

Spring 2017

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Recommended Citation

Wagner, Ryan T., "The Significant Influencing Factors of Xenophobia" (2017). *Student Scholarship - Education*. 2.
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The Significant Influencing Factors of Xenophobia

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Abstract

This paper serves as a review of the influencing factors of xenophobia and its behavioral products. Two primary categories of influencing factors of xenophobia are discussed: inherent factors and environmental factors. Inherent factors that are considered include genetic factors and personality factors; a variety of perspectives on the impact of these factors are reviewed. Discussion on the impact of environmental factors will focus on the impact of education and inter-group contact on xenophobic attitudes. The factors that influence xenophobia are clearly multifaceted, though conclusions about the extent to which environment and genetics play roles in the development of xenophobia and its by-products (racism, ethnocentrism, etc.) will require more research.

The Significant Influencing Factors of Xenophobia

Despite the rapid rate at which the world-wide community is becoming increasingly connected, it appears as if xenophobia is blossoming amid people of all races, religions, and ethnic backgrounds. Xenophobia is a complex psychological construct that makes itself apparent in a variety of ways. These can include fear or apprehension towards foreign cultures, perceived superiority of one's social group over others, or a readiness to openly discriminate against foreign people groups (Barbarino & Stürmer, 2016). Events in recent history, such as the Nazi Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide, have shown that unchecked prejudice and discrimination can leave the door open for inhumane acts of segregation, violence, and genocide. In order to properly address the visible ills of xenophobia—racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, bigotry—it is beneficial to first understand where xenophobic attitudes originate. This paper seeks to present a comprehensive assessment of modern research regarding the significant factors that influence xenophobic attitudes. The two main influences that will be discussed are inherent factors (genetics and personality) and environmental factors.

Inherent Factors

Genetic Factors

There are a number of theories that attempt to explain the correlation between genetic factors and xenophobic attitudes. These include Disease-Avoidance Mechanisms (Faulkner, Schaller, Park, & Duncan, 2004), the Male Warrior Hypothesis (McDonald, Navarrete, & Van Vugt, 2012), and the Genetic Similarity Theory (Rushton, 2005). This paper will briefly assess each of these theories.

Male warrior hypothesis. Suggested by McDonald et al. (2012), the Male Warrior Hypothesis arose out of the historical prevalence of conflict as an element of inter-group contact,

with particular interest in the undeniably consistent tendency for male instigation of and participation in intergroup conflict. The hypothesis relies on the notion that men and women are primarily motivated by reproductive success, and thus behave in order to maximize their reproductive fitness. It suggests that humans—with an emphasis on males—have developed certain psychological mechanisms that allow them to form groups for the purpose of increasing available reproductive resources by way of aggression towards out-groups. These psychological mechanisms would serve as the foundation for xenophobic attitudes.

McDonald suggested that, “if men’s psychology is designed in ways that facilitate success in intergroup conflicts, evidence for the [mechanisms] should be apparent in the thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behaviors relevant to intergroup conflict among men in modern societies” (McDonald, 2012, p. 672). Barbarino and Stürmer’s analysis (2016) of the correlation between human personality and xenophobic attitudes corroborates McDonald’s suggestion in showing that male adolescents had higher levels of xenophobic orientations, while females tended to have higher levels of xenophilic orientations, with xenophilia being described as “a favorable attitude toward exploratory contact with individuals from other groups that are perceived as culturally different and unfamiliar on the basis of their language, ethnicity habits, or customs” (Stürmer et al., 2013, p. 833). McDonald described a number of ways that men provide evidence of such psychological mechanisms.

Tendency for prejudice and discriminatory intent. Across time, men have consistently self-reported greater xenophobic and ethnocentric attitudes than women, and are more likely to dehumanize out-group members. Men are also more likely to accept in-group sacrifice in order to exact harm on out-groups, but only when the out-group is primarily composed of men.

Preference for intergroup hierarchies. Men tend to have a stronger Social Dominance

Orientation, or to designate their in-group as superior or dominant over out-groups. Modern men also more strongly identify with group memberships, such as nationalities, sports teams, and social class identifications.

Supporting of the in-group. Men are more willing to accept personal sacrifice for the well-being of their in-group when the status or safety of their in-group is faced with external threats or competition with out-groups.

Intergroup aggression and competition. McDonald also cited boys' preference for competitive, war-like games, the nearly homogenous male composition of street gangs, and male initiation of almost all large-scale historical conflicts as evidence for male predisposition towards aggression and competitive inter-group behavior (McDonald et al, 2012).

Evolved Disease-Avoidance Mechanisms. Faulkner et al. (2004) suggested that inherent disease-avoidance mechanisms influence human inclination towards xenophobic attitudes. These mechanisms are suggested to have developed evolutionarily as a collection of cues pertaining to disease or danger that elicit affective reactions, such as behavioral avoidance or disgust. The connection between foreign peoples and disease-avoidance mechanisms can be shown through a logical progression of statements (Faulkner et al., 2004).

1. Psychological mechanisms that allowed ancient people to avoid contagious diseases would have been advantageous, and thus adaptive.
2. Foreign people are more likely to carry diseases which the in-group has yet to develop resistances to. Foreign cultures are also likely to engage in different hygienic customs, potentially making them more prone to carrying disease.
3. Disease-avoidance mechanisms are based on cues that would indicate disease, such as lesions, abnormalities, rashes, etc.

4. Foreignness may have developed as a cue that suggests disease, due to foreign peoples' propensity for carrying diseases unfamiliar to the in-group.
5. Individuals develop psychological mechanisms that are particularly adept at detecting a broad range of cues that differentiate foreign and familiar peoples.

Faulkner et al. (2004) tested their hypothesis—"individual differences in perceived vulnerability to disease may predict xenophobic reactions to subjectively foreign peoples" (Faulkner et al., 2004, p. 336)—through a series of four studies on Canadian undergraduate students of primarily East Asian and European backgrounds. They consistently found that there was a positive correlation between chronic perceived vulnerability to disease (PVD) and negative attitudes towards unfamiliar foreign people groups, particularly in regards to immigration of or contact with said people groups. This conclusion was further supported by their finding that exclusionary/xenophobic attitudes were only expressed when the immigration group in question was identified as of clearly foreign origin (African), as opposed to familiar origin (European or East Asian) (Faulkner et al., 2004). Further, individual levels of PVD predicted perceived characteristics of foreign peoples that were associated with avoidance/disgust, such as uncleanliness, disease, and danger, while levels of PVD failed to predict perceived characteristics that were less clearly associated with behavioral avoidance, such as ignorance, poverty, etc. (Faulkner et al., 2004).

Genetic Similarity Theory. Rushton (2005) proposed the Genetic Similarity Theory (GST) to explain the preference of in-group members over out-group members. In many ways, GST coincides with the sociobiological perspective on in-group/out-group behavior and attitudes, which analyses human behavior as the result of evolutionary processes.

An expansion of kin selection theory, GST suggests that if genes can produce "effects

that allow bearers to recognize and favor each other,” (Rushton, 2005, p. 495) then we would naturally assort ourselves into groups based upon genetic similarity; in contradiction with Cultural Theory (the theory that humans assort themselves primarily by phenotypic or adaptive traits) GST proposes that genotypic sources are more accurate predictors of significant and marital relationships than phenotypic sources.

Rushton (2005) demonstrated that this is supported by a significant body of empirical evidence. When a variety of physical, social, and cognitive traits were considered within marital relationships, greater similarity was consistently found in more heritable traits than in less heritable traits. Marital satisfaction has also been found to be greater when spouses align on more heritable traits. Women have also been shown to prefer bodily scents of men with genes similar to their own over those with dissimilar genes. And, interestingly, greater similarity in personality has been found in cross-ethnic relationships than in ethnically homogenous relationships, suggesting a compensation for ethnic dissimilarity. In studies on siblings, those who were biologically related tended to seek out more alike friends than adoptively related siblings, suggesting that shared genes lead to similar friend choices. Twin studies have also shown that identical twins choose more similar spouses and friends than do fraternal twins.

Beyond predicting group and relationship selection, Genetic Similarity Theory proposes that altruistic behavior and in-group favoritism can also be predicted by genetic similarity. Altruistic behavior has historically been problematic for evolutionary theory. Since self-sacrifice, particularly sacrifice of life, tends to reduce an individual’s reproductive fitness, it would seem that altruistic behavior would not be adaptive, and thus would eradicate itself from the gene pool. However, the continuation of altruistic behavior suggests that somehow, genes that encourage altruistic behavior are still being passed on from generation to generation. Rushton (2005) cites

the work of Hamilton (1964), who developed a solution to the issue altruism posed to evolutionary biology by suggesting that inclusive fitness, or the fitness of particular genes collectively, can at times take precedence over individual fitness, or the preservation of genes in one particular individual. At the foundation is the notion that reproductive fitness (or ability to preserve genes through offspring) is optimized when gene preservation is maximized; sacrifice of self is to be expected when it allows greater opportunity for gene preservation through kin than would be possible otherwise. While this solution has been generally accepted by evolutionary biologists, Genetic Similarity Theory proposes that altruism, or self-sacrifice, becomes increasingly prevalent in human behavior as genetic similarity between the individual and the beneficiary increases.

Personality Factors

Barbarino and Stürmer (2016) and Stürmer et al. (2013) made significant preliminary findings on the correlation between personality type and attitudes towards other peoples. Using the HEXACO personality framework, they intended to prove that xenophobia and xenophilia had direct correlations to Endeavor-related and Altruism-related personality traits. Their hypotheses are based on the nature of inter-group contact in comparison to the innuendoes of Endeavor-related and Altruism-related traits; Endeavor-related traits incline one towards inter-group contact and thus should encourage xenophilic attitudes, while Altruism-related traits incline one to avoid inter-group conflict and thus should discourage xenophobic attitudes.

Endeavor-related traits are defined primarily by a drive to pursue opportunities from which personal benefit may be derived; those who strongly identify with Endeavor-related traits are willing to sacrifice and invest in order to realize the potential individual gain from the experience. Stürmer et al. (2013) noted that leaving the safe social context of the in-group into an

unknown environment can be a risky and uncertain endeavor. However, the personal and collective benefits of inter-group interactions are great: social gains can include new friends, allies, and potential mates, cognitive gains include access to new ideas, perspectives, and knowledge, and material gains include greater access to (and use of) biological or economic resources. Due to the potential gains of inter-group contact, those with Endeavor-related traits would be more interested in and willing to engage in said contact, and thus have a greater xenophilic orientation.

Altruism-related traits on the other hand represent desires to create and foster opportunities for mutual or collective benefit, and are associated with a disdain for inter-group conflict. Barbarino and Stürmer (2016) claimed that the risky nature of inter-group contact is a disincentive for those who highly identify with altruistic traits, as their desire to contribute for mutual benefit relies upon the certainty that their altruistic acts won't be exploited. The selective nature of altruism is supported by the findings of Rushton (2005)—a preference to act altruistically within stable social environments, or within one's in-group or familial context, is predicted by the Genetic Similarity Theory (GST). This behavioral facet of HEXACO's Altruism-related traits explains why those with notable orientation towards Altruism-related traits are not predisposed towards xenophilic attitudes. However, the nuances of the traits HEXACO defines as altruistic (Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, and Agreeableness) do not collectively suggest a positive correlation with xenophobia as the primarily behavioral emphasis of GST does, but rather a negative one. HEXACO's personality framework emphasizes the duality of Altruism-related traits, both as stimulating cooperation and sharing, while also creating a strong tendency to avoid aggression and hostility in social contexts. This preference for harmony is in conflict with the discriminatory and potentially hostile nature of xenophobic

attitudes, suggesting higher levels of Altruism-related traits would predict lower levels of xenophobic attitudes in general. Barbarino and Stürmer note that it has been proven that competitiveness, as well as hostility, prejudice, and discrimination towards the out-group, were facilitated by low levels of Altruism-related traits; this was further corroborated by Barbarino and Stürmer's own finding that xenophobic orientations were consistently predicted by low levels of the Altruism traits (Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, and Agreeableness) (2016).

Most significant of their findings was the inherent distinction between the phenomena of xenophobia and xenophilia—rather than being direct opposites, Stürmer et al. (2013) and Barbarino and Stürmer (2016) showed that xenophobia and xenophilia are separate psychological orientations which can be traced back to two different subsets of the human personality (Altruism-related traits and Endeavor-related traits, respectively). The distinct difference between xenophobia and xenophilia has also been confirmed by Lewis, Kandler, and Riemann (2014), who found via his studies on monozygotic and dizygotic twins that independent genetic effects were responsible for in-group favoritism and out-group prejudice and discrimination. This implies the challenging concept that xenophobic attitudes and prejudice are not mutually exclusive from xenophilic interest in other cultures; absence of either xenophobic products, such as ethnocentrism or active discrimination, or xenophilic interest in and pursuit of inter-ethnic contact is not significant enough to infer the other's presence. Likewise, encouraging xenophilic behavior and attitudes will not necessarily reduce one's xenophobic orientation.

Environmental and Social Factors

Social and environmental influences have been the primary focus of research regarding xenophobia and its products since its conception as a psychological construct, and various environmental factors have been found to significantly impact human attitudes towards in-groups

and out-groups. Among these are the structure of one's governing body and welfare state (Nagayoshi, 2015; Coenders & Sheepers, 2003), the composition of the minority population (Hjerm, 2011), and one's economic well-being (Hjerm, 2011; Nagayoshi, 2015). Two prominent influencing factors that will be discussed in this paper are education and inter-ethnic contact—a number of theories will be presented which explain why these are significant factors in influencing xenophobic and ethnocentric orientations.

Education

While there is still considerable discussion about why education has a liberalizing effect on nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies, it is clear that education is a significant factor in reducing xenophobic and ethnocentric attitudes, and this significance has been shown to be internationally consistent. Some research suggests that education may be the most significant environmental factor in the development of individual variation in xenophobic attitudes (Coenders & Sheepers, 2003). In general, those who are more highly educated are more supportive of ethnic integration, less likely to hold prejudiced views towards ethnic out-groups, and are less likely to have feelings of in-group cultural superiority. Those with lower education have been found to have stronger chauvinistic feelings, or blind feelings of cultural superiority and uncritical attachment to one's in-group, and were more likely to exclude ethnic outgroups (Coenders & Sheepers, 2003). Two of the potential explanations for education's effect upon xenophobic orientation will be briefly discussed here.

Socialization Theory. Socialization Theory proposes that education affects one's inclination towards xenophobic attitudes via the transference of cultural norms, values, and models of behavior. It suggests that the educational system is the primary social institution by which people interact with the society's "ideal" culture; education, as a system designed to better

the individuals who participate, will inherently embrace and attempt to transfer the norms and attitudes a society wishes to embody. Coenders and Sheepers (2003) suggested, in accordance with socialization theory, that because of education's role in instilling social norms and values in students, the type of governing body impacts the effect education has on xenophobic attitudes. This was confirmed via a review of data from the International Social Survey Program, which showed that education in countries with newly established democratic governing bodies had markedly lower liberalizing effects than countries with long established democratic governing bodies.

Contemporary research has primarily focused on the cognitive aspect of socialization theory. This approach acts on the assumption that ethnic stereotypes and prejudiced beliefs are intellectually unenlightened opinions, or the result of cultural ignorance; due to cognitive underdevelopment, one's social experiences are understood in a drastically oversimplified manner, which leads to the improper generalization of irrational beliefs to whole people groups. This has been supported by the finding that cultural knowledge is strongly correlated with positive attitudes towards outgroups—the more one knows about (or is educated about) other cultures, the less likely they are to maintain irrational prejudices and stereotypes towards said people groups (Coenders & Sheepers, 2003).

Realistic Group Conflict Theory. Realistic Group Conflict Theory (RGCT) is broadly accepted as a means of understanding the perpetuation of xenophobic attitudes. It proposes that negative attitudes towards cultural out-groups are a realistic response to competition with said groups over scarce resources (Elmer, 2006). RGCT recognizes both the actual existence of the conflict between social groups and the realistic perceived conflict between groups as the source of xenophobic attitudes; this implies that those who seem to be more directly in conflict with out-

groups will be more xenophobic towards them, whether the conflict is real or not. RGCT would suggest that education increases one's knowledge of the multicausal nature of societal issues, thus reducing one's perception of threat from various out-groups (Coenders & Sheepers, 2003).

Inter-ethnic Contact

Contact Theory is one of the most well-known hypotheses pertaining to the social origins of xenophobic orientations. Popularized by Gordon Allport in 1954, Contact Theory suggests that intergroup contact has the ability to affect intergroup relations; positive intergroup contact will improve intergroup relations, while negative contact will harm intergroup relations (Forbes, 2013). In order to make sense of the seemingly increased levels of prejudice and group conflict found in highly populated areas, Allport suggested that all contact will not inherently reduce prejudice between groups—casual contact, which comprises most of the contact between cultural groups in densely populated areas, will actually generate prejudice rather than eradicate it. Only instances of contact which Allport defined as “true acquaintances” would generate positive effects for intergroup prejudice and discrimination. Three primary conditions that allowed for “true acquaintance” encounters were equal status of individuals involved, cooperation towards a common goal, and support for the interaction by cultural norms and authorities. Bekhuis, Ruiters, and Coenders (2013) showed in a study on inter-ethnic contact between children that the amount of intergroup contact that occurred was insignificant in affecting xenophobic attitudes when the contact was neutral, or casual; only when there was a positive or negative perception of the contact did it affect the child's attitudes towards ethnic out-groups. Later studies have shown that the conditions Allport proposed are not essential for contact to reduce levels of xenophobic attitudes, however they remain as a standard that allows contact to stimulate the greatest effect on intergroup prejudice (Forbes, 2013).

Conclusion

Xenophobia is a complex, multifaceted psychological construct that has significant implications on international and interethnic interactions, especially in our increasingly globalized community. Xenophobia has historically been understood as a result of social and environmental interaction, with education and inter-ethnic contact being two of the most significant factors in predicting xenophobic orientation. While these still remain an integral part in understanding xenophobia, recent research has found that inherent factors, such as genetics and personality, play an important role in shaping individual levels of xenophobia as well. This research has been supplemental to our understanding of xenophobic origins, providing logical explanations for variance in xenophobia which were previously unexplained by social theories—in other words, genetic and personality models help us better understand why variance in xenophobic orientations exists, rather than simply how to change them. Examples of this are the thoroughly confirmed tendency for males to have higher levels of xenophobic orientation which McDonald's Male Warrior Hypothesis (McDonald, 2012) attempts to explain, and the human propensity to form in-groups with those most similar to oneself despite increasingly multicultural societies, as is understood by Genetic Similarity Theory (Rushton, 2005).

Arguably the most significant takeaway from the recent research on environmental and inherent factors of xenophobia is the need for more research; the ambiguous nature of the collaboration between environment and genetics in influencing xenophobia has been given little attention. Other recent findings, such as the distinction between xenophobia and xenophilia as separate constructs with independent genetic origins (Barbarino & Stürmer, 2016), suggest the need for more research on the methodology we use when attempting to decrease xenophobic or increase xenophilic orientations.

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