

EXPLAINING XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of xenophobia among South Africans, which a number of researches have pointed out [1], became plain in May 2008 when widespread violent attacks were carried out by crowds of South Africans against African immigrants and other South African citizens suspected of being foreign nationals [1-2].

These attacks, which went on for over a week, resulted in a major humanitarian, political and ethical crisis for the country. Numerous African immigrants and suspected South Africans were burned and/or killed in the violence and hundreds were severely assaulted [2]. Shops belonging to African immigrants were looted. The State was forced to open a number of refugee camps for thousands of people who were displaced from their homes [2]. Cabinet and the president of South Africa were compelled to offer public statements condemning and apologising for the violence [3-4].

Clearly, antagonism against foreign nationals amongst South Africans is an issue that needs to be better understood. This information sheet presents findings from a study on antagonism toward African immigrants in Johannesburg, South Africa [5]. The study was based on an analysis determining perceptions of prejudice against African immigrants. The study tested the Integrated Threat Theory (ITT) as an explanation of xenophobic prejudice. The Integrated Threat Theory (ITT) by Stephan and Stephan is a tool used to predict attitudes towards outgroups [6]. This model provides a framework for determining the reasons behind increased anxiety and prejudice towards an outgroup. The ITT focuses on a number of variables that are thought to influence prejudice in all groups [6-7]. Questionnaire results were analysed using various quantitative statistical analysis.

WHAT IS XENOPHOBIA?

Xenophobia may be defined as the hatred and prejudice against "outsiders" or foreigners. Xenophobia is also described as a fear or contempt of that which is foreign or unknown, especially of strangers or foreign people [8].

Immigrants and citizens of immigrant origin face threat of violence motivated by xenophobia in South Africa and globally.

XENOPHOBIA, RACIALISATION AND VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

- According to the Southern African Migration Project, South Africa displays one of the highest levels of xenophobia in the world [9].
- In South Africa, xenophobia appears to be racialised in that Black immigrants are the primary targeted victims. Black immigrants from other African countries in particular are at a greater risk of being victimised than white immigrants from other continents or Africa [10].
- Xenophobia in South Africa is not restricted to fear and dislike. Instead, it results in intense tension and even violence by South Africans toward African immigrants [11].

POSSIBLE CAUSES OF XENOPHOBIA

Xenophobia may be driven by, among other, the following factors:

- Negative beliefs and stereotypes, when foreigners are perceived as endangering the existence of individuals, politically, economically and even physically
- Perceived threats to culture or national identity
- Religious doctrine
- Competition for scarce resources (e.g. housing, health care, employment)

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO XENOPHOBIC PREJUDICE

The analysis from the study on antagonism toward African immigrants in Johannesburg reveals that prejudice is related to a number of factors. According to the ITT [4-5], these factors are intergroup anxiety, negative stereotypes, realistic threats and symbolic threats:

Intergroup Anxiety: refers to feelings of discomfort that people may experience when engaging with members of a group other than their own.

Negative Stereotypes: are the expectations or predictions of negative behaviours of an out-group.

Realistic Threats: refers to threats associated with political power and economic welfare.

Symbolic Threats: occur when the in-group believes that their views, morals and values (i.e. way of life) are under attack by the out-group.

The relationship between prejudice and intergroup anxiety, negative stereotypes, realistic threats and symbolic threats are represented in Figure 1.



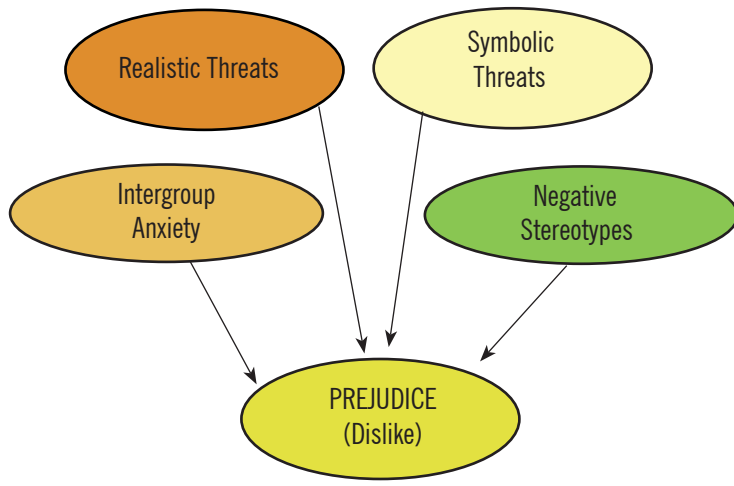


Figure 1: The relationship between prejudice and intergroup anxiety, negative stereotypes, realistic threats and symbolic threats

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Findings indicated that:

- The greater the intergroup anxiety, the higher the levels of prejudice toward African immigrants. The greater the tendency to stereotype negatively, the greater the propensity to be prejudicial.
- Feelings of realistic threat increased prejudice.
- Symbolic threats and prejudice did not show any type of relationship in this study (see Figure 2).

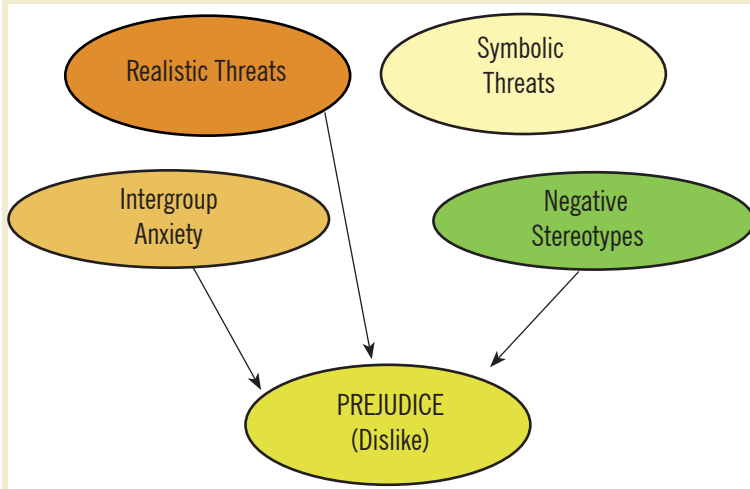


Figure 2: Relationship to prejudice as found in the study in Johannesburg

CURBING XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE

- Greater support for anti-xenophobia efforts and exposure of those media outlets that support anti-immigrant feelings.
- More coherent and integrated state intervention programmes to prevent xenophobic violence amongst South Africans, including surveillance systems in respect of xenophobia.
- Material and political support for groups working to prevent or reduce xenophobia.
- Government-led efforts to educate the police on xenophobia and to instruct them to act expeditiously in curbing xenophobic attacks.
- Government needs to provide proper information to the South African public on migration and its impact on the economy in terms of employment and health care.
- Government to improve service delivery, particularly in poor communities, in terms of housing, electricity and other basic amenities so as to reduce uncertainty and anxiety among South Africans.

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