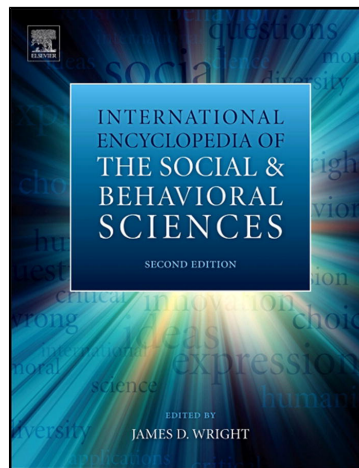


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Xenophobia: Social Psychological Aspects

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Abstract

Xenophobia refers to a fear of the stranger that has taken on diverse forms throughout history and is conceptualized according to different theoretical approaches. Often confounded with racism in modern times, the concept of xenophobia is rooted in universal fears of the unfamiliar, but also in specific historical traditions and regulations regarding the place devoted to outsiders within host societies. With the rise of the nation-state and the development of migration, xenophobia depicts immigrants, asylum seekers, or populations of immigrant descent as posing a material or identity threat to nationals.

Very often the word xenophobia is simply used as a synonym of prejudice – with no clear distinction with the term of racism. Racism is a form of prejudice toward individuals or groups based on the socially constructed notion of ‘race’, which defines social categories on the basis of differentiating phenotypical markers such as skin color. In contrast, coming from the Greek words *xenos* = stranger and *phobos* = fear, xenophobia denotes a hostility toward the stranger perceived as a threat. However, the notion of stranger is ambiguous, ranging from total otherness to the foreigner next door.

The Greek root *xenos* may evoke the stranger as a general category, referring to the uncommon or the unfamiliar, as well as a political dimension that, rather than a universal psychological reaction to extraneity, is primarily concerned with rules and regulations that codify access to a territory and demarcate the civic body from the outsiders. Therefore, xenophobia may be conceptualized at different levels of analysis, depending both on the targeted stranger and the theoretical frame of reference. Nevertheless, the core notion of threat seems to be consistently associated with the phenomenon and is present in most theoretical approaches of its social psychological roots. Indeed, reactions to the stranger have been addressed both on their positive side as welcoming behaviors toward the outsider as a guest or partner for exchange, and on the negative side as an aversion toward the outsider as a menace. However, the fundamental ambivalence attached to the figure of the stranger (Simmel, 1908/1984) fades away in the case of xenophobia. This is unambiguously a response to the alleged dangers a given society faces when confronted with someone who is not ‘one of us’.

Hence, xenophobia is not simply an attempt to demarcate oneself from the other. Underlying the phenomenon, particular classifications allow to distinguish members of the community from all those who belong to the outside world (as were the barbarians for the Greeks or in modern times citizens of other nations) or from those who become, temporarily or permanently, and under a variety of forms, ‘strangers from the inside’ (as were the Wogs for the Greeks or are the contemporary immigrants). These ‘foreigners living among us’ can be considered as the typical targets of xenophobia. The relationship with them may vary considerably, between acceptance and rejection. Xenophobia is an explicit hostility against those who are considered as intruders, usurpers, or vectors of disease.

As a social psychological phenomenon, this hostility has often been understood either as a decontextualized fear of otherness, or as a form of prejudice against an out-group somewhat confounded with racism. Yet, the more recent forms of enmity against immigrants, which have developed under the very name of xenophobia within national contexts recruiting ‘guest workers’, have received less research attention. This may be due to the focus of Western social psychology on the study of universal psychological processes. However, these can hardly account for the genuine xenophobic reactions that arise when members of a receiving society are entitled with formal rights and prerogatives that are denied to the members of an incoming group. Recent research has addressed anti-immigrant attitudes in a variety of ways, reflecting the increasing complexity of immigration issues that are concerned with a larger array of targets in the current context of globalization. Within this turn, it becomes difficult to disentangle xenophobia, as a fear of the stranger, from a large variety of responses to the presence and arrival of people whose presumed difference from national majorities evokes material as well as value, cultural and symbolic threats.

The Fear of the Other

Throughout history, outsiders have been associated with risks. Unclean foods, unusual hygienic customs, contagion, or epidemic spread stand as potential dangers motivating avoidance of intergroup encounters. The Jewish people, for instance, have experienced persecution on the basis of their alleged propagation of disease from the Middle Ages, where they were blamed for poisoning the water, to the contemporary era in which anti-Semitic propaganda has likened them to nonhuman carriers of germs and infections. A number of models link the recurrent and widespread disease-related reactions to outsiders to adaptive behaviors bearing safeguard and protection for the group against potential harmful contacts. The evolutionary approach attempts to explain how contemporary psychological experiences, and in particular xenophobic attitudes, may reflect ancestral adaptive mechanisms eliciting affective and behavioral reactions aimed at keeping the stranger at a distance (Faulkner et al., 2004). While evolutionary models identify perceived risk of becoming ill as

a central feature, another line of thought draws upon psychodynamic theory for understanding blaming responses as a means to protect the identity of the self by denying one's own vulnerability to illness and linking health and safety risks to the 'other' (Joffe, 1999).

Either at a collective or at an individual level, several social psychological models have addressed fundamental processes underlying perceived threats – whose fear of disease is but one significant case in point – and eliciting anxiety, stigmatization, and prejudice (Stangor and Crandall, 2000). Yet, along these lines, research has stressed a universal and decontextualized version of the stranger, equating it with the transhistorical figure of the Other. Moreover, recent accounts from genetic theory derive in-group favoritism and out-group derogation from the operation of genes and hormones (Dawkins, 2006).

While these borrowings from other scientific domains, such as biology, may contribute to an understanding of an indiscriminate and panhuman hatred of strangers, it fails to grasp the peculiar social, political, and symbolic underpinnings of contemporary xenophobia. These are more accurately accounted for by classic social psychological models, even though, most often, the phenomenon remains confounded with neighboring notions such as prejudice, discrimination, or out-group derogation.

The Societal Context of Xenophobia

Xenophobia should be situated in its wider societal context. According to Scheffer (2011), the cycle of interethnic relations following immigration generally comprises three steps: avoidance, conflict, and accommodation. "On arrival, migrants tend to keep themselves to themselves, partly as a result of the attitude of avoidance they detect in the society around them. In the years that follow, migrants and their children struggle to claim a place for themselves in the new country, and this leads to rivalry and strife. The question of how everyone can live together becomes unavoidable. If a satisfactory answer is found, the descendants of the original migrants will be absorbed more or less smoothly into society" (Scheffer, 2011: p. 6). Xenophobia can be seen as a symptom of the avoidance and/or conflict steps, and interpreted as reactions of host community members facing societal changes often experienced as threatening. Migrants often experience this perception of threat as well, which may lead some of them to withdraw in their own community. This withdrawal then contributes to strengthen host community members' mistrust.

With the transformations of migration flows, the arrival of immigrants and asylum seekers from more distant non-Western regions, but also with the settling down of reunited families and the increase in the numbers of second or third generation residents born or grown up in their families' host country, discourses about immigrants tend to include a series of themes related to values, culture, or habits. Migration is not only more diverse in terms of cultural origins, but groups of migrants tend to assert their cultural identity through struggles for recognition involving ostensible signs or demands for cultural or religious arrangements (Sanchez-Mazas, 2004). Furthermore, former societal divisions along political lines during the cold war have given way to a framing of

antagonisms in cultural terms, for example through the notion of 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington, 1996). The turning of xenophobia into more radicalized forms of hostility toward the culturally different foreigners jeopardizes not only harmonious multicultural relations within nation-states, but also the construction of a cosmopolitan worldwide society.

However, these themes do not replace, but rather merge with more traditional arguments evolving around the actual or alleged foreign status of the immigrant offspring. This combination of delegitimation registers has important implications in the recent evolution of xenophobia toward more complex and combined forms of anti-immigrant attitudes. The fact that the populations of immigrant descent are still viewed as foreign regardless of their formal citizenship allows a wider range of anti-immigrant prejudices compared to prejudice against indigenous ethnic minorities. Thus, in France, access to formal citizenship has not prevented relegation of 'youngsters from the suburbs' to a second-class citizenship, hence feeding among them feelings of denial of recognition, sometimes giving rise to violent outbursts. In addition, anti-immigration discourses include both blatant and subtle expressions of prejudice (Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995), the latter being often associated with apparently rational arguments about 'tolerance threshold', scarcity of jobs, or welfare abuse that legitimize the expression of 'politically incorrect' opinions against them. Hence, the stranger, now reconstructed as an Other reluctant to integrate, and therefore as a menace to Western culture, is the target of rhetorical positions against 'foreign overpopulation', 'invasion', or 'flood' (i.e., the expression 'migration tsunami' used by French far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen).

Classical xenophobic themes involving notions of foreign invasion and overgrowth have gained momentum during the last decades, as asylum policy has been placed on the political agendas of Western nations. Official discourses concerned with national sovereignty, State control over borders, and antiterrorist policy after 11 September 2001 have targeted immigrants and asylum seekers, in such a way that threats posed by incoming refugees and other immigrants were associated with fears regarding domestic security. Concerns with the volume of asylum seekers have been addressed through expeditious processing of applications, tight restrictions upon the right to work, removal of support, or detention for failed asylum seekers. The representation of the refugees as claiming for asylum on a fraudulent basis, searching for illegal work, or being engaged into criminal activities such as drug dealing and prostitution, represents a renewed vision of the undeserving and unwanted foreigner (Sayad, 1991). In addition, the liberalization of Western economies has produced a category of precarious illegal workers who can easily be marked out as stealing jobs or lowering wage rates. Hence, nowadays, rejected asylum seekers are the preferred target of xenophobic discourses. These discourses lie at the core of right-wing populist politicians' strategies for conquering power.

Realistic Threats

Several major social psychological theories addressing the psychological roots of prejudice propose key concepts that

might be highly relevant for the study of xenophobia. Thus, a structural approach conceptualizes intergroup prejudice as reflecting the modalities of intergroup relations that can be framed in terms of competition over scarce resources or asymmetrical economic power. This *Realistic Conflict Theory* (Sherif, 1967) assumes that intergroup conflict, but also intergroup cooperation, stem from material interests that provide the infrastructure of reciprocal representations. However, images not only evolve according to the transformations of the nature of interactions, they also actively contribute to the unfolding and the justification of these interactions. The xenophobic rhetoric depicting immigrants as taking advantage of jobs, housing, or welfare opportunities originates from the perceived realistic threat foreign workers or foreign unemployed pose to nationals. Empirical research dealing with xenophobia against 'guest workers' in Switzerland showed that negative attitudes toward foreign people went hand in hand with the perception of intergroup relations in terms of negative interdependence between groups. That is, these interactions were perceived as a competitive relationship between Swiss nationals and foreigners, in a zero-sum game where 'what the other group gains, my group loses' (Mugny et al., 1991). This competitive zero-sum belief has also been identified as a mediator in the relationship between social dominance orientation – the individual preference for hierarchy within social systems – and negative attitudes toward immigrants (Esses et al., 1998).

Concern over material threats may be a relevant criterion for differentiating xenophobia from other types of prejudice primarily based on feelings of in-group superiority. The impact of alleged economic menaces on attitudes toward immigrants has been found both in Europe (Pereira et al., 2010) and North America (Esses et al., 1998). Indeed, arguments blaming foreign populations for benefitting from undue advantages at the expense of nationals are pervasive, particularly in those countries where immigrants, deprived of citizen rights, nonetheless benefit from the welfare system. Thus, people who see themselves and their national group as relatively disadvantaged in comparison with immigrants experience resentful feelings. This kind of reaction, typical of xenophobia, perfectly fits the assumptions of *Relative Deprivation Theory*. Because, unlike *Realistic Conflict Theory*, it emphasizes the subjective evaluation of this disadvantaged comparison (Pettigrew et al., 2008), this perspective helps explain the prevalence of xenophobia under different objective circumstances as well as the sensitivity of public opinion to anti-immigration stances about the foreign 'profiteer'.

Identity Threats

Social Identity Theory complements the *Realistic Conflict Theory* by adding a symbolic dimension tapping people's identities and belief systems (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). It is based on the notion that social identities are part of the self-concept, and that people are motivated to derive a clear and positive image of their social identities through comparisons with other social categories. The explanation of prejudice, including prejudice against immigrants, is often derived from *Social Identity Theory* predictions (Esses et al., 2005). Symbolic motives underlie

intergroup attitudes and behaviors and account for the tendency to favor one's own group because it serves and secures its members' sense of identity. Thus, this model clarifies some observed discrepancies in receiving societies between interpersonal relations with out-group members and political stances or voting behavior. Hence, people may support xenophobic political parties while at the same time describe friendly relationships with immigrants. Social identity theory may explain this gap according to the notion that attitudes and behaviors held at an intergroup level are driven by social identity motives – i.e., maintain or acquire a positive social identity as a group member – that differ from interindividual motives, such as personal attraction.

The combined effects of perceived material and symbolic threats are very much plausible in the development of xenophobic attitudes. But perception that their national, subnational, or supranational identity is threatened by divergent social practices, values, or cultural arrangements introduced by immigrants may be sufficient to trigger prejudice against them among majority-group members. Muslims, in particular, are portrayed as posing such a value threat, as shown by examples of xenophobic political parties condemning the use of the Muslim scarf, the presence of minarets, or the selling of halal meat. Indeed, Velasco Gonzalez et al. (2008) found that prejudice against Muslim immigrants among Dutch adolescents was predicted by symbolic threats and negative stereotypes, but not realistic threats.

Perception of the values of immigrants as being incompatible with those of the receiving society implies the vision of nationals as a homogeneous group sharing common values (Esses et al., 2005). The view that immigrants undermine national values suggests that xenophobia correlates with nationalism. However, nationalism has proved to be a determinant of anti-immigration attitudes only to the extent that national identification is framed in ethnic – rather than civic or political – terms that is, with an emphasis put on ancestral values, shared culture, and blood ties (Pehrson et al., 2009). Since nations vary in the importance they attribute to different dimensions of national identity and citizenship (e.g., the German vs the French models and the corresponding *jus sanguinis* and *jus solis*), different approaches to the presence of people of foreign origin are to be distinguished, ranging from cultural assimilation – imposing strong cultural obligations – to multiculturalism – promoting culture maintenance among immigrant minorities. Besides, identification at other levels than the nation could also inspire xenophobia. For example, a study conducted in Belgium showed that identification with Europe, rather than national identification, positively correlated with a tendency to wish there were fewer foreigners in Belgium (Licata et al., 2011).

Xenophobia and Attitudes toward Immigration Issues

Xenophobia can be expressed through informal prejudice against individuals in day-to-day interactions. However, it can also inspire political position-taking regarding immigration issues and policies (Licata et al., 2011). Citizens of receiving countries may adopt different attitudes toward entry criteria set for immigrants, which define who can enter and live in the

in-group territory. Entry criteria can either be based on category membership (ascribed criteria), such as nationality or religion, or on individual merit (acquired criteria), such as education or professional skills. Green (2009) showed, across 20 European countries, that citizens of countries with a poor economic situation (i.e., experiencing realistic threat) expressed stronger support for the use of ascribed immigration criteria than citizens of wealthier countries. She also showed that individual perceived threat (realistic and symbolic) was more predictive of support for acquired criteria in wealthy than in poor countries. This suggests that xenophobic attitudes toward foreigners are mainly based on a social category distinction inspired by economic threat in poorer countries, whereas they tend to be based on a meritocratic ideology and pressure to normative conformity on individual immigrants in wealthier nations.

The way different categories of immigrants are named and represented in public discourse and the media, particularly on the moral dimension, heavily weighs on xenophobic attitudes. Esses et al. (2008) showed that negative attitudes toward refugees and the Canadian refugee policy were influenced by representations of refugees as immoral (not respecting the asylum procedure, cheating, etc.). As a case in point, the expression 'illegal immigrants' or 'undocumented' immigrants have different connotations. 'Illegal' contains an accusation of criminality and, through internal attributions, portrays the immigrant as active and guilty. In contrast, 'undocumented' refers to bureaucratic procedures. Suggesting external attributions, it presents the immigrant as a passive victim of the system. Not surprisingly, in the USA, different segments of the population tend to use the two expressions: 'illegal' is often used in legislative debates, whereas 'undocumented' is often used by immigrant rights groups (Deaux, 2008).

Of particular relevance is the framing of immigration as a personal choice or as a constraint, which affects attitudes toward integration policies. Verkuyten (2006) showed that presenting immigration as a personal choice, rather than as 'lack of choice', led to more negative attitudes toward multiculturalism in the Netherlands. This held true both for work-related immigrants (Moroccans or Turks) and for refugees and asylum seekers.

Research conducted in Germany also showed that negative attitudes toward immigrants – both blatant and subtle forms of prejudice – predicted the endorsement of ideologies of assimilation or segregation (versus integration) of immigrants (Zick et al., 2001). Conversely, Ward and Masgoret (2008) showed in New Zealand that both endorsing a multicultural ideology and having contacts with immigrants decreased perception of threat. A lower perceived threat was then associated with more positive attitudes toward immigrants, which, in turn, predicted more endorsement of positive immigration policies (higher number and greater diversity of immigrants).

Studies conducted in Québec and in California (Bourhis et al., 2010) showed that respondents who endorsed more restrictive acculturation orientations toward immigrants (assimilationism, segregationism, or exclusionism) had more conflictual relationships with them than those who favored more welcoming orientations. Studies carried out in Québec further revealed that more restrictive acculturation orientations were endorsed with respect to devalued – visible

minorities – but not with valued immigrants – Christian White immigrants from Europe.

Reducing Xenophobia

Different strategies have been proposed for reducing prejudice. They are generally based on the social psychological theories that have been mobilized to identify its causes and can be applied to xenophobic instances of prejudice. However, most research on prejudice reduction has been conducted in laboratories with artificial groups (Paluck and Green, 2009), or focused on racist prejudice against Black people, and cannot be blindly extrapolated to xenophobia. There exist, however, interesting exceptions.

Research assessing Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis has consistently confirmed that intergroup contact reduces prejudice, provided it takes place on an equal footing, involves cooperation (positive interdependence), allows for the development of close relationships, and receives institutional support. For example, a longitudinal study with school students from three European countries – Germany, Belgium, and England – showed that contact between host majority members and immigrant minorities' members had a positive effect on majority members' subsequent attitudes toward immigrants (Binder et al., 2009). But the reverse relation was also true: prejudice reduced opportunities for contact. These effects were strengthened if immigrant friends were seen as typical members of their group. In addition, reduction in intergroup anxiety mediated this effect. Interestingly, however, this positive effect of contact was not found among immigrant participants.

Building on *Social Identity Theory*, scholars have explored the potentially beneficial effects of different solutions based on social categorization strategies (Paluck and Green, 2009): The recategorization strategy aims at reducing prejudice by decreasing the salience of a social identity while emphasizing a superordinate level of identification that includes both the in-group and the out-group; the crossed categorization strategy is based on the idea that making members of both groups aware that they share a belonging to a third group should improve their relations; finally, the dual identification strategy tries to make a superordinate category salient, while at the same time maintaining identification with the subgroup. Each strategy was found to yield significant reduction in prejudice, although mainly in laboratory settings using artificial groups and with prejudice being measured as in-group bias. A study conducted in Australia by Nickerson and Louis (2008) in real settings brought support for the dual identification strategy. It showed that attitudes toward asylum seekers were the most positive among participants who both identified with their nation and as human beings.

Prejudice against foreigners has also been investigated in the framework of models addressing social norms and conformity. Conformity to group norms proves to depend on perceived in-group threat and on the extent to which the norm provides an appropriate answer to such a threat. Falomir-Pichastor et al. (2004) observed that Swiss nationals conformed to an antidiscrimination in-group norm (i.e., they reduced discrimination against foreigners) when the

out-group was perceived as nonthreatening (i.e., when foreigners were not perceived as taking jobs nor increasing nationals' unemployment). However, the same norm did not obtain any influence, and a counterconformity effect even tended to appear, when the out-group was perceived as threatening. Hence, adhering to antidiscrimination norms endorsed by the in-group tends to decrease prejudice, except when immigrants are perceived as threatening economic or symbolic interests.

Xenophobia vs Xenophilia

Xenophobia and racism are difficult to oppose since these phenomena are subject to transformations and often become confused. Interestingly, however, unlike racism and other related notions, xenophobia has an antonym: Xenophilia, meaning sympathy for the stranger. Thus, xenophobia can be considered as the opposite of hospitality. In a variety of historical situations, foreigners have been marked out as not belonging to the political community. Yet, embodying different characters – the merchant, the pilgrim, the beggar, the fairground stallholder – they held a designed place among local citizens and natives. According to the roman distinction between *urbs* – the material town – and *civitas* – the civic city – they brought novelty to the former while being excluded from the latter. While xenophobia reflects the refusal to incorporate the foreigner as a citizen, it develops in the framework of a bond or even interdependence between outsiders and the host society.

Indeed, whereas the total stranger triggers fears and hostile reactions, the foreigner can become familiar when his or her otherness is mastered through categorization processes, social practices, and institutional controls that define his or her status within a given community. Besides antagonism, the relationship with the stranger is also open to alliance and reciprocity, sometimes represented through rituals or recognition signs. In premodern times, for example, the traveler receiving hospitality would give his host half of a piece of clay, a *symbolon*, and keep the other half for himself, in such a way that, when the host traveled in turn, he could be recognized abroad as a guest rather than a stranger.

Nowadays, the rising of xenophobia conceals opposing trends in most Western societies toward the development of multiculturalism, the adoption of antidiscrimination laws and diverse forms of support to immigrants and asylum seekers claiming for their rights. Opposing xenophobia through institutional devices, volunteer support, or political mobilization contributes to shape today's complex and contradictory forms of the relationships with foreigners. Contemporary manifestations of xenophilia involve political and ideological positions as well as individual and collective behaviors, which still realize nowadays some of the fundamental dimensions of human experience, such as persons mobility, intergroup contact, mutual social influence, and integration of novelty.

See also: Dehumanization; Essentialism; Ethnicity and Migration in Europe; Immigration: Social Psychological

Aspects; Intergroup Relations; Meritocracy and Tokenism; Racism: Social Psychological Perspectives; Social Dominance Orientation; Social Identity in Social Psychology; Social Psychology; Stigma, Social Psychology of.

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