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Threatened by the uncontrollable: Psychological and socio-economic antecedents of social distance towards labor migrants in Israel[☆]

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Abstract

The primary objective of the current study is to examine the relations between a number of psychological and socio-economic factors, on the one hand, and social distance towards labor migrants on the other. Hence, this study takes up the question of the nature of the combined effects of locus of control, socio-economic status and economic-cultural threat perceptions upon the development of social distance towards labor migrants in Israel. In a field study in Israel in May 2003, attitudes of 383 participants towards labor migrants were tested according to their ascription to four different "socio-economic status" groups: academic-employed, academic-unemployed, non-academic-employed and non-academic-unemployed. The main findings show that, contrary to previous research, educational attainment and locus of control have no significant direct impact on social distance. Employment status, however, may have such an impact, but a negligible one. Yet these findings lend credence to socio-economic as well as personality theories on prejudicial attitudes. Namely, the effect of educational attainment and locus of control on social distance results from the mediation of threat perception. Unlike existing assumptions, neither lack of academic education nor external locus of control can be considered sole direct root causes of social distance. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Social distance; Threat perception; Locus of control; Educational attainment; Employment status

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1. Introduction

Democratic governance depends on more than formal institutions. It greatly relies on a democratic political culture which includes the loyalty of citizens to democratic values (Almond & Verba, 1963). The willingness to protect and respect minority rights may be considered one such democratic value (Rawls, 1971). It is widely agreed that negative attitudes and behavior towards minority group members may be a two-edged sword as they entail an injustice of both the moral values of the hater and to the daily life of the hated person. Yet negative attitudes towards cultural, ethnic and religious minorities, labor migrants or political refugees, are quite common in democratic societies (e.g., Boehnke, Hagan, & Helfer, 1998; Canetti-Nisim & Pedahzur, 2003; Coenders & Scheepers, 2003; Hjerm, 2001; Pedahzur & Yishai, 1999). In effect, 39% of citizens in 15 EU countries opposed granting civil rights to legal migrants (Eurobarometer, 2003). In addition, 48% of the European Social Survey sample expressed general resistance to diversity, and 50% expressed general resistance to immigration (European Social Survey, 2003).

The point of departure for our study is the well-known political insight according to which individual attitudes of equality are a prerequisite for democracy (Griffith, Plamenatz, & Pennock, 1956; Sullivan & Transue, 1999). Hence, using a relatively unique “four-group” design and structural equations, the current study hopes to address the question of the manner in which social distance towards labor migrants is affected by factors based on two theoretical cores—a psychological core and a socio-economic one. Particularly, are locus of control, educational attainment and employment status associated with social distance in and of themselves or via the mediation¹ of threat perception?

1.1. Theoretical overview and research hypotheses

Various concepts have been used over the years to describe intergroup hostility and negative attitudes (Duckitt, 2003). The concept of prejudice which is probably the most influential and common is typically defined as a negative attitude towards the members of specific social group (Allport, 1954). Contemporary concepts like “symbolic racism” (Sears, 1988), “modern racism” (McConahay, 1986), “xenophobia” (Mudde, 1995, 1999), or political tolerance (Gibson, 2005; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995), focus on more specific aspects of intergroup relations and attitudes.

Nevertheless, although negative attitudes are of importance, in our view it is their destructive behavioral implications that should be main the focus of scholars’ attention. According to Duckitt (2003, p. 565), the most studied behavioral expression of prejudice has probably been “*Social Distance*” (see also Triandis, 1964).² Social distance, which was originally outlined and examined by Bogradus (1968, 1959), is defined as the extent to which people wish to maintain social distance and avoid increasing levels of intimate contact between themselves and members of different social, racial, ethnic or national

¹According to Baron and Kenny (1986), mediation is a hypothesized causal chain in which one variable affects a second variable that, in turn, affects a third variable. The intervening variable is the mediator. It “mediates” the relationship between a predictor and an outcome.

²Yet, it is worth noting that beside social distance, a large number of studies on this field are focused on discrimination as a behavioral expression of negative attitudes and prejudice (in the sense of intergroup bias, see: Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002).

groups (for reviews see: Dovidio, Brigham, Johnson, & Gaertner, 1996; Owen, Eisner, Howard, & McFaul, 1981). Oftentimes, social distance is motivated by a feeling of discomfort about contact with outgroup members without explicitly denying ethnic equality (e.g., Bogradus, 1968; Kleinpenning & Hagendoorn, 1993).

A large portion of the contemporary studies which examine the determinants of negative attitudes and social distance emphasize the role of competition on political, social, economical or cultural grounds, as a pivotal motivator of these attitudes (e.g., Quillian, 1995; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, & Prior, 2004). This emphasis has triggered an examination of the foundations of these attitudes, particularly on the basis of perceptions of threat (Duckitt, 2006; Huddy, Feldman, Taber, & Lahav, 2005; Levine & Campbell, 1972; Schwarzwald & Sabo-Manor, 2005; Stephan & Stephan, 2001). In fact, threat perception is considered by most scholars as the single best predictor of hostile attitudes within the domain of inter-group relations (Stephan & Stephan, 2001; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982). It gives expression to individuals' cognitive evaluation regarding the ways by which the out-group members interfere with their desire to achieve their groups' goals (Fiske & Ruscher, 1993), and may bring about social distance as well as violent, destructive outcomes (Pettigrew, 2003).

This approach bears a resemblance to the "realistic group conflict theory" (Campbell, 1965; Sherif, 1967). It is based on the notion that attitudes and behavior towards out-groups develop according to the in-group's interests. Thus, when in-group members feel threatened by out-group members, they may develop negative attitudes towards them (Horowitz & Rabbie, 1989). The process of formation of an integrative subjective evaluation of the conflict (threat perception) may be influenced by both contextual factors (conditions) and individual differences (Bobo, 1983; Duckitt, 2006; Feldman & Stenner, 1997). Thus, the premise underlying this study is that threat perceptions mediate the influence of both contextual and individual variables on social distance (e.g., Campbell, 1965; Stephan & Renfro, 2003). It is suggested that threat perception plays a crucial role in determining which factors may encourage social distance. What follows is an examination of the way in which locus of control (trait), educational level and employment status (states) influence perception of threat, which in turn influences social distance.

1.1.1. Locus of control, perceived threat and social distance

Since the early 1950s, there has been ongoing discussion of the role played by individual differences in the study of attitudes towards minorities. The "authoritarian personality" for instance, was claimed to have a major impact on prejudice and intolerance (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1996; Duckitt & Farre, 1994). In some cases this impact was further intensified by real or perceived threats (Feldman & Stenner, 1997). Yet as studies found that people who reject ethnic minorities are generally bigoted (e.g., Crandall & Cohen, 1994), it may only be appropriate to search for additional individual traits that might account for negative attitudes towards minorities.

In contrast to other well-known individual differences like "social dominance orientation" or "right wing authoritarianism", whose relations to threat perception and hostile attitudes have been intensively investigated (for a review see: Kreindler, 2005), by and large, scholars have neglected locus of control in the context of threat and prejudice. Hence, in line with the theoretical view presented by Stephan and Renfro (2003), who suggest that people with an external locus of control might have a tendency to feel more threatened, we have incorporated locus of control (Rotter, 1966) in our inquiry. Locus of

control refers to the subjective evaluation of individuals regarding their abilities to affect events in their lives (Lefcourt, 1982). Studies have found that locus of control is a relatively constant human trait (Zuckerman, Knee, & Kieffer, 1996). The main idea is that people are located on a continuum that represents their perception of control. On one hand, there are those people who believe they are responsible for the course of their lives (internal locus of control), and on the other, there are people who feel they have no control over their lives (external locus of control). “Internals” tend to have a better ability to cope and adjust (Zuckerman et al., 1996); they are more independent, competitive and exhibit higher levels of trust and political involvement (Cohen, Vigoda, & Samorly, 2001; Lipman, 1980; Payzer, 1980). “Externals” believe that responsibility is in the hands of powerful others, luck, god or faith (Thompson, 1981).

It is suggested that individuals who do not feel that they have control over their lives (externals) will develop high levels of perceived threat. In an early study, Strickland (1977) found that internals tend to be less threatened by minorities, and therefore, he argued (but did not empirically examine) that they may be less hostile towards them. His argument regarding the anticipated relations between locus of control and negative attitudes was empirically tested by other scholars (Duckitt, 1984; Heaven & Furnham, 1987; Sayed, 1998) who found that externals tend to hold negative attitudes towards minorities. We would like to include both of these arguments in an integrative empirical examination. H_1 : The more external the locus of control, the higher the levels of social distance towards labor migrants. H_2 : Most of the impact of locus of control on social distance will be mediated via the perception of threat.

1.1.2. Level of education, employment status, perceived threat and social distance

In view of the findings of a study on conflicts between ethnic groups in New York during the 1960s, Glazer and Moynihan (1970) argued that the root causes of many such conflicts could be best understood not in terms of pure racism, but rather as competition for scarce resources. This argument reflects the “power theory” (Olzak, 1993), “which sees the relations between groups as a function of their competitive positions” (Giles & Hertz, 1994, p. 317). Competition between groups leads to perceptions of threat with regard to basic resources (e.g., prevailing wages, jobs, living accommodations, private or public welfare, tax burdens, and even sexual partners) (Bobo, 2004; Citrin, Green, Muste, & Wong, 1997; Olzak, 1993). Hence, people of low socio-economic status that tend to feel that they are up against higher levels of competition with out-groups, develop profound threat perceptions and, in turn, are highly susceptible to prejudicial attitudes (Dustmann, 2000; Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001; Quillian, 1995).

However, empirical studies indicate that the nature of the direct relations between socio-economic factors and negative attitudes remains somewhat unclear. While some studies have found that unemployed people and blue-collar workers tend towards higher levels of prejudice (Palmer, 1996; Scheepers, Gijsberts, & Coenders, 2002), others have not revealed unequivocal associations (Campbell, 2003; Fetzer, 2000; Hoskin, 1985; Linder, 1993; Wimmer, 1997). Nonetheless, the majority of studies (e.g., Bohenske & Nauck, 2001; Coenders & Scheepers, 2003; Hjerm, 2001; Miller, Polinard, & Wrinkle, 1984) show that people with higher educational attainment, particularly academic education (Sullivan, Shamir, Walsh, & Roberts, 1985), tend to hold attitudes favoring minorities.

As implied thus far, numerous studies (e.g., Rajman, Semyonov, & Schmidt, 2003; Scheepers et al., 2002; Sniderman et al., 2004) have explained such heterogeneous findings

by means of the mediation of a threat perception. This perception may be a key component of a cognitive chain which leads people with low levels of education to endorse higher levels of social distance. The chain begins with a sense of economic or employment uncertainty, along with a perception that members of the minority group with equal skills (e.g., uneducated) are willing to work for minimum wages. Perceptions of competition develop perceptions of threat and bring about a bigoted desire among those with low educational levels to deny minority rights and, in this way, to demonstrate superiority.

We thus propose the following hypotheses. H_3 : People with non-academic education will tend to express higher levels of social distance towards labor migrants. H_4 : Unemployed people will tend to express higher levels of social distance towards labor migrants, yet the impact of employment status will be marginal in comparison to that of educational attainment. H_5 : Most of the impact of educational attainment and employment status on social distance will be mediated by threat perception.

1.2. *The setting of the study*

Israel may be described as a simmering melting pot where old and new cultures clash. Among the minority groups, labor migrants³ are significant in that they do not anticipate citizenship, and are mainly interested in Israel as an economic resource. In the late 1980s, Israel began to import large numbers of overseas labor migrants, mostly from Rumania (in the construction sector), Thailand (in the agriculture sector) and Philippines (for geriatric care, nursing and domestic services). Official records indicate that, at the time of the study, there were 189,000 labor migrants, while only 40% (around 75,600) were registered (Central Bureau of Statistics: Press Release—28.7.2003). As elsewhere, labor migrants hold the least desirable jobs, earn the lowest wages, suffer from harsh working conditions, and generally do not benefit from the local welfare system and union protection (Rajiman et al., 2003). Official policy formally acknowledges that they take the jobs of Israelis, and are largely responsible for higher unemployment rates and recession (Kemp & Rajiman, 2003). They are therefore blamed by many local citizens for economic difficulties and because they are not Jewish, they are considered a threat to the core cultural values of the Jewish majority. It comes as no surprise that many studies have found high levels of public hostility towards this group (e.g., Canetti-Nisim & Pedahzur, 2003; Pedahzur & Yishai, 1999; Rajiman & Semyonov, 2004).

2. Method

2.1. *Sample and procedure*

Based on the premise that socio-economic status represents a combination of several different socio-economic factors (Oliver & Mendelberg, 2000), we have used a relatively

³Both in official documents as well as in daily language, labor migrants in Israel are referred to as “foreign workers” (Kemp & Rajiman, 2003). In contrast to the situation in some European countries, they are regarded as people who are foreigners in every sense of the word and who arrive in Israel for a short period to work and then return to their countries of origin. They are not pending citizenship, and only in rare cases, are allowed to become citizens of Israel. Yet we have chosen to use the term, “labor migrants,” as it is used by scholars studying this phenomenon.

unique study design, which has combined face-to-face interviews with participants who were preliminarily divided into four groups, according to their socio-economic status. This “target design,” which is based on a purposive (goal) sampling⁴ that has been chosen by the researchers in order to adequately serve the specific research goals (Kahn & Lambert, 1998),⁵ enables an insightful evaluation of the distinct effects of each socio-economic status factor (educational attainment, employment status) on social distance.

In June 2003, “face-to-face” interviews⁶ were conducted among 412 Israelis who were (potential) participants in the Israeli labor market (having completed army service). The data were collected in five urban centers distributed from the north to the south of Israel—Tel-Aviv, Haifa, Beer-Sheva, Carmiel, Beit-Shean and Hadera. Participation in the survey was voluntary but, as most participants were approached in public institutions (employment agencies, manpower agencies, universities) or in their workplaces (private businesses), they were a rather captive audience. Respondents were divided into four groups, academic–employed, academic–unemployed, non-academic–employed and non-academic–unemployed, and were interviewed in their natural everyday environments.

In the final sample, we included only Israeli-Jews ($N = 383$). Fifty-three percent of participants were men, 89% were born in Israel, and 62.6% earned an income that was above the average. Seventy-four percent of the participants defined themselves as secular, while only 5% were religious or ultra-orthodox (the rest were traditional). As for their political tendencies, 30.5% defined themselves as right or extreme right-wingers, and 32.1% as left or extreme left wingers (the rest were centrists).

2.2. Measurements

We measured social distance, threat-perception, educational attainment, employment status, and locus of control (see Appendix A for all items used). We also obtained relevant demographic information (i.e., income, self-definition of level of religiosity, self-definition of political stance).⁷

Social distance towards labor migrants was measured by the classical social distance scale (Bogradus, 1959), which was adapted and validated in Israel (Pedahzur & Yishai, 1999). It consists of four items measured on a 1–6 scale. Negatively worded items were reversed with 1 denoting the least agreement with the item and 6 the most; agreement

⁴“Purposive sampling is the deliberate seeking out of participants with particular characteristics, according to the needs of the developing analysis and emerging theory” (Morse, 2004, p. 884). In the current study, which focuses on SES characteristics, the particular characteristics by which the participants were chosen were their employment status and their level of education.

⁵As a by-product of the study design, approximately 50% of participants were academic and around 50% were unemployed. Although this distribution adequately serves the specific goals of the current study, it should be emphasized that it does not constitute an accurate representation of proportions within the entire Israeli-Jewish public. Just for illustration, levels of unemployment in Israel during the relevant years were around 9–10% (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Yet the sample represented the distribution of the Israeli-Jewish population with regard to sex, age, place of residence and voting behavior.

⁶According to Krosnick (1999), “face-to-face” surveys are more representative and their participants are more cooperative and less likely to express dissatisfaction with the length of the questionnaire. In addition, he found that telephone respondents were more suspicious and more likely to present themselves in socially desirable ways than face-to-face respondents.

⁷All measures were based on established scales and adapted to the political culture in Israel. They were tested in a pilot study and, when necessary, modifications were added.

indicates a high level (or great amount) of social distance. The uni-dimensionality of the scale was confirmed by principle component analysis and the index was thus constructed on the basis of the mean scores of the measure. The scale was composed of the items' mean and yielded a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha of .87 with no item below this level of reliability.

Threat perception was measured by the “combined economic–cultural threat perception scale” (Watts, 1996).⁸ It consists of six items measured on a 1–6 scale, with 1 denoting the least agreement with the item and 6 the most; agreement indicates a high level (or great amount) of perceived threat. The uni-dimensionality of the scale was confirmed by principle component analysis and the index was thus constructed on the basis of the mean scores of the measure. It yielded a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha of .68 with no item below this level of reliability.⁹

Educational attainment was measured by the preliminary distribution of the groups as demonstrated in the detailed description of the four research groups design (see Section 2.1), and was confirmed in the questionnaire. Following findings on the crucial role of academic education in determining attitudes towards minorities (Sullivan et al., 1985), we defined this variable dichotomously: 0 denotes no academic education and 1 denotes the attainment of an academic education. It should be noted that in Israel, the definition of “academic education” refers to any university degree (at least, a B.A.).

Employment status was also measured by the preliminary distribution of the groups as shown elsewhere, and confirmed in the questionnaire. Following the common method of using this variable dichotomously (e.g., Fetzer, 2000), in this study, 0 denotes unemployment and 1 denotes employment. Yet all individuals described in our sample as unemployed: (1) were capable of working (i.e., not handicapped or pensioners); (2) were actively looking for job.

Locus of control was measured by the Rotter (1966) scale, which has showed high reliability and construct validity in previous studies (e.g., Rotter, 1966; Thompson, 1981; Zuckerman et al., 1996; in Israel, see: Cohen et al., 2001). This scale is composed of 29 pairs of statements. With respect to each pair, participants were asked to choose the one they felt more in accord with. The computed index was thus measured on a 0–1 scale, with 0 denoting internal locus of control and 1 denoting external locus of control. The uni-dimensionality of the scale was confirmed by principal components analysis and the index

⁸Security and physical threats are of major importance in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and because we wished to focus on the socio-economic arena, we particularly chose to test attitudes towards the labor migrant minority (and not the Palestinian citizens of Israel) and thus selected an economic–cultural threat scale. Yet it should be noted that we do not claim that our threat measure expresses the entire picture of threat as perceived by Israeli citizens.

⁹Following the rationale presented by Loewenthal (2001), we used item-rest correlations and none obtained item-rest-of-test values lower than accepted. In addition, although the reliability was above the acceptable cut-off point (Krosnick & Fabrigar, 2001), and because the scale was revised and adapted for the purpose of this study and its reliability may be considered modest, the scale's external validity was examined and proved to be adequate. Additionally, relying on Rajman et al.'s (2003) argument (and resulting analysis) on the relatedness of hostile attitudes and threat perception and the correlation in this study ($r = .48, p < .001$), it was necessary to ensure that the two concepts were empirically distinct. To this end, a factor analysis was conducted yielding two distinct factors—one for each scale. Overall, this procedure lends support to the argument that the present constructs measure two different dimensions.

was constructed on the basis of the mean scores of the measure. The scale was composed of the items' mean and yielded a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha of .75 with no item below this level of reliability.

2.3. Data analyses strategy

The preliminary analysis consists of three steps: means of the computed scales, selected means of prominent items, and correlations between research variables. In the second stage, *T*-tests and *F*-tests were performed to determine if there were significant differences in the mean levels of social distance and threat perception according to main independent variables—locus of control, educational attainment and employment status (H_1 , H_3 and H_4). The integrated model and potential mediations (H_2 and H_5) were assessed on the third stage by means of structural equations modeling with latent variables, using version 4.0 of the AMOS program which enables a full information maximum likelihood procedure (Arbuckle & Wothke, 1999).^{10,11} Along with the research model outlined in Fig. 1, we also tested a variety of other models, in case any of these were found to have a better fit.¹² Generally speaking, the results showed that out of all alternative models, the present model showed the best configuration of goodness of fit, explained variance, and direction and magnitude of paths coefficients.

¹⁰The SEM consists of confirmatory latent-variable structural models (Bentler, 1990), which are powerful tools for dealing with systematic and unsystematic measurement errors (Bolck, Croon, & Hagnaars, 2004; Bollen, 1989; Boomsma, 2000). It provides a simultaneous estimation of hypothesized regressions using the estimated covariance matrix generated on the basis of the observed covariance matrix of the measured variables (Kline, 1998). The estimated matrix is also used for evaluating the goodness of fit between the data and the model. A covariance matrix among the research variables formed the input for the analysis and the results were calculated. In setting the indicators for the latent variables, we advanced two approaches. As for xenophobia, the results were calculated on the basis of four indicators comprising a latent variable. As recommended in the use of a large number of indicators (Bandalos, 2002; Marsh, Hau, Balla, & Grayson, 1998), parceling technique was advanced for threat perception and locus of control. As for threat perception, the results were calculated on the basis of two parcels—one for economic threat and one for cultural threat—comprising a latent variable. As for locus of control, the results were calculated on the basis of three parcels of indicators comprising a latent variable. Finally, academic education and employment were two observed exogenous variables.

¹¹The quality of the models was evaluated using three criteria. *The first*, consisted of five fit measures: the χ^2 test is the most basic, but is sensitive to sample size, and is considered stable and reliable only in samples of 200–400 (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1994) or of 50–500 (Hayduk, 1987). NFI, TLI, CFI, and RMSEA were also reported (Boomsma, 2000). Good models provide fit measures that are higher than 0.9 and RMSEA which is lower than 0.1 (Boomsma, 2000). *The second criteria* was a high percentage of explained variance of the dependent variable. Good fit of the hypothesized model to the observed data, however, does not necessarily mean that it is the correct causality model (Kline, 1998). Hence, *the third* set of criteria consisted of the magnitude and direction of path coefficients (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1994).

¹²Following Bollen (1989), we advanced a multigroup model (with four research groups as our grouping variable). The first model allowed structural paths to vary across socio-economic groups, and the second compelled all structural paths to be equal between groups. Chi-squared difference test showed that the models were generally held for the four groups. We also examined reduced forms of the research model: a model with only educational effect, a model with only threat effects, and models which alternatively examined the mediation of two separate latent variables of threat (economic and cultural). In addition, we ran the multivariate analyses with dummy variables to control for possible differences between respondents of varying social positions (e.g., income, religiosity and political stance). Complete results (including fit indices) and more information on these and other procedures advanced based on this data set are available upon request.

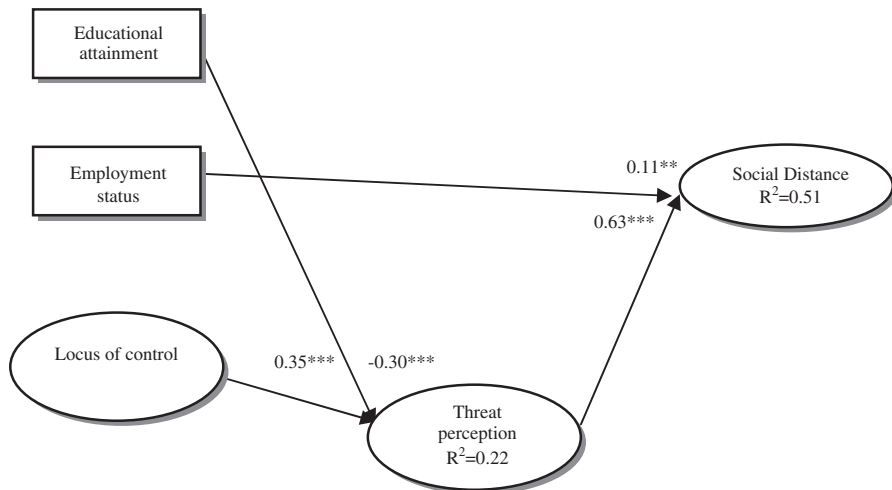


Fig. 1. Structural equation model of the effects of education, employment status, locus of control, and threat perception on social distance towards labor migrants. Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; standardized significant coefficients are reported.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive overview

The mean level of social distance fell in the middle of the scale with relatively high distribution ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.36$). By and large, respondents perceived labor migrants as a cultural and economic threat ($M = 3.33$, $SD = .92$). Threat perception items generally showed a consistent variance, with wide agreement that labor migrants were bad for the Israeli labor market ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.70$) but modest agreement that labor migrants should adopt the Israeli way of life ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.44$). Of the social distance items, respondents highly objected to romantic relations with labor migrants ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.85$), as opposed to minor objection to host labor migrants as guests in their homes ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 1.142$).

Correlations among most of the study variables were significant at the level of $p < .001$. The correlation between educational attainment and threat perception ($-.27$) was negative, whereas that between locus of control and threat perception ($.23$) was positive. In a similar vein, the correlation between educational attainment and social distance ($-.33$) was negative, whereas the relationship between locus of control and social distance ($.29$) was positive.¹³ However, no significant correlations were found between employment status and threat perception or social distance. The correlation between threat perception and social distance, however, was positive, highly significant, and of a high magnitude ($.48$).¹⁴

¹³Hence, while a high level of education correlates with low levels of threat perception and social distance, an external locus of control correlates with high levels of both these variables.

¹⁴Correlations between independent variables—i.e., locus of control and socio-economic status, were found to be very low: while the correlation between locus of control and employment status was not significant, the one between locus of control and level of education was significant but low ($r = .11$, $p < .05$). As a by-product of the study design, no correlation was found between level of education and employment status.

Table 1
Differences (*T*-test) in social distance by SES variables and locus of control

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>T</i>
<i>Educational attainment</i>					
	Academic <i>N</i> = 186		Non-academic <i>N</i> = 197		
Social distance	2.38	1.21	3.18	1.41	5.92***
<i>Employment status</i>					
	Employed <i>N</i> = 204		Unemployed <i>N</i> = 179		
Social distance	2.70	1.30	2.90	1.47	-1.34
<i>Locus of control</i>					
	<i>N</i> = 121 “Externals”		<i>N</i> = 259 “Internals”		
Social distance	3.11	1.41	2.63	1.33	-3.01**

p* < .05, *p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

3.2. Differences between groups

Testing of Hypotheses 1, 3 and 4: In the following stage, the differences between “internals” and “externals” in terms of their levels of social distance and threat perception were tested. To this end, the sample was divided into two groups (internal–external) exactly in the middle range point of responses to the locus of control questionnaire.¹⁵ The results in Table 1 reveal significant differences between internals (*M* = 2.63, *SD* = 1.33) and externals (*M* = 3.11, *SD* = 1.41) in levels of social distance. Likewise, results reveal significant differences between internals (*M* = 3.24, *SD* = .92) and externals (*M* = 3.54, *SD* = .89) in threat perception. Put differently, externals both express higher levels of social distance and feel more economically and culturally threatened by labor migrants. These findings are consistent with our expectations (*H*₁), according to which persons with external locus of control are apt to exhibit higher levels of social distance than people with internal tendencies.

Looking at the distinct socio-economic groups (Table 2), no significant differences were found between the two academic groups (1 and 2) in terms of social distance and threat perception. Yet while no significant differences were found between the two non-academic groups (3 and 4) in terms of threat perception, there were significant differences in social distance. This might mean that employment status is a relevant predictor of social distance only among non-academic individuals. Statistically speaking, these first round findings may imply an interaction effect of education and employment status on social distance.

As seen in Table 2, significant differences in social distance and threat perception were found between the two employed groups (1 and 3) and the same was true for the two unemployed groups (2 and 4). These differences emphasize the role played by educational attainment in discouraging social distance (*H*₃). A comparison of two groups (2 and 3), which combines two inconsistent levels of socio-economic status (i.e., high education with low employment status or vice versa), sheds light on the significant difference between the social distance of the non-academic–employed (*M* = 3.02, *SD* = 1.38) and that of the

¹⁵The middle of the range was determined by the mean square of the highest and lowest scores given by a subject who answered all 29 questions. For the scale in the current study, the middle of the range was 0.46.

Table 2

Means, standard deviations, *F*-tests and post hoc test of social distance and threat perception in four SES groups (group numbers)

	Non-academic–unemployed (4)		Non-academic–employed (3)		Academic–unemployed (2)		Academic–employed (1)		<i>F</i>	Group differences ^a
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Threat perception	3.66	.91	3.47	.86	3.04	.96	3.17	.84	***8.23	1,2<4 2<3
Social distance	3.39	1.43	3.02	1.38	2.44	1.35	2.32	1.06	***13.04	3,2,1<4 1,2<3

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

^aOnly significant differences which were found in a “post hoc” (Tucky) test between the four research groups were displayed.

academic–unemployed ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.35$). This comparison reinforces the superiority of educational attainment over employment status in their effect on social distance.

As shown in Table 1, it may be argued that levels of social distance towards labor migrants were significantly higher among non-academics ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.41$) than among academics ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.21$). Nevertheless, no significant differences between employed and unemployed people were found (H_4). The findings thus far lend credence to H_3 , i.e., academics hold lower levels of social distance, yet cast initial doubts with regard to H_4 , specifically, that higher levels of social distance are to be found among unemployed persons.

3.3. Assessment of research model

Testing of Hypotheses 2 and 5: Although interesting, our preliminary findings do not tell us whether, and to what extent, threat perception may mediate the impact of locus of control and socio-economic factors on social distance. As mentioned, in order to uncover the mediating relations between those variables (H_2 , H_5), we used an estimation of structural equations models (SEM). The structural model, which was based on a viable measurement model ($\chi^2(37, N = 383) = 96.31$, $p < .00$; $NFI = .99$; $TLI = .98$; $CFI = .99$; $RMSEA = .06$), has adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2(39, N = 383) = 105.06$, $p < .00$; $NFI = .99$; $TLI = .99$; $CFI = .99$; $RMSEA = .07$). Further, the model explained most of the variance in social distance as well as the variance in threat perception. Notably, threat perception served as a major source of explained variance in social distance.

As our structural model included direct and indirect paths, it allowed for comparisons between the direct effects of educational attainment, employment status, and locus of control with the indirect effects of these same variables on social distance via threat perception. The direct and indirect paths showed ostensibly exclusive patterns which were also extremely different in terms of magnitude. Of the direct paths, only the direct effect of employment status on social distance was significant, though weak and positive. This means that employed people might express higher levels of social distance. Yet the coefficient (.11) was probably only statistically significant because of the relatively large sample size. Therefore, the relationship between these specific variables is essentially trivial

and may possibly be deleted from the model. Although H_4 states that the employed are prone to be less socially distant, the preliminary analyses showed that there are no differences between the employed and unemployed, and the structural analysis reveals a positive, yet almost meaningless coefficient.

Turning to the indirect paths, three out of four were significant. All were of high magnitude, but the path between threat perception and social distance was of the highest magnitude (.63). This means that, in line with the preliminary statistics, people with an external locus of control and no academic education were more threatened, and in turn, highly likely to express socially distant attitudes. Threat perception did not play a mediating role in the relationship between employment status and social distance.

Further calculations were made to compare the relative magnitude of the direct vis-à-vis indirect paths. Yet it should be noted that regarding cases in which indirect associations were found, there were no corresponding direct ones and vice versa. Namely, there was an indirect path between educational attainment and social distance ($-.30 \times .63 = -.19$), as well as between locus of control and social distance ($.35 \times .63 = .22$), both via threat perception.¹⁶ Conversely, employment status was only directly and weakly related to social distance (.11). In other words, threat perception actually changed the “rules of the game.” In accordance with common assumptions on mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986), the structural analysis greatly supported H_3 and H_5 ; threat perception mediated the effects of locus of control and education on social distance.

All in all, the model indicates that less educated people and those with an external locus of control tend to feel threatened by labor migrants. These threat perceptions in turn may lead to the espousal of social distance. However, perception of threat did not play an important role in mediating the minor impact of employment status on social distance.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The primary objective of this study was to examine the relations between psychological and socio-economic factors, on one hand, and social distance towards labor migrants, on the other. By and large, results show that threat perception plays a key role in the conversion of psycho-economic factors into social distance. Unlike educational attainment and locus of control, employment status played only a minute role in explaining social distance, mostly due to its non-existing impact on the perceptions of threat. Put differently, less educated people and those with an external locus of control express higher levels of social distance because of their high threat perception.

The existing literature focuses on factors that influence the development of negative attitudes towards minorities in two main domains—socio-economic and psychological. Duckitt (2006) has suggested that a combination of psychological and socio-economic aspects can better explain the formation of prejudice. At the core of this integration stands the perception of threat, which enhances the influence of individual and contextual factors on prejudice. This explanatory structure derives from the perspective that perception, as a pure psychological concept, is influenced by the integration of external threatening messages (socio-economic) and internal receptive mechanisms (e.g., locus of control) (Duckitt, 2006; Stephan & Renfro, 2003).

¹⁶To calculate the magnitude of an indirect path, it is customary to multiply the two direct paths, one against the other (Kline, 1998).

Our addition to previous studies is twofold. First, this is a significantly novel attempt to incorporate locus of control as a personality variable into the social–psychological model for explaining social distance and prejudice. [Stephan and Renfro \(2003\)](#) previously offered it as a theoretical suggestion and other scholars (e.g., [Sayed, 1998](#); [Strickland, 1977](#)) have tested narrow and specific parts of that model (i.e., locus of control–threat perception or threat perception–prejudice), yet no study has empirically examined the entire model (i.e., locus of control, threat perception, prejudice/social distance). Second, the four socio-economic group study design that was used in the current study enabled a deeper and more specific inquiry into the process that leads some socio-economic factors to affect negative attitudes and others not to have impact on it at all. In a way, the integration of inconsistent socio-economic features in the same group purified the distinct impact of each socio-economic variable on social distance.

In greater detail, the main conclusion arising from our findings regarding psychological explanations is that people who have a tendency towards external locus of control are likely to express higher levels of social distance towards labor migrants. Of no less novelty, however, is the fact that the effect of locus of control on social distance is a result of the mediation of threat perception. In line with other studies (e.g., [Strickland, 1977](#)), perception of control over the surrounding world has clear implications for the perception of threat. Those who believe they can affect the main events of their lives will feel less threatened by potential competition.

It is interesting to note that other scholars have previously established the relationship between perceptions of threat and various concepts of personality structures like extraversion, openness to experience ([Marcus et al., 1995](#)) and authoritarianism ([Feldman & Stenner, 1997](#)). No doubt that at least some of these proposed variables are related to locus of control ([Heaven, 1988](#)). Hence it would be of interest to examine their combined influence on prejudice and social distance in future research.

As mentioned, our primary challenge in terms of socio-economic explanations was to unravel the effects of the different socio-economic factors on social distance (as opposed to treating them as a cluster measuring status). The findings suggest two principal arguments in regard to the relations between SES factors and social distance. *First*, the higher the educational attainment, the lower the social distance, but only via threat perception. *Second*, employment status has only a miniscule direct influence on social distance, and no indirect influence (via threat).

The findings may be best understood by the integration presented earlier between realistic and psychological motivators. Underlying the theories which argue that low SES is likely to lead to hostility towards minorities is the premise that all social systems are based on competition over scarce resources among social groups ([Coser, 1956](#)). However, particular conditions in which this feeling of competition is aroused are important. Strictly speaking, people are apt to feel threatened mainly when they are worried about the deterioration of their status and not merely due to lower socio-economic status ([Scheepers et al., 2002](#)). The perception of threat and competition basically relies on similarity of skills and qualifications ([Quillian, 1995](#)). This depends mainly on people's educational attainment and not on their current employment status. Hence, we assume that the theory of “labor market competition” ([Bonacich, 1972](#)), which claims that individuals tend to be more suspicious towards external competitors who have similar skills to their own and thus might put their position in the labor market at risk, may best explain our SES-related findings.

In addition to its theoretical contribution, some practical and societal implications are embedded within the current study's findings. As we know, it may be impossible to drastically change the socio-economic polarization in inequality. Hence, the result according to which the influence of some socio-economic status indicators (i.e., employment status and income level), on social distance is very low makes a potential change in inter-group relations, in general, and in social distance, in particular, much more attainable. As indicated by our findings, it is not necessarily the objective socio-economic situation that impacts social distance, but rather the subjective perceptions of control and threat. Although scholars usually perceive of locus of control as a relatively stable individual phenomenon, empirical studies show that some educational methods may influence it, at least to some degree (see [Lefcourt, 1982, chap. 10](#)). Hence, we suggest that an education which aims at enhancing levels of internal locus of control may contribute to the moderation of threat perceptions and, in turn, may reduce negative inter-group attitudes and social distance. In sum, recent social science literature has placed great emphasis on the need to study hostility towards ethnic and cultural minorities outside of the American and European countries ([Campbell, 2003](#)). This study adds to the as yet small number of empirical studies which simultaneously examine the relationships between psychological characteristics, SES factors and the endorsement of negative attitudes, and behavior towards a culturally and religiously distinct group. It brings together separate approaches (i.e., political, psychological and sociological) in an effort to explain support for social distance. Greater attention to the interaction between sub-fields in psychology, sociology and political science is particularly pertinent in our times in light of the rise of anti-democratic belligerence exhibited by groups of all colors, faiths and cultures. We hope that, whatever further research may demonstrate, the end result will be a better understanding of the origins of negative attitudes and behavior towards others, all of which are at the heart of current world conflicts.

Appendix A

A.1. Measure of social distance towards labor migrants

1. Are you willing to invite a labor migrant to a social event at your home?
2. Are you willing to accept a labor migrant as your boss?
3. Would you approve of a member of your family becoming romantically involved with a labor migrant?
4. Would you agree to live in the same neighborhood with a labor migrant?

A.2. Measure of threat perception

1. Labor migrants cost us more money than they bring in themselves.
2. Where qualifications are equal, labor migrants should have the same chance in the job market as Israelis (reversed).
3. Labor migrants burden the already stressed job market in Israel.
4. Labor migrants should adopt the Israeli way of life.
5. Labor migrants enrich the cultural diversity of our everyday life (reversed).
6. Labor migrants lead to the decline of Israeli culture and everyday life.

A.3. *Measure of locus of control*

1. a. Children get into trouble because their parents punish them too much.
b. The trouble with most children nowadays is that their parents are too easy with them.
2. a. Many of the unhappy things in people's lives are partly due to bad luck.
b. People's misfortunes result from the mistakes they make.
3. a. One of the major reasons why we have wars is because people don't take enough interest in politics.
b. There will always be wars, no matter how hard people try to prevent them.
4. a. In the long run, people get the respect they deserve in this world.
b. Unfortunately, an individual's worth often passes unrecognized no matter how hard he tries.
5. a. The idea that teachers are unfair to students is nonsense.
b. Most students don't realize the extent to which their grades are influenced by accidental happenings.
6. a. Without the right breaks, one cannot be an effective leader.
b. Capable people who fail to become leaders have not taken advantage of their opportunities.
7. a. No matter how hard you try, some people just don't like you.
b. People who can't get others to like them, don't understand how to get along with others.
8. a. Heredity plays the major role in determining one's personality.
b. It is one's experiences in life which determine what one is like.
9. a. I have often found that what is going to happen, will happen.
b. Trusting fate has never turned out as well for me as making a decision to take a definite course of action.
10. a. In the case of the well-prepared student, there is rarely, if ever, such a thing as an unfair test.
b. Many times, exam questions tend to be so unrelated to course work that studying is really useless.
11. a. Becoming a success is a matter of hard work; luck has little or nothing to do with it.
b. Getting a good job depends mainly on being in the right place at the right time.
12. a. The average citizen can have an influence in government decisions.
b. This world is run by the few people in power, and there is not much that the little guy can do about it.
13. a. When I make plans, I am almost certain that I can make them work.
b. It is not always wise to plan too far ahead because many things turn out to be a matter of good or bad fortune anyhow.
14. a. There are certain people who are just no good.
b. There is some good in everybody.
15. a. In my case, getting what I want has little or nothing to do with luck.
b. Many times, we might just as well decide what to do by flipping a coin.
16. a. Who gets to be the boss often depends on who was lucky enough to be in the right place first.
b. Getting people to do the right thing depends upon ability; luck has little or nothing to do with it.

17. a. As far as world affairs are concerned, most of us are the victims of forces we can neither understand nor control.
 - b. By taking an active part in political and social affairs, the people can control world events.
18. a. Most people don't realize the extent to which their lives are controlled by accidental happenings.
 - b. There really is no such thing as "luck."
19. a. One should always be willing to admit mistakes.
 - b. It is usually best to cover up one's mistakes.
20. a. It is hard to know whether or not a person really likes you.
 - b. How many friends you have depends on how nice a person you are.
21. a. In the long run, the bad things that happen to us are balanced by the good ones.
 - b. Most misfortunes are the result of ignorance, laziness, lack of ability, or all three.
22. a. With enough effort, we can wipe out political corruption.
 - b. It is difficult for people to have much control over the things politicians do in office.
23. a. Sometimes, I can't understand how teachers arrive at the grades they give.
 - b. There is a direct connection between how hard I study and the grades I get.
24. a. A good leader expects people to decide for themselves what they should do.
 - b. A good leader makes it clear to everybody what their jobs are.
25. a. Many times, I feel that I have little influence over the things that happen to me.
 - b. It is impossible for me to believe that chance or luck plays an important role in my life.
26. a. People are lonely because they don't try to be friendly.
 - b. There's not much use in trying too hard to please people; if they like you—they like you.
27. a. There is too much emphasis on athletics in high school.
 - b. Team sports are an excellent way to build character.
28. a. What happens to me is my own doing.
 - b. Sometimes, I feel that I don't have enough control over the direction my life is taking.
29. a. Most of the time, I can't understand why politicians behave the way they do.
 - b. In the long run, the people are responsible for bad government on a national as well as on a local level.

Score one point for each of the following (A high score = external locus of control): 2.a, 3.b, 4.b, 5.b, 6.a, 7.a, 9.a, 10.b, 11.b, 12.b, 13.b, 15.b, 16.a, 17.a, 18.a, 20.a, 21.a, 22.b, 23.a, 25.a, 26.b, 28.b, 29.a.

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