Measuring the fear of immigrants

The demographic changes caused by global migration tend to be followed by an upswing of negative attitudes toward newcomers.

In Europe, populist political parties have thrived by opposing the waves of such incoming immigrants, from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, and anti-immigration sentiments are a prominent issue in several Western European countries, and in other parts of the world.

But xenophobia is still an understudied phenomenon. We know little of its extent, how it develops, and how it’s best dealt with.

Xenophobia differs from racism

The English writer and scholar Kenan Malik has argued that far-right extremist groups have been joined by people whose hostility toward immigrants, minorities and Muslims is shaped less by racism, and more by a sense of fear and insecurity. This sound a lot like the xenophobia an international team of researchers are now trying to measure.

“Xenophobia differs from racism,” says Reidar Ommundsen, from the University of Oslo.

“Racism was originally seen as ‘looking down on others’ and having contempt for others because they look different. But that’s not necessarily the same as fearing them,” he says. “Hate and fear can be related, but often hate is simply a result of fear.”

Researching xenophobia

Ommundsen has teamed up with researchers from the Netherlands and the US to develop a tool for measuring xenophobia. Lists of statements from several sources have been trimmed down, rearranged and tailored to make up a survey which the researchers hope is fit for cross-national studies.

“We have developed a measurement tool that can be used to capture changes in fear-based attitudes toward immigrants,” says Ommundsen.

“The ultimate wish is to figure out what predicts or explains a growing degree of xenophobia in different countries. And the first step is to develop the tools.”

The survey includes five items: ‘Immigration in this country is out of control’, ‘I doubt that immigrants will put the interest of this country first’, ‘I am afraid that our own culture will be lost with the increase in immigration’, ‘with increased immigration I fear that our way of life will change for the worse’, and
‘interacting with immigrants makes me uneasy’.

The respondents were asked to what degree they agreed or disagreed with the statements.

The immediate aim of the study was to develop a tool where these statements are in a hierarchal order, based on how ‘easy’ it is for respondents to agree with the statement. Ommundsen says this particular way of ordering statements or questions in surveys is becoming increasingly common in social psychological research.

**Tested on students**

To test the tool, the researchers surveyed undergraduate students in Norway, the Netherlands and the US. It turned out in fact that the statements had the same hierarchical order in the three countries. For example, while more respondents tended to agree that immigration is out of control, fewer reported that an increase in immigration would affect their way of life negatively. Even fewer admitted that they personally felt uneasy interacting with immigrants.

“So far our results indicate that the measurement tool is suitable in different countries,” Ommundsen says. He explains that the collected data say little of the general degree of xenophobia in these countries, since the population samples were limited to students. But this wasn’t the purpose of the study.

“Some people find this kind of work tedious, but methodology research is incredibly important,” he says. “Researchers will have a hard time discussing social phenomena if they can’t measure them. If we want to investigate how widespread something is, we need a scale.”

And now when the tool is in place, the next step can be taken.

“We hope this scale can be used in much larger surveys, so we can look at what xenophobia correlates with,” says the researcher.

### Fact box

Xenophobia is defined by Wikipedia as "an unreasonable fear of foreigners or strangers or of that which is foreign or strange".

Dictionary definitions of xenophobia include: deep-rooted antipathy towards foreigners (Oxford English Dictionary), unreasonable fear or hatred of the unfamiliar, especially people of other races (Webster's) and a fear of strangers (Dictionary of Psychology).

**Source:** Wikipedia [10]

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[11] Reidar Ommundsen's homepage at the University of Oslo
