Not Everyone is Xenophobic in South Africa

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Objective: Show that South Africa is not uniquely xenophobic. *Methods:* Regression analysis of SASAS 2013. *Results:* There are clear patterns who tends to be more xenophobic: people in vulnerable positions, and people who have less contact with foreigners. These patterns reflect those found in other countries. *Conclusion:* South Africa is not uniquely xenophobic.

Keywords: xenophobia, attitudes to foreigners, South Africa, quantitative analysis

In the past few years, South Africa has seen recurring violent attacks on immigrants. When they happen, these attacks send shock-waves through the media, and the country is left searching for explanations. It appears that opposition to immigrants and xenophobia are pervasive and found across the population. A common position is that xenophobia is so widespread that it is impossible to identify patterns and tendencies (Mattes et al. 1999; Harris 2002; Landau 2010). Commentators often question whether research from other countries and continents applies to South Africa, although usually no convincing argument is provided why South Africa is such an exceptional case.

A common narrative consistent with the view that xenophobia in South Africa is common across the population links xenophobia to the nation-building project in post-apartheid South Africa (Crush 2001; Peberdy 2001). In this context of low trust (Steenkamp 2009), negative identification against immigrants – the out-group – is inherently linked to positive identification with a multi-racial post-apartheid South Africa – the (new) in-group. In this sense, violence against immigrants and xenophobia are a perverse upshot of the end of apartheid (Harris 2002), and persistent with the negative media coverage of immigrants in South Africa (Danso and McDonald 2001).

With recurring violence against immigrants, explanations drawing on nation-building have face-validity (Dodson 2010). At the same time, it is unclear why there is occasional violence against immigrants and widespread xenophobia in established Western countries where there is no such nation-building project. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, I assume that the same mechanisms are at work in South Africa as elsewhere (see Pettigrew (2016) for a recent review;

see also Gordon (2015), Gordon (2016), Pecoraro and Ruedin (2016), Pecoraro and Ruedin (2017)). In this short note, I highlight that findings from other countries apply to South Africa, namely that individuals in vulnerable positions, and those without contact with immigrants are more likely to oppose them.

Pettigrew (2016) highlights three mechanisms: relative deprivation, (lack of) contact with immigrants, and authoritarian personality. Most relevant are *perceptions* of relative deprivation that mean vulnerability to competition with immigrants over limited resources like jobs. Such relative deprivation can translate into xenophobia particularly when people lack a social support network – in the literature the term ‘social capital’ is common (Steenkamp 2009). These are people in vulnerable positions who feel relatively isolated in addition to relatively worse off economically.

Personal contact with immigrants is consistently associated with more positive attitudes to immigrants (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Such contact can be as friends, as acquaintances, and even through friends who are friends with immigrants (Hewstone and Swart 2011). One challenge to this line of research is that individuals with positive attitudes may seek and accept friendship with immigrants, or at least avoid such contacts (Enos 2016). For this reason I focus on acquaintances in this short note. I do not present results regarding authoritarian personality here.

To quantitatively examine xenophobia in South Africa, I use nationally representative data from the *South African Social Attitudes Survey* (SASAS) 2013. The outcome variable is based on six questions that capture various aspects of attitudes to immigrants, which are combined as a scale of xenophobia (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.78$): immigrants causing crime, immigrants not being good for the economy, immigrants taking away jobs, immigrants not making South Africa more open to new idea, immigrants bringing disease, and immigrants not bringing skills to South Africa. To maximize use of the information in the data, I used multiple imputations (5 imputations).

To capture relative deprivation, I use a question on whether respondents find that their income does not quite cover their living costs. Access to support networks and community help are captured with two questions that I combined: whether respondents would be comfortable to borrow a cup of sugar from a neighbour, and the same for R20. Respondents were also asked how many acquaintances they have who have come to live in South Africa from another country.

The following table presents the results from a normal regression model. Respondents who declare an insufficient income to make ends meet are more likely to express xenophobia, as visible by the positive coefficient. At the same time, individuals who can count on the community for help have more positive attitudes to immigrants, as do those with immigrant acquaintances – as visible by the negative coefficients.

Variable	Estimation	95% Confidence Interval
Insufficient income	0.14	[0.07 .. 0.20]
Community help	−0.06	[−0.09 .. −0.04]
Contact with foreigners	−0.10	[−0.12 .. −0.07]
(Intercept)	0.88	[0.72 .. 1.06]

Outcome variable: xenophobia (scale of negative attitudes to foreigners).

Contrary to what some commentators on xenophobia in South Africa argue (Harris 2002; Mattes et al. 1999), we can discern clear patterns whom among the population tends to be more positive or negative about immigration. This means that South Africa is not uniquely xenophobic, but that patterns of xenophobia follow what has been established in other countries (Pettigrew 2016). Having found that there are clear tendencies for some people to be more xenophobic than others, however, is no excuse for xenophobia and violence against immigrants.

More work is needed to identify the mechanisms at work, especially with regard to how xenophobic attitudes translate into xenophobic violence, and separate out ostensibly xenophobic violence from other reasons – like businesses undercutting their competitors as Piper and Charman (2016) demonstrate for Cape Town, Durban, and Gauteng. International research on attitudes to immigrants and xenophobia can be useful to understand the situation in South Africa, just like the situation in South Africa can be used to test stipulated mechanisms on a fresh case.

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