Prejudice as a Response to Perceived Group Threat: Population Composition and Anti-Immigrant and Racial Prejudice in Europe

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Following the work of Blumer (1958), I extend and test a theory of prejudice based on perceived threats to dominant racial or national groups by subordinate groups. Perceived threat is hypothesized to be a function of economic conditions and of the size of the subordinate group relative to the dominant group. I test the group-threat theory using a multilevel model that combines population data with survey results on attitudes towards immigrants and racial minorities from Eurobarometer Survey 30. "Group threat" explains most of the variation in average prejudice scores across the 12 countries in the sample and has a small but statistically significant effect on the influence of certain individual-level variables on prejudice. These results demonstrate the importance of perceived intergroup threat in the formation of prejudicial attitudes and suggest a re-interpretation of past findings on the relations between individual characteristics and expressions of prejudice.

Largely because racial prejudice measures are widely available in sample surveys, the predominant research on prejudice has focused on the relations between demographic, social, and psychological characteristics and prejudicial attitudes. These studies usually view racial prejudice as resulting from individual propensities or experiences, or as an outcome of the relation between individuals in the dominant and subordinate groups. Although these studies have increased our understanding of individual-level predictors of prejudice, they are limited in their ability to explore group-level sources of prejudice.

I argue that the focus on individual characteristics and relations omits an important source of dominant-group prejudice: the perception by the dominant group that an outside group threatens their group's prerogatives. As described by Blumer (1958), prejudice is a response to threats to established group privileges, which are not necessarily linked to the individual interests of group members. I expand on Blumer's observations to develop a theory of prejudice toward outgroups based on collective threat. I propose that collective threat is a function of two factors: the numerical size of the subordinate group relative to the dominant group, and economic circumstances. This group-threat theory conceptualizes prejudice as a largely collective phenomenon in which individual attitudes are crucially affected by intergroup relations. I test this theory using a cross-national data set that includes both population and survey data from more than 11,000 respondents in 12 European countries.

In this study, I build upon previous work both empirically and theoretically. First, I develop a more explicit and complete model of the group-level causes of prejudice and relate prejudice to measures of the demographic and economic positions of the dominant and subordinate groups. Second, I gen-
generalize the model by examining the association between prejudice and threat in a multinational context and by measuring two types of prejudice: anti-immigrant prejudice and racial prejudice. Finally, I test the importance of group threat by employing representative survey data and aggregate demographic statistics. The data are analyzed using multi-level models that disentangle individual and group-level influences on prejudice and that provide more accurate inference statistics than do the regression models more typically employed.

THEORIES OF PREJUDICE

For my purposes, prejudice against a group is "antipathy accompanied by a faulty generalization" (Pettigrew 1980:821). Prejudice is characterized by irrationality (a faulty generalization) and emotional evaluation (antipathy). There are both individual-level and group-level theories of prejudice.

Individual-Level Theories of Racial Prejudice

The literature on causes of racial prejudice branches into three streams: social-psychological approaches, studies of individual correlates of prejudice, and self-interest based theories.¹ I do not suggest that these approaches are wrong; nor do I intend to provide a comprehensive review. But I do wish to point out that none of these theories provides a complete explanation of prejudice, and thus, to lay a foundation for distinguishing individual and group-level theories of prejudice.

Social-psychological approaches view racial prejudice as resulting from individual emotional and/or cognitive processes that are beyond completely conscious control. This research has explored causes of prejudice as the psychological displacement of fear or anxiety onto others (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears 1939), a form of psycho pathology resulting from personality orientations developed in childhood (Adorno Frankel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanfor 1950), or an expression of stereotypical beliefs resulting from cognitive limitations and distortions in attribution (Hoffman and Hurs 1990). Numerous social-psychological experiments support the operation of these processes (for a brief review, see Olson and Zanna 1993:141–45).

A second stream of research focuses on individual correlates of racial prejudice in attitude surveys. Typically, this approach uses statistical techniques to associate the answers to questions about racial attitudes with individual characteristics such as education level or age. The results of these studies are generally consistent: People from the working class, from older cohorts, and who have less education² express more prejudice (Maykovich 1975; Hyman, Wright, and Reed 1975; Case, Greely, and Fuchs 1989). A related literature investigates the correlates of the related concepts of tolerance and support for civil liberties (Stouffer 1955; Sullivan, Pierson, and Marcus 1982).

The final individual-level theory of racial prejudice, self-interest theory, postulates that individuals develop negative affects and rigid stereotypes toward individuals with whom they are in competition and conflict. Because individuals are seen to develop prejudices that further their own self interest, self-interest theories are related to rational-choice perspectives. Probably the most familiar example for sociologists is split labor-market theory (Bonacich 1972). The empirical evidence on prejudice, however, demonstrates only a weak link between individual interests and prejudice. Several studies document that dominant group members whose individual interests (economic or otherwise) are not directly threatened by an opposing group are often as likely to express racial prejudice as are those whose economic interests are directly threatened (for a review, see Sears and

¹ An additional stream of prominent research on prejudice in the United States argues that, since the 1960s, prejudice has been increasingly expressed symbolically rather than directly (Kinder and Sears 1981). It is not clear if these arguments apply to Europe. I deal here with manifest prejudice.

² There is considerable debate over the interpretation of the link between education and prejudicial attitudes toward racial minorities (Jackman 1978; Jackman and Muha 1984), but for my purposes the precise cause of the education-prejudice link is unimportant.
Funk 1991). For instance, Bobo (1983) finds that parents with school-aged children are not any more likely to oppose busing than people without school-aged children. Other studies document a weak link between individual interests and support for government policies, such as bilingual education, taxes and spending, guaranteed government employment, programs to promote gender equality in the workplace, and national health insurance (Sears and Funk 1991:23–25). Dominant group members may express a desire for immigration restrictions or espouse prejudicial attitudes, even though they may profit from the lower production costs resulting from the employment of low-wage immigrants. Thus, self-interest theories cannot explain the existence of prejudice among individuals whose interests are not directly in conflict with the subordinate group.

A problem with all three individual-level explanations of racial prejudice is that they do little to explain the extensive variation in prejudice across different regions and time periods. Middleton (1976), for instance, finds that after controlling for a host of individual-level variables, the large observed difference in racial prejudice between the northern and southern United States remains unexplained. Yet these cross-regional variations in prejudice are probably at least as important to study as the sources of prejudice among individuals. Prejudice causes the most damage when a dominant national or racial group institutionalizes discrimination. While all individual-level theories provide interesting insights and often correctly identify variables that influence prejudice, none offers a complete explanation because group-level variables are ignored.

**Group-Level Theories of Racial Prejudice**

A few theories of prejudice emphasize group-level causes, although they are less explored than individual-level theories. In particular, several theories explore threats to the dominant group by the subordinate group as a cause of prejudice. One of the earliest versions of this theory is Blumer’s (1958, henceforward Blumer).

In his paper, “Racial Prejudice as a Function of Group Position,” Blumer claims that racial prejudice by the dominant group is the result of collective threat. Prejudice emerges as groups develop a sense of their social position relative to one another. Blumer outlines four “feelings” among members of the dominant group that lead to racial prejudice: (1) a feeling of superiority, (2) a feeling that the subordinate race is intrinsically different and alien, (3) a feeling of proprietary claim to certain areas of privilege and advantage, and (4) a fear and suspicion that the subordinate race harbors designs on the prerogatives of the dominant race.

Blumer argues that the dominant group develops the view that certain resources belong exclusively to them—a sense of group position, in Blumer’s terms. A sense of group position grows out of a history of unequal power relations between groups. Prejudice is a defensive reaction against explicit or (usually) implicit challenges to the dominant group’s exclusive claim to privileges. This is not to say that all members of the dominant group respond to a challenge with prejudice. Members of the dominant group do share a sense of group membership and of their group’s position relative to the subordinate group. The greater the sense of threat to their prerogatives, the more likely are members of the dominant group to express prejudice against threatening outsiders. I refer to this theory as *group-threat theory*, because it emphasizes the perception of threat to dominant group prerogatives.³

³An almost identical theory was developed independently by Vanneman and Pettigrew (1972), which is sometimes referred to as *fraternal-deprivation*. Vanneman and Pettigrew’s research found that survey questions asking about feelings of fraternal deprivation (or threats) against Whites as a group were stronger predictors of voting behavior in the 1972 Los Angeles mayoral election than were feelings of individual threat.
result, prejudice in the dominant group is a response to collective threats against the real interests of the dominant racial group, rather than to perceptions of group interests that may have no connection to any real group interest.

In support of group-threat theory, Bobo (1983) and Bobo and Kluegel (1993) argue that Whites support the principle of equality more than they do race-targeted policies to achieve racial equality because race-targeted polices are particularly threatening to Whites. Although I follow Blumer’s description of the forces underlying collective threat, I do not attempt to adjudicate between realistic and perceived group threats.4

SOURCES OF THREAT

The group-level theories discussed above relate perceived threat and prejudice, but they do not explore the causes of perceived threat. I explore two causes of prejudice that are often thought to act through perceived group threat: relative size of the subordinate group and economic circumstances.

Relative Size of the Subordinate Group and Perceived Threat

Sociologists have long speculated that prejudice and discrimination increase as the relative size of the subordinate group increases. This position is thoroughly developed by Blalock (1956, 1957, 1967), who stresses the consequences of minority group size for discrimination and prejudice. Blalock (1967) outlines two reasons for a connection between intergroup threat and prejudice: First, competition for scarce resources increases with the relative size of the minority group to the dominant group; second, since numbers are a potential resource for political mobilization, group size can increase the potential for political mobilization and result in a greater threat to the dominant group.

Using U.S. data, a number of studies demonstrate a link between the percent of a city or county’s population that is Black and racial inequality (Blalock 1956; Frisbie and Neidert 1977; Wilcox and Roof 1978). Yet these studies do not conclusively support the relation between increased size of the subordinate group and increased discrimination. As pointed out by Semyonov, Hoyt, and Scott (1984), the level of observed inequality between groups is a function of several factors, only one of which is discrimination. Thus, a positive correlation between subordinate group population size and racial inequality does not necessarily indicate that subordinate group size and discrimination by the majority group are linked. For example, if a labor market is racially split so that Blacks hold only peripheral sector jobs, then an increase in percent Black could lead to greater competition for peripheral sector jobs, and cause a decline in wages and a corresponding increase in racial inequality—with no increase in discrimination. Even if the link between discrimination and percent

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Discrimination may therefore be maintained by a series of uncoordinated though similar individual acts no one of which has more than short-run significance... In most Northern cities the Marxian thesis of a conscious and highly rational plot on the part of entire White group would simply not apply. In a very real sense, the dominant Whites do not act as a group at all. (P. 160)
Black is established, this does not necessarily imply a link to racial prejudice: Discrimination can be based on nonprejudicial rationales, such as statistical discrimination by employers based on productivity-related characteristics. The relation between prejudice and discrimination is too complex to draw conclusions about prejudice from studies of discriminatory behavior that do not measure prejudice separately.

Few studies, however, have attempted to directly relate relative size of the minority group and levels of prejudice. A handful of studies using aggregate data find that anti-Black attitudes are more pronounced in cities or regions with larger Black populations (Pettigrew 1957; Giles 1977). These studies, however, suffer from a lack of individual-level controls in their analyses that make ambiguous their results regarding group or individual-level processes. To the best of my knowledge, only one study includes individual-level controls and percent Black in predicting prejudice. Fossett and Kiecolt (1989) regress measures of anti-Black attitudes on percent Black in the local area and on individual-level variables. They find that anti-Black prejudice is positively related to the percent of the population that is Black.

Economic Conditions and Perceived Threat

A second hypothesis sometimes advanced regarding racial prejudice is that racial discrimination and racial prejudice are closely related to economic conditions. Many have speculated on this connection, although little research has been done. Blalock (1967:184-86) sees improved economic conditions as a possible source of improved relations between Whites and Blacks in the United States. Similarly, Kinloch (1974) describes the importance of economic improvement to improved race relations in his historical description of racial progress in the United States. Tienhaara (1974) finds that Canadian opposition to immigration grew during periods of economic recession. Schissel, Wanner, and Frideres (1989), on the other hand, find only a weak relation between city-level rates of unemployment and individual attitudes toward immigrants.6

It is usually argued that the link between economic circumstances and prejudice results from either blaming the subordinate group for economic hardship (scapegoating), or from competition with the subordinate group for scarce resources. Although either scapegoating or competition can occur between individuals, the collective threat interpretation implies that a worsening of economic circumstances among some dominant group members should increase prejudice among all group members, not only among those directly in competition with immigrants. When dominant group members perceive their economic circumstances as precarious, they fear they will lose their economic advantages over the subordinate group; when economic circumstances improve, the corresponding reduction in perceived competition decreases group feelings of threat.

Threat in the Context of European Immigrants

Although most of the theories presented above were proposed in the context of U.S. race relations, they can be generalized to explain prejudice against racial groups elsewhere and minority groups based on characteristics other than race. I apply these ideas to both racial and anti-immigrant prejudice in Europe.

I study immigrants and racial minorities in the 12 countries of the European Economic Community (EEC). There is considerable diversity among these 12 countries in their racial, economic, and social makeup. Immigrants from non-EEC countries into the EEC, however, are fairly homogeneous in their motives for immigration: The majority migrate to improve their economic circum-

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5 I am indebted to an ASR reviewer for bringing this study to my attention. Fossett and Kiecolt's (1989) regression specification is equivalent, as shall be discussed more below, to an entirely fixed specification of group effects (see note 17).

6 This hypothesis has also been explored in the literature on causes of ethnic conflict. Olzak (1992), for instance, finds that any sudden change in economic conditions increases ethnic group mobilization.
stances; some come to stay, while others intend to return to their home country (Castles and Kosack 1973; Kramer 1980; Castles 1989). As a result, (1) migrants go in larger numbers to the wealthier economies, and (2) migrants are usually in direct economic competition with low-wage earners and manual laborers, as most immigrants are employed in manual labor (Castles 1989).

The wealthier the population of a country, then, the smaller the percentage of its population that is likely to be in competition with immigrants, because wealthy countries have fewer citizens employed in manual-labor occupations. The jobs most immigrants from non-EEC countries compete for are likely to be low-wage, low-skill jobs that most citizens, especially in the wealthier European countries, prefer to avoid. Immigrants to Greece or Portugal, say, are likely to have the skills to compete for jobs with many citizens. In West Germany, on the other hand, few citizens are likely to be in direct economic competition with immigrants, because few immigrants have the skills to compete for the jobs held by most German citizens. Thus, economic circumstances affect perceived threat by influencing the degree of potential economic conflict between the dominant and subordinate groups.

Both economic circumstances and subordinate group size, then, are expected to affect perceived threats to the dominant groups. The group-threat theory offers no clear prediction about whether the effect of subordinate group size and economic conditions will be additive or multiplicative. A multiplicative effect is entirely possible, because a dominant group facing both large numbers of immigrants and difficult economic circumstances might be particularly hostile toward immigrants. The degree of hostility expressed could then be more than a linear combination of these two factors; one factor may tend to intensify the effect of the other. I test this possibility below.

7 For the 12 countries of the EEC, the correlation between gross domestic product and percent of the population employed in occupations likely to be affected by immigrant labor is -.73. Occupations considered affected by immigrant labor are those labeled by the Eurobarometer as “manual,” “skilled manual,” “farming,” or “fishing” occupations.

**Threat and Individual Characteristics**

Individual characteristics can interact with macrolevel variables. Lieberson (1980:374–76) postulates that latent dispositions carried by individuals are increasingly expressed as discrimination when the subordinate group grows in size. Similarly, when a racial or national group is threatened, certain characteristics indicate which individuals are more likely to respond with prejudice. Threat and the effect of individual characteristics on expressions of prejudice, then, are not completely separate.

Individual-level characteristics indicate in part which individuals are most vulnerable to expressing prejudice when they perceive that their group is threatened. Individuals with particular characteristics may feel threats particularly acutely because the threats affect them more directly, or they may be under psychological influences that make them more likely to express prejudice when they perceive threats. Thus, I also investigate whether the strength of relations between individual-level characteristics and the expression of prejudice varies with the level of perceived threat faced by the dominant group.

**THEORY AND HYPOTHESES**

**Theoretical Framework**

My approach combines theoretical ideas from Blumer (1958), Blalock (1956, 1957, 1967), and Lieberson (1980) and rests on four main tenets:

1. Following Blumer, I conceptualize racial prejudice as the result of a feeling by the dominant group that their prerogatives are threatened by the subordinate group. Prejudice is, then, a response to perceived threat.

2. Following Blalock, I see the size of the subordinate group relative to the dominant group as a major demographic cause of perceived threat. A large subordinate group is perceived as a greater threat to the group prerogatives of the dominant group than is a small subordinate group.

3. Again following Blalock (and others), out-groups are more threatening when the economic situation of a host country is precarious. The worse the economic circumstances are, the more threatened is the domi-
natt group and the more prejudice will be expressed. This is because dominant group members fear that their group's economic advantage will be damaged through competition with the subordinate group. This fear increases when poor economic conditions increase competition for scarce resources. In Europe, wealth tends to decrease the competition for jobs and resources between immigrants and the host society.

(4) Specific individual-level characteristics predict which individuals are most at risk for developing prejudicial attitudes when their group prerogatives are threatened. The more the dominant group is threatened, then, the stronger the association between some specific characteristics and prejudice.

In contrast to individual-level theories of prejudice, this four-part model does not conceptualize prejudice as the result of competition between individuals in the dominant group and individuals in the subordinate group. As described above, prior research demonstrates only a weak link between threats to individuals and prejudice. Rather, it is the collective feeling that the dominant group is threatened that leads to prejudice against the subordinate group. This group-threat theory highlights the crucial importance of a notion of "our" race or nationality and the "other" race or nationality in the formation of prejudice. To borrow Anderson's (1981) term, the "imagined community" of the nation or the racial group are primary social identities through which prejudices against outsiders are formed.

**Hypotheses**

The group-threat theory suggests two hypotheses that I test in this paper:

H₁: Prejudice is a function of the perceived threat the subordinate group poses to the dominant group. Perceived threat is influenced both by the economic situation faced by the dominant group and by the size of the subordinate group relative to the dominant group. The effects may be additive or interactive.

H₂: Individual-level prejudice emerges when the perceived threat posed by the subordinate group is greater. That is, specific individual-level characteristics are more strongly associated with prejudice in settings where a higher proportion of the population belongs to the subordinate group and where the economic circumstances are worse.

A word is due about the unit of measure: countries. Why not cities or even smaller geographic regions? Countries are convenient; many more comparable statistics are available for countries than for cities or other collectivities. But I have a theoretical justification as well—countries are important cultural, political, and economic units. People develop their senses of threat with, as Blumer says, a history of their own group and of the other group within national boundaries. Given the predominance of national product brands, media, labor pools, and languages, the "people of a nation" is the most likely reference group when evaluating intergroup relations in Europe.