

# Exposure Therapy (ET) principles for xenophobia: An exploratory study of "White Fragility"

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### Introduction

- "White Fragility" is a theory that was developed by Robin DiAngelo (2011) to explain the defensive reaction that white individuals may exhibit in response to conversations about race.
- Hate crimes, over half of which are motivated by race or ethnicity, have continued to rise each year since 2015 (Eligon 2018, US Dept. of Justice, 2020)
- Diversity trainings aimed at decreasing bias are becoming increasingly more common, but are ineffective at changing behavior

Education by itself doesn't guarantee change.

- Resistance to change can be conceptualized through a biopsychosocial framework that explains defensiveness as an adaptive response to perceived threats to self-concept and established world-view
- **Biological processes:** Sympathetic nervous system activation leads to automatic and unconscious attempts to reestablish homeostasis (i.e., parasympathetic activation), which can reinforce defensive reactions/behaviors (Rosqvist, 2005; Holland & Gallagher, 1999)
- **Psychological processes:** Schema development inaccurately codifies subjective and socially constructed information as descriptive truths, which creates cognitive ambiguity (e.g., threats to world-view). Individuals will automatically cope by unconsciously pulling from existing schemas to resolve the threat, even if the existing schema is inaccurate (e.g., bias), which further reinforces and embeds existing schemas (Kruglanski, 1989; Kruglanski & Webster 1996)
- **Social processes:** Ingroups and outgroups are an inevitable result of evolutionary imperatives to be prosocial (Niedenthal & Ric, 2017). Negative ingroup/outgroup dynamics contribute to xenophobia and develop as a result of evolutionarily-driven impulses to maintain and protect group membership and group functioning. Perceived threats to group membership or group functioning result in activation of biological and psychological defensive processes. (Sherif, 1954; Sherif et al., 1961; Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2018)

Individuals with insecure self-concept may have lower tolerance for contradictory perceptions/worldviews (e.g., decreased openness and increased defensiveness).

- Self-concept can be impacted by situational variance (Campbell et al., 1996; Kernis et al., 2005; Paradise & Kernis, 2002; Schroder-Abe et al., 2007)
- White individuals may be more prone to defensiveness when discussing race because of insecure self-concept as racialized beings (See white identity models: Sabnani, Ponterotto, & Borodovsky 1991; Hardiman, 1982; Helms, 1984; Ponterotto, 1988)

There is a gap in the literature regarding the effectiveness of diversity trainings to change behavior as well as a gap regarding the integration of evidenced based principles and interventions in the development of diversity trainings.

- The **purpose of this study** is to explore the receptivity to behaviorally based, descriptive amoral framings of diversity definitions compared with morally-laden framings, as well as to explore the relationship between previous exposure to diverse populations and receptivity to amoral framings.

### Methods

#### This study attempted to explore the following hypotheses:

- Individuals are more receptive to behaviorally based, descriptive amoral framings of diversity definitions than morally-laden framings.
- Individuals who endorse having less exposure to diverse populations will be more receptive to amoral descriptive framings and will also evidence a negative response to moral diversity framings.

An anonymous online survey was provided to participants who were recruited through online, snowball sampling on various social media platforms.

#### Measures included:

- Three vignettes describing "white fragility" and a list of 10 adjectives following each vignette that mapped onto defensiveness or openness
  - First vignette (option A) pulled from DiAngelo (2011), second (option B) and third (option C) vignettes authored by present researchers
  - Option A is a direct quote utilizing DiAngelo's (2011) moralized framework; option B offers an amoral framing with social theory principles; option C offers an amoral framing with learning theory and behavioral principles
- Questionnaire about general demographic information (e.g., gender, race, political affiliation, age, etc.)
- Optional, open ended question about reaction/opinion to survey for qualitative data
- Note: as of this study, there are no standardized measures for these specific research questions, so a mixed methods approach was used to explore participant reactions

#### Inclusion criteria:

- Participants had to be 18 years of age or older, fluent in English, and have lived in the United States for at least 5 years.

### Results & Data Analysis

31 participants completed the survey, and one entry was excluded due to not having lived in the United States for five years.

Some of the demographic information reported was as follows:

- 25 participants identified as white; 1 identified as African American; 1 identified as Native American; 1 identified as Asian; 1 identified as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; 3 identified as Other
- Ages ranged from 22 years to 64 years
- 11 participants identified as cisgender men; 10 identified as cisgender women; 1 identified as a transgender man; 2 identified as non-binary; 6 identified as other
- 8 participants identified as Democrat; 1 identified as Green, 7 identified as Independent; 8 identified as Leftist; 3 identified as Libertarian; and 3 identified as Republican

#### Data analysis is currently underway; however, some of the following trends and themes have been observed:

- 5 participants chose option A as preferred; 9 chose option B; 11 chose option C; 4 stated they picked no option (3 of which expressed negative opinions about the survey overall); 1 did not answer
- Of the participants that reported feeling anger at any of the offered vignettes, none selected option A as preferred
- Participants who chose option A tended to report a preference for A due to brevity/conciseness; participants who chose option C tended to report a preference for C due to relatability, generalizability, and for being "least offensive"

#### Qualitative responses presented some of the following themes:

- Group membership regarding race and/or political values; awareness of/concern for ingroup/outgroup tension; moralization of content aligned with left leaning values

### Discussion

- This study was an attempt to create a foundation and informed direction for the development of diversity training curriculum that effectively changes behavior.
- The data thus far appear to suggest that receptivity to diversity trainings decreases when trainings are developed with moralizing frameworks. Receptivity appears to also decrease as ingroup/outgroup tensions increase (e.g., if one group is presumed as morally aligned [i.e. "good"] with the training and the other group is presumed as morally unaligned [i.e. "bad"]).
- **Data analysis will need to be completed for conclusions to be formalized.**

Psychological science has identified the ineffectiveness of shame-based models. The power of self-motivation, or the effectiveness of *motivational interviewing*, may provide an evidenced-based foundation for diversity training curriculum. (Westra, 2012)

#### Limitations

- Small sample size
- Response bias: Growing implementation of diversity trainings and mainstreaming of antibias principles may prevent individuals from responding honestly due to perceived social expectations or concerns about social desirability
- Lack of standardized methods to measure reactions and effectiveness

#### Future directions

- Development of diversity training curriculum that integrates evidenced based principles and interventions for change by:
  - Utilizing amoral framings
  - Utilizing exposure therapy models to prevent backfire effects and maladaptive reinforcement
  - Utilizing motivational interviewing to intrinsically motivate change
  - Facilitating positive intergroup contact to reduce prejudice and xenophobia
    - Education and positive emotional experiences may create new, positively reinforced schemas that result in changed beliefs and changed behavior

Research has shown that quality of intergroup exposure often determines lasting impact. (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011)

- Development of standardized measure(s) of diversity training effectiveness
- Development of a culture of empathy and corrective community experiences
  - DBT principles: Interpersonal effectiveness (e.g. Being right vs being effective, rupture/repair, etc.)

Change is possible: We can create whatever culture we want.

#### References:

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