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How "undocumented workers" and "illegal aliens" affect prejudice toward Mexican immigrants

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Although the terms "illegal aliens" and "undocumented workers" are often used interchangeably to refer to the same immigrant population, they have very different connotations. The present study investigated why these two terms invoke different levels of prejudice. A group of undergraduate students ($n = 269$) were assigned to evaluate either "illegal aliens" or "undocumented workers." Two models were tested based on integrated threat theory (ITT) and instrumental model of group conflict (IMGC). ITT situates threat-related variables (realistic threat, symbolic threat, negative stereotypes) as proximal determinants of prejudice, and IMGC situates perceived competition-related variables (zero-sum competition beliefs, social dominance orientation) as proximal determinants of prejudice. The ITT model better accounted for the fact that "illegal aliens" invoked greater prejudice than "undocumented workers," indicating that the term "illegal aliens" is associated with increased perceptions of threat. The potential implications of these findings are considered and ideas for future research are proposed.

Keywords: Immigrants; Prejudice; Threat; Competition; Integrated threat theory; Instrumental model of group conflict.

Although extensive research has been conducted on prejudice, most of this research in the United States has focused on the conflict between Whites and Blacks (Lee & Ottati, 2002). In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau identified that Hispanics/Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States, not including the estimated 8.7 million illegal immigrants not accounted for in the census (Grieco & Cassidy, 2001). Therefore, it is important that research be conducted on intergroup relations and prejudice toward

this group. Given that the majority (58.5%) of Hispanics/Latinos were self-identified as Mexican (Guzman, 2001), particular attention should be given to Mexican immigrants.

Immigration has become a highly charged social and political topic about which individuals have strong opinions (Dougherty, 2005; Oppenheimer, 2008). People's opinions toward Mexican immigrants may not only result in meaningful behaviors toward immigrants (Lee & Ottati, 2002; Lee, Ottati, & Hussain, 2001), but there is also a notion that these opinions carry over toward non-immigrant Mexican-Americans, who become conflated into the Mexican immigrant out-group (Jiménez, 2007). Among Mexican immigrants there are those who are considered legal and illegal, or documented and undocumented. Although most political rhetoric voiced against Mexican immigration refers only to illegal immigrants, this author contends that the anti-immigration attitudes extend (unconsciously) to legal immigrants. In fact, although prejudice against illegal Mexican immigrants tends to be greater than prejudice toward legal Mexican immigrants, prejudice against legal Mexican immigrants is no different from prejudice against illegal English-Canadian immigrants (Short, 2004; Short & Magaña, 2002).

In the United States, prejudice toward immigrants is a growing concern as the number of immigrants is steadily increasing (Lyman, 2006). It is important to understand how the media may affect prejudice toward Mexican immigrants. Many news stories refer to "Mexican immigrants," "illegals," "illegal aliens," and "undocumented workers." Much of the time, any of these terms could be applied in each case. The present study focuses on the use of the two most commonly used terms: "illegal aliens" and "undocumented workers." Whereas "illegal alien" connotes a criminal, invading foreigner, "undocumented worker" connotes a hard-working person lacking official documentation (Soderlund, 2007). Some have argued that using the term "illegal alien" is damaging to Mexican immigrants as a whole, as opposed to using the term "undocumented worker" (Greenfield, 2006; Soderlund, 2007).

DEFINITION OF PREJUDICE

Prejudice can be defined as "a hostile opinion about some person or class of persons . . . usually grounded in misconception, misunderstanding, and inflexible generalizations" (American Heritage New Dictionary, 2009). Based on the models examined in the present study, prejudice is considered to be emotional prejudice, which is defined by negative affective evaluations of a social group or members of a particular social group. A recent meta-analysis has found that emotional prejudice (subsequently referred to as just "prejudice") has been found to be one

of the most robust predictors of both observed and self-reported discrimination (Talaska, Fiske, & Chaiken, 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand what predicts prejudice toward Mexican immigrants.

INTEGRATED THREAT THEORY OF PREJUDICE

Multiple theories propose that prejudice stems from perceptions of threat. Realistic group conflict theory predicts that when groups are competing for scarce resources, prejudice toward the out-group members occurs (Levine & Campbell, 1972). Realistic threats involve "any threat to the welfare of the group or its members," including threats to political/economic power and overall well-being (Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999, p. 2222). Theories of symbolic racism predict that when an in-group perceives an out-group to have different morals or values, prejudice toward the out-group occurs (Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sears & Kinder, 1985). Symbolic threats involve threats to a group's worldview. Integrated threat theory (ITT; Stephan & Stephan, 2000) proposes that in addition to realistic and symbolic threats, negative stereotypes are "implied threats to the in-group because they lead in-group members to fear that negative consequences will befall them in the course of intergroup interaction" (Stephan, Diaz-Loving, & Duran, 2000, p. 241). In essence, ITT claims that perceptions of threat drive prejudice, and thus factors influencing prejudice are likely to act through influencing perceptions of threat (e.g., intergroup contact).

INSTRUMENTAL MODEL OF GROUP CONFLICT

An extension of realistic group conflict theory, the instrumental model of group conflict (IMGC; Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998) asserts that negative attitudes and behaviors toward out-group members represent attempts to remove a source of competition. Perceived competition is assumed to be the driving force behind prejudice. In fact, Esses et al. (1998) have shown that perceived competition, or zero-sum competition beliefs, mediates the relationship between social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) and prejudice.

The present study examines why the term "illegal aliens" activates more prejudice than the term "undocumented workers." Two theoretical approaches are examined: integrated threat theory (ITT; Stephan & Stephan, 2000) and the instrumental model of group conflict (IMGC; Esses et al., 1998). ITT predicts that participants who are randomly assigned to evaluate "illegal aliens" will report greater threat (realistic threat, symbolic threat, negative stereotypes) than participants assigned to evaluate "undocumented workers," which will be associated with more prejudice (see Figure 1). IMGC predicts that participants who are randomly assigned to evaluate "illegal aliens" will report greater perceived competition
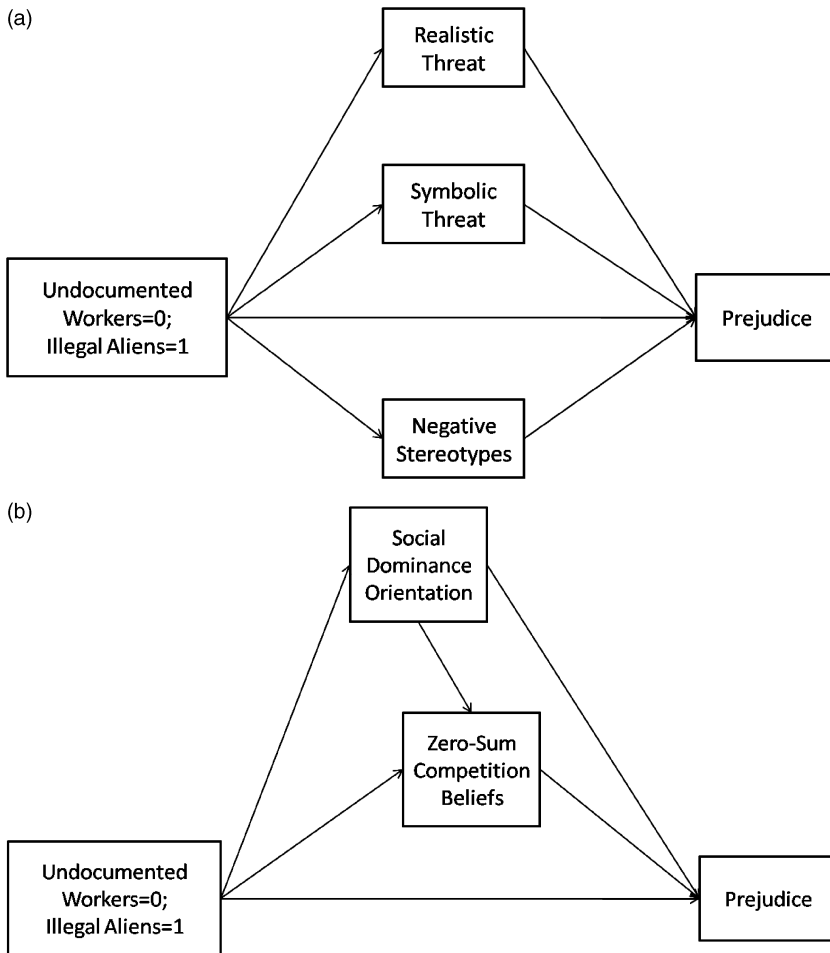
(a)

Realistic
Threat

Symbolic
Threat

Undocumented
Workers=0;
Illegal Aliens=1

Prejudice

Negative
Stereotypes

(b)

Social
Dominance
Orientation

Zero-Sum
Competition
Beliefs

Undocumented
Workers=0;
Illegal Aliens=1

Prejudice

Figure 1. Integrated threat theory (top) and the instrumental model of group conflict (bottom) as explanatory models of the relationship between term use and prejudice.

(SDO, zero-sum competition beliefs), which will be associated with more prejudice (see Figure 1).

METHOD

Participants

A total of 269 undergraduate psychology students (67 men, 202 women) participated in this study to partially fulfill a research participation requirement in psychology courses. Participants were randomly assigned

to conditions with no constraints regarding equal numbers in each group (121 assigned to "illegal aliens" condition; 148 assigned to "undocumented workers" condition). Some of the participants completed the measures in a research lab on campus ($N = 24$), but the majority completed the survey online ($N = 245$). Of the sample, 37.9% were freshmen, 15.2% were sophomores, 24.5% were juniors, 21.9% were seniors, and .4% were graduate students. The majority self-identified as Caucasian or White (61.7%), followed by African American or Black (20.8%), Asian or Pacific Islander (5.6%), Latino/a (4.8%), and Other (6.3%). Only 9.7% of the sample were married or divorced; the remainder classified themselves as single (63.4%) or in a committed relationship (26.9%). This study was approved by the Human Subjects Committee of the College of Sciences at the participating university.

Measures

Realistic threats (RT)

The measure of perceived realistic threats toward Mexican immigrants consisted of 12 items measured on a 10-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "10 = strongly agree" ($\alpha = .85$; Stephan et al., 1999). Example items include, "Mexican immigration has increased the tax burden on Americans" and "Mexican immigrants get more from this country than they contribute." The terms "Mexican immigrants" or "Mexican immigration" was replaced with either "illegal aliens" or "undocumented workers" depending on assigned condition. This replacement was consistent across all measures such that the term "Mexican immigrants" was always replaced by the terms "illegal aliens" or "undocumented workers". Higher scores on this measure are associated with higher perceived realistic threats. Good internal consistency was found in the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$).

Symbolic threats (ST)

The measure of perceived symbolic threats toward Mexican immigrants consisted of 12 items measured on a 10-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "10 = strongly agree" ($\alpha = .68$; Stephan et al., 1999). Example items include, "The values and beliefs of Mexican immigrants regarding moral and religious issues are *not* compatible with the beliefs and values of most Americans" and "Mexican immigrants should *not* have to accept American ways" (reverse-coded). Higher scores on this measure are associated with higher perceived symbolic threats. Adequate internal consistency was found in the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$).

Stereotypes

A measure of negative stereotypes toward Mexican immigrants consisted of 12 evaluative words (dishonest, ignorant, undisciplined, aggressive, hard-working, reliable, proud, respectful, unintelligent, clean, clannish, friendly) where participants estimated the percentage of Mexican immigrants displaying each quality on a 10-point scale ranging from 0–10% to 90–100% (Stephan & Stephan, 1993). Items were coded such that higher scores were indicative of higher endorsement of negative stereotypes. Good internal consistency was found in the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$).

Zero-sum competition beliefs

A four-item measure of zero-sum competition beliefs was adapted from Bobo and Hutchings (1996), measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "7 = strongly agree." The competition beliefs stem from four domains: jobs (e.g., "More good jobs for Mexican immigrants means fewer good jobs for members of other groups"), housing, economics, and politics. Good internal consistency was found in the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$).

Social dominance orientation (SDO)

The social dominance orientation scale consists of 16 items measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "1 = very negative" to "7 = very positive." Example items include, "Some groups of people are simply not the equals of others" and "Some people are just more worthy than others" (Pratto et al., 1994). Principal-components analyses across 12 diverse samples and a confirmatory factor analysis in one large sample ($n = 463$) suggest that the SDO scale measures a unitary construct. Across 12 diverse samples ranging from 46 to 463 participants, high internal consistencies were found, averaging $\alpha = .83$ (ranging from .80 to .89). Convergent validity has been demonstrated in that SDO is positively correlated with social and political ideologies that support intergroup inequality, such as anti-Black racism and sexism. Discriminant validity has been demonstrated, such that SDO is negatively correlated with support for social programs, women's rights, tolerance, and altruism (Pratto et al., 1994). Excellent internal consistency was found in the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$).

Emotional coldness

Because there is no standard measure of prejudice toward Mexican immigrants, multiple measures were used. A feeling thermometer (FT) was used as a measure of prejudice in which participants were asked to report how "cold" or "warm" they felt toward Mexican immigrants on a scale

from 0 to 100. This method has been used in past research (Miller, Smith, & Mackie, 2004). This item was recoded such that higher scores reflect higher levels of emotional coldness toward Mexican immigrants.

Attitudes

Another measure of prejudice involved asking participants to identify how often they felt certain emotions when "encountering or thinking about Mexican immigrants" (Miller et al., 2004). This measure included 11 emotion words (afraid, angry, disgusted, uneasy, hopeful, sympathetic, resented, respectful, grateful, admiring, irritated) to describe their attitudes toward Mexican immigrants. On a 5-point Likert scale, they ranked how they felt these emotions in relation to Mexican immigrants ($1 =$ almost never/never, $5 =$ almost always/always). Items were coded such that higher scores were associated with higher negative emotions, or higher affective prejudice. Good internal consistency was found in the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

Demographics/debriefing

A standard demographics questionnaire was administered that asked about participants' race, age, gender, class status, marital status, and birth date. After completing all other measures, participants were informed of the true nature of the study including the hypotheses regarding the effects that the assigned conditions would have on prejudice measures. Finally, participants were asked not to talk to others in the participant pool regarding the purpose of the study.

Procedure

All participants were first presented with a notification statement emphasizing their right to withdraw from this study and the anonymity of their responses. The notification statement stated that the study examined college students' opinions toward "*Mexican immigrants*," which was designed to prime all of the participants to think of Mexican immigrants for the remainder of the study. Following the notification statement, there were no more references to Mexican immigrants. The participants were randomly assigned to either the "illegal aliens" or "undocumented workers" condition. In each condition participants completed all measures with only the use of one of these two terms. All participants completed the questionnaires in the same order, which is listed as follows: negative stereotypes, negative attitudes, SDO, symbolic threat, realistic threat, zero-sum competition beliefs, feeling thermometer, and demographics.

After completing all questionnaires, participants were thanked for their participation and were presented with a debriefing sheet that explained the true nature of the study.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses

Histograms indicated that all variables (realistic threat, symbolic threat, negative stereotypes, emotional coldness, negative attitudes; SDO, zero-sum competition beliefs) were unimodal and approximately normally distributed. All skewness and kurtosis values were $<|.67|$.

The assigned conditions did not significantly differ from each other on any demographic variable that was collected (race, gender, age, class status, marital status), meaning that none of the group differences could be accounted for by demographic differences.

Main analyses

In order to determine whether the effect of condition on prejudice was mediated by the threat variables, as indicated by ITT, and/or the perceived competition variables, as indicated by IMGC, mediation tests were conducted using a non-parametric bootstrapping procedure. This procedure estimates an empirical sampling distribution of the indirect effect and refrains from making the unsubstantiated assumption that the indirect effect is normally distributed (Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008). Past research had demonstrated that testing the joint significance of the indirect effect has been shown to be more powerful than testing each direct effect separately (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007; MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). The significance of each indirect effect is determined by a 95% bias corrected confidence interval that does not contain zero.

As expected, the dummy-coded condition variable (undocumented worker $= 0$, illegal aliens $= 1$) had a significant total effect on both measures of prejudice (negative attitudes: $B = .34$; emotional coldness: $B = 7.65$) such that "illegal aliens" was associated with more negative attitudes and more emotional coldness than "undocumented workers." As can be seen in Figure 2, condition significantly predicted realistic threat, symbolic threat, and negative stereotypes, which in turn significantly predicted negative attitudes and emotional coldness. Consistent with ITT (see Table 1), realistic threat, symbolic threat, and negative stereotypes significantly mediated the relationship between condition and negative attitudes; in addition, realistic threat and symbolic threat significantly
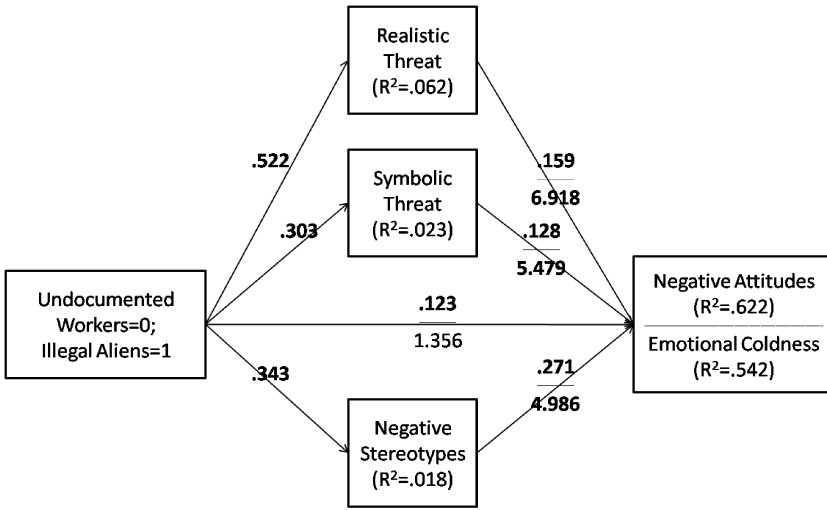
Figure 2. Path-analytic model of the relationship between assigned condition on prejudice in the context of integrated threat theory. Significant effects are in bold, and were determined by 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals that do not contain zero. Correlations between realistic threat, symbolic threat, and negative stereotypes have been omitted for clarity.

TABLE 1

Decomposition of total, total indirect, specific indirect, and direct effects of condition on prejudice with integrated threat theory variables

	95% confidence interval		
	Lower bound	*B*	*Upper bound*
Condition → Negative attitudes			
Total effect	.169	**.337**	.501
Total indirect effect	.087	**.215**	.352
Specific indirect effects:			
Negative stereotypes	.011	**.093**	.182
Realistic threat	.037	**.083**	.147
Symbolic threat	.009	**.039**	.094
Direct effect	.020	**.123**	.230
Condition → Emotional coldness			
Total effect	2.368	**7.647**	13.128
Total indirect effect	2.279	**6.291**	10.477
Specific indirect effects:			
Negative stereotypes	−.009	1.529	3.667
Realistic threat	1.578	**3.388**	5.964
Symbolic threat	.156	**1.374**	3.269
Direct effect	−2.490	1.356	4.943

Significant effects are in bold, and indicated by a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval that does not contain zero.

mediated the relationship between condition and emotional coldness. The threat variables partially mediated the relationship between condition and negative attitudes; however, the threat variables fully mediated the relationship between condition and emotional coldness. Overall, the ITT models accounted for 62.2% of the variance in negative attitudes and 54.2% of the variance in emotional coldness.

As depicted in Figure 3, condition failed to predict SDO or zero-sum competition beliefs; however, SDO significantly predicted zero-sum competition beliefs, which in turn significantly predicted negative attitudes and emotional coldness. Consistent with IMGC (see Table 2), zero-sum competition beliefs fully mediated the relationship between SDO and negative attitudes and partially mediated the relationship between SDO and emotional coldness. Neither SDO nor zero-sum competition beliefs alone mediated the relationship between condition and either form of prejudice; however, the double mediated path (condition → SDO → zero-sum competition beliefs → negative attitudes) was significant for negative attitudes (but not emotional coldness) and the total indirect effects were statistically significant for both negative attitudes and emotional coldness. The IMGC models accounted for 36.3% of the variance in negative attitudes and 38.7% of the variance in emotional coldness.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to identify why differential prejudice is invoked by two different terms commonly applied in reference to the same demographic; specifically, why the term "illegal aliens" activates more prejudice toward Mexican immigrants than the term "undocumented workers." Whereas integrated threat theory (ITT; Stephan & Stephan, 2000) predicted that perceptions of threat (realistic threat, symbolic threat, negative stereotypes) would mediate the relationship between assigned condition and prejudice, the instrumental model of group conflict (IMGC; Esses et al., 1998) predicted that perceived competition (SDO, zero-sum competition beliefs) would mediate this relationship.

ITT more completely accounted for the relationship between assigned condition and prejudice than IMGC. First, assigned condition significantly predicted each threat variable, but failed to significantly predict either perceived competition variable. Second, the threat variables significantly and consistently mediated the effect of assigned condition on prejudice, with the exception that negative stereotypes did not significantly mediate the effect of assigned condition on emotional coldness. Neither of the perceived competition variables acted as sole mediator of the relationship between assigned condition and prejudice, and there was only a small, significant double mediated path from condition to negative attitudes

TABLE 2
Decomposition of total, total indirect, specific indirect, and direct effects of condition
on prejudice with instrumental model of group conflict variables

	95% confidence interval		
	Lower bound	B	Upper bound
Condition → Negative attitudes			
Total effect	.169	**.337**	.501
Total indirect effect	.022	**.117**	.218
Specific indirect effects:			
Social dominance Orientation	−.001	.038	.097
Zero-sum competition beliefs	−.010	.059	.140
Both	.000	**.020**	.050
Direct effect	.080	**.220**	.360
SDO → Negative attitudes			
Total effect	.169	**.337**	.501
Specific indirect effect			
Zero-sum competition beliefs	.022	**.117**	.218
Direct effect	−.001	.038	.097
Condition → Emotional coldness			
Total effect	2.369	**7.647**	13.127
Total indirect effect	.022	**3.345**	6.896
Specific indirect effects:			
Social dominance orientation	−.113	.982	2.520
Zero-sum competition beliefs	−.751	1.726	4.762
Both	−.072	.638	1.734
Direct effect	.004	**4.302**	8.736
SDO → Emotional coldness			
Total effect	4.571	**6.822**	9.079
Specific indirect effect			
Zero-sum competition beliefs	1.508	**2.687**	4.156
Direct effect	2.174	**4.135**	6.001

Significant effects are in bold, and indicated by a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval
that does not contain zero.

(condition → SDO → zero-sum competition beliefs → negative attitudes).
Last, the ITT models explained much more variance in prejudice (62.2%
and 54.2%) than the IMGC models (36.3% and 38.7%). Therefore,
consistent with ITT (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), realistic threat, symbolic
threat, and negative stereotypes together fully (or partially) explained
the differences in prejudice activated by these two terms. It can be concluded
that the use of the term "illegal aliens" (in comparison to "undocumented
workers") intensifies prejudice by increasing perceptions of threat from
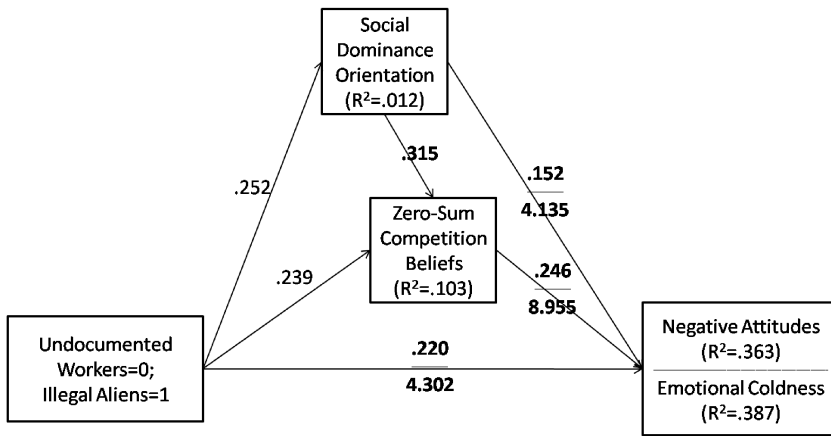this group.

Figure 3. Path-analytic model of the relationship between assigned condition on prejudice in the context of the instrumental model of group conflict. Significant effects are in bold, and were determined by 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals that do not contain zero. Correlations between realistic threat, symbolic threat, and negative stereotypes have been omitted for clarity.

It must be noted that the prediction of IMGC that zero-sum competition beliefs would mediate the effect of SDO on prejudice was fully supported by the data. In fact, zero-sum competition beliefs fully mediated the effect of SDO on negative attitudes and partially mediated the effect of SDO on emotional coldness. Overall support for IMGC was found in the present study. However, in comparison to IMGC, ITT was better able to account for the specific reason that the term "illegal aliens" activates more prejudice than the term "undocumented workers."

One unresolved issue from the present study is whether participants view "illegal aliens" and "undocumented workers" as essentially the same demographic. For example, one could argue that "illegal aliens" is a broader term that refers to all immigrants who do not have the proper documentation permitting their presence in the United States, whereas "undocumented workers" are a particular, hard-working subgroup of "illegal aliens." Future studies should examine to what extent individuals believe that these terms are synonymous and refer to the same demographic. Regardless of individuals' perceptions, these two terms are commonly used interchangeably in the media. The present study successfully revealed that the terms are associated with different levels of threat, which in turn relate to different levels of prejudice, warranting a careful examination of the terms' usage.

One limitation to the present study is that males were significantly under-represented as they comprised only 25% of the sample. Although there were no gender differences in prejudice in the present study, the small sample of men precluded the ability to examine the predictive models separately for men and women. This male–female ratio was a result of a broader limitation to the present study, in that the sample was a convenient sample of undergraduate psychology students. Thus, one must be particularly careful not to generalize the findings of this study to other populations until further research is conducted with more diverse populations.

Future research should be aimed at examining these mediation models longitudinally, such that baseline levels of each of the variables can be controlled, and each participant's prejudice toward both "illegal aliens" and "undocumented workers" can be examined. In addition, different terms used to characterize this group could also be examined including "illegals" and "unauthorized migrants." Future research is needed to fully examine what different mental representations different terms can invoke that affect prejudice. For example, does the term "illegal aliens" invoke more prejudice because it activates notions of criminality or foreignness, or both? Although this study only examined how these terms affected self-reported prejudice, future research should focus on examining how these terms may produce different action tendencies or behaviors toward this group (e.g., discriminatory behaviors). Although this study focused on self-reported prejudice, future research should also examine whether these terms have differential effects on nonconscious processes (e.g., implicit prejudice).

Conclusion

The present study gives preliminary support to the position that the reason why the terms "illegal aliens" and "undocumented workers" activate differential prejudice is due to the fact that these two terms elicit different levels of threat. Little support was found to indicate that the terms result in different levels of perceived competition. Therefore the present study finds more support for ITT than IMGC as an explanatory model of how these terms relate to differential prejudice. This finding should increase awareness of the importance that the application of labels can have on intensifying or attenuating prejudice. An increase in awareness might be especially helpful to individuals in the media, who are purported to give objective reports.

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