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

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In Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe, members of the national majority are exposed to immigration in their everyday lives. Both the interactions one has with immigrants (the quality of these interactions, their frequency) as well as societal norms (shaped by legislation, policies, social climate, and media depictions) shape one's attitudes related to immigration. To understand and combat anti-immigration prejudice and discrimination, it is crucial to understand how such interactions and societal norms act in concert.

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#### Messages for Decision-Makers

- **Positive encounters with immigrants need to be encouraged as they foster tolerant attitudes and prevent the influence of exclusive and intolerant climates.**
- **Inclusive climates facilitate tolerant attitudes: tolerance can be promoted through awareness of diversity policies and anti-discrimination legislation, balanced communication of public opinion (e.g., debunking stereotypes depicted in media) and knowledge of inclusive authority stances towards immigration.**

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#### The Importance of Inclusive Normative Climates

The number of immigrants living in European countries, whether coming from outside or within Europe, is at an all-time high. At the same time, immigration continues to be a hot political topic frequently debated in Switzerland and throughout Europe. Encountering immigrants in one's everyday life (in public space, at work, etc.) and developing positive relationships with them (e.g., befriending immigrants) has been frequently proven to

curb negative attitudes towards immigrants. The society surrounding citizens conveys appropriate and acceptable ways of dealing with and thinking about immigration. This also plays an important role shaping individuals' attitudes towards immigration.

The underlying research question in this project is that the normative environment in which individuals are embedded shapes whether and how having contacts with immigrants affect attitudes towards them. Both being surrounded by people holding positive attitudes towards immigrants, and inclusive legislation and policies towards immigration, signal a tolerant normative climate. We studied whether inclusive climates enhance the relationship between contact and attitudes. Moreover, interactions with immigrants in everyday life can buffer the deleterious effects of an intolerant normative context to which individuals are exposed (e.g., restrictive legislation and policies or prejudice-prone attitudinal climate). Absence of contact, then, can increase the effects of an intolerant normative environment. While the influence of both normative climates and of contact on attitudes towards immigration have been amply demonstrated, the way these two factors act in concert to shape immigration attitudes has received hardly any attention.

Our research employed large-scales surveys in Switzerland and across European countries as well as experimental studies (i.e., systematically exposing participants to either egalitarian or anti-egalitarian norms). We provide evidence that positive and frequent contacts with and the presence of immigrants can buffer the deleterious impact of exclusive norms on attitudes towards immigrants, whereas the lack of contact with immigrants enhanced the effect of exclusive norms.

### **When Tolerant Integration Policies Improve Attitudes of the National Majority**

Inclusive migrant integration policies convey that a nation is tolerant regarding immigrants. One study was conducted comparing European countries and using country-level immigration policies to tap normative climate (assessed with the Migrant Integration Policy Index – MIPEX). Comparing 20 countries, we show that anti-immigration attitudes are weaker in countries where integration policies are inclusive rather than exclusive (controlling for economic factors and presence of immigrants in these countries). Importantly, the relationship between contact with immigrants and reduced anti-immigration stances is more prominent in countries where integration policies are inclusive rather than exclusive. In another study comparing 22 European countries, in turn, we found that identification with Europe was associated with lower anti-immigrant prejudice. This relationship was stronger in countries characterized by inclusive policies than in countries with more exclusive policies. These findings show the power of tolerant migrant integration policies in shaping the attitudes of national majorities.

### **Counteracting Exclusive Norms: The Beneficial Impact of Being Surrounded by Immigrants**

We were also interested in whether the presence of immigrants could counteract the deleterious effects of exclusive norms. Across Swiss districts (over 1000 Swiss citizens from 136 districts), we examined the interplay of an exclusive normative climate, measured by referenda results in previous years, and presence of immigrants in explaining endorsement of an ethnic based conception of Switzerland. Expression of the latter was, for example, the idea that to be truly Swiss one should have Swiss ancestry. We found that living in areas characterized by exclusive normative climates had less impact on individuals' endorsement of an ethnic conception of Switzerland when the presence of immigrants, in particular from Western European countries, was high.

### **Counteracting Exclusive Norms: When Interacting with Immigrants Helps**

Finally, we wanted to assess whether having interactions with immigrants could counteract the deleterious effects of exclusive norms. With a set of experimental studies conducted in Switzerland, we showed that positive contact experiences with immigrants is a protective factor against the negative effects of exposure to exclusive, anti-egalitarian norms. We systematically found that different forms of interactions with immigrants, such as having interaction experiences, positive experiences, or even merely imagining everyday encounters with immigrants, buffered the effects of exposure to exclusive norms on anti-immigration attitudes.

#### **Key Publications**

- Sarrasin, Oriane, Eva G. T. Green, Claudio Bolzman, Emilio Paolo Visintin, and Emanuele Politi. "Competition- and Identity-Based Opposition to Immigration among Individuals with and without an Immigrant Background." *International Review of Social Psychology* 31 no. 1 (2018).
- Visintin, Emilio Paolo, Eva G. T. Green, and Oriane Sarrasin. "Inclusive Normative Climates Strengthen the Relationship between Identification with Europe and Tolerant Immigration Attitudes: Evidence from 22 Countries." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 49, no. 6 (2018): 908-923.