



The relation between societal factors and different forms of prejudice: A cross-national approach on target-specific and generalized prejudice



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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper was to investigate the generalizability of prejudice across contexts by analyzing associations between different types of prejudice in a cross-national perspective and by investigating the relation between country-specific contextual factors and target-specific prejudices. Relying on the European Social Survey (2008), results indicated that prejudices were indeed positively associated, confirming the existence of a generalized prejudice component. Next to substantial cross-national differences in associational strength, also within country variance in target-specific associations was observed. This suggested that the motivations for prejudice largely vary according to the intergroup context. Two aspects of the intergroup context – economic conditions and cultural values – showed to be related to generalized and target-specific components of prejudice. Future research on prejudice and context should take an integrative approach that considers both the idea of generalized and specific prejudice simultaneously.

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1. Introduction

Traditional prejudice research starts from the theoretical expectation that specific types of prejudice targeting different outgroups are strongly correlated (e.g. Akrami et al., 2011; Allport, 1954; Bierly, 1985). The idea is that if one holds negative attitudes toward some outgroups, e.g. immigrants, one will also dislike other outgroups, like homosexuals, religious minorities or disabled people, a phenomenon referred to as ‘generalized prejudice’ or a ‘general devaluation of outgroups’ (Bäckström and Björklund, 2007; Duckitt and Sibley, 2007; Zick et al., 2011). The core assumption is that different types of prejudice have a mutual origin and can be triggered by the same factors (Zick, Wolf, et al., 2008). The levels of and associations between different types of prejudice are often explained by relying on individual difference variables such as personality traits, right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) (Akrami et al., 2011; Altemeyer, 1998; Asbrock et al., 2010; Duckitt and Sibley, 2010). It is argued that different forms of prejudice share a common core which is identified by a general ideology of inequality and a preference for dominance and hierarchy, affecting all types of prejudice simultaneously (Zick, Wolf, et al., 2008).

Empirical research has indeed shown that most types of prejudice are associated but not necessarily to the same extent, so that different structures or clusters of prejudice can be identified (Asbrock et al., 2012; Bratt, 2005; Duckitt and Sibley, 2007).

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This observation strengthens the idea that there should be particular reasons and motivations explaining *why* prejudice toward a specific target group might be triggered, in addition to the determinants of prejudice in general. Research on generalized prejudice has largely overlooked the importance of the intergroup context in this regard. In this paper, we argue that different types of prejudice can be triggered by distinct contextual sources. Therefore, we follow the group-focused enmity approach, suggesting that “which outgroups become target of prejudice and discrimination depends on the options a specific society offers” (Zick, Wolf, et al., 2008, p. 367; Zick et al., 2011).

We propose an integrative approach that considers both the idea of generalized prejudice (emphasizing the communality in prejudices) and the importance of context (emphasizing the uniqueness of prejudices). We do this (1) by analyzing the associations between different types of prejudice in a cross-national perspective, and (2) by investigating the relation between country-specific contextual factors and different types of prejudice. The latter allows us to assess whether the context of a particular country has more far-stretched implications for attitude formation than is currently assumed. Importantly, contrary to previous research on context and prejudice we take into account the communality between prejudices, as emphasized by the generalized prejudice perspective.

We focus on two aspects of the national context: economic conditions and cultural values. Group conflict theory predicts that unfavorable economic conditions are especially related to higher levels of prejudice toward ethnic minorities and immigrants because these groups are in direct competition over scarce resources with the majority group (e.g. Quillian, 1995; Zick, Pettigrew and Wagner, 2008). It remains unclear, however, whether this link with economic conditions generalizes to prejudice directed at target groups not posing a direct economic threat (e.g. anti-gay prejudice), as would be assumed by the generalized prejudice idea. Cultural values such as egalitarianism and individualism, on the other hand, are manifested in the daily lives of people and are therefore expected to influence general intergroup attitudes and relations (Schiefer, 2013; Schwartz, 2006a). Hence, one might expect cultural values to be related to all types of prejudice, irrespective of the target group.

We test these theoretical expectations making use of a large cross-national data source, the European Social Survey. While we are certainly not the first to study prejudice in a cross-national perspective, almost all previous studies focused on a single form of prejudice and never investigated a combination of prejudices (e.g. Andersen and Fetner, 2008; Hooghe and Meeusen, 2013; Meuleman et al., 2009; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008, but see Schiefer, 2013).

2. Literature

2.1. Associations between prejudices

Gordon Allport showed in the early 50s that different types of prejudice are strongly related and can be summarized by a common factor of ‘generalized prejudice’ (Allport, 1954). Different authors have confirmed the existence of a negative attitude toward outgroups in general among different subgroups of the population, in different societies and across time (e.g. Bratt, 2005; Davidov et al., 2011; Kinder and Kam, 2010; Zick, Wolf, et al., 2008). Building on Allport’s research tradition, scholars have tried to offer explanations for these strong correlations. A common trend in the literature has been to attribute generalized prejudice to individual difference variables such as RWA, SDO and personality (e.g. Akrami et al., 2011; Altemeyer, 1998; Ekehammar et al., 2004; McFarland, 2010). Zick, Wolf and colleagues (2008), e.g., show that different forms of prejudice indeed share a common core, which can to a large extent be explained by an ideology of unequal status, i.e. a social dominance orientation. People who believe in a natural hierarchy between groups tend to devalue all sorts of outgroups that are judged to be subordinate to the own group. Similarly, Duckitt and Sibley (2007, 2010) argue that different types of prejudice correlate because the outgroups are targeted for the same reasons: they can either be perceived as threats to the social order, norms and values or as competitors for the same scarce resources.

Different forms of prejudice can, however, not entirely be defined by a prejudiced or authoritarian personality. Next to a general component, important target-specific variance remains unexplained (Akrami et al., 2011; Davidov et al., 2011; Meeusen and Dhont, 2015). This suggests that there are factors that trigger specific prejudice instead of generalized prejudice. Akrami et al. (2011) indeed propose that specific (i.e. variance unique to a certain type of prejudice) and common (i.e. variance shared by different types of prejudice) components of prejudice can be explained by different types of indicators: while the common component should primarily be associated with personality traits (e.g. openness and agreeableness), specific components should be more strongly related to situational and group-specific variables. The authors looked at gender as an example of a group-specific variable to show that group membership was more closely related to the specific component of sexism than the common component. Zick, Wolf, et al. (2008), on the other hand, found that the situational variable ‘group relative deprivation’ – explicitly referring to the comparison between the economic position of immigrants and native Germans – was related to the common core of prejudice, rather than to specific prejudices such as xenophobia and Islamophobia. The authors concluded that prejudices are indeed triggered by the same factors. Another situational variable – intergroup contact – has also evidenced to have generalizing effects: positive attitudes toward outgroups involved in the contact (e.g. immigrants), can generalize to outgroups not involved in the contact (e.g. homosexuals and Jews) because of attitude generalizations (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008; Schmid et al., 2012; Tausch et al., 2010). Interestingly, Schmid et al. (2012) show that these generalizing effects are dependent on the salience of the outgroup in a particular country, emphasizing the importance of cross-national comparisons.

Whether prejudice toward a certain outgroup is triggered may indeed depend on the history, traditions, the state of the economy and the cultural values of a country (Bergamaschi, 2013; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008). Similarly, differences in

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