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Introduction

Changing attitudes toward immigration in Europe, 2002–2012: A dynamic group conflict theory approach applied to data of the European Social Survey (ESS)

Jaak Billiet a, Bart Meuleman a, Eldad Davidov b

a CeSO, University of Leuven, Parkstraat 45 Box 3601, 3000 Leuven, Belgium
b GESIS-Central Archive for Empirical Social Research, University of Cologne, Germany

Since ESS first round in 2002 several comparative studies on changing attitudes toward immigrants are published. The availability of repeated two item-sets measuring attitudes towards immigrants (2 x 3 items) in the core module of each biennial survey (2002-2014) made these studies possible. In this presentation, we will focus on our own studies that are based on dynamic group conflict theory. Two of our own studies combine a longitudinal and cross-country perspective, and focus on the changes between countries and over time in the attitudes towards immigration. The longitudinal effects of changes in the economic context and immigration flows on anti-immigration attitudes in respectively 17 (Meuleman, Davidov & Billiet, 2007) and 26 European countries (Meuleman, Davidov & Billiet, 2016 in review) were also studied. A third study analyzed the fifth round of ESS (2010-2011) that contains a module on the individual’s economic conditions (on the labor market) in times the economic crisis (Billiet, Meuleman & De Witte, 2014). We wanted to find out how a vulnerable position on the labor market and recent changes in the individuals’ economic condition were related to perceived ethnic threat, and how far these individual level relations were affected by variation in the country’s economic context?

In the latter study it was found that at the micro level, unemployment, job insecurity, and income deterioration early in the period of economic crisis (2008-2010) affected perceived ethnic threat, as predicted by group conflict theory. These effects were however rather small. Among the context variables, only Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth showed an effect in the expected direction: perceived threat seems higher in countries in which GDP growth is lower. The design of this study, that contained short-term retrospective questions did not allow to conclude that changes in the economic context lead to changes in attitudes towards immigrants (Billiet, Meuleman & De Witte, 2014). A significant cross-level interaction for economic growth suggests that the threat-inducing effect of unemployment is stronger in contexts where GDP growth is high. This finding contradicts our hypothesis, and might be explained by the emergence of a generalized feeling of economic insecurity in countries severely hit by the economic crisis. Strong feelings of economic insecurity – and high levels of perceived ethnic threat - might be also be present among those who are employed, thereby diminishing the gap with the unemployed.

The two cross-sectional longitudinal studies are evidently better suited to answer the question whether changes in economic context lead to changes in attitudes toward foreigners. This is in particular the case for the most recent study that covers the 2002-2012 period (Meuleman, Davidov, & Billiet, 2016 in review). Analyzing this cross-national time series by means of societal growth curve modelling makes it possible to set longitudinal effects apart from cross-sectional differences, and to overcome the weaknesses of previous studies relying only on cross-sectional data. In absence of strict experimental data, the combination of multiple countries with longitudinal (quasi panel) data at the macro level is an optimal design to study change, and to closely approach a causal interpretation (see Campbell & Stanley, 1966).

Our results provide clear evidence for the existence of longitudinal effects of economic conditions on economic threat perceptions. Growing unemployment as well as decreasing rates of economic growth are found to instigate feelings of economic threat, thereby lending support to the dynamic
version of group conflict theory. A severe economic shock produces an effect on economic threat perceptions similar in size to the effect of social class or political orientation, and this effect differs in strength according to educational level. Contrary to feelings of economic threat, feelings of cultural threat appear to be detached from the economic dynamics studied.

**Discussion in seminar:** focus on the weakness and strength of multi-country cross-sectional data at individual level combined with (quasi) panel data at the country level...

Other questions...

**Literature**

