

# Prejudice toward American Muslims

## An Integrated Threat Analysis

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### Abstract

This study explores prejudice toward American Muslims. Prejudice is conceptualized using Stephan and Stephan's integrated threat theory (ITT). ITT identifies four kinds of threat that can lead to prejudice: realistic threats, symbolic threats, stereotypes, and intergroup anxiety. Data were gathered in the United States ( $N = 281$ ) among self-identified Christians. Findings confirm: 1) a positive correlation between real and symbolic threats, and stereotypes, 2) increased contact with an immigrant group, in this case Muslims, is negatively correlated with perceptions of real and symbolic threat, and 3) levels of prejudice differ based on level of education. Theoretical and practical implications of the relationship between prejudice, interpersonal contact/communication, and education are discussed.

**Keywords:** *Prejudice, Integrated Threat Theory, Islam*

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### Introduction

Muslims in the United States have increasingly been targets of prejudice and discrimination since the terrorist attacks of September 11 (Abdo, 2005; Scroggins, 2005; Shamma, 2009). After the attacks, American politicians increasingly have used anti-Muslim rhetoric for political gain, hate crimes against Muslims have increased, and acceptance of Muslims (particularly Muslim immigrants) in the U.S. has decreased (Abbas, 2007; Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2011; González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008). Overall, Christians in the U.S., the dominant cultural group, believe Muslims are a threat to the American way of life; this assertion has been echoed in many European nations such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany (Croucher, 2008; Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2011; González et al., 2008). Understanding the factors that contribute to the dominant culture perceiving the minority group as a threat has practical and theoretical implications.

Stephan and Stephan (1993, 1996) in their integrated threat theory (ITT) argue the perception of threat can predict prejudice and other negative attitudes toward a minority group. Specifically, intergroup threats such as realistic threats, symbolic threats, stereotypes, and intergroup anxiety are strong predictors of negative attitudes toward minority groups (Bizman & Yinon, 2001; Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999).

The bulk of research using ITT has focused on the perception of threat from Muslims in Europe (Bizman & Yinon, 2001; González et al., 2008; McLaren, 2003; Stephen et al., 1999). The research has demonstrated Muslims are perceived as realistic and symbolic threats to dominant European cultures, which are predominantly Christian. Moreover, the more threatening Muslims are perceived to be, the more negatively they are stereotyped by non-Muslims. Collectively, Muslims in Europe have been shown to be a threat on multiple levels to Christian Europe. No research has explored the perception of threat from U.S. Muslims. As U.S. Muslims are one of the fastest growing populations in the nation, and as they are facing rising Islamophobia, it is essential to better understand the prejudice they face. Thus, this study explores prejudice toward Muslims in the U.S. using integrated threat theory.

# Integrated Threat Theory

Prejudice is a set of negative attitudes or beliefs related to the expression and communication of negative emotions or hostility towards members of an out-group (Allport, 1954; Duckitt, 1992). A variety of factors predict prejudice such as: personality factors, membership in social groups, adherence to values/beliefs, and cultural differences between in and out-groups (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Stephan and Stephan (1993, 1996) stated when people believe their values/beliefs and/or social groups are in danger, prejudice emerges. Perception of threat is important, as a threat need not be real; perception of threat alone is enough for prejudice.

Stephan and Stephan (1993, 1996) identified four kinds of threats that can lead to prejudice: realistic threats, symbolic threats, stereotypes, and intergroup anxiety. Realistic threats are mainly economic, physical, and political (Stephan & Stephan, 1993). There are resources, and thus individuals compete for resources. Individuals perceive competition with outsiders for resources and competition leads to prejudice and discrimination. It is common to hear politicians blame immigrants and minorities for economic woes for example. Symbolic threats come from perceived differences in values, beliefs, and norms (Stephan & Stephan, 1993). Out-groups (minority groups) often have differing worldviews than dominant groups. Symbolic threats from minority/immigrant groups are related to negative attitudes towards minorities/immigrants (e.g. Gonzàlez et al., 2008; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). Stereotypes are expectations of how a member of an out-group will behave. Negative stereotypes are related to feelings of threat and fear (Verkuyten, 1997). Intergroup anxiety is fear people have when interacting with out-group members. Prejudice increases as intergroup anxiety increases (Islam & Hewstone, 1993). Intergroup anxiety is a feeling of being personally threatened during interactions with out-group members, while realistic threats, symbolic threats and stereotypes are directed at the in-group. Thus, scholars have generally excluded intergroup anxiety in analyses of group threat (Tausch, Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2007). Intergroup anxiety is therefore not included in this study.

## Hypotheses and Research Question

Scholars have studied ITT in Europe, focusing specifically on the perception of Muslims. Research shows that the more members of the dominant culture perceive realistic threats from an immigrant or a minority group, the more likely they are to perceive symbolic threats and have negative stereotypes toward the groups (Bizman & Yinon, 2001; Gonzàlez et al., 2008; Stephan & Stephan, 1993, 1996). Therefore, the first hypothesis is posed:

*H1: There is a positive correlation between realistic threats, symbolic threats, and stereotypes toward American Muslims.*

Interpersonal contact and communication with immigrant and/or minority groups has also been found to affect prejudice (Bizman & Yinon, 2001; Gonzàlez et al., 2008; Stephan & Stephan, 1993, 1996). The more contacts members of the dominant culture have with immigrant/minority groups, the less likely they are to be prejudicial. Therefore, the second hypothesis asserts:

*H2: There is a negative correlation between prejudice (realistic and symbolic threats, and stereotypes) and interpersonal contact/communication with American Muslims and American non-Muslims.*

Finally, individuals with higher educational levels should be less prejudicial toward immigrant/minority groups; as such individuals should be more likely to be open to diversity (Bizman & Yinon, 2001; Stephan & Stephan, 1996). However, fewer studies have explored this assertion and other demographic aspects of ITT. Thus, the following research question is put forth:

*RQ: Will levels of prejudice (realistic and symbolic threats, and stereotypes) toward American Muslims differ based on educational level?*

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

A total of 281 self-identified Christians in the United States completed paper surveys in 2011. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 35 ( $M = 26.43$ ,  $SD = 4.97$ ). Men made up 48.4% ( $n = 136$ ) of the sample and women made up 51.6% ( $n = 145$ ) of the sample. The educational level of the sample was fairly diverse, 17.1% ( $n = 49$ ) completed some high school or less, 47.3% ( $n = 133$ ) were high school graduates, 18.9% ( $n = 53$ ) had some university, and 16.4% ( $n = 46$ ) were university graduates.

Data were collected through self-administered paper surveys in 2011 after the approval of Human Subjects Review. Participants were contacted through social networks previously established by each of the researchers. Participants did not receive financial incentive for participation.

### Measures

Surveys included demographic questions, a measure of intergroup contact, a measure of realistic and symbolic threat (González et al., 2008; Stephan et al., 1999), and a stereotype measure (González et al., 2008). See Table 1 for means, standard deviations, correlations, and alphas associated with all study variables.

**Table 1:** Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Alphas Associated with Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>a</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(1) Symbolic Threat	2.14	.70	.87	-			
(2) Realistic Threat	2.73	.70	.84	.61*	-		
(3) Stereotypes	2.64	.98	.75	.33*	.85**	-	
(4) Contact	1.26	.54	.90	-.79**	-.35*	-.11	-

Note: \*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ .

### Intergroup contact/communication

Intergroup contact/communication was measured with four items from González et al. (2008). The items were: "How many Muslim friends do you have?" "Do you have contact with Muslim students or co-workers?" "Do you have contact with Muslims in your neighborhood?" and "Do you have contact with Muslims somewhere else, such as at a sports club or other organization?" The first item was rated 1 *none* to 4 *only Muslim friends*, while the remaining items were rated 1 *never* to 4 *often*. In the González et al. (2008) study the alpha was .70.

### Realistic and symbolic threat

Participants were given six items to measure realistic and symbolic threats. To measure realistic threat, individuals were given three items that evaluated the effect of Muslims on the U.S. economy (González et al., 2008). These statements were: "Because of the presence of Muslims, people have more difficulties finding a job," "Because of the presence of Muslims, people have more difficulties finding a house," and "Because of the presence of Muslims, unemployment in the U.S. will increase." Responses ranged from 1 *strongly disagree* to 5 *strongly agree*. This measure has shown reliability of .80 and higher (González et al., 2008).

Three items were also used to measure symbolic threat (González et al., 2008, Stephan et al., 1999). The items were: "U.S. identity is being threatened because there are too many Muslims," "U.S. norms and values are being threatened because of the presence of Muslims," and "Muslims are a threat to U.S."

culture.” Responses also ranged from 1 *strongly disagree* to 5 *strongly agree*. González et al. (2008) reported high reliability of .89 for this measure.

## Stereotypes

To measure stereotypes of Muslims, participants were asked the extent to which the following traits describe Muslims: violent, dishonest, unintelligent, friendly (reverse-scored), arrogant, kind (reverse-scored), avaricious, and inferior. Responses ranged from 1 *no, absolutely not* to 5 *yes, certainly*. In González et al. (2008) the alpha for this measure of stereotypes was .83.

## Results

### Hypotheses

The first hypothesis (*H1*) proposed a positive correlation between realistic threats, symbolic threats, and stereotypes toward American Muslims. Pearson correlations revealed all three elements of prejudice (realistic threats, symbolic threats, and stereotypes) to be significantly positively correlated with one another (see Table 1). The second hypothesis (*H2*) posed interpersonal contact/communication with Muslims would be negatively correlated with prejudice (realistic threats, symbolic threats, and stereotypes). Pearson correlation analysis supports this hypothesis for two elements of prejudice, symbolic and realistic threats. Stereotypes was not significantly correlated with interpersonal contact/communication ( $r = -.11, p = ns$ ), see Table 1.

### Research Question

The research question explored differences in prejudice based on an individual’s level of education. Using Pillai’s trace[1], there was a significant effect of education on prejudice levels toward Muslims,  $V = .08, F(12, 828) = 1.93, p < .05$ . However, separate univariate ANOVAs on the outcome variables revealed non-significant differences in educational level on the different aspects of prejudice: realistic threat,  $F(4, 276) = .86, p = .49$ , symbolic threat,  $F(4, 276) = 1.78, p = .13$ , and stereotypes,  $F(4, 276) = 1.71, p = .15$ . See Table 2 for means and standard deviations broken down by educational level for realistic threat, symbolic threat, and stereotypes.

**Table 2** Means and Standard Deviations for Realistic Threat, Symbolic Threat, and Stereotypes by Educational Level

Educational Level	Realistic Threat		Symbolic Threat		Stereotypes	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Some High School or Less	2.81	.49	2.00	.29	2.50	.71
High School Graduate	2.68	.72	2.23	.80	2.73	1.03
Some University	2.70	.80	2.08	.73	2.72	1.13
University Graduate	2.83	.61	2.13	.58	2.41	.86

## Discussion

The findings from this study confirm much of the research on prejudice. Specifically, the results reveal: 1) a positive correlation between real and symbolic threats, and stereotypes, 2) increased contact/communication with an immigrant group, in this case Muslims in the United States, is negatively correlated with perceptions of real and symbolic threat, and 3) levels of prejudice differ based on an individual’s level of education. The results of this study have theoretical and practical contributions/implications.

## Implications

These findings confirm previous studies showing increased contact/communication with an immigrant and/or minority group decreases prejudice toward the group. The findings also extend this line of research (Bizman & Young, 2001; Gonzalez et al., 2008; Stephan & Stephan, 1993, 1996) into a new sociopolitical context. Previous studies into the relationships between prejudice and contact have all been conducted on dominant cultures and immigrant/minority groups in Europe. In the 10 years since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims has been rather tenuous (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2011). Therefore, this study offers further support for the contact-prejudice hypothesis outside of just the European context.

The results of this study revealed a significant effect of education on prejudice levels toward Muslims ( $V = .08$ ). Previous studies, conducted in Europe, alluded to more educated individuals being less prejudicial (Stephan and Stephan, 1996). In this study, there was no specific trend in levels of prejudice based on an individual's level of education; there was just a difference in prejudice based on educational level. The lack of a clearly delineated trend in level of prejudice may be attributed to what Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) argued as a new racial ideology in the U.S. The authors asserted Americans, regardless of educational level and age, are not likely to discuss race or diversity, as such issues are seen as taboo. Therefore, from a theoretical and methodological perspective, it may be prudent to investigate the influence of this perception of taboo on willingness to divulge prejudice.

From a practical perspective, individuals (practitioners, mediators, etc...) who practice conflict mediation/negotiation should take steps to better understand all aspects of prejudice. Kimmel (2006) described how the recognition of stereotypes when mediating conflicts is an important aspect of effective conflict mediation as it helps mediators and individuals in conflict better understand one another. However, the perception of threat is often ignored in conflict resolution/mediation situations, even though the perceptions of threats significantly influence the escalation of conflict and the success of conflict mediation/resolution (Cant & Johnstone, 2009). Since the perception of realistic and symbolic threats is intrinsic to prejudice, practitioners would be well served to investigate the roots of such threats and try to mitigate these threats as well as stereotypes, which are typically discussed.

## Future Research and Limitations

There is a long history of research on the relationship between the media and stereotyping of immigrants, particularly Muslim immigrants (see Croucher et al., Said, 1981 for reviews of this literature). The bulk of this literature focuses on how media emphasize societal stereotypes of Muslims, with most work examining how media frame news events and Muslims as either moderates or radicals. The research has yet to adequately address the perception of threats (real and/or symbolic) from Muslims in the United States and other nations in Europe for example. Future research should explore media's influence on how American's and others perceive threat, as media does influence perception of stereotype it is highly possible media influence perception of threat.

Future research into prejudice toward Muslims should also explore the relationship between prejudice and acceptance of Muslim immigrants. As immigration from Islamic nations to non-Islamic nations continues to increase (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2011), it is imperative to understand whether or not these immigrants are accepted into their new homelands or not. One aspect of acceptance is host-culture receptivity (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Based in the work of Kim's cultural adaptation/assimilation theory, when individuals move to a new culture, they will begin to assimilate to some level into the new culture (Croucher, 2009; Kim, 1977, 2001). However, the host-culture must accept their assimilation efforts (Croucher, 2008). A barrier to host-receptivity is prejudice. Future work in intercultural communication and conflict should examine this relationship to improve our understanding of the relationship between prejudice and host-culture receptivity.

As with all studies, there are limitations. There are two limitations to this study. The first limitation is that the sample for this study was a convenience sample. Compared to a random sample, a convenience sample is limited in its generalizability. However, considering the sample the study is generalizing to it would be extremely difficult to obtain a random sample. Therefore, it is necessary to use a convenience sample. The second potential limitation is the use of self-reports (Oetzel, 1998). As this survey in this

study includes an assessment of prejudice, it is possible participants may have under-estimated their prejudice to appear more socially desirable.

This study is one of the first attempts to understand the effects of threat on the perceptions of Muslims in the United States. The results confirm previous research conducted in Europe on the perceptions of European Muslims; that aside from a positive relationship between the types of threat/stereotypes, increased contact with Muslims decreases these threats/stereotypes, and level of education affects levels of prejudice. Future work should continue to explore prejudice to garner an improved theoretical and practical understanding of the effects of prejudice on society.

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[1] Pillai's trace was used as it accounts for unequal cell sizes.

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Journal of Intercultural Communication, ISSN 1404-1634, issue 32, July 2013.  
URL: <http://immi.se/intercultural>