



## Cultural inertia: The effects of cultural change on intergroup relations and the self-concept

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### ABSTRACT

Throughout the world, immigration and the ensuing political reactions have become dominant social problems in the 21st century. One contributor to these problems includes the continual social change. In the United States, ethnic minority populations are growing while the White majority is becoming proportionally smaller. It is proposed that change, in and of itself, can produce intergroup tension. Here, the concept of cultural inertia is introduced as one contributor to intergroup prejudice. Cultural inertia entails a resistance to change, unless change is already occurring. Change is perceived differently across groups as a function of how well the groups already match the current dominant culture. Cultural inertia causes differential preferences for cultural change as a function of the extent to which people identify with a cultural group, their sense of esteem for a cultural group, and the perception that a culture is (or is not) already changing. Three studies manipulated participants' perception of cultural change and show that cultural change influences inter-group prejudice, group esteem, and engagement with the culture. The implications of cultural inertia for models of intercultural ideologies are discussed.

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### Introduction

Cultural change is a global reality. Large immigrant population movements, shifting international coalitions and intra-national population movements force societies to deal with constant cultural change. Adding to the pre-existing cultural diversity inherent to the United States' cultural landscape, the United States is now approximately 16% Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Moreover, the recent immigration surge has become one of the most divisive issues in the country (Massey, 2010). How does this cultural change influence attitudes regarding those groups? The present studies investigate how the process of perceived cultural change itself influences intergroup relations and how groups interact with society.

Cultural change brings issues of intergroup relations, prejudice, cultural and self identity, and perceptions of society to the forefront. Although there are a number of ideological approaches to managing colliding cultures (Berry, 1984), *cultural assimilation* and *multicultural* ideologies dominate the debate in the United States (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). Berry actually proposed four ideologies, but very few people espouse marginalization and separation and are rarely discussed within the literature. Proponents of the *assimilation* interethnic ideology advocate that the best approach to managing differences

across cultures is for all cultures to assimilate to a dominant culture. Assimilation ideologies suggest that, through a common identification (e.g., American), attention is drawn away from ethnic group differences. Eliminating ethnic group boundaries thereby eliminates intergroup prejudice. Within this type of framework for the research presented here, color-blind ideologies are considered an assimilation type ideology (Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009). Both the assimilation and color blind ideologies assert that eliminating or ignoring group differences is considered the appropriate path to amicable intergroup relations.

Conversely, a multicultural ideology holds that all cultures should retain their basic cultural norms, style, and language within a greater cultural framework (Berry, 1984). Individuals learn to adapt to other cultures. Under this model, prejudice is reduced through mutual acceptance and appreciation for group differences. The research presented here uses this cultural framework as a model for understanding societies as dynamic entities and extensions of the self. Because cultures are dynamic, one need not limit research to assimilation and multiculturalism as the only possible points along the continuum of cultural integration. Cultural inertia focuses attention to the movements and processes between the endpoints, and to the perceived pressures to conform to the cultural demands of others. It directs attention to how people perceive how group interaction and changing identities influence their status within the larger group dynamic. One might assume, for instance, that independent of group goals, assimilation generally occurs with few exceptions. Historically, this is generally true within the U.S. independent of those desires, however, people make conscious efforts to retain their cultural identity and the associated change and resistance to change can influence

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interaction patterns. Thus, the theoretical framework extends identity threat models to models of assimilation and multiculturalism by investigating the dynamic processes involved as groups interact.

### *Cultural inertia*

Multiculturalism and assimilation ideologies make recommendations regarding how to manage one's cultural identity, but their implications are different for members of cultural minority and majority groups (Zárate & Shaw, 2010). For minority groups, assimilation means that minorities must change to accommodate the dominant majority culture and that the dominant culture will not accept the minority culture. Conversely, multicultural ideologies mean that minority groups can maintain their culture amidst an accepting majority culture. For members of majority groups, assimilation implies that they will be able to maintain their current cultural style without the need to change greatly to accommodate other groups. In contrast, multiculturalism might mean having to change to accommodate other groups. It is proposed that this change, in and of itself, contributes to negative intergroup attitudes. The research presented here identifies a common process driving prejudice toward outgroups from an ethnic majority and minority viewpoint. It is proposed that reactions to cultural change, or cultural inertia, underlie differential preferences for multicultural and assimilation ideologies. One can first identify the concept of inertia and adopt it to fit social psychological processes. According to Merriam and Webster (2008), inertia is a property of matter by which the object remains at rest or in uniform motion along the same trajectory unless acted upon by some external force. In the same way, cultural inertia is defined as the desire to avoid cultural change, or a change in trajectories, or conversely, desire cultural change once movement or change is already occurring. Cultural inertia suggests that groups resist change due to perceived pressure from outside forces.

Research and public opinion polls show that most majority group members expect ethnic minorities to assimilate quickly (Verkuyten, 2005). The primary message, then, is that minorities should change to resemble the majority group norm. Research within the lab shows that often, a common ingroup identity reduces prejudice (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Validzic, 1998; Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, & Anastasio, 1996). Within a common ingroup framework, identifying people as "American" should reduce prejudice, consistent with an assimilation perspective. It is also the case, however, that much of the research that supports that research has utilized majority group members. Similarly, research and polls also show that in general, ethnic minorities often desire a more multicultural society (Verkuyten, 2005). One possible conclusion, then, is that minorities are also avoiding change. Experimental research shows that often, affirming group distinctiveness reduces prejudice (Carpenter, Zárate, & Garza, 2007; Zárate, García, Garza, & Hitlan, 2004; Zárate & Garza, 2002). Asking ethnic minorities to ignore their group identity can foster reactivity and increase prejudice. That research has tended to use ethnic group participant samples. In essence, support for assimilation ideologies and multicultural ideologies are at least partially predicted by the same process, which is the desire to avoid change.

Conflict arises when one compares the self to the larger cultural norm. If an individual does not "fit" the cultural norm, there may be perceived pressure to change to fit the group norm (Zagefska & Brown, 2002), or discomfort at having to change. Those that do fit the norm may expect others to change to conform to the norm, or similarly, resist feeling the need to change to accommodate non-normative groups. Cultural inertia suggests that conflict arises partially from the push and pull of societal shifts. When groups integrate, it is often the case that there is a larger or dominant cultural group, and there are smaller and less prototypic groups. In the United States, for example, there is the dominant White Euro-American culture, and multiple

smaller ethnic/racial groups. With a cultural inertia framework, the dominant group is the more stable group that resists cultural change, whereas the smaller ethnic groups propose changing the environment (so they don't have to change). Within cultural inertia terms, one can think of the US White population as the rock that resists movement, and other groups as the forces that attempt to effect change. In this metaphor, majority groups are the inert force, and resisting cultural change and minority groups are the force for change — at the cultural level.

### *Not all change is alike*

Change is resisted at multiple levels. At the group level, change is perceived differently as a function of where one is in the social hierarchy. Eibach and Keegan (2006) argue that the same cultural change, operationalized as minority gains, is often perceived as losses for most White Americans. Unfortunately, equivalent losses and gains are perceived differently (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). Losses are subjectively more negative than equivalent gains are positive. Within an intergroup context, the perceptions of loss are most often due to the perceptions that economic benefits are a zero-sum process. If one group gains, it must be at the cost to the other group. Because even the same exact cultural change, which seems difficult to empirically identify or measure, would produce different negative and positive reactions based on how one relates to the status quo. Any cultural movement might by definition produce tension. Thus, change and resistance work together to produce prejudice and discrimination.

At the individual level, change is stressful (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). For instance, the Social Readjustment Rating Scale shows that more change in the past year is associated with greater stress risks. Even positive life changes, such as marriage or the birth of a child, produce stress. Related individual difference variables, like openness to new experiences (Caligiuri, Jacobs, & Farr, 2000), are expected to show complementary effects. Individuals who appreciate new experiences are hypothesized to be more welcome to the change brought about by immigration. Regarding intergroup relations, it has been proposed that political conservatives, compared to liberals, tend to be more prejudiced, partially because conservatives more often avoid change (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Within cultural inertia terms, the more one identifies with their group, the more they should resist change. Identification, then, might be seen as quite similar to being embedded or grounded to a particular spot, and therefore more resistant to cultural pushes.

Cultural inertia builds upon and integrates multiple closely related social psychological theories including the instrumental model of group conflict, acculturative fit, and system justification theory. Cultural inertia contributes to our understanding of prejudice by bringing together multiple related constructs and focusing on the processes between the endpoints of integration. The focus on the effects of perceived cultural change (the proposed causal concept) and when movement and change are desired versus resisted provided new directions in research. Before we continue our discussion of the tenets of cultural inertia, a discussion of these relevant frameworks and how cultural inertia is unique is necessary.

The instrumental model of group conflict asserts that perceptions of competition over scarce resources produce prejudice toward outgroups (Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998). Accordingly, the mechanism that drives prejudice is perceptions of competition over limited resources from an out-group. Although cultural inertia is consistent with the instrumental model of group conflict, cultural inertia posits that prejudice toward out-groups can be produced by perceptions of future cultural changes, irrespective of perceived competition from the source of cultural change. In fact, within cultural inertia terms, the primary fear is cultural change, not economic competition (and Experiment 2 here specifically eliminates economic competition as a

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