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Meaning matters. An empirical analysis into public denotations of the label ‘strangers’ and their relationship with general ethnic prejudice

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ABSTRACT

Survey research on ethnic prejudice often relies on statements focusing on generic labels such as ‘immigrants’, ‘strangers’, or ‘foreigners’. In this paper we argue that there are, however, good reasons to expect certain heterogeneity in the denotations respondents assign to these labels, and that the specific group respondents think of matters with respect to their response. We tested this assumption by using survey data from Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium, $N=1375$) that includes an open-ended question asking respondents which groups they associate with the label ‘strangers’ (Dutch: ‘vreemdelingen’). Content analysis revealed that the ten different meanings people in Flanders give to this label can be organized into four main groups concerning the *content* of the criterion (nationality, culture, race, no answer/refusal) and two ways concerning *how* the criterion is used (strangers defined as ‘them’ versus ‘not us’). Regression analyses subsequently showed systematic differences in general ethnic prejudice depending on the meaning of strangers, with people in Flanders who associate strangers with Muslims or people from predominantly Muslim countries reporting the highest level of prejudice. Finally, our data suggests that that the group people in Flanders associate with the label stranger varies according to respondents’ socio-demographic background. Not taking into account these different meanings of strangers might lead to an underestimation of the social differences in ethnic prejudice.

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1. Introduction

Survey research on ethnic prejudice often relies on statements focusing on generic labels such as ‘immigrants’, ‘strangers’, or ‘foreigners’. This practice is informed by the idea that a defining characteristic of prejudice concerns its generalized nature. Indeed, studies have found strong associations between attitudes towards different ethnic, national, and cultural groups (Echebarria-Echabe & Guede, 2007; Zick, Pettigrew & Wagner, 2008). Kam and Kinder (2012), for example, found that negative feelings towards one out-group easily spill-over to other out-groups resulting in a diffuse general (ethnic) prejudice. Likewise, Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner (2009) found that aversion towards Muslims was best explained by the observation that Muslims belonged to a ‘band of others’, or a collection of different out-groups. Hagendoorn and Sniderman (2001, p. 21)

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summarize “[. . .] prejudice can be defined as a consistent tendency to evaluate immigrant groups negatively, which is to say that these groups are negatively evaluated in all respects and that all relevant groups are negatively evaluated”. Such a view is often underpinned by the idea that ethnic prejudice derives from a more general closed-mindedness characterized by a nonreflexive projection of negative traits on a ‘generalized other’ (e.g., Gabennesch, 1972; Hagendoorn & Sniderman, 2001). Finally, focusing on general labels also dovetails with the way public actors such as right-wing populist parties address topics related to immigration, i.e. as a whole and undifferentiated mass (Mudde, 2007).

Although these arguments should not be downplayed, there are also good reasons to expect a certain heterogeneity in the denotations people assign to labels such as ‘strangers’ or ‘immigrants’, and that the specific group people associate with these labels matters for their response. Indeed, a growing number of studies explicitly investigate the denotative connotations of concepts like ‘foreigners’ or ‘immigrants’ (e.g., Asbrock, Lemmer, Becker, Koller, & Wagner, 2014; Bail, 2008; Blinder, 2015; Braun, Behr & Kaczmirek, 2013). In this paper we engage with that literature by using survey data from Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium), which included an open-ended question asking participants what groups they associate with the label ‘strangers’ (Dutch: ‘vreemdelingen’). This allows us to study whether (1) there is a certain heterogeneity in what groups people in Flanders associate with the label ‘strangers’, (2) the level of general ethnic prejudice varies depending on this association, and (3) the denotation of the label ‘stranger’ depends on a person’s socio-psychological profile.

This research adds to the existing literature in three ways. Firstly, we deliver further support for the idea that heterogeneity exists in the meaning people in Flanders give to such general labels and that this bears important consequences for their level of general prejudice. Secondly, we demonstrate that people in Flanders do not only differ in the specific criteria they rely on to define strangers but also regarding *how* these criteria are used. While some respondents define strangers by focusing on their in-group (‘not us’) others make use of out-group focused criteria (‘them’). This finding not only contributes to the literature on survey research on ethnic prejudice, but also to the broader literature on ‘boundary making’. Thirdly, our findings suggest that neglecting the heterogeneity in meaning associated with strangers may lead to an underestimation of the relationships between often used social-demographics (e.g., age and education) and general ethnic prejudice.

2. The meaning of ‘strangers’

Opinions and attitudes about public issues, such as immigration and the multicultural society, are the result of the complex interplay between personal dispositions and schemes of interpretations (e.g. social dominance orientation), personal experiences, and public discourse surrounding a specific public issue (Wimmer, 2009; Zaller, 1992). Starting from that point of view, there are at least two reasons to expect that the associations with labels like ‘immigrants’, ‘strangers’, or ‘foreigners’ may have changed over time *and*, more importantly, may vary between individuals. First of all, there is an increased diversification of the immigrant population in Western European countries, and secondly, there has been a shift in the discourse of right-wing populist parties and media.

Increased economic integration, more open labor markets, and internal and inter-state conflicts have resulted in an increase in the flow of people that cross national borders to live and work in other countries. About one-third of the international migrants currently live in Europe, making it the largest destination region (UNDESA, 2011). However, not only the number of immigrants has changed; for most Western countries the nature of immigration itself has also changed over time (Martiniello, 2013). In Western Europe, including Belgium, early immigration mainly consisted of people from former colonies and guest workers (Timmerman, Vanderwaeren & Crul, 2003). The latter were actively recruited in Southern Europe and Northern Africa in general, and in Turkey and Morocco in particular. A considerable number of these immigrants never returned to their motherland. Family reunifications continue to fuel immigration from these countries towards Western Europe (albeit at a much lower rate than in the past). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and more recently the enlargement of the European Union, new immigrants coming from Eastern Europe (e.g., Poland) and the Balkan (e.g., Bulgaria) arrived.

These migration patterns result in a highly heterogeneous immigrant population, rendering it plausible that personal encounters with immigrants differ among people. These differences do not only affect the substantial opinion about ‘immigrants’ (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), but may also influence the mental representation of the *attitude object* itself, that is, the groups that come to people’s mind when they think of immigration or immigrants (for a theoretical overview see Blinder, 2015).

Notwithstanding the continuing migration and the increasingly diverse immigrant population, members of the host society typically only have limited contact with immigrants (see Gijssberts & Dagevos, 2005). As a consequence, public discourse, articulated through mass media and political elites, surrounding the issue of immigration may have a profound impact on people’s mental representations (e.g., Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Meeussen et al., 2013). Against this background, several studies indicated how especially the discourse of right-wing populist parties has changed over time, not only with respect to the justification strategies these parties rely on, but also concerning the groups they target (e.g., Betz & Meret, 2009; Zuquete, 2008). Whereas until the end of the nineties these parties targeted guest workers and focused on racial hierarchies and immigrants per se, they currently focus more on ‘cultural differences’ in general and ‘Muslims’ in particular (Betz & Meret, 2009; Van der Noll, 2014). Especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States, Muslims increasingly became a ‘suitable enemy’ for populist right-wing parties (Fekete, 2009). Such an ‘Islamization of the stranger’ has also been found in content analyses of mass media (Richardson, 2009). This tendency is also visible in Flanders, the region we focus on in the current paper. In the beginning of the nineties the Flemish radical-right wing party

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