When the Majority Becomes the Minority

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In his 1970 recording "Space Captain," Joe Cocker sent out a message of cross-cultural peace when he sang the lyrics "learning to live together 'til we die."

Recent social research indicates that coexistence with our out-groups has never been more critical. The United Kingdom is on track to become the most ethnically mixed country in the Western world in fewer than 40 years, according to the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford. In fact, Whites are now a minority in London, according to UK census figures.

The foreign-born populations in cities like Amsterdam, Singapore, Sydney, and Toronto range from 40%–50%. And the US Census Bureau projects that the national population of non-White racial groups will exceed that of Whites before the middle of this century.

With rising immigration and declining birth rates, we are indeed witnessing a seismic shift in the ethnic and cultural makeup of many nations in the developed world. Racial and ethnic majorities are slowly transitioning toward minority-group status. In the United States, Canada, and parts of Europe, Whites may still comprise the single largest racial group, but their numbers are on the verge of shrinking below the combined populations of other ethnic groups.

Although some embrace the concept of racial and cultural diversity, large pockets of people in the traditional majorities are far more averse to it. A British government survey, for example, indicated that almost a third of White Britons believe ethnic minorities receive preferential treatment, even though unemployment among minority groups remains disproportionately high. In Greece and Spain, animosity toward foreign-born residents — particularly Muslims — has been stoked by massive unemployment. And many Singaporeans have been complaining about foreign workers putting a strain on housing, jobs, and infrastructure.

Several psychological theories — including power threat theory, first proposed by Hubert Blalock in 1960 — have attempted to explore the deepest drivers of the resistance to these demographic shifts. Expanding on Herbert Blumer's theory that racial prejudice arises from the way racial groups view themselves in relation to other groups rather than individual feelings or attitudes, the power threat theory posits that the majority group perceives a threat to its hold on economic, political, and even cultural resources when a minority group's size increases.

Fears About Status

According to power threat theory, the majority responds to these status threats by creating or tightening state control in racialized ways; one example is the support for intensifying immigration laws. In the United States, that support primarily has targeted Mexicans. In Europe, it has focused significantly on Muslims — now fueled by Islamic extremists' recent terrorist attacks in Paris.

How might these intergroup dynamics change once a historically dominant ethnic group no longer constitutes a majority?

To examine the effect this shift may have on White Americans' racial attitudes, Maureen Craig of New York University and Past APS Board Member Jennifer Richeson of Northwestern University set up an experiment to determine whether making this majority–minority shift salient to White participants would increase their pro-White and/or antiminority feelings. They first primed participants with either an article about the aforementioned Census Bureau's projections or an article about *current* racial demographics, then measured subjects' explicit racial bias with the Evaluative Bias Scale. They also

used Implicit Association Tests to measure implicit racial bias and found that subjects primed with the information about the impending majority–minority shift exhibited greater implicit pro-White and antiminority biases, compared with control subjects to whom projected increases in the ethnic minority populations in another country (the Netherlands) were made salient.

"These findings suggest that rather than ushering in a more tolerant future, the increasing diversity of the nation may actually yield more intergroup hostility," the authors wrote.

To test the potential repercussions of these demographic changes on overall political views, Craig and Richeson conducted another study in which White American participants read a text either about the US majority–minority shift or about a shift toward increased geographic mobility. They found that participants who read about the impending majority–minority racial demographics expressed support for more conservative policies than did those who read about geographic mobility — even on race-neutral issues, such as the environment — and were more likely to identify as conservative.

Changing Archetypes

Some of this effect may be rooted in the threat that shifting demographics pose to a nation's prototypicality. The label "all-American," for example, emerged in the 1930s as a descriptor bestowed only on those in the White majority. What does it mean to be all-American when Whites no longer represent that majority?

Psychological scientists Felix Danbold and Yuen J. Huo of the University of California, Los Angeles, explored this question in a study published in 2015. Across two studies involving White American adults recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk, they asked participants questions designed to measure their attitudes toward ethnic diversity and cultural assimilation. In Study 1, participants indicated the extent to which they expected the racial makeup of the US population to change between the present and 2050. They also were asked to rate their feelings about their status as prototypical Americans and about how much other ethnic groups should adopt American values. As they expected, Danbold and Huo found that Whites who viewed their racial group as prototypically American, and who felt threatened by their numerical decline in the population, were the most resistant to diversity and were most likely to want people from other cultures to assimilate.

In a second experiment, also employing Mechanical Turk, Danbold and Huo found that simply showing White participants information about their relative population decrease lowered their endorsement of diversity — especially when they viewed their status as prototypical Americans as under threat.

Studies in other industrialized countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Russia, and Australia, have shown that the more people perceive an increase in the number of foreigners moving into their borders, the greater the antiforeigner sentiments they express.

For example, psychological researchers Daniel Johnson, of the Queensland University of Technology, Australia, and Deborah J. Terry and Winnifred R. Louis, of the University of Queensland, Australia, found similar reactions among Australian Whites toward Asians. The scientists recruited 255 White adults and had them complete questionnaires designed to measure their feelings about obedience, discipline, and conformity and their perceptions of Asian Australians. They also had the participants rate

the status of White Australians compared with Asian Australians. Results showed that the higher White Australians scored on authoritarian beliefs, the more signs of prejudice they showed toward Asian Australians. But of particular significance was that Whites who viewed their status as high but unstable and porous showed the strongest anti-Asian bias, particularly when they felt their privileged position to be deserved.

A Matter of Resources

Anxiety over economic resources can be heard in calls for immigration restriction, which are often invoked alongside the specter of job and public-resource scarcity for native citizens. In fact, there is evidence that minority racial markers become more salient during economic downturns: Subjects perceived Black faces to be "darker" and "more stereotypically Black" under scarcity conditions in a 2014 study by Amy Krosch and APS Fellow David Amodio of New York University. Subjects in that study also allocated less money to Black recipients in a money-splitting task, suggesting the kind of real-world effect these economically moderated perceptions can have.

In a series of experiments, an international team of psychological researchers demonstrated the ways that these feelings of exclusion can fuel intolerance toward minority groups. In one of those experiments, the researchers, led by Nilüfer Aydin of the Alpen-Adria University of Klagenfurt in Austria, assigned a group of students in Germany to imagine themselves as new employees in a workplace environment. Some participants were told that their colleagues avoided them by refusing to have lunch with them or to help them with new or difficult tasks. Others imagined being welcomed by their coworkers, while still others were told to picture a neutral new-job situation. The participants then filled out a questionnaire designed to measure anti-Muslim attitudes.

Next, the participants were asked to support the construction of a mosque in Munich. (Unbeknownst to the students, the mosque project was fictitious.) As the researchers predicted, the participants who had imagined being outcasts at work scored higher on anti-Muslim attitudes compared with the other participants. They also were less likely than their peers to support the mosque project.

In a second experiment, Aydin and her colleagues showed a way to buffer the xenophobia that feelings of social exclusion kindle. They had another pool of students imagine the same workplace scenario as in the earlier experiment, then had a subset of participants write essays about a time when they felt particularly powerful and in control of their lives. Another group wrote about a time when they felt powerless and out of control. The participants then were asked about their views on the social and economic costs caused by immigrants. Specifically, they rated their level of agreement with statements ranging from "Foreigners increase crime rates" to "Foreigners are good for the economy."

In analyzing the results, the researchers found that participants in the social-exclusion condition were less apt to report anti-immigrant attitudes if they'd been prompted to recall being in control of their lives.

In fact, many psychological scientists have turned their focus to examining the factors that promote positive intergroup relations.

Other research has shown that having strong objectives and principles douses resistance to

heterogeneity. In a 2014 study, for example, Cornell University psychological scientist Anthony L. Burrow and colleagues recruited White adults via Mechanical Turk and used a variety of measures to capture not only their personality traits, emotions, comfort with diversity, awareness of current racial issues, and connectedness with people from other ethnic groups, but also their sense of purpose in life. Burrow and colleagues found evidence that, among White adults, having a sense of purpose in life bolsters comfort with living in an ethnically diverse community — no matter what the individual's overall affect and connections with people from other ethnicities.

Getting Together

The idea that increased diversity leads to more positive intergroup relations draws largely on the contact hypothesis, first developed by Gordon Allport in 1954. This theory posits that increased contact and communication between groups can bring about increased understanding and decreased stereotyping and prejudice. However, several conditions are required for this theory to hold, two of which are equality of status between groups and a lack of competition between them.

It also may be true that intergroup contact does indeed positively influence attitudes about outgroups, but that these positive changes are mitigated by the effects of perceived group threat. A 2009 study of Dutch subjects examining the two theories simultaneously found evidence that both group threat and intergroup contact mediated changes in attitudes toward immigrants. An inflated perception of the number of immigrants predicted an increased perception of group threat, which in turn predicted disapproval of immigrants; at the same time, the increased intergroup contact associated with surging immigrant populations predicted a decrease in perceived group threat and was negatively associated with disapproval of immigrants, the researchers discovered.

Other interventions, such as those based on the common ingroup identity model, seek to expand individuals' conception of "us" to include others formerly categorized as "them." This model, first proposed by APS Fellows John F. Dovidio and Samuel L. Gaertner, draws on the process of social categorization, or how people perceive group boundaries and identities. Because individuals generally will favor the ingroup over the outgroup, the key is to encourage people to identify with a group superordinate to their racial or ethnic group such that their conception of "we" includes other groups. For example, in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, many found their racial and political group identities superseded by their identification as Americans; on a smaller scale, affinity for a common sports team can cut across even robust racial and social lines.

Studies examining this model have found that White subjects rated Black confederates more favorably when they were positioned as members of the same work group rather than as separate individuals, as well as when the Black confederates displayed the same university affiliation as the subject. Common ingroup identification also has been observed in majority populations after a natural disaster.

As many Western countries come to face these demographic changes, it is difficult to predict what lies ahead. Conditions that previously had to be artificially created within the confines of a lab will soon prevail outside of it as the norm. Whether this change will usher in a new era of cultural harmony or sharpen the spears of intergroup hostility remains to be seen. In the meantime, psychological scientists continue to seek out mechanisms for studying and ultimately reducing the intergroup tensions and hostilities that this shift could exacerbate. Their work echoes the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

"We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools." œ

Jennifer Richeson will sit down for an "Inside the Psychologist's Studio" interview at the 2016 APS Annual Convention, May 26–29 in Chicago, Illinois.

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