

SI SE PUEDE: THE EFFECTS OF COLLECTIVE ANGST AND IDENTITY ON GROUP ACTIVISM  
DURING THE NATIONAL IMMIGRATION DEBATE

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PREVIEW

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DURING THE NATIONAL IMMIGRATION DEBATE

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PREVIEW

## **Abstract**

The United States is involved in an ongoing debate on immigration. States have passed their own laws intended to enforce federal law. The new controversial laws allow local law enforcement to act as federal immigration agents. Opponents argue these new laws unlawfully target Latinos. Latinos are of interest for politicians and lawmakers, due to their rapid growing population. The current research investigated the effects that anti-immigrant laws have on Latino citizens' American identity, ethnic identity and civic engagement. Preliminary data showed conservative Latinos have low intention of voting when primed with anti-immigrant laws. Absent from the pilot study are the emotional changes occurring. In the current study, the threat of anti-immigrant laws is amplified to induce collective angst; a fear of an uncertain future for one's group. Findings include heightened collective angst in Latinos under threat of impending restrictive immigration legislation. Collective angst mediated the effect of threat on attitudes toward collective action. Latinos who experienced threat also experienced fear for Latinos' future and led to more support for benevolent and hostile forms of collective action. Latinos also had higher support for collective action as their ethnic identity increased, when under threat. The current research adds to the body of knowledge surrounding national and ethnic identity. Further, the current research provides insight as to why ethnic minorities distance themselves from certain political parties. This research also serves to caution lawmakers who draft laws that may violate a group's civil rights.

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PREVIEW

## **Identity and Immigration Legislation**

Recently the United States has experienced an economic crisis. Following the recession in 2007 a surge of anti-immigration laws were proposed in multiple states. Arizona was among the first states to propose an uncompromising law designed to combat undocumented immigration in the state. The strictest law of its kind at signing, Arizona's SB1070, was brought to the Supreme Court to debate whether or not it violated certain civil rights. The Arizona law was fought in the Supreme Court, and other laws are headed toward court actions. In addition to the Arizona law, similar laws have been passed Indiana, Georgia, Alabama, Utah and South Carolina have passed similar anti-immigration laws in the recent years (S.1070, 2010; S.590, 2011; H.87, 2011; H.56, 2011; H.497, 2011; S.20, 2011, respectively). Although these laws often have unique aspects, most laws share one common component. The new laws allow local law enforcement to act as federal immigration agents in questioning people about citizenship, requesting documentation and allowing officers to detain individuals who cannot produce this documentation. The most controversy surrounding this element is that police officers need only to have a "reasonable suspicion" that a person is residing in the country illegally. These immigration laws are vague, instructing police to, "for any lawful stop, detention or arrest...where reasonable suspicion exists that the person is an alien who and is unlawfully present in the United States, a reasonable attempt shall be made, when practicable, to determine the immigration status of the person" (S.1070, 2010). Opponents of the laws have expressed their concern that the new laws target ethnic minorities and in essence, legalize racial profiling (Bean & Stone, 2011).

I argue that laws that seemingly target those with noticeable ethnic differences can change how one feels about their own identity, especially if one is legally protected by the law because of their nationality. For this reason, it is critical to examine the effects that immigration laws have

on ethnic and national identity. American citizens who appear foreign are immediately at risk for arrest. Among those who are most expected to be directly affected by these laws are Latino Americans. For the purposes of the current research, I define Latino Americans as those who self-identify as Mexican, Mexican American, Latino, Hispanic, Chicano or biracial Mexican and Caucasian. Latino Americans often have physical features that make their ethnicity detectable. Because of this vulnerability, Latino Americans' identity that stems from their ethnic and national group membership is expected to be heightened. Thus, the current research investigated the extent anti-immigrant laws affect ethnic and national identity and the outcome of those effects.

### **Social Identity Theory**

Social identity can be defined as one's self concept and sense of belonging to a social group such as gender, race, political affiliation, or any group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory states that people gain value from their group memberships and often work to improve their own self-esteem through their group memberships (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). Thus, social group memberships become an integral part of one's overall identity. Social identity theory also states that, under most conditions, those who highly identify with their group will exhibit increased ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation once that group is threatened (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tajfel, Billing, Bundy, and Flament (1971) conducted a landmark study to examine behavior of people who were placed into a seemingly random group with almost no similar characteristics or time to bond. Participants were briefly presented with paintings by artists Klee or Kandinsky. Subjects were led to believe that their preference of the paintings were able to meaningfully group individuals. Once the participants chose their preference for either painting, they were randomly placed in the Klee or Kandinsky group. Participants were then allowed to reward anonymous participants with money. Participants consistently favored their

own group members without forming any bond or knowing any other characteristics. Results showed that even when group boundaries are artificially and randomly created in an experiment, participants awarded the most to their ingroup rather than outgroup. Studies that followed used this minimal group paradigm and observed similar group behavior (Billig & Tajfel, 1973, Turner, Sachdev, & Hogg, 1983). Favoritism toward the ingroup as well as derogation toward the outgroup is amplified when in the ingroup is threatened or in direct competition with an outgroup, especially when groups are forced to compete for valuable resources (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). The threat of the potential loss of resources is also known as realistic threat.

### **Positive Group Distinction**

Social identity theory states that people seek a positive and distinct social identity. That is, people strive to have a positive view of their ingroup when compared to outgroups (Turner, 1999). Further, it is more desirable to belong to a high status group rather than a low status group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). Latinos make up the highest numbers in the civilian labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013), have the second lowest median household income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), and the lowest percentage of college graduates in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Latinos as an ethnic group are generally perceived by society as a low status group (Chavira-Prado, 1994). Society often supports these attitudes by passing laws that allow racial profiling (Bean & Stone, 2011). Evidence has shown that people who support anti-immigrant laws appear driven by ethnocentric bias rather than by a desire to uphold the law (Longazel, 2013). Threat to one's ethnic identity, values, or interests that are intangible is known as symbolic threat. This ethnocentric prejudice is reinforced by perceived symbolic and realistic threat (Stephan & Ybarra, 1999; Mukherjee, Molina & Adams, 2011; Mukherjee, Adams, & Molina, 2013).

Specifically, supporters of tough anti-immigration laws favor harsher punishment toward undocumented immigrants compared to their American citizen employers and toward non-White immigrants than White immigrants (e.g. Canadian) (Mukherjee, Adams, et al. in press). Such ethnocentric bias is rooted in both perceived competition for economic resources (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001; Zarate, Garcia, Garza & Hitlan, 2004) and the belief in a normative White American identity (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Zárate & Smith, 1990). These conditions make it particularly difficult for low status groups to have a positive and distinct view of themselves.

### **Permeability of Group Boundaries**

For a low status group, positive group distinction is dependent on permeable and impermeable group boundaries. Permeable and impermeable group boundaries describe group membership as flexible or fixed (van Knippenberg & Ellemers, 1993). Those who have permeable group boundaries are able to shift from one group to another. For example, the United States is widely known for its endorsement of the “American dream.” The notion is that you can be born into poverty and with hard work and determination you can shift upward into a group of higher status. Permeable group boundaries provide an optimistic future for someone born into a low status group and can be associated with a positive group stereotype. Conversely, with impermeable group boundaries a negative group stereotype can be associated with those who are confined to their group. Ethnicity can be considered an impermeable boundary. Latinos may be confined to their own group and therefore must use a different approach to a distinct, positive social identity.

It is safe to infer that, under the Latino umbrella ethnicity, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans have different experiences and different feelings about SB1070 and similar laws, especially if those Latinos view themselves as White. Latino identity may change within society as well as within an individual. In this sense, ethnicity can be seen as a permeable group boundary.

## **Ethnicity as a Behavior Guide**

When looking at ethnic groups that are generally sorted into umbrellas (Asian American, European American) it is important to acknowledge subpopulations, especially when said groups are thought of as having different experiences (Tanaka, Ebreo, Linn, & Morera, 1998). Tanaka, et al. outline common problems researchers often make when comparing ethnic groups, specifically Asian Americans. Asian Americans are comprised of different ethnic groups such as Chinese Americans, Hmong Americans and Cambodian Americans. One mistake researchers often make is forcing the different ethnic groups to identify themselves as simply Asian American on a demographics form, thereby disregarding unique facets of their ethnicity that might set them apart from other “Asian Americans.” In the current study, as Latinos are referred to as anyone who self identifies with one of five set Latino categories, these problems may occur. It is noted that the institution that all of the participants are sampled from has a majority Hispanic population and is border city with many Mexican heritage residents. It is expected that those in the region who self-identify as Latino, share common cultural characteristics and experiences and are mostly of Mexican descent. Of interest for future research are the different effects the national immigration debate has on Cuban Americans, Puerto Rican Americans and Mexican Americans.

Tanaka, et al. (1998) postulate two conditions for when ethnicity should guide behavior. The first is that individuals should view their ethnic membership as “a relevant and salient guide for behavior.” The second is that being Asian American should be more apparent such that outside social conditions should make ethnic membership salient for the individual. I propose that the current research fulfills both postulates. First, restrictive anti-immigrant laws that allow for the possible persecution of citizens who *appear* foreign under reasonable suspicion make ethnic membership for Latinos both salient and a guide for behavior. Whether the behavior being guided is one of submissiveness to the laws or opposition is what is being investigated in the current research. The second proposition is met because the SB1070 and similar laws indirectly target Latino group membership with their vague language. If the only criterion for police to be able to stop or detain someone are that a person fulfills a “reasonable suspicion” of being in the country illegally, one must make their own conclusions as to what those suspicions may include. If a person in a