

The Antecedent of Fear in the Public Discourse: From Donald Trump's Nativism to Transgender Bathroom Access

Henrik Gert Larsen*

Chicago School of Professional Psychology, 325N Wells, Chicago, IL 60654, USA

*Corresponding author: Henrik Gert Larsen, Chicago School of Professional Psychology, 325N Wells, Chicago, IL 60654, USA, Tel: +1 312-329-6600; E-mail: hlarsen@thechicagoschool.edu

Rec date: May 29, 2016; Acc date: Jun 28, 2016; Pub date: Jun 30, 2016

Copyright: © 2016 Larsen HG. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Introduction

In the past few years, it would appear that the public discourse relating to social and demographic developments in the US has become louder and more fearful. The current election cycle has seen at least two topics elevated in the public discourse, resulting in almost around the clock coverage by the major US networks [1]: (1) Hispanic and Muslim immigration and (2) the social and civil rights of transgender individuals.

Donald Trump's call for a ban on Muslims entering the US has, to the surprise of many observers, garnered wide spread support among Republicans and recent opinion polls [2] documented that 77% of his supporters "believe that the values of Islam are at odds with American values and way of life." Similar, comments by Donald Trump on Mexican undocumented immigrants bringing crime and being rapists and the promise to build a great wall to keep out these people [3] have stoked a very fear- and hateful public discourse often spilling over in violent confrontations between protesters and Trump supporters [4]. The issue of transgender rights has boiled over into heated debates about transgender individuals' right to visit public bathrooms and locker rooms corresponding with their gender identity. Some proponents of transgender rights liken the "bathroom" issue with African Americans' civil rights struggle, where the so-called "Jim Crow" Laws barred African Americans from using restrooms for white people [5]. On the other hand the opposition conjures up images of men pretending to be women sexually assaulting girls in school locker rooms [6]. Consequently several states are trying to implement laws to prevent transgender individuals free bathroom access [7].

Basically the sides of the above conflicts reduce each other to either bigots and racists or criminals and sexual predators and these inter group incriminations are amplified by a ratings hungry news media, who are only too happy to weed out moderate voices and allow the loudest and most extreme voices to shape the public discourse and thus reproducing an overarching sense of fear in society. Research has documented that the term "fear" is now used in news reporting at a significantly higher rate than what used to be the norm and it can be argued that "fear" has become "a discursive framework of expectations and meaning within which problems are expressed" [8]. In other words the information element in news coverage may have become second to its dramatic framing.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical perspective on what appears to be a public discourse framed by fear by drawing on cognitive theories and research as well as social media research. The aim is to raise the awareness among stakeholders in the educational system that fear in the public discourse is not simply driven by the issues themselves, but rather how these issues are framed and interact with our cognitive processes.

Attitude Formation

In 1935, Allport concluded "An attitude is a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situation with which it is related" [9]. The causal relationships between experience, attitudes and behavior have stimulated researchers to formulate hypotheses regarding the functionality of this causality. For example, Katz [10] suggests that attitudes serve as mechanisms for: (1) adjustment, (2) ego defense, (3) value expression, and (4) knowledge acquisition and Boyd and Richerson [11] suggest that evolution has made it possible to economize mental and physical resources on decision making by adhering to established templates of thinking and behaving.

Contemporary research has continuously documented a causal relationship between experience and attitude formation, where it is proposed that attitudes are stronger, more enduring, more accessible, and, therefore, more likely to influence behavior, when they are activated from the memory of personal experiences [12]. This assumption was supported by a meta-analysis of 29 research papers on attitude formation published before 2004 [13]. The problem with these theories and findings would seem to be that much of the fear in the public discourse is not anchored in any personal experience. For example very few people would to this day have had the experience of sharing a public bathroom with a transgender person, let alone being assaulted by a transgender person in any context and locality. So where does the fear come from that propels politician to legislate against gender based bathroom access, as has been the case in North Carolina? Apparently lack of personal experience does not prevent us from forming strong attitudes about social issues and act on them. Thus we should question the importance of personal experience in the attitude behavior equation.

Consequently some researchers [14] have departed from a focus on the experience-attitude-behavior equation in favor of a theoretical perspective, which encompasses the simultaneous and bidirectional influence of beliefs, associations, emotions, behavior, and experiences [15]. Thus contemporary cognitive theories imply that attitudes consist of a multitude of contradicting associations [16]. For example the associative-propositional theory hypothesizes that attitudes are formed by competing affective and cognitive processes, where the affective response is almost exclusively biased, where the cognitive processes serves to moderate what can be referred to as a "gut feeling" about an issue [17].

Contact Theory

Contact theory posits that inter-group contact dismantles stereotypes and reduces prejudice [18] as the individual learns more

about “the other” and through experience realizes that the “fear” they initially harboured was unfounded. For example, a 2006 study [19] demonstrated that students paired with a roommate belonging to another race or socioeconomic group become more empathetic towards this group and their interests. The validity of contact theory is further supported by a meta-analysis of 515 studies [20].

So why is it then that a society, where so many of the formal discriminating boundaries, which has separated and segregated various social groups, still experience elevated levels of fear and inter-group hatred? This would indeed seem to be the case with regards to many white Americans’ ambivalent feelings towards the growing hispanic and Muslim communities, A situation that Donald Trump has managed to exploit to his political benefit. Critiques of contact theory thus argue that contact studies only have demonstrated a correlation between exposure and positive inter-group attitudes, but not proved any causality. Consequently Forbes [18] argues that increased inter-group contact facilitates little more than an acceleration of the process of either conflict or coexistence, which is already under way. In support of these notions acculturation research has documented that even after prolonged contact social groups may still fail to appreciate each other’s cultures [21] and continue to manifest antagonistic communication patterns [22]. It is however important to notice that this phenomenon is not isolated to the receiving majority culture. Studies have shown [23] that while the receiving culture may be open to the migrating minority culture, the minority culture may reject and attempt to isolate itself from the majority culture of the host country a phenomenon that Kenichiro [24] labelled “antagonistic acculturation.”

Intergroup Threat Theory

Inter-group threat theory operates with two categories of threats: realistic and symbolic. Realistic threats are fundamentally experiential, while symbolic threats are perceived directed against a group’s values or way of life. Inter-group threat theories posit that realistic threats are likely to trigger anger and fear; whereas symbolic threats may trigger emotions such as disgust, contempt and rejection, which may lead to dehumanization and infrahumanization¹

In empirical research it is however near impossible to distinguish between subjects’ experiences of realistic and symbolic threats. Therefore social identity theory posits that, in the final analysis, all threats have symbolic meaning [25,26]. For example Eidelson and Eidelson [27] posit that actual historical events can be transformed into symbolic threats by future generations through cultural engrained self-understandings such as superiority, injustice and vulnerability beliefs, distrust and helplessness. Thus the fear may be the function of individuals consulting cultural dependent beliefs rather than any significant personal experience.

It is further argued that mutual acknowledgement and communication between individuals generate a perception of external norms [28]. Thus it is argued that individuals express prejudice to the extent it is perceived as appropriate within their social context [29]. It is in this connection that the framing of events within a “fear” narrative by the mass media becomes particular salient for understanding the often venomous public discourse, we are currently experiencing. This is particular evident within social media, which

instead of breaking down boundaries between people, more and more are functioning as “echo chambers” for both hate and fear [30].

The Impact of Social Media on Fear Mongering

Up until the end of the 1990s online communities had little impact in the broader social context. However, with the increased speed of the Internet and the evolution of user interfaces, online communities have in the past 10-15 years become a significant force for social connectivity [31] and as early as 2010 it was estimated that more than a billion people were engaged in online communities, such as forums, social network sites, blogs, etc. [32]. However within the relative anonymity of virtual reality, we have witnessed the emergence of a new form of discourse with what seems to be less social accountability [33]. This is evidently the case for the Yik Yak community, which has no user profiles and has been linked to campus bullying of both students and professors prompting some schools to establish geo-fencing in order to neutralize it [34].

Studies [35] have identified new personality types based on online behaviors for example: (a) celebrities, (b) newbies, (c) lurkers, (d) flammers, (e) trolls, and (f) ranters. “Celebrity” is perhaps a confusing term, but these are the individuals who through the sheer volume of their post define the tone and culture of the online community. This term is confusing because its coining predates the proliferation of Twitter and Instagram, which has allowed actual celebrities to create their own “echo-chambers.” Numerous experiments have demonstrated that idols have a strong influence opinions and behavior via identification [36] and their followers would according to Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance be highly motivated to adapt their attitudes, beliefs, and actions and conform to a dominant world view of a celebrity led social media effort [37]. Thus individuals may resolve feelings of social ambiguity by deferring to perceived group norms [38], which research indicates are inherently prejudice towards out-group members [39].

It is hypothesized that the motivation of celebrities both real and virtual is the development of a positive self-image and attainment of social power through their ability to define the social rules and norms of their community [40]. In this connection a 2009 media survey concluded that only about 16% of the online population is responsible for around 80% of the user generated content [41]. This study further segmented the influencers into: (a) mass connectors and (b) mass mavens, where the mass connectors share their opinions and mass mavens generate content. Thus, only 6.2% of online adults in the US are mass connectors and generate 80% of the influence impressions [42]. With close to 8 million followers on Twitter Donald Trump is without doubt a serious mass connector and the 2015/16-election cycle has demonstrated his ability to control the public discourse and mobilize his followers, where even his tweets are covered by the traditional news media. In other words it would appear that Donald Trump, through his celebrity status, has been able to generate a massive “echo-chamber” for his followers thus inoculating or even isolating these from negative stories being reported on the “outside.” In the words of Tufekci [43] “Trump supporters affirm one another in their belief that white America is being sold out by secretly Muslim lawmakers, and that every unpleasant claim about Donald Trump is a fabrication by a cabal that includes the Republican leadership and the mass media.” Hence Donald Trump’s observation [44] that “I could

¹ Infrahumanization refers to the perception that the out-group members are only able to experience some very basic animalistic emotions such as anger and pleasure and not the subtle emotions felt by in-group members such as guilt, empathy etc.

stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue, shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters."

The Digital Foot Print of "Dark" Personalities

Altheide and Michalowski [8] argue that traditional news media embraced the fear narrative as a means to dramatize news and thereby increase consumption, which would appear to be a rational commercial choice, but what motivates celebrities to embrace a similar narrative seemingly without remuneration? It could be that mass-communicators like Donald Trump truly believe that the US are on the wrong track. However it is worth taking into account that recent studies have documented a correlation between narcissism, Machiavellianism, sadistic personality traits and a high frequency of social media usage. Especially the latter trait appears to be strongly correlated with trolling [45]. Golder and Donath [35] defined trolls as individuals who engage in identity deception as they pose as genuine opinion makers, but with a covert purpose of creating strife through manipulation and misrepresentation. Further research has indicated that trolls may even construct specific personalities for different online forums [33]. However scholars also propose that these assumed personalities are not separate from the identity of the individual, but merely reflect different and highly amplified personality aspects. Researchers have proposed terms such as "the collective self" and "the society of mind" to describe the idea that the totality of an individual's identity in an online world can be distributed among several different online personalities, who serve as vehicles for acting out unresolved conflicts and character difficulties [46]. Irrespective of the mechanisms research [45] has demonstrated that "dark personalities leave larger digital footprints" and may be assuming the role as normative gatekeepers in the public discourse relating to social ambiguous topics such as immigration and transgender rights [47].

Conclusion

Scholars have from time to time pointed to the paradox between the level of fear and anxiety expressed through various media and the unprecedented level of relative safety Americans live in during these times [45]. The aim of this article was to provide multiple theoretical perspectives on what has caused this paradox to arise exemplified by the fear and anxiety associated with two hot topics in the current election cycle: Immigration and transgender rights. The literature indicates that our cognitive and affective spectrum predispose us towards various degree of bias and stereotyping if not prejudice, which may have been useful survival traits long ago, but less functional in our modern age. Further research indicate that the media has embraced the dramatization of news delivery and with a 24 hour replay of the same events on all channels may contribute to a polarization of attitudes and heightened fear in the population.

The manner in which events are repacked into dramatic news with subtle and not so subtle racial, sexual and social cues stimulate our "cave-man" mental software thus activating strong out-group fear responses. These out-group fear responses can be observed on social media, where the fear-biased news become reinterpreted and retransmitted to the audience as unfiltered guttural statement of hate and fear. Studies further indicate the group dynamics of social media platforms tend to provide dominant individuals with an opportunity for exerting social control, shape the online culture and set boundaries for what counts as acceptable viewpoints. Research has further documented an overlap between the online mass-communicator and the narcissistic and Machiavellian personality types, which may cause

the culture of certain online forums to become hateful towards out-group members and condone bullying of dissenting voices. For example a recent analysis of online forums documented that 81% of evaluative statements about out-group members' customs and behaviors were negative and that 26% of these opinionated statements were generated by just 5% of unique contributors [48].

Consequently it may be worthwhile for stakeholders in our educational system to reflect on the notions that the "production" of news has become a fear centered entertainment industry; that the arch-typical mass-communicator on social media platforms may have certain personality traits, which drives him or her to dominate the tone and culture of an online forum by amplifying the traditional media's fear narrative and chastise out-group members and finally to consider how susceptible we are to those stimuli and it is therefore not only the issues that drive wedges into the social fabric of our society, but also the style, tone and personalities of the old and new media industries.

References

1. Balz D (2015) Trump: Summer rerun or a headache-inducing new series for GOP? Retrieved from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-2016-summer-rerun-or-a-headache-inducing-new-series-for-gop/2015/07/11/f4631178-2747-11e5-b77f-eb13a215f593_story.html.
2. Younge G (2015) Donald Trump shows hate speech is now out and proud in the mainstream. Retrieved from: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/08/scale-of-donald-trumps-discrimination-debases-currency-of-democracy>.
3. Gabbatt A (2015) Donald Trump's tirade on Mexico's 'drugs and rapists' outrages US Latinos. Retrieved from: <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/16/donald-trump-mexico-presidential-speech-latino-hispanic>.
4. Elving R (2016) A Campaign On The Brink: Donald Trump And The Intersection Of Outrage And Violence. Retrieved from: <http://www.npr.org/2016/03/14/470375065/a-campaign-on-the-brink-donald-trump-and-the-intersection-of-outrage-and-violenc>.
5. The Editorial Board (2015) For Transgender Americans, Legal Battles Over Restrooms. Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/27/opinion/for-transgender-americans-legal-battles-over-restrooms.html?_r=0.
6. Brown E, Balingit M (2016) Transgender students' access to bathrooms is at front of LGBT rights battle. Retrieved from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/transgender-students-access-to-school-bathrooms-is-new-front-in-war-over-lgbt-rights/2016/02/29/ba66d676-da61-11e5-925f-1d10062cc82d_story.html.
7. Blinder A, Fausset R (2016) North Carolina Officials Say They'll Defy Federal Deadline on Bathroom Law. Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/us/north-carolina-defy-federal-deadline-bathroom-transgender.html>.
8. Altheide DL, Michalowski RS (1999) Fear in the news: A discourse of control. *The Sociological Quarterly* 40: 475-503.
9. Fazio RH, Petty RE (2008) Conceptualizing attitudes. In: Fazio RH, Petty RE (Eds) *Attitudes, their structure, function and consequences*. New York, NY: Psychology Press 1-5.
10. Katz D (1960) The functional approach to the study of attitudes. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 24: 163-204.
11. Boyd R, Richerson PJ (2008) Gene-culture coevolution and the evolution of social institutions. In: Engel C, Singer W (eds) *Better than conscious?: Decision making, the human mind, and implications for institutions*. Strungmann Forum Reports Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 305-324.
12. Aiken LR (2002) *Attitudes and related psychosocial constructs, theory assessment and research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication.
13. Glasman LR, Albarracin D (2006) Forming attitudes that predict future behavior: A meta-analysis of the attitude-behavior relation. *Psychological Bulletin* 132: 778-822.

14. Zanna MP, Rempel JK (1988) Attitudes: A new look at an old concept. In Bar-Tal D, Kruglanski AW (eds) *The social psychology of knowledge* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 315-334.
15. Chaiken S, Baldwin MW (1981) Affective-cognitive consistency and the effect of salient behavioral information on the self-perception of attitudes. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 41: 1-12.
16. Bavel JJV, Xiao Y, Cunningham WA (2012) Evaluation is a dynamic process: Moving beyond dual system models. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6: 438-454.
17. Gawronski B (2007) Unraveling the processes underlying evaluation: Attitudes from the perspective of the APE Model. *Social Cognition*, 25: 687-717.
18. Forbes HD (1997) *Ethnic conflict: commerce, culture and contact*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
19. Boisjoly J, Duncan GJ, Kremer M, Levy DM, Eccles J (2006) Empathy or antipathy? The impact of diversity. *The American Economic Review* 96: 1890-1905.
20. Pettigrew TF, Tropp LR (2006) A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 90: 751-783.
21. Takeuchi R, Marinova SV, Lepak DP, Liu W (2001) A model of expatriate withdrawal-related outcomes: Decision making from a dualistic adjustment perspective. *Human Resource Management Review* 15: 119-138.
22. Matsumoto D, Hee Yoo S, LeRoux JA (2009) Emotion and intercultural communication. In Kotthoff H, Spence-Oatey H (Eds) *Handbook of Intercultural Communication*. Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter Publishers 77-97.
23. Larsen HG, Wolowitz L (2015) A Netnographic Case Study of Western Expatriates' Attitudes towards the Chinese in Shanghai. In: Rozbicki MJ, (Eds) *Perspectives on interculturality: The construction of meaning in relationship of difference*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan 179-204.
24. Kenichiro H (2010) Acculturation for resistance. *Journal of Cultural Interaction in East Asia* 1, 27-56. http://www.sciea.org/data-j01/04_Articles2_Hirano.pdf
25. Stephan WG, Ybarra O, Morrison KR (2009) Intergroup threat theory. In: Nelson T (Eds) *Handbook of prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination*. New York, NY: Psychology Press 43-59.
26. Lieberthal K, Thurnau AF (2006) American perceptions of China. Annual lecture in honor of A. Doak Barnett & Michel Oksenberg, Shanghai 01 March, 2006. Retrieved from: http://www.ncusr.org/files/2006-B-O_lecture.pdf
27. Eidelson RJ, Eidelson JI (2003) Dangerous ideas. Five beliefs that propel groups toward conflict. *Am Psychol* 58: 182-192.
28. Stangor C (2004) *Social groups in action and interaction*. New York, NY, Psychology Press.
29. Stangor C (2009) The study of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination within social psychology. A quick history of theory and research. In: Nelson T (Eds) *Handbook of prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination* New York, NY: Psychology Press 1-22.
30. Lo A (2015) Social media amplifies hate and despair. Retrieved from: <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1820113/social-media-amplifies-hate-and-despair>.
31. Giles M (2010) A special report on social networking: A world of connections. *Social Commerce Today*. Retrieved January 15, 2011 from the Syzygy Group website: http://www.socialcommercetoday.com/downloads/Economist_Social_Networking_Special_Report.pdf.
32. Kozinets RV (2010) *Netnography: Doing ethnographic research online*. London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd.
33. Kozinets RV (1998) On netnography: Initial reflections on consumer research investigations of cyberculture. *Advances in Consumer Research* 25: 366-371. Retrieved from: <http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/display.asp?id=8180>.
34. Mahler J (2015) Who Spewed That Abuse? Anonymous Yik Yak App Isn't Telling. Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/09/technology/popular-yik-yak-app-confers-anonymity-and-delivers-abuse.html?_r=0.
35. Golder SA, Donath J (2004) Social roles in electronic communities. Paper presented at the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) conference Internet Research 5.0. Brighton, UK. Retrieved from Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab Blog: <http://web.media.mit.edu/~golder/projects/roles/golder2004.pdf>.
36. Snyder M, DeBono KG (1985) Appeals to image and claims about quality: Understanding the psychology of advertising. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 49: 586-597.
37. Eagly AH, Chaiken S (1993) *The psychology of attitudes*. Fort Worth, TX. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.
38. Major B, Sawyer PJ (2009) Attributions of discrimination: Antecedents and consequences. In: Nelson T (Eds) *Handbook of prejudice and discrimination*. New York, NY: Psychology Press 89-109.
39. Bowles S, Choi JK, Hopfensitz A (2003) The co-evolution of individual behaviors and social institutions. *J Theor Biol* 223: 135-147.
40. Chen LL, Gaines BR (1996) Knowledge acquisition processes in internet communities. Proceedings of the 10th Knowledge Acquisition Workshops. Banff, Canada. Nov. 9-14, 1996. Retrieved July 2, 2011 from: <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/34864474/SOCIAL-ROLES-IN-ELECTRONIC-COMMUNITIES-Scott-A-Golder-and-Judith>.
41. Zuberance Report (2011) Brand Advocate Data & Insights. Retrieved July 28, 2011 from The Zuberance company website: <http://www.zuberance.com/downloads/brandAdvocateInsights.pdf>.
42. Elliot N (2010) Peer influence analysis: What it is & how marketers use it. [Web log post]. Retrieved from: http://blogs.forrester.com/augie_ray/10-0420peer_influence_analysis_what_it_how_marketers_use_it.
43. Tufekci Z (2016) Adventures in the Trump Twittersphere. Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/opinion/campaign-stops/adventures-in-the-trump-twittersphere.html?_r=0.
44. Murdock S (2016) Trump Claims He Could Shoot Someone And Not Lose Voters. Retrieved from: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-could-shoot-someone_us_56a3ccbbe4b076aadcc6da93.
45. Buckels EE, Trapnell PD, Paulhus DL (2014) Trolls just want to have fun. *Personality and Individual Difference*, The Dark Triad of Personality 67:97-102.
46. Turkle S (1999) Cyberspace and identity. *Contemporary Sociology* 28: 643-648. Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2655534>.
47. Booghin J, Doogan J, Vetvik OJ (2010) A new way to measure word-of-mouth marketing. *McKinsey Quarterly*. Retrieved from: http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/A_new_way_to_measure_word-of-mouth_marketing_2567.
48. Larsen HG (2015) *The Shanghai City Brand. A netnographic study of social media communication* Saarbrücken, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing.