

Fear, Anger and Attitudes Toward Immigration

Written by Rose McDermott

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/03/30/fear-anger-and-attitudes-toward-immigration/>

ROSE MCDERMOTT, MAR 30 2016

In the United States, there has been a great deal of recent hand-wringing about the rise of Donald Trump as a Republican candidate for President given his antagonistic comments about minorities, including his accusation that Mexicans are rapists and Muslims hate the United States. But this concern about immigrants is not limited to the United States. Extreme pressures have been exerted by the mass emigration of refugees from war zones, Syria in particular. It has brought renewed contention to the issue of immigration in Europe as well, challenging the long time viability of the previously successful Schengen zone.

Amanda Taub's recent exceptional article in Vox on authoritarianism surely explains an important part of the reason people respond to Trump in the United States, and may also help to explain why large segments of the population in Europe may be responding to right wing political candidates who oppose immigration as well. However, there is another factor that should not be underestimated and likely overlaps with the preference for order and structure which in turn contributes to a bias against out-groups and others who have minority status: fear and anger. In other words, strong emotions may help drive many reactions that influence policy decisions about such topics as immigration or counter-terrorism measures including surveillance. These emotions may not necessarily be logically connected in clear and obvious ways to specific policy positions, but are nonetheless related psychologically in significant ways.

To be clear, this does not make emotions wrong or "irrational" in the dismissive ways they are often discussed. Rather, emotional responses have evolved in part to help serve important purposes, including alerting us to incipient dangers in our environment. That is why our brains privilege emotional responses based in our amygdalas, making such associations and reactions faster than those involving more deliberative thoughts rooted in the prefrontal cortex. However, rather than motivating us to run from predators like bears, as our ancestors may have done, we now often over-generalize the fear and attach it to many kinds of threats to which these strong responses need not necessarily apply. We shape our policy positions in reaction to them. It should, nonetheless, be noted that as with anything else, individuals are unique and vary in their propensity for responding to threat, challenge or risk with fear or anger.

Let's unpack the operation of each of these emotions as they relate to immigration and broader attitudes toward out-groups. First, in our work on fear, we undertook a genetic examination of twins, which allowed us to examine the extent to which a particular behavior, in this case social fear, can be attributed to genetic factors, common environmental factors like growing up in the same home, or attending the same school, or unique environmental factors, or things that happen only to an individual, such as in utero hormones, or a childhood sexual assault. We then investigated how these propensities affected particular political attitudes and beliefs, including attitudes toward immigration. We found that those individuals who had a higher degree of social fear were more likely to express anti-immigration and pro-segregation attitudes.

Importantly, because we had family samples, and could look at the relationship between parents' dispositions and their children's attitudes, we were able to examine the causal direction of these relationships. In so doing, we discovered that the adage that more conservative people are more fearful does not hold ground, as some have posited. Rather, it was found that more fearful people are more conservative. This is not inconsistent with an argument which suggests that authoritarians want a strong leader to impose order on society. But it goes beyond this recognition by helping to explain one of the reasons why conservative individuals in particular may prefer a strong

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leader who will impose order: They simply experience a higher degree of dispositional fear in the face of unfamiliar others than those who are by nature less afraid.

An interesting aspect of these findings emerged from the genetic analysis which indicated that one of the ways in which social fear and attitudes toward immigration were related was through a shared genetic pathway. Part of what unites these responses is aversion to uncertainty and unfamiliarity; suggesting that it is indeed during times of upheaval and tumult that we would expect such attitudes to become particularly prominent. As such fears emerge and spark contagion among broader segments of the population who might not otherwise become primed to such issues. Leaders seek to impose policies which serve to restore order and protect the in-group, however defined, from the amorphous threats that are seemingly posed by the out-group. Note that in the current political environment, such lines of identity are often defined along ethnic or sectarian terms, but can just as easily align along social categories, as the debate over same-sex marriage in the United States illustrates so clearly (Haidt and Hersh, 2001).

At such times, leaders can strive to manipulate emotion among followers in order to pursue their own personal political agenda which may have little or nothing to do with the goals that followers seek (McDermott, 2010). Indeed, often such leaders only want to maximize their own personal power at the expense of an electorate eager to surrender freedom for order, as Erich Fromm analyzed so brilliantly decades ago in trying to understand the German response to Hitler's rise in Nazi Germany (Fromm, 1994).

But of course fear is not the only emotion driving political responses to immigration or other efforts at out-group segregation. The other one notable to anyone watching cable news networks involves anger. Just as fear operates to protect, anger works to defend. And often what it seeks to defend is a particular privilege of place in society. As Cosmides & Tooby discuss in their welfare trade-off model (Cosmides and Tooby, 2013), anger represents a psychological mechanisms which gets activated when people feel that their welfare has not been treated reasonably. When such a violation happens, people may initially attempt to prove their worth to others, but if and when that fails, they may strike out in order to force the other to consider their welfare in making decisions and allocating resources. Of course this model can be used to help explain the dynamic that underlies minorities who fight for equal treatment, but it can equally speak to those who feel that their expectations or assumptions of privilege have been violated.

We can see this in various contexts. Thomas Frank's recent brilliant piece on how Trump's position on trade appeals to working class white voters who have seen their jobs outsourced to Mexico and other countries speaks to precisely this dynamic. Especially for those from dominant social groups who were born into believing that they deserved a position of privilege, at least in relation to minorities. Policies like Affirmative Action which gives ostensible privileges to minorities, or out-sourcing of jobs to foreign countries undermines such expectations. In this way, individuals who support Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders unite despite their ostensible ideological divide; they merely represent different perspectives on who is to blame for their failed social expectations: minorities or big banks, respectively.

This of course, reflects a deeper concern within recent economic and demographic analysis undertaken by economists Anne Case and Nobel Laureate Angus Deaton on the rising tide of deaths in middle age whites without a college education in the United States. Many of these deaths result from suicide, often aided by opioid abuse and alcoholism, but certainly precipitated by the evaporation of good working class jobs. This social group in particular, may have known that they would not do as well as whites who were more educated or from a more wealthy background, but for better or worse expected to be able to economically outperform minorities in their same class. When they see minorities receiving ostensible social, political and economic benefits that they do not, or which they believe they themselves deserve, it is easy to see how latent anger would be sparked, and why they seek a political resolution. Often such individuals, who may not fully understand the intricacies of globalized economic trade could simply believe that if out-groups are excluded, and seemingly politically allocated privileges retrenched, then they themselves would be able to do better economically within a fairer playing field.

Of course such factors are not the only ones at play. Heroin abuse in the larger population in America for example has been precipitated not only by changes in Federal Regulation which make it more difficult for physicians to prescribe opioids, but also by the increased supply, especially in the last decade from Afghanistan. Less attention has been paid to the contributions of American Foreign Policy in that state to dramatically spiking heroin addiction in

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the United States. But the economic and social frustrations that lead to drug abuse, among other social ills, often find their roots in anger which results from feeling that one's own welfare has not been sufficiently valued by the larger society, or by those groups whose actions have caused difficulty or repression to others.

The emotions that undergird the reactions to outgroups, especially fear and anger, contribute greatly to coalescing diverse interests into supporting strong border controls which exclude immigrants. They also help sustain and support an authoritarian impulse which can become activated especially during times of uncertainty and perceived threat. The solution is not to eliminate emotion, or strive to always privilege reason, as philosophers have urged in a sexist manner for centuries. This is not a realistic or beneficial response because emotions aid in helping us make fast and efficient decisions across multiple domains, and provide us with the foundations of the best aspects of cooperation and attachment which sustain our political, social and family structures. After all, without emotion, we would not care for our parents, children or friends. But we can remain alert to politicians who seek to manipulate public emotion for purposes of their own personal political ambition in ways that ultimately undermine our own real sense of community and security against the real communal threats which pose the greatest risk to us all, such as climate change.

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