

Personal Threat, Collective Threat and Discriminatory Attitudes: The Case of Foreign Workers in Israel

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Introduction

Social scientists have long been interested in understanding sources and causes of discriminatory attitudes, hostility and prejudice toward out-group populations and the mechanisms underlying the emergence of such sentiments. Consequently, a variety of alternative theoretical models have been advanced in the literature to explain why members of the majority population hold discriminatory attitudes toward out-group populations and why they are willing to deny subordinate minority groups from equal access to social, political and economic rights (e.g. Blumer 1958, Fetzner 2000, Schnapper 1994). The alternative theoretical explanations range from racism or symbolic racism to authoritarian personality, to right wing mobilization and to competitive threat, to name but a few (for a detailed discussion of the alternative theoretical models, see Wimmer 1997). Although these alternative explanations are not necessarily contradictory or mutually exclusive, each emphasizes a different mechanism underlying the emergence of prejudice, discrimination and hostility, and each has received some empirical confirmation and support.

The present paper confines its discussion and analysis to the 'competitive threat model' and examines the role played by fear of competition and by perception of threat in producing anti-minority sentiment. Thus, first, we shall outline the basic logic embodied in the 'competitive threat' model as discussed in previous studies; second, propose a typology that distinguishes between two types of threat (i.e. individual threat and collective threat) and delineate the mechanisms through which threat and fear of competition affect anti-minority sentiment; third, examine the model with data obtained from Israeli society, and finally discuss the findings and their meaning in the light of the competitive threat theoretical model.

Theoretical Considerations and Expectations

According to the 'competitive threat' model a growing presence of an out-group ethnic minority is likely to increase competition over social, political and economic resources with members of the majority population. Threat of competition, in turn, whether actual or perceived, is likely to increase negative sentiments, prejudice and antagonism toward members of the out-group population (e.g. Blalock 1967). The logic embodied in this model contends that once members of the majority group feel that a minority population poses a threat to their interests, rights and prerogatives they develop negative sentiments toward the minority population and endorse discriminatory and exclusionary actions toward this group (e.g. Scheepers et al. 2002; Raijman et al. 2003) even when such actions may be counter-productive to their own interests (Semyonov et al. 2002).

In other words, the major tenet in the competition model holds that members of the majority hold a zero sum view of their relations with other populations and that their views toward out-group populations should be understood in terms of group identification. These views are shaped by the struggle over control of power, resources, rewards and collective identity with other groups. From this perspective prejudice attitudes toward an out-group population should be viewed as a defensive reaction to threats and challenges, whether real or perceived, posed to members of the majority group's exclusive superiority in access to resources, rights, prerogatives, and privileges.

The competitive threat model has been applied in a variety of countries to examine the thesis that threat, whether real or perceived, is likely to increase discriminatory attitudes toward an out-group population (Scheepers et al. 2002, Semyonov et al. 2004). All researchers in this tradition operate under the premise that individuals who are socially and economically vulnerable are more threatened by competition generated by minority population in the labor market, the housing market, and in society at large. Hence, they are more likely to express hostile attitudes toward the out-group population. Subsequently, the body of research on the topic has examined the impact of socio-economic, demographic and socio-psychological attributes of individuals belonging to the majority population on attitudes toward the out-group population. These studies have lent considerable support to the thesis that vulnerable populations express more antagonistic attitudes toward immigrants and ethnic minorities (Semyonov et al. 2004; Raijman et al, 2003). More specifically,

researchers have repeatedly observed that individuals with low income and/or low education, as well as the unemployed and the elderly populations, are more likely to express negative attitudes toward out-group populations.

Discriminatory attitudes toward out-group population may also be a result of a threat posed by the out-group population to the collective identity of the majority population, regardless of the threat to the personal interests of individuals. That is, in many cases a presence of an out-group population (e.g. an ethnic or religious minority) may be viewed as constituting a threat to the national, ethnic or cultural homogeneity of society (Schnapper 1994; Fetzer 2000) as well to the social and economic well-being of the society as a whole. According to this view, individuals who hold conservative (i.e. political, cultural or religious) ideologies are likely to develop antagonistic attitudes toward the minority group even if they are not personally threatened by the presence of the minority group population. Indeed, studies on this issue have found that individuals with a conservative political ideology, and religious people, are more likely than others to express negative and exclusionary views toward an out-group population (e.g. Rajzman et al. 2003, Semyonov et al. 2008)

Whereas the literature on the subject has become substantial, researchers have only seldom distinguished between two types of threat (for a recent notable exception see Rosenstein (2008) who made a distinction between threat to interests of the individual and threat to interest of the collective). In this article we propose a typology that classifies threat into distinct categories based on combining personal threat and collective threat. Specifically, four groups are distinguished: those who feel threatened both personally and collectively (consistently threatened); those who are personally threatened but do not think that their collective is threatened (personally threatened); those who do not sense personal threat but believe that their collective is threatened (collectively threatened); and those who do not sense threat either personally or to their collective (consistently unthreatened).

Following the theoretical rationale of the competitive threat model we expect negative views toward the out-group to rise in the cases of both a sense of personal threat and a sense of threat to the collective. The greater the sense of threat the more pronounced would be the negative attitudes toward the minority population. In line with this logic we further expect that those who sense threat both to their personal interests and to the interests of the collective would be the most antagonistic toward

the out-group population, and those who are neither threatened at the individual-level nor view a threat to the collective would be the least antagonistic toward the out-group population. Indeed, we expect personal threat and collective threat to mediate the relations between socio-economic and demographic attributes of individuals and attitudes toward the out-group population. In what follows we put these expectations to test using data on attitudes toward 'foreign-workers' in Israeli society.

The setting – Israel

Israel is a multi-ethnic society inhabited by Jewish immigrants who arrived from practically every corner of the globe and Arabs who have lived in the region for generations. In recent decades, however, Israel has become a destination for global labor migrants who have begun replacing Palestinian workers from the West Bank and Gaza mostly in menial manual jobs that the local population is reluctant to perform. They are not permanent residents of Israel. Nor can they become citizens. They comprise about 10 percent of the Israeli work force and are viewed by citizens as the most disadvantaged out-group population (Rajjman, 2010). In the analysis that follows we will examine attitudes of the Jewish population toward this out-group population and whether such attitudes are shaped and formed by perceptions of personal and collective threat. We will also study whether such perceptions mediate the relations between socio-demographic attributes of individuals and hostile attitudes toward the out-group population.

Data and Variables

The data for the present analysis were obtained from an attitudinal survey regarding worker groups administered to a representative sample of Israeli adults. The research population was limited to 668 Jewish citizens aged 24-60 who were born in Israel or who immigrated to Israel prior to 1989. Thus, the research population represents members of the dominant group in Israeli society. The demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of respondents included in the analysis are those traditionally used as predictors of attitude towards minority groups. They are: age (in years), gender (male=1), marital status (married=1), education (academic degree=1), monthly income (in New Israeli Shekels), labor force position (a set of dummy variables distinguishing white collar, blue collar, not in the active labor force and

unemployed), political orientation (in 5 ordinal categories, with left-wing orientation=1) and level of religiosity (orthodox and religious=1).

The main dependent variable in the analysis – prejudice against foreign workers – is measured on a 1 to 7 scale and represents averaged respondents' extent of agreement with five statements attributing negative characteristics to foreign workers (exact wording of the items are presented in Appendix A). Perceived threat at individual level is based on respondent's extent of agreement with the following sentence: 'Foreign workers can hurt welfare services which you are entitled to'. Perceived threat at group level is based on respondents' extent of agreement with the following sentence: 'Foreign workers are a strain on the welfare services system'. Both types of threats are measured on a 1 to 7 scale.

Analysis and Findings

Descriptive Overview

Starting with the characteristics of the population, the average age of the respondents in the sample is 41.7 years. The sample consists of 44 per cent men and 55 percent women; 26 percent of respondents define themselves as religious people and 31 percent of respondents have had an academic education. The mean value of the political orientation variable (3.56 on a 1 to 5 scale) demonstrates that more Israelis hold right-wing political ideologies than left-wing political ideologies. Four percent of the respondents are unemployed, while 45 and 19 percent of the respondents are engaged in white collar and blue collar occupations, respectively.

The data presented in the Appendix reveal that prejudice against foreign workers is quite widespread among Israeli Jewish citizens. For example, about a third of the interviewees feel that foreign workers are suited to manual labor only and that they bring diseases to the country. One of every five interviewees attributes violent tendencies to foreign workers and only a slightly smaller proportion of the interviewees feel aversion or discomfort in the presence of foreign workers. In addition, descriptive statistics show that around 40 per cent of Israeli citizens feel that foreign workers pose a threat to their collective interests in the welfare services system, while 30 per cent feel that foreign workers threaten their personal interests in this area. Indeed, the level of collective perceived threat expressed by Israelis is higher than the level of personal perceived threat.

It is important to note that individual threat and collective threat are strongly inter-related. The correlation between the two indicators of threat reaches $r = .0.7$. That is, respondents who tend to express threat to the welfare of the collective are more likely to report threat at the personal level. Likewise, those who do not feel threatened at the personal level are less likely to express threat at the collective level. This is clearly reflected by the distribution of the population across the four-fold typology we propose in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

Following the theoretical logic presented at the outset of the paper, for the purpose of illustration, we distinguish between four categories: Those who feel threatened both at the personal level and at the collective level (consistently threatened); those who do not express threat either at the personal level or at the collective level (consistently unthreatened); those who are threatened as individuals but do not sense threat to the collective (personally- threatened); and those who do not feel threat to their personal interest but sense that the out-group population poses a threat to the collective (collectively-threatened).

The data displayed in Table 1 reveal that over half of the Israeli population (57.6%) is consistently unthreatened by competition generated by the out-group population and over one quarter (25.1%) is consistently threatened by such competition. Only a negligible portion of the population (4.4%) feels that foreign workers pose a threat to their personal welfare but do not pose a threat to the collective. However, almost 13% of Israelis report that foreign workers, although not being a source of competitive threat to them at the personal level, are a source of threat to the welfare of their collective.

Multivariate Analysis

In table 2 we examine whether and to what extent a sense of competitive threat affects prejudice toward out-group populations. To this end we estimate a series of five regression equations predicting prejudice toward foreign workers in Israel. In equation 1 we let prejudice be a function of individuals' socio-demographic attributes. In equations 2 and 3, respectively, we add personal and collective threat to the predictors of prejudice to examine their net impact on prejudice and whether they mediate the relations between socio-demographic attributes of individuals and prejudice toward foreign workers. In equation 4 both personal threat and collective

threat are included in the set of predictors, and in equation 5 we also include an interaction term between personal threat and collective threat to examine whether the typology distinguishing between consistently threatened individuals and consistently unthreatened individuals affects prejudice beyond individual level threat and collective level threat.

Table 2 about here

The coefficients of equation 1 suggest that prejudice is significantly affected by three variables: religiosity, political orientation and education. More specifically, prejudice toward an out-group population is likely to be higher among religious persons and among persons holding a right-wing political ideology. Prejudice, however, is likely to be lower among academically educated individuals. Personal threat exerts a significant strong and positive effect on prejudice in equation 2 and collective threat exerts a significant positive strong effect on prejudice in equation 3; implying that prejudice is likely to increase with either personal or collective threat. Threat, however, does not fully mediate the relations between either education or political orientation and prejudice. When threat is included in the set of predictors (whether in equation 2 or in equation 3) the impact of political orientation on prejudice has hardly changed, the impact of education has decreased by a quarter; the effect of religiosity, however, has substantially declined and become statistically insignificant.

The data revealed by equation 4 firmly support previous findings and the hypothesis that both individual threat and collective threat affect prejudice. Both variables exert net significant impact on prejudice toward out-group populations. However, the interaction term between the two types of threat suggest that consolidation of these two types does not increase prejudice to a higher level than either of the two types of threat (as evidenced by the negative coefficient of the interaction term). Apparently, while each type of threat is likely to increase prejudice, the 'consistently threatened' versus 'the consistently unthreatened' typology proposed here does not increase prejudice to a higher level than each type of threat.

Conclusions

In the present paper we proposed a typology that distinguishes between two types of threat (personal threat and collective threat) and examined the extent to

which these two types exert differential effects on prejudice. The data reveal that although personal threat and collective threat are highly correlated, each exerts a significant effect on prejudice – the higher the sense of threat, (whether to the welfare of the individuals or to the welfare of their collective), the greater the prejudice toward the out-group population. Typology that examines the combination between the two types of threat does not reveal that those who are threatened both at the personal level and at the collective level are more prejudiced than others. According to the data presented here the impact of threat on prejudice can be understood within an additive model (where each type of threat exerts a net effect on an increase in prejudice) and not within an interactive model (where the combination of the two types of threat generates an increase in prejudice). Nevertheless, the hypothesis that those who are consistently threatened are more likely to express the highest levels of prejudice should not be flatly rejected. We recommend that this hypothesis is further tested and examined in other social contexts and with other data sets.

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Table 1: Distribution of the Israeli majority group population across the four-fold typology of perceived threat (% , n=641)

		Personal level perceived threat	
		Threatened	Not threatened
Collective level perceived threat	Threatened	25.1	12.9
	Not threatened	4.4	57.6

Table 2: Linear regression model coefficients (standard errors) predicting prejudice toward foreign workers in Israel

	1	2	3	4	5
Constant	2.11	1.67	1.65	1.57	1.19
Men	-0.099 (0.123)	-0.114 (0.118)	-0.117 (0.119)	-0.111 (0.117)	-0.094 (0.117)
Married	0.194 (0.131)	0.197 (0.125)	0.139 (0.126)	0.152 (0.125)	0.169 (0.124)
Age	0.008 (0.005)	0.009+ (0.005)	0.008 (0.005)	0.009+ (0.005)	0.010* (0.05)
Religious	0.311* (0.157)	0.280+ (0.151)	0.166 (0.154)	0.199 (0.152)	0.159 (0.152)
Political orientation	0.259* (0.054)	0.225* (0.053)	0.218* (0.053)	0.212* (0.052)	0.217* (0.052)
Unemployed ^a	0.572 (0.340)	0.351 (0.325)	0.344 (0.327)	0.301 (0.322)	0.277 (0.321)
Not in the active labor force ^a	0.094 (0.181)	-0.079 (0.174)	0.034 (0.175)	-0.064 (0.174)	-0.055 (0.173)
White collar occupations ^a	-0.223 (0.176)	-0.276 (0.168)	-0.252 (0.170)	-0.219 (0.167)	-0.262 (0.167)
Academic education	-0.400* (0.138)	-0.331* (0.132)	-0.359* (0.133)	-0.317* (0.131)	-0.327* (0.130)
Individual level threat	---	0.174* (0.027)	---	0.120* (0.036)	0.282* (0.076)
Group level threat	---	--	0.179* (0.026)	0.093* (0.036)	0.178* (0.050)
Individual level threat X Group Level Threat	---	--	---	---	-0.033* (0.014)
R square	0.152	0.213	0.210	0.224	0.232

a. omitted category is blue collar occupations

*p<0.05

+ The coefficient on the border of significance (p=0.065)

Appendix A: Definition and descriptive statistics for the dependent variable

	Definition The variable was measured on a 1-7 scale (1= absolutely agree, 7=absolutely disagree)	Per cent of responses from 5 to 7
Prejudice (Generalization of negative characteristics)	1) I feel aversion or discomfort in the presence of foreign workers	17.4%
	2) Foreign workers in Israel are only fit for unskilled work (manual labor); they cannot manage in other kinds of work that require a higher level of skills	31.2%
	3) Foreign workers bring diseases	28.1%
	4) Foreign workers have a tendency toward violence	20.5%
	5) Foreign workers do not mind living in substandard living conditions	52.2%