

The Psychological Impact of Fear and Insecurity on Prejudiced Attitudes

Fathima Haneefa¹, Dr. Hemanth Babu R²

¹M.Sc. Psychology, PG Studies Centre for Distance and Online Education, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India

²Research Guide, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India

Abstract: *The present study examined the relationship between fear and insecurity and prejudiced attitudes among young adults. The study focused on whether experiences of uncertainty, perceived vulnerability, concerns about personal safety and financial security, cultural identity, social change, and unfamiliar situations were associated with prejudiced attitudes toward individuals from unfamiliar or different backgrounds. A quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional correlational design was adopted. Participants were young adults aged 18–30 years recruited through purposive sampling using an online questionnaire. Although 154 responses were received, 146 complete responses were retained for analysis. Data were collected using a demographic data sheet, a 20-item Fear and Insecurity Scale (FIS), and a 15-item General Prejudiced Attitudes Scale (GPS). Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, normality testing, and Pearson product-moment correlation were used. The FIS demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha = .918$), while the GPS demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .793$). The mean FIS score was 61.88 ($SD = 13.06$), and the mean prejudiced attitudes score was 40.09 ($SD = 8.04$). Pearson's correlation indicated a moderate, positive, statistically significant association between fear and insecurity and prejudiced attitudes, $r = .469$, $p < .001$. The findings indicate that higher fear and insecurity were associated with higher reported prejudiced attitudes. Because the study was cross-sectional and correlational, the result should be interpreted as an association rather than evidence of causation.*

Keywords: fear, insecurity, prejudice, prejudiced attitudes, perceived threat, stereotyping, young adults

1. Introduction

Prejudice is a complex psychological and social phenomenon involving negative, biased, or exclusionary evaluations of people perceived as belonging to social, cultural, religious, ethnic, or other groups. Such attitudes can influence social perception, interpersonal interaction, and responses to individuals considered unfamiliar or different. Fear and insecurity are relevant psychological experiences because perceived vulnerability and uncertainty may increase reliance on familiar categories and influence evaluations of out-groups.

The relationship between fear, insecurity, perceived threat, and prejudice has been discussed through several theoretical perspectives. Social Identity Theory emphasizes the psychological significance of group membership and distinctions between in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Realistic Conflict Theory highlights perceived competition over valued resources and opportunities (Sherif, 1966). Terror Management Theory proposes that existential insecurity can increase attachment to cultural worldviews and social identities (Greenberg et al., 1990). Integrated Threat Theory provides a broader framework in which realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes can be related to prejudiced attitudes (Stephan & Stephan, 2000).

Previous literature reviewed in the dissertation indicates that threat-related experiences, emotional responses, social identity, media exposure, socialization, economic insecurity, and personality-related factors may be associated with intergroup attitudes (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Doty et al., 1991; Landau et al., 2004; Ramasubramanian, 2010). Prejudice is multidimensional, and fear or insecurity

represents only one possible set of contributing psychological experiences.

The present study focused specifically on the relationship between an overall measure of fear and insecurity and an overall measure of prejudiced attitudes among young adults. Fear of unfamiliar people and situations was included within the broader fear and insecurity construct.

1.1 Objectives

- To examine the relationship between fear and insecurity and prejudiced attitudes.
- To determine how fear of the unfamiliar contributes to stereotyping and bias.
- To contribute evidence-based recommendations for promoting inclusivity and social cohesion.

1.2 Research Question

Is there a significant relationship between fear and insecurity and prejudiced attitudes among young adults?

2. Review of Literature

The literature reviewed in the dissertation conceptualized fear and insecurity as experiences involving uncertainty, perceived vulnerability, concerns about safety, financial stability, cultural identity, social change, and unfamiliar situations. These experiences may influence social information processing and attitudes toward unfamiliar people.

Theoretical perspectives provide complementary explanations. The Authoritarian Personality perspective links intolerance to preferences for certainty, conformity, and

established norms (Adorno et al., 1950). Social Identity Theory explains how categorization into in-groups and out-groups can shape social evaluations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Realistic Conflict Theory emphasizes competition over scarce resources (Sherif, 1966). Terror Management Theory addresses responses to existential insecurity and threats to cultural worldviews (Greenberg et al., 1990). Integrated Threat Theory brings together realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes as pathways relevant to prejudice (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Empirical and conceptual work reviewed in the dissertation suggests that perceived threat and emotional responses can be related to attitudes toward other groups. Cottrell and Neuberg (2005) proposed that different groups may elicit different emotional reactions depending on perceived threats. Landau et al. (2004) examined mortality salience and reactions to worldview-threatening targets. Ramasubramanian (2010) examined media viewing, social identity, and intergroup emotions in relation to racial attitudes.

The dissertation identified gaps concerning cross-cultural research, longitudinal evidence, digital media exposure, intersectionality, and intervention research. The present study addresses the need for further quantitative examination of fear and insecurity as broader psychological experiences associated with prejudiced attitudes among young adults.

3. Methodology

Research Design

A quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional correlational design was used. The design examined the direction and strength of association between fear and insecurity and prejudiced attitudes without manipulating either variable. Because measurements were obtained at one point in time, causal conclusions cannot be drawn.

Participants And Sampling

The target sample was 150 young adults aged 18–30 years. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling using an online questionnaire distributed through academic groups, student networks, and social media outreach. A total of 154 responses were received. Eight incomplete responses were excluded, leaving 146 complete responses for final analysis. Participants were required to be aged 18–30 years, have completed at least Higher Secondary education, understand English sufficiently to complete the questionnaire, and provide voluntary informed consent.

Measures

Demographic Data Sheet. Background information included age, gender, educational qualification, occupation, place of residence, religion, socioeconomic status, and social media usage.

Fear and Insecurity Scale (FIS). The FIS consisted of 20 items rated from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Items covered personal safety, financial insecurity, cultural identity, future uncertainty, unfamiliar situations and people, social change, and unpredictability. Higher total scores represented greater fear and insecurity. Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was .918.

General Prejudiced Attitudes Scale (GPS). The GPS consisted of 15 items assessing attitudes toward people or groups perceived as unfamiliar or different. Items 8, 9, 10, 13, and 15 were reverse scored. Higher total scores represented greater prejudiced attitudes. Cronbach's alpha was .793.

Procedure and Ethics

Participants received information about the study and provided informed consent before completing the online questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, no personally identifying information was required for analysis, and participants could choose not to participate. The study involved no deception or experimental manipulation. Responses were screened for completeness and analyzed in aggregate form.

Data Analysis

Microsoft Excel was used for data entry, preparation, statistical analysis, and presentation. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, Shapiro–Wilk normality testing, and Pearson product-moment correlation were used. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

4. Results

The final analysis included 146 complete responses. Participants ranged from 19 to 30 years ($M = 23.64$, $SD = 3.30$).

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	86	58.9
	Male	60	41.1
Education	Higher Secondary	21	14.4
	Undergraduate	55	37.7
	Postgraduate	27	18.5
	Other	43	29.5
Residence	Urban	112	76.7
	Rural	34	23.3
Socioeconomic status	Low	9	6.2
	Middle	117	80.1
	High	19	13
	Missing	1	0.7
Social media use	Daily	109	74.7
	Weekly	25	17.1
	Occasionally	8	5.5
	Rarely	4	2.7

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants (N = 146).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the main study variables

Variable	N	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Fear and Insecurity	146	61.88	13.06	22	94
Prejudiced Attitudes	146	40.09	8.04	22	59

Table 3: Internal consistency reliability

Measure	Items	Cronbach's α
Fear and Insecurity Scale	20	.918
Prejudiced Attitudes	15	.793

Table 4: Shapiro–Wilk tests of normality

Variable	N	W	p
Fear and Insecurity	146	.990	.375
Prejudiced Attitudes	146	.968	.002

The FIS did not show a statistically significant departure from normality, $W = .990$, $p = .375$. Prejudiced attitudes showed a significant Shapiro–Wilk result, $W = .968$, $p = .002$. Pearson’s correlation was retained for the primary analysis given the sample size and the planned correlational approach.

Table 5: Pearson correlation between fear and insecurity and prejudiced attitudes

Variables	N	r	p
Fear and Insecurity – Prejudiced Attitudes	146	.469	< .001

Pearson’s correlation indicated a moderate, positive, statistically significant association between fear and insecurity and prejudiced attitudes, $r = .469$, $p < .001$. Participants reporting higher fear and insecurity also tended to report higher prejudiced attitudes. The result supports the primary hypothesis concerning a positive association, but does not establish causation.

5. Discussion

The primary finding was a significant moderate positive association between fear and insecurity and prejudiced attitudes. Participants reporting greater fear and insecurity tended to report greater prejudiced attitudes. This is consistent with the study’s conceptual framework, in which uncertainty, perceived vulnerability, and discomfort with unfamiliarity may be associated with more negative evaluations of unfamiliar or out-group members.

The finding can be considered in relation to Integrated Threat Theory, which proposes that perceived threats can be associated with negative attitudes toward out-groups (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). However, the present study did not separately measure realistic threat, symbolic threat, intergroup anxiety, or negative stereotypes. The result therefore should not be interpreted as evidence for a particular threat pathway.

The result is also theoretically compatible with Social Identity Theory, which emphasizes group membership and distinctions between in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity was not independently measured, so this explanation remains theoretical rather than directly tested.

The finding is broadly consistent with the literature reviewed in the dissertation concerning perceived threat, emotional responses, mortality-related insecurity, and intergroup attitudes (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Doty et al., 1991; Greenberg et al., 1990; Landau et al., 2004). It should not be treated as a direct replication because the present research used its own measures, sample, and cross-sectional design.

Interpretation of Objective 2

The questionnaire included items concerning unfamiliar people and situations, trust, and attitudes toward people from

different backgrounds. However, stereotyping and bias were not separately measured as independent constructs. Therefore, the present data support an association between the broader fear/insecurity construct and prejudiced attitudes, but do not independently establish how fear of the unfamiliar contributes to stereotyping and bias.

6. Implications

The findings suggest that psychological experiences of fear, insecurity, uncertainty, and perceived threat are relevant considerations when understanding prejudiced attitudes. Educational settings may provide opportunities for respectful dialogue, collaborative activities, and meaningful contact among people from different backgrounds. Psychological education may help individuals recognize how fear and uncertainty can influence perceptions of unfamiliar people. For psychologists and counsellors, attention to emotional awareness, flexible thinking, and constructive engagement with differences may be relevant when working with persistent discomfort around unfamiliar social situations.

7. Limitations and Future Research

- The cross-sectional design prevents conclusions about causal relationships.
- Purposive sampling limits generalizability beyond the participant group.
- Only 146 complete responses were available for final analysis, although the original target was 150.
- Self-report measures may be influenced by response tendencies, interpretation of items, and social desirability.
- The measures assessed broad constructs; specific factors such as social identity, media exposure, stereotyping, intergroup contact, and political context were not independently tested.
- The sample was not designed to represent the general population.
- The study identified an association but did not establish that increases in fear and insecurity directly produce increases in prejudice.

Future research should use larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and measures that separately assess fear of unfamiliar people, perceived threat, stereotyping, social identity, intergroup contact, media exposure, and social cohesion. Intervention studies could examine whether approaches intended to reduce unnecessary fear and increase positive intergroup contact are associated with changes in prejudiced attitudes.

8. Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between fear and insecurity and prejudiced attitudes among young adults. Based on 146 complete responses, a significant moderate positive relationship was found between the two variables, $r = .469$, $p < .001$. Participants who reported higher levels of fear and insecurity also tended to report higher levels of prejudiced attitudes. The result supports the primary hypothesis and is broadly consistent with theoretical perspectives emphasizing perceived threat, uncertainty, and intergroup attitudes. Because the study was correlational and

cross-sectional, the finding represents an association rather than evidence of causation. The study highlights the relevance of psychological experiences of fear and insecurity in understanding prejudiced attitudes and provides a basis for further research on inclusivity and intergroup relations.

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