cogitatio

COMMENTARY

A Step and a Push in Understanding People Without an Immigrant Background: An Analysis of Crul et al. (2024)

Tomás R. Jiménez

Department of Sociology, Stanford University, USA

Correspondence: Tomás R. Jiménez (tjimenez@stanford.edu)

Abstract

This commentary offers an analysis of the article "The Integration Into Diversity Paradox: Positive Attitudes Towards Diversity While Self-Segregating in Practice" by Maurice Crul, Lisa-Marie Kraus, and Frans Lelie, published in this thematic issue of *Social Inclusion* (Crul et al., 2024). I argue that the article is a step and a potential push forward in research on people without an immigrant background. The step forward is their findings that people without an immigrant background tend to have more positive attitudes about ethnic diversity, and yet, an important segment of these people have little to no contact with people with an immigrant background. Their findings may be part of burgeoning evidence suggesting that the emergence of "critical white racial identity," defined by a heightened awareness critique of the privileges of whiteness, is steeped in a liberal political orientation that values diversity and racial equity learned in and reinforced by politically homophilous social networks, educational institutions, and professional organizations, and characterized by high socioeconomic status, insulating individuals against a status threat perceived by poorer whites.

Keywords

diversity; Europe; immigration; intergroup attitudes; intergroup relations; racial identity; United States; whiteness

---

Questions of immigrant integration/assimilation/incorporation have been central to social science research for over a century. Although some early scholarship defined assimilation to include the possibility of change among the long-established populations that immigrants encountered after they arrived (Park & Burgess, 1921), research and theorizing have overwhelmingly focused on change among immigrants and their

descendants. It was not until Richard Alba and Victor Nee oriented scholars to think about assimilation as a process involving change among established populations (Alba & Nee, 2003), or "people without an immigrant background," in the parlance of Crul et al. (2024, defined as people whose ancestry dates back at least two generations in a country) that social scientists began seriously considering what change might look like. I took up that topic in my work, using ethnographic methods to show how an ethnoracial and social class spectrum of people without an immigrant background in California's Silicon Valley experience and make sense of immigration-driven change happening in their neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and interpersonal networks (Jiménez, 2017). I found that assimilation is a relational process: a back-and-forth volley of change and response between people with and without an immigrant background that, over time, can result in dramatically changed understandings of race, ethnicity, and the nation.

The ability of a group to influence that relational process depends on population size, group status, and institutional arrangements that put groups in a position to determine their fate. While Alba and Nee (2003) use historical data from earlier waves of immigrants to provide a conceptual and theoretical account of how immigration changes the mainstream, my work attempted to examine the here-and-now experience of people without an immigrant background who are on the "other side" of the assimilation equation. The Becoming *a* Minority project is, to my knowledge, the first attempt to examine people without an immigrant background using large-scale survey and interview data in multiple sites. This larger project is a leap forward in testing and advancing theories of integration/assimilation/incorporation. Published in this thematic issue of *Social Inclusion*, the article "The Integration Into Diversity Paradox: Positive Attitudes Towards Diversity While Self-Segregating in Practice" is a step and a potential push forward in research on people without an immigrant background (Crul et al., 2024). The article uses a Becoming *a* Minority survey from six European cities to establish further the theoretical importance of treating immigrants and people without an immigrant background as central actors in the integration/ assimilation/incorporation process, providing a typology of network composition and attitudinal orientations and bringing to light theoretically important dimensions of that typology. First, the step forward. The findings inspire greater confidence in the core tenets of the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), which posits a positive relationship between intergroup interaction and attitudes. Early formulations of the hypothesis postulated that intergroup attitudes become more positive when individuals of different groups are of equal status, have a common goal or task that they work toward cooperatively, and have support from authority figures. Decades of research bear out the hypothesis' predictions, even when relaxing the conditions in the original formulation (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Crul, Kraus, and Lelie's findings support the hypothesis, showing a positive correlation between more diverse interpersonal networks and the attitudes of non-immigrant populations (Crul et al., 2024, Table 1, positions 3 and 6).

A second contribution comes from how the article pushes thinking forward in considering the paradox that the authors uncover about contemporary immigration attitudes and intergroup relations. Their analysis of the integration into diversity matrix shows that 12% of respondents have no friends or acquaintances with a migration background and still have positive attitudes towards ethnic diversity (position 9). Critically, the share jumps to 26% among respondents with a BA or MA. Respondents in position 9 might seem to contradict the contact hypothesis or potentially support the notion that attitudes precede contact (perhaps individuals in position 9 are just waiting to find the contact with immigrants that their attitudes would presumably make them prone to seek). The authors turned to their in-depth interviews to make sense of the paradox, showing that some respondents with positive attitudes are hesitant to interact with migrant

populations because they "[do] not know the codes [of conduct], and [are] afraid of offending people by saying the wrong things" (Crul et al., 2024, p. 10). The authors then turn to resolving the paradox, implicitly turning to the core tenets of the contact hypothesis. They show that respondents hold more positive attitudes when their interpersonal networks are more diversified, have a partner from a migration background, their oldest child attends a school with individuals from a migration background, engage in activities with a mixed population, and work alongside people from a migration background. My research in Silicon Valley, California (Jiménez, 2017) suggests that these are indeed important variables. I found that children, through intermarriage and their interpersonal networks and schools, thrust parents and even grandparents into social milieus with individuals from other ethnoracial groups, softening the attitudes of older cohorts. Blue- and white-collar workplaces have become more diversified in ways that expose people without an immigrant background to individuals with a migration background, their culture, and even their migration histories. Research conducted on two continents in multiple cities should give us confidence in the importance of the variables Crul and colleagues show to be important to the diversification of interpersonal networks and the attitudes that follow.

If the authors attempt to resolve the paradox by showing how respondents can make their attitudes reflect their networks, what remains unresolved is how the paradox comes to exist. If, for people in position 9, pro-diversity attitudes appear to be unconnected to real-life interactions with the people about whom they have such positive attitudes, where do those attitudes come from? That there are inconsistencies between attitudes and behavior (Fazio & Zanna, 1981), or support for principles of racial equality but not the policies that realize the principles (Schuman et al., 1997), is well known. However, Crul and colleagues may have tapped into something more. The respondents in position 9, and especially those with a college degree or more in the authors' integration into diversity matrix, are part of a larger set of college-educated individuals in the US and Europe who profess liberal attitudes about immigration and race, but who by virtue of their class standing may not have significant or meaningful contact with non-whites and people with a migration background. These findings suggest that it is not only class background but political orientation that correlates with such attitudes. Eric Kaufmann has shown that white liberals in the US and England have among the most positive attitudes about immigrants and diversity and the most liberal attitudes about race (Kaufmann, 2018, 2019). Kaufmann also shows that white Democratic voters in the US are the only group that has less favorable attitudes about their own group than they do toward other groups (Kaufmann, 2019). Other researchers have revealed similar patterns. Where immigration is concerned, partisan attitudes on the left are driving attitudinal polarization. In the last decade, Democrats' attitudes have become dramatically more positive, a trend that is especially pronounced among white Democrats (Ollerenshaw & Jardina, 2023; Wright & Levy, 2020). My research with Deborah Schildkraut, Yuen Ho, and John Dovidio in the US states of Arizona and New Mexico shows that white Democrats report being nearly as positively affected by welcoming immigration policies as foreign-born Latinos (Jiménez et al., 2021).

Combined, the emerging findings about race, political polarization, attitudes, and intergroup contact suggest the emergence of new forms of white racial identity that might explain the paradox of individuals in position 9 in the integration into diversity index. This new form of white racial identity comes into more focus, considering that it emerges in a larger context of political polarization taking place in the US and Europe. Scholars have argued that polarization is affective, rooted in a sense of political orientation as a deeply felt social identity rather than merely a set of attitudes about issues (Iyengar et al., 2019). Affective political polarization bisects ethnoracial groups rather than envelopes them. This new form of white racial identity,

what we might call "critical white racial identity," is defined by a heightened awareness and critique of the privileges of whiteness (in contrast to whiteness as an unstated or "unmarked" standard; see Frankenberg, 1993). Critical white racial identity is steeped in a liberal political orientation that values diversity and racial equity learned in and reinforced by politically homophilous social networks, educational institutions, and professional organizations. Critical white racial identity is also characterized by high socioeconomic status, insulating individuals against a status threat perceived by poorer whites (Craig et al., 2018). Individuals who embody critical white racial identity largely navigate residential and professional contexts that offer little peer contact with ethnoracial minorities, especially the poorest among them. Indeed, critical white racial identity may capture the individuals in position 9: They have progressive attitudes about race and ethnicity but little contact with individuals from the groups about whom they have such a favorable view.

This rough sketch of critical white racial identity emerges from piecing together a growing body of evidence about the opinions and attitudes of white liberals in the US and, to a lesser degree, Europe. Crul, Kraus, and Lelie's findings about the relationship between intergroup contact and attitudes are another potential building block. I hope the accumulated evidence and the rough sketch I provide encourage scholars to examine this and other possible new forms of white racial identity in a politically polarized world.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Alba, R., & Nee, V. (2003). *Remaking the American mainstream: Assimilation and contemporary immigration*. Harvard University Press.

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Addison-Wesley.

Craig, M. A., Rucker, J. M., & Richeson, J. A. (2018). Racial and political dynamics of an approaching 'majority–minority' United States. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *677*(1), 204–214.

Crul, M., Kraus, L.-M., & Lelie, F. (2024). The integration into diversity paradox: Positive attitudes towards diversity while self-segregating in practice. *Social Inclusion*, *12*, Article 8226. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8226

Fazio, R. H., & Zanna, M. P. (1981). Direct experience and attitude-behavior consistency. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *14*, 161–202.

Frankenberg, R. (1993). *White women, race matters: The social construction of whiteness*. University of Minnesota Press.

Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *22*, 129–146. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034

Jiménez, T. R. (2017). *The other side of assimilation: How immigrants are changing American life*. University of California Press.

Jiménez, T. R., Schildkraut, D. J., Huo, Y. J., & Dovidio, J. F. (2021). *States of belonging: Immigration policies, attitudes, and inclusion*. Russell Sage Foundation Press.

Kaufmann, E. (2018). *Whiteshift: Populism, immigration and the future of white majorities*. Harry N. Abrams.

Kaufmann, E. (2019, March 18). Americans are divided by their views on race, not race itself. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/18/opinion/race-america-trump.html

Ollerenshaw, T., & Jardina, A. (2023). The asymmetric polarization of immigration opinion in the United States. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *87*(4), 1038–1053. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfad048

Park, R. E., & Burgess, E. W. (1921). *Introduction to the science of sociology*. University of Chicago Press.

Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *90*(5), 751–783.

Schuman, H., Steeh, C., Bobo, L., & Krysan, M. (1997). *Racial attitudes in America: Trends and interpretations* (revised edition). Harvard University Press.

Wright, M., & Levy, M. (2020). American public opinion on immigration: Nativist, polarized, or ambivalent? *International Migration*, *58*(6), 77–95.

About the Author

Tomás R. Jiménez is a professor of sociology and comparative studies in race and ethnicity at Stanford University. He is also the founding co-director of Stanford's Institute for Advancing Just Societies. He is the author of three books: *States of Belonging: Immigration Policies, Attitudes, and Inclusion* (with Deborah Schildkraut, Yuen Ho, and John Dovidio), *The Other Side of Assimilation: How Immigrants are Changing American Life*, and *Replenished Ethnicity: Mexican Americans, Immigration, and Identity*.