



# Examining relationships among epistemic motivation, perspective taking, and prejudice: A test of two explanatory models



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## ABSTRACT

In the present research, we take an individual difference approach and test two models examining relationships among epistemic motivation (Openness to Experience, need for cognitive closure), perspective taking, and prejudice toward low-status groups. We refer to these as the *perspective-taking-explanation* and *epistemic-motivation-explanation* models. Across three studies, results only supported the *epistemic-motivation-explanation* model. Openness to Experience and need for cognitive closure statistically accounted for the negative relationship between perspective taking and prejudice, but perspective taking did not account for the relationship between these epistemic motivation constructs and prejudice. Results from the present investigation consistently suggest epistemic motivation is an underappreciated link that explains why those who take the perspective of others tend to report less prejudice toward low-status groups.

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## 1. Introduction

Arguably none have provided greater insight into the workings of prejudice than Gordon Allport. In *The Nature of Prejudice*, he articulated the idea that the prejudiced personality is rooted in a general motivated cognitive style (Allport, 1954), noting that, “A person’s prejudice is unlikely to be merely a specific attitude toward a specific group; it is more likely to be a reflection of his whole way of thinking about the world” (p. 175). Contemporary research has provided support for this idea by investigating the epistemic motivation of need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996), a strong predictor of prejudice (e.g., Roets & Van Hiel, 2011a). Allport also articulated the role of perspective taking—what he called “*psychodramas*”—as a means of reducing prejudice whereby a person sympathizes with and actively imagines the world from the vantage point of another (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005). This idea, too, has found support in empirical research (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Stephan & Finlay, 1999; Todd & Galinsky, 2014). What remains unclear is how these two concepts, epistemic motivation and perspective taking, fit together.

In the present work, we aim to expand upon the ideas of Allport and others by examining relationships among epistemic motivation, perspective taking, and prejudice. While it is important to identify psychological constructs that predict prejudice, it is also important to know *how* these constructs are related to prejudice. Taking an agnostic stance,

we conducted three studies to investigate two models regarding the relationship between epistemic motivation and perspective taking and their impact on prejudice. Is it that epistemic motivation predicts less prejudice through imagining the world from the perspective of another, or rather that a proclivity toward perspective taking predicts less prejudice through a motivation to adjust existing belief structures and attitudes in the face of new information?

### 1.1. Epistemic motivation, perspective taking, and prejudice

Epistemic motivation refers to a cognitive-motivational process by which people search for and interpret information to construct their attitudes, beliefs, and judgments about the world (Kruglanski, 1989). Historically, Lay Epistemic Theory has advanced research on epistemic motivation with a focus on the need for cognitive closure construct (Kruglanski, 1989; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996), but more broadly epistemic motivation ranges along a dimension with Openness to Experience on one side (McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae & Sutin, 2009) and need for cognitive closure on the other (Kruglanski, 2004; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). McCrae and Costa (1997) argue that Openness to Experience must be understood “in both structural and motivational terms,” asserting that it represents “a recurrent need to enlarge and examine experience” (p. 826). Generally thought of as broader than the need for cognitive closure construct (e.g., Kruglanski & Webster, 1996), Openness to Experience is a Big-Five personality dimension that drives social experience, interpersonal interactions, values, and attitudes (McCrae, 1996). Individuals high in openness tend to be broad-minded, imaginative, curious, unconventional, socially tolerant, and

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stimulated by aesthetic experiences (Costa & McCrae, 1992; John & Srivastava, 1999). Kruglanski and Webster (1996) state that need for cognitive closure is a motivation to seek firm, unambiguous answers about one's social world by quickly “seizing” on incoming information (*urgency tendency*) and “freezing” on judgments to prevent future attitude change (*permanence tendency*). Together, seizing and freezing function to help individuals avoid aversive feelings of uncertainty.

Though important distinctions exist between these constructs, openness and closure are opposing epistemic forces that are theoretically and empirically related (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1998; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Onraet, Van Hiel, Roets, & Cornelis, 2011). Openness and closure are differentially associated with flexibility of judgments, tolerance of ambiguity, and the motivation to expose oneself to diverse viewpoints and perspectives (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae & Sutin, 2009). Onraet et al. (2011) have provided a detailed account of the relationship between Openness to Experience and need for cognitive closure. Although they agree that openness represents the broader construct, they also argue that both openness and closure are cognitive-motivational variables. In the present work, we recognize these similarities between openness and closure (also see Jost et al., 2007) and operationalize epistemic motivation as individual differences in Openness to Experience and need for cognitive closure.

Perspective taking is the psychological process of imagining the world from the vantage point of another person (Galinsky et al., 2005), which can occur in both interpersonal (Davis, 1983) and intergroup contexts (Todd & Galinsky, 2014). Interestingly, epistemic motivation and perspective taking have been shown to operate using similar cognitive anchoring and adjustment processes. Research suggests that adjusting from a previously anchored judgment in the face of new information is a tendency of those high in Openness to Experience (McElroy & Dowd, 2007). Need for cognitive closure, however, is associated with chronic cognitive anchoring and insufficient adjustment in the face of new information (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983). When perspective taking, the highly accessible perspective of the self is used as a cognitive anchor that undergoes a series of adjustments to reflect another's perspective. Inaccurate perspective taking involves a failure to adjust beyond one's own perspective, leading to egocentrism (Epley & Gilovich, 2001; Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004). If accurate perspective taking reflects the extent to which one adjusts from the egocentric anchor of the self, those more likely to perspective take should also be high in the motivation to use new information to adjust previously anchored judgments. Indeed, those high in openness and low in the need for cognitive closure tend to seek out alternative viewpoints and perspectives rather than avoid them (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; McCrae & Costa, 1997). It stands to reason that Openness to Experience should be positively correlated with perspective taking and need for cognitive closure negatively correlated with perspective taking.

Noteworthy is the finding that Openness to Experience, need for cognitive closure, and perspective taking are each closely linked with prejudice. Individuals high in openness (Ekehammar & Akrami, 2007; Flynn, 2005; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008; cf. Brandt, Chambers, Crawford, Wetherell, & Reyna, 2015) and low in the need for cognitive closure (Dhont, Roets, & Van Hiel, 2011; Roets & Van Hiel, 2011a) tend to report less prejudice toward outgroups. Because openness and closure indicate the extent to which people cling to highly accessible information or flexibly alter their attitudes in response to new information (Kruglanski, 1989; McCrae, 1987), those high in openness and low in closure may be less prejudiced because they consider novel, stereotype-disconfirming information about outgroups (Flynn, 2005; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Other work suggests that an open-minded cognitive style, which is the willingness to consider novel information and perspectives in an unbiased manner, uniquely predicts less prejudice toward racial outgroups (Price, Ottati, Wilson, & Kim, 2015).

Similarly, perspective taking has been shown to not only predict but causally lead to less prejudice (for a review, see Todd & Galinsky, 2014). Those more likely to take the perspective of racial/ethnic outgroups

tend to express less ethnic prejudice (Sparkman & Eidelman, 2016), and directly taking the perspective of an outgroup target leads to less prejudice toward the entire group (Batson et al., 1997; Dovidio et al., 2004; Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003). If epistemic motivation and perspective taking operate using similar cognitive anchoring and adjustment processes, and epistemic motivation (openness, closure) and perspective taking are both associated with the expression of prejudice, perspective taking might explain the relationship between epistemic motivation and prejudice. Alternatively, epistemic motivation might explain the relationship between perspective taking and prejudice. Noting the overlapping—but distinct—relationship between epistemic motivation and perspective taking and their link with prejudice, we aimed to investigate if (1) the relationship between epistemic motivation and prejudice is accounted for by perspective taking, and (2) if the relationship between perspective taking and prejudice is accounted for by epistemic motivation. In what follows, we outline and refer to these as the *perspective-taking-explanation* and the *epistemic-motivation-explanation* models.

### 1.2. Perspective-taking-explanation model

Individuals high in Openness to Experience and low in need for cognitive closure tend to seek out alternative viewpoints and perspectives rather than avoid them (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae & Sutin, 2009). Because perspective taking involves taking the psychological point of view of another person, the epistemic motivations of openness and closure should be related to perspective taking. Indeed, Webster and Kruglanski (1998) argue that the epistemic motivation of need for cognitive closure should influence the extent of information processing when taking the perspective of another person. When need for cognitive closure is high, people are less effective at taking the perspective of a dissimilar other, but when need for cognitive closure is low, people are more effective at perspective taking (Webster, Findley, & Irvin, 1995). The influence of epistemic motivation on perspective taking may lead to variability in the expression of prejudice (e.g., Todd & Galinsky, 2014). In sum, the *perspective-taking-explanation* model predicts that the relationship between epistemic motivation (openness, closure) and prejudice is explained by the extent to which people take the psychological point of view of others.

### 1.3. Epistemic-motivation-explanation model

Perspective taking tends to reveal highly accessible, egocentric information because of a failure to properly adjust beyond one's starting anchor (the self) (Epley et al., 2004). More effective perspective taking reveals accurate information about others because of greater adjustment beyond the perspective of the self (Epley & Gilovich, 2001; Epley et al., 2004). Thus, those who frequently take the perspective of others should be better at making adjustments beyond the starting anchor because these individuals use the viewpoints of others as novel, informative sources of information. This adjustment in the face of new information embodies *epistemic unfreezing* (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996), a characteristic of people high in openness (e.g., Perry & Sibley, 2013) and low in need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996).

In intergroup contexts, considering the psychological point of view of outgroup members should be associated with relying less on overgeneralized intergroup attitudes and stereotypes, which are highly accessible and crystallized social schemas (e.g., Kruglanski, Deschne, Orehek, & Pierro, 2009; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Thus, perspective taking may be associated with less prejudice through epistemic “unfreezing” (i.e., high openness, low need for closure) because this reflects the tendency to avoid highly accessible information and a willingness to adjust one's attitudes in accord with the psychological perspective of outgroups. In sum, the *epistemic-motivation-explanation* model predicts that the relationship between perspective taking and prejudice is explained by epistemic motivation, that is, the extent to which people adjust their attitudes and beliefs in the face of new information.

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