



Review

Prejudice towards Immigrants: A Conceptual and Theoretical Overview on Its Social Psychological Determinants

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Abstract: Immigration processes and the possible marginalization of ethnic minorities in the receiving countries are essential issues in contemporary societies. Prejudice and discrimination can be critical obstacles to immigrants' integration into the host country and can severely affect their well-being and mental health. This theoretical and conceptual overview aims to highlight the critical social-psychological processes underlying attitudes toward immigrants. First, it tackles the social psychological roots of social prejudice by focusing on the role of individual (ideological, motivational, and cultural) factors and categorization processes. Second, it examines how contextual factors such as intergroup perceptions and structural relations can lead to high levels of prejudice and discrimination towards immigrants. This review highlights how prejudice against immigrants can be driven by various factors at the individual and contextual level, suggesting that programs aimed at facilitating harmonious relations in contemporary multi-ethnic societies should consider such different determinants. Accordingly, the conclusion discusses possible interventions that can promote better relations between the majority and immigrant groups and counteract the negative impact of discrimination.

Keywords: prejudice; immigrants; social psychological determinants



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1. Introduction

The immigration process and the possible marginalization of ethnic minorities in the receiving countries are essential issues that societies have to care about. Social prejudice and discrimination are severe obstacles for immigrant groups to develop a sense of belonging to the new society and are critical for their mental health ([The APA Presidential Task Force on Immigration 2013](#)). Thus, prejudice and discrimination¹—whether against economic migrants, asylum seekers, or refugees—must be regarded as major concerns for public health.

The issue of immigration is often intensely debated and divisive within society. Many people see immigrants as a threat to their country's resources, stability, and cultural character (e.g., [Esses 2021](#); [ICMPD 2019](#); [Nese 2022](#)), and therefore display their prejudice against them or even behave in a discriminatory way. Socio-psychological research has pointed out that prejudice and its behavioral facet—namely, discrimination—can take different forms and has revealed that, in the last decades, overt intolerance and prejudice seem to have given way to subtler or ambivalent expressions of negative intergroup attitudes ([Dovidio et al. 2013](#); [Quillian 2006](#)). Even though immigrants continue to be victims of major discrimination (e.g., being denied housing or being denied a promotion) or hate speech (e.g., [Bilewicz and Soral 2020](#)), they often experience more “routine” forms of discrimination: For instance, they are avoided

or disrespected in public places, monitored in stores, or treated with condescendence or paternalism (e.g., [Taylor et al. 2019](#)). Even immigrant pupils are often harassed and bullied by their peers (e.g., [Alivernini et al. 2019](#); [Bayram Özdemir et al. 2016](#)) and risk being socially isolated in the classroom (e.g., [Cavicchiolo et al. 2022, 2023](#)). Moreover, teachers frequently evaluate students with immigrant backgrounds as less academically competent than native students ([Kleen and Glock 2018](#); [Menegatti et al. 2017](#)), undermining their academic performance, motivation, and well-being ([Manganelli et al. 2021](#); [Paletta et al. 2017](#)).

Based on these considerations, the present conceptual and theoretical overview focuses on the main, consolidated, social–psychosocial accounts of the origins of prejudiced attitudes against immigrants to provide a detailed picture of the state of the art on factors that might account for prejudice towards this stigmatized social group. Given that systematic reviews on the social psychological accounts of prejudice already exist (e.g., [Brown 2010](#); [Esses 2021](#)), the goal of the present contribution was to provide a comprehensive illustration of the variety of individual (ideological, motivational, and cultural) and contextual (intergroup perceptions and structural relations) factors that can be called into play to explain prejudice and discrimination against immigrants. In this respect, and differently from available reviews on the same topic (cf. [Esses 2021](#)), this contribution also aimed to enlarge the analysis of the individual-level factors associated with high levels of prejudice (e.g., epistemic cognitive motivations, moral motivations, and cultural motivations). By doing that, we aim to offer new insights into how multiple factors (e.g., social cognitive processes and individual-level motivations) that previous reviews have considered in isolation might have joint effects on prejudice.

Indeed, acknowledging this fact might completely change how scholars think about intervention tools (e.g., [Paluck et al. 2021](#)) since it might reveal—for instance—that intergroup contact works better for individuals with specific motivational mindsets (e.g., in terms of motivated closed-mindedness; [Baldner and Pierro 2019b](#); [Dhont et al. 2011](#)).

In the conclusion, we will briefly reason on possible interventions that can promote better relations between the majority and immigrant groups and counteract the negative impact of discrimination.

2. Social Psychological Accounts of Prejudice

Social prejudice has been a crucial issue for social psychological research for decades. [Allport \(1954\)](#) pivotally defined it as “an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization (. . .) directed towards a group as a whole or towards an individual because he is a member of that group»” (p. 10). Importantly, as stressed by [Brown \(2010\)](#), although prejudice can be both positive and negative, its negative, derogatory, and hostile form afflicts many societies worldwide and, therefore, asks for a deep understanding. As underlined in such definitions, the social cognitive roots of prejudice can be found in the social categorization process that leads individuals to distinguish between “us” (the groups they belong to) and “them” ([Tajfel and Turner 1979](#)).

Besides paving the way for social cognitive accounts of prejudice based on the process of social categorization, [Allport \(1954\)](#) also provided the idea of a generalized tendency towards prejudice, stating that someone who has prejudicial attitudes towards one group refuses all other (minority) outgroups (cf. [Roets and Van Hiel 2011](#); [Roets et al. 2012](#)). This calls into play the problem of whether individual differences explain the endorsement of prejudice or if situational (i.e., contextual) cues shape it. In this regard, we will first outline the person-based approaches that explain differences in prejudice in terms of personal traits, ideologies, or motivations. Second, we will briefly review critical studies concerning the automatic nature of prejudice. Then, we will describe the contextual cues highlighted in the literature as factors eliciting prejudicial views of others.

2.1. The Role of Individual Differences, Ideologies, and Motivations

Some theoretical approaches have provided explanations of prejudicial attitudes and discrimination focusing on individual-level factors. Among these, we can distinguish indi-

viduals' personality traits (e.g., authoritarian personality, Big Five Traits, etc.), ideologies (e.g., right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation), epistemic motivations (e.g., need for cognitive closure), moral motivations (e.g., binding moral foundations), and cultural motivations (e.g., desired cultural tightness).

2.1.1. Personality Traits

Prejudice and intergroup hostility can be predicted based upon stable and enduring personal characteristics. [Adorno et al. \(1950\)](#) were the first to consider prejudice as an expression of a personality trait, namely, the authoritarian personality. People with this trait suffer from the psychopathological consequences of hierarchical parent–child relations and express their hostility by attacking others. Also, there is evidence that the Big Five traits ([Goldberg 1990](#)) of agreeableness (i.e., being kind and gentle vs. rude and harsh) and openness to experience (i.e., being innovative and unconventional vs. shallow and conventional) predict more positive attitudes towards immigrants; whereas neuroticism (i.e., being moody and anxious vs. relaxed and calm) is associated with more negative attitudes (for a review, see [Hodson and Dhont 2015](#)). Moreover, [Sibley et al. \(2010\)](#) highlighted that high scores on personality factors were predictive of prejudice to a low extent if the nature of the target group was not considered (e.g., derogated/low-status outgroups and dangerous groups). More recently, [Ashton et al. \(2004\)](#) proposed the HEXACO model of the personality structure, differently representing Agreeableness and Emotionality. This model also added a sixth dimension, Honesty–Humility, tapping sincerity, fairness, and modesty versus deception, greed, and slyness. This additional dimension is very relevant to prejudice (cf. [Hodson and Dhont 2015](#)) since individuals high in Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy show high levels of prejudice ([Hodson et al. 2009](#)). These latter clinical constructs (known as the “dark triad”; [Jonason and Webster 2010](#)) underline a malicious and antisocial nature and thus are easily associated with prejudice. Overall, it must be acknowledged that these trait-based approaches to prejudice have been criticized since they provide relatively inflexible explanations of intergroup discrimination/prejudice; whereas, in reality, intergroup antipathy can arise and dissipate within dramatically short spaces of time ([Abrams and Hogg 1988](#)).

2.1.2. Ideologies

Among person-based variables, the positive association between ideological constructs and prejudice has been underlined (e.g., [Duckitt and Sibley 2009](#)). The idea that individuals with authoritarian personalities are more prejudiced has been renewed and updated by [Altemeyer \(1981\)](#), who introduced the concept of Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA). Altemeyer stressed that the roots of RWA are not related to psychodynamic explanations but to teaching and modeling, particularly during adolescence. More specifically, RWA is conceived as an individual's ideology expressing adherence to conventional norms and values, uncritical submission to authorities, and aggressive feelings towards people violating the norms ([Altemeyer 1981](#)). In other words, it expresses the motivational goal of establishing and maintaining societal security, order, and cohesion. This theorization has been recently encompassed in the dual motivational model of ideology, politics, and prejudice formulated by [Duckitt and Sibley \(2009\)](#), who stressed that the path through which RWA leads to high levels of prejudice is rooted in the perception that the social/group context is dangerous and threatening.

Another individual ideology associated with higher prejudicial attitudes and legitimization of inequalities is the social dominance orientation (SDO; [Sidanius and Pratto 1999](#)). The SDO indicates an individual's worldview about social hierarchies and the groups that deserve to be superior to others and are not directly related to a specific political ideology. People high in SDO are less sensitive to moral violations and the welfare of others. In contrast, people with low SDO are motivated by egalitarianism and altruistic social concerns, prioritizing fairness and harm avoidance. Given that SDO is also strongly linked with perceived competition by immigrants ([Duckitt and Sibley 2010](#))—in line with predictions of the ethnic

competition theory (Scheepers et al. 2002)—evidence has consistently shown that individuals with high SDO have more negative attitudes toward immigrants (e.g., Küpper et al. 2010).

Developmental studies have underlined this association (e.g., Bratt et al. 2016). In this respect, it is essential to underline that children's sensitivity to intergroup inequality is associated with parents' SDO (Tagar et al. 2017). Children of parents with low SDO were more fairness-oriented towards outgroups, whereas those of parents high in SDO favored the ingroup. Interestingly, Albarello et al. (2020) provided longitudinal evidence on the associations between adolescents' SDO, prejudice towards migrants, and social inclusiveness across time. They found that SDO was associated with higher prejudice at Time 1, which in turn led to higher levels of SDO at a later time (Time 3), thus stressing that SDO is malleable, at least in adolescence.

Among ideologies, Hodson and Dhont (2015) highlighted further "rationalization constructs" or legitimizing myths that provide moral or intellectual legitimization to inequalities in society. People endorsing ideologies that justify the status quo, for instance, the belief that "prejudice is justified, normative, and 'understandable'" (p. 21), are more likely to accept prejudice towards outgroups.

Similarly, beliefs in a just world (Lerner and Miller 1978) allow people to cope with inequality as they stress an individual's motivation to believe that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. Interestingly, such beliefs are related to the justification of the status quo, as encompassed in the system justification theory (Jost 2020; Jost and Hunyady 2003). On the contrary, individual endorsement of values, such as self-transcendence values (Schwartz 2010), can be (negatively) associated with individuals' prejudicial tendencies.

2.1.3. Epistemic Cognitive Motivations

The need for cognitive closure (NCC; Kruglanski 1989; Kruglanski et al. 2009) is another individual-level difference associated with intergroup biases and prejudice (e.g., Roets et al. 2012, 2015). Even though it can be conceptualized as an individual trait (cf. Webster and Kruglanski 1994), the NCC is a motivation to search for epistemic certainty and avoid the ambiguity that starts when individuals are confronted with a question they do not have an answer to and stops when the answer is found. Individuals with a high NCC tend to prefer stable environments and secure knowledge while disliking change (Kruglanski 2004). For these reasons, they refer to their groups as sources of knowledge stability (i.e., group centrism hypothesis; Kruglanski et al. 2006). As a consequence, high NCC individuals will be more likely to have negative attitudes toward outgroups such as immigrants (Dhont et al. 2011) since they represent a change that might threaten natives' realistic and symbolic resources (Stephan and Stephan 2000). Interestingly, a recent contribution (Albarello et al. 2023b) related the NCC with the so-called prejudice-prone personality theorized by Allport (1954), providing the first empirical test that individuals with high NCC are prejudiced towards multiple outgroups to the same extent.

The NCC might also be a feature of environments, which can be raised by threatening societal/ecological conditions causing uncertainty. As a consequence, during wars, worldwide pandemics, and economic and environmental crises, the increased NCC might, in turn, intensify prejudice against immigrants (Albarello et al. 2023a; Mula et al. 2022).

2.1.4. Moral Motivations

Other motivational factors that lead to enhanced prejudice towards immigrants have been highlighted by research on moral foundations (e.g., Baldner and Pierro 2019a, 2019b). According to the moral foundations theory (Graham et al. 2011; Haidt 2012), people judge what is right or wrong through moral intuitions rooted in the culture. Specifically, while the individualizing foundations of Fairness and Care emphasize protecting individuals and guaranteeing individual rights and prosperity, the binding foundations emphasize preserving larger groups (e.g., overall culture) through duties, loyalty, and purity. Studies have consistently shown that the binding moral foundations predicted prejudice (e.g., Baldner

and Pierro 2019a, 2019b; Bianco et al. 2021; Federico et al. 2016), whereas the individualizing foundations are negatively associated with intergroup prejudice (e.g., Federico et al. 2013; Forsberg et al. 2019). Importantly, research has underlined that these moral motivations can be prompted by other individual-level factors such as RWA, SDO, or NCC. For instance, Hadarics and Kende (2018) showed that binding foundations mediated the effect of RWA on prejudice towards dissident groups, including immigrants. In contrast, individualizing foundations mediated the effect of SDO on the same groups.

Interestingly, Strupp-Levitsky et al. (2020) argued that the epistemic and existential motivations to reduce uncertainty and threat that underlie political ideologies (e.g., conservatism and system justification; Jost et al. 2003) elicit the endorsement of binding moral foundation in terms of preference for ingroup loyalty, defense to authority, and enforcement of purity sanctions (Kugler et al. 2014), thus stressing their role as antecedents of individuals' higher endorsement of moral motivations to protect their groups.

Overall, these contributions suggest that it is crucial to deepen knowledge of the intertwined effects of different kinds of individual-level antecedents of prejudice and to address the complex psychological processes underlying anti-immigrant prejudice.

2.1.5. Cultural Motivations

Recent contributions bridging insights from cultural psychology and social psychology of prejudice have underlined the role of desired cultural tightness–looseness in affecting prejudice. Cultural tightness is defined as “the strength of social norms, or how clear and pervasive norms are within societies, and the strength of sanctioning, or how much tolerance there is for deviance from norms within societies” (Gelfand et al. 2011, p. 1226). In this vein, strengthening social norms in response to threats serves as an adaptive mechanism that helps individuals coordinate to survive, but it can also lead to intolerant attitudes towards outgroups (e.g., immigrants, Dhont et al. 2011, and homosexuals, Brandt and Reyna 2010). Consistent evidence has been collected on the relation between individuals' desire for their culture/society to be tight and high levels of anti-immigrant prejudice (e.g., Gelfand 2018; Mula et al. 2021, 2022) since people with high desired cultural tightness view immigrants as sources of chaos disrupting the social order they seek for (cf. Goffman 2009; Jackson et al. 2019).

This individual motivation is indeed fostered by situational uncertainty. For instance, Albarello et al. (2023d) showed that the situational threat of COVID-19 led people with a high NCC (Kruglanski 1989) to desire that their society endorse high cultural tightness through stricter definitions of allowed and forbidden behaviors in order to fight the spread of the virus. This, in turn, led to increased negative attitudes towards immigrants, who were perceived as disturbing the social order or competing with the ingroup of natives in terms of access to resources.

2.2. Categorization Processes and Automatic Ethnic Prejudice

The idea that (ethnic) prejudice stems from the ordinary process of social categorization helps explain why it is so difficult to eradicate it even from societies based on egalitarian principles. In particular, race is an extremely salient dimension of person categorization, which quickly occurs in information processing. For instance, studies conducted using event-related potentials (ERPs) of White people have shown that race effects appeared in the N100 component, which occurred with a mean latency of 122 msec, with larger amplitude for black than white faces (for a review, see Kubota and Ito 2015). Given the association of the N100 with selective attention, the larger ERP responses for black faces could reflect orienting to the more threatening or salient social group. However, other studies have reported divergent findings examining other components. For instance, research involving both Black and White and both Asian and White participants has observed larger P200 responses—which reflects goal-directed attention and perceptual matching—to outgroup faces, irrespective of their race (Dickter and Bartholow 2007; Dickter and Kittel 2012; Willadsen-Jensen and Ito 2008). These results suggest that attentional processes reflected

in the P200 are sensitive to the target group membership, with greater attention directed to the threatening or novel cues represented by outgroup targets. Even more interesting is the case of the processing of children's faces. Indeed, studies have shown that infant faces, whether of own ethnicity or another, capture attention equally as they possess certain features, such as a large head, chubby cheeks, and big eyes, which make them appear cute and trigger the observer's caregiving system (Proverbio and De Gabriele 2019). Therefore, this "baby-schema" would take precedence over the processing of ethnic affiliation (Dickter and Bartholow 2007).

Similarly, people categorize others more rapidly when they can use race than when they cannot (McCann et al. 1985). This ability appears very early in life: many studies have shown that by three years of age, children effortlessly sort people into racial categories and use membership in these categories to interpret behaviors in accord with the stereotype (Aboud 1989; Katz 1986). Thus, during socialization, cultural beliefs about social groups become well learned and are activated, without conscious awareness or intention, in the presence of members of stereotyped groups, and can consequently influence social thought and behavior (e.g., Brewer 1988; Fiske and Neuberg 1990). The consequences of these automatic activations have been shown by research conducted within the Weapon Identification paradigm. In early experiments (e.g., Payne 2001), participants made visual discriminations between guns and harmless objects right after a black or white face appeared. Results showed that guns were detected faster and were seen more often when the face was black rather than white. Additional studies revealed a similar bias in the decision to "shoot." In a video game simulation, participants were instructed to "shoot" anyone holding a gun but not to shoot targets carrying anything else. They decided to shoot Black armed targets more quickly and frequently than White targets and not to shoot unarmed targets more quickly and more frequently when they were White rather than Black (Correll et al. 2002).

Despite the above discouraging results, consistent evidence shows that ethnic prejudice is not inevitable. Although virtually everyone knows ethnic stereotypes, their influence can be diminished through controlled processing. Non-prejudiced individuals can intentionally inhibit stereotypes and replace them with belief-based responses when they are motivated to respond without bias, are aware that the stereotype has been activated, and have cognitive resources (Devine 1989). In recent years, several research programs have shown that situational or contextual factors play a central role in this inhibition process. For instance, participants who viewed videos showing Black individuals at an outdoor barbecue or in a church displayed less automatic bias than those exposed to videos depicting Black individuals in a gang or ghetto street context (Mitchell et al. 2003; Wittenbrink et al. 2001). Subsequent studies demonstrated that individuals motivated to control prejudice showed an automatic bias favoring Blacks when the context (e.g., jail) implied that the targets were threatening (Maddux et al. 2005). Other findings showed that participants with high internal and low external (normative) motivation to respond without prejudice and little external motivation to respond without prejudice displayed lower levels of implicit racial bias (Devine et al. 2002). The same was found for those who reported chronically accessible egalitarian values (Moskowitz et al. 2000).

In sum, research has documented that stereotypes and biases are not unconditionally automatically activated and that prejudiced responses can be avoided. For some individuals, negative evaluations are automatically activated when encountering a person of a different ethnicity. However, individuals can be motivated, sincerely or strategically, to monitor and avoid the effects of such activation. Moreover, there are "truly non-prejudiced" individuals who do not experience the activation of the negative ethnic stereotype or may even experience an activation of a positive evaluation (Fazio et al. 1995). Thus, it is possible to think and act without prejudice.

2.3. Contextual Factors Leading to Prejudice

Since the first studies with the minimal group paradigm (which involves laboratory groups whose members are unknown by other participants; Tajfel et al. 1971), scholars

have pointed out that categorization—i.e., the mere awareness of belonging to a group distinct from an outgroup—is generally sufficient for individuals to favor their ingroup over others (e.g., [Brewer 1979](#); [Rubini et al. 2014](#)). Such a finding has been explained by relying on the concept of social identity, intended as the part of an individual's self-image that derives from group memberships ([Tajfel and Turner 1979](#)). According to social identity theory (SIT), individuals wish to maintain a positive social identity, and, to this aim, search out various forms of positive distinctiveness for their ingroups: for instance, they favor the ingroup and show prejudice against outgroups. Accordingly, whenever individuals think of themselves as being of one national or ethnic group, they are motivated to stress the superiority of such a group over other groups in order to win social comparisons.

Whereas categorization processes are at the roots of intergroup discrimination, research has highlighted the crucial role of contextual cues in determining prejudice against members of outgroups, especially the stigmatized ones. In this section, we will discuss the role of intergroup perceptions in terms of threat, structural differences, and specific contextual cues that affect ethnic prejudice.

2.3.1. Perceived Intergroup Threat

Convergent evidence has stressed that intergroup threat (which can be defined as economic threat, cultural/values threat, safety/security threat, competition, threat to well-being/security, demographic threat, etc.; [Esses 2021](#); for reviews, see [Riek et al. 2006](#); [Rios et al. 2018](#)) is an antecedent of negative attitudes towards outgroups (e.g., [Salvati et al. 2020](#)), as well as the exclusion of minority groups (e.g., [Albarello et al. 2017, 2019](#)). Such relationships should be understood through the lens of various social psychological theorizations emphasizing the role of threat and competition as antecedents of prejudice. Among them, the ethnic competition theory ([Scheepers et al. 2002](#)) assumes that mixing different groups will likely elicit intergroup tensions due to competition over resources.

Accordingly, the natives can perceive immigrants as a threat to the ingroup's welfare ([Stephan and Stephan 2000](#); [Scheepers et al. 2002](#); see also [Stephan et al. 2016](#)), representing resource stress (i.e., the perception that, within a society, access to desired resources is limited; [Esses et al. 2001, 2010](#)) that leads to perceived group competition for resources ([Esses 2021](#)). Support for this contention comes also from sociological studies, which assumed that ethnic heterogeneity works as a threat to ingroup identity and showed that the higher the immigration rate in a country, the lower the support for social welfare expenditure ([Eger 2010](#)).

Indeed, one of the most successful theorizations has been formulated by [Stephan and Stephan \(2000\)](#), who distinguished between realistic threat (i.e., a threat to the ingroup's existence, economic, and political power, or physical or material well-being) and symbolic threat (i.e., threat related to outgroups' differential morals, values, beliefs, and standards) and showed that both types of threat predict social prejudice towards immigrants. In this respect, [Pereira et al. \(2010\)](#) found that realistic threats due to immigrants (operationalized as threats to well-being/safety and economic threat) mediated the relationship between prejudice and opposition to immigration. In contrast, symbolic threat (i.e., a threat to natives' culture/identity) mediated the effects of prejudice on opposition to the naturalization of outgroups. Interestingly, the impact of intergroup threat in enhancing prejudice and discrimination towards an ethnic outgroup was also found with an implicit measure of discrimination, such as the level of abstraction of terms used to describe the outgroup (see [Rubini et al. 2014](#)). [Albarello and Rubini \(2018\)](#) showed that both realistic (i.e., a threat to ingroup's resources) and symbolic threats (i.e., a threat to ingroup identity and culture) enhanced linguistic derogation and affective prejudice toward Roma. A similar process can be detected in teachers, who tend to implicitly provide biased evaluations of immigrant pupils (representing a demographic threat) by describing their achievements with more abstract negative and more concrete positive terms than those of native pupils ([Menegatti et al. 2017](#)).

Moreover, [Albareello et al. \(2019\)](#) investigated the role of threat to ingroup's resources and threat to ingroup's identity and culture on the projection of negative prejudice from one minority, negatively evaluated outgroup (e.g., Roma and Islamic terrorists) onto another super-inclusive and partially overlapping outgroup (e.g., Romanians and Arabs). They found that both realistic and symbolic intergroup threats led to higher affective prejudice towards the super-inclusive outgroup and the perception that the members of the minority outgroup and the super-inclusive one "were all alike," thus extending negative attitudes from one outgroup onto another. A further study ([Albareello and Rubini 2022](#)) showed that both kinds of threat enhanced the denial of human rights to the stigmatized outgroup of migrants via increasing perceived relative deprivation of the ingroup of natives.

Taking a different stance and considering demographical threat related to the (perceived) size of the immigrant population or the rate of arrivals of immigrants in the receiving country (cf. [Esses 2021](#)), various contributions highlighted the association between rising numbers of immigrants and the display of negative attitudes toward them (e.g., [Hopkins 2010](#); [Strabac 2011](#)).

2.3.2. Uncertainty as Situational Threat

Besides intergroup threats related to the outgroups, research has shown that the uncertainty raised by various situational threats (e.g., economic threats, environmental threats, pandemic-related threats, immigrant threats, etc.) works as a proxy for individual-level factors outlined above as antecedents of prejudice, such as the NCC, binding moral foundations, system justification, etc. ([Jost et al. 2003](#); [Strupp-Levitsky et al. 2020](#)). For instance, as argued by [Liaquat et al. \(2023\)](#), threat due to uncertainty explains why Republicans in the U.S. are more resistant to equality-promoting policies, irrespective of their race and ethnicity.

[Franks et al. \(2022\)](#) provided similar evidence by examining the effect of racial framing of COVID-19 outcomes (i.e., stressing the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on minorities) on decreasing support for COVID-19 mitigating policies. They showed that racial framing of the pandemic decreased support for COVID-19 mitigation policies in respondents who were high in racial bias through the mediation of perceived realistic threat related to the coronavirus (Study 1a). Symbolic threat related to the coronavirus did not mediate this relationship. Importantly, this outcome was more pronounced in those with higher beliefs in a just world ([Lerner and Miller 1978](#)), thus showing that such beliefs are associated with higher prejudice and lower approval of policies supporting minorities.

Similar findings have been highlighted by research on the NCC. Situational uncertainty operationalized in terms of individual's concern for the COVID-19 threat led individuals with high NCC to desire their country to be tighter, which in turn increased prejudice towards immigrants ([Albareello et al. 2023d](#); [Mula et al. 2022](#)).

2.3.3. Structural Features of Intergroup Relations

Social psychologists have underlined that structural features of intergroup relations can act as antecedents of prejudice and discrimination. Studies adopting the "minimal group paradigm" ([Tajfel et al. 1971](#)) identified a series of conditions under which ingroup love/favoritism (e.g., preference for ingroup members) or outgroup hate/derogation (e.g., the allocation of "penalties" to outgroup members) are likely to occur (e.g., [Moscatelli et al. 2017](#); [Rubini et al. 2014](#)). For instance, Rubini and colleagues (for a review, see [Rubini et al. 2014](#)) showed that both low- and high-power groups attributed more penalties to the outgroup compared to groups in an equal-power situation. Moreover, they also showed that high- and low-status groups described the outgroup in a more biased fashion than equal-status groups, suggesting that status asymmetries enhance outgroup derogation conveyed through language. In a similar vein, [Moscatelli et al. \(2014\)](#) examined the consequences of experiencing relative deprivation (i.e., the perception that the ingroup is worse off than an outgroup) or relative gratification (i.e., the feeling that the ingroup is better off

than an outgroup). They found that both experiences increased behavioral and linguistic discrimination towards the outgroup (cf. [Rubini et al. 2014](#)).

Even though conducted in the laboratory, these studies demonstrated that contextual structural societal differences could enhance discrimination and prejudicial attitudes towards outgroups by advantaged and disadvantaged social groups. More ecological research showed converging results. For instance, [Pettigrew et al. \(2008\)](#) found that fraternal relative deprivation was linked to prejudice against immigrants in Europe. [Guimond and Dambrun \(2002\)](#), who manipulated relative deprivation and relative gratification by bogus information on respondents' job prospects compared to an outgroup, found that both conditions increased prejudice against North African immigrants in France compared to a control condition. [Dambrun et al. \(2006\)](#) confirmed this evidence by examining prejudice against African and Western immigrants in a representative sample of South Africans. Interestingly, [Postmes and Smith \(2009\)](#) pointed out that the effects of relative gratification can be explained by increased conformism to the dominant group's norms: namely, economic and status improvements are connected to support for anti-immigration policies only when the elite's norms against immigrants are negative rather than positive. Moreover, when the ingroup advantage is portrayed as legitimate (i.e., based on merit), individuals are more prone to rely on traditional prejudice toward ethnic minorities—which implies the belief that such minorities are inherently inferior to the native majority—as a means to justify the intergroup inequalities ([LeBlanc et al. 2015](#)).

More recently, [Jetten et al. \(2021\)](#), integrating macro-economic and political science findings with socio-psychological processes, showed that all the wealth groups within a society (i.e., the poor, the middle, and the more affluent groups) become more opposed to immigrants when economic inequality is growing rather than declining. Moreover, extreme-right-wing-anti-immigrant movements can develop not only when the national economy is contracting but also when the economy is booming ([Mols and Jetten 2016](#)) since the leaders of those movements are able to turn objective relative gratification into perceived relative deprivation.

In the attempt to examine the contextual factors that determine prejudice, it is crucial to stress that stereotypes and prejudice are socially created and transmitted and that different types of prejudice target different groups. In this respect, [Fiske et al. \(2002\)](#) (see also [Cuddy et al. 2008](#)) formulated the stereotype content model (SCM), which provides a heuristic explanation of the peculiar and different contents of prejudice against social groups based on the perception of the groups in terms of warmth (i.e., trustworthiness and sociability) and competence (i.e., how capable or agentic groups are). This model also allows the detection of the multiple dimensions underlying prejudicial portrayals of a group by considering the combination of warmth (high and low) and competence (high and low). As a consequence, four types/clusters of prejudice have been theorized: (a) admiration prejudice (the most positive pattern of prejudice, usually referring to ingroups) targets highly competent and warm groups who do not compete with other groups; (b) paternalistic prejudice targets low competence and high warmth groups (e.g., older people); (c) envious prejudice portrays groups as competent but not warm, that is, as having no positive intentions toward the ingroup (e.g., Asians); and (d) finally, contemptuous prejudice targets low competence and low warmth groups (e.g., homeless people). Notably, the last pattern of prejudice is the worst one since—depending on the connection between contempt/disgust and dehumanization ([Harris and Fiske 2007](#))—it usually conveys a less human perception of the groups.

Considering these variegated socially shared perceptions of specific social groups is of utmost importance if we aim to address the roots of intergroup prejudice thoroughly. Among these, research has highlighted the crucial role of dehumanization (i.e., the denial of full humanness to individuals or groups as a specific facet of prejudice and discrimination; [Albarello and Rubini 2008](#)). In the last two decades, a considerable amount of research tackled the denial of full humanness to outgroups as a specific form of prejudice (for reviews, see [Haslam 2006](#); [Vaes et al. 2012](#)). With respect to the aim of this contribution, the

most critical finding collected in such a field is that the attribution of lesser humanness to outgroups is a factor that enhances the extent to which the group is discriminated. Interestingly, Albarello and Rubini (2015) experimentally manipulated the perceived humanity of a target and found higher linguistic derogation of the less human target expressed in the use of more abstract negative terms (Rubini et al. 2014), as well as the use of derogatory insults (Rubini et al. 2017).

3. Conclusions

Prejudice is a crucial issue that profoundly affects targeted individuals' and groups' well-being and mental health. Understanding the factors leading to prejudice and discrimination is critical to developing interventions to reduce their detrimental effects.

3.1. *The Multiple Social Psychological Roots of Prejudice*

In this contribution, we illustrated the numerous person-based and contextual factors discussed in the inherent literature as leading to higher prejudice towards social groups. Overall, we highlighted the multiple sources of prejudicial attitudes towards stigmatized outgroups such as immigrants. On the one hand, research on contextual determinants of prejudice pointed out how structural features of society (e.g., wealth distribution and economic status) and the perception of immigrants as a threat have predictable effects, suggesting that political and media communication can build on such factors to influence, at least to some degree, individuals' attitudes and proneness toward integration efforts. On the other hand, studies on person-based determinants can help clarify which individual characteristics result in relatively high and stable levels of prejudice and the necessary interventions. An intertwined analysis of the role of different variables and integration of perspectives can increase the understanding of the multifaceted origins of prejudice (Duckitt and Sibley 2009) and allow practitioners to implement more efficient interventions to challenge the detrimental outcomes of prejudice and discrimination.

3.2. *The Good News: Prejudice Can Be Challenged*

If we have reviewed the multiplicity of factors associated with prejudice, we should also stress that prejudice can still be challenged. Even though we have shown that person-based factors predispose people to be prejudiced and treat all outgroups as if they were "all alike" (Allport 1954), studies suggest that intervention aimed to reduce prejudice can be effective even for these individuals (cf. Baldner and Pierro 2019b; Roets et al. 2015). For instance, intergroup contact (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006) has been shown to reduce, under precise conditions (e.g., institutional support and monitoring; equal status of groups engaging in contact; common goals; and intergroup cooperation), prejudice towards immigrants in various contexts and with different groups (for a recent review, see Vezzali et al. 2014).

It is also important to underline that intergroup contact (direct or extended) has been consistently employed to develop interventions to reduce prejudice and discrimination at school. Nonetheless, empirical evidence supporting the contact theory in schools, particularly in European settings, is quite controversial (cf. Thijs and Verkuyten 2014; Vervoort et al. 2011). In this respect, Vezzali et al. (2019)—with a sample of Italian elementary school students—unexpectedly showed that direct contact increased negative implicit attitudes toward immigrants, whereas extended contact reduced implicit prejudice only among those with less direct contact experiences.

In addition, studies on the secondary transfer effect of intergroup contact showed that contact might lead to lower prejudice not only towards the specific outgroup (i.e., primary outgroup) met at school, but also towards further outgroups (i.e., secondary outgroups), especially in majority youth (Vezzali et al. 2019). Such evidence suggests that contact and its consequences (e.g., secondary transfer effect and reduction in intergroup anxiety) are most effective for majority members when structural inequalities characterize intergroup relations. Thus, contact cannot be conceived as a panacea for challenging prejudice when

the optimal conditions theorized by Allport (1954) (e.g., equal status of the groups) for its efficacy are not met in the specific intergroup context at stake.

Besides contact, other strategies have been outlined as social cognitive tools aimed at challenging prejudice towards immigrants. For instance, relying on the multiple categorization paradigm (i.e., providing more than four categorical dimensions to define outgroups; Crisp and Hewstone 2007) and the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000), Albarello et al. (2018) showed that salience of human identity (Morton and Postmes 2011; Wohl and Branscombe 2005; see also Turner et al. 1987) and providing multiple categorical dimensions to define a Black immigrant target led to the highest reduction in target dehumanization. Likewise, interventions relying on cognitive creativity (Crisp and Turner 2011), such as counterstereotypes or surprising category combinations (Hutter and Crisp 2008; Vasiljevic and Crisp 2013), also reduce prejudice towards others.

Not less importantly, studies in the school domain have shown a negative association between student's objective socio-economic status (SES) and anti-immigrant prejudice; that is, the higher the SES, the more individuals report positive feelings toward immigrants (Alivernini et al. 2019), and the lower they show anti-immigrant prejudice. Such evidence has been explained by stressing that students from more affluent families have more opportunities than their less advantaged peers to visit different countries and understand more about foreign cultures. As a consequence, on the one hand, this increased contact with different outgroupers contributes to broadening adolescents' views about their society and increases their tolerance toward it; on the other hand, those adolescents who have less access to socioeconomic resources might perceive immigrants as a possible threat to their interests and as competitors for the same resources, thus leading to less favorable attitudes toward immigrants. This suggests the importance of carefully disentangling the specific role of the multiplicity of factors accounting for prejudice within each specific domain of analysis.

3.3. *The Reduction in Prejudice in the School-Related Domain*

This contribution uniquely attempted to reach this goal by keeping the analytical view as broad as possible to reach a thorough understanding of the phenomenon at stake. In this respect, recent research allows us to be optimistic: in the very same context wherein youth belonging to stigmatized minority outgroups are exposed to discrimination and prejudice—that is, school—beneficial processes can be stimulated.

Albarello et al. (2023c) pointed out that the contents of prejudice toward immigrants can be affected by the extent to which adolescents are exposed to a classroom context characterized by high levels of classroom openness to discussion (i.e., a climate in which teachers motivate students to feel free to bring up issues to the class, express their own opinions, explore diverse perspectives, and respect the opinions of each other; Gniewosz and Noack 2008). These findings suggest that the classroom, with its specific compositional characteristics, can profoundly affect the pattern of adolescents' prejudice towards immigrants, as it represents a context wherein very peculiar social processes happen, such as social tuning of attitudes. Thus, interventions to foster an open-to-discussion classroom climate can be effectively implemented to challenge anti-immigrant prejudice. The role of teachers is also fundamental: Karataş et al. (2023) showed that perceived equal treatment by teachers was related to higher positive and lower negative contact over time.

In conclusion, besides stressing the detrimental factors that can lead to prejudice and its automatic nature, it is important to underline that the adverse effects of prejudice can also be challenged in youth. Various interventions are available and can be applied in contexts such as the classroom (e.g., promotion of classroom open-to-discussion climate, Albarello et al. 2023c; inter-ethnic contact institutionally supported by school administration, Vezzali et al. 2014; imagined intergroup positive contact, Vezzali et al. 2014; and making chronically salient multiple categorization dimensions to define outgroupers, cf. Albarello et al. 2020), the domain wherein youth spend most of their time and meet different others who belong to groups varying in terms of ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual preference, etc. By reducing the experience of being prejudiced in school,

young people can feel that they are respected members of the national society, and such a feeling can increase their well-being (Liebkind and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2000). This virtuous circle might have positive outcomes in society when young people grow to the age of adults. Moreover, it has to be underlined that the intervention strategies that might be implemented in the school, as well as in other domains (e.g., work domain, sports domain, etc.), all require support by institutions—for instance, through the definition of laws aimed at punishing the display of prejudicial attitudes and enactment of discriminatory behaviours (e.g., social exclusion; hate speech; bullying, etc.)—institutionalizing and guaranteeing their actualization, as Gordon Allport (1954) contended in his pivotal contribution on intergroup contact as a resource for promoting more harmonious relations with different groups. Even more importantly, as underlined in this contribution, it has to be acknowledged that the intervention strategies aimed at challenging prejudice highlighted in the literature (cf. Paluck et al. 2021) need to be carefully implemented considering the intertwined effects of individual-level variables (e.g., NCC, binding moral foundations, and desired cultural tightness) that might moderate or augment their effectiveness.

3.4. Recommendations

This contribution highlights the multiplicity and complexity of the origins of prejudice. At the same time, it raises the question of how to implement interventions that target the different factors involved. For example, community interventions aimed to promote acceptance of a refugee settlement in a certain area must be able to take into account both the possible feelings of threat, deprivation, and competition raised by such settlement and the ideological variables that can fuel prejudice towards immigrants. At the same time, outreach actions should not disregard the “natural” reactions triggered by meeting people from different and unfamiliar groups, as well as the beneficial effects of exposure to multicultural environments. Having in mind the various factors that feed distrust, fear, or negative views of immigrants—as illustrated in this review—might help maximize the effectiveness of the intervention. Similarly, this review highlights the need for research to consider simultaneously different determinants of negative attitudes towards immigrants (as well as negative attitudes of immigrants towards the native population; e.g., Tropp and Pettigrew 2005), exploring how factors at different levels intertwine and reinforce each other. As Allport (1954) stated, “plural causation is the primary lesson we wish to teach” (p. xii). Nearly seventy years later, such a claim still represents a key reminder to researchers and practitioners who wish to ameliorate reciprocal attitudes between natives and immigrants and facilitate the success of interventions in different domains.

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Note

- ¹ In line with existing literature, from now on we will broadly refer to prejudice as an attitude, thus having cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (cf. Hovland and Rosenberg 1960) and to discrimination as its behavioral facet.

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