



Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Emily F. Wood Monica K. Miller , (2016), "Prejudice toward immigrants in student and community samples", Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research, Vol. 8 Iss 4 pp. 290 - 300

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JACPR-03-2016-0217>

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Prejudice toward immigrants in student and community samples

Emily F. Wood and Monica K. Miller

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Abstract

Purpose – *The number of immigrants in the USA has increased steadily in recent decades. Two studies investigated individual differences that relate to attitudes toward immigrants in student and community samples. The paper aims to discuss this issue.*

Design/methodology/approach – *US university students and a community sampler were surveyed.*

Findings – *In both samples, higher scores on attributional complexity were associated with more positive attitudes toward immigrants and individuals who make dispositional attributions for the causes of crime and/or who are higher in faith in intuition tended to have more negative attitudes. Political orientation was a significant predictor in both samples; being more liberal and identifying as a Democrat compared to a Republican was related to more positive attitudes. Higher need for cognition scores were associated with more positive attitudes and higher legal authoritarianism scores were associated with more negative attitudes; however these were only significant predictors in the community sample.*

Originality/value – *Prejudicial attitudes toward immigrants can have adverse effects on immigrants in the realms of the legal system, workplace, healthcare, and education.*

Keywords *Prejudice, Immigrants, Discrimination, Attributions, Cognitive processing, Sample differences*

Paper type *Research paper*

Because the rate of immigration has increased steadily in the past few decades (Bureau of the Census, 2012), immigrant related issues are salient in the media and in political and social arenas. Attitudes toward immigrants vary drastically. Some people (51 percent in a survey conducted by Pew Research Center, 2015) believe that immigrants strengthen the country (Hamilton *et al.*, 2010). Others (41 percent in the same survey), view immigrants as burdens (Hamilton *et al.*, 2010).

Understanding attitudes toward immigrants is important because attitudes are a key component in the formation of prejudice, which can lead to discrimination (Quillan, 2006). For example, jurors who hold negative attitudes toward immigrants might show prejudice toward immigrant defendants (Holmberg and Kyvsgaard, 2003), immigrants might experience employment discrimination (Chao and Nguyen, 2005; Derous *et al.*, 2009; Soylu and Buchanan, 2013), or immigrants might be the target of aggression and violence (Anderson, 2002). Perceived prejudice and discrimination is related to negative health outcomes such as higher stress and poor mental and physical health. (Araújo and Borrell, 2006; Karlsen and Nazroo, 2002; Williams *et al.*, 2003). As individual differences are factors that substantially explain variation in prejudice (Hodson and Dhont, 2015), determining individual difference variables that relate to attitudes toward immigrants is important for understanding and combatting negative attitudes and prejudice.

Past research has examined broad reasons for negative attitudes (e.g. labor market competition) and how basic demographic variables relate to attitudes (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014;

Received 5 March 2016
Revised 24 April 2016
18 June 2016
28 June 2016
Accepted 29 June 2016

Hamilton *et al.*, 2010). Other research has investigated how personality variables relate to attitudes toward immigrants (e.g. Gallego and Pardos-Prado, 2014; Hodson and Dhont, 2015; Sibley and Duckitt, 2008). Few studies have examined other individual difference variables, such as cognitive processing style, legal authoritarianism (LA), and attributions about the causes of crime, that relate to attitudes toward immigrants. These individual difference variables are related to other social issues (Miller *et al.*, 2013; Lindsey *et al.*, 2013); thus, the purpose of the current research was to investigate if these individual differences were also related to attitudes toward immigrants in student (study 1) and community (study 2) samples. There is an ongoing debate in the social science literature (Wiener *et al.*, 2011) about whether an undergraduate student sample substantially differs from community samples and, if so whether this group is an adequate sample to use in social science research. Thus, another purpose of these studies was to compare predictors of attitudes in student and community samples.

Individual differences related to attitudes toward immigrants

Individual differences relate to a number of social and legal issues such as support for the death penalty (Miller *et al.*, 2013) and support for parental involvement clauses in abortion laws (Lindsey *et al.*, 2013). Thus, it is possible that individual differences also relate to attitudes toward immigrants, as discussed next.

Political orientation and affiliation

Political orientation and affiliation are strong predictors of social issues. Being conservative compared to liberal is correlated with prejudice toward a variety of deviant and disadvantaged groups (Duckitt, 1992; Webster *et al.*, 2011, 2014), including immigrants (Hodson *et al.*, 2013). Conservatives, compared to liberals, are more likely to be prejudiced, in part, because they tend to prioritize maintaining the status quo even if this means justifying inequality (Hodson and Dhont, 2015; Jost *et al.*, 2003).

With regard to attitudes toward immigrants, one survey found that 63 percent of Republicans but only 32 percent of Democrats think that immigrants are a burden to the USA (Pew Research Center, 2015). Similarly, 62 percent of Republicans support building a wall or a fence along the entire Mexican border compared to 44 percent of Independents and 39 percent of Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2011). Thus, we would expect that Republicans and conservatives would have more negative attitudes than their counterparts.

Cognitive processing style

Individuals differ in the ways in which they process information, which guides their behavior. The current study used the Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory (CEST; Epstein, 1990) to assess participants' cognitive processing style. CEST posits that individuals process information in two distinct ways: rationally and experientially (Epstein, 1990). The rational system, measured by the need for cognition (NFC) scale, is deliberate and logical while the experiential system, measured by the faith in intuition (FI) scale, is automatic and relies on heuristics and emotions when processing information (Epstein, 1990).

Individuals higher in NFC tend to be less racially prejudiced (Waller, 1993), less punitive (Sargent, 2004; Tam *et al.*, 2008), and use fewer stereotypes (Schaller *et al.*, 1995). Individuals higher in FI are more likely to use emotions to guide their decisions (Nan, 2009) and rely on heuristics (Shiloh *et al.*, 2001). We would expect that individuals who score high on the NFC scale or low on the FI scale will have more positive attitudes toward immigrants compared to their counterparts. Individuals who score high on FI might be more likely to utilize heuristics and incorporate emotional appeals into their attitudes instead of considering factual information about immigrants.

Attributional complexity (AC)

AC is an individual difference variable that measures the degree to which individuals make complex rather than simple attributions about the causes of behavior (Fletcher *et al.*, 1986).

The more complex attributions individuals make, the more likely they are to make better and more accurate social judgments as they are more likely to consider multiple causes for others' behavior (Fast *et al.*, 2008; Fletcher *et al.*, 1986). Individuals who make more complex attributions are also less likely to make errors and display biases (Fast *et al.*, 2008). AC is negatively associated with punitiveness and racism (Carroll, 1979; Pettigrew, 1979; Tam *et al.*, 2008). Thus, individuals who make more complex attributions might have more positive attitudes toward immigrants compared to individuals who make simple attributions because they are better able to think about why immigrants leave their home countries and make more accurate judgments.

Dispositional attributions of crime

Individuals assign attributions to the behavior of others and the type of attribution made affects how individuals think of and treat the individual who did the behavior (Heider, 1958; Moskowitz, 2005; Weiner, 1979). Individuals make situational attributions when external causes are perceived to be responsible for the behavior and make dispositional attributions when personal characteristics are determined to be the cause (Heider, 1958). When individuals make dispositional attributions about the cause of a person's behavior they tend to blame the individual and view them more negatively (Weiner, 1995).

The type of attributions that individuals make about crime and criminals is related to punitive attitudes (Carroll and Payne, 1977; Hartnagel and Templeton, 2012). Measuring the extent to which individuals make dispositional attributions about the causes of crime is one way to get at whether participants tend to blame individuals for their actions or blame situational factors. We would expect that participants with higher scores on the dispositional attributions of crime measure would be more likely to blame immigrants for their situation and hold more negative attitudes compared to their counterparts.

LA

Individuals high in authoritarianism highly regard rules, order, and authority and dislike people who do not conform to society's conventions (Adorno *et al.*, 1950; Allport, 1954). Authoritarianism is a strong predictor of prejudice toward outgroups, especially when the outgroup is perceived as threatening (Altemeyer, 1996; Duckitt, 1992; McFarland and Adelson, 1996). Authoritarianism scores are negatively related to attitudes toward illegal immigrants (Basset, 2011).

LA is closely related to the traditional concept of authoritarianism (Kravitz *et al.*, 1993; Narby *et al.*, 1993). LA measures peoples' legal attitudes and biases (Butler and Moran, 2007). Individuals high in LA tend to feel that the rights of the government are greater than the rights of the defendant and are more punitive and conviction prone (Narby *et al.*, 1993). Authoritarianism is related to prejudice because authoritarians tend to be hostile to lower status groups and favor their own group (Adorno *et al.*, 1950). It is likely that immigrants are considered a subordinate outgroup and might be considered threatening. Thus, we would expect that participants higher in LA would have more negative attitudes toward immigrants.

The present research

The purpose of these two studies was to determine if individual difference variables relate to attitudes toward immigrants in student (study 1) and community (study 2) samples:

- H1.* Democrats, compared to Republicans and Independents, will have more positive attitudes (study 1). Being more liberal compared to conservative will be associated with more positive attitudes (study 2).
- H2.* Higher scores on NFC will be associated with more positive attitudes.
- H3.* Lower scores on FI will be associated with more positive attitudes.
- H4.* Higher scores AC scores will be associated with more positive attitudes.
- H5.* Lower scores on the LA scale will be associated with more positive attitudes.

H6. Lower scores on the dispositional criminal attributions scale will be associated with more positive attitudes.

RQ1. Will these relationships be the same for the student and community samples?

Study 1 – student sample

Participants

Participants were 539 mostly White (72.5 percent) University of Nevada, Reno students (61.8 percent female). Mean age was 21.97 (range = 18 to 55). See Table I (Tables referred to in this paper can be found at [http://wolfweb.unr.edu/homepage/emilywood/Tables1-5Prejudice toward immigrants.pdf](http://wolfweb.unr.edu/homepage/emilywood/Tables1-5Prejudice_toward_immigrants.pdf)) for demographics.

Procedure

Participants completed an online questionnaire, which included demographics, individual difference scales, and a scale assessing attitudes toward immigrants. Participants received partial course credit for their participation.

Materials

Attitudes toward immigrants. Attitudes toward immigrants and their impact on American life was measured using Esses *et al.*'s (1998) Zero-Sum Beliefs about Immigrants Scale. In total, 15 items were rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) (e.g. "Immigrants are taking our jobs"). Scores were averaged and higher scores indicate more negative attitudes toward immigrants (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.97$).

Demographic questionnaire. Participants self-reported their age, gender, race, political affiliation, and religious background.

NFC and FI. Cognitive processing traits (NFC and FI) were measured using the ten-item Rational-Experiential Inventory (Norris *et al.*, 1998). The scale consists of two subscales: NFC and FI. Items were rated on a scale from 1 (completely false) to 5 (completely true) (e.g. "I trust my initial feelings about people"). Scores on the two subscales were averaged separately, with higher numbers indicating greater NFC or FI (Cronbach's α s = 0.69 and 0.89 for NFC and FI, respectively).

AC. AC was measured using Fletcher *et al.*'s (1986) 28-item AC scale. Items were rated on a scale from 1 (completely false) to 5 (completely true) (e.g. "I really enjoy analyzing the reasons or causes for peoples' behavior"). Scores were averaged, with higher numbers indicating more AC (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$).

LA. LA was measured using the Revised Legal Attitudes Questionnaire (Kravitz *et al.*, 1993). In all, 23 items were rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (e.g. "The law coddles criminals to the detriment of society"). The items were averaged, with higher scores indicating higher LA (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.65$).

Dispositional attributions of crime. The tendency to make dispositional attributions about the cause of crime was measured using a scale created by the authors that was adapted from previous studies (Carroll *et al.*, 1987; Templeton and Hartnagel, 2012). Seven items were rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (e.g. "Most criminals deliberately choose to prey on society"). Scores were averaged and higher scores indicate a greater tendency to make dispositional attributions about the cause of crime (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.73$).

Results

An ordinary least squares regression analysis was conducted to examine which individual difference variables significantly predicted attitudes toward immigrants. Analyses revealed no multicollinearity (see Table II). The omnibus regression model contained political affiliation, LA, AC, NFC, FI, and dispositional attributions of crime. Political affiliation was dummy coded so that Democrat was the reference group. All variables were entered into the model simultaneously.

The regression model significantly predicted participants' scores on the attitudes toward immigrants scale ($R^2 = 0.24$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.22$; $F(8, 350) = 13.51$, $p < 0.001$). Political affiliation, AC, and dispositional attributions of crime were all significant predictors of attitudes, offering support for *H1*, *H4*, and *H6*. Republicans, Independents, and individuals who indicated having no affiliation had more negative attitudes compared to Democrats (Democrats compared to Republicans $p < 0.001$, Democrats compared to Independents $p = 0.04$, Democrats compared to no affiliation $p = 0.001$), providing support for *H1*. Individuals who scored higher on AC had more positive attitudes ($p = 0.028$) and individuals who scored higher on the dispositional attributions of crime measure had more negative attitudes ($p < 0.001$), providing support for *H4* and *H6*. FI was nearing significance ($p = 0.051$), indicating that higher FI scores were related to more negative attitudes, offering partial support for *H3*. NFC and LA were not significant predictors; thus, *H2* and *H5* were not supported. However, both variables were trending in the expected direction. See Table IV for means and standard deviations and Table V for regression statistics. Study 2 was conducted to determine if these individual differences relate to attitudes toward immigrants in a community sample the same way that they do for a student sample.

Study 2 – community sample

Whether student samples are comparable to community samples has been a concern of social science researchers, as much of social psychological research utilizes student samples due to convenience and cost. Student samples tend to be younger, be more liberal, be more educated, and have higher socioeconomic statuses (Barua, 2012; Wiener *et al.*, 2011). Older participants are more likely to want to decrease the amount of legal immigrants in the country and age is negatively associated with support for immigration; thus, students might have more positive attitudes toward immigrants (Chandler and Tsai, 2001; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007). Student samples also differ in their attitudes (e.g. toward crime control; Miller *et al.*, 2016; Yelderian *et al.*, 2016) and on measures of other variables (e.g. NFC; McCabe and Krauss, 2011; McCabe *et al.*, 2010). More research comparing student and community samples is necessary as it is unclear how sample type affects research outcomes and under what circumstances. Replication in different samples makes results more generalizable and robust and will add to the growing literature on differences between student and community samples. Thus, study 2 investigated attitudes toward immigrants in a community sample.

Participants

Participants were 509 mostly White (83.3 percent) community members (55.8 percent male) recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The mean age was 34.67 (range = 18-67; see Table I for demographics).

Procedure

The procedure of study 2 was similar to the procedure in study 1 except participants were recruited via Amazon's MTurk and received \$5.00 for their participation.

Materials

All predictor variables were identical to study 1 except that political affiliation was assessed using a single item political orientation measure that ranged from 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative). Differences in political affiliation measures allow us to test if one measure is superior to the other, more predictive, or if both measures are robust in their relation to attitudes. Additionally, all other variables were measured using seven-point scales instead of five-point scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Results and discussion

The statistical analysis was the same as study 1. Analyses revealed no multicollinearity (see Table III). The regression model significantly predicted participants' scores on the attitudes toward immigrants scale ($R^2 = 0.32$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.31$; $F(6, 388) = 29.81$, $p < 0.001$). All individual difference variables were significant predictors of attitudes toward immigrants. Higher scores on the political affiliation measure (i.e. more conservative) were associated with more negative attitudes ($p < 0.001$). Higher AC scores ($p = 0.004$) and higher scores on the NFC

scale ($p = 0.036$) were associated with more positive attitudes. Higher scores on the FI scale ($p = 0.041$), LA scale ($p = 0.001$), and dispositional attributions of crime scale ($p < 0.001$) were associated with more negative attitudes. These results provide support for all hypotheses. See Table V for regression statistics.

General discussion

The current study investigated the relationship between individual differences and attitudes toward immigrants in student and community samples. Overall, all of the variables were associated with attitudes in predictable ways, but the strength of the associations differed between the student and the community sample on some measures.

In both studies, political affiliation, AC, dispositional attributions of crimes, and FI (marginally significant in the student sample) were significant predictors. However, NFC and LA were significant predictors only in the community sample. More specifically, AC and NFC were negatively related to attitudes toward immigrants. Being conservative or not identifying as a Democrat, LA, FI, and dispositional attributions for the cause of crime were positively related to attitudes. These two studies help illuminate important differences between student and community samples' attitudes.

Measures of attributions were significantly related to attitudes in both samples. This might suggest that, for both samples, the type of attributions that are made about a stigmatized group's situation and how complexly participants tend to think about causes are related to attitude formation toward immigrants. This comports with other research that demonstrated that the attributions people make are related to attitudes toward the poor, support for welfare, and verdicts (Angelone *et al.*, 2007; Kluegel and Smith, 1986). Additionally, these results are in line with research about attributions that asserts that attributions affect the way in which individuals are viewed and treated (Heider, 1958; Moskowitz, 2005; Weiner, 1979).

In both samples, measures of political affiliation were related to attitudes. The finding that Democrats and liberals have more positive attitudes comports with previous studies that have shown that political affiliation is related to attitudes toward immigrants (e.g. Chandler and Tsai, 2001; Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996)

Both studies also found that FI was related to attitudes (marginally significant in the student sample); participants who scored higher on the FI scale had more negative attitudes toward immigrants. The media regularly portrays immigrants negatively and focusses on the threats that immigrants pose to Americans, which can lead to dehumanization and serve as a justification for prejudicial attitudes (Esses *et al.*, 2013). Individuals who scored higher on FI might have relied on heuristics, such as negative things they have heard in the media, to form their attitudes toward immigrants. Media portrayals of immigrants as threatening or as terrorists might also lead individuals who are higher in FI to rely on emotions when forming attitudes.

The student and community sample differed in how LA and NFC were related to attitudes. Past research has demonstrated that students and community members differ in authoritarianism. One study found that student samples are less authoritarian compared to community samples (Berg and Vidmar, 1975). Similarly to Narby *et al.* (1993), the current study found that the relationship between authoritarianism and attitudes toward immigrants was weaker for students compared to community members; however, the trend was in the predicted direction. Students might hold authoritarian beliefs but might not yet apply these beliefs to external circumstances, possibly explaining why LA was not significantly related to attitudes in a student sample but was in the community sample. Further research on the relationship between LA and attitudes is needed to parse out differences between the samples.

Past research provides conflicting results about cognitive processing differences in students and community members. This research found that students and community members scored about the same on NFC ($3.55/5 = 0.71$ for students and $5.11/7 = 0.73$ for community members) but there was more variability in scores for community members ($SD = 1.31$) compared to students ($SD = 0.68$), which might be why NFC was not predictive of attitudes in the student sample. College students might be a more homogenous sample in regard to NFC scores compared to community members. More research is needed to further examine the instances when cognitive processing traits are relevant to attitudes for the different groups.

Implications

As attitudes are predictive of behavior in some instances, negative attitudes about immigrants can have a wide array of consequences and result in bias in settings such as hiring, healthcare, education, and the legal system (Kraus, 1995). This research has many implications for explaining prejudicial attitudes, as well as reducing prejudice and discrimination that stems from negative attitudes. Implications for reducing prejudice toward immigrants are particularly important as prejudice toward groups such as sexual minorities, is associated with bias-motivated aggression and violence (Herek, 2009; Parrott, 2009; Parrott *et al.*, 2011) and dehumanization (i.e. Costello and Hodson, 2010; Hodson and Costello, 2007).

First, the results of these studies can be used to inform prejudice reducing education and training programs. Some prejudice intervention programs in schools have been effective (see Paluck and Green, 2009 for review); research about the predictor of negative attitudes toward stigmatized groups, such as immigrants, can be used to make these programs even more effective. The present research indicates that the attributions that individuals make, how complexly they think about the cause of situations, and cognitive processing style are related to attitudes. Cognitive interventions that provide individuals with factual information about immigrants and their circumstances might reduce reliance on stereotypes and encourage individuals to think of the situational factors that cause immigrants to leave their home countries, which might reduce negative attitudes.

Trainings that incorporate the results of these studies could encourage individuals to become aware of their own attributions and biases, think deeply and complexly about immigrants, as well as consider how their attitudes might impact their work and daily interactions with immigrants might also reduce negative attitudes. Further research is needed to determine the most effective methods for reducing prejudice; understanding individual difference variables that relate to the formation of negative attitudes is an important first step.

Second, this research also has implications for campaigns, such as political campaigns that utilize the media. Various forms of media are frequently utilized to deliver social and political messages to the public (Paluck and Green, 2009) and are effective (Gerber *et al.*, 2011). The present research suggests that campaigns aiming to foster positive attitudes toward immigrants (e.g. a presidential candidate in favor of “a path to citizenship”) would benefit from disseminating messages that make viewers or readers think deeply about immigrants’ situations. Conversely, anti-immigrant campaigns would likely benefit from encouraging shallow processing and emotional messages.

Finally, these studies have implications for psychology. Past research (e.g. Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014; Hamilton *et al.*, 2010; Ostfeld, 2015) has shown how cultural and economic threats affect individuals’ attitudes toward immigrants; the present research demonstrates that a substantial portion of the variance in attitudes toward immigrants can be explained by individual differences variables. This highlights the important contribution, as others also have noted (e.g. Hodson and Dhont, 2015), of individual level variables in explaining prejudice and that they need to be considered alongside situational variables.

This research contributes to the literature about differences in student and community samples and in which circumstances sample type matters. These studies also suggest that attitude formation might be different in students compared to community members and thus, aims to change attitudes might differ based on the target group.

Limitations and future research

Although the studies presented in this paper present models that explain a substantial portion of the variance in attitudes toward immigrants in student and community samples (24 and 32 percent, respectively) the research is not without limitations. First, both samples were predominantly white; thus we did not have enough race/ethnicity differences to test in-group/out-group bias; future research should acquire a broader, more diverse sample to investigate race/ethnicity differences from an intergroup bias perspective. Second, the student sample was from a university in the Western USA. Results from other universities might differ, as different parts of the country are

affected by immigration differently. Third, responses were collected from the student sample and the community sample in different years; thus, immigration issues and media coverage could have differed at the time of data collection, which could have affected participants' responses. Additionally, the questionnaire did not specify which type of immigrants were being asked about; thus future research should investigate if and how attitudes toward specific groups of immigrants differ. A final limitation is that demographic variables, such as education and gender, were not controlled for as other studies have done (e.g. Rustenbach, 2010).

Conclusion

Immigration continues to be a topic of debate in the USA. Individuals who hold negative attitudes toward immigrants might express prejudice and discriminate against immigrants in a variety of settings. This study found that political orientation, attributions, LA, and cognitive processing traits are strong predictors of attitudes in a community sample but only political affiliation, AC, FI, and dispositional attributions of crime are significant predictors in the student sample. These findings illuminate how differences between individuals affect attitudes toward immigrants.

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