The Role of Cultural Inertia in Reactions to Immigration on the U.S./Mexico Border

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Assimilation and multiculturalism are often contrasted as opposite interethnic ideologies about cultural integration. Here, we address models of assimilation and multiculturalism and how group identity influences attitudes toward immigrants. One overlooked issue concerns the dynamic processes involved in integration. It is proposed that cultural inertia, defined as the desire to avoid cultural change, or conversely, to continue change once it is already occurring, can account for a number of seemingly discrepant findings. In particular, cultural inertia predicts that majority groups should prefer assimilation type models, whereas minority groups should prefer multicultural models. Resistance to change is the mediating process. Cultural inertia is used as a model to understand discrepant attitudes toward assimilation and multiculturalism across different groups.

Immigration is one of the most divisive current issues in United States politics. In a recent survey, 52% of those polled agreed with the statement, "Immigrants today are a burden because they take jobs [and] housing" compared to 38% in the year 2000 (Kohut, Suro, Keeter, Escobar, & Doherty, 2006). Conversely, 41% agreed with the statement, "Immigrants today strengthen the United States with their hard work and talent" compared to 50% in 2000. Attitudes regarding immigration coincide with a growing immigrant population. There are approximately 17.8 million Latino immigrants alone (Rosenbaum et al., 2004). Together, authorized and unauthorized immigrants constitute over 15% of the U.S. population (Larsen, 2004). Americans are deeply divided over the perceived effects of immigration. Almost as many people believe that immigrants will strengthen the American way of life as believe that immigrants are a threat to "traditional

American values" (Kohut et al., 2006). There is also tremendous debate regarding what to do with the immigrants already living in the United States. Americans are also divided about whether the governments should allow the illegal immigrants to stay (32%), send them home (27%), or grant them temporary worker status (32%; Kohut et al., 2006). The near perfect split among the three diverse options highlights the divisiveness of the issue.

Attitudes toward immigrants are determined by both economic and cultural concerns (Zárate, Garcia, Garza, & Hitlan, 2004). Here, we further explore cultural factors influencing attitudes toward immigrants and focus on cultural identity and perceptions of cultural change as predictors of attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. We argue that as groups integrate, the process of change itself influences attitudes. Change is often met with resistance. Moreover, assimilated and multicultural societies entail different levels of change for minority versus majority group members. Assimilation and multiculturalism mean different things for different groups, and change, or resistance to change, might account for multiple discrepant findings. This article reviews experimental research conducted at University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) on Mexican Americans' attitudes toward immigrants, focusing on how identity influences perceptions across groups with multiple identities and shifting cultural norms. Finally, it introduces the concept of cultural inertia, which explains divergences between ethnic minority and majority attitudes toward immigrants and immigration.

Demographic Differences in Attitudes toward Immigration

Differences in American attitudes toward immigrants and immigration organize around geographical and cultural lines (e.g., Doherty, 2006). People in places with higher concentrations of immigrants are more likely to see immigration as a relevant problem but have more favorable attitudes toward immigrants overall (Kohut et al., 2006). They are more likely to believe that immigration has been mostly good for the country and that immigrants face unfair discrimination. They are also less likely to believe that immigrants take jobs from Americans, do not pay their share in taxes, and are less likely to support tougher immigration laws (Rosenbaum et al., 2004). They are also more likely to say that current levels of immigration should be either maintained or increased (Kohut et al., 2006).

There are also notable differences in attitudes toward immigration across cultural groups. For example, legal immigrants are much more likely (57%) than nonimmigrants (33%) to believe that the United States should be a "country made up of many cultures and values that change as new people come here" (Rosenbaum et al., 2004, p. 3). When asked the opposite, whether the United States should be "a country with a basic American culture that immigrants take on when they come here" the results flipped. Thirty-nine percent of legal immigrants and 64% of nonimmigrants believed that the United States had a basic culture that immigrants

should assimilate to. Furthermore, Mexican Americans are more likely than White, non-Hispanic Americans to reject stricter immigration laws (Binder, Polinard, & Wrinkle, 1997).

El Paso, Texas, provides a unique opportunity to study ethnic minorities' attitudes toward immigration. El Paso sits directly on the U.S./Mexican border, and the most recent census estimates the population to be 81% Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). The student population of the UTEP includes approximately 70% Mexican American students, with an additional 10% Mexican National students. By virtue of being a border community, residents are also especially aware of immigration issues. The cultural milieu in El Paso, however, also mirrors more broadly many places worldwide where cultures, nations, and languages intermix in a border region. It may also reflect the future cultural composition of the United States. It is projected that by the year 2042, ethnic minorities will be the majority in the United States (Bernstein & Edwards, 2008). Thus, understanding the reactions to immigration here has wide ranging consequences both for U.S. culture in the coming years, and in other cultures worldwide.

Theoretical Predictors of Reactions to Immigration

Interethnic ideologies often determine people's attitudes toward immigration (Berry, 1984; Ryan, Casas, & Thompson, this issue). Two of these frameworks, assimilation and multiculturalism, dominate the debate, though there is also recent work investigating colorblind ideologies. Assimilation models of integration propose that, when groups merge, the primary task is for the minority group to assimilate to the dominant group's culture and norms. The immigrant group is expected to learn the rules of the host country and adopt them as their own. In this sense, all groups should adopt the cultural norms of the majority group. In the original meaning of *assimilation*, as groups merge, a new norm is developed that encompasses both cultures in a weighted fashion such that the new norms are more similar to the dominant group but are a combination of all the groups (Berry, 1984). In the United States, however, most calls for assimilation propose that only immigrant groups actually change. Most calls for assimilation also focus on language, as language is a marker for prejudice toward foreigners (Dovidio, Gluszek, John, Ditlmann, & Lagunes, this issue). The idea is that through linguistic unity, America becomes strong. This may be why, in the United States, other languages die quickly, even among Latino immigrants in high Latino population areas (Rumbaut, Massey, & Bean, 2006). Consistent with this expectation, as groups move to the United States, assimilation has historically occurred quickly. Within an assimilation model, as Latinos move to more parts of the country, their role should be to adopt U.S. cultural norms and to assimilate as best one can to the local culture.

At the other end of the spectrum, some individuals espouse multicultural models of integration. Within a multicultural model, ethnic groups retain their cultural heritage. As groups merge, each cultural group retains some basic norms while being equally identified as "American." Therefore, new immigrants to the United States are encouraged to continue speaking their language, for instance. Individuals who espouse a multicultural world contend that diversity is a good thing and the strength of America lies in the diverse cultural norms and styles. As a land of immigrants, diverse cultural norms should be celebrated.

Group Identity and Group Distinctiveness

Social psychological research mirrors the assimilation versus multicultural-ism debate. Some models of intergroup relations stress identifying a common identity, whereas other models stress retaining distinctive subgroup identities. Research reveals that simply categorizing a group as an "out-group" can cause bias and discrimination (Tajfel, Billig, Flament, & Bundy, 1971). This effect is amazing in the sense that this bias is automatic and does not even require that the two groups compete (Turner, 1975). Because social categorization alone causes conflict, researchers proposed that to eliminate intergroup conflict, attention must be drawn away from the between-group boundaries. Thus, once one identifies an overarching group membership that envelops seemingly distinct groups, the former out-groups are now seen as part of the in-group (Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Validzic, 1998; Dovidio et al., 1997). This theory suggests that assimilation is the optimal approach to eliminating conflict between two groups. As reviewed elsewhere (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), this approach reliably reduces intergroup bias.

Assimilation and common identity approaches to reducing intergroup con-flict present a dilemma for ethnic minorities. Typically, proponents of assimilation suggest that everyone needs to adopt an American identity. The problem is, "Amer-ican identity" is often confounded with "White American identity" (Devos, 2006; Devos & Banaji, 2005; Dovidio et al., this issue). Devos and Banaji (2005) show that, in general, pictures of White targets are more closely associated with being American than are pictures of others, even among ethnic minority participants (Devos, 2006). As such, adopting an "American"-only identity might marginalize many ethnic minorities (Dovidio et al., this issue). Assimilation ideologies are problematic because, for many minorities, their ethnic identity plays an impor-tant role in their social identity (Quintana, Herrera, & Nelson, this issue; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). Indeed, members of ethnic minority groups are more likely than members of ethnic majority groups to endorse multi-cultural approaches to cultural contact (Ryan & Casas, in press; Verkuyten, 2005).

Research on the mutual identity differentiation model supports a multicultural approach to immigration and suggests that retaining cultural subgroup identities

within a greater cultural framework is the best way to manage cultural contact (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). It advocates simultaneously invoking people's overarching (American) identity and their subgroup (Mexican) identity. Under this model, distinct (but equally valuable) strengths of different groups are recognized and highlighted (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). Through invoking everyone's unique and valuable group identity, attitudes about the out-group and the in-group are improved. As with the common in-group identity model, the mutual identity differentiation model is also successful in reducing intergroup bias (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000).

The mutual identity differentiation model also suggests that Mexican Americans need a sense of positive distinctiveness from Mexican Nationals and White Americans to maintain positive attitudes about themselves and others. Both groups represent a potential threat to their group distinctiveness. At the very least it recommends the simultaneous activation of their cultural similarities and differences to reduce group distinctiveness threats. Consistent with a group distinctiveness approach, one factor influencing prejudice amongst one Latino group regarding another Latino group is the relationship between group identity and need for distinctiveness.

Research on group identity gives further reason to believe that, for ethnic minorities, multiculturalism is a more preferable approach to incoming immigrant cultures. Crisp, Stone, and Hall (2006) show that individuals who have a strong group identity often express more prejudice toward other groups, once one identifies an overlapping common group identity. Across three studies using either school or national identity, Crisp and colleagues reported that individuals who are high in group identity respond with more prejudice when provided with a common in-group identity than those not provided with the common identity. The UTEP samples consistently express very high ethnic identity (Zárate & Garza, 2002). If high group identity predicts an unwillingness to identify with an overlapping social identity, then that predicts that Mexican American students will express more prejudice toward groups that threaten their ethnic identity.

Mexican Americans' Attitudes toward Immigrants and Cultural Integration

Research participants at UTEP consistently prefer a multicultural approach to cultural contact. The findings repeatedly demonstrate that inducing Mexican Americans to attend to group differences reduces prejudice toward Mexican immigrants and White Americans (Carpenter, Zárate, & Garza, 2007; Zárate & Garza, 2002; Zárate et al., 2004). These studies were based on the assumption that cultural minorities' ethnic identity is an important part of the self-concept (Quintana et al., in press) and that attempts to minimize important identities threaten their sense of positive distinctiveness (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Our research program focused

on multiple predictors of prejudice, including need for distinctiveness, perceived economic competition, and attitudes about cultural change.

In the experimental studies, participants are induced to perceive either that there are large cultural differences between Mexican Americans and Mexican Nationals or White Americans, or that there are few differences between the groups. The largest sample is Mexican American participants, and they evaluate either White American or Mexican National individuals. Research participants are provided with manipulated end points in a similarity judgment task. Participants are given a series of questions to respond to regarding the similarity between their group and another local group. Some participants are asked to make similarity judgments (from 1 = *not at all similar,* to 7 = *extremely similar*), whereas others are asked to make contrast judgments (from 1 = *not at all different* to 7 = *extremely different*). Theoretically, similarity judgments bias participants to see more similarities, which produce a threat to one's group distinctiveness that is expressed as greater prejudice.

Zárate and Garza (2002) demonstrated that Mexican American participants express less prejudice toward Mexican immigrants after having made contrast judgments compared to having made similarity judgments. Moreover, this effect is stronger for individuals high in need for uniqueness (Experiment 2). In addition to manipulated differences, Zárate and Garza predicted and found that participants high in need for distinctiveness (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977) react more negatively to threats to their group identity. The fact that both manipulated perceptions of similarity and individual differences in need for uniqueness produce the same effects is good evidence that El Paso's border residents have a need for group distinctiveness. Consequently, threats to that distinctiveness provoke greater prejudice toward those that threaten the group identity.

Economic competition compounds the effects of threats to group identity. Zárate et al. (2004) manipulated similarity in two ways. For some participants, the manipulations highlighted similarities and differences between U.S. citizens and Mexican immigrants on work-related traits (e.g., ambitious, hard-working). For others, interpersonal traits (e.g., friendly, generous) were highlighted. Zárate et al. (2004) manipulated perceptions of similarity of work related or interpersonal traits using the same comparison manipulation as Zárate and Garza (2002). It was hypothesized that similarity in work-related traits would produce different responses than would similarity in interpersonal related traits. Two individuals with similar work-related traits can compete for the same job. Thus, in this case, similarity would produce a perceived realistic threat for jobs. In contrast, it was predicted that perceived differences in interpersonal traits would produce a symbolic threat regarding one's way of life, which would produce more prejudice. The results demonstrated just that effect. Similar job skills, but different interpersonal traits, produced higher prejudice. The effects of similarity differ as a function of the quality of the traits being evaluated. Economic competition is not appreciated,

nor are cultural differences. These findings highlight important conflicts in the literature. At times, similarity can be a good thing. At other times, differences are more greatly appreciated.

Cultural Inertia: A Model for Understanding Differences in Minority and Majority Responses to Immigration

Cultural inertia reconciles different effects regarding attention to common identities versus distinct identities reduce prejudice. One distinguishing feature between studies that find support for a common in-group identity from those studies that find support for a distinct in-group identity is the status of the participant group. Most studies that find support for an assimilation ideology use majority group participants and highlight the majority group identity. In contrast, most studies that find support for a multicultural ideology use ethnic minority participants or use participants with a particularly high identity with their subgroup membership. Those studies also highlight the minority group membership. Thus, multiculturalism and assimilation might mean different things, and be differentially advantageous, for different groups (Verkuyten, 2005).

Opposing attitudes to multiculturalism and assimilation may result from "cultural inertia." *Cultural inertia* is defined as the desire to avoid cultural change, or conversely, to continue change once change is already occurring (Zárate, Shaw, Marquez, & Biagas, 2009). Change concerns both behavior and group identity. As with most social psychological constructs, change is defined by the perceptions of change rather than by any measurable change itself. Regarding different types of change, behavioral change is often related to tangible resources or activities and people often react in a conscious fashion. Behavioral change can entail different policies at schools regarding bilingual education or about the legality of undocumented immigrants even attending school. Change might entail learning a new language to be competitive in the job market. A more subtle change concerns group identity. Change takes effort. Change requires adapting to the needs of others. Change entails recognizing that the current cultural norms and morals are not only culture specific, but also possibly wrong or inefficient. To the extent that individuals resist change, so too will the associated society. Thus, cultural inertia is the process whereby anticipated change produces resentment and prejudice toward the agents of change. Research shows that people often associate *American* with *White* (Devos & Banaji, 2005). Thus, as the American cultural landscape changes, people often react negatively, despite the fact it may not directly influence them. These changes have little direct impact, but they might impact one's ability to navigate the environment. They might also influence the types of friends their children have. These issues define a more abstract and possibly more important issue. How does one define American and do immigrants change that definition?

Cultural inertia produces a differential preference for an assimilated society or a multicultural society as a function of how one currently matches the dominant culture. For the majority group, a multicultural society means having to accommodate other groups. For a minority group, a multicultural society means doing nothing and being able to retain some ethnic identity. On the other hand, for the majority group, assimilation means doing nothing. Thus, when a dominant group member espouses an assimilation model, they are really saying, "everyone should act like me." For ethnic minorities, however, assimilation means having to relinquish their ethnic identity and adopt a new identity. Cultural inertia concepts can account well for seemingly disparate findings regarding common in-group identity approaches and group distinctiveness approaches. If one is a member of the dominant group, which describes most college students, one should be more favorable toward assimilation approaches. An assimilation approach suggests that members of the cultural majority do not have to change. Using the same construct, if one is a member of a group with a particularly strong subgroup identity, cultural inertia concepts suggest that they should be more favorable toward a multicultural approach. A multicultural approach means they do not have to change. Thus, resistance to change can predict multiple types of attitudes—depending on how one already fits the associated group norm and how much one would have to change to fit that norm.

Individual Differences in Cultural Inertia

A number of individual difference factors and social factors influence how one reacts to perceptions of change, and therefore, how one perceives social groups. Two particularly important individual difference factors include identity centrality and openness to change. Crisp et al. (2006) demonstrate that high identifiers react negatively to the imposition of a larger group identity. Presumably, high identifiers react negatively to the belief that they will have to give up or otherwise abandon important self-constructs. It seems equally plausible that high identifiers react negatively to the belief that others will "ignore" their important self-constructs. Moreover, from a cultural inertia perspective, high identifiers have farther to travel in relinquishing that identity. More of their daily activities revolve around their cultural norms and more of their identity is wrapped in their group identity. In contrast, low identifiers, by definition, can more easily abandon an identity that is less salient to them.

The second important individual difference factor is openness to change. Change is central to cultural inertia and affects the process from all perspectives. It is not the case that all White Americans dislike immigrants. In fact, polls highlight the disparate opinions on the issue. Our data show that individuals open to change are more positive about new immigrants coming to this country (Zárate et al., 2009). Immigration suggests change, and those who see change as

a good thing also see more positives in more immigrants moving to the United States. On the other hand, openness to change, from a minority perspective, has a number of ramifications. If one chooses to move to a new country, one is already in a state of change. From a cultural inertia perspective, objects in motion tend to stay in motion. Thus, for many immigrants, one can envision that they are particularly anxious to adopt their new country norms. If one is forced to immigrate to support his or her family, the forced change may be perceived as unwanted and will provoke negative reactions toward the majority cultural group and its members. Cultural inertia predicts different effects for voluntary immigrants and nonvoluntary immigrants. Voluntary immigrants have moved freely from one country to another. In the case of the United States, voluntary immigrants might move to the United States in search of the "American dream." Cultural inertia suggests that these individuals are high in openness to change and enthusiastic about adapting to their new country. In contrast, nonvoluntary immigrants might move to the United States to escape difficult political or economic situations elsewhere, for instance. Their identity might be that of their homeland, and they may even plan on returning to their homeland once the situation changes. Thus, they are not in the process of psychologically moving to their new country. As such, they will also demonstrate greater resistance to assimilation.

Social and Contextual Moderators of Cultural Inertia

Attitudes toward immigration vary across regions in the United States. For instance, people in areas with low concentrations of foreign-born immigrants consider them a burden for the United States. People in areas with high concentrations of foreign-born immigrants, on the other hand, are more likely to consider immigration an issue that is important to their local community (Kohut et al., 2006). In some metropolitan areas, there is a long history of large immigrant populations moving through the area. The area is perceived as active and in a constant state of change. New York City is one such example. Cultural inertia predicts that New York City residents should be more favorable toward immigrants because change is an expected event. Objects in movement tend to stay in movement. In this sense, because of the history of constant change, more change is expected and therefore welcomed. In contrast, cultural inertia predicts that immigrants will be more negatively viewed in small towns with a history of minimal change.

Empirical evidence in support of cultural inertia. Research on cultural inertia confirms several of these predictions. For example, when Mexican Americans believe that U.S. culture is already changing to accommodate incoming immigrant populations, they express less prejudice toward Mexican immigrants (Zárate et al., 2009). Furthermore, higher openness to change predicts less prejudice toward immigrants. Also, when members of the same population expect that they

will have to change their personal lifestyle to accommodate incoming populations, they express more prejudice toward those populations. There is also evidence that the perception that another culture will change to accommodate one's own culture becomes a source of collective self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) for their own culture.

Cultural inertia predicts that immigrants are not perceived the same way everywhere. Cultural inertia predicts that the social context and history of change will influence attitudes toward immigrants. Cultural inertia suggests that attitudes toward immigrants derive from a sense of accommodation. It has little to do with prejudice toward the actual group, but rather, how much effort will be needed to change the self to accommodate the group.

Implications for Cultural Contact and Integration for the United States

Immigration is particularly relevant to border communities. Often, border areas are areas of high immigrant populations. By definition, immigrants and nonimmigrants differ in nationality, but they might be similar in cultural and linguistic background. Thus, social identity and the need for a distinct group identity complicate border issues and prejudice. As the country becomes more diverse, immigration issues on the border will spread throughout the country. In this sense, cultural inertia is particularly important. Cultural inertia can help explain both majority and minority reactions to immigration as Latino immigrants move to all parts of the country. Like other models, cultural inertia recommends the simultaneous maintenance of cultural subgroup identities and creation of overarching superordinate identities. It adds to other models, though, in that it identifies perceptions of change as the culprit behind the prejudice between minority and majority groups. Assimilation and multiculturalism are often perceived of as two distinct endpoints on a continuum. Cultural inertia, however, suggests that there is a common process driving preferences for these two models of cultural integration.

Cultural inertia suggests that when creating policies to deal with immigrants and immigration, one must take into account the extent to which individuals will perceive having to change, keeping in mind that with perceptions of cultural change come decrements in self-esteem for their own group and increases in prejudice toward other groups. Cultural inertia also suggests that as communities become more diverse, intergroup conflict may decrease because of decreasing worries about having to adapt. Until that critical mass is reached, intergroup conflict can be expected to increase as members of groups resist having to accommodate one another.

This research also contributes to our understanding of prejudice toward immigrants and intergroup prejudice in general. Researchers have begun to note that it is essential to consider the substantive threat posed by specific groups to better understand and mitigate prejudice between groups (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005).

While much research has focused on the relations between Black and White Americans (Dovidio et al., this issue), it is essential to identify sources of anti-immigrant prejudice also (Dovidio et al., this issue; Ryan et al., this issue). This research predicts that perceptions of cultural change will cause White Americans to express prejudice toward immigrants. It also suggests that perceptions of cultural change can cause Mexican Americans to express prejudice toward both Mexican immigrants and White Americans.

The most important lesson we have learned from research on the U.S./Mexico border is that subgroup cultural identities are particularly important to Latinos. Trying to minimize the importance of ethnic minorities' cultural identities may produce more social conflict between ethnic minority and majority groups. Therefore, models of assimilation that require the ever increasing number of Latinos in the United States to give up their cultural identities will be met with disfavor. Likewise, multiculturalism will be resisted by White Americans to the extent that they feel they have to change to accommodate new, incoming cultures. The studies reviewed here suggest that, as the United States becomes more diverse, identifying the processes involved in changing identities will provide new insights in prejudice reduction.

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