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Project Title: Inspirational Immigrants: Harnessing the Positive Psychological Dividends of Immigration

Abstract:

Background

Immigration is part and parcel of many of our lives, yet it remains one of the most contentious issues especially across the developed world. Given the economic imperatives for immigration, how can we make full use of our co-existence with immigrants? How can we harness any positive psychological dividends that can arise from our co-existence with immigrants?

We posit that one way is to view immigrants as potentially inspirational individuals who possess qualities that we can learn and apply in our lives. Indeed, a pilot study on Singaporeans' views on immigrants that we conducted revealed highly encouraging findings - our participants had found certain immigrant groups inspiring and they were inspired by these immigrants to improve the treatment of foreigners and to be more motivated towards their personal goals.

Given this potential to enhance intergroup relations and our own lives, our research aims to thoroughly investigate the phenomenon of inspirational immigrants - who are they, why are they inspirational, and how we can leverage on their qualities to enhance both our lives and our interactions with them.

Approach and Aims

We will pioneer and test a theoretical model that examines the process, antecedents, and consequences of inspirational immigrants. This model will allow us to subsequently design an intervention programme to harness the potential benefits from inspirational immigrants. Four key components of our approach and their respective aims are highlighted below:

- 1) **Process of inspiration:** What is the process through which inspiration is evoked? What are the conditions necessary for inspiration to be evoked? We propose and test a two-step model of inspiration, involving transcendence and assimilation as key processes that influence inspiration. We propose that immigrants not only need to demonstrate outstanding qualities, so that the locals can perceive transcendence, the context also needs to facilitate the locals to internalise the outstanding qualities, i.e., assimilation.
- 2) **Antecedents of inspiration:** Who has the potential to be inspiring? What are the different conditions required for outgroup inspiration to occur? We propose that not all immigrant groups are equally inspiring. Leveraging on the Stereotype Content Model, we examine diverse groups of immigrants located along the warmth and competence dimensions and the differences in their capacity to evoke inspiration, through the processes of transcendence and assimilation.
- 3) **Consequences of inspiration:** What are the attitudinal and behavioural effects of inspiration in both intrapersonal and interpersonal domains? We examine a diverse range of direct consequences where inspiration from immigrants can be derived and applied, including both intrapersonal (e.g., personal striving, entrepreneurship/creativity) and interpersonal (e.g., prosocial behaviour) domains. We also investigate the indirect effects of inspiration in terms of attitudes and acculturation preferences. We propose that inspirational immigrants can increase the perceived value of immigrant groups and elicit acculturation preferences of integration and individualism, which can positively influence intergroup relations.

4) **Application of inspiration:** How can we apply our knowledge of the antecedents and consequences of inspiration in various aspects of our lives? We develop ways to enhance the capacity of locals to harness the psychological benefits of coexisting with different immigrant groups. We predict that increasing locals' ability to a) detect the outstanding qualities of immigrants, b) feel inspired, and c) capitalise the feeling of inspiration will allow locals to enjoy the motivational benefits of co-existing with inspirational immigrants.

Theoretical Significance

1) We expand the process of inspiration

Past research has highlighted the importance of transcendence; here, we theorise and highlight the importance of assimilation. Given that the process of inspiration is an interpersonal process (from the inspirer to the inspired), we argue that a social target's outstanding quality is not sufficient to activate inspiration. Without the step of assimilation, transcendence alone would not activate inspiration.

2) We extend the study of inspiration to an intergroup context

Research on inspiration has been limited to the inter-personal domain, such as examining how role models from the same ingroup may evoke inspiration. Here, we examine the process of inspiration in an intergroup context. By linking the process of inspiration with the larger literature on stereotype, warmth, competence, social status and threats, the present research offers new avenues for research on intergroup processes.

3) We broaden the contexts to which inspiration can be applied

By examining the intrapersonal (personal striving, entrepreneurship/creativity) and interpersonal (e.g. prosocial) consequences of inspiration, we broaden the domains to which inspiration can be applied. In contrast to past research that focuses on knowledge acquisition, we show that inspiration has implications for a better self, which can motivate an individual to excel in a variety of domains.

4) We highlight the importance of inspiration in the ingroup-outgroup relationship

Inspiration has been a neglected process in the local-foreigner as well as ingroup-outgroup relationship. We will show that highlighting the inspiring qualities of immigrants can potentially increase the perception of immigrants as valued members of our community, thereby improving local-foreigner relations.

Practical Significance

1) Living an inspired life from co-existence with immigrants

Our research enables us to unlock diverse avenues for inspiration and allow us to be more motivated in our personal pursuit. Our research will identify how exactly we can apply inspiration in our lives as we explore the various domains in which inspiration can be derived.

2) Enhance local-foreigner relations

Our research will inform ways in which local-foreigner relations can be improved. Specifically, our research will uncover the means through which immigrants can be positively viewed as groups that possess inspirational qualities and are valuable members of our society from whom we can learn.

Feasibility

This research is highly feasible. The findings from our pilot studies have illustrated the potential of this research. The data collection and participant recruitment methods have all been successfully implemented in the past by the research team. Furthermore, NUS is one of the top research-intensive universities worldwide. As such, it offers excellent support in providing the infrastructure, facilities, and climate for conducting pioneering research projects such as the one proposed.