

## **“United We Stand? The Effect of the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks on Ethnic Boundary Formation”**

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“I saw hordes of scarred, trembling, soot-encrusted New Yorkers wandering the streets in a bewildered daze looking for all the world like homeless people, entirely stripped of the personal apparatus and poses with which we tend to signify our status over the next fellow. Everyone seemed all one race now. All were branded a neutral gray.”

- Lee Stringer, *The New York Times*, Sept. 16, 2001  
“In Fort Greene, Brooklyn, a crew of black and Latino teenage boys say they can no longer think of the police as enemies. Since Sept. 11, the boys say, the officers who patrol their neighborhoods, most of whom are white, no longer eye them with suspicion.”
- Somini Sengupta, *The New York Times*, Oct 10, 2001

### INTRODUCTION

In the weeks, months, and even years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. national rhetoric changed to focus on a common enemy and the articulation of a new “war on terror.” That the 9/11 attacks constituted a profound cultural re-examination of Americans is not usually debated, and it has been argued by many that the 9-11 attacks led to support for the invasion of Iraq in March of 2003. In this paper we analyze and understand the meaning of this form of nationalism by examining the ethnic boundaries of African-Americans interviewed in a cross-sectional nationally-representative survey before and after the 9/11 attacks up to one year before the attacks occurred, and up to two years after the attacks.

### PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There is a large body of existing research in the social sciences that have examined the consequences of 9/11, but only a handful of studies have focused on the social or political effects. Most research, primarily drawing from the field of political psychology, has documented how 9/11 led to increased support for George W. Bush (Landau et al. 2004), increased patriotism (Skitka 2004), and heightened xenophobia towards Arab-Americans and Muslims (e.g., Esses et al. 2002). These studies support the general social-psychological finding that social threat tends to result in what has been variously called the “authoritarian personality,” “right-wing authoritarianism” or “social dominance orientation” (e.g., Adorno 1950; Altemeyer 1996; Sidanius et al. 1999). While useful in showing the negative effects of collective trauma, these studies have ignored issues of race almost entirely. Indeed, there has been virtually no research examining the effects of 9/11 on the social and political attitudes of African-Americans. The only study consisted of a small sample of working class African-American mothers. Harlow and Dundes (2004) conclude: “...Based on our findings... this crisis did not bridge the racial divide, contrary to public perception, and may have in fact served to reinforce existing racial boundaries. The division is in part due to feelings of inclusion or exclusion from a national identity” (2004: 440).

### THEORETICAL APPROACH

The theoretical background for our analysis is based on social threat theory, which is the basic principle that an external threat leads to internal cohesion (Cosser 1957; Simmel [1908] 1955). This theory has a distinguished lineage in sociology, perhaps best summarized by the sociologist Sumner (1906), who writes: "...a differentiation arises between ourselves, the we-group, or in-group, and everybody else, or the other-groups, out-groups... The relation of comradeship and peace in the we-group and that of hostility and war towards other-groups are correlative of each other. The exigencies of war with outsiders are what make peace inside" (12). The problem with this basic formulation "that other factors are likely to be important in larger collectivities... larger collectivities contain subgroups and coalitions, which may also confuse any attempt to extrapolate findings from the small group level" (158). To overcome this limitation and more fully explain the pattern of group cohesion in the wake of conflict-inducing events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks, we extend social threat theory using recent empirical and theoretical work on ethnic boundary formation. This new approach, which, building off Wimmer (2008) we call *multilevel threat theory*, recognizes the historically-constituted structural positions of affected groups, takes into account the way individuals uniquely interpret events (thereby adding cultural indeterminacy to structure), and examines group membership, such as class or ethnicity, as a dependent variable rather than an essential category of being (cf. Brubaker 2004). In short, we combine social threat theory with a boundary work approach to sociologize a theory that has too often been psychologized.

## METHODOLOGY

To estimate the causal effect of 9/11 on boundary formation, we use propensity score matching, using a rich set of covariates to estimate the propensity score. This procedure is based on the counterfactual model of causality, which employs the intuition of experimental design to clarify the conditions under which causal estimates are valid. In this study we conceptualize the dichotomous treatment variable as 9/11, with respondents interviewed up to one year before 9/11 as being in the "control" group and those interviewed up to two years after 9/11, or up until the invasion of Iraq, as being in the "treatment" group. While the treatment is plausibly exogenous, thus satisfying the assumption of ignorability, because of sampling design we include a range of either pretreatment or stable covariates in estimating the propensity score. These matching covariates include gender, age, household size, mother's education, father's education, longevity of grandparents, citizenship status, region, health at age sixteen, welfare receipt in childhood, delinquency in childhood, neighborhood structural resources, computer ownership.

## DATA

The findings are based on the National Survey of American Life (NSAL), a nationally-representative sample of over two thousand African- and -European Americans. This survey contains extensive data on racial identities as well as rich set of covariates. For the outcome variables we examine two kinds of symbolic boundaries, intraethnic and interethnic. Symbolic boundaries are "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (Lamont and Volnar 2002: 22). They are relationally-defined cognitive schemas that separate individuals from each other while simultaneously clustering them into groups (see Epstein 1992: 232). We measure interethnic symbolic boundaries using a series of questions that ask how close respondents feel to individuals in other ethnic groups. Similarly, to measure intraethnic boundaries we use a series of questions that ask how close respondents feel to members of their own ethnic group.

## FINDINGS

There are two main findings from the data. First, with regard to inter-racial symbolic boundaries, European-Americans did not feel closer to any other racial groups after 9/11. This contrasts with African-Americans, who reported feeling much closer toward European-Americans and, to a lesser extent, Hispanic-Americans. Furthermore, African-Americans were less likely to report a particularist ethnic identity when given the opportunity to choose among several categories of identification. The effect was strongest for a non-specified category of “just a person,” but there was a substantial effect for identification to an “American.” The second main finding relates to intra-racial symbolic boundaries. Depending on question wording, African-Americans either reported feeling less close to their own ethnic and racial identity or they reported no change when stating closeness toward other black Americans. There was also no change in beliefs in stereotypes of blacks after 9/11.

The finding that European-Americans on a variety of measures felt no closer to other ethnic groups after the 9/11 attacks supports the theory that current racial divisions are created and maintained by “laissez-faire” racism (e.g., Bobo et al. 1997). According to this view, the overt racism of the Jim Crow era, characterized by legal segregation and lynchings, has been replaced by “a more subtle, insidious type of racism that operates in the guise of democratic values and egalitarianism” (Eposito and Murphy 1999: 401). The striking lack of an effect of 9/11 on the racial boundaries of European-Americans implies that, while not engaging in overt racism, there exists a strong cognitive barrier of European-Americans to racial integration.

## CONCLUSION

There are several strengths of this study. First, we allow for comparison of culture before and after a significant social event. This is in contrast to prior studies, which address this retrospectively through the lens of reflection after the fact. Second, using a multilevel threat model, we examine ethnicity as a relational, “structured” concept. Third, in our analysis we are able to differentiate between patriotism (as loyalty to a nation-state) and nationalism (as loyalty to an ethnic group), which has been ignored in previous research. Fourth, we contributed to the growing literature on the formation of ethnic boundaries, showing that external conflict can lead to ethnic boundaries, a point not fully addressed by Wimmer (2008). Finally, these findings supplement contextualized knowledge of reactions to 9/11 by examining cultural change.

Notwithstanding, there are at least two caveats. While the results are statistically significant, researchers and scholars should not conflate statistical significance with substantive significance. The small effect size likely reflects the inherent difficulty of quantifying culture and may also lend support to the argument that culture, including racial attitudes, is relatively difficult to change (e.g., Patterson 2004). Moreover, given our research design it is impossible to disentangle completely the treatment effect from temporal change independent of the treatment. To wit, ethnic attitudes may have increased slightly, but these could be independent of 9/11, or might have even been greater if 9/11 had not occurred.