

No Longer “All-American”?: Whites’ Defensive Reactions to Their Numerical Decline

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Felix Danbold¹ and Yuen J. Huo¹

Abstract

We suggest that Whites’ declining share of the U.S. population threatens their status as the most prototypical ethnic group in America. This *prototypicality threat* should lead to growing resistance toward diversity, motivated by the desire to reassert Whites’ standing as prototypical Americans. In Study 1, how dramatically Whites perceived their share of the population to decline predicted support for cultural assimilation, mediated by prototypicality threat (controlling for realistic and symbolic threat). This relationship held only among Whites who felt that ethnic groups differ in their prototypicality, not among those who saw all groups representing America equally. Study 2 experimentally manipulated exposure to demographic projections such that Whites who saw their group shrinking showed weaker diversity endorsement relative to those who believed their share to be stable, again mediated by prototypicality threat. These findings reveal Whites’ threatened prototypicality as a novel, emerging source of resistance toward diversity in 21st-century America.

Keywords

intergroup relations, diversity, Whites, prototypicality, demographic changes, identity threat, intergroup threat, moderated mediation

In the 1930s, the term “All-American” emerged in the American lexicon to describe “the iconic manifestation of the true American way of life” (Norris, 2011). Underlying this term was the assumption that to be “All-American” was to be part of the White majority. Who then will claim this title when Whites are no longer a numerical majority? Between 2015 and 2050, non-Hispanic White Americans will drop from 62% to 47% of the total U.S. population, becoming, for the first time, a numerical minority (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2012). Some may conclude that for a society that generally regards diversity positively (Bell & Hartmann, 2007) and whose education systems purportedly triumph multiculturalism (Glazer, 1998), Americans should welcome this burgeoning diversity. Such hopeful views, however, should be tempered by evidence showing that Whites actually have little support for multiculturalism (Citrin, Sears, Muste, & Wong, 2001; Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011) and are likely to engage in defensive strategies to preserve their dominant standing in American society (Knowles & Marshburn, 2010). Indeed, a declining share of the population may herald for Whites “the erosion of ‘whiteness’ as the touchstone of what it means to be American” (Hsu, 2009).

In the current research, we examine Whites’ perceptions of and reactions to this new vulnerability—that their claim to being prototypical All-Americans may be slipping along with their share of the population. As a result, despite growing declarations of a post-racial America, the portent of a

minority–majority nation may loom ominously for Whites, triggering a rejection, rather than embrace, of growing diversity. Echoing media reports (Curry, 2012), recent research has found that reminding Whites of their declining relative group size led to greater bias, anger, and fear toward minorities (Craig & Richeson, 2014a; Outten, Schmitt, Miller, & Garcia, 2012) and endorsement of conservatism among the politically unaffiliated (Craig & Richeson, 2014b). In this article, we examine White Americans’ reactions to becoming a numerical minority and test the hypothesis that concerns about losing their status as prototypical Americans uniquely drive opposition to growing diversity in response to population changes.

The Value of Prototypicality

Group prototypes serve as the norm against which individual members are judged, with those most prototypical being positively valued and awarded access to resources and social standing (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1998). The in-group projection model (Wenzel, Mummendey, & Waldzus, 2007)

¹ Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Felix Danbold, Department of Psychology, University of California, 1285 Franz Hall, Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA.
Email: fdanbold@ucla.edu

argues that just as individuals can be prototypical of groups, so can subgroups be prototypical of superordinate categories. Given the benefits of prototypicality, individuals readily project their in-group attributes onto relevant superordinate categories (Waldzus, Mummendey, Wenzel, & Boettcher, 2004). Although subgroup members are motivated to construe their superordinate category in a way that enhances their subgroup's prototypicality, structural realities allow some subgroups to hold a stronger claim. For instance, Whites, Asian Americans, and African Americans all implicitly perceive the prototypical American to be White (Devos & Banaji, 2005). However, with demographic changes, Whites' declining relative group size may threaten this long-standing and valuable association between being White and being American.

We conceptualize prototypicality threat as the potential loss of a subgroup's standing as most representative of a superordinate category. Although well-articulated outlines of intergroup and identity threats exist in the literature (e.g., Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001; Stephan & Stephan, 2000), none directly address threat to prototypicality. Moreover, research that has examined such threat focused on the prototypicality of *individuals* within a group rather than the relative prototypicality of *subgroups* within a superordinate category (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1997). An intergroup-based conception of prototypicality threat allows for novel predictions about how members of traditionally prototypical subgroups respond to the potential loss of their claim to be most representative of the superordinate category.

Consequences of Prototypicality Threat: Study Predictions

Because perceiving one's subgroup as prototypical is psychologically valuable, individuals under prototypicality threat should respond in two ways to defend against this threat. First, individuals experiencing prototypicality threat can seek to reassert their subgroup's prototypicality by demanding that other groups assimilate to established norms. Assimilation reinforces the notion that norms associated with the prototypical subgroup are the norms to which all others should conform. Alternatively, individuals may devalue the general concept of diversity as doing so directly targets what threatens to dislodge their subgroup's prototypicality.

Additionally, we predict that differences in individuals' beliefs about the exclusivity of Whites' prototypicality may moderate the relationship between perceived demographic change and prototypicality threat. Specifically, how individuals see prototypicality distributed among America's ethnic groups should moderate this relationship, such that demographic change should *only* trigger prototypicality threat for those who feel that some ethnic groups (i.e., Whites) represent America more than others. However, for those who believe that different ethnic groups represent America equally, projections of future demographics should not evoke prototypicality threat.

Present Research

In two studies, we tested the prediction that Whites who perceived a decrease in their ethnic group's relative size would oppose this growing diversity, expressed in both increased support for assimilation (Study 1) and decreased endorsement of diversity (Study 2). We further predicted that this relationship would be mediated by prototypicality threat (Studies 1 and 2), the concern that Whites' status as the prototypical ethnic group in the United States will be lost. Finally, we predicted that this relationship would only hold for those Whites who saw prototypicality as theirs to lose (Study 1).

Study 1 assessed Whites' perceptions of demographic change in the United States and examined the relationship between these perceptions and support for assimilation in several ways. First, we tested whether this relationship was mediated by prototypicality threat over and above two other group-based threats, realistic and symbolic threat. Realistic threat emerges from competition over resources (e.g., jobs, political and economic power; Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999), and symbolic threat emerges from conflicts over cultural beliefs and values (Stephan et al., 2002). Although these threats are also likely evoked in response to changing demographics, we predicted that prototypicality threat would elicit a distinct response, as it specifically captures the unique psychological experience of Whites at risk of losing their status as prototypical Americans.

We then tested whether the indirect effect (IE) of perceived demographic change would hold primarily among those who believed that prototypicality is exclusive to, and thus can be lost by, one ethnic group (Whites). To test this possibility, we relied on an individual difference measure, *prototypicality distribution*, developed to gauge the extent to which individuals view America's ethnic groups as varying or equal in their prototypicality. Whites who view America's ethnic groups as equally prototypical should report minimal prototypicality threat when confronted with their shrinking population share. In contrast, those who view Whites and other ethnic groups as differentially prototypical should report greater prototypicality threat and support for assimilation. Study 2 (an experiment) conceptually replicated Study 1 by exposing individuals to information indicating either demographic changes or stability and examined the role of prototypicality threat in mediating the effect of this information on diversity endorsement.

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested whether White Americans who perceived their group's percentage of the population to be declining would report greater support for assimilation and whether this relationship would be (1) mediated by prototypicality threat (controlling for realistic and symbolic threat) and (2) moderated by individual differences in prototypicality distribution.

Method

Participants and Procedures

One hundred and ninety-four White American adults (50% women; $M_{age} = 36.90$ years, standard deviation [SD] = 12.89) were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) for a study of “America’s Future” and were paid US\$0.75. Although we had no prior data on Whites’ experience with prototypical threat from which to run power analyses, we estimated a targeted sample of 200 participants based on the research on Whites’ experiences with related forms of identity concerns (Huo, Molina, Binning, & Funge, 2010). Six participants were recruited into the study but did not complete the survey. Thirty-four percent identified as Democrats, 19% as Republicans, and 47% as Independents. Eighty-nine percent reported having some college education or higher. Four participants who took longer than 40 min to complete the survey (more than twice the average of 20 min) were excluded from analyses. Eight participants who later self-identified as an ethnicity other than White (e.g., multiethnic, Arab American, etc.) were also excluded, leaving a final sample size of 182 participants.

Measures

Perceptions of White American population decrease. Participants indicated the extent to which they expected the number of Whites, along with African Americans, Asians, and Latinos, to change between now and 2050 as a percentage of total U.S. population ($-5 = rapidly decreasing$ to $5 = rapidly increasing$). Ratings of expected change for White Americans were used as our primary predictor variable and reverse coded (higher numbers represent more rapid decrease).

Support for assimilation. Support for assimilation was measured with 3 items, adapted from Hehman et al. (2012): “If people want to succeed in the US, they should adopt the values of my ethnic group,” “What makes the US strong is that we are a mix of different racial cultures (reverse coded),” and “America should be an English-only country” ($1 = strongly disagree$ to $7 = strongly agree$; $\alpha = .72$).

Prototypicality threat. Three items assessed the extent to which Whites felt that their status as a prototypical American was threatened: “I fear that in 40 years time, it won’t be clear what it means to be American,” “I believe that there will always be a place for my ethnic group in American society” (reverse coded), and “I fear that in 40 years time, my ethnic group will not represent the American identity” ($1 = strongly disagree$ to $5 = strongly agree$; $\alpha = .78$).

Realistic threat. Three items were adapted from Stephan et al. (1999): “The growth of other ethnic groups has increased the tax burden on members of my ethnic group,” “Social services have become less available to members of my ethnic group because of the growth of other ethnic groups,” and “Members

of other ethnic groups are not displacing members of my ethnic group from their jobs (reverse coded)” ($1 = strongly disagree$ to $5 = strongly agree$; $\alpha = .79$).

Symbolic threat. Three items were adapted from Stephan et al. (1999): “The values and beliefs of other ethnic groups regarding moral issues are not compatible with the values and beliefs of my ethnic group,” “The growth of other ethnic groups is undermining American culture,” and “The values and beliefs of other ethnic groups regarding work are not compatible with the values and beliefs of my ethnic group” ($1 = strongly disagree$ to $5 = strongly agree$; $\alpha = .89$).

Prototypicality distribution. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, and White Americans represent the values and ideals of America on a 7-point scale ($1 = least representative$ to $7 = most representative$). We conceived of prototypicality distribution as how widely dispersed ratings of the ethnic groups were. Prototypicality distribution was calculated by computing the within-participant statistical variance of these ratings. We relied on within-participant statistical variance, rather than difference scores, because it is a more valid representation of dispersion of ratings. For example, a White/non-White difference score overlooks variation within ratings of non-White groups whereas that variation is captured by our measure. Thus, participants who rated each ethnic group as equally prototypical would produce a prototypicality distribution score of 0. Alternatively, participants who gave different ratings to each group would generate positive prototypicality distribution scores with higher scores indicating greater dispersion.¹

Results

Descriptives and inter-item correlations are presented in Table 1.

Perceived Population Decrease, Support for Assimilation, and Prototypicality Threat

We hypothesized that Whites’ perceptions of their numerical decline would be positively associated with endorsement of assimilation and that this relationship would be mediated by concerns about the loss of prototypicality. Correlations shown in Table 1 and preliminary analyses supported this hypothesized model. To directly test our hypothesis, we examined the unique mediational effect of prototypicality threat including realistic and symbolic threat in a multiple mediation model. We tested whether the indirect effect (IE) of perceived White population decrease on assimilation endorsement through prototypicality threat was significant over and above the IEs of realistic and symbolic threat (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Coefficients for the paths tested are shown in Figure 1.

To determine whether prototypicality threat mediated this relationship above and beyond other intergroup threats, we conducted a nonparametric bootstrap analysis using 5,000

Table 1. Study I Correlations.

| | Mean | SD | White Population Decrease | Pro-Assimilation Attitudes | Prototypicality Threat | Realistic Threat | Symbolic Threat | Prototypicality Distribution |
|------------------------------|------|------|---------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| White Population decrease | 6.80 | 1.84 | | | | | | |
| Pro-Assimilation attitudes | 3.38 | 1.46 | .16* | | | | | |
| Prototypicality threat | 3.15 | 1.49 | .25** | .67** | | | | |
| Realistic threat | 3.03 | 1.08 | .16* | .66** | .63** | | | |
| Symbolic threat | 2.39 | 1.14 | .11 | .75** | .71** | .67** | | |
| Prototypicality distribution | 2.25 | 2.60 | .14 [†] | .46** | .47** | .44** | .57** | |

Note. *SD* = standard deviation.

[†] $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

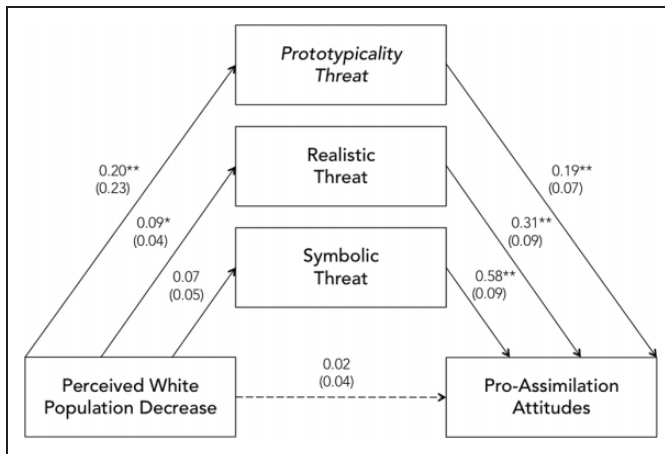


Figure 1. Study I multiple mediation model. All coefficients are unstandardized. Standard errors are in parentheses; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

resamples. As hypothesized, prototypicality threat significantly mediated the relationship between perceived White population decrease and pro-assimilation attitudes (IE lower 95% confidence interval [CI] = .01, upper 95% CI = .09). Because zero is not in the 95% CI, the IE is significantly different from zero. Realistic threat also mediated the relationship between White population decrease and pro-assimilation attitudes (IE lower 95% CI = .00, upper 95% CI = .07), but symbolic threat did not (IE lower 95% CI = $-.02$, upper 95% CI = .11). Adding prototypicality threat to a model with only realistic and symbolic threat as mediators increased variance accounted for (adjusted R^2 change = .02). In sum, the IE of population decrease on assimilation endorsement was mediated by prototypicality threat even after controlling for other forms of intergroup threat.

Prototypicality Distribution as a Moderator

We next tested whether beliefs about the relative prototypicality of America's different ethnic groups would moderate the relationship between perceived White population decrease and prototypicality threat. For those who saw all ethnic groups as relatively equal in prototypicality (low prototypicality

distribution), we expected a negligible effect of perceived White population decrease on prototypicality threat. For individuals who rated ethnic groups as differentially prototypical (high prototypicality distribution), we predicted higher levels of prototypicality threat in response to White population decrease.

First, we tested the assumption that Whites perceive their in-group to be the most prototypical ethnic group in America. As expected, participants reported White Americans as significantly higher in prototypicality ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 1.12$) than African Americans, $M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.54$, $t(181) = 9.75$, $p < .01$; Asians, $M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.66$, $t(181) = 10.70$, $p < .01$; and Latinos $M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.71$, $t(181) = 11.68$, $p < .01$. These results were in line with prior research showing that Whites see their in-group as most prototypical of America (Devos & Banaji, 2005). Only seven participants rated non-Whites as slightly more prototypical than Whites. As the exclusion of these participants did not alter our main findings, they were retained in our analyses.

We next investigated whether differences in prototypicality distribution (the within-participant statistical variance of ethnic group prototypicality ratings) moderated the relationship between perceived White population decrease and prototypicality threat. Prototypicality distribution scores ranged from 0 (no variance in ratings of ethnic groups) to 12 (high variance in ratings of ethnic groups; $M = 2.28$, $SD = 2.63$). Prototypicality threat was significantly predicted by both perceived White population decrease ($\beta = .15$, $p < .05$) and prototypicality distribution ($\beta = .44$, $p < .01$). In addition, there was a significant interaction between population decrease and prototypicality distribution ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$; $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $p < .05$; Figure 2). For participants with low prototypicality distribution scores (i.e., those who rated America's four largest ethnic groups as equally prototypical), low levels of prototypicality threat were reported regardless of perceived decrease in Whites' share of the population. For participants high in prototypicality distribution (i.e., those who reported variance in the prototypicality of America's ethnic groups), prototypicality threat was positively associated with perceived White population decrease. For these participants, more dramatic perceptions of shrinking group size were associated with greater levels of prototypicality threat. In contrast, prototypicality

Table 2. Study 1 Conditional Indirect Effect of Perceived White Population Decrease on Pro-Assimilation Attitudes Through Prototypicality Threat at Low (-1 SD), Moderate (Mean), and High ($+1$ SD) Levels of Prototypicality Distribution.

| Conditional Level of Prototypicality Distribution | Indirect Effect | Bootstrapped Standard Error | Bias-Corrected Lower Limit | Bias-Corrected Upper Limit |
|---|-----------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| -1 SD (low prototypicality distribution) | .01 | .04 | -.08 | .09 |
| Mean | .07 | .03 | .01 | .13 |
| $+1$ SD (high prototypicality distribution) | .13 | .04 | .05 | .23 |

Note. SD = standard deviation. Bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals were calculated using 5,000 bootstrap samples (with replacement). Significant conditional indirect effects ($p < .05$) are highlighted in boldface.

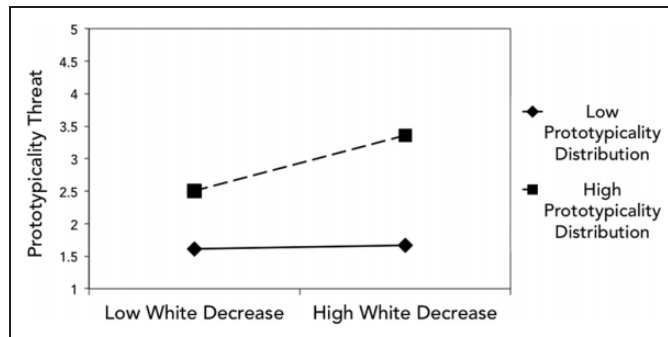


Figure 2. Study 1 moderation analyses demonstrating the interaction between perceived White population decrease and prototypicality distribution on prototypicality threat. Low and high levels of the predictor variables represent 1 standard deviation below and above the mean.

distribution did not moderate the relationship between White population decrease and realistic threat, the only other significant relationship in our earlier test of mediation ($\Delta R^2 = .00$, $p = .67$).

We next conducted a test of moderated mediation, evaluating whether the IE of population decrease on assimilation endorsement, mediated through prototypicality threat, was moderated by prototypicality distribution. We used Hayes' MODMED macro (Model 2) for Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 20; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007) to estimate the IE of perceived White population decrease on pro-assimilation attitudes through prototypicality threat at conditional levels of prototypicality distribution using 5,000 bootstrapped resamples. Table 2 shows that the conditional IE of perceived White population decrease on assimilation endorsement through prototypicality threat at varying levels of prototypicality distribution. Whereas the IE of perceived White population decrease on assimilation endorsement through prototypicality threat was reliable for those who were at the mean (prototypicality distribution = 2.25, IE = .07; bias-corrected (BC) 95% CI = [.01, .13]) or 1 SD above the mean of prototypicality distribution (prototypicality distribution = 4.85, IE = .13; BC 95% CI = .05, .23), the IE was not reliable among participants who were 1 SD below the mean of prototypicality distribution (prototypicality distribution = 0, IE = .01, BC 95% CI = [-.08, .09]). Thus, the stronger relationship between perceived White

population decrease and assimilation endorsement among participants at high (vs. low) levels of prototypicality distribution is explained by the former's perceptions of threat concerning their in-group's future prototypicality.

Discussion

Consistent with our predictions, Whites' perceptions of their numerical decline were associated with support for assimilation. Moreover, this relationship was mediated by concerns about retaining Whites' prototypicality, controlling for realistic and symbolic threat. Finally, prototypicality threat's effectiveness as a mediator was moderated by differences in prototypicality distribution, such that prototypicality threat was a significant mediator only for those who perceived some ethnic groups (i.e., Whites) to represent America better than others. Although these findings are consistent with predictions, correlational data preclude the causal inference that demographic change indeed triggered these defensive reactions. Thus, we conducted an experimental conceptual replication to test this hypothesized causal pathway.

Study 2

Study 2 tested the prediction that exposure to information about changing demographics triggers Whites' concerns about their prototypicality in America, and subsequently, opposition to diversity.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 98 White American adults (50% women; $M_{age} = 37.54$ years, $SD = 13.13$) recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete a survey about "America's future" in exchange for US\$0.50. A target sample size of 50 participants per condition was chosen to approximate the sample size of a comparable paradigm (Study 1 in Outten et al., 2012). Thirty-six percent of participants were Democrats, 21% Republican, and 31% Independent. Eighty-seven percent of participants reported having some college education or higher.

Our sampling strategy preempted the participation of individuals from 10 continuous immigrant gateways (defined as having above-average percentage foreign-born for every

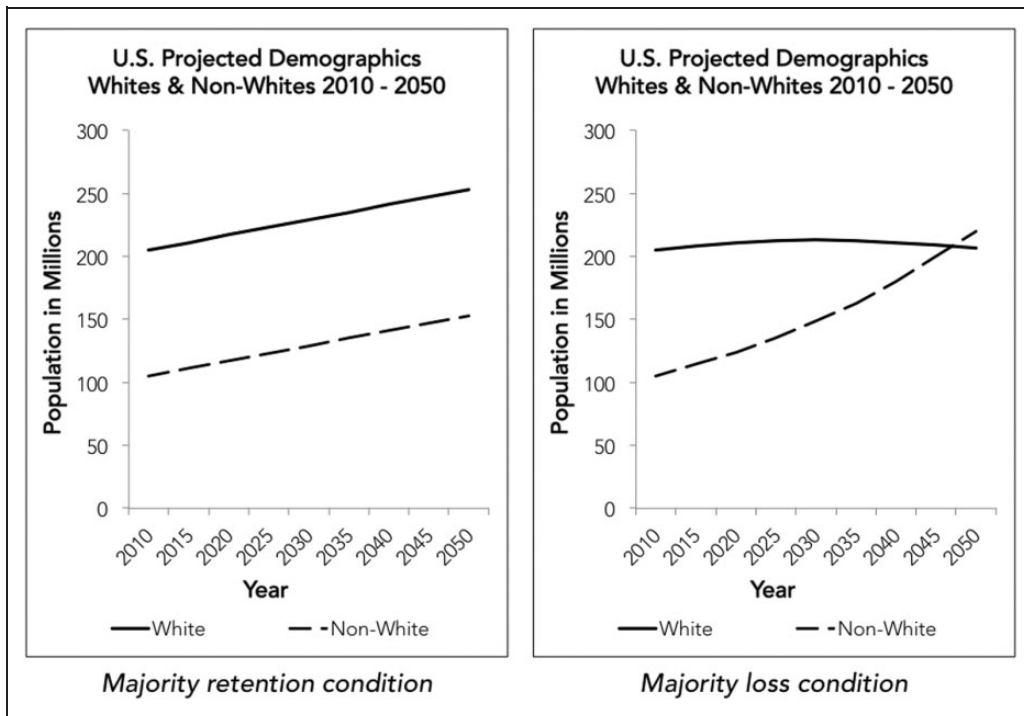


Figure 3. Study 2 White majority status manipulation conditions.

decade, 1900–2000). We precluded these individuals from participation because they live in communities of long-standing diversity and were likely to have become immune to the social changes we were interested in examining. During an eligibility screening, we asked participants for their home ZIP code. Those residing in ZIP codes located in the following metropolitan areas identified by Singer (2004) as continuous immigrant gateways were *not* recruited into the study: Bergen-Passaic, Boston, Chicago, Jersey City, Middlesex-Somerset-Hunterdon, Nassau-Suffolk, New York, Newark, and San Francisco. In analyzing reported ZIP codes of our participants, only two individuals were not recruited into the study because of their location.

White majority status manipulation. Participants were recruited into a study ostensibly on data processing and were told that they would be asked to view and summarize “two randomly selected graphs or charts about America.” All participants first saw a chart of U.S. Census data showing the gender demographics of America in 2010. Participants were then exposed to one of the two figures representing either the “majority loss” or the “majority retention” condition (see Figure 3).

Dependent variables. After exposure to the manipulation, participants completed a brief questionnaire on their views about various social issues in the United States. Filler questions were included.

Prototypicality threat. Three items assessed the extent to which participants felt that their group’s status as prototypical Americans was threatened by the demographic changes that were presented in the manipulation. Items began with the stem, “Compared to today, 50 years from now . . .” followed by “. . . what it means to be a true American will be less clear,” “. . . the values and beliefs of the typical American will be different from the values and beliefs of people like me,” and “. . . the typical American and people like me will have less in common than in the past” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .75$).

Diversity endorsement. We adapted Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, and Sanchez-Burks (2011) 6-item diversity endorsement scale to measure the extent to which participants thought diversity should be valued and encouraged in America. Sample items included “It is important to have multiple perspectives in America (i.e., from different cultures, races, and ethnicities),” “One of the goals of our country should be to teach people from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds how to live and work together,” and “Americans should understand that differences in backgrounds and experiences can lead to different values and ways of thinking” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .95$).

Manipulation check. Participants were asked to recall whether the second figure they saw showed either that “Non-Whites are growing much faster than Whites and will be the majority in

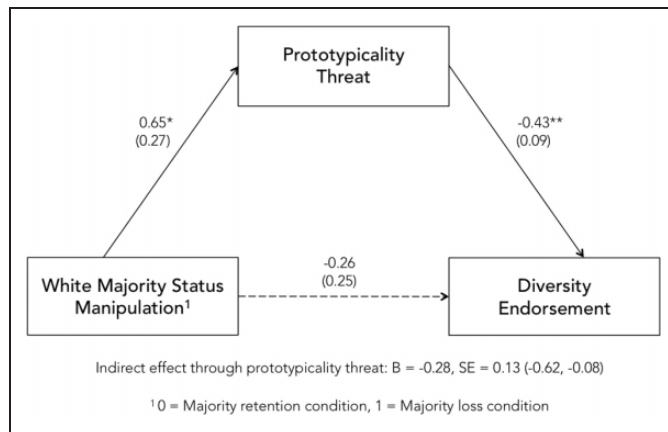


Figure 4. Study 2 mediation model. All coefficients are unstandardized. Standard errors are in parentheses; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

2050” (majority loss condition) or “Whites are expected to grow just as fast as non-Whites and still be the majority in 2050” (majority retention condition).

Results

Manipulation Check

Two participants who failed the manipulation check were removed from subsequent analyses. Four participants were also excluded from analyses for taking longer than 30 min to complete the survey. At more than twice the mean time of completion (14 min), these participants were considered inattentive and unreliable respondents. In addition, four participants who failed to complete the dependent measures were excluded, leaving a final sample size of 88 participants.

To assess the plausibility of our manipulation, participants were asked in an open-ended question at the end of the survey to report whether anything about the study was “surprising or unusual.” Mentions of our manipulation in response to the open-ended prompt did not differ across conditions ($p > .05$).

White Majority Status, Diversity Endorsement, and Prototypicality Threat

Using analysis of variance, we found that participants in the majority loss condition reported significantly higher levels of prototypicality threat ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.13$) than those in majority retention condition ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.38$), $F(1, 86) = 5.90$, $p = .02$. In contrast, participants in the majority loss condition reported significantly lower diversity endorsement ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.12$) than those in the majority retention condition ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.31$), $F(1, 86) = 3.91$, $p = .05$.

Replicating the Mediation Model With Experimental Data

We used nonparametric bootstrapping analyses with 5,000 resamples (Preacher et al., 2007) to test a model in which the effect of majority group status on diversity endorsement was

mediated by prototypicality threat. Mediation is considered to be significant if the 95% bias-corrected CI for the IE does not include 0. As predicted, prototypicality threat significantly mediated the relationship between exposure to demographic information and diversity endorsement (IE lower 95% CI = $-.62$; upper 95% CI = $-.08$; $R^2 = .23$, $p < .01$; see Figure 4).

General Discussion

Prior research shows that individuals are motivated to project their subgroup’s attributes onto the superordinate category (Wenzel et al., 2007). The current research demonstrates that those who believe that their subgroup already holds this prototypicality will defend it under threat. Findings from two studies demonstrated that for White Americans, perceptions of the shrinking of their relative group size predicted greater support for assimilation and lower endorsement of diversity. Several pieces of evidence converge to indicate that these reactions stem from Whites’ perceptions of threat to their group’s standing as prototypical Americans.

In Study 1, prototypicality threat explained the relationship between perceived loss of majority numerical status and support for assimilation, controlling for other forms of intergroup threat. Furthermore, the relationship between perceived population decrease and prototypicality threat was moderated such that prototypicality threat functioned as a mediator only among those who felt that prototypicality was theirs to lose. This appeared not to be the case for White Americans who felt that no single ethnic group best represents America. Study 2, an experiment, demonstrated that systematic exposure to information about Whites’ relative population decrease led to lower endorsement of diversity, again mediated by prototypicality threat.

Our identification of a novel mediator (prototypicality threat) and an individual difference moderator (prototypicality distribution) is a step toward understanding majority group members’ psychological response to demographic shifts. Beyond views about diversity, a broader array of situations and behaviors could also be explained by prototypicality threat. For example, prototypicality threat may compel individuals to engage in behaviors intended to present themselves and their subgroup as more prototypical of the superordinate category (e.g., displaying American flags). Prototypicality threat may also lead majority group members to deprecate other subgroups’ claims to prototypicality or to apply restrictive inclusionary criteria to preclude members of other subgroups from qualifying as “true Americans.”

In the research presented, we focused on the experience of Whites Americans. We hope that these findings will motivate future research on other groups that may be similarly susceptible to prototypicality threat. For example, among men, increasing participation of women in historically male-dominated professions may trigger prototypicality threat and subsequent opposition toward the source of threat (women) in the form of decreased support for inclusionary workplace policies.

By examining the perspective of the majority group, this research complements a vast literature addressing diversity challenges with a focus on minority group members (for reviews, see Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009; Huo, Binning, & Begeny, 2015). We show that when majority group members' prototypicality is threatened, they too may challenge social cohesion. However, this research (Study 1) and that of others (Waldzus, Mummendey, Wenzel, & Weber, 2003) suggest that individuals are less likely to react defensively to prototypicality threat when they believe that prototypicality can be shared across subgroups. As demographic changes compel us to redefine what it means to be "all-American," a more inclusive conception of who fits the prototype of the superordinate group may be a potentially effective strategy for ameliorating Whites' opposition to diversity. In the days following 9/11, the Ad Council (2001) aired public service announcements affirming the standing of many different cultural and social groups as equally American. The message embodied in such ads exemplifies a route through which we can mitigate Whites' fears about losing their status as prototypical Americans and thus engender their support for diversity amid the highly anticipated demographic changes ahead.

Conclusion

Findings across a survey and an experiment show that White Americans relate and react to their pending loss of numerical majority group status. They report concerns about the precariousness of their group's long-standing claim of being "All-American" and express subsequent opposition to growing diversity. Just as the focus was once on ethnic minority group members as a threat to social cohesion, the focus now has shifted to Whites. Understanding the central role prototypicality threat plays in the psychological reactions of Whites to ongoing demographic shifts will be critical to understanding and managing intergroup relations in the "new" America.

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Note

1. Exploratory measures not relevant to our theoretical framework or study predictions were included but not reported. Abbreviated versions of validated scales were used to accommodate survey length constraints. Readers are welcome to contact the authors for details.

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Author Biographies

Felix Danbold is a PhD student at the University of California, Los Angeles. His research focuses primarily on the perceptions and consequences of declining dominance among majority populations and definitions and expectations of ethnic diversity.

Yuen J. Huo, PhD, is an associate professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. She examines how social identity processes and justice concerns operate to influence group dynamics and intergroup relations in the context of diversity.