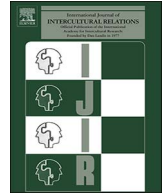


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Brief report

The effect of perceived equity on perceptions of immigrants

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ABSTRACT

Building on the Instrumental Model of Group Conflict (Esses et al., 1998) and using Equity Theory (Adams, 1965) as a framework, this study investigates the effects of perceptions of immigrants' economic success and contribution on host nationals' prejudice toward and perceived threat from immigrants. It is hypothesised that attitudes will be more positive under equitable conditions (relative success = relative contribution) than inequitable conditions (relative success \neq relative contribution). A 3-by-3 between-subjects experiment was conducted on 415 native-born Singapore citizens. The results show partial support for the hypothesis when immigrants' contribution is relatively less. Overall, although mostly non-significant, the results suggest a small effect size of more prejudice and symbolic threat when immigrants are just as successful as the host, compared to being less or more successful. Further study into the role of contribution, other possible moderators of success, and the application of equity theory in intergroup relations is encouraged.

In historically immigrant societies such as the United States, Canada, and Singapore, immigration policies such as education or skills requirements ensure that migrants who enter the country can contribute to the economy as soon as they arrive. Immigrants thus tend to be primed for success, and this is seen as important to show host nationals that they are beneficial to the larger society. The image of successful immigrants is thus thought to validate their presence and engender positive attitudes toward them by host nationals.

Empirically, however, portrayals of success appear to have a negative effect on attitudes. Research by [Esses, Jackson, and Armstrong \(1998\)](#), [Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, and Armstrong \(2001\)](#), [Esses, Jackson, Dovidio, and Hodson \(2005\)](#) on the Instrumental Model of Group Conflict (IMGC) found that immigrants' success is construed as threatening to host nationals as they are perceived to be competing with them for resources. Despite the established relationship between success and attitudes, less attention has been given to other situational factors that may alleviate concerns that may arise from immigrants' success. For example, it has been found that when number of immigrants is manipulated alongside their economic success, successful immigrants are perceived more positively when they are decreasing or stable in number as compared to when they are increasing in number ([Masgoret, Esses, & Ward, 2004](#)). Other elements may yet shed more light on how media depictions of immigrants influence perceptions of them.

One of the sources of resource stress in the IMGC is the perception of unequal distribution of resources; in other words, there is not enough to go around. However, this assumes that societies expect resources to be apportioned equally to every person or group. To some, equal distribution could mean equitable distribution, where each gets what they deserve. Thus, the economic success of host nationals and immigrants should not be evaluated in isolation. An accompanying consideration tends to be what the person or group has done to earn that success, in a manner that is fair and just.

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According to the Equity Theory (Adams, 1965), outcomes gained between two parties are deemed to be equitable when they are proportionate to the investments put in. In that regard, as much as immigrants may or may not benefit from the host society, reactions to this may be balanced with how much they contribute in return. Thus, in an effort to better understand how portrayals of immigrants' success affect intergroup attitudes, this study proposes an investigation of its influence as moderated by immigrants' contribution.

Equity (Adams, 1965) can be summarised with the following equation:

$$\frac{\text{Person's outcomes}}{\text{Person's inputs}} = \frac{\text{Other's outcomes}}{\text{Other's inputs}}$$

Outcomes can refer to any tangible profit by either party, e.g. pay, while inputs can refer to any investment made by either party to gain that profit, e.g. time, effort. The theory thus posits that people would strive to keep the ratio of their outcomes and inputs equal to others' outcomes and inputs. Inequity occurs when a person perceives his or her outcome/input ratio and others' outcome/input ratio to be unequal, i.e. when their own outcome/input ratio outweighs that of the subject of comparison, or vice versa. Either way, perceived inequity results in a sense of dissatisfaction and an unpleasant emotional state within the individual, which can manifest in negative attitudes toward the subject of comparison.

In the context of this study, hosts are the "person" of interest and occupy the left side of the equation while immigrants form the other group. Outcomes then refer to success, while inputs refer to contributions. The following equation reflecting equity between hosts and immigrants is thus derived:

$$\frac{\text{Locals' success}}{\text{Locals' contributions}} = \frac{\text{Immigrants' success}}{\text{Immigrants' contributions}}$$

Although most commonly applied to reward allocation in workplace settings, Equity Theory has been found to be useful in other forms of social exchange such as predicting satisfaction in intimate relationships (Michaels, Edwards, & Acock, 1984) and consumer services (Fisk & Young, 1985). It has also received strong empirical support in laboratory studies (e.g. Austin & Walster, 1974; Wicker & Bushweiler, 1970). To our knowledge, Equity Theory has not been applied before to the field of intergroup relations between host nationals and immigrants. We believe it would be a viable setting to test the propositions of Equity Theory, giving a fresh perspective on the study of intergroup attitudes as well as a predictive framework with which to understand the influence of success and contribution on attitudes.

The present study

Past research on the role of immigrant success portrayals have shown that the success of immigrants is perceived by host nationals as a source of threat and conflict, mainly due to the fear of them infringing on believed-to-be-scarce resources (e.g. Esses et al., 1998). In this study, we thus use prejudice, realistic threat, and symbolic threat as dependent variables.

Immigrant groups inherently impose some measure of threat to the host nationals, and this threat has been robustly shown to be associated with subsequent intergroup attitudes (e.g. Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Stephan et al., 2005). In terms of group-level interactions, perceived threats may occur in two forms. Realistic threat refers to infringements on the in-group's tangible resources by the out-group, such as educational and employment opportunities; this threat does not have to actually exist, so long as the in-group perceives it to exist. Symbolic threats are threats that occur due to the introduction of values and beliefs that are different from that of the in-group, thus causing them to question their own worldview and cultural identity (Stephan & Stephan, 2000).

Threats to the in-group may consequently manifest in prejudice toward the outgroup. Prejudice is defined as an unfavourable sentiment toward a person or group that is not necessarily grounded in actual experience (Allport, 1979). Realistic group conflict theory proposes that prejudice for an out-group arises when there is competition between the in-group and out-group (LeVine & Campbell, 1972). In such situations, intergroup hostility helps to justify the sense of threat and conflict.

It is thus hypothesised that host nationals would perceive less realistic and symbolic threat from immigrants, and harbour less prejudice toward them, when success and contribution is perceived to be equitable [immigrant(success/contribution) = host(success/contribution)] than when they are inequitable [immigrant(success/contribution) ≠ host(success/contribution)].

Method

The present study was designed as a 3 (relative success) × 3 (relative contribution) between-subjects experiment. As the study focuses on host nationals' perceptions of immigrants, situations of equity or inequity were experimentally produced by manipulating the portrayal of immigrants' economic success to be relatively more, equal, or less than that of the hosts, and their economic contribution as relatively more, equal, or less than that of the hosts. When immigrants' relative success is proportionate to their relative contribution, there is equity. When immigrants' relative success is greater or less than their relative contribution, inequity is perceived. The success/contribution combinations and the experimental conditions produced are summarised in Table 1.

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