

The Influence of Economic Conditions on Aspects of Stigmatization

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Realistic group conflict theory (LeVine & Campbell, 1972) posits that people resist policies that advance the relative standing of out-group members, especially during periods of threat. To test the viability of realistic conflict in a meaningful social context, an experimental method was used to explore the influence of economic threat on stigmatization in White individuals' personnel decisions and resistance to diversity policies. As expected, compared to participants in a control condition, participants who were exposed to an economic threat evaluated a minority female job candidate more negatively than a White male candidate. In addition, willingness to support programs related to diversity was reduced among participants who endorsed zero-sum ideologies. This study highlights the role of economic threat on stigmatization and indicates that vigilance in addressing discrimination may be particularly important in the context of the current turmoil of the world economy.

As the plentiful economic spending of the 1990s has given way to the economic turmoil of the 21st century, many workers are experiencing negative financial repercussions, including reduction in bonuses, fewer promotions, furloughs, and layoffs. Economic decline may have important implications for stigmatization and intergroup relations, as competition for resources may engender frustration and aggression toward out-group members and the organizational policies that benefit them. A compelling rationale for this pattern is provided by the seminal theory of realistic group conflict (LeVine & Campbell, 1972), which

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posits that individuals advocate policies that enhance their personal and in-group interests, whereas they resist policies that threaten their economic security and improve the relative status of out-group members. In light of worldwide economic turbulence, this study seeks to determine how economic conditions influence the stigmatization process.

Realistic Group Conflict Theory

Taking a more group-oriented approach than previous theorists (e.g., Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears', 1939 frustration–aggression hypothesis), LeVine and Campbell (1972) developed realistic group conflict theory, which states that realistic threats (i.e., competition for scarce resources) increase ethnocentrism and in-group bias while simultaneously increasing hostility toward out-group members, particularly when they are believed to be the source of the threat. Researchers across the social sciences have documented that as the perceived threat that out-groups pose to the interests of in-group members increases, hostility toward out-group members and the organizational, structural, and societal policies that benefit them correspondingly increases (e.g., Baughn & Yaprak, 1996; Calavita, 1996; Green & Cowden, 1992; Kaiser & Wilkins, this issue; Sherif, 1966; Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 2001). Notably, it is not the actual experience of realistic threat, but the perceived or forecasted amount of competition that engenders hostility toward the perceived source of the threat (Bobo, 1983). This is consistent with relative deprivation theory, which predicts that awareness of discrepancies between what people believe they deserve and receive compared to others (e.g., Olson, Herman, & Zanna, 1986) can lead to intra- and interpersonal conflict. This concept was extended to intergroup relations as fraternal deprivation, which represents the experience of relative deterioration of one's own group relative to the position of another group (e.g., Schmitt & Maes, 2002). The experience of fraternal deprivation can occur even when the status of one's own group remains unchanged as the gains by an out-group can engender feelings of relative loss (Ellemers & Bos, 2006). Together, these notions suggest that members of advantaged groups are concerned with maintaining their status relative to disadvantaged groups.

People tend to oppose policies that appear to hurt their personal or group interests or that improve the relative standing of out-group members (Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998; Jackson, 1993). Indeed, it appears that national or personal economic threats can elicit strong reactions from people. For example, economic trends can elicit intense emotions such as fear and anger, seemingly independent of people's rational cognitions about the economy (Conover & Feldman, 1986). Furthermore, research indicates that the national economic outlook is also related to the expression of negative attitudes and authoritarian behaviors (Doty, Petersen, & Winter, 1991; Padgett & Jorgenson, 1982). Consistent with realistic

group conflict, a robust literature indicates that economic threat and a competition for scarce resources negatively influences in-group members' attitudes toward out-groups and the societal and organizational policies and laws that support them (e.g., Stephan et al., 2002). Thus, conditions of threat will elicit stigmatization of members of minority groups. Conditions of prosperity, however, may be subject to parallel forces. In principle, the expectation of economic prosperity should help to resolve resistance to diversity programs and policies. Individuals who hold particular ideological stances, however, may resist efforts to allocate resources to socially disadvantaged groups regardless of economic conditions.

Social Dominance Orientation

Indeed, there is variability in recognition of social norms that members of advantaged groups should support socially disadvantaged groups and avoid any manifestation of prejudice (e.g., Dovidio, 2001). Responses to economic prospects, then, depend in part on the extent to which individuals endorse or embody such norms. One important factor that may determine whether economic conditions result in stigmatization is an individual's social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto et al., 1994), a measure of one's belief in and desire to maintain social and economic hierarchies. In general, SDO is associated with prejudice toward a range of disadvantaged groups (Esses et al., 2001). Individual differences in SDO may determine reactions to situations in which a hierarchy that has traditionally encouraged, maintained, and justified the dominance of one's own in-group is threatened (Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; Esses et al., 2001; Federico & Sidanius, 2002). Because SDO reflects a desire to maintain hierarchical structures, individuals who are high in SDO may engage in stigmatization across economic conditions. This can be contrasted with the actions of individuals who are low in SDO, who may resist enacting stigmatization unless threatened by economic uncertainty.

Zero-Sum Beliefs

A similar but distinct moderator of the effect of realistic group conflict on stigmatization is the possession of zero-sum beliefs (ZSB). ZSB represents variability in the degree to which individuals believe that a gain by the out-group automatically implies a loss for the in-group (Bobo & Hutchings, 1996). It follows that individuals who endorse ZSB will react more negatively to a perceived out-group economic threat than those who do not. Indeed, some research has shown that these beliefs might be more predictive of the extent to which people stigmatize out-group members than is SDO (Esses et al., 1998). We anticipate that individuals who do not endorse ZSB may not perceive economic threat as a motivator for stigmatization, whereas individuals who possess a ZSB system may feel the strongest sense of threat under conditions of economic threat. Individuals

who are high in ZSB will experience economic decline as reducing their “piece of the pie,” and thus will be most likely to withhold resources from out-group members under conditions of economic threat.

Overview of the Present Research

The intersection of economic conditions and personality traits likely affect reactions to a wide range of socially disadvantaged targets. Previous research suggests that attitudes toward Blacks and support for the programs designed to benefit them depends in part on economic indicators such as the narrowing Black–White earnings gap (O’Neill, 1990; Stephan et al., 2002). We argue that economic conditions would similarly influence the formation of attitudes toward a range of (often unstudied) out-groups, including Hispanic and gay and lesbian targets. Majority group members often hold negative beliefs about and attitudes toward sexual minorities (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered individuals [LGBT]; Herek, 1991) and Hispanic (Newton, 2000) targets. More importantly, however, the mechanisms that account for reactions to Black targets under conditions of threat and prosperity are likely to generalize to other targets of stigma and policies of which they may be beneficiaries.

Given this rationale, we anticipate that White participants will allocate less money to programs that support diversity as a goal and offer less support for diversity-related programs (Hypothesis 1a) when a negative economic outlook is predicted than when a positive one is. This relationship should be moderated by SDO (Hypothesis 1b) and ZSB (Hypothesis 1c) such that participants who score low on these traits support diversity programs less when the economy is declining than when it is improving, and participants who score high on each of these traits show low levels of support regardless of economic conditions. We will assess support for multiple diversity programs to explore whether SDO or ZSB is more influential in determining reactions to particular policies. Given that ZSB involves resource allocation and SDO involves social status, it may be that ZSB affects support for financially oriented programs whereas SDO influences attitudes regarding programs that more directly involve social hierarchies.

Economic conditions might also affect how participants rate applicants on a selection task, particularly when these applicants have stigmatized features that represent an out-group. When participants experience an economic threat, they should rate such diverse applicants less favorably than more traditional applicants (i.e., White men) (Hypothesis 2a). However, in the absence of an economic threat (and thus, a lack of justification for discriminatory behavior), participants should act in a socially desirable way in rating diverse applicants as comparable to traditional applicants (Hypothesis 2b). This effect should be moderated by SDO (Hypothesis 2c) and ZSB (Hypothesis 2d) such that participants who are low on

these traits should rate nontraditional applicants more negatively during times of economic decline than prosperity.

Method

Participants

Seventy-nine (34 men, 45 women) White undergraduate and graduate students from two organizational behavior classes (M age = 22.26, SD = 5.86) participated in this study.

Procedure

Participants imagined that they were human resource assistant managers and completed a series of in-basket exercises. The first exercise was ostensibly a measure of "written communication skills and the ability to summarize and effectively present information." Participants read an article about the current and projected economic state of the organization and an article about the general economic outlook of the American economy across all industries. These documents in concert argued for one of two economic outcomes: the economic outlook for the organization and for America was declining (economic threat) or the economic outlook for the organization and for America was improving (no economic threat). To increase the salience of the manipulation, participants wrote a one-page summary of these articles.

A pilot test was conducted to ensure that the opposing documents did not differ on critical dimensions (see Taylor-Carter, Doverspike, & Alexander, 1995). Specifically, 19 participants read either the two documents indicating a negative economic outlook or the two documents indicating a positive economic outlook and then rated each document on six 7-point Likert-type scales: complexity, familiarity, subjectivity, persuasiveness, believability, and polarity. The results indicated that evaluations did not differ with the exception of a significant difference on the polarity dimension indicating a successful manipulation check.

The second in-basket task instructed participants to review their fictitious company's (Ty Nant Corporation) previous top seven goals and subgoals for the 2003 fiscal year and update them for the 2004 fiscal year based on the forecasted economy described in the previous exercise. Among the list of the company's goals (e.g., "Maximize employee satisfaction and well being" and "Develop fail-safe quality control procedures"), one goal and one subgoal related to diversity (i.e., "Increase company diversity and inclusion" and "Select and retain the best available diverse employees"). Participants were told that they had \$1,000,000 to allocate to programs that would support each of the major goals. Included among these seven programs was one program related to diversity

(“Implement programs to leverage the benefits and talents of a diverse workforce”). As such, participants’ distribution of funds to certain departments provided a measure of support for organizational diversity programs as a function of economic times.

The third in-basket exercise involved reviewing and ranking four applicants applying for a marketing assistant position within the corporation. Participants read four alphabetically ordered resumes matched on quality but differing based on the gender and race of the applicant (a White man, a White woman, a Black man, and a Hispanic woman), as manipulated through the applicants’ names. We focused on evaluations of the Black male and Hispanic female targets, as these represent out-groups to the participants in this study. Because Hispanic women may be subject to the stigmas associated with gender and ethnicity (i.e., are “double deviants”), we were particularly interested in evaluations of these targets compared to the White male applicants. Participants rated how qualified each applicant was and how likely they were to hire the applicant on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). These two items were averaged to create a composite positivity score for each applicant (average $\alpha = .87$). Participants rank ordered the applicants based on their expected success in the job.

A pilot test was used to match the resumes on relevant criteria. Participants in the pilot study ($N = 9$) reviewed each of the four resumes (with names removed) and rated their quality and the likelihood that they would want to hire that applicant. The results indicated that none of the resumes differed significantly on these two dimensions. Furthermore, participants from the previous pilot study ($N = 19$) were given a list of names and asked to identify the race of the individual. Names were chosen that were uniformly perceived to be related to their expected race and gender categories (i.e., “Roydell Jenkins”—Black male, “Mary Catherine Pierce”—White female, “Celina Rodriguez”—Hispanic female, “James O’Sullivan”—White male).

Participants completed a fourth task in which they reviewed and responded to employment-related e-mails. This task assessed participants’ support for organizational policies that benefit gay and lesbian workers. The e-mail described pros and cons regarding whether medical and dental benefits should be extended to the life partners of gay and lesbian employees. Participants indicated whether the policy should be implemented and whether the policy would help in the recruitment of gay and lesbian employees, make some people uncomfortable, positively affect the company’s economic success, create a culture of inclusion, be beneficial to Ty Nant, and be harmful to Ty Nant. A principal component analysis with a varimax rotation indicated that all the items except for the “recruitment of gay and lesbian employees” question (which was removed from further analysis) loaded on to one factor (eigenvalue = 3.00), and after reverse scoring negatively worded items, these six factors were averaged to form an overall composite score ($\alpha = .83$), such that a higher score on the composite reflects greater support.

Finally, participants completed a “personality test typically used for selection procedures” consisting the eight items from the SDO scale (Pratto et al., 1994; $\alpha = .86$), five items measuring general ZSB adapted from the group threat scale (Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; $\alpha = .87$), and two items each measuring specific ZSB about racial minorities and homosexuals. Then, participants completed a “personnel action form” that assessed their age, gender, and race, grade point average, and political orientation.

Results

Allocation of Funds to Diversity Programs

A hierarchical regression equation was used to determine the most reliable predictors of distribution of money to diversity programs. Four covariates (i.e., political orientation, grade point average, gender, and age) were entered in Step 1, three variables related to threat (i.e., the economic condition manipulation, ZSB composite, and SDO composite) were entered into Step 2, and two interaction variables (i.e., SDO \times economic condition and ZSB \times economic condition) were entered in Step 3 to assess whether individual difference variables moderated the relationship between economic threat and attitudes toward specific diversity policies.

Contrary to Hypothesis 1a, none of the variables that were related to economic threat predicted allocation of funds to diversity programs ($R^2 = .05, p = .82$), as seen in Table 1. However, as expected by Hypotheses 1b and 1c, the addition of the two situation \times disposition interaction terms in Step 3 significantly improved the predictive ability of the model ($R^2 = .11, p = .02$). More specifically, there was an interaction between the economic condition manipulation and ZSB ($\beta = -1.24, p = .03$). Figure 1 illustrates that people low in ZSB appeared to give increasing amounts of funds to diversity programs as the economy improved, whereas people high in ZSB appeared to allocate decreasing amounts of resources to diversity programs as the economy improved. The relationship between SDO and allocation of resources for diversity-supportive programs was positive in the economy declining condition ($\beta = .39, p < .01$), but it was negative in the economy improving condition ($\beta = -.29, p < .05$).

Rating of Diverse Applicants

A 2 (economic condition: declining, improving) \times 4 (applicant: White man, White woman, Black man, Hispanic woman) mixed-subjects design was used to explore whether an economic threat influenced participants' ratings of diverse applicants. As expected, the economic condition \times applicant linear contrast, $F(1, 77) = 5.01, p = .03$, indicated that participants experiencing an economic

Table 1. Responses as a Function of Demographic Predictors, Economic Threat Predictors, and Dispositional × Situational Interactions

Predictor	Allocation of Funds to Diversity Programs			Support for Life Partner Benefits		
	Step 1β	Step 2β	Step 3β	Step 1β	Step 2β	Step 3β
Gender	-.10			.11		
Age	.14			-.05		
G.P.A.	.10			.05		
Political party	-.13			-.49***		
Economic condition		.01			.11	
Social dominance orientation (SDO)		.02			.09	
Zero-sum beliefs (ZSB)		-.01			-.29*	
Economic condition × SDO			-.18			-1.91****
Economic condition × ZSB			-1.24*			.55
R ²	.05	.05	.16	.28***	.38***	.41***
ΔR ²		.00	.11*		.10*	.04
Df	4,70	7,67	9,65	4,72	8,68	10,66

Note. **p* < .05, ****p* < .001, *****p* < .010.

threat valued traditional applicants, whereas participants experiencing an economic boost valued increasingly diverse applicants (see Figure 2). Moreover, the applicant who was stigmatized on two dimensions (i.e., a minority female) and the nonstigmatized applicant (i.e., a White male) were rated differently when different economic forecasts were predicted, $F(1, 77) = 6.69, p = .01$. A one-tailed post hoc test showed that participants rated the White male applicant more positively when the economy was expected to decline ($M = 5.73, SD = 1.04$) than when it was expected to improve ($M = 5.23, SD = 1.29; t(77) = 1.89, p = .03$). However, participants rated the Hispanic female applicant significantly more negatively when the economy was expected to decline ($M = 5.49, SD = 1.00$) than when it was expected to improve ($M = 5.93, SD = .99; t(77) = -1.98, p = .02$). Contrary to Hypotheses 2b and 2c, however, there was no Economic Condition × Applicant × SDO or ZSB interaction.

Benefits for Gay and Lesbian Life Partners

When participants’ attitudes toward extending benefits to partners of gay and lesbian employees were regressed on the five predictor variables in Step 1, the value of R^2 was .28, $p = .0001$. As shown in Table 1, consistent with our expectation, when economic threat variables were entered in Step 2, the predictive ability of the model did significantly improve ($\Delta R^2 = .10, p = .04$), as ZSB

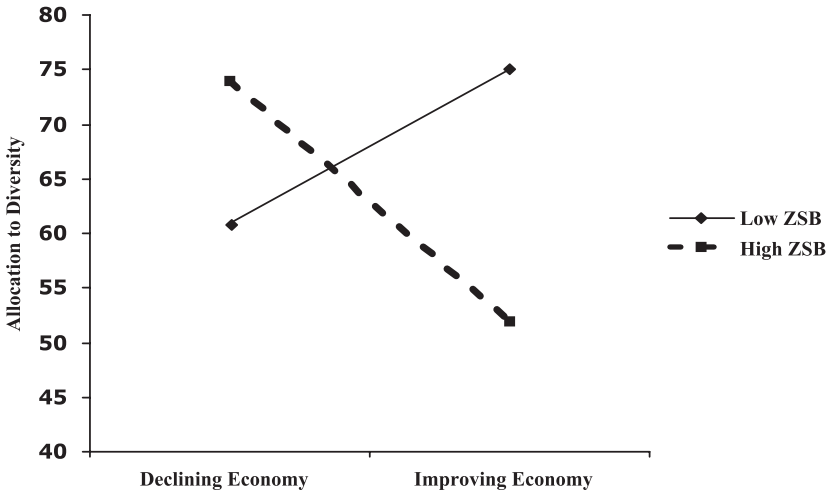


Fig. 1. Allocation of funds to diversity programs as a function of economic condition and zero-sum beliefs.

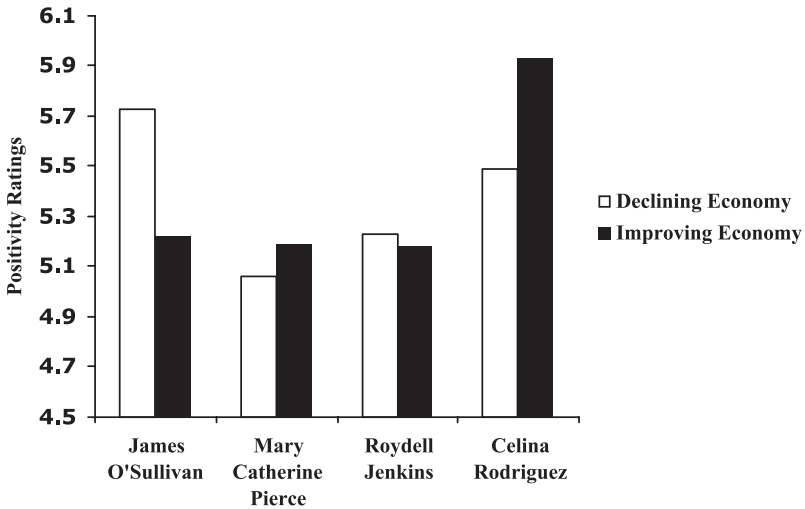


Fig. 2. Ratings of four applicants as a function of applicant diversity and economic condition.

were a significant predictor ($\beta = -.29, p = .03$) of attitudes. Participants with high ZSB were least supportive of offering benefits to life partners. Entering the two interaction terms in Step 3 did not improve the model ($\Delta R^2 = .04, p = .15$). However, the marginal Economic Condition \times SDO interaction ($\beta = -1.91,$

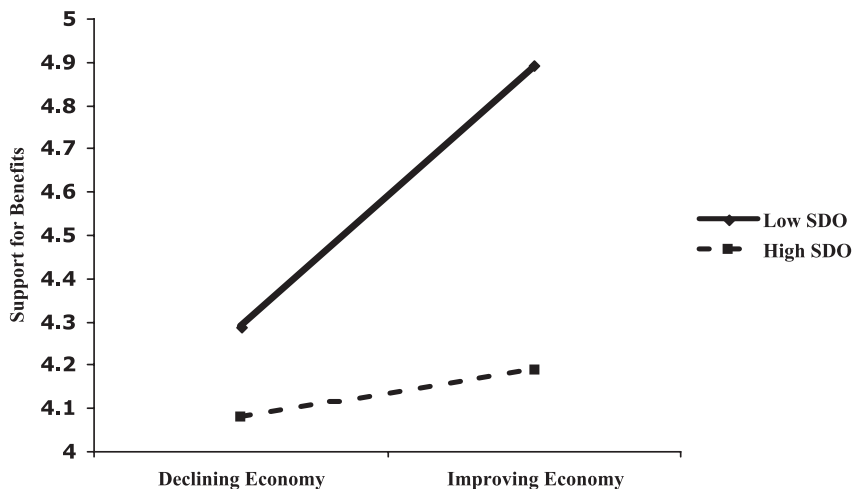


Fig. 3. Support for life partner benefits as a function of economic condition and social dominance orientation.

$p = .06$) illustrated in Figure 3 indicates that participants with a low SDO (but not high SDO) approved of extending benefits to partners of gay and lesbian employees unless they perceived the economy was declining. The relationship between SDO and support for LGBT-friendly policies was not significant in the economy declining condition ($\beta = -.02, p > .10$), but it was significantly negative in the economy improving condition ($\beta = -.23, p < .05$).

Discussion

The current results suggest that economic conditions influence stigmatization in selection decisions. In line with our expectations and consistent with realistic group conflict theory, economic prosperity predicted support of a Hispanic female job applicant. In addition, economic conditions interacted with individual difference variables to predict resources allocated for diversity-supportive programs and benefits for LGBT workers. We reasoned that the allocation of resources to support diversity programs would depend on both economic conditions and individual differences. Ratings and rankings of diverse job applicants confirm that economic conditions can directly affect stigmatization in selection decisions. Indeed, Hispanic female candidates were rated lower and selected less often than the more traditional applicant during an economic downturn. Conversely, during times of economic recovery, the applicant who was nontraditional on two dimensions was actually valued more than the most traditional applicant. These findings suggest that stigmatization of workers from diverse backgrounds may be most likely when

economic decline threatens the status quo, implying that diversity programs may be most essential when an economy is perceived to be unstable. This is particularly relevant given the magnitude of the current economic crisis.

It is unfortunate, then, that the anticipated person by situation interactions emerged for the broader indicators of support for diversity programs. The results suggest that individuals who are low in ZSB are willing to give resources to support diversity programs when the economy is strong, but withhold those resources when the economy is weak. This implies that economic concerns may be deemed more important than social justice concerns when the economy is declining, particularly among individuals who would generally support diversity programs. When the economy is improving and the realistic threat or fraternal deprivation is reduced, individuals low in ZSB allocate substantial funding support to diversity programs. These findings suggest that ZSB affect beliefs regarding fund allocation under conditions of economic decline and prosperity, thereby highlighting the need for diversity in ideological backgrounds within organizational decision-making groups such as boards of directors.

Individual differences in SDO (more so than ZSB) seem to influence support for a more social—(rather than financially) oriented outcome. In the case of support for benefits for same-sex partners, individuals high in SDO oppose such policies regardless of economic conditions, whereas individuals low in SDO indicate opposition only when the economy is in decline. Together, these results suggest that individuals who have ZSB or who are high in SDO may respond unfavorably to diversity programs even under conditions of economic prosperity, and that people who do not subscribe to ZSB or SDO may enact similar prejudices under conditions of economic threat. An unfortunate implication is that programs designed to support socially disadvantaged individuals may lose their strongest supporters when economies decline.

More research is needed to delineate the boundary conditions under which economic threat does and does not lead to stigmatization. Overall, the economic threat manipulation introduced here was related to evaluations of job applicants, but the allocation of resources for diversity in a broad sense and benefits for LGBT workers in particular depended on individual differences in endorsement of ZSB and SDO, respectively. The lack of ZSB and SDO effects on hiring decisions might indicate that economic threat influences in-group favoritism in hiring regardless of individual beliefs. Individual differences did influence more general decisions when participants believed the economy was improving; in these conditions, low SDO and ZSB were associated with greater support for out-group members. This implies that threat from economic downturn may outweigh some of the characteristics that otherwise bolster diversity initiatives. Individuals who believe that out-group gains lead to in-group losses (i.e., ZSB) and individuals who prefer hierarchical systems (i.e., SDO) may oppose programs designed to support minorities regardless of economic conditions.

Taken together, the current study revealed several distinctive results that raise new questions for theory and practice related to social stigma. From a theoretical standpoint, the current study extends previous research on stigmatization by examining how realistic group conflict extends to an organizational setting, thus uniting the context of industrial/organizational psychology with the research of social psychology, sociology, economics, and political science. Furthermore, this research shows which types of programs (i.e., life partner benefits, general diversity programs) and employees (i.e., female minority applicants) are particularly at risk during difficult economic times. Future research should disentangle the relative importance of individual and contextual factors for a variety of stigmatized targets and a range of diversity programs. In addition, future research might integrate ideas from system justification theory, which suggests that people of both high- and low-status groups justify, reinforce, and perpetuate the status quo and existing social arrangements (Jost & Banaji, 1994). From this perspective, the proximal effect of economic threat may be that it evokes fear about changing social structures.

From an applied standpoint, organizations should be aware that diversity policies and members of stigmatized groups are vulnerable to attack during periods of economic threat; the individuals who typically advocate for disadvantaged group members may be silenced by fear. Organizations can proactively develop programs, communication strategies, and other safeguards to minimize the realistic group conflict engendered by economic threat. In line with this notion, future research should develop methods to reduce stigmatization engendered by economic threat in the workplace. One method of attenuating such stigmatization with regards to immigration attitudes has been to challenge ZSB by explicitly stating that economic gains by immigrants do not come at the expense of citizens already living there (Esses et al., 2001). The current research suggests that another approach might be to reduce perceptions of intergroup threat by focusing on long-term prosperity rather than short-term challenges. Research has also adopted the common in-group identity model (Dovidio, Brigham, Johnson, & Gaertner, 1996) to reduce the threat associated with immigrants. Specifically, by telling participants that everyone's ancestors were immigrants at some point (thus indicating a common shared past) and by encouraging participants to think of a united national identity as including both native-born citizens and immigrants (thus indicating a common shared present and future), participants decategorized their former "us versus them" mentality into a recategorized "we" mentality (Esses et al., 2001).

Conclusion

As the current research has shown, realistic group conflict theory (LeVine & Campbell, 1972) explains intergroup attitudes and behaviors when resources are perceived to be scarce, and such research is very timely given the current economic

crisis. More specifically, a manipulation of economic threat negatively influenced attitudes both toward general diversity policies and the amount of stigmatization displayed toward applicants. Individual difference variables such as ZSB also had unique and interactive effects on participants' support for specific diversity programs. Ultimately, the current research might help organizations identify ways to mitigate the negative effects of realistic group conflict while securing the potential benefits of a diverse workforce.

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