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ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMMIGRANTS IN THE LIGHT OF EMPATHY AND AUTHORITARIAN WORLD VIEW[16]

Abstract

The main aim of this study was to provide a better understanding of attitudes of citizens of the Republic of Serbia towards immigrants, but also to examine the role that empathy and authoritarian worldview could have in forming specific attitudes towards immigrants. A total of 322 participants, aged 18 to 54 ($M = 23.54$, $SD = 5.94$), mainly female ($N = 253$) were included in this research. The data was obtained using The Scale of Attitudes towards Asylum Seekers (Župarić-Iljić & Gregurović, 2013), Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983), and Authoritarian Worldview Scale 2 (Bojanović, 2004). The results have shown that perception of social threat could be predicted by perspective taking ($\beta = -.17$, $p = .00$), fantasy ($\beta = -.17$, $p = .00$), and authoritarian worldview ($\beta = .38$, $p = .00$), ($F = 21.76$, $R = .51$, $R^2 = .26$, $p = .00$). When it comes to the perception of cultural threat significant predictors were fantasy ($\beta=-.15$, $p=.01$), personal distress ($\beta = -.12$, $p=.04$), and authoritarian worldview ($\beta = .33$, $p=.00$) ($F = 10.85$, $R = .38$, $R^2 = .15$, $p = .00$). Authoritarian worldview has shown to be a significant predictor ($\beta = .24$, $p = .00$) of perception of health-economic threat ($R = .27$, $R^2 = .07$, $F = 4.86$, $p = .00$). The results are discussed in accordance with previous findings and theory. Practical implications are provided.

Key words: attitudes towards immigrants, empathy, authoritarian worldview, Republic of Serbia

Introduction

Serbia was one of many countries that was dealing with the European migrant crisis that began in 2015. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, at the beginning of the crisis, 1000 to 4000 immigrants would pass through Serbia daily, whereas at one point, there were 70000 of them in the country (Simović, 2017), while approximately 800,000 people crossed the

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territory of Serbia in this period (FRONTEX, 2016; as cited in Petrović & Pešić, 2017). Unlike the countries of the European Union, the countries of Southeast Europe have so far not had the experience of accepting a larger number of immigrants from the Middle East and Africa, which creates new challenges in terms of integration of this population, state Petrović & Pešić (2017).

When it comes to attitudes towards immigrants and the possibilities of their integration, only few research has been conducted in our and neighboring countries providing certain insights. In a qualitative research conducted in Serbia (Vuletić & Pešić, 2017) it was shown that attitudes towards immigrants differ in the north and south part of the country, with a cold and rational attitude dominating in the north. When it comes to the south there is a greater degree of empathy, the suffering of homeless people is emphasized, but so are cultural differences e.g., religion. However, when it comes to the possibility of integration, resistance exists in both northern and southern parts of the country. Similar results were obtained in a study done by Petrović and Pešić (2017), as well as in Croatia. In a research that Župarić-Iljić and Gregurović (2013) conducted in Croatia it was shown that students perceive the presence of immigrants as social, cultural, and health-economical threats, which was confirmed in some other research (Kalebić Maglica, Švegar, & Jovković, 2018). In which way could such results be interpreted?

Namely, Župarić-Iljič and Gregurović (2013) state that in the search for protection and asylum, immigrants are often suspected of certain negativities in society in the eyes of the local population. Some parts of society can experience the kind of hostility made up of a complex set of attitudes and negative emotions towards immigrants. The perceived threat manifests itself as fear of losing social identity, national culture and national unity, fear of losing economic stability and employment of the local population, fear of crime and deviance, fear of disease and epidemic, fear of terrorism, etc. In line with that, it could be said that the perception of threat could be on a social, cultural and/or health-economic level (Župarić-Iljić & Gregurović, 2013). Undoubtedly, an important role in attitudes towards immigrants also have some individual factors, e.g., authoritarianism (Kalebić Maglica et al., 2018; Oyamot, Fisher, Deason, & Borgida, 2012), gender (Kalebić Maglica et al., 2018), religiosity (Župarić-Iljić & Gregurović, 2013), while empathy has been proven to be a protective factor in forming negative attitudes towards asylum seekers (Mikilkowska, 2017; 2018).

Having in mind that only a few qualitative studies have been conducted in our country when it comes to attitudes towards immigrants, a need was recognized for better understanding of whether immigrants are perceived as social, cultural, and health-economical threat in citizens of Republic of Serbia, as well as the role that some personal traits, such as empathy and authoritarian worldview, could have in forming attitudes towards immigrants.

Empathy was initially seen as "the ability to understand another person's emotion and to perceive reality in the way another person does" (Stojiljković, 2009) emphasizing the cognitive aspect. From the psychoanalytic and social

psychology point of view, empathy was viewed as a purely affective phenomenon and was presented as a phenomenon of "emotional contagion". Today's definitions of empathy are characterized by an integrative approach and perception of empathy as a cognitive-affective phenomenon (Stojiljković, 2009). One of the well known integrative models of empathy was given by Mark H. Davis. According to Davis (1983) empathy could be defined as a reactivity to the experiences of another person, which implies the involvement of the cognitive and affective components. The affective component, referred to as empathic concern or sympathy, pertains to the vicarious experience of emotions, consistent with those of the observed person, which often results in feelings of concern and compassion for another (Miklikowska, 2018). The cognitive component, or perspective taking, refers to the understanding of others' internal states. According to Miklikowska (2018) perspective taking influences processes involved in the representations of outgroup members, it enables putting oneself in the shoes of the stigmatized outgroup members, which increases the salience of injustice and arouses sympathetic feelings for the outgroup. On the other hand, affective dimension, more precisely empathic concern enables valuing others' well-being, sensitizes to their needs and negative experiences, and motivates to alleviate their distress.

In previous research, empathy as a trait has been linked to adults' prejudice (Bergh & Akrami, 2016; Miklikowska, 2018). More precisely, although both empathic concern and perspective taking were correlated with anti-immigrant attitudes (Miklikowska, 2018), empathic concern did not directly predict changes in anti-immigrant attitudes. It predicted them indirectly, via its effects on perspective taking. Similar results were found in research done by Gutsell & Inzlicht (2012), showing that prejudiced adults exhibit less empathic-concerning states than do non-prejudiced adults.

The concept of authoritarian personality was described by Erich Fromm (1969; as cited in Bojanović, 2004), referring to people who are submissive to the authority of some person or institution that has great power over them. Fromm believes that the main characteristics of an authoritarian personality is a pessimistic view of human nature. Such a view is characterized by a tendency towards hierarchy, striving for power, hostility, hatred, prejudice, perception of goodness as weakness, etc. (Stevović, 2004; as cited in Đigić, 2013). Adorno (1950; as cited in Grahek, 2008) conducted one of the first researches on authoritarianism and defined this concept using nine characteristics of authoritarian personality: conventionalism, authoritarian submissiveness, aggression, antiintraceptiveness, respect for the government and a positive attitude towards it, destructiveness and cynicism, frequent use of projection as a defense mechanism, rigid thinking and existence of superstitions and stereotypes, and interest in sexual perversions. If an authoritarian worldview is seen as a cognitive phenomenon, it represents a unique system of attitudes, beliefs, and values. As such, it has a dynamic character, i.e. the power to incite behaviors that are consistent with it. It is believed that because of this, people with this worldview tend to try to impose their views on

others, and criticize and condemn any attitude that is not in line with their personal one (Đigić, 2013). In line with that, in the research done by Kalebić Maglica et al. (2018) it was shown that authoritarian individuals, due to their tendency to view the world as a dangerous place, adhere to conventional values, obey authority, and have negative attitudes towards individuals who violate conventional norms perceive immigrants as social, cultural, and health-economic threats. Accordingly, the authors further state that if someone consider their own culture as the best and as a starting point for evaluation of other cultures, each arrival of immigrants of a different culture disrupts the existing culture with a foreign and "less valuable" culture, which also threatens the homogeneity of their own group. Therefore, it is not surprising that in their research, authoritarian worldview was proven to be the strongest predictor of threat perception. Similar results are obtained and in some oder studies (Oyamot et al., 2012).

Having in mind previously said, the main aim of this study is to provide a better understanding of attitudes of citizens of the Republic of Serbia towards immigrants, as well as to examine the role that empathy and authoritarian worldview could have in forming specific attitudes towards immigrants.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 322 subjects, aged 18 to 54 ($M = 23.54$, $SD = 5.94$). The majority of the sample (73%, $N = 253$) was female. The research was done online through a Google Form. The participants were informed about the subject matter of the research, as well as the participation being anonymous. They gave written agreement of consent to take part in this study. The research was conducted during April and May, 2020.

Instruments

Attitude towards immigrants was measured with The Scale of Attitudes towards Asylum Seekers (Županić-Iljić & Gregurović, 2013). The scale was adapted to Serbian language for the purpose of this research. It consists of 16 items on a 5-point scale with the points meaning the following: 1 – I completely disagree to 5 – I completely agree. The scale consists of 3 subscales: *perception of social threat* - reflects the so-called "NIMBY - not in my backyard" (Županić-Iljić, Gregurović, 2013, p. 45) rhetoric, where the attitude towards the object is accepting as long as there is a social distance from it (item example: "I would help an immigrant if I had the opportunity."; α = .91); *perception of cultural threat* - refers to the need for non-interference between immigrants' and Serbian culture (item example: "The immigrants' culture should not be mixed with Serbian culture."; α = .60); *perception of health-economic threat* - the perception of health threat refers to the fear due to hygienic and epidemiological conditions in asylums, whilst the economic threat

refs to the fear of economic deprivation and "stealing" of jobs (item example: "Immigrants are not a threat to the economic progress of Serbia."; α = .74).

Empathy was measured with the Interpersonal Reactivity Index scale (IRI; Davis, 1983). The scale consists of 4 subscales, with each subscale having 7 items on a 5-point scale (28 items in total). The subscales are: *perspective taking* - reflects the ability to take a flexible stand in social interactions, tendency to spontaneously accept the psychological point of view of another person (item example: "When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while."; α = .71); *fantasy* refers to a person's tendency to get into the feelings and actions of fictional personalities (item example: "After seeing a play or movie, I have felt as though I were one of the characters."; α = .82); *empathic concern* measures individual differences in an individual's emotional response to perceived emotional manifestations of others (item example: "I am often quite touched by things that I see happen."; α = .74); *personal distress* - a person may experience a feeling of fear, discomfort only by perceiving the stressful situation or bad living conditions of other person/people (item example: "Being in a tense emotional situation scares me."; α = .77).

Authoritarian worldview was measured using the Authoritarian Worldview Scale 2 (AP2; Bojanović, 2004), which consists of 26 items with possible answers between 1 – completely untrue to 4 – completely true (item example: "I don't like people who stick out too much"; α = .82).

Results

The results of descriptive statistics will be presented first (Table 1), and then the focus will be on correlation and regression analysis.

Table 1
Descriptive statistic of variables

Variables	M	SD	Min	Max	Sk	Ku
Authoritarian worldview	2.24	0.39	1.31	3.38	0.07	-0.19
Perspective taking	3.70	0.64	1.14	5.00	-0.42	0.55
Fantasy	3.82	0.80	1.29	5.00	-0.55	-0.19
Emphatic concearn	3.46	0.73	1.43	5.00	-0.39	-0.24
Personal distress	3.02	0.80	1.00	4.71	-0.09	-0.55
Perception of social threat	2.32	0.96	1.00	5.00	0.69	-0.05
Perception of cultural threat	2.19	0.74	1.00	5.00	0.66	0.34
Perception of health-economic threat	3.28	1.00	1.00	5.00	-0.27	-0.14

In Table 2 correlations between the subscales of attitude towards immigrants, and subscales of empathy and authoritarian worldview are presented.

Table 2

Correlation between the subscales of attitude towards immigrants, and subscales of empathy and authoritarian worldview (Pearson correlation analysis)

Variables	Perspective taking	Fantasy	Empathic concern	Personal distress	Authoritarian worldview
Perception of social threat	-.30**	-.24**	-.20**	-.01	.39**
Perception of cultural threat	-.15**	-.17**	-.13*	-.08	.31**
Perception of health-economic threat	-.06	-.09	-.12*	-.00	.23**
Perspective taking	1	.31**	.32**	-.015	-.14**
Fantasy	/	1	.47**	.21**	.05
Empathic concern	/	/	1	.40**	.00
Personal distress	/	/	/	1	.21**

Note. *Correlation is significant at the .05 level; **correlation is significant at the .01 level.

According to Table 2 it can be seen that all subscales of attitudes towards immigrants are positively correlated with authoritarian worldview, whereby authoritarian worldview is in moderate correlation with both perception of social and cultural threat, and in weak correlation with perception of health-economic threat.

When it comes to empathy, empathic concern is the only subscale of empathy that correlates with all subscales of attitudes towards immigrants, and that correlation is weak and negative. Subscales of perspective taking and fantasy are in negative and weak correlation with both perception of social threat, and perception of cultural threat.

Table 3

Multiple regression analysis – empathy and authoritarian worldview as predictors of perception of social threat (Multiple regression analysis - method Enter)

Predictor variables	β	p	Model summary
Perspective taking	-.17	.00	$R = .51$
Fantasy	-.17	.00	$R^2 = .26$
Empathic concern	-.05	.37	$F = 21.76$
Personal distress	-.04	.50	
Authoritarian worldview	.38	.00	$p = .00$

According to Table 3, it can be seen that the regression model is statistically significant, explaining 26% of variance of perception of social threat. It can be noticed that the authoritarian worldview has the largest contribution in predicting the perception of social threat. Perspective taking and fantasy were also shown to be statistically significant predictors.

Table 4

Multiple regression analysis – empathy and authoritarian worldview as predictors of perception of cultural threat (Multiple regression analysis - method Enter)

Predictor variables	β	p	Model summary
Perspective taking	-.06	.28	$R = .38$
Fantasy	-.15	.01	$R^2 = .15$
Empathic concern	-.00	.99	
Personal distress	-.12	.04	$F = 10.85$
Authoritarian worldview	.33	.00	$p = .00$

The results show that the regression model is statistically significant, explaining 15% of variance of perception of cultural threat (Table 4). It can be noticed that the significant predictors are authoritarian worldview, perspective taking and fantasy.

Table 5

Multiple regression analysis – empathy and authoritarian worldview as predictors of perception of health-economic threat (Multiple regression analysis - method Enter)

Predictor variables	β	p	Model summary
Perspective taking	.03	.65	$R = .27$
Fantasy	-.07	.28	$R^2 = .07$
Empathic concern	-.10	.14	
Personal distress	.00	.94	$F = 4.86$
Authoritarian worldview	.24	.00	$p = .00$

According to Table 5, it can be seen that the regression model is statistically significant, explaining 7% of variance of perception of health-economic threat, and authoritarian worldview is the only significant predictor.

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to provide better understanding of attitudes of citizens of the Republic of Serbia towards immigrants, as well as to examine the role that empathy and authoritarian worldview could have in forming specific attitudes towards immigrants.

In line with previous findings (Kalebić Maglica et al., 2018; Mikilkowska, 2017; 2018; Oyamot et al., 2012) results of our research show that both empathy and authoritarian worldview are not only correlated with, but also represent significant predictors of attitudes towards immigrants. More precisely, both perception of social threat and perception of cultural threat are positively correlated with perspective taking, fantasy, empathic concern, but in a negative correlation with authoritarian worldview. On the other hand, perception of health-economic threat is correlated positively with empathic concern and negatively with authoritarian worldview. In accordance with that, we could say that participants with a higher level of empathy are more likely to have a more positive attitude towards immigrants, while participants with a higher manifestation of the authoritarian worldview are more likely to have a negative attitude towards immigrants, confirming results of previous research.

Summing previously stated it can be noticed that authoritarian worldview is shown as a significant predictor of every perception of threat when it comes to immigrants. Considering that the authoritarian worldview implies conservatism, as well as difficulty accepting changes and differences in general (Bojanović, 2004), these results are expected. In this particular context, this would be manifested as a non-acceptance of a people that has quite different characteristics from people of the country immigrants are located in, and a country whose citizens were our participants. As Kalebić Maglica et al. (2018) stated, authoritarian individuals, due to their tendency to view the world as a dangerous place, adhere to conventional values, obey authority, and have negative attitudes towards individuals who violate conventional norms, also perceive immigrants as social, cultural, and health-economic threats.

On the other hand, empathy, primarily perspective taking, fantasy, and personal distress are shown as, perhaps we could say, a buffer against negative attitudes towards immigrants. These results indicate that compassion and understanding of human suffering are significant factors in perception and acceptance of others regardless of cultural differences. The results are in line with the previous findings (Bergh & Akrami, 2016; Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2012; Miklikowska, 2018). When it comes to dimensions of empathy, the obtained results have shown

that perspective taking is a significant predictor of attitudes towards immigrants, while the empathic concern is significantly correlated, which is in line with research done by Miklikowska (2018). Still, since the cited author did not include dimensions of fantasy and personal distress in her research, we are limited when it comes to comparing our results in more detail.

It is also important to look at the percent of variance of the criterion variable that is explained by the model. Namely, the model which consisted of dimensions of empathy and authoritarian worldview accounted for 26% of perception of social threat, 15% for perception of cultural threat, and only 7% for health-economic threat. Although empathy and authoritarian worldview were shown as significant predictors, it seems that a large percent of attitudes towards immigrants could also be explained by some other variables, e.g. personality traits, religiosity, experience with immigrants… In line with that, one of the recommendations for further research would be to include some other possible predictors of attitudes towards immigrants in order to better understand factors that are correlated with them. Another suggestion for future research could be to include samples that are more uniform in terms of variables such as age and gender. Perhaps it could be of importance to conduct research that would examine the attitudes of children towards child immigrants, or the attitudes of participants in late adulthood.

Having in mind that only little research was done when it comes to attitudes towards immigrants in our and neighboring countries, and that some of them are qualitative in nature, we believe that our research provides significant findings. In line with the results of previous findings (Miklikowska, 2017, 2018) as well as ours, it seems that preventive strategies aimed at reducing negative attitudes towards immigrants should focus on strengthening the empathic capacity of individuals through e.g. perspective taking and role playing. Further, relying on the results that a large percent of variance was not explained by variables included in the study, another possible direction for consideration could be paying more attention to environmental factors that can be influenced through public policy in order to enhance integration of immigrants. Namely, Pagotto, Voci and Maculan (2010) stated that intergroup contact between Italian hospital workers and foreign patients was effective in reducing prejudice towards immigrants in general. Similar findings could be found in the review paper done by Berg (2020) indicating that intergroup contact between native-born citizens and immigrants is associated with holding prosocial attitudes towards immigrants and immigration policy. Further, Vallejo-Martin, Canto, Garcia and Novas (2021) emphasize that in order to provide peaceful coexistence and reduce negative attitudes towards minority groups, including immigrants, it is a priority to design public policies that support the inclusion and integration of minority groups with the goal of building societies that respect human rights.

Conclusion

According to the obtained results we can conclude that both authoritarian worldview and empathy have an important role when it comes to attitudes towards immigrants, but in different directions. On one hand, authoritarian worldview contributes to forming more negative attitudes towards immigrants, while the dimensions of empathy, primarily fantasy, perspective taking, and personal distress were shown to be protective factors. Still, having in mind that a large percentage of criteria was not explained by included predictors, we could say that although authoritarian worldview and empathy are significant predictors of attitudes towards immigrants, further research on this topic is needed.

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