



## *Chapter 7*

# **ON THE CENTRAL ROLE OF “THREAT PERCEPTION” IN MEDIATING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS ON XENOPHOBIC ATTITUDES**

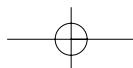
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and Ami Pedahzur**

### **Introduction**

Democratic government depends on more than formal institutions. It relies greatly on democratic political culture with the commitment of citizens to democratic values (Almond and Verba 1963). The willingness to protect minority rights in general and the willingness to accept and appreciate minorities both socially and culturally is one such democratic value. Yet xenophobia toward minorities is quite common in Western and other democracies. In Western Europe, there is recent evidence of the expansion of negative attitudes to outgroups such as ethnic minorities, religious minorities, and labor migrants (e.g., Boehnke, Hagan, and Hefler 1998).

One of the oldest and most common predictors of xenophobic attitudes to minorities in the social science literature is the individual's socioeconomic status (SES) (Glazer and Moynihan 1970). However, in recent years, the premise



that low SES leads to xenophobic attitudes has been challenged by a number of studies that did not find any increase in these attitudes during periods of economic recession or high unemployment (Wimmer 1997).

Another important psychological explanation which has had wide empirical support in recent years places the subjective “threat perception” of the individual as the main factor in predicting negative attitudes toward minority groups (Bobo 1983; Sullivan et al. 1985; Stephan and Stephan 2000; Scheepers, Gijssberts, and Coenders 2002). This psychological explanation provides the basis for the main questions of the current study: Is socioeconomic status critical in explaining xenophobic attitudes to minorities? Or, alternatively, does the subjective perception of threat determine the evolution of xenophobic attitudes?

We hope to advance an innovative point of view here regarding the relationship between the socioeconomic and the psychological approaches in investigating xenophobic attitudes. This integrated approach might serve as an optional solution to the problem of ambivalent findings regarding the influence of socioeconomic status on these attitudes. We test this approach in a relatively unique study design, which enables us to reassess the socioeconomic approach by examining the differential influence of each of the components of socioeconomic status on xenophobic attitudes.

### *Foreigners in the Israeli arena*

Pedahzur and Yishai (1999: 102) described the relatively broad phenomenon of xenophobia among Jews as “a case of hatred by one of the most hated people in human society.” Unlike relatively homogeneous societies where xenophobia is targeted almost exclusively at labor migrants, Israel has been settled by dispersed immigrants from the Diaspora over many years (Horowitz and Lissak 1990), in addition to a large Palestinian minority. Here we chose to test attitudes to three minority groups that might provoke a perception of economic and cultural threat in majority group members, namely Jews born in Israel. These groups are the Palestinian citizens of Israel, the large minority of immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU), and the foreign workers.

The Palestinian citizens of Israel (19 percent of the population) constitute the largest minority group at which xenophobia has been targeted in Israel over the years (Shamir and Sullivan 1985; Moore 2000). This group is unique in that under the special circumstances of the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Arab world, most Jews perceive it as a hostile minority with national, religious, and cultural ties with the enemy (Smootha 2002).

The largest Jewish minority in Israel is immigrants from the FSU (around 15 percent of population). The massive wave of immigration was made possible by the Israeli Law of Return, which grants immediate citizenship and economic assistance to all immigrants of Jewish origin (Horowitz 1999). This group is

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widely heterogeneous, highly educated, and in no hurry to blend into Israeli society (Al-Haj 2002). Moreover, in recent years reports of 250,000 “non-Jews” among the immigrants from the FSU have amplified the perceptions of religious and cultural threat among “veteran” Israelis (ibid).

Labor migrants residing in Israel are officially reckoned to approximate 189,000 in number, while only 40 percent are listed (Central Bureau of Statistics, July 28, 2003). Labor migrants hold the least desirable jobs and occupations; they earn the lowest wages, suffer the worst working conditions, and do not generally benefit from the welfare system or the union protection accorded to Israeli citizens (Raijman, Semyonov, and Schmidt 2003).

## **Theoretical Background**

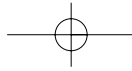
### *Threat perception and xenophobia*

For many years xenophobia was understood in a minimalist manner, referring only to fear of, hatred of, or hostility toward “ethnic minorities” (Campbell 1965; Meijerink, Mudde, and Holsteyn 1998). During the 1980s the concept was significantly expanded and the term “xenophobia” was frequently applied to replace the blasphemous concept of racism, which has traditionally reflected hatred based on congenital differences (Mudde 1995, 1999; Watts, 1996; Lubbers and Scheepers 2001; Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002).

The evolution in the concept reflects an approach which sees attitudes and behavior toward outgroups as deriving mainly from the challenges those groups present to ingroup values, identity, culture, and even socioeconomic status (e.g., Quillian 1995). Hence, we refer to xenophobia as a “negative attitude toward, or fear of, individuals or groups of individuals that are in some sense different (real or imagined) from oneself or the group to which one belongs” (Hjerm 1998: 341).

This socially based approach to the concept of xenophobia has led to the examination of the origins of xenophobic attitudes mainly in the area of perceptions of threat<sup>1</sup> (Stephan and Stephan 2001). The important role of threat and fear in creating negative attitudes and prejudice toward outgroups has been well established (e.g. Adorno, et al. 1950; Allport 1954; Levine and Campbell 1972; Smith 1993). According to Watts (1996), this association between threat perception and xenophobia derives from a mechanism by which the “ingroup” members accuse the “outgroup” members of having a conflict of interests.

The perception of the conflict between groups might have a major effect on negative attitudes. This perception combines situational-objective conditions and a subjective evaluation of the threat posed by the outgroups (Bobo 1983). The mechanism of the formation of the integrative subjective evaluation might be influenced by both situational factors and individual differences (Stephan and Renfro 2003). The perception of threat may be attributed to a variety of



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factors – physical, religious, cultural, and economic threat, among others. In the current study we have chosen to concentrate on the perception of threat on cultural and economic bases (Watts 1996). *Hence, we expected to find a positive correlation among Israeli veterans between threat perception and xenophobic attitudes targeted at the three minority groups tested (Palestinian citizens of Israel, FSU immigrants, and labor migrants) (H1).*

### ***SES and xenophobia***

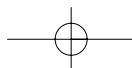
The main socioeconomic approach to understanding intergroup relationships, with roots in socialpsychology, is the “realistic group conflict theory” (Sherif and Sherif 1967; Levine and Campbell 1972). The theory asserts that “the basis of all attitudes of members of one group towards members of another group is well-rooted in the nature of the functional relations between the groups” (Sherif 1967: 63). According to this theory, humans adopt a “zero sum game” political approach – “us against them” (Rajiman and Semyonov 2004), which implies that the success of one group automatically leads to the failure of the other (Sherif 1967). Based on that premise, one would expect to find higher levels of xenophobic attitudes among people of low SES.

Nevertheless, as illustrated elsewhere in this chapter, empirical studies that have examined the influence of two specific aspects of socioeconomic status – employment status and level of education – on attitudes to minorities were not unequivocal in their conclusions. While some studies found that the unemployed evinced higher levels of xenophobic attitudes (Espenshade and Hampstead 1996; Palmer 1996, 1998; Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Schmidt 2002), others found no clear associations (Hoskin 1985; Linder 1993; Wimmer 1997; Fetzer 2000; Campbell 2003). We submit that neither proposition is borne out.

Most studies on the influence of education on attitudes to minorities show lower levels of hostility in more highly educated people (Miller, Polinard, and Wrinkle 1984; Espenshade and Hampstead 1996; Boehnke and Nauck 2001; Hjerm 2001; Coenders and Scheepers 2003). In a cross-national study, Sullivan and his colleagues (1985) found that academic education was a major factor in fostering tolerance. *Therefore, we would expect to find a significant negative correlation between education level and xenophobia (H2) and a negative, but low, correlation between employment status and xenophobia (H3).*

### ***SES, threat perception, and xenophobia***

Both the “realistic group conflict theory” and a number of later “socioeconomic competition” theories like the “power theory” (Olzak 1993; Legge 1996) or the “instrumental model of group conflict” (Esses et al. 2001) claim that the



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conflict between groups is composed of situational-objective conditions, in addition to a subjective evaluation of the threat that derives from the outgroups (Bobo 1983). Hence, people of low socioeconomic status feel greater competition from the outgroup, so they develop significant perceptions of threat which ultimately lead to xenophobic attitudes (Quillian 1995; Espenshade and Hampstead 1996; Dustmann 2000; Esses et al. 2001).

Only a few studies (e.g., Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002; Verberk, Scheepers, and Felling 2002; Raijman, Semyonov, and Schmidt 2003) have examined this theory empirically, by analyzing threat perception as a mediator between SES and hostile attitudes to minorities. These studies have generally found that most of the influence of education level on xenophobic attitudes is via perception of threat (Raijman, Semyonov and Yom-Tov 2002; Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002; Verberk, Scheepers, and Felling 2002). Findings on the mediating influence of employment status on xenophobia are conflicting. Just as with the direct associations, the indirect effect of employment status on willingness to discriminate against outgroups is somewhat minor compared with other SES factors (Raijman, Semyonov, and Schmidt 2002; Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002; Verberk et al. 2002).

A closer examination of these results might benefit our understanding of the equivocal findings on the plausibility of explaining xenophobic attitudes by socioeconomic factors, particularly employment status. People of low education may perceive high levels of threat to their labor market position, regardless of employment status. Conversely, highly educated people will not feel threatened by “low-skilled” minorities, even if they are unemployed themselves. We therefore propose an examination of the influence of socioeconomic aspects on xenophobic attitudes via threat perception using the following hypotheses: *Most of the effect of education level and employment status on xenophobic attitudes will be mediated by the perception of threat (H4). The mediating influence of employment status on xenophobia will be marginal compared with the influence of the level of education (H5).*

## Method

### *Sample and Procedure*

Based on the premise that SES consists of several different socioeconomic factors (Oliver and Mendelberg 2000), we used a unique study design combining a “face-to-face” survey with preliminary division of the participants into four groups according to their specific SES. This study design (“target design”), which is based on a goal sample chosen by the researchers to serve the specific research goals adequately (Kahn and Lambert 1998), facilitates an evaluation of the distinct effects of each socioeconomic factor (level of

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education, employment status) on xenophobic attitudes in greater detail than could be achieved by a conventional survey design.

In June 2003 interviews were conducted among 412 Israelis who were potential participants in the Israeli labor market. Participation was voluntary, but as most participants were approached in public or private institutions, they were a “half captive audience.” We used a between-subjects design. The four preliminary divisions were: (1) Academic-Employed, (2) Academic-Unemployed, (3) Nonacademic-Employed, (4) Nonacademic-Unemployed. Questionnaires were given to subjects in their “natural” socioeconomic environment (e.g., employment agencies, workforce agencies, universities, private firms). For reasons given elsewhere, in the final sample we included only Israeli-born Jews ( $N = 383$ ); 53 percent of the participants were men, 89 percent were born in Israel, and 62.6 percent earned above the average income.<sup>2</sup>

### Measurements

We measured xenophobia and threat perception as if emanating from three minority groups, education level, and employment status. We also obtained relevant demographic information (income, self-definition of level of religiosity, self-definition of political position).<sup>3</sup>

*Xenophobia* toward the three minority groups was measured by the classic Social Distance scale (Bogardus 1959), which was validated in Israel by Pedahzur and Yishai (1999).<sup>4</sup> It consists of four items measured on a 1–6 scale. Through reversal, 1 denotes the lack of xenophobia and 6 denotes high levels of xenophobia. The scale was composed of the items’ mean and yielded a satisfactory Cronbach’s alpha: .87 for Palestinian citizens of Israel, .91 for FSU immigrants, and .84 for labor migrants.

*Threat perception* was measured by the “combined economic-cultural threat perception” scale (Watts 1996).<sup>5</sup> It consists of six items measured on a 1–6 scale, where 1 denotes the lack of threat perception and 6 denotes high levels of threat perception.<sup>6</sup> The scale was composed of the items’ mean and yielded a satisfactory Cronbach’s alpha: .79 for Palestinian citizens of Israel, .69 for FSU immigrants, and .58 for labor migrants. Considering Raijman and her colleagues’ (2003) argument and analysis of the relatedness of xenophobic attitudes and threat perception, and the correlation that emerged here between the two ( $r = .48, p < 0.001$ ), the two concepts had to be kept empirically distinct. Factor analysis produced two distinct factors, one for each scale.<sup>7</sup> Overall, this procedure lent support to the argument that the present constructs measure two different dimensions.

*Level of education* was measured by the preliminary distribution of the groups as described earlier, and was confirmed in the questionnaire. Following Sullivan et al. (1985), who found that the one crucial level of education that would make

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a person more tolerant (e.g., Sullivan et al. 1985) was academic education, we defined education dichotomously, with nonacademic education denoted 0 and academic education 1.

*Employment status* was also measured by the preliminary distribution of the groups, and confirmed in the questionnaire. Following the common method of using this variable dichotomously (e.g., Fetzer 2000), 0 denoted unemployment and 1 employment.<sup>8</sup>

## Results

Prior to setting out the advanced analysis, we present the descriptive characteristics for the main two endogenous variables of the research. By and large, the means of xenophobia were rather high, ranging from 1.87 (SD = 1.16) toward immigrants from FSU, 2.79 (SD = 1.37) toward labor migrants, to 3.39 (SD = 1.56) toward Palestinian citizens of Israel. In contrast to xenophobia, the highest levels of cultural-economic threat (M = 3.33, SD = .92) were attributed to labor migrants, and not to the Palestinian citizens of Israel (M = 3.10, SD = 1.14). Similar to the results on xenophobia, the lowest threat (M = 2.5, SD = .95) was perceived from FSU immigrants. Table 7.1 presents a correlation matrix for the main research variables.

Overall, the highest significant ( $p < .001$ ) correlations were found between each perception of threat and its related xenophobic attitudes scale. These preliminary results largely confirmed H1. While the correlation between threat perception and xenophobia toward Palestinian citizens of Israel was .73, the correlation between threat perception and xenophobia toward labor migrants was .48. However, similar to findings in previous studies, even that correlation was much higher than others found (Ashmore and Del-Boca 1976; Quillian 1995; Stephan and Stephan 2000; Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002; Raijman, Semyonov, and Schmidt, 2003).

A preliminary look reveals relatively high and negative direct correlations between level of education and xenophobia (Palestinians  $r = -.36$ , FSU immigrants  $r = -.32$ , labor migrants  $r = -.33$ ). Contrary to these results, the correlations between employment status and xenophobia were not significant regarding labor migrants and Palestinian citizens of Israel, and significant but low ( $r = .13$ ) regarding FSU immigrants. These findings provide preliminary support for H2 and H3. Table 7.2 sets out a variance analysis of the differences between the four research groups. As seen in the table, with the exception of two cases, a constant ascending order appears: academic-employed were the least xenophobic, followed by the academic-unemployed and the nonacademic-employed, and the most xenophobic were the nonacademic-unemployed. Obviously, our main interest focuses on the two groups that evince two nonconsistent SES characteristics. Comparison of the attitudes of these groups

**Table 7.1** Correlation matrix – research variables

|   | 1.      | 2.      | 3.      | 4.      | 5.      | 6.      | 7.      | 8.      | 9.      | 10.    |
|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| <i>Dependent Variable</i>               |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |        |
| 1. Xenophobia:<br>labor migrants        |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |        |
| 2. Xenophobia: FSU                      | .67***  |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |        |
| 3. Xenophobia:<br>Palestinians          | .72***  | .58***  |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |        |
| <i>Mediating Variable</i>               |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |        |
| 4. Threat perception:<br>labor migrants | .48***  | .33***  | .47***  |         |         |         |         |         |         |        |
| 5. Threat perception:<br>FSU            | .51***  | .63***  | .55***  | .56***  |         |         |         |         |         |        |
| 6. Threat perception:<br>Palestinians   | .57***  | .47***  | .73***  | .62***  | .66***  |         |         |         |         |        |
| <i>Independent Variables</i>            |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |        |
| 7. Education                            | -.33*** | -.32*** | -.36*** | -.27*** | -.30*** | -.30*** |         |         |         |        |
| 8. Employment Status                    | .07     | .13*    | .04     | .00     | .13**   | .10     | .00     |         |         |        |
| <i>Controlling Variables</i>            |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |        |
| 9. Religiosity                          | .34***  | .27***  | .32***  | .22***  | .29***  | .30***  | -.22*** | .14**   |         |        |
| 10. Political Stand                     | -.43*** | -.30*** | -.55*** | -.36*** | -.35*** | -.52*** | .31***  | -.07    | -.39*** |        |
| 11. Income                              | -.17*** | -.20*** | -.14**  | -.05    | -.25**  | -.18*** | .27***  | -.37*** | -.22*** | .19*** |

$p < .05$ , \*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*\*

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**Table 7.2** Differences in xenophobic attitudes by the research groups

|                            | Non-academic –<br>Unemployed(4) |      | Non-academic –<br>Employed(3) |      | Academic –<br>Unemployed(2) |      | Academic –<br>Employed(1) |      | F<br>(Tukey)                       |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|------|-------------------------------|------|-----------------------------|------|---------------------------|------|------------------------------------|
|                            | M                               | SD   | M                             | SD   | M                           | SD   | M                         | SD   |                                    |
| Xenophobia: labor migrants | 3.39                            | 1.43 | 3.02                          | 1.38 | 2.44                        | 1.35 | 2.32                      | 1.06 | <b>**13.04</b><br>4>3,2,1<br>3>1,2 |
| Xenophobia: FSU            | 2.46                            | 1.44 | 1.93                          | 1.19 | 1.64                        | .99  | 1.50                      | .66  | <b>**13.25</b><br>4>1,2,3<br>3>1   |
| Xenophobia: Palestinians   | 4.31                            | 1.51 | 3.58                          | 1.39 | 2.66                        | 1.54 | 3.05                      | 1.35 | <b>**21.86</b><br>4>3,2,1<br>3>1,2 |

*p* < .05\*, *p* < .01\*\*, *p* < .001\*\*\*

strengthens our earlier findings that the influence of the level of education on xenophobia is higher than influence of the employment status.

Xenophobic attitudes to labor migrants were significantly higher ( $t = -3.01, p < 0.01$ ) in the nonacademic-employed group ( $M = 3.02, SD = 1.38$ ) than in the academic-unemployed group ( $M = 2.44, SD = 1.35$ ). The same findings were obtained for the differences ( $t = -4.49, p < 0.001$ ) in xenophobic attitudes to Palestinian citizens of Israel between the nonacademic-employed ( $M = 3.58, SD = 1.39$ ) and the academic-unemployed ( $M = 2.66, SD = 1.54$ ). On the other hand, no significant differences between these two groups were found in their attitudes to FSU immigrants. In sum, as expected, after deduction of the joint effect, the influence of employment status on xenophobia seems negligible. In contrast, level of education is a crucial aspect in the evolution of these attitudes. To find the origins of these differences and obtain a deeper understanding of the comprehensive developmental model of xenophobic attitudes, we investigated the exact role of the perception of threat in any plausible explanation.

To test H4 and H5 in an advanced manner we conducted three steps of regression equations for each minority group. The three equations follow the three conditions suggested by Baron and Kenny<sup>9</sup> to test mediation. In the first equations (Table 7.3, column 1) the perception of threat is predicted as a function of the level of education, employment status, and the major background variables. Column 2 presents a prediction of xenophobia as a function of the same set of independent variables. In equation 3 (column 3), the perception of cultural-economic threat is added to the set of predictors of xenophobic attitudes.

The coefficients shown in column 1 suggest that threat perception is affected in all cases by the level of education, in the expected direction: threat is likely to decrease as education level is higher. On the other hand, no association was found between employment status and the perception of threat from any of the minority groups. These findings imply the absence of significant differences between people who work and who are unemployed in their perception of competition and threat. This may be a very important and meaningful argument in the challenge to understand the logic of the potential influence of SES factors on xenophobic attitudes.

The integration of columns 2 and 3 of each model was aimed at testing the hypothesis that perceived threat intervenes between individuals' SES and their xenophobic attitudes (Rajzman, Semyonov, and Schmidt 2003). The results in column 2 reveal that level of education, political position, and religiosity exerted significant effects on xenophobia against all minority groups. In contrast, employment status and income level<sup>10</sup> did not affect xenophobia in either of the minority group models. These two variables are known in the literature (Oliver and Mendelberg 2000), being the natural "partners" of education level, as the main components of the SES variable.

Column 3 reveals that the perception of threat partially mediates the influence of education level on xenophobic attitudes. Therefore, the results

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**Table 7.3** Regression equations coefficients predicting threat perception and xenophobic attitudes to the three minority groups

|                   | Labor Migrants               |                             |                            | Immigrants from FSU         |                             |                            | Palestinian Citizens of Israel |                             |                            |
|-------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
|                   | 1                            | 2                           | 3                          | 1                           | 2                           | 3                          | 1                              | 2                           | 3                          |
| Education level   | Threat<br>-.175**<br>(-3.30) | Xeno'<br>-.20***<br>(-3.94) | Xeno'<br>-.14**<br>(-2.91) | Threat<br>-.17**<br>(-3.30) | Xeno'<br>-.23***<br>(-4.28) | Xeno'<br>-.13**<br>(-2.96) | Threat<br>-.15**<br>(-3.10)    | Xeno'<br>-.22***<br>(-4.61) | Xeno'<br>-.13**<br>(-3.42) |
| Employment status | -.01<br>(-.20)               | -.00<br>(-.04)              | .00<br>(.04)               | .05<br>(1.01)               | .06<br>(1.21)               | .03<br>(.68)               | .03<br>(.59)                   | -.03<br>(-.71)              | -.05<br>(-1.26)            |
| Religiosity       | .07<br>(1.22)                | .16**<br>(3.13)             | .14**<br>(2.87)            | .14**<br>(2.71)             | .13*<br>(2.45)              | .05<br>(1.19)              | .08<br>(1.63)                  | .11*<br>(2.22)              | .06<br>(1.56)              |
| Political stand   | -.30***<br>(-5.43)           | -.31***<br>(-5.98)          | -.21***<br>(-4.16)         | -.21***<br>(-4.01)          | -.16**<br>(-3.01)           | -.04<br>(-.95)             | -.42***<br>(-8.40)             | -.44***<br>(-9.21)          | -.20***<br>(-4.73)         |
| Income            | .07<br>(1.25)                | -.01<br>(-.11)              | -.03<br>(-.59)             | -.11*<br>(-2.00)            | -.05<br>(-.86)              | .01<br>(.18)               | -.02<br>(-.37)                 | .03<br>(.62)                | .04<br>(1.05)              |
| Threat perception |                              |                             | .34***<br>(7.13)           |                             |                             | .55***<br>(12.12)          |                                |                             | .57***<br>(13.81)          |
| R <sup>2</sup>    | .17                          | .25                         | .35                        | .20                         | .17                         | .42                        | .29                            | .35                         | .58                        |
| N                 | 361                          | 361                         | 361                        | 360                         | 360                         | 360                        | 359                            | 359                         | 359                        |

p < .05\*, p < .01\*\*, p < .001\*\*\*

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suggest that xenophobic attitudes to Palestinian citizens of Israel, labor migrants, and FSU immigrants derive from two parallel paths: the direct influence of the level of education on xenophobic attitudes, and the influence of education level on perceptions of economic-cultural threat, which amplify xenophobic attitudes. Employment status, which had no direct effect on xenophobic attitudes, did not have an indirect mediating effect either.

## Discussion

The primary objective of the study was to provide a general overview of the relations between socioeconomic and psychological factors, on the one hand, and xenophobia against minorities, on the other. Generally, threat perception played a key role in the translation of socioeconomic factors into xenophobia. The findings also highlighted the very potent impact of threat perception on xenophobic attitudes, as a mediating variable but also on its own. Unlike education level, employment status played only a minute role in explaining xenophobic attitudes toward minorities. Put differently, less educated people were more xenophobic because of their high threat perception. Yet surprisingly enough, although unemployed people proved more xenophobic than employed ones, due to the lack of meaningful correlation between employment status and threat perception, the effect of employment status on xenophobia was found to remain fairly marginal.

The main theoretical argument that this study challenged is the assertion that low socioeconomic status leads to higher levels of xenophobic attitudes to minorities (Quillian 1995; Espenshade and Hampstead 1996; Dustmann 2000; Esses et al. 2001). The unique study design enabled us to create a more focused analysis of the impact of education level and employment status on xenophobia. The findings show that out of an array of socioeconomic indicators, only education level had an effect on xenophobic attitudes via threat perception. Furthermore, the impact of the level of education on xenophobia regarding all groups was much higher than that of other SES variables (employment status, income), and held true even after controlling for political position and religiosity.<sup>11</sup>

We submit that perception of threat and competition may occur mainly when individuals are worried about deterioration of status, and not merely as a result of lower socioeconomic status (Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002). Socioeconomic factors will foster xenophobia only when people's status leads them to feel that the outgroup creates competition that may endanger their current status (Oliver and Mendelberg 2000). The perception of threat and competition basically relies on similarity of skills and qualifications (Quillian 1995), which depends mainly on education level, not on current, and sometimes temporary, employment status. Hence, our findings lend credence to the theory

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of “labor market competition” (Esphenshade and Hampstead 1996), which claims that individuals tend to be more suspicious of external competitors who have similar skills to their own and who might thereby endanger their position in the labor market.

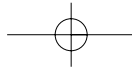
No substantial differences, then, exist in the perception of threat experienced by an unemployed person and by a “nonskilled” employed worker. In some situations the latter might even feel more threatened due to the lack of stability of his/her labor market position. So it is not surprising to find that employment status alone affects neither perception of threat nor xenophobic attitudes. Consequently, for both employment status and education level, threat perception serves as critical in determining which factors may affect xenophobic attitudes.

Understanding the mediation role of perceived threat in the development of xenophobic attitudes emphasizes the necessity of future investigation of more situational variables as exogenous in the same “mediating” model. The theoretical logic for the influence of economic, political, or demographic variables on xenophobia via threat has been tested in previous studies (e.g., Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002; Raijman, Semyonov, and Schmidt 2003), but it needs further development. In addition, this study design might inspire future investigators who are interested in evaluating the specific impact of psychosocial factors on xenophobia.

In sum, our findings might have some influence on the development of research in the field of intergroup relations. First, we argue that the study of the origins of xenophobic attitudes to minorities should not focus on socioeconomic status in general but on education level, particularly academic education. The meaning of this argument is that even a poor individual who has the opportunity for academic education will have a better chance of developing more tolerant attitudes to minorities. Second, it cannot be ruled out that it is not necessarily the objective socioeconomic situation that impacts xenophobic attitudes, but rather subjective threat perceptions. We are not suggesting that changing perceptions is easy, but it definitely is worth a try...

### Notes

1. The semantic meaning of “xenophobia” is fear of foreigners/strangers, so a few recent studies have argued that threat perception and hate (xenophobia) are in fact the same concept (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004). Nevertheless, a number of empirical examinations of this argument have yielded two distinct independent variables (Luedemann 2000; Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002; Raijman, Semyonov, and Schmidt 2003) and accordingly we adopt this attitude in our study.
2. As a by-product of the study design, approximately 50 percent of the participants were academics.
3. All measures were tested in a pilot study carried out among Israeli students. Where necessary, modifications were made according to the findings.

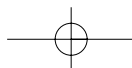


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4. The scale consisted of the following four items: (1) Are you willing to invite (a Palestinian citizen of Israel/an FSU immigrant/a labor migrant) to a social event at your home? (2) Are you willing to accept (a Palestinian citizen of Israel an FSU immigrant/a labor migrant) as your boss? (3) Would you approve of a member of your family becoming romantically involved with (a Palestinian citizen of Israel/an FSU immigrant/a labor migrant)? (4) Would you agree to live in the same neighborhood as (a Palestinian citizen of Israel/an FSU immigrant/a labor migrant)?
5. Security and physical threats are of major importance in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and because of our wish to focus on the socioeconomic area we deliberately chose to test attitudes to minority groups relevant (Palestinian citizens of Israel) and not relevant (labor migrants and immigrants from FSU) to the conflict. For the same reason we decided to use a scale of economic-cultural threat.
6. The scale consists of the following six items: (1) (Palestinian citizens of Israel/FSU immigrants/labor migrants) cost us more money than they bring in themselves. (2) Where qualifications are equal, (Palestinian citizens of Israel/FSU immigrants/labor migrants) should have the same chance in the job market as Israelis. (reversed) (3) (Palestinian citizens of Israel/FSU immigrants/labor migrants) burden the already stressed job market in Israel. (4) (Palestinian citizens of Israel/FSU immigrants/labor migrants) should adopt the Israeli way of life. (5) (Palestinian citizens of Israel/FSU immigrants/labor migrants) enrich the cultural diversity of our everyday life (reversed). (6) (Palestinian citizens of Israel/FSU immigrants/labor migrants) are causing a decline in Israeli culture and everyday life.
7. The confirmatory factor analyses reported in this section represent only the final stage of comprehensive prior treatment to establish the validity and reliability of each measure. To be more accurate, the first (not rotated) factor analysis yielded three factors: (1) xenophobia, (2) cultural threat, (3) socioeconomic threat. Only after limiting the number of potential factors to two were the two distinct, expected scales discovered.
8. To insure that the effect on the endogenous variables was obtained strictly from the SES variables that we chose for that study, income level, political stand, and religion definition were all measured as background variables.
9. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), a variable will serve as a mediator only if the following three conditions are met. First, the variance of the "potential" mediating variable is explained by the independent variable. Second, the "potential" mediating variable significantly explains the variance in the dependent variable. Third, when the "potential" mediating variable is imported into the regression equation of the dependent-independent variable, the effect of the independent on the dependent disappears (full mediation) or moderates (partial mediation).
10. Income level was measured as one of the main background variables.
11. In the Israeli arena, political position and religiosity are generally important determinants of attitudes to minorities (Pedahzur and Yishai 1999; Rajzman, Semyonov, and Schmidt 2003).

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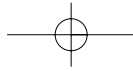
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