



# Relational skill assets and anti-immigrant sentiments



Naeyun Lee, Cheol-Sung Lee\*

Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, United States

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## ABSTRACT

This study introduces the role of relational skill assets in accounting for attitudes toward immigrants: relational skill assets. Drawing upon stratification researchers' notion of "non-cognitive skills," we build a theoretical framework highlighting the role of occupational skill requirements in explaining anti-immigrant sentiment. Then, utilizing two occupation-specific measures, interpersonal skill requirement and instrumental skill requirement, we construct an explanatory factor, relational skill specificity. We test its effect on anti-immigrant attitudes as well as on the concentration of foreign-born workers in occupations, using the 2004 national identity module of General Social Survey. The findings confirm our argument that workers with a higher possession of interpersonal skill assets relative to instrumental skill assets are exposed to less intense competitions with immigrants, and are therefore less likely to express anti-immigrant sentiments. Our findings suggest that occupational-level relational skill assets based on sociocultural differences play an important role in shaping native workers' attitudes toward immigrants.

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## 1. Introduction

Growing numbers of immigrants have transformed socio-economic and demographic structures in advanced industrial countries. Native populations in these rich countries have developed varied responses to the newcomers from developing countries. While some native workers show favorable attitudes toward migrants, others exhibit hostility. In an attempt to understand these responses, social scientists, on one hand, have sought to identify the determinants of natives' responses to immigrants, mostly by underscoring individuals' social and demographic aspects (Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996; Semyonov et al., 2002), perceived threats on group interests (Blumer, 1958; Bobo and Hutchings, 1996) or cross-national variations in structural conditions such as population composition and unemployment (Quillian, 1995; Semyonov et al., 2006).

Meanwhile, on the other hand, scholars of labor market have applied their utilitarian ways of thinking to interpreting the growing anti-immigrant sentiments in Western societies, by emphasizing the role of skill-based labor-market competition (Borjas et al., 1997). In their perspective, the basis of anti-immigrant sentiment originates primarily from fierce competition between low-skilled natives and immigrant workers. The recent theoretical developments and applications advance this line of labor-market competition theory by incorporating trade theories such as the Heckscher-Ohlin family of factor endowment models: skilled workers will move from rich, skill-abundant countries to poor, labor-abundant countries, while unskilled workers will move from poor to rich countries, thereby driving unskilled workers in rich countries in vulnerable positions (Scheve and Slaughter, 2001; Mayda, 2006; O'Rourke and Sinnott, 2006; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010). Based on this logic,

\* Corresponding author at: 1126 E. 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, United States.

E-mail addresses: [naeyun@uchicago.edu](mailto:naeyun@uchicago.edu) (N. Lee), [chslee@uchicago.edu](mailto:chslee@uchicago.edu) (Cheol-Sung Lee).

unskilled native workers in rich countries will be more discontented with the influx of unskilled immigrants, as it increases competition in the labor market already exacerbated by the rise of the service economy.

We find that there are unexplored dimensions for explanatory variables in these studies of attitudes toward immigration, and introduce a new independent variable: the role of occupation-specific relational skills. Conventional approaches in this area mostly treat skills as a general construct of human capital (Becker, 1964). Studies of attitudes toward immigrants pay their primary attention to labor market competitions based on skill levels, structural conditions such as the size of out-group populations and unemployment at regional level (Quillian, 1995; Kunovich, 2004; Semyonov et al., 2006). Scholars of immigrant labor, on the other hand, have concentrated on the effect of human and social capital on immigrant earnings.

This study argues that two components of relational skills, interpersonal and instrumental skills, play a critical role in shaping anti-immigrant sentiments. We will propose two causal mechanisms: (1) first, the notion of relational skill specificity will capture the degree of transferability of skill assets across different cultures and societies, which will eventually determine workers' occupational-specific exposure to competitions with immigrants; (2) second, it will also represent 'personality traits and facets' (Heckman and Kautz, 2012) that involve intellectual and emotional openness, trust, and unselfishness, arising from pre- and post-labor market training. We assume that these 'personality traits,' correlated with occupational skill requirements, will also determine workers' sentiments toward immigrants. In the subsequent sections, we propose three sets of hypotheses and causal explanations that link occupation-specific relational skills with anti-immigrant sentiments, and then test them with a General Social Survey module (National Identity, 2004).

## 2. Theoretical discussions

This study highlights the significance of 'occupational-level relational skill standards' in accounting for attitudes toward immigrants. We define 'relational skill standards' as average skill requirements of an occupation needed for workers to perform appropriate levels of job-specific tasks in their interactions with people and tools.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, they refer to occupational skill requirements of a worker's functional tasks in relation to 'people' such as co-workers, transaction partners, and customers, as well as 'things or objects' such as products, devices, and tools.

Regarding 'people' dimension, we note that any occupational tasks cannot be performed without simple or complex interactions among people. Workers of an occupation may have to help others or serve the requests by others. They may have to exchange information with others or closely communicate with others in order to produce products or provide services. For some occupations, the interpersonal skills constitute the core essence of their job functions. For lawyers, persuasion and negotiation skills are the key components of different stages of legal procedures, not only for lawsuits in courts, but also for informal settlements outside courts (Heinz and Laumann, 1982). For sales representatives, explaining the functions of products to their customers, and instructing subordinates and reporting to their supervisors are essential parts of their jobs.

With respect to 'things' dimension, workers often deal with simple to complex tools and machines. For a carpenter, being able to handle necessary tools comprises a core essence of his or her job performance. A scientist in a biology lab should know how to operate and manage lab equipment, and how to raise and maintain living organisms on a regular basis. Note that, although manual laborers need to communicate with their colleagues for simple instructions or procedural protocols, communication skills are less essential than their skill with tools or machines. However, a scientist working in a laboratory may be required to communicate with co-workers at very diverse, sophisticated, and complex levels while simultaneously holding high levels of skills to handle laboratory facilities.

These aspects of skill assets have been largely neglected in stratification research since Cain and Treiman (1981)'s pioneering exploration of DOT (Dictionary of Occupational Titles) measures and a couple of subsequent investigations using such measures as "nurturant skill" (Kilbourne et al., 1994). In recent years, scholars have started to use the Occupational Information Network (O\*NET) data (see Liu and Grusky, 2013; Kunovich, 2013a, 2013b). The previous studies on immigrants' labor market experience have also paid little attention to the role of relational skills. The conventional approaches have mostly attributed migrants' earnings deficit to the lack of human capital and the concentration of social capital within ethnic communities (Reitz, 2001; Aguilera and Massey, 2003; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003; Li, 2004, 2008; Cranford, 2005; Ness, 2005; Nakhaie, 2007).

Departing from these preexisting views, our study argues that relational skills play an important role in shaping anti-immigrant sentiments through two mechanisms. First, relational skills will limit the supply of not only domestic labor-market competitors, but also immigrants or foreign workers who aspire to enter into or move up in the labor market. Subsequently, exposure to immigrants in a respective occupational labor market will affect the job qualities, wage levels, and the risk of unemployment for native workers (at least their perceptions of them), eventually shaping their attitudes toward immigrants. Second, relational skills required for occupational tasks tend to be correlated with 'personality traits' (Heckman and Kautz, 2012) that bring in "openness to (new) experiences," "tendency to act in a cooperative unselfish manner," and "(sympathetic) tender-mindedness" all of which may foster more favorable understanding of immigrants' situations and their contributions to a host society. The following sections identify causal mechanisms between occupational skill assets and native workers' attitudes toward immigrants.

<sup>1</sup> The following sections on interpersonal and instrumental skills further elaborate on the definition and the concept of occupational skills regarding "people" and "tools" dimensions.

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