

2016

# Social Identity Complexity Theory: Attitudes Towards Diversity and Its Relationship with Nationalism, Religiosity, and Aggression

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## Recommended Citation

Sabanathan, D., Brown, J., Sekamanya, S., Hough, M., & Sutton, J. (2016). Social identity complexity theory: Attitudes towards diversity and its relationship with nationalism, religiosity, and aggression. In C. Roland-Lévy, P. Denoux, B. Voyer, P. Boski, & W. K. Gabrenya Jr. (Eds.), *Unity, diversity and culture. Proceedings from the 22nd Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*. [https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iaccp\\_papers/190](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iaccp_papers/190)

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# **Social Identity Complexity Theory: Attitudes Towards Diversity and Its Relationship with Nationalism, Religiosity, and Aggression**

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## **Abstract**

In this study we tested social identity complexity theory (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) in relation to attitudes towards diversity and the associated variables of nationalism, religiosity, and aggression in a cross-cultural study of 397 Malaysian and 240 Australian students. Australians reported higher positive attitudes towards diversity than Malaysians. Diversity was positively associated with nationalism, religiosity, and aggression in Malaysians. Traditional nationalism was negatively associated with diversity in Australians. These results support social identity complexity theory and partially support associated predictions for Australian, while contradicting predictions for Malaysians.

## **Introduction**

### **Attitudes toward Diversity**

In the past decade there has been exponential growth in globalization and thus exposure to diversity in terms of culture, religion, and nationalism to name a few, highlighting both similarities and differences between individuals and societies. This has led to increased attitudes of acceptance, but has also been associated with conflict as the awareness and disparity of privilege has become evident. It is increasingly important to investigate the nature of these attitudes, which often extend across generations in an attempt to understand and thus address these negative attitudes, creating greater social harmony.

The formation of attitudes toward diversity is intrinsically linked to how individuals socially identify themselves with others, and interact with diverse groups of others (Tajfel, 1978; Brewer, 1999). Tajfel's social identity theory elucidates individuals' need to distinguish the in-groups from out-groups in an attempt to preserve distinct social identities with in-groups, which will elevate conceptions of the self (Turner *et al.*, 1994). Tajfel (1978) suggested that the mere perceived presence towards out-groups can pave the way to negative attitudes of out-group discrimination.

## Social Identity Complexity Theory

Roccas and Brewer (2002) elaborated a theory of social identity complexity in which they accounted for differences in complexity between societies, based on the extent of overlapping of different in-group memberships. They suggested that when there is little complexity, in that there is substantial overlap in the group identities, there will be less tolerance for difference in those who do not share the in-group status. Where there is less overlapping of in-group memberships, there will be greater complexity, accompanied by a greater acceptance of diversity.

Two distinct social group identities that often fulfill individuals' need for a sense of self-belief and belonging, are *nationality* and *religion*. Over time, researchers (*e.g.*, Allport & Ross 1967; Gorsuch & Venable, 1983; Rothi, Lyons & Chrussochoou, 2005) have found these two social identities to be consistently predictive of higher degrees of negative attitudes towards diversity.

Dekker (2001) proposed that an individual's national identity is a salient social identity as it establishes the need to preserve the identity of subjective bond with one's nation. Nationalism has the ability to generate negative responses of exclusivity and subjugation of national out-group members, and give rise to negative attitudes towards diversity (Devos and Banaji, 2005; Li & Brewer, 2004). In some countries, national identity can become intertwined with other identities, such as religious identity.

Religious identity is another salient social identity that is usually established early in life and consistently reinforced. A religious social identity is key to one's sense of self, and influences social attitudes as it provides a cultural framework to guide and aid individuals' construal and expectations around what is and is not acceptable (Citrin, Reingold, & Green, 1990). Researchers found that religiosity has been correlated with measures of religious fundamentalism, and predictive of negative attitudes towards diversity, accompanied by prejudice (Donahue, 1985; Grant & Brown, 1995; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Allport and Ross (1967) noted that individuals' need to distinguish religious in-groups from out-groups in an attempt to preserve distinct social identities with the in-group to secure social status, fuelling negative attitudes towards diversity.

The above belief identities of nationality and religion have been linked with aggression. Rokeach's (1960) belief congruence theory asserts that perceived dissimilarities in beliefs, attitudes, and values to diverse others, gives rise to negative orientations towards them. In line with belief congruence theory, Struch and Schwartz (1989) postulated that the greater the perceived dissimilarity to others or out-groups, the more inhumane the out-group is perceived to be and that is linked with aggression towards them. As such, we propose possibly dissimilarity in beliefs, critical to both religiosity and nationalism, contribute to aggression and thereby negative attitudes towards diversity.

## The Current Study

In this study, we will explore the link between social identity complexity theory as it applies to two countries, Australia and Malaysia, where we believe there are stark differences in social complexity. According to Roccas and Brewer (2002), complex social identities are more likely seen in individuals living in multicultural societies that embrace integrationist ideologies, such as Australia. In Australia, national identity is not infused or overlapping with specific religious ideals, and thus more complex social identities are likely to be formed, leading to greater tolerance for diversity. In contrast, complex social identities are less likely seen in individuals living in a less diverse society, such as Malaysia, a society in which the large majority of individuals' identity is composed of highly overlapping salient social identities of Malaysian nationality and the Islamic religion. Malaysian Muslims, who make up approximately 61% of Malaysia's population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010), are simultaneously in-group members on both the social group dimensions of Malaysian nationality and Islamic religion, creating a less complex social identity than Australia.

The following hypotheses were made:

1. **Pro-diversity Attitudes and Culture:** In line with social identity complexity theory (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), we predicted that Australian students would report more positive attitudes towards diversity than Malaysian students.

2. **Nationalism and Pro-diversity Attitudes:** In line with past research (*e.g.*, Li and Brewer, 2004; Rothi, Lyons & Chrussochoou, 2005) we predicted that nationalism would be negatively associated with positive attitudes towards diversity and that this would be more pronounced for Malaysian than for Australian students.

3. **Religiosity and Pro-diversity Attitudes:** In line with past research (*e.g.*, Allport & Ross, 1967; Grant & Brown, 1995) we predicted that religiosity would be negatively associated with positive attitudes towards diversity and that this would be more pronounced for Malaysian than for Australian students.

4. **Aggression and Pro-diversity Attitudes:** In line with past research (*e.g.*, Rokeach, 1960; Struch & Schwartz, 1989), we predicted that aggression would be negatively associated with positive attitudes towards diversity and that this would be more pronounced for Malaysian than for Australian students.

## Method

### Participants

The sample consisted of 637 participants (445 female, 192 male) with 240 Australian students and 397 Malaysian students. The mean age of participants was 21.09 years ( $SD = 3.88$ ), with an age range of 17-65 years, and modal age of 20 years. Australian participants in this study had varied reports of religious identity (Christian = 145, Agnostic = 55, Other - Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, New Age = 39), while all Malaysian participants reported Muslim religious identity.

## Measures

Participants were asked to report demographic information on age, gender, nationality, and religious identity, in addition to the following scales.

Nationalism was measured in two subscales, using the 20-item Nationalism scale (Rothi, Lyons, & Chrussochoou, 2005). The scale assesses the degree of attachment and identity with a nation in two subscales: Traditional-cultural Nationalism (historic heritage view of nationalism) and Civic Nationalism (modern view of nationalism of shared democracy and civic obligations). Based on a 5-point Likert scale, participants rate each item on the extent to which the item applies to them (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The total score for each subscale is the mean over all items. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the Traditional-cultural and Civic subscales in the current study are .92 and .87, respectively.

Religiosity was measured in two subscales, using the 20-item Age Universal Intrinsic-Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scale (I-E Scale; Gorsuch & Venable, 1983), which assesses the degree of attachment and identity with religion in two components of religious orientation in the two subscales: Intrinsic Religiosity and Extrinsic Religiosity. The scale was originally developed by Allport and Ross (1967), and later modified by Gorsuch and Venable (1983) into the scale used in the current study. We further modified the scale to include the Muslim religious identity in the wording on relevant items. Based on a 5-point Likert scale, participants rate each item on the extent to which the item applies to them (1 = I Strongly Disagree, 5 = I Strongly Agree). The total score for each subscale is the mean over all items. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the Intrinsic and Extrinsic Religiosity subscales in the current study was .89 and .93, respectively.

Aggression was measured using The Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992), which is a 29-item scale, comprising four subscales: Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Anger, and Hostility. Based on a 5-point Likert scale, participants rate each item on the extent to which the item is characteristic of them (1 = Extremely Uncharacteristic of Me, 5 = Extremely Characteristic of Me). Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$  for the total score in the current study as all subscales were added together, as has been done in other studies.

Diversity was measured using the 15-item Short Form of the Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale (M-GUDS-S; Fuertes, Miville, Mohr, Sedlacek, & Gretchen, 2000; Kottke, 2011). The scale assesses the degree of pro-diversity attitudes, and comprises three subscales: Diversity of Contact, Relativistic Appreciation, and Comfort with Differences (the last reverse-scored). Based on a 6-point Likert scale, participants rate each item on the extent to which the item is true for them (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Higher scores on diversity indicate a positive attitude towards diversity. The total score is the mean of the 15 items, taking into account reverse-scored items. The total scale showed adequate reliability in the present study, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ .

## Procedure

Following ethics approval, Australian participants completed the survey online, where they received course credit for participation while Malaysian participants were given a paper-pen version to complete with no incentive for participation.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics and Group Comparison

Means and standard deviations for each variable are listed in Table 1. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare Australian and Malaysian students. The analyses revealed significant differences between the groups for all variables, with higher diversity scores and lower nationalism, religiosity and aggression scores for Australian than for Malaysian students.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive statistics across variables for Malaysian and Australian samples*

| Variables       | Malaysian sample |      | Australian sample |      | Between groups differences |          |
|-----------------|------------------|------|-------------------|------|----------------------------|----------|
|                 | Mean             | SD   | Mean              | SD   | <i>t</i>                   | <i>p</i> |
| Diversity       | 4.04             | 0.52 | 4.48              | 0.68 | 8.44                       | 0.00     |
| Nationalism     |                  |      |                   |      |                            |          |
| Traditional     | 3.77             | 0.62 | 2.42              | 0.76 | -3.25                      | 0.00     |
| Civic           | 4.01             | 0.58 | 3.55              | 0.66 | -8.87                      | 0.00     |
| Religiosity     |                  |      |                   |      |                            |          |
| Intrinsic       | 4.02             | 0.57 | 2.56              | 0.81 | -2.78                      | 0.00     |
| Extrinsic       | 4.25             | 0.49 | 2.60              | 1.11 | -4.44                      | 0.00     |
| Aggression      | 3.03             | 0.63 | 2.41              | 0.70 | -1.20                      | 0.00     |
| Age             | 21.10            | 1.80 | 20.98             | 6.01 | -0.30                      | 0.76     |
| Gender (Female) | 61%              |      | 85%               |      |                            |          |

Hypothesis 1 predicted that Australians would report higher diversity than Malaysians. This hypothesis was accepted as Australians reported higher diversity than Malaysians.

### Bivariate Analyses

Pearson's product-moment correlations were used to test Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4 and are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

Correlation matrix of the mean values of independent and dependent variables. Australians are above the diagonal ( $n=240$ ) and Malaysians are below the diagonal ( $n=397$ )

| Variables                 | 1      | 2      | 3       | 4      | 5      | 6    |
|---------------------------|--------|--------|---------|--------|--------|------|
| 1.Diversity               | -      | .07    | -.24*** | .08    | .06    | -.08 |
| 2.Civic Nationalism       | .25*** | -      | .37***  | .07    | .09    | -.02 |
| 3.Traditional Nationalism | .30*** | .59*** | -       | .23*** | .24*** | .13* |
| 4.Extrinsic Religiosity   | .29*** | .21*** | .32***  | -      | .88*** | .09  |
| 5.Intrinsic Religiosity   | .23*** | .19*** | .25***  | .69*** | -      | .12  |
| 6. Aggression             | .19*** | .05    | .13**   | .09    | .10*   | -    |

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

Hypothesis 2 predicted that nationalism would be negatively correlated with diversity and that this association would be greater for Malaysians than for Australians. A negative correlation was found for Australians for traditional nationalism ( $r_A = -.24$ ,  $p > .001$ ) supporting the hypothesis, while there was no significant correlation for civic nationalism and diversity. Contrary to our hypothesis, Malaysians reported a positive correlation between both civic nationalism ( $r_M = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and traditional nationalism ( $r_M = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in relation to diversity. Thus the hypothesis was partially accepted for Australians, but not supported for Malaysians.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that religiosity would be negatively related to diversity and that this would be greater for Malaysians than for Australians. There were no significant correlations for religiosity and diversity for Australians, while Malaysians reported a positive relationship for diversity and external religiosity ( $r_M = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as well as intrinsic religiosity ( $r_M = .23$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, the hypothesis was in the opposite direction than was predicted for Malaysians and was not supported for Australians.

Hypothesis 4 stated that aggression would be negatively associated with diversity and that this would be greater for Malaysians than for Australians. Aggression was not significantly correlated with diversity for Australians, but contrary to predictions, was positively associated with diversity for Malaysians. Thus, the hypothesis was not supported

for both samples.

### **Post Hoc Regression Analysis**

To determine the best set of predictors from our variables for diversity, we conducted a linear regression analysis, entering the variables of country, nationalism, religiosity, and aggression. The following variables predicted diversity: Country ( $t = -8.06, p < .000$ ), civic nationalism ( $t = 4.44, p > .000$ ), traditional nationalism ( $t = -2.35, p < .02$ ) and external religiosity ( $t = 4.18, p < .000$ ). Thus, positive attitudes towards diversity were predicted by living in Australia, by high levels of civic nationalism, by low levels of traditional nationalism, and by high levels of external religiosity. This result accounted for 16.1 percent of the variance.

### **Discussion**

Australian students reported higher levels of positive support for diversity than Malaysian students. Traditional nationalism was negatively related to pro-diversity attitudes for Australians, but was positively related to pro-diversity for Malaysians. Civic nationalism was not related to pro-diversity attitudes for Australians, but was positively related to pro-diversity attitudes for Malaysians. Pro-diversity attitudes were not related to religiosity for Australians, but were positively related to both intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity for Malaysians. Aggression was not related to pro-diversity attitudes for Australians, but was positively related to pro-diversity attitudes for Malaysians. Thus, while pro-diversity attitudes were reported to be higher for Australians than Malaysians, the majority of the results suggested that pro-diversity attitudes were positively related to nationalism and religiosity for Malaysians, but only traditional nationalism was negatively related to diversity for Australians. The predictors of pro-diversity attitudes were: living in Australia, higher civic nationalism, lower traditional nationalism, and higher extrinsic religiosity.

As predicted by social identity complexity theory, Australian students reported higher attitudes towards diversity than Malaysian (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Contrary to other researchers (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Li & Brewer, 2004), religiosity and nationalism were not negatively related to pro-diversity attitudes in Malaysia. However, the predicted negative relationship between traditional nationalism and pro-diversity attitudes was supported for the Australian sample. It may be that civic nationalism, which is modern view of nationalism (shared democracy and civic obligations), as opposed to traditional nationalism (historic heritage), could more easily be linked to positive attitudes towards diversity and this is reflected in the Malaysian data, a country where nationalism may still have more meaning than it does in Australia. Of course this is speculative and would need further research for verification.

Aggression was positively related to pro-diversity attitudes in Malaysians rather than negatively, as predicted (Struch & Schwartz, 1989). The link between aggression and diversity is not easily understood. However, the correlation for Malaysians was small,

and there is no significant correlation for Australians. It is also possible that nationalism is perceived differently in Malaysia, where they pride themselves on being a country of Malays, Chinese, and Indians and thus may be more open to ideas related to nationalism than social identity complexity theory would predict.

Likewise, Malaysians also embrace religious diversity which is evident in the importance and their acceptance of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism in the country. However, it should be pointed out that all of the Malaysian participants were Muslim and at an Islamic university in a country where 61% identify as Muslim. It is possible that pro-diversity attitudes in this moderate country are widely practiced and threats of difference are not experienced by participants, accounting for the positive attitudes. Yet, if this were the case, then Australians should not have scored higher on diversity than Malaysians. Of course religion often preaches tolerance and possibly this is demonstrated in the positive attitudes. In the regression analysis, only external religiosity was significant, which is the category where external practice rather than internal belief is the motivating factor. The lack of relationship between religion and pro-diversity attitudes in Australia may be due to the increasingly small emphasis on religion in the society. Thus, the students completing the survey were not particularly religious and thus no relationship was found.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While concerns are often raised by self-report measures, Howard (1994) has praised them for their heightened internal consistency and reliability in comparison to subjective qualitative measures. Nonetheless, well-documented limitations associated with self-report measures may demonstrate socially desirable response bias. Gorsuch (1984) acknowledged the limitation in using a self-report scale to measure religiosity (Gorsuch & Venable, 1983), stating the importance of more open-ended questions and “personalistic approaches” as a more valid measure of religious phenomena. Future research may endeavor to utilize both quantitative and qualitative measures to make reliable and valid interpretations about the complex psychological constructs explored in the current study.

Another factor that could account for the contrary results for Malaysians is that these participants completed a paper and pencil version of the questionnaire, which may have been influenced by social desirability more than would an online version of the survey.

Finally, the results of the current study are representative of the Malaysian Muslim and Australian student population surveyed. While these two cultures provided insightful indications of the existing differences between them, it must be noted that these results cannot be generalized to the wider public. As such, the current study informs future endeavors to explore different cultural samples of contrasting levels of complexity, to determine whether the results and implications of the current study can be replicated and generalized to other populations.

To influence attitudes towards diversity, programs in the school and community could encourage individuals to identify and list all the multiple social identities they have. This should elicit the identification of universal identities, such as “parent”, “charity worker”, that are less susceptible to negative attitudes towards diversity. Becoming aware of actually having multiple social group identities reduces the weight of one large and exclusive social identity alone for fulfilling individuals’ need for a sense of self and belonging (Brewer, 1991). Preventative measures could aim to promote that all individuals can have complex social identities, and highlight the importance of those identities that are less susceptible to negative attitudes towards diversity. Individuals would therefore be able to relate to, and be more aware and positively accepting of the multiple, complex identities of diverse others in all walks of life, paving the way for more harmonious relationships around the world.

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