

## **The Pros and Cons of Examining Multicultural Policy Support on Different Levels of Analysis: a Comment on Liu and Sibley (2006)**

**Eva G. T. Green**

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences  
University of Lausanne  
Anthropole  
CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland  
E-mail: [eva.green@unil.ch](mailto:eva.green@unil.ch)

Nowadays when multicultural issues are high on the political agenda of most first world countries, it is fascinating to learn about the similarities and differences in the ways majority populations react to cultural diversity. Liu and Sibley's (2006) article on differential effects of societal anchoring and attitude certainty presents a timely analysis of majority population attitudes towards bicultural policies in New Zealand. First, they predicted that the European majority population differentiates between policies aiming to redistribute resources in favour of Maori and policies integrating Maori heritage in mainstream culture. Policies integrating Maori values were expected to be favoured over policies requiring resource redistribution. Second, by means of a multi-level model Liu and Sibley hypothesised that intra-individual factors (i.e., perceived policy importance and attitude certainty) predict support for bicultural policies, whereas societal and interpersonal factors (i.e., perceived media salience and peer discussion) predict opposition to these policies. The article provided sophisticated empirical support for these predictions. In this commentary, I will present my insights concerning the two main findings of their paper.

### **Antecedents and Consequences of Symbolic Versus Material Rights of Maori**

Social psychological research has shown the role of perceived material and symbolic threats as a cause of hostile attitudes and prejudice towards immigrants and national or ethnic minorities (e.g., Stephan & Renfro, 2003). While material threat is based on economic resource-based considerations, symbolic threat reflects value considerations. These threat perceptions are not mutually exclusive and it is thus plausible that both material and symbolic concerns underlie hostile attitudes towards minorities. Liu and Sibley found that bicultural policies with material implications that were designated to aid the Maori minority received

less support than policies with symbolic stakes. From a threat theory perspective, these findings suggest that perceived material threats, more so than symbolic threats associated to Maori, were prevalent among the New Zealand Europeans. Therefore, the marginalisation of Maori was revealed mainly on an instrumental level, such as in opposition to affirmative action policies.

The majority populations' reasoning behind opposition to policies that require material resources (e.g., use of individual merit as basis for redistribution, perceived irrelevance of history) is similar to that found in studies on immigration attitudes in Europe or attitudes concerning bettering the situation of African Americans in the United States. However, the support for symbolic policies is a more intriguing finding that seems to be specific to the New Zealand context. For example, in the United States, African Americans have been perceived to violate, more than Whites, traditional American values such as self-reliance, the work ethic, and respect for authority. Theories sketching the emergence of "new" types of racism (as opposed to traditional racism e.g., institutionalised segregation of ethnic minorities and beliefs in their biological inferiority), such as symbolic racism theory (Sears & Henry, 2005) suggest that African Americans' perceived value violations reflect Whites' moral codes of what is socially desirable behavior. Whereas symbolic racism in the United States derives from perceiving African Americans as threatening a social order, New Zealand Europeans apparently do not have similar concerns regarding Maori.

The authors outlined two compelling explanations to this finding. On the one hand, they suggested that support for symbolic bicultural policies might be a way for the majority population to collectively cope with guilt related to the historical European domination of Maori. Providing symbolic advantages to Maori for guilt reduction has nevertheless no material cost, or at least is less costly than implementation of retribution policies. On the other hand, due to the recency of independence from the United Kingdom, knowledge and appreciation of Maori culture permits New Zealand Europeans to construct their own national identity. Liu and Sibley thus proposed that despite their materially disadvantaged position, Maori gain symbolic power when Europeans' adopt their culture and traditions.

Whereas both explanations of the difference in support for symbolic and material policies seem plausible, the proposed consequence of the Europeans' identity construction is questionable. It seems unsure that the use of Maori culture for Europeans' identity building provides substantial increase in symbolic power for Maori. Although appreciation of Maori culture and adoption of Maori practices may indeed enhance the collective ethnic self-esteem of the Maori population and indicate changes of social representations concerning Maori, as a means for construction of the majority's national identity, this may also be perceived as a self- or group-serving strategy that banalises Maori cultural heritage. Moreover, valuing of Maori heritage may in some cases merely depict the current trend of superficial idealisation of the exotic and the primitive (e.g., Said, 1978). Despite the appreciation of Maori heritage, true integration and mutual recognition of a dominant and subordinate culture may still not be reached.

Instead of regarding the acceptance of value-based policies as a sign of enhancement of symbolic power, it can also be considered an indicator of a kind of benevolent prejudice, in the same vein as benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). While attitudes are favorable towards authentic Maori traditions, Maori are nevertheless viewed as insufficiently competent to deal with material power. This perception then legitimises the maintenance of the ethnic status hierarchy between Maori and Europeans.

Liu and Sibley shortly evoked the "reduction of collective guilt" explanation and discussed in more detail the "identity construction" explanation, but they did not favour one over the other nor did they test the explanations directly. Although deciding between the two reasons

was not the focus of their study, a question of such importance and complexity merits further research to gain a more definite understanding of the differences in the justifications underlying material and symbolic bicultural policy support in New Zealand.

### **Explaining Differential Effects of Societal Factors and Attitude Certainty on Policy Support**

The second principal result in the Liu and Sibley paper showed that perceived certainty concerning a bicultural policy predicted its support, whereas perceived media salience of Maori issues and discussing these issues with peers predicted opposition to such policies. Social representations theory, discourse analysis and social cognition literature were drawn upon to develop the analytical model of a policy attitudes construct. In the spirit of a social representational approach, attitudes were conceived as embedded in social representations, defined as “*a system of interconnected knowledge with intrapersonal, interpersonal and institutional factors aspects*” (Liu & Sibley, 2006, p. 1.2). Though this is definitely a worthwhile endeavor for achieving a more complete picture of a societal phenomenon such as discrimination of ethnic minorities, the model raises some issues.

First, despite an interesting theorising involving different levels of analysis, the empirical analysis remained mostly on an individual level insofar as the interpersonal and institutional factors were operationalised as individual perceptions. Yet, the societal level, conceptualised as media salience, was thoroughly discussed in light of previous research on the content of media messages. The paper explained that the mainstream New Zealand media is dominated by an ideological discourse concerning the Maori issue which stresses, for example, that equality should be based on individual instead of categorical merit and that the impact of past discrimination is no longer relevant. Therefore, the authors argued that, in this cultural context, it is reasonable to expect that exposure to media messages primes individuals to oppose bicultural policies.

Second, compared to the impact of media salience, the reasoning of the negative impact of peer discussions on policy support was fuzzier. Though Liu and Sibley qualified their prediction as culture- and domain-specific, it seems hardly conceivable that communication per se leads to opposition of bicultural policies. Why and how would discussions with pro-Maori minded peers lead to opposition to a policy? Information of the direction of opinions prevailing in peer discussions would be necessary in order to conclude more convincingly the way interpersonal communication relates to opposition to bicultural policies. The assumption underlying the authors' prediction seems to be that all peer discussions conclude in support for the dominant ideology used to justify the inequality between Europeans and Maori.

Third, the paper conceptualised and tested the strength of policy attitude and communication as *complementary distinct* factors predicting policy support. Though this makes sense, one may ask why the individual- and social-level factors were treated as independent of each other. For example, effects of media exposure on policy support may operate indirectly through individual certainty statements. Being exposed to anti-Maori media messages can lead to greater attitude certainty, which then leads to stronger opposition of the policy. In addition, individuals may selectively choose to be more or less exposed to anti-Maori media coverage by following conservative news sources in order to increase certainty of opposition or support. Similarly, seeking likeminded peers to discuss anti-Maori positioning towards policies may be motivated by the need to confirm one's views. Finally, the authors' suggested that the “hot” stable core of a social representation of bicultural policies is “*achieved through a combination of talking about the issues to a range of persons, testing the stability of the conceptual core through dialogue [...], and through feeling*

*emotional involvement as indexed by the individual's certainty of their attitudes*" (Liu & Sibley, 2006, p. 1.12). This proposition certainly calls for further research and reflection focused on disentangling the individual and societal processes underlying policy support as well as the relationships *between* these processes. Consideration of indirect effects of both individual and social predictors on policy attitudes would therefore allow observing more precisely the embeddedness of different levels of analysis (Doise, 1986).

### Conclusion

Notwithstanding the additional considerations and reservations outlined in my commentary, the work of Liu and Sibley provides an interesting framework to study support for multicultural policies. I very much look forward to reading the future work of these scholars on the topic. Their framework could also be applied to investigate attitudes towards ethnic minorities and immigrants in Europe. In the context of expansion of the European Union to the East, and harmonising of immigration and asylum policies within the Union, hostile social representations of immigrants remain common (e.g., Green, in press; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Understanding the differential support for symbolic (e.g. right to vote) and material (e.g., health care) immigration policies in addition to detecting individual- and societal-level predictors underlying policy support across European countries remains a challenge.

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