

Demographic anxiety fuels white Americans' views on diversity

By Reece Wallace

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White Americans respond more positively to narratives about rising multiracialism in the U.S. than they do to the suggestion that the country is becoming a “majority-minority” society, new research shows, indicating that the way narratives around race and ethnicity are framed is “enormously influential” on broader attitudes toward diversity.

According to an [article](#) published on Jan. 5 in *Perspectives on Politics*, framing America’s transforming demographics in terms that don’t assume a “white-nonwhite binary” substantially brightens white Americans’ views of the changes.

By focusing less on racial and ethnic identities as unchanging groups jockeying for majority status in the U.S. population, the stories Americans hear about increasing diversity are much less likely to spark threatened feelings — and opposition to public spending — among whites, researchers found.

“Stripped of the idea that [racial and ethnic] groups are sharply bounded, that numerical dominance should be thought of as zero-sum, and that whites are in decline, the

forecast of rising diversity has far more muted effects on emotions and political attitudes,” said authors Morris Levy and Dowell Myers of the University of Southern California.

“Indeed, we find that a broad cross section of whites not only accepts but embraces the rise of multiracialism and the emergence of a more diverse but persistent white majority as visions of the country’s racial future,” they continued.

Anxiety among white Americans about demographic change has been widely noted in academic research and in prominent media outlets, Levy and Myers noted, referencing prior literature pinpointing the link between news of forecast changes to the country’s racial and ethnic mix with a range of potentially troubling reactions.

Those reactions include “a heightened sense of threat over waning group status that fuels racial prejudice, anticipation of rising anti-white discrimination, backlash against immigration, opposition to government programs assisting the poor, increased conservative and Republican self-identification and support for Donald Trump,” they said.

While this link has been widely established, it wasn’t clear from earlier studies whether white Americans were reacting to the “raw fact of changing racial demography” or instead to the way that fact is framed by the media and other public institutions.

That's because the data by itself doesn't necessarily support a single, obvious story about America's racial future, according to Levy and Myers.

While demographic projections from the U.S. Census Bureau are most often couched in terms of a trend toward a "majority-minority" country, the projections themselves are consistent with narratives that don't rely on such narrow, exclusive definitions of the racial and ethnic categories that the bureau tracks. Some of the alternative narratives, including those that the bureau itself also uses, rest on broader, more inclusive definitions — and prompt "decidedly positive reactions" from white American audiences, the researchers noted.

Levy told *The Academic Times* that he and Myers were inspired by sociological critiques pointing out the limitations of the dominant "majority-minority" narrative and wanted to know whether viewing the same data through a different lens might reveal that white attitudes were being conditioned by narrative rather than demography per se.

"It was one thing to say the projections are misleading or incomplete," he said "And another thing to [ask], 'What is the public significance of this [narrative]? Do people care? Does it make any difference to them?'"

To gauge whether white Americans' demographic anxieties are fueled by the projections themselves or by how they're depicted in media and political discourse, the researchers designed studies to determine how non-

Hispanic whites, as well as Hispanics and other nonwhite groups, react to different potential narratives about demographic change.

One study, given to 2,600 non-Hispanic white individuals, randomly exposed each respondent to one of four news stories. A story unrelated to racial projections served as the control, while another story, labeled the “diversity” treatment, reported on “continued increases in U.S. racial diversity, led by rapid growth among Hispanics and Asians,” without referencing the majority-minority narrative.

Other respondents read a variant of the diversity treatment, called the “blending” narrative, which emphasized that a white majority, “defined inclusively to include a growing number of Americans with mixed racial ancestry,” would persist. Still others read a version that included the majority-minority framing of the coming changes.

The findings showed the majority-minority narrative “greatly increases self-reported anxiety while dampening hopefulness, both by approximately 17 percentage points over the bare diversity narrative.” By contrast, the blending narrative boosted hopefulness and cut anxiety.

Narrative framing also impacted white respondents’ attitudes toward public spending on education, a shift the researchers said could indicate that people were more reluctant to subsidize a younger, more diverse cohort that in some interpretations was on the verge of being

majority-minority. While exposure to the majority-minority treatment didn't cause a substantial jump in opposition to a proposed 10% tax hike to fund public schools, opposition to the proposal was significantly lower among respondents who'd read the "blending" narrative — evidence that rising multiculturalism is perceived more positively among white respondents than narratives foretelling a white minority.

Notably, the effects of narratives emphasizing "rising multiracialism and mixed-race marriage" on white respondents held even when they were also exposed to competing stories reminding them of the more common majority-minority narrative and challenging the notion that mixed-race people can be considered white, according to the researchers.

They also found that on the whole, respondents who self-identified as Black, Asian or Hispanic viewed all narratives of rising diversity positively, whether they read information framing the changes as tending toward a non-white majority or toward multiracialism.

Taken together, the research suggests that attitudes toward demographic change are largely a function of which narrative individuals are exposed to, according to Levy and Myers, rather than of the simple fact that changes are on the horizon.

"When it comes to public reactions to rising diversity now and into the future, demography is not destiny," Levy and Myers said. "Narratives powerfully influence

what people make of demographic change and their political responses to it.”

Politicians and journalists are likely to remain drawn to narratives that rely on relatively rigid notions of race and ethnicity because they’re effective ways to get a message across, Levy said. But acknowledging that other, equally plausible narratives exist and influence public opinion could pave the way for healthier discourse on racial issues.

“My hope would be ... that Americans become habituated to recognizing that racial change isn’t simply a matter of some people replacing other people,” he continued, noting that notions of race evolve according to changing social norms and behaviors.

According to Levy, there’s also cause for hope that, “Increasing attention to the plausibility of different narratives, which carry different meanings and rest on different assumptions, would allay some of the [perceived] threat and perhaps start a more nuanced conversation about what racial change really means in America.”

The article “Racial Projections in Perspective: Public Reactions to Narratives about Rising Diversity,” published on Jan. 5 in Perspectives on Politics, was co-authored by assistant professor Morris Levy and professor Dowell Myers of the University of Southern California.