



## The populist effect: Threat and the handover of freedom

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### ABSTRACT

People universally value autonomy, and this is the case particularly in individualist societies. Nevertheless, we hypothesize that even in the US, an individualist society, people are willing to relinquish personal control and choose to be an amorphous entity in a behaviorally homogeneous group when under physical threat because such groups increase the effectiveness in mobilizing collective effort. We found evidence for this hypothesis in two studies. In Study 1, individual differences in perceived physical threat (but not social threat) predicted the preference for joining a homogeneous group, through the mediating effect of lowered endorsement of personal agency. We replicated this result in Study 2, in which the cognitive salience of physical and social threat was experimentally manipulated. We discuss the implications of these results.

### 1. Introduction

In self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2008) the need for autonomy is a universal basic need. Likewise, in Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 2003), people do not compromise their need for distinctiveness unless they have a stronger desire to satisfy another equally fundamental motive (e.g., need for belongingness; see also Carver, Yunger, & Perry, 2003; Crocker & Park, 2004; Egan & Perry, 2001; Sanchez & Crocker, 2005). The preference for uniqueness and the distaste for being an amorphous entity in a homogenized group are particularly strong in individualist societies that privilege self-expression and personal identity signaling (Kreuzbauer, Chiu, Bae, & Lin, 2014; Triandis, 1995). Against this backdrop, it is puzzling to witness the recent rise in the support for populist tribalism (prioritization of loyalty to ingroup cultural legacy) and nativism (emphasis on indigenous customs and resistance to outside influences), as epitomized by the UK Brexit referendum and the Trump victory in the US Presidential Election.

Take the Trump victory as an example. Some political commentators (e.g., Cassidy, 2016) have characterized his political positions as being populist, nativist, protectionist and isolationist. For example, Trump advocates the enshrinement of the ingroup cultural legacy (he has political will to make America great again), He also disavows civil liberties, globalization and immigration, which in his opinion may threaten American security. These positions, if implemented successfully, will compromise personal agency and increase cultural homogeneity. Our research question is: Why do many people in individualist societies prefer and vote for political positions that may constrain personal agency, reduce diversity, and convert individuals to

amorphous faces in a uniform group?

A possible answer is the tradeoff between security and freedom. Gelfand, Jackson, and Harrington (2016) suggested that Trump's popularity ensues from his success in instilling fear of threatening events such as crime and mass-immigration into the mind of many Americans. Trump also admits that when it comes to issues related to civic liberty, he is willing to err in favor of security. There is ample evidence that people are more committed to ingroup norms when the security of the ingroup is at risk.

However, threat is not a unitary construct. It may refer to physical threat (threat of physical harm) and non-physical threat (e.g., social threat, symbolic threat and existential threat). Although both physical and non-physical threats increase conformity, they may do so through different mechanisms and hence have different behavioral consequences. In the face of a physical threat (e.g., crime, disease or terrorism) that needs to be coped with by mobilizing collective effort, individuals may be willing to give up personal control or agency to march in lockstep with the ingroup. Consistent with this idea, Huang (1988) showed that in ancient China, the need to mobilize coordinated effort to cope with the constant threats of war and flooding accounted for the evolution of collectivist norms. Agent-based modeling studies also showed that events that deplete the society's physical resources increase cooperation pressure and behavioral uniformity (Roos, Gelfand, Nau, & Lun, 2015). Furthermore, across nations as well as different states within the US, societies that were historically confronted with larger amounts of threat (e.g., disease prevalence or crime) have tighter cultures (cultures characterized by strict norm adherence). Graham and Haidt (2010) also contend that tight (vs. loose) moral

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groups (in particular, those rooted in moral obligations of ingroup loyalty and obedience to authority) were evolutionary more adaptive during a history of continuous outside threats from intergroup competition. Comparably, Murray and Schaller (2012) postulated that disease-threat increases conformity by showing that individuals under such threat more strongly value norms centering around loyalty and traditionalism while also shifting their behavior in a way that aligns it with that of the majority.

With these findings in mind it seems that norm adherence of individuals under threat is not simply driven by an aimless conformity to blindly run with the pack as commonly assumed. On the contrary, under physical threat individuals seem to abide by specific norms such as cooperation and loyalty to the ingroup (e.g., militarism) which constrain personal autonomy and are hypothesized to enhance group uniformity. Indeed, for effective mobilization and social coordination to occur, conformity should exclusively be aimed at such norms. In fact, numerous social norms (e.g., independence or distinctiveness) may enhance behavioral diversity, rather than uniformity, effectively debilitating collective mobilization efforts. As such, rather than conformity in and of itself, we hypothesize that it is the urge to relinquish personal control or agency that is the driving force behind the increased endorsement of uniformity enhancing social norms by individuals under physical threat. Ultimately because of a higher-order need to become an amorphous entity in a uniform group.

In contrast, non-physical threats, such as social or existential threats, tend to increase the need for belongingness and adherence to the identity-defining values of the ingroup. For example, in the face of induced existential threat (mortality salience), people would strengthen their social identification by endorsing the dominant cultural worldview (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002; Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, & Schimel, 2000; Hirschberger, Florian, & Mikulincer, 2003; Wisman & Koole, 2003). Similarly, norm adherence ensues from threats to one's social identity (Elsbach, 2003; Petriglieri, 2011). Jetten, Postmes, and McAuliffe (2002) showed that identity threat induces a stronger adherence to individualist norms in individualist cultures, and collectivist norms in collectivist cultures. In short, non-physical threats may enhance ideational conformity through an elevated desire for social acceptance. America, as an individualist society, provides a context to separate the divergent effects of physical and non-physical threats, because two identity-defining values in America are self-expression and the uniqueness of the individual. Thus, in the face of social threats, Americans may display ideational conformity (conformity to the individualist worldview) and prefer to join a group that permits behavioral diversity. In the current study, we used social threats as an example of non-physical threats because past research has shown that social, existential and symbolic threats have similar effects on ideational conformity.

### 1.1. Current research

Two studies tested our hypotheses that (a) physical, but not social threat, induces a preference to be part of a uniform group by (b) giving up personal agency. In Study 1, we focused on individual difference constructs: we measured the perceived risk of becoming a victim of a violent crime (physical threat) or that of being a target of ostracism (social threat), the valuation of personal agency (the hypothesized mediator) and the preference for being part of a uniform social group (the dependent variable). In Study 2, to establish the causal role of threats, we experimentally manipulated the cognitive salience of physical and social threat.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Method

The participants were 152 Americans recruited from Amazon MTurk (34.9% male; mean age = 37.9,  $SD = 12.7$ ; 67.1% White; 14.5%

high school graduates, 71% some college education, 14.5% some graduate qualification). All participants received a small monetary compensation for completing the survey.

Obtaining an adequate sample size to perform a multiple logistic regression analysis is a complex process that often results in the requirement of extremely large sample sizes. Because, more often than not, this is not feasible within psychological science, a reliable estimate that usually results in a required amount of cases that is within a realizable range, is given by  $N = 10k/p$ , where  $k$  is the amount of predictors, and  $p$  is the smallest proportion of positive and negative cases in the population (Peduzzi, Concato, Kemper, Holford, & Feinstein, 1996). In our study,  $k = 5$ , and  $p = 0.36$ . Hence, the minimum required amount of cases was 139.

#### 2.1.1. Materials

To measure social threat, we had the participants first fill in the 11-item Social Ostracism Scale ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ; Gilman, Carter-Sowell, DeWall, Adams, & Carboni, 2013), which measures perceived threats of ostracism. An example item is "In general others treat me as if I am invisible." The scale ranged from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*).

Physical threat was measured with the 10-item Risk of Victimization Scale (PRV;  $\alpha = 0.96$ ; Ferraro & LaGrange, 1992).<sup>1</sup> Participants indicated how likely they felt they were at risk of becoming a victim of a crime. The scale ranges from 1 (*Not at all likely*) to 10 (*Very likely*). An example item is "How likely do you think it is that you will be physically assaulted by a stranger?"

We measured group preference by presenting to the participants an animated video.<sup>2</sup> The video showed two groups of 6 humanoid creatures walking in open space (see Fig. 1). In Group 1, all creatures walked in the same manner. In Group 2, each creature had a distinctive movement pattern. At the bottom of the video, a motionless creature was shown. All humanoid creatures in the video had the same physical appearance, size, color and shape. Participants were asked to imagine that they were the motionless creature and indicate whether they preferred being a member of Group 1 (Homogenized Group) or a member of Group 2 (Individuated Group). We used novel humanoid groups as stimuli to minimize the effect of prior knowledge of the groups on preferences. Similar stimuli have been used in past group perception research (Ip, Chiu, & Wan, 2006).

To measure the effect of threat on the importance of personal agency, we administered the Short Schwartz Value Survey (SVS; Schwartz, 1992). In this scale, participants were presented 10 values along with its value items. For example, participants were asked to rate the importance of "Self-direction, that is, creativity, freedom, curiosity, independence, choosing one's own goals" and "Conformity, that is, obedience, honoring parents and elders, self-discipline, politeness." We were particularly interested in the Self-direction values, because the item measures the importance of personal agency. Moreover, we wanted to explore the effect of threat on conformity values, because they represent the importance of accommodating oneself to others, which is indicative of the need for social acceptance (e.g., Johnson & Sheets, 2004). Hence, we could test our prediction that a potential preference for group uniformity is driven by a devaluation of personal agency instead of an elevation of general conformist tendencies. The scale asks participants to rate the importance of 10 values on an 8-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Opposed to my principles*) to 8 (*Of supreme importance*). Finally, participants entered demographic information such as age, gender and education level.

<sup>1</sup> The scale also includes a section that measures fear of victimization. Because this measure assesses emotional responses rather than risk perception, we did not include it in our measure of physical threat.

<sup>2</sup> Researchers who wish to implement our video measure of group preference in their study can find it on <https://youtu.be/RGvetAadt5E>.

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