



Brief report

Gender differences in the perception of immigration-related threats

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ABSTRACT

Although many studies have concluded that men and women differ in their attitudes towards immigrants, no research has yet examined the mechanisms behind these differences. This paper provides an analysis of how specific immigration-related perceived threats (job competition, threats to the majority culture, sustainability of the welfare system, and out-group size) are associated with perceptions of a general, immigration-related threat among men and women in Luxembourg. In analyses conducted separately for residents with different migratory backgrounds, we found that native women had a greater tendency than their male counterparts to associate the threat of crime with a general threat. Among first-generation immigrants, men put more emphasis on the out-group size threat, whereas women placed greater stress on the importance of the culture threat. Among second-generation immigrants, men and women differed with respect to their perception of job, cultural, and out-group size threats.

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1. Introduction

Foreign-born residents (primarily from European Union countries) represent approximately 43 percent of the total population of Luxembourg (STATEC, 2011). Questions therefore continue to arise concerning the cohesion of society and the nature of interaction between the in- and out-groups. In this context, studies that have examined perceptions of immigrants and determinants of anti-immigrant sentiments are of special relevance in Luxembourg, despite the fact that the country demonstrates one of the most positive attitudes towards immigrants among European nations (Semyonov, Raijman, & Gorodzeisky, 2006).

The literature detailing the factors that influence natives' perceptions of immigrants examines – alongside other issues such as the contextual situation of the host country and the characteristics of immigrants and the individual characteristics of members of the majority group – the effect of specific threats related to immigration (realistic threats: job, welfare or crime; symbolic threats: cultural and out-group size) on different facets of anti-immigrant sentiments (Bridges & Mateut, 2009; Dustmann & Preston, 2000; Gang, Rivera-Batiz, & Yun, 2002; Malchow-Møller, Munch, Schroll, & Skaksen, 2006; Mayda, 2006; O'Rourke & Sinnott, 2006). There are, however, to our knowledge no studies that have explicitly focused on how men and women differ in terms of the effect of the perception of specific threats on anti-immigrant sentiment or general perceptions of immigration-related threat, though it might be expected that men and women would ascribe different weights to different drivers of anti-immigrant attitudes.

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This is a novelty in research designed to investigate attitudes towards immigration, as previous studies have only examined a nominal gender gap in perceptions of immigrants without exploring whether such differences could be explained by the fact that women's perception of a general threat might be more directly related to the different aspects of immigration-related threats in comparison to the anti-immigrant stances of men.

Additionally, this paper examines gender differences not only among the majority population/in-group but also among residents with a migratory background (first- and second-generation immigrants).

2. Literature review

Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald, and Tur-Kaspa (1998), Stephan, Ybarra, and Bachman (1999) distinguished between two types of threats underlying negative attitudes towards out-groups: realistic and symbolic threats. Realistic threats arise when members of the in-group feel threatened by out-group members with respect to political and economic power. Realistic threats include labour market competition, economic and political power struggles, and competition for welfare state provision. Symbolic threats are related to the endangering of the symbolic and cultural domination of the in-group.

Stephan et al.'s category of realistic threats can be enlarged to include crime threat, as this directly concerns individual security and material wellbeing (Mayda, 2006; Semyonov, Raijman, & Gorodzeisky, 2008). The symbolic threats can also be taken to include, alongside the standard cultural threat, size of minority group, which has been researched by Semyonov et al. (2008) and Meuleman, Davidov, and Billiet (2009).

It is necessary to bear in mind the conceptual difference between perceived and actual threats (Blalock, 1967). Actual threats are objective figures and facts of intergroup competition, whereas perceived threats measure how individuals perceive inter-group competition. Given the aims of this paper, we focus only on perceived threats.

Citrin, Green, Muste, and Wong (1997) and Mayda (2006) have noted that the effects of different immigration threats are not exogenous in and of themselves. An individual might possess negative attitudes towards immigrants primarily for economic reasons, which in turn will negatively affect person's opinion regarding, e.g., cultural threat.

A number of studies have dealt in greater detail with the effects of perceived labour market threats (Gang et al., 2002), welfare threats (Bridges & Mateut, 2009; Dustmann & Preston, 2000; Gang et al., 2002; Mayda, 2006; Semyonov et al., 2008), crime threats (Bridges & Mateut, 2009; Mayda, 2006) and cultural threats (Dustmann & Preston, 2000; Maisonneuve & Testé, 2007; McLaren, 2003; Oudenhoven, van Prins, & Buunk, 1998).

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The literature suggests that men and women differ with respect to different facets of anti-immigrant attitudes. However, the size and the nature of the gender differences vary across countries and also depend on the aspect of attitude towards immigration on which one focuses. O'Rourke and Sinnott (2006), for example, report that in the pooled sample of 24 countries, women exhibit stronger general anti-immigrant attitudes than men. After closer examination, this is found to hold only among respondents not in the labour force and those from Eastern Europe. Gang et al. (2002) show that women are slightly less likely to report that there are too many immigrants in their country than men. This is in line with the finding of Bridges and Mateut (2009) who demonstrate that European men are more likely to oppose further immigration than women, especially regarding immigrants of a different race. Racial hostility appears to be lower among women than among men, whereas the opposite tendency is observed for job-related and welfare concerns (Dustmann & Preston, 2000).

Chafetz (2006) argues that the gender differences evident in attitudes towards immigrants, as with any other attitudes, may be attributable to the fact that men and women typically perform different social roles, are involved in different types of networks, and face different opportunity and reward structures in adulthood. The reasons behind such differences nevertheless have not yet been thoroughly explored, and one can put forward various potential explanations for the phenomenon.

One possible explanation for the gender-based differences in attitudes towards immigrants is economic in nature. As women's position in the labour market is, in general, more vulnerable than that of men (OECD, 2008), and they rely more extensively on welfare provisions or their partners, women are more likely to voice concern over the impact of an immigrant labour force on the job market and on the sustainability of the welfare state.

Another explanation of the aforementioned gender difference relates to contact theory, which asserts that those in day-to-day contact with non-natives will display less concern about immigration threats (Dixon, 2006). In this context, the most powerful and influential contacts are core networks – i.e., contacts with people with whom one has close emotional ties (Marsden, 1987). As women, especially older women, are less likely to be employed than men (Hardarson, 2006), and as their networks often include other women in similar situations, they are less likely to be exposed to or have contact with newcomers on a daily basis.

A final potential explanation related to contact theory concerns family and parenthood networks. In most European countries, women still dedicate more time to family responsibilities than men (Hardarson, 2006), and thus are more directly concerned with issues surrounding the security and safety of their families and children. As a result, one could expect women to exhibit more protectionist attitudes. Gang et al. (2002) found that members of larger families with children

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