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The Interplay of Social Norms and Intergroup Contact in Understanding Immigration Attitudes in Multicultural Societies

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In their everyday lives, national majority members are exposed to immigration to different degrees – in particular due to different compositions of neighborhoods, of regions, or of countries in terms of immigrants and natives. This will affect the amount of everyday intergroup contact people experience. Moreover, inclusive versus exclusive policies as well as shared values convey societal norms that shape the national majority members' attitudes. The aim of this project is to uncover the interplay between societal norms and intergroup contact in explaining national majorities' stances towards immigration.

With Switzerland and Western European countries growing more and more culturally diverse, the coexistence between national majorities and immigrant minorities gives rise to a number of challenges. Negative reactions to immigration among the national majority have frequently been shown to be prevalent in areas with low immigration rates and are thus unrelated to personal experiences with immigrants (see Hewstone 2015 on diversity and social cohesion). Indeed intergroup contact research in social psychology has consistently shown that positive interactions between the national majority and immigrant groups reduce anti-immigrant prejudice and opposition to immigration and multicultural policies (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

The underlying argument in this project is that the normative context shapes the impact of intergroup contact (see Green and Staerklé 2013; Guimond et al. 2014). When individuals perceive that their group—the national majority—has positive attitudes or the institutional position towards immigration is lenient, this inclusive normative context can enhance the relationship between contact and attitudes. Moreover, contact can buffer the deleterious effects of a negative, exclusive normative context. Absence of contact,

then, can increase the effects of an exclusive normative context. While the influence of both normative contexts and of intergroup contact on attitudes towards immigration have been amply demonstrated, the way these two factors interact to shape immigration attitudes has received hardly any attention up to now. The main contribution of this project is to examine this interaction.

In the research, we differentiate intergroup contact quantity (for example, high or low presence of immigrants) and quality (that is, positive versus negative interaction experiences) in the interplay between contact and normative context. Different levels of conceptualization of inclusive versus exclusive norms (experimentally manipulated norms as well as measured policy and attitudinal indicators of normative climates of countries or local communities) are also examined. Moreover, we investigate how national identification – that is the way national majority members relate to their nation – and identification with a superordinate, inclusive category (for example, European identification) relate to stances towards immigration as a function of exclusive and inclusive normative contexts as well as contact.

The project features two complementary methodological approaches. A multilevel approach employs secondary survey data to assess the interplay of societal-level normative climates, diversity and intergroup contact in Switzerland and across European countries (that is, individual- and context-level modelled simultaneously). An experimental approach brings together previously used experimental paradigms in a novel way investigating the effect of norms and contact to examine the interaction effect between them.

Preliminary Findings

The cross-sectional surveys in Switzerland and across European countries as well as the experimental studies have provided evidence that positive contact with and the presence of immigrants can buffer the impact of exclusive norms on attitudes towards immigrants, whereas the lack of contact with immigrants enhanced the effect of exclusive norms. Moreover, inclusive contexts when assessed with migrant integration policies boosted the beneficial effect of contact.

Across Swiss districts, we examined the interplay of an exclusive normative climate (assessed with referenda results) and presence of immigrants in explaining endorsement of an ethnic conception of the nation. Analyzing MOSAiCH 2015 (Swiss International Social Survey Programme ISSP data), we found that the presence of “valued” and culturally close immigrants (here West Europeans) in a district attenuated the relationship between an exclusive normative climate and individuals’ endorsement of an ethnic conception of the nation.

One study was conducted comparing European countries with European Social Survey ESS Round 7 data and using country-level immigration policies to tap normative climate (assessed with the Migration integration MIPEX indicator). Comparing 20 countries, we show that the relationship between contact with immigrants and reduced anti-immigration stances (perceived threat and social distance) is more prominent in countries where integration policies are inclusive rather than exclusive.

With a set of experiments conducted in Switzerland we show that positive contact experiences with immigrants is a protective factor against the negative effects of exposure to exclusive, anti-egalitarian norms. In our studies, inclusive versus exclusive social norms about intergroup relations were experimentally manipulated by asking participants to read results of a fictitious survey showing that Swiss support equality or inequality between the Swiss and immigrants in Switzerland. Participants are either invited to report on the amount and quality of encounters they have with immigrants or to imagine an encounter with an immigrant. Indeed across the studies, intergroup contact buffered the effects of exposure to exclusive norms on anti-immigration stances.

Presentations

- Green, Eva G. T., Emilio Paolo Visintin, and Oriane Sarrasin. 2016a, Comment un climat idéologique exclusif et la diversité culturelle façonnent les frontières de l’endogroupe, 11e Congrès International de Psychologie Sociale en Langue Française, Geneva, 29 June 2016.
- Green, Eva G. T., Emilio Paolo Visintin, and Oriane Sarrasin. 2016b, The interplay of ideological climate and immigrant presence shape cultural diversity attitudes, 2nd Annual Conference of the nccr – on the move, Neuchatel, 23 June 2016.
- Green, Eva G. T., Emilio Paolo Visintin, and Oriane Sarrasin. 2016c, The Interplay of Ideological Climate and Immigrant Presence Shape Cultural Diversity Attitudes. 39th Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology, Warsaw, 14 July 2016.
- Green, Eva G. T., Emilio Paolo Visintin, Oriane Sarrasin, and Miles Hewstone. 2016, The Role of Intergroup Contact in Reducing Anti-Immigrant Sentiment: Does It Vary in Different National Contexts? European attitudes to immigration The British Academy conference, London, 16–17 Nov 2016.
- Visintin, Emilio Paolo, Eva G. T. Green, Juan Manuel Falomir-Pichastor, and Jacques Berent. 2016a, Il contatto intergruppi modera gli effetti delle norme anti-egalitarie sui pregiudizi, 14th Italian Association of Psychology Conference – Social Psychology Section, Napoli, 22 Sept 2016.
- Visintin, Emilio Paolo, Eva G. T. Green, Juan Manuel Falomir-Pichastor, and Jacques Berent. 2016b, Intergroup Contact Counteracts the Effects of Anti-Egalitarian Social Norms on Prejudice. 39th Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology, Warsaw, 14 July 2016.
- Visintin, Emilio Paolo, Eva G. T. Green, Juan Manuel Falomir-Pichastor, and Jacques Berent. 2016c, Le contact intergroupe modère les effets des normes sociales anti-égalitaires sur les préjugés, 11e Congrès International de Psychologie Sociale en Langue Française, Geneva, 29 June 2016.

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