



The evaluation of immigrants' political acculturation strategies



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ABSTRACT

Although acculturation involves changes of both minority and majority group members, previous research focused primarily on the former. Furthermore, while the relevance of acculturation in the socio-cultural domain is well established, research has largely ignored acculturation in the political domain. This paper presents two experimental studies that investigated the extent to which Dutch majority members' out-group feelings are influenced by the political acculturation strategies of Muslim immigrants. Majority members reacted strongly to the different acculturation strategies, defined in terms of group interests and goals. Their feelings were more negative when Muslims were presented as politically advancing the interests of their in-group, while Muslims furthering goals that benefit society as a whole were met with considerably less resistance. The differential evaluation of the political acculturation strategies depended on perceptions of power threat.

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1. Introduction

Minority participation in political systems is widely recognized as crucial for the democratic process and for improving the socio-economic position of disadvantaged groups (Bieber, 2008; Pande, 2003; Petrusevska, 2009). In many European states there is a very limited number of immigrant minorities that participate in mainstream politics. Immigrants' relative absence from the political domain does not simply reflect their recent arrival, lack of integration or slow acquisition of citizenship (Bloemraad & Schönwälder, 2013; Kapur, 2014). Political participation of members of immigrant-origin groups is often met with controversy and resistance because of derogatory group images and doubts about their national loyalty and ability and right to participate (e.g., Petrusevska, 2009; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). These negative reactions could lead to increased inequality and exclusion, and might negatively affect the democratic process. Thus, it is important to understand the processes underlying majority members' willingness to accommodate immigrant-origin group members in the political domain.

Acculturation processes involve mutual adaptations that different groups and their individual members make when they come into structural contact (Berry, 1997). Research, however, focuses primarily on the adaptation and attitudes of immigrant group members, and to a far lesser extent on the views of majority members (Brown & Zagefka, 2011; Matera,

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Stefanile, & Brown, 2011). Furthermore, while acculturation is studied extensively in the social and cultural domains of life and in relation to group identities, researchers have largely ignored acculturation in the political domain.

This paper presents two experimental vignette studies designed to examine how majority members' out-group feelings are influenced by the political acculturation strategies of Muslims immigrants. Specifically, we tested the proposition that out-group feelings depend on the group interests that politically active Muslims are advancing. Further, we will examine the role of power threat perceptions on how majority members evaluate immigrants' acculturation strategies. Our research was conducted in the Netherlands where Muslims (whether first, second, or third generation) are placed at the heart of national debates on immigration and integration (McLaren, 2003; Scheepers, Gijsberts, & Coenders, 2002). Since this is the case in many European countries (Helbling, 2012), the Netherlands offers a prototypical context for our research.

Muslims of immigrant-origin currently make up about five per cent of the Dutch population. Most of them are of Turkish and Moroccan origin and came to the Netherlands as migrant laborers starting at the end of the 1960s. In addition, there are smaller groups of Muslims originating from Indonesia, Suriname, Afghanistan and Somalia (Maliapaard & Gijsberts, 2012). More than half of these immigrants have Dutch citizenship and are thus may fully participate in Dutch politics (Douwes, de Koning, & Boender, 2005). Additionally, non-Dutch citizens are allowed to vote in local elections if they possess another EU nationality, or if they have lived legally in a particular municipality for at least five consecutive years.

1.1. Political acculturation

Although the importance of political acculturation processes is acknowledged (Berry, 1997), research has not systematically applied the acculturation framework to the political domain. In the socio-cultural domain acculturation is typically seen as involving two key issues that determine immigrants' acculturation strategies (Berry, 1997). First, immigrants need to decide on the extent to which they want to have social contacts and get involved with the dominant majority group. The second issue concerns the extent to which the heritage culture should be maintained. The combination of these two issues leads to the well-known four acculturation strategies: assimilation (low on cultural maintenance, high on contact), integration (high on both cultural maintenance and contact), separation (high on cultural maintenance, low on contact), and marginalization (low on both).

Experimental vignette studies operationalizing these four strategies show that majority members respond to them differently. For example, in the context of the Netherlands, native majority members clearly have more positive attitudes toward immigrants who endorse assimilation or integration over those that endorse separation and marginalization (Van Oudenhoven, Prins, & Buunk, 1998; Verkuyten, Thijs, & Sierksma, 2014). Native Italians have also been found to evaluate immigrants who endorse assimilation and integration more positively than those who endorse separation and marginalization (Kosic, Mannetti, & Sam, 2005). Furthermore, a study in Belgium (Flanders) showed that students perceived a conflict between the tendency of immigrants who want to maintain their heritage culture and their adoption of the host culture (Van Acker & Vanbeselaere, 2012). Furthermore, the assumed tendency to maintain the heritage culture paired with the perception of limited engagement with the host society was experienced as threatening (Van Acker & Vanbeselaere, 2011).

In general, majority members prefer immigrants to assimilate or integrate because this indicates that immigrants value the host society culture to the extent that they want to adopt it (Brown & Zagefka, 2011). This makes majority members feel valued, which in turn results in more favorable out-group attitudes. Conversely, immigrants seeking to maintain their cultural heritage tend to be viewed as a threat to the majority culture and consequently are evaluated more negatively (e.g., Tip et al., 2012).

Members of immigrant-origin groups can participate politically in various ways, such as voting in elections, running for office, establishing a political party, joining political demonstrations, contacting politicians, signing petitions, and being politically active on internet forums and social media (Carlisle & Patton, 2013; Marien, Hooghe, & Quintelier, 2010). We know very little about how people respond to immigrants adopting any of these political behaviours. Applying the acculturation framework to the political domain, we focus on immigrants' political participation in terms of advancing particular group interests and goals (Hartmann & Gerteis, 2005). Thus we propose an adapted two-dimensional framework for understanding majority members' evaluation of political acculturation strategies. First, immigrant-origin members face the question whether or not they wish to advance politically the interests and goals of their minority in-group. Second, they face the question whether they wish to advance interests and goals that benefit the society of settlement as a whole. When we consider these two issues simultaneously, we can derive four political acculturation strategies (see Fig. 1).

Marginalization refers to the situation in which immigrant-origin members do not wish to represent any group interests or goals. Since this implies that one wants to keep away from group-based politics we will not further consider this strategy.

When an immigrant wishes to advance national society's interests and not those of his or her minority group, the *assimilation strategy* is defined. This strategy does not necessarily imply a low desire to maintain one's heritage culture but indicates that minority identity and culture is not considered a basis for political participation. We expect that majority members will evaluate this strategy most positively because it does not harm them, and it signals acceptance of the existing political system and status quo as well as acceptance of the dominant culture at large (Tip et al., 2012).

Separation is the strategy in which immigrant-origin members wish to advance only the interests of their minority in-group. Majority members will probably evaluate this strategy most negatively. Group competition is an important basis for prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and the separation strategy directly challenges the political status quo, and with it, the privileged status position of the majority group in society.

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