Racism and immigration policies: the impact of the quality of democracy on the mediation role of threat perceptions

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Session: Attitudes toward immigrants: The role of ethnicity, race and religion

“People, they were told, were not of equal value [the author was referring to Germans, Italians and Japanese, after WWI]. Just as some breeds of dog were better at hunting than others, they themselves belonged to the best race, the one designed for ruling.”


Abstract

The recent dramatic events that immigrants and refugees have been facing while trying to reach Europe looking for a decent life are also a reflex of the prejudice and discrimination that they are subject. This paper aims to understand how is it possible that in formally democratic societies people that are perceived as belonging to a different race, religion or ethnic group, are still subject to prejudice and discrimination. Using data of 18 countries from the European Social Survey 7, our findings show that: 1) despite the anti-racist norm that characterises democratic societies, biological racist beliefs continue to generate explicit feelings of threat and the support for discriminatory policies; 2) the relationship between racists beliefs and discriminatory behaviours is mediated by perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat that function as legitimating factors of discrimination; 3) the mediation role of threat perceptions becomes progressively crucial as the quality of democracy increases, due to the salience of the anti-discrimination norm in higher quality democratic contexts.

Keywords
Biological racism
Threat perceptions
Discrimination policies
Quality of democracy
According to the UN, during the last 15 years 30,000 people have died in the Mediterranean trying to reach Europe, 2,500 of them between January and May 2016. This is one of the most dramatic indicators of the indifference that immigrants and refugees are facing and of the prejudice and discrimination that they are subject to, when Europe needs them. In fact, also according to the UN, to be able to maintain its standard of living, Europe needs 50 million new immigrants by 2050.

The question that we now address is the following: how it is possible that in formally democratic societies, like those in Europe, people trying to reach the continent, or that already live there, and are perceived as belonging to a different race, religion or ethnic group, are subject to prejudice and discrimination. The present study is part of a research programme that aims to contribute to the understanding of this question (e.g. Ramos, Pereira & Vala, 2016).

**Background**

The most consensual answer to our question proposes that immigrants are subject to discrimination mainly from the most fragile groups of society (e.g. Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010; Quillian, 2006) since these are the ones that most fear immigrants as a new source of strain on social and job resources, mainly when this perception goes along with feelings of negative interdependence (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson & Armstrong, 2001) or relative deprivation (Pettigrew, Christ, Wagner, Meertens, Van Dick & Zick, 2008).

Without neglecting the importance of these factors, some studies show that the values of egalitarianism vs the values associated with conservation (e.g. Ford 2011, Davidov & Meuleman 2012, Ramos & Vala 2009) as well as ideological factors, such as the ideologies of social dominance (Guimond, De Oliveira, Kamiesjki, & Sidanius, 2010) and ideologies about citizenship (e.g. Heath 2005) present a higher predictive power than the economic or instrumental factors mentioned above.

This evidence is supported by the line of research according to which not only economic threat perceptions but also symbolic ones, associated with the need of cultural identity preservation, predict orientations towards racial and anti-immigrant prejudice (Sears & Henry, 2003; Stephan, Renfro, Esses, Stephan, & Martin, 2005); however, the inverse pattern (prejudice as a
predictor of threat) has also been identified (Pereira, Vala, & Costa-Lopes, 2010; Pereira, Vala, & Leyens, 2009).

While the mentioned studies refer to individual-level variables, other studies of a macro (country-level) nature have underlined, besides the predictive power of economic or demographic factors, such as GDP and immigration flows (e.g. Green 2009), the importance of cultural values (Ramos, Pereira & Vala, 2016; Schwartz, 2006) and ideological factors (Wilkes, Guppy & Farris, 2007) in the explanation of anti-immigrant attitudes.

Beyond the theoretical and empirical controversy over the relative weight of economic factors (including subjective ones) vs. symbolic factors, aspects related with the dynamic processes underlying the reasons for the persistence of prejudice and discrimination in democratic societies have started to be a subject of study.

Firstly, several approaches show that the antiracist norm, now prevailing in democratic societies, has led to a reduction of the expression of blatant racial prejudice, in particular anti-black, (e.g. Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998), and also to the expression of prejudice in a subtle (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995) or implicit way (e.g. Wittenbrink, Judd & Park 1997). This same process is confirmed in studies on the non-explicit infra-humanisation of minorities (Vaes, Leyens, Paladino, & Miranda, 2012) or on their representation as radically inferior humans in relevant cultural aspects, as theorised by the concept of cultural racism (e.g. Balibar, 1989; Vala & Pereira 2012). Therefore, from a dynamic perspective, racism has evolved like a virus, and it is through its subtle expression, apparently not anti-normative, that anti-immigrant prejudice prevails in democratic societies.

Another aspect of dynamic processes associated to attitudes towards immigrants has also been studied and has contributed to enlightening the debate on the persistence of prejudice and discrimination in democratic and legally unprejudiced societies. We refer to the process of legitimization (eg. Jost & Major, 2001; Tyler, 2006) in its social and psychological aspects. This process proposes that a given behaviour or belief is perceived as legitimate when it is consistent with norms, principles, concerns or socially accepted values that make such behaviour justifiable or fair (Costa-Lopes, Dovidio, Pereira, & Jost, 2013). Our perspective is that, at the intergroup level, the perception that an out-group is a threat to the in-group legitimates behaviours that in different situations would be seen as condemnable. Several studies have shown the consequences of this process of legitimization in the discrimination against immigrants (e.g. Pereira, Vala & Costa-Lopes, 2010). In this sense, the anti-immigrant discrimination is legitimised because immigrants are perceived as a threat not only to the
material resources and the security of the in-group, but also to their symbolic resources such as identity and culture. It is in this analytical framework that we can understand that the EU has deported refugees and immigrants to Turkey that were in Europe, in violation of the rules of international law, while invoking the need to protect European citizens from the threats that these people supposedly represented.

The current research

The study that we now present is based on ESS7 data and constitutes a step forward on the work so far published on the legitimation process, since it analyses this process in the context of immigrants’ discrimination in different areas of public policies: ethnicist criteria of selection of immigrants (being white, Christian and being able to speak the hosting country’s language) and opposition to anti-discrimination legislation at the work place. Furthermore, and despite the previous literature showing that racism is expressed today in a veiled form mainly owing to the pressure of the anti-racism norm (e.g. Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Sears & Henry, 2003), we take the blatant racist beliefs, expressing the most traditional biological racism, as a predictor of discriminatory attitudes in the field of public policies on immigration, thus showing that these beliefs remain socially effective. Finally, this research aims to respond to another question that, as far as we know, so far has not been analysed in the literature: that psychological legitimacy can be moderated by socio-political factors of a contextual and structural nature and not only by individual factors, as already shown (Pereira et al., 2009).

In this context, we put forward the following hypotheses: the greater the adherence to biological racism (i.e. believing that some racial or ethnic groups are born less intelligent than others and harder workers that others), the greater the orientation for discriminatory public policies in the field of immigration. The relationship between biological racist beliefs and discrimination is mediated by the perceptions of symbolic threat (i.e., the perception that immigrants undermine national values, customs and practices) and realistic threat (i.e., the perception that immigrants take jobs from national citizens and contribute to increase crime in the country). In our model, realistic and symbolic threats represent the process of legitimation; and this mediation is moderated by the quality of democracy in the countries studied, in the sense that the mediation will only occur, or will occur more strongly, in countries with higher indices of quality of democracy (Democracy Barometer, 2014). The argument is that in these countries discrimination needs more strongly to be legitimised because people are more aware that it violates the egalitarian values that underlie the democratic system.
Data and Methods

Data from 18 participating countries in the ESS 7 were used to test our hypothesis (N= 33322). The variables used in the models are the following:

A) Individual-level

Biological racism

“Do you think some races or ethnic group are born less intelligent than others” (Yes/No)

“Do you think some races or ethnic group are born harder working than others” (Yes/No)

Realistic Threat Perceptions

Realistic threat perception is an index of the following indicators:

“Would you say it is generally bad or good for [country’s] economy that people come to live here from other countries?” (0-Bad for the economy to 10-Good for the economy)

“Are [country’s] crime problems made worse or better by people coming to live here from other countries?” (0-Crime problems made worse to 10-Crime problems made better)

“Would you say that people who come to live here generally take jobs away from workers in [country], or generally help to create new jobs?” (0- Take jobs away to 10-Create new jobs)

Symbolic Threat Perceptions

Symbolic threat perception is an index of the following indicators:

“Do you think the religious beliefs and practices in [country] are generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?” (0-Religious beliefs and practices undermined to 10- Religious beliefs and practices enriched)

“Would you say that [country’s] cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?” (0-Cultural life undermined to 10-Cultural life enriched)
Discrimination Policies

Ethnicist criteria of immigrants’ selection

“Please tell me how important you think each of these things should be in deciding whether someone born, brought up and living outside [country] should be able to come and live here: a) be able to speak [country’s official language(s)]; b) be white; c) come from a Christian background. Ethnicist criteria is an index of these three characteristics.

Anti-discrimination law

“How good or bad is it for a country to have a law against racial or ethnic discrimination in the workplace?” (0-Extremely bad to 10-Extremely good).

Items measuring threat perceptions and anti-discrimination law were reversed so that higher values correspond to more negative attitudes.

B) Aggregate-level

Quality of Democracy

General score of the democracy barometer, retrieved from the Democracy Barometer: http://www.democracybarometer.org/index.html, 2014

Results

At a descriptive level the ESS 7 data show a higher adherence to traditional racist beliefs than what would be expected in light of the literature on the new racisms (eg. Balibar 1989; Vala & Pereira 2012) and an increase of symbolic threat perceptions between 2002/03 and 2014/15. An important finding is the general decrease of realistic threat perceptions between this same period of time: among the 18 countries under analysis, the perception that immigrants take jobs, contribute to the increase of crime and that immigration harms the economy decreased in 13 countries and remained the same in 5. This shift associated to the increasing expression of symbolic threat perceptions suggests the growing impact of the anti-racist norm. However, taking all the findings together, in half of the countries negative feelings concerning immigrants and immigration have raised during the last 10 years.

Concerning the legitimation process, results of a structural equation modelling analysis confirmed our hypothesis. In fact, the mediation process proposed to explain the impact of the biological racism on discriminatory policies was observed (figure 1).
Specifically, the more respondents adopt biological racist beliefs, the greater the perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat; and the stronger these perceptions are the likely respondents are to adopt ethnicist criteria in the selection of immigrants and to oppose to anti-discrimination legislation. The analysis by country showed that the model is confirmed in all of them. However, the multi-group analysis showed significant variations between countries. Our hypothesis is that these variations are related to the quality of democracy in each country.

Figure 1: The mediation role of threat perceptions in the relationship between biological racism and the endorsement of discrimination policies regarding immigrants (values are standardised maximum likelihood estimates; ***p<.000)

In fact, multilevel analyses showed a cross-level interaction between the impact of threat perceptions and the quality of democracy on the support for discrimination policies. Concerning opposition to anti-discrimination laws (figure 2), the higher the score of quality of democracy, the more the relationship between biological racism
and opposition to anti-discrimination laws is mediated by perceptions of symbolic threat. This effect does not occur in the case of realistic threat.

**Figure 2: Moderated mediation: the impact of symbolic threat (individual-level) and quality of democracy (country-level) on opposition to anti-discrimination laws.**

Regarding the endorsement of ethnicist criteria for immigrants’ selection, the higher the score on quality of democracy, the more the relationship between biological racism and ethnicist criteria is mediated by realistic threat perceptions (fig 3). This effect was not observed in the case of symbolic threat.

**Figure 3: Moderated mediation: the impact of realistic threat (individual-level) and quality of democracy (country-level) on ethnicist criteria for immigrants’ selection**
Conclusions

Racist beliefs matter. And despite the anti-racist norm that characterises democratic societies, the belief that some people are born less intelligent and less fitted to work only because they belong to a specific ‘racial’ or ethnic group is higher than expected and continues to generate explicit feelings of threat and the support for discriminatory policies.

Racism is an evolving virus. But it still needs to be justified, legitimised, by socially acceptable reasons, namely those that address cultural differences and underlie the measure of symbolic threat.

Democracy demands further legitimation, since it is in the countries that score highly in quality of democracy that people more feel the need to justify their attitudes that violate the anti-discrimination norms.

References


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