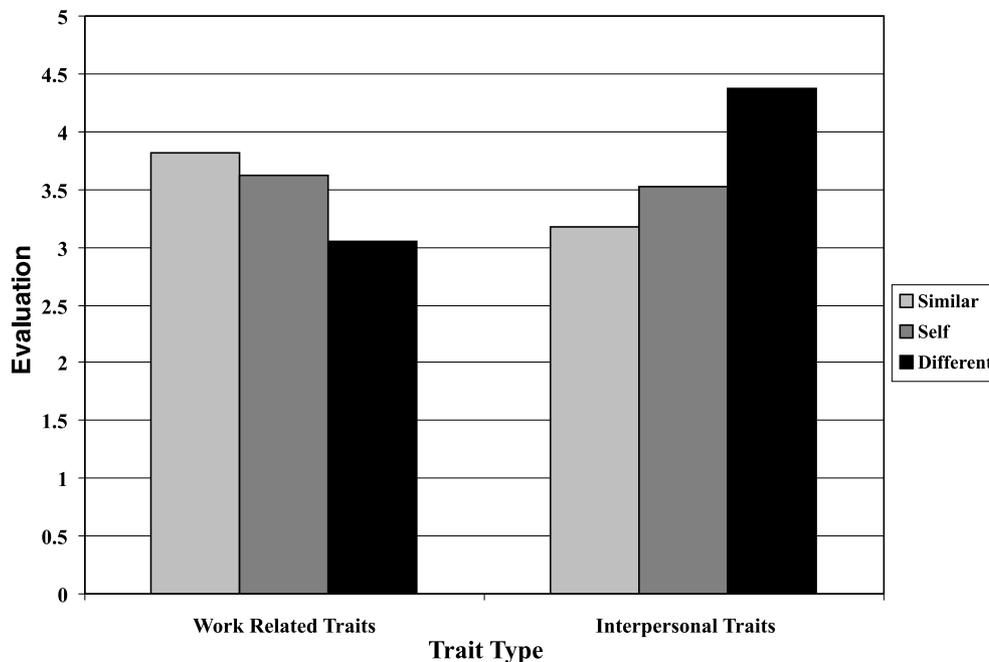


Fig. 1. Out-group evaluations as a function of comparison type and trait type.

groups of 2–6. At the end of the experiment, participants were thanked and debriefed (see Fig. 1).

## Results

Because of the conceptual similarity of the three measures of intergroup attitudes, the three scale scores were submitted to a principal components analysis. The principal components analyses revealed that all three scales loaded highly on one superordinate factor that accounted for 76% of the variance. Consistent with that, all three scales correlated highly with each other, with correlations between .56 and .70. Each scale utilized the same 10 point scale, with similar means and variances. As such, the three scales were averaged to obtain an aggregate score which was used in all further analyses.

Data were analyzed using a 3 (comparison type) by 2 (trait type) factorial design. The ANOVA revealed a strong comparison type by trait type interaction  $F(2, 99) = 6.20, p = .0034$ . The means are presented in Fig. 1. Planned comparisons revealed that when differences were made salient, focusing on interpersonal differences led to more negative evaluations than when work related differences were made salient ( $F(1, 32) = 11.82, p = .0016$ ). In direct contrast, when between group similarities were made salient, work related comparisons led to more negative evaluations than when interpersonal similarities were made salient ( $F(1, 33) = 3.96, p = .055$ ). That same analysis also revealed that it was not the mere act of making evaluations that produced the negative evaluations. When

participants evaluated the self on the various traits, there were no differences as a function of trait type ( $F(1, 36) = .03, ns$ ). Thus, exactly as predicted by cultural threat hypotheses, perceptions of intergroup personal distinctiveness produces greater levels of prejudice. As further predicted by realistic threat hypotheses, perceptions of intergroup similarity on economic skill variables produces greater levels of prejudice.

## Discussion

The data presented add two distinct contributions to the literature, including the identification of the *quality* of similarity on perceptions of prejudice, and the further exploration of relevant social dimensions on attitudes towards out-groups. Each factor is discussed below.

Recent models of intergroup relations highlight the conditions when perceptions of between group similarities or differences will produce more stereotyping and prejudice. The research presented here highlights that one must go one step further. Models of stereotyping and prejudice must do more than identify degrees of similarity. They must identify the *quality* of that similarity.

Cultural threat models predict that differences in interpersonal traits should produce a group threat, thereby increasing prejudice. Distinct immigrant groups pose threats to the social welfare of citizens of the host country. This pattern is perfectly consistent with the reported data. People reported more prejudice when they were induced to identify differences between their

in-group and Mexican immigrants on interpersonal traits. Thus, immigrants different from the norm pose a threat to the “social fabric” of the host country and are subsequently evaluated more negatively.

Realistic group conflict theory, however, predicts that when people feel that others have similar skills and attributes, their sense of job security will be threatened. The essence of this threat is that immigrant groups compete for scarce economic resources. In this case, it was expected that those who identified the similarities between their in-group and Mexican immigrants on work-related traits would feel more threatened than when differences are highlighted. That threat would lead to more prejudice. That prediction was supported.

Regarding the manipulations, these manipulations were effective despite the fact existing groups were used to influence well established beliefs. UTEP sits on the border between the US and Mexico. Ten percent of UTEP students are Mexican National, so attitudes towards Mexican immigrants are no doubt well established, yet this manipulation was still effective. It is plausible that attitudes towards various groups are multifaceted and ambivalent and the manipulations used here serve to make particular attitudes salient. It was important to use existing groups (rather than minimal groups) as a way to involve the self in the associated processes (Zárate & Garza, 2002). When a particular group identity is important, minimal group paradigms cannot capture the relevant social psychological factors. One’s ethnic or gender identity is developed over a lifetime of experiences, so it may be unreasonable to expect that lab produced group loyalties will reflect those types of attachments.

Finally, the presented research highlights that one must identify how similarity impacts interpersonal perceptions. In one study, Garza (2000) asked participants to rate how similar or different their ethnic in-group was to an ethnic out-group or asked them to rate how similar or different they themselves were to an individual member of an ethnic out-group. Results demonstrated that making similarity comparisons produced more positive evaluations when making interpersonal comparisons (Byrne, 1961; Byrne, Clore, & Smeaton, 1986; Rosenbaum, 1986a, 1986b). In contrast, making difference comparisons produced more positive evaluations when making intergroup evaluations. Thus, the level of comparison influences the effects of similarity on the evaluations of individuals and group members. Once again, the data demonstrated that the *quality* or type of similarities influences perceptions differently.

## Summary

This study was designed to contrast interpersonal threat from economic threat hypotheses. The data found

support, however, for both theories under particular conditions. Many treatments of a particular attitude appear to implicitly assume that there is a single determinant of negative attitudes towards an out-group, yet we demonstrated two distinct mechanisms. These findings stress the importance of understanding the parameters around any one particular theory rather than attempting to provide wholesale support or refutation for any one theory. These data demonstrate distinct types of threat as a function of manipulated perceived similarity between two groups. At times, between-group similarities are good and at other times they are bad.

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