

**Who is afraid of border controls? A review of  
economic and cultural threat theories of  
attitudes towards immigration**

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An essay submitted to NIDEA in fulfilment of the  
requirements of

POPS589-17A Directed Study  
University of Waikato  
2017

*National Institute of Demographic and Economic Analysis*

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# Who is afraid of border controls? A review of economic and cultural threat theories of attitudes towards immigration

## Abstract

What determines public attitudes toward immigrants and immigration? To provide insight into this complex question, this paper focuses on the two dominant theoretical paradigms: economic threat theory and cultural threat theory. These theories frame and answer the question primarily from the disciplines of economics and social psychology respectively, but the question has also been addressed by other disciplines, such as sociology and political science. Hence a large body of literature from this range of disciplines was reviewed for this paper. Findings from selected studies conducted in New Zealand, Europe and the US that provide empirical evidence regarding economic threat theory and cultural threat theory are highlighted. Most studies employ quantitative data to provide individual, country, international and comparative analysis of determinants of attitudes. Future research on this topic could include the qualitative measurement of attitudes, as this has been largely neglected in the literature. A broad conclusion is that those who feel culturally threatened will prefer immigrants who are culturally akin to themselves in order to preserve cultural and national identity whilst those who feel economically threatened prefer immigrants who are very different to themselves and thereby are not in direct competition with them. The variety of scholarly opinions found in the literature has led to a rigorous and continuing debate regarding the key determinants of attitudes towards immigrants and immigration – whether they be positive or negative.

## Introduction

Immigration is not a new phenomenon. People have been crossing international borders for centuries to seek new opportunities and living conditions. However, in modern times, and during the last 30 years in particular, the world has experienced a large volume of migration – leading to an unprecedented stock of immigrants in some developed countries. This has been argued to be the result of three revolutions: The Communication Revolution where rapid information flows across national borders have enabled better access to resources in other countries; the Transport Revolution, which reflects the ease and low cost of travel; and the Rights Revolution which reflects human rights conventions which have allowed expansion of equal rights in most countries (Martin, 2013). The combination of these developments has enabled and encouraged much of the rise in numbers of cross-border movers.

Since 1990, the number of international migrants increased by 65% in the global North, and by 34% in the global South (OECD, 2013). This significant growth in numbers of immigrants has contributed to growing cultural and ethnic diversity in many developed countries. This has caught the attention of many scholars from around the world who seek to understand the impacts of such social change. A great deal of research exists about the causes and impacts of immigration, however this paper focuses on an important topic in this literature, namely the attitudes towards immigrants and immigration and factors that have contributed to these attitudes. The aim is to provide a brief review of some theoretical understandings of attitudes toward immigrants and immigration from the perspective of members of the receiving country. It will do so by examining the findings from studies based on two theoretical paradigms: the economic threat of immigration and the cultural threat of immigration respectively. These two literatures were selected based on my own disciplinary background and the disciplines represented in NIDEA.

## Literature Review

Publications were selected for this directed study course on the basis of the proposed theory of the author(s), the country in which the research was conducted, and the year of publication. The objective was to provide comprehensive and contemporary coverage of both economic and cultural threat theories from a global perspective. What became apparent was the dominance of the deductive reasoning approach and the near-exclusive use of quantitative data to understand the determinants of attitudes toward immigrants and immigration.

One of the ways in which the selected literature can be classified is the means of accessing data for analysis. Some of the literature employs existing international-level data to enable international comparisons, whilst others use existing country-specific data to highlight findings applicable to one country only – or for comparison with another. Few authors conducted surveys themselves specifically for the purpose of explicitly studying attitudes towards immigrants and immigration. However, I have found that using pre-existing international level social survey data can be limiting, as will be discussed later in this report.

In New Zealand, Masgoret & Ward (2006, 2008) and Johnstone et al. (2010) conducted independently research specifically for the purpose of studying attitudes in a single country, i.e. Aotearoa New Zealand. Given that attitudes vary greatly across countries and contexts, these surveys provided questions specific to attitudes toward immigration in the New Zealand context which, I argue, tends

to lead to more robust findings than studies based on data from multi-country studies. An example of the latter is New Zealand research by Grbic (2010) who used pre-existing data from the 1995 and 2003 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP).

Other studies, such as Burns & Gimpel (2000) and Scheve & Slaughter (2001) also used pre-existing country-level data – in both cases from the American National Election Surveys of 1992 and 1996. Such surveys provide easy access to public opinions on many factors which affect public perceptions of social well-being, however they are not designed to directly investigate immigration-specific attitudes. Hainmueller et al. (2015) conducted independent research using a targeted survey of US employees in 12 different industries. This innovative approach adds rigour to the study by Hainmuller & Hopkins (2013) in 2014. The overwhelming majority of the remaining literature reviewed drew on pre-existing studies conducted at the international level such as the World Values Study, the European Values Study, and the European Social Survey.

Such studies are useful to enable comparative conclusions. However, comparisons can be problematic due to varying respondents' interpretations of questions, idiosyncratic interpretations of what constitutes an immigrant and prevailing levels of immigration in any particular country (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010). For example questions such as, 'Do you think current levels of immigration are 'too high, too low, or about right'' can be interpreted differently depending on country-specific characteristics such as the prevailing economic conditions and immigration policy. Further weaknesses in this approach to research is that these surveys are developed to understand attitudes to a wide range of social phenomena – they are not developed specifically for the purpose of studying attitudes toward immigrants and immigration, and therefore can be limiting in their findings.

Compounding this are the apparent inconsistencies in the findings, with either economic or cultural threat being argued to be the key determinants of attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. Whilst some studies argue that economic threat is the key determinant, others argue that cultural threat is more important. Further research could benefit from conducting country-specific research, designed specifically to investigate only immigration-related attitudes resulting from a perception of economic or cultural threat. Such research could also benefit from using additional methodologies, endorsing the credibility that qualitative data can offer such studies.

A vast body of knowledge in previous studies have identified the necessity to examine the numerous individual and situational predictors or variables when examining attitudes in relation to existing theory. A range of factors have been argued to be associated with the findings – **age** (Bauer, Lofstrom, & Zimmermann, 2000; Card, Dustmann, & Preston, 2005; Grbic, 2010; Johnston, Gendall, Trlin, & Spoonley, 2010; OECD, 2010; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011), **education and labour market**

**conditions** (Bauer et al., 2000; Card et al., 2005; Grbic, 2010; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2013; Johnston et al., 2010; OECD, 2010), and **location** (Card et al., 2005; Johnston et al., 2010). These factors must not be overlooked when analysing findings.

Less has been written about symbolic interaction theory. This theory asserts that people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them, and that these meanings are derived from social interaction (Aksan, Kısac, Aydın, & Demirbuken, 2009). By addressing the subjective meanings that people construct toward immigrants and how this is (re)produced in daily social interactions could be worthwhile exploring in future research. This would include the use of qualitative data. Again I argue that this is missing in the present literature on the subject.

## Discussion

Previous research has identified two prominent theories which can be argued to be the key determinants of negative attitudes toward immigrants; namely: economic threat theory (Bauer et al., 2000; Malhotra, Margalit, & Mo, 2013; Mayda, 2006; Scheve & Slaughter, 2001) and cultural threat theory (Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan, & Lahav, 2015; Grbic, 2010; Pettigrew et al., 2011; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001; Ward & Masgoret, 2006). Theoretical conversations around the key determinants of attitudes are at times consensual, but at other times hotly contested. With respect to economic threat, some scholars have argued that immigrants increase competition for jobs or suppress the wages of locals. Support for a cultural threat can be found among those who believe that immigrants induce a threat to national identity or 'way of life'.

### Definition and constructs of immigrants and immigration

Much of the literature interchangeably uses of the terms migrant and immigrant. The Merriam-Webster (2016) defines the term '*migrant*' as "a person who moves regularly in order to find work". The key message in this definition is 'moves regularly'. Conversely, the term '*immigrant*' is defined as "a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence". Here the key word is 'permanently'. However, in much of the scientific literature and in public discourse the terms migrant and immigrant are used interchangeably. Keeping in mind the perceived permanency of immigration, this paper employs the term *immigrant* to articulate what determines attitudes on the basis of a mental position with regard to the impact, threat or opportunity that immigrants pose in a receiving country. These attitudes will be explored from individual, group and national level perceptions.

**Who is considered an immigrant?** This question is often unclear in public debates (The Migration Observatory, 2011). There are three dimensions typically used to further clarify the 'permanent' component. The first is country of birth, second is nationality and thirdly length of stay. It should be noted that, in the current New Zealand context of large increases in measured immigration (Permanent and Long-Term Arrivals), most of the increase is due to temporary migration (i.e. foreign students and those on fixed term work contracts). Yet the public and the media continue to perceive the increase in immigration to be due to the arrival of people seeking to live in New Zealand indefinitely.

**Who likes immigrants? Who doesn't?** Those who tend to view immigrants and immigration positively are more likely to be younger, more educated, and have frequent and voluntary contact with immigrants (Card et al., 2005). Those who are less likely to view immigrants in a positive vain are those who feel threatened by the existence of immigrants due to the perceived competition that immigrants pose to the consumption of, and competition for scarce resources (economic threat theory, as noted above), or the threat that immigrants pose for group and national identity (cultural threat theory).

**Who cares?** The debate began in Europe in the early 1800s, and continues some 200 years on, although the debate has intensified and is much more based on empirical evidence driven by the vast growth in statistical information on immigration and impacts in recent decades.

The idea of economic and cultural threats from immigration is not new, as can be shown by the following historical quote from the US:

"....to colonize their subjects who come to this country for the purpose of maintaining in them a love of their mother country. This was accomplished through agents of the home government and church sent here to keep them from imbibing a knowledge of, and affection for, the institutions of the United States, which might, and probably would, result in their purchase of homes here and final expatriation from their own country. That result meant a permanent loss to those countries of the allegiance and usefulness of such of their subjects as adopt our views and become American citizens, as well as loss of the enormous aggregate revenue sent back annually by those who cherish the intent of ultimately returning, buying homes and living on the proceeds of their savings." as cited in (Tosti, 1905, p. 74)

Negative sentiments such as this have been a catalyst for anti-immigration attitudes. One hundred and twelve years on we are more liberal in our remarks but some of this discourse remains prevalent in many receiving countries.

The purpose of studying attitudes towards immigrants can be political. The findings of research regarding the determinants of attitudes regarding immigration can be used by governments of receiving countries to produce policies which can assist in encouraging positive attitudes. Such

findings can be operationalised through informing immigrant integration policies, and quotas on types and numbers of immigrants entering the receiving country.

Attitudes towards immigration is a topic that has attracted the interest from virtually all social sciences. However, the main disciplines in this respect are economics, sociology, political science and psychology. Much of the research, however, crosses disciplinary boundaries. The Venn diagram (Figure 1.) on the next page shows how examples of recent research can be positioned in terms of (cross)-disciplinary perspectives.

## **The Economic Paradigm – Labour Market Competition Theory (LMCT)**

The economic debate is relatively straightforward. Immigration has an economic effect that is primarily due to the impact that immigration has on the size and composition of the labour force of the receiving country (Longhi, Nijkamp, & Poot, 2010). On an individual level, public perception of this impact can range from one end of the spectrum to the other. Those who argue that immigration has negative consequences, for example that immigrants provide competition for a given number of jobs, stand opposite to those who argue that immigration has positive labour market consequences - that immigration creates jobs. This juxtaposition has been extensively explored in the literature (see Longhi et al., 2010). The conclusion from this literature is that there is little evidence of immigration lowering wages and increasing unemployment at the macro level. Instead, only the native born whose labour market outcomes are negatively affected by immigration are those who are direct substitutes for the migrants in narrowly defined labour markets (e.g. native born taxi drivers' vis-à-vis immigrant taxi drivers). Let's consider the evidence for this conclusion in the literature.

Firstly, the literature suggests that immigrants may create unfair competition to the native born in some labour markets (Bauer et al., 2000; Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015; Johnston et al., 2010; Malhotra et al., 2013; OECD, 2010; Schlueter, Meuleman, & Davidov, 2013). Recent research which has empirically verified Labour Market Competition Theory (LMCT) suggests that the level of competition will depend on factors such as: 1) the skill levels of both immigrants and natives of the receiving country; 2) the current economic situation of the receiving country; and 3) the relative effects on both the demand and supply side of the labour market.

# (CROSS)-DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMMIGRANTS

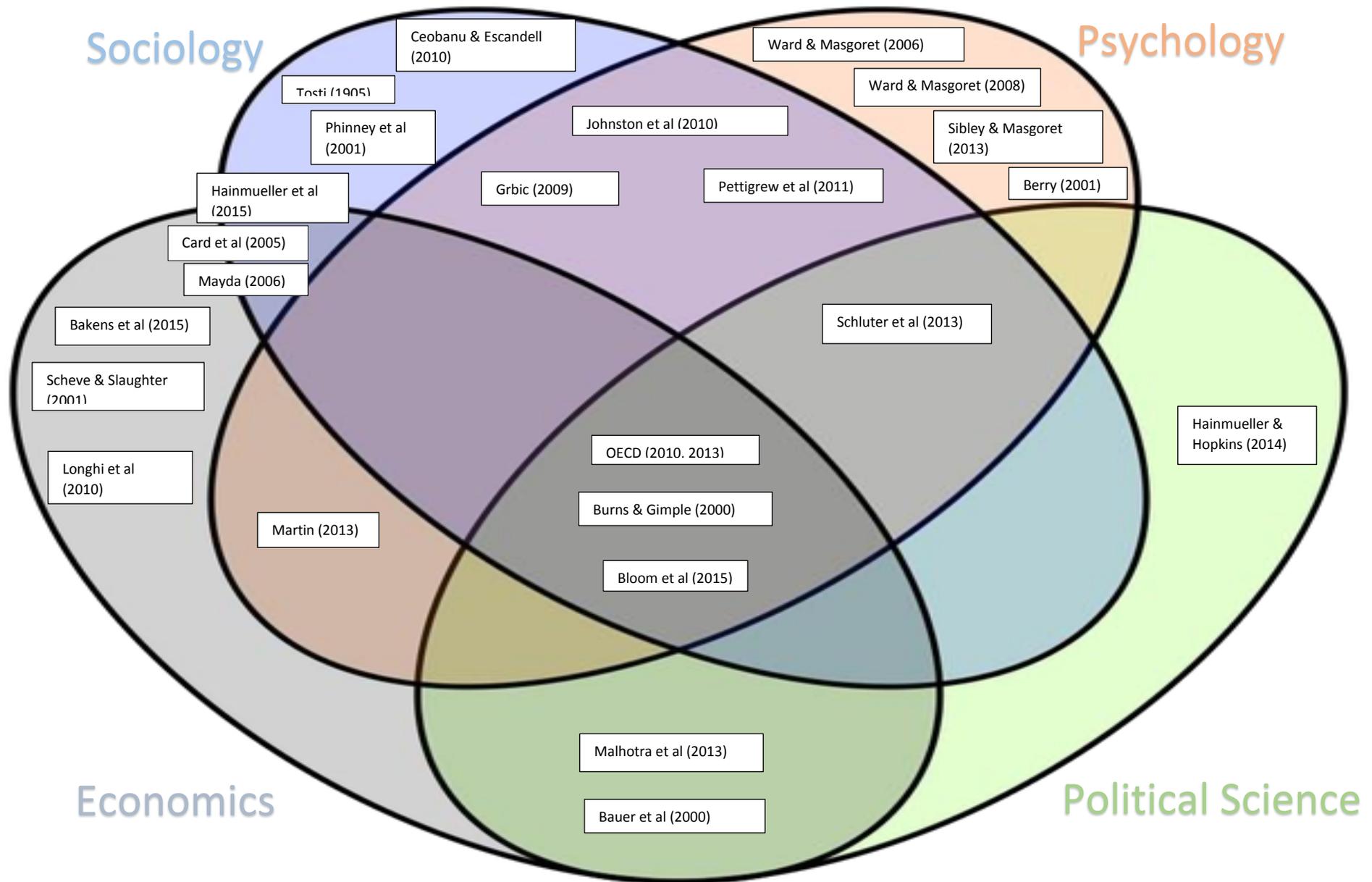


Figure 1. (Cross)-disciplinary

The skill level debate is supported by Mayda (2006) who suggests that low-skilled immigrants will be in competition with low-skilled natives, just as much as high-skilled immigrants will be in competition with high-skilled natives. In other words, natives will hold negative attitudes towards immigrants who are similarly skilled. This is supported by Scheve and Slaughter (2001) who suggest that competition will depend on skill levels of both groups. Another position, supported by Hainmueller, Hiscox, and Margalit (2015), offers a more simplistic view stating that natives in general prefer high-skilled over low-skilled immigrants.

Central to the argument by Burns and Gimpel (2000) is that the current economic climate of the receiving country is an important factor when considering what determines attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. They claim that when the economic climate is favourable, then so too are attitudes. Complementary to this, Mayda (2006) asserts that when GDP per capita in the receiving country is relatively high, then attitudes toward immigration will be more positive than if GDP is relatively low. Card et al. (2005) add to this simply by commenting that members of the receiving country will prefer immigrants from richer countries than those from poorer, less developed countries.

As is commonly the case, there are some dissenting research findings. For example, Ben-Nun Bloom et al. (2015) found no direct link between attitudes and skill levels, or between attitudes and the state of the national economy. Instead they support cultural threat theory in that the threat that immigrants pose to the maintenance of individual values, culture and cohesiveness was found to be a greater determinant of anti-immigrant attitudes.

A further dimension of LMCT is how attitudes toward immigrants and immigration can be affected by the perception of the impacts on the supply and demand for labour. Bakens, Nijkamp, and Poot (2015) suggest that immigrants should not only be seen as competition for labour, but also that immigrants increase the demand for resources by means of their consumption. Hence rising numbers of immigrants brings about an increased demand for output, thereby creating jobs. Additionally, these authors contend that the fiscal impact of immigration is either zero or negative. If this research finding were to be more generally accepted by the public, then attitudes towards immigrants would become more favourable.

Let's consider this fiscal impact more closely, – namely the impact upon taxes, welfare and social services (Card et al., 2005; Johnston et al., 2010; Mayda, 2006; OECD, 2010). Anti-immigrant attitudes in the public domain include the view that that immigrants induce tax-hikes and draw from welfare and social services. Evidence from Hainmueller & Hopkins, (2010) and Schlueter et al. (2013) dispute this and claim that there is no evidence to support that immigration poses a taxes-based fiscal threat

to the economy. They prefer the view that natives should be more concerned about an immigration-induced *erosion* of spending. This tax debate has been summarised by OECD (2010) who claim:

“On the one hand, the impact of low-skilled immigration on the funding of social protection will be felt more by high earners, who are most likely to be paying higher income taxes. On the other hand, if the level of funding remains the same, low-skilled immigration is liable to result in reduced benefits for native-born workers with low incomes” p. 124.

Card et al. (2005) argue that such a self-interest argument suggests that native residents could be expected to oppose inflows of immigrant groups who pay less in taxes than they receive in benefits, and support immigration by groups who will pay more in taxes than they will receive in benefits. On the other hand, natives may resent the claims made on health and education services by immigrants who are not seen to have contributed adequately to their funding, fuelling anti-immigrant sentiment.

In this context OECD (2010) comment that:

“Preferences about immigrants’ right to benefit from a social protection system can generally be put down to individual characteristics. Table III.5 [not illustrated] first of all shows, quite logically, that people who think that immigrants are net beneficiaries of the social protection system are more hostile to the idea of them receiving social benefits, whether as a matter of course or even after they have worked and paid taxes for a year.”p.134.

Similarly, Mayda (2005) agrees that an important economic factor shaping people’s stance on immigration is the perceived impact on the welfare state. In some receiving countries immigrants are likely to belong to the bottom of the income distribution, which makes them probable beneficiaries of costly welfare programs and small contributors to taxes. This in turn will affect natives’ individual contributions to and benefits from the welfare state and, therefore, their attitudes toward immigrants.

Finally, rich and educated members of the receiving country are more open to immigration than poorer and less educated members due to the former feeling low-levels of perceived economic threat (Grbic, 2010; OECD, 2010). Additionally, scholars found evidence to suggest that when the current economic climate is favourable – so then are attitudes toward immigration (Card et al., 2005; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2013; Johnston et al., 2010; Mayda, 2006; OECD, 2010; Scheve & Slaughter, 2001). Contrary to these findings, and already noted previously, Ben-Nun Bloom et al. (2015) and Burns & Gimple (2000), suggest that when empirically testing economic threat theory, they found no direct link between the state of the national economy and attitudes toward immigration.

## The Social-Psychological Paradigm – Cultural Threat and Intergroup Conflict Theory (CTICT)

The sociological-psychological debate is more complex. However, the dominant theory in this domain is Cultural Threat and Intergroup Conflict Theory (CTICT). When using this framework to understand determinants of anti-immigrants attitudes, typical questions include: Are immigrants perceived to pose a threat to a national, social or cultural identities of the receiving country? Do they diminish the strength of the dominant culture and inherent ideologies, diluting the social make-up which has been created over the course of multiple generations; Or do they enhance the culture offering the addition of new cultural norms, values and ways of life? Individual responses to such questions may be key determinants to attitudinal outcomes. These factors have been studied in much detail over time. The findings are complex because there are many factors which can influence these perceptions. As identified in numerous studies, these factors include current levels of immigration in countries surveyed, the age, skill level, education and location of respondents, personal experience, and the individual and national level economic status of the receiving country. Interestingly, many of these factors are also responsible for the attitudes explained by LMCT.

This theoretical paradigm draws upon sociological and psychological concepts and frameworks. This inter-disciplinary theory is concerned with two fundamental issues: group characteristics and contact between groups (Berry, 2001). Much of this literature argues that by understanding the differing approaches to the constructs of cultural, group and national identity, this may assist in understanding determinants of attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. CTICT also considers preference toward particular acculturation strategies of both the members of the receiving country and the immigrants themselves, and level and type of contact with immigrants.

Notions of cultural identity are well-documented in the literature. With respect to immigration this is a highly salient component due the choices and preferences made by both the immigrant and members of the receiving country as to whether to retain or surrender their cultural identity when integrating into the receiving country. A perception that immigrants pose a cultural threat to the national identity of the receiving country is regularly argued to be a determinant of attitudes (Johnston et al., 2010; Ward & Masgoret, 2008). A corollary to that is that immigrants who are of similar ethnicity, language, values, and religion as those in the receiving country are welcomed more than those who are very different and that the former therefore stimulate positive attitudes (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015; Johnston et al., 2010).

As outlined above, perceptions of threat to prevailing identities have been argued to be important factors in determining attitudes toward immigrants. This is supported by intergroup threat theory

which identifies that threat is experienced when members of one group perceive that another group is in a position which may harm features of their own group. Anti-immigrant sentiments are often felt by those who have a strong sense of national identity and who fear that immigrants may diminish some aspects of their own identity. Positive attitudes toward immigrants are then found among those who hold a more altruistic approach toward society in general. Those who hold socio-tropic values (i.e. concerns about national-level impacts as opposed to individual-level impacts, Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2013) regarding social justice and equal rights for all members of a country tend to be more accepting of immigrants and liberal immigration policy.

Berry's (1997) acculturation strategies as illustrated in Figure 2 below, are a useful starting point for understanding immigration and cultural identity (Phinney et al., 2001). The model suggests four methods of acculturation. The first is *separation (or segregation)*. Separation suggests that immigrants prefer to retain their cultural identity, opting not to adopt that of the receiving country. In contrast, the second method of acculturation has been termed *marginalisation*. This strategy involves immigrants neither retaining their own cultural identity nor that of the receiving country. Those who choose to retain their cultural identity whilst seeking daily contact with members of the receiving country prefer *integration* as a form of acculturation, whilst those who completely blend in with the culture of the receiving country and abandon their original identity prefer *assimilation*.

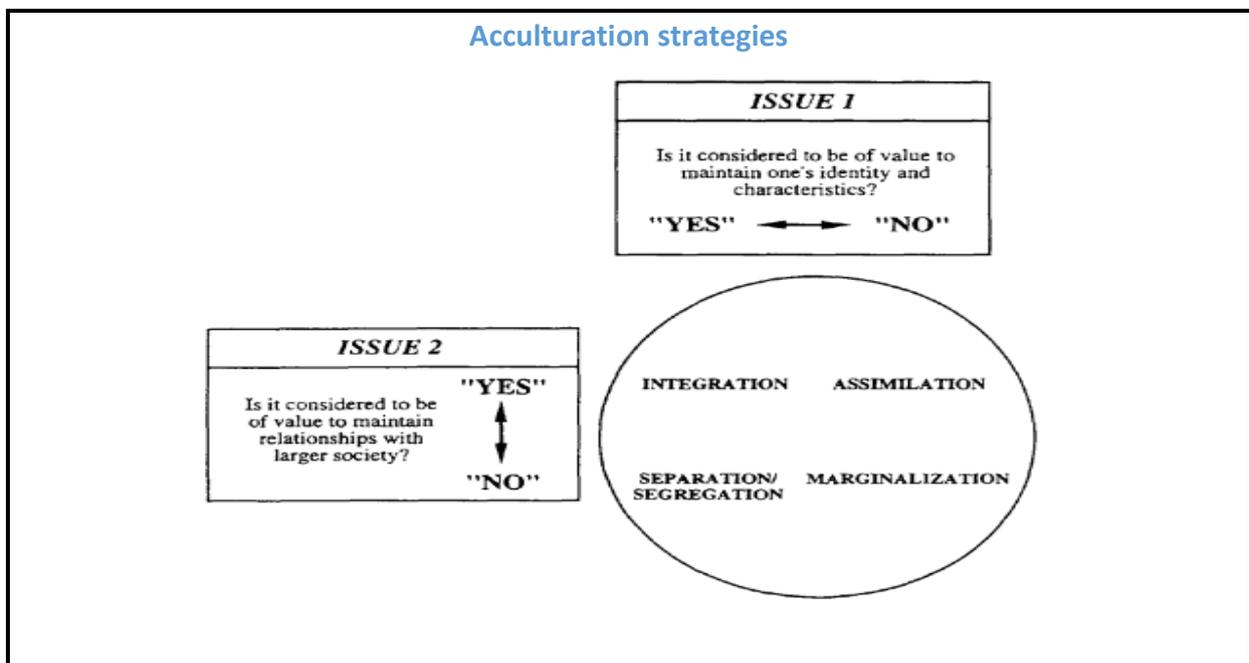


Figure 2. Source: Berry (1997).

It is well documented that integration is the preferred method of acculturation from the perspective of public policy. It is implied that when the immigrant embraces the culture of the receiving country whilst maintaining the elements of their own, this promotes a multicultural ideology and prompts the most positive attitudes toward immigrants by members of the receiving country (Berry, 2001; Grbic, 2010; Johnston et al., 2010; Phinney et al., 2001; Sibley & Ward, 2013; Ward & Masgoret, 2006; Ward & Masgoret, 2008).

Further contributions from the social-psychological field suggest that the level, and type of contact with immigrants plays a pivotal role in determining attitudes. Those who are in frequent and voluntary contact with immigrants report reduced prejudice and diminished perceptions of threat and therefore tend to be more accepting of immigration (Pettigrew et al., 2011; Ward & Masgoret, 2006; Ward & Masgoret, 2008). As reported by Johnstone et al. (2010), anti-immigrant sentiments are believed to be stronger amongst those who have little or infrequent contact with immigrants.

## A synthesis

Understanding the determinants of attitudes toward immigrants and immigration can be helpful for decision making in the public policy arena. Sensible immigration policy can effectively enhance social wellbeing for all members of society regardless of their country of birth. This can be achieved through practical integration policies which encourage multicultural ideology for the purpose of reducing perceptions of cultural threat. Additionally, continually revising evidence-based quotas on types and numbers of immigrants to assist in an equilibrium for the supply and demand for labour may also be useful in reducing perceptions of economic threat – all for the purpose of discouraging negative attitudes towards immigration.

Nevertheless, the strength of the contention and debate surrounding economic (LMCT) versus cultural threat (CTICT) do not appear to be dissipating anytime soon. This is compounded by the persistence of a variety of academic opinions. Scholars such as Ben Nun-Bloom et al. (2015) and Malhotra et al. (2013) suggest that economic and cultural threat are not mutually exclusive. They should therefore be studied in unison. Offering a contrasting insight, Hainmueller & Hopkins (2013) recommend differentiating and isolating economic and cultural factors. These authors contend that cultural effects are two to five times stronger than economic effects. Reinforcing this argument, Burns & Gimpel (2000) and Ceobanu & Escandell (2010) claim that cultural threat is more consequential than economic threat. However, counter to this argument, the economist Mayda (2006) rejects the

commonly held view that cultural factors are the most influential, contending that labour market concerns are the most influential determinants of attitudes toward immigrants.

A useful synthesis at this point - which neither isolates or combines economic and cultural threat theories - is that those who feel culturally threatened will prefer immigrants who are culturally akin to themselves in order to preserve cultural and national identity (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015; Phinney et al., 2001), whilst those who feel economically threatened prefer immigrants who are much different to themselves and will not be seen as in direct competition for similar resources (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015; Card et al., 2005).

I conclude that this debate will not abate until there can be some consensus on the methodologies and on the individual and national level variables employed to research this complex topic. This will encourage a greater understanding of the determinants of attitudes towards immigrants and immigration, and move beyond the current use of contrasting theory and methodology.

Future research on this topic could include the qualitative measurement of attitudes, as this has largely been neglected in previous literature. Such subjective meanings gathered by means of observing individuals and in-depth interviews may cast new insights beyond traditional theory.

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