



# The relationship between outgroup size and anti-outgroup attitudes: A theoretical synthesis and empirical test of group threat- and intergroup contact theory

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## ABSTRACT

Although anti-immigrant attitudes represent a widespread social problem in many European societies, research has only partially understood the role the demographic size of the immigrant population plays for the prevalence of such attitudes. In this study, we use group threat- and intergroup contact theory to derive competing hypotheses on the role the size of the immigrant population plays for explaining the anti-immigrant attitudes of Dutch citizens. To this end, we used structural equation modeling with robust standard errors on nationally representative individual-level survey data enriched with official municipality-level statistics. We found empirical evidence for both group threat- and intergroup contact theory. Objective measurements of immigrant group size corresponded with subjective perceptions of a larger immigrant group size. Conversely, subjective perceptions of a larger immigrant group size were associated with perceptions of threatened group interests, which in turn related to anti-immigrant attitudes. On the other hand, however, larger immigrant group size facilitates intergroup contact, which was negatively associated with perceived threat and subsequent anti-immigrant attitudes.

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## 1. Introduction and background

Understanding the sources of anti-outgroup sentiments necessitates to account for contextual- and individual-level explanatory characteristics alike (Bobo and Fox, 2003; Pettigrew, 2006). One of the central issues is the relationship between outgroup size and anti-outgroup attitudes. Group threat theory has proven a viable theoretical framework to relate outgroup size as a contextual-level characteristic to individual-level anti-outgroup attitudes, proposing that a larger outgroup size increases anti-outgroup attitudes mediated by perceptions of threatened group interests (Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958, see also Bobo, 1999; Quillian, 1995, 1996). However, the empirical evidence that outgroup size increases anti-outgroup attitudes was judged inconclusive (Semyonov et al., 2004, p. 684; Wagner et al., 2006, p. 381f.). One group of studies lends support to the positive relation of outgroup size with different manifestations of outgroup derogation (e.g., Coenders, 2001; Fosset and Kiecolt, 1989; Pettigrew and Cramer, 1959; Quillian, 1995, 1996; Scheepers et al., 2002a; Semyonov et al., 2006)<sup>1</sup>; another group failed to find such evidence (e.g., Coenders et al., 2005a,b; Evans and Need, 2002; Semyonov et al., 2004; Strabac and Listerhaug,

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<sup>1</sup> We like to point out that much of the literature finding positive relationships of greater outgroup size with anti-outgroup attitudes relates to the negative attitudes of white people towards black people in the U.S. (e.g., Black, 1976; Fosset and Kiecolt, 1989; Giles, 1977; Giles and Evans, 1985; Glaser, 1994; Matthews and Prothro, 1966; Taylor, 1998).

2008); and yet another group of studies even documented a *negative* relation (Hood and Morris, 1997; Lubbers et al., 2006). Particularly the latter findings could be explained by intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Wagner et al., 2006). In brief, intergroup contact theory proposes that a larger outgroup size provides opportunities for positive intergroup contact, which in turn ameliorates anti-outgroup attitudes. However, to date only a handful of studies set out to synthesize and test group threat theory and intergroup contact theory simultaneously. Consequently, the actual evidence of outgroup size as contextual characteristic assumed to affect (positively or negatively) anti-outgroup attitudes remains inconclusive.

In the present study, we attempt to improve upon this state of research in three complementary ways. First, from both group threat theory and intergroup contact theory, we derive and specify contradictory hypotheses on the association of outgroup size with anti-outgroup attitudes, and subject these hypotheses to a simultaneous empirical test. This task has rarely been taken up before, but is likely to further understanding of the role of outgroup size and to explain anti-outgroup attitudes. Second, we set out to deliver a more comprehensive examination of the micro-social processes linking outgroup size to anti-outgroup attitudes. Third, we attempt to make methodological contributions by employing structural equation modeling suitable for modelling cluster-sampled survey data (Muthén and Satorra, 1995) used in the empirical part of this study.

We chose to conduct our study in the Netherlands. The Netherlands is a host country for a substantial immigrant population due to labor migration, migration flows from former colonies and recent influxes of asylum seekers. Against this background, the arrival and residence of immigrants as reflected by the size of the immigrant population in the Netherlands has been accompanied by ongoing public debate and substantial amounts of exclusionary reactions towards immigrants (e.g., Coenders et al., 2005a). Examining whether and how the prevalence of anti-immigrant attitudes is affected by the size of the immigrant population is therefore of great theoretical and practical interest.

## 2. Two contradictory theories on outgroup size and anti-outgroup attitudes

### 2.1. Group threat theory and outgroup size

Group threat theory has proven to be a key approach for social science research seeking to explain anti-outgroup attitudes. This theory may be summarized by the general proposition derived from the classic work by Blalock (1967) that actual intergroup competition over scarce resources drives subjectively perceived threats to the ingroup's interests, which, in turn, motivate ingroup members to express anti-outgroup attitudes. More specifically, the reasoning underlying this proposition proceeds in two steps. First, actual intergroup competition for scarce resources is assumed to increase perceptions of outgroups as posing a threat to the ingroup (Blalock, 1967). Issues at stake in such intergroup competition can refer to tangible (e.g., housing or labor market issues) as well as intangible goods (e.g., religious or language issues) (Allport, 1954; Blalock, 1967; Coser, 1956). Second, ingroup members are hypothesized to respond to such perceived group threat with exclusionary anti-outgroup attitudes. According to the theory, such anti-outgroup attitudes serve to protect or restore the ingroup's interests vis-à-vis such threats (Blumer, 1958, p. 5, see Blalock, 1967; Bobo, 1999; Quillian, 1995). It is important to note that perceived group threat and anti-outgroup attitudes represent two closely related, yet theoretically and empirically distinct concepts (Blalock, 1967; Mughan and Paxton, 2006; Quillian, 1995; Scheepers et al., 2002a; Schlueter et al., 2008; Semyonov et al., 2004). More precisely, the concept of perceived group threat is commonly defined as "anticipation of negative consequences" due to the presence of some outgroup (Stephan and Renfro, 2002, p. 197). As distinguished from the cognitive appraisal of perceived threat (Stephan and Renfro, *ibid.*), the theory considers anti-outgroup attitudes to express explicit preferences for denying "to individuals or groups of people equality of treatment which they may wish", to cite Allport's (1954, p. 51) classic and well-known definition of social discrimination. Thus, the theory conceptualizes perceived group threats as immediate predictors of more explicit, discriminatory anti-outgroup stances. To what extent such perceived threats induce such discriminatory attitudes towards the outgroup is, in fact, an empirical question (McLaren, 2003, p. 915). However, previous research clearly supports the assumption that perceived group threat increases anti-outgroup attitudes. This conclusion is backed up by results from experimental analyses (Esses et al., 2001; Riek et al., 2006; Stephan et al., 2005; Ullrich et al., 2006), cross-national comparative investigations (Coenders, 2001; Scheepers et al., 2002a; Semyonov et al., 2004) as well as multiwave panel analyses (Schlueter et al., 2008). In addition, previous work on group threat theory specified several antecedent conditions for perceiving an outgroup as threatening (e.g., Coenders, 2001; Stephan and Renfro, 2002). On the individual level, research has shown that those with fewer socioeconomic resources (as indicated by lower level of education, lower income or unemployment; e.g., Gijssberts et al., 2004) as well as those with stronger religious attachment (as indicated by attendance of religious meetings; e.g., Scheepers et al., 2002b) are relatively more prone to perceive an outgroup as threatening the ingroup's interests. It has also been theorised and examined that threats seen to be posed by the outgroup to one's personal self-interests (individual threats) might motivate ingroup members to choose hostile stances towards the outgroup (Pettigrew et al., 2007; Rosenstein, 2008; Stephan and Renfro, 2002). Yet according to the logic embodied in the theory, even when ingroup members perceive their personal self-interests not to be affected by intergroup competition, they still might perceive the interests of their group to be threatened and, consequently, show anti-outgroup attitudes (Blumer, 1958, p. 5; Bobo, 1983, 1999; Quillian, 1996). As Riek et al. (2006) emphasize: "[...] a white male may perceive affirmative action as threatening the overall interests of his ingroup even when he is not personally affected" (Riek et al., 2006, p. 337). To understand therefore which sources, other than individual self-interests, increase perceived group threat and unfavorable intergroup attitudes, contextual-level characteristics need to be taken into account. Given the

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