

# – UXG1701 | INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLOGY –

## Assignment 1

### Introduction

The behavior I wanted to focus on is Xenophobia in Singapore. Being a Filipino who grew up in Singapore, I have a unique experience in which I personally feel culturally Singaporean but still feel like an outsider due to my race even though I have similar experiences growing up as my Singaporean peers. Xenophobia is defined as the feeling of fear and animosity towards foreigners, which is often seen in negative attitudes and discrimination against non-locals. In Singapore's context, this is seen against non-Singaporeans such as expats and migrant workers. This behavior is extremely relevant as a lot of current online discourse has highlighted this behavior and my personal experiences have reinforced my viewpoint that it truly exists in Singapore. Xenophobia is a multifaceted issue in Singapore as there are multiple reasons to explain this behavior be it competition from skilled workers and locals, government policies and online rhetoric could explain this behavior. However, we can analyze this behavior from the following perspectives of psychology, namely, Biological, Behavioral, Evolutionary, Humanistic, and Social-Cultural.

### Biological Perspective

From the perspective of Biological Psychology, xenophobia could be explained through the viewpoint of evolutionary mechanisms and certain neurobiological processes. This perspective explains that humans have evolved to favor in-group members as a survival strategy. Research done by Gary J. Lewis and Timothy C. Bates has revealed that the temporal stability of in-group favoritism is mostly attributed to genetic factors. Variations in genes related to social behavior could influence people to develop stronger attachments to their own social or cultural group. This behavior can also be explained by this perspective through biological functions in the brain, more specifically the amygdala. When heightened, the amygdala may trigger anxiety and hostility, which can be directed to groups of people unlike their own. An example of this is when a Singaporean interacts with a group of migrant workers speaking a language they are unfamiliar with, their amygdala may become more active, which could cause them to feel uneasy or afraid. Furthermore, neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine could influence mood and heighten anxiety. An example of this is when a Singaporean

interacts with a group of migrant workers speaking a language they are unfamiliar with, their amygdala may become more active, which could cause them to feel uneasy or afraid. For example, during times of economic stress, such as labor market competition with foreign workers, certain Singaporeans may experience changes in neurotransmitter levels, which could exacerbate xenophobic tendencies. Ultimately, I believe that Xenophobia cannot be fully explained solely through the lens of Biological Psychology because some things cannot be explained. For example, Singapore is a multicultural community with citizens who are mostly from immigrant backgrounds; being so xenophobic is unthinkable.

## Behavioral Perspective

The perspective of Behavioral Psychology can be linked to Xenophobia in Singapore through conditioning and the social learning theory. Such conditioning can be as simple as repeated exposure to frequent news about crimes committed by foreign nationals which could lead to a negative connotation to them. The stimulus is frequent repeated negative news and the response is the negative association with the group even without having a negative experience with them. Another example of conditioning can be through rewards and punishments. A reward could be social acceptance from other Singaporeans when one shares negative sentiments of foreigners online which leads to likes and shares. This gives positive reinforcement to Singaporeans who receive positive feedback from doing such things. From my experience, I see such things quite often in Facebook pages and Reddit threads; r/sgexams being a breeding ground of anti-immigrant sentiments and certain Facebook pages comments have negative remarks about CECA, an economic agreement between Singapore and India. Finally, the Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura could also explain Xenophobia in Singapore. The Social Learning Theory hypothesizes that individuals learn their behaviors by observing and imitating others such as family members, peers and influential figures. For example, a Singaporean might take up xenophobic views after seeing their parents have negative experiences and showing frustration about competition from foreign talent, even without having negative sentiments about foreigners themselves. Similarly, like the previous perspective of psychology, not everything could be explained just with the perspective of Behavioral psychology. Such examples as generational differences and individual differences where Behavioral psychology doesn't adequately explain why individuals in the same environment may develop different levels of xenophobia and why different age groups in Singapore might exhibit varying levels of xenophobia. For this, we can look to other perspectives of psychology to possibly explain these nuances in the behavior.

## Evolutionary Perspective

The perspective of Evolutionary Psychology could explain how a behavior and even psychological traits could be developed over time as an adaptation for survival and reproduction. The facets of the perspective of evolutionary psychology include in-group preference, resource competition and disease avoidance. Similarly to the perspective of Biology Psychology, in-group preference is a core explanation for this behavior of xenophobia. Most evolutionary psychologists claim that humans evolve to favor members of their own group as a survival strategy. Since ancient times, people outside of your own group are often potential threats, which makes being wary of strangers an adaptive trait. For example, from personal experience, when I first moved to Singapore, my family had trouble finding places to stay, as most rental agreements prefer people of their own races as the landlords fear that the culture of the incoming immigrants may be unsuitable for their houses and in turn, their houses may have unsavory things happen to them. Another explanation of evolutionary psychology is in resource competition. From an evolutionary psychologist's standpoint, xenophobia could be a response to the limited resources of a certain environment. Historically, this could be viewed in the causes of WW2, more specifically the Anschluss and the general expansion of Germany to provide housing space and land for its citizens or even more recently, the trade wars between USA and China, sparking a more specific version of xenophobia, sinophobia. In Singapore's context, this can be seen in Singaporeans expressing resentment toward expats who could be seen as taking more high-paying jobs than their Singaporean counterparts. Furthermore, another explanation by evolutionary psychologists is in disease avoidance. There is a theory called the behavioral immune system theory, which suggests that humans may have evolved psychological mechanisms to detect and avoid potential sources of diseases. This can lead to wariness towards strangers who may contain unknown diseases or pathogens. Historically, an example could be the Spanish Flu in the early 20th century or even more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. These events could influence people to feel increased xenophobic attitudes towards people of certain nationalities due to their perceived associations with the virus's origins. Personally, I feel that the evolutionary perspective could be a strong candidate for explaining this behavior, however, it is still lacking in certain aspects as it cannot explain certain things. For example, it has a lack of universality, because if xenophobia was a purely evolved trait, we would see it universally across all of humanity's cultures. However, it could be seen historically that attitudes towards strangers have varied over different societies through time. Furthermore, the evolutionary perspective may oversimplify such a complex issue by downgrading it to just a genetic predisposition, instead of it being a multifaceted issue that has roots in cultural, historical and individual factors.

## Humanism Perspective

From the humanistic perspective, the behavior of xenophobia has a very interesting way of being explained. This is due to the humanistic perspective emphasizing the potential of an individual, self-actualization and also the importance of a subjective experience; a personal experience being unique to anyone else in the world. A way that humanists explain a behavior that may go against the ethos of humanism is by explaining it as a response to a person's self-concept and identity. In a nation such as Singapore where national pride and a united national identity is strongly promoted, some people may view foreigners as a threat to their own sense of self and cultural identity. This could lead to some of them developing xenophobic tendencies as a defense mechanism to protect their own self-concept and identity. Furthermore, Maslow's hierarchy of needs has belongingness as a fundamental human motivation. Similarly to having a self-concept and identity, humanists explain xenophobia as a way for individuals to fulfill their sense of belonging by expressing xenophobic tendencies to reassert themselves to belong in their community. Interestingly, humanists also perceive such behavior as a way humans can fulfill self-actualization and personal growth. Humanists see it as a barrier to personal growth which if a person learns from it and grows from such a negative behavior, leads to self-actualization of the individual. For example, a Singaporean who overcomes initial xenophobic tendencies through cross-cultural friendships or travel experiences might achieve personal growth and a more inclusive worldview. Personally, I feel that this may be one of the weakest explanations of this behavior. This is partly due to humanists believing the inherent good in every individual and also believing that humans have an inherent drive to pursue self-improvement. I believe that there are too many facets regarding xenophobia, it being up to the individual feels too utopian and unrealistic.

## Social-Cultural Perspective

The perspective of social-culturists explains xenophobia in a wide lens, as it analyzes how social and cultural factors could influence behavior and mental processes. This approach is particularly relevant in understanding xenophobia in Singapore's diverse and rapidly changing society. One such explanation is the Social Identity Theory. Henri Tajfel and John Turner established this theory, which holds that involvement in social groups contributes to an individual's self-concept. In Singapore, a strong national identity mixed with rapid population shifts might result in sharper in-group/out-group divisions. For example, Singaporeans may highlight their "Singaporeanness" in comparison to foreigners, resulting in prejudice or exclusion of non-locals in social and professional situations. I personally experienced this when I was working in a particular

company in Singapore, the way I was treated was very different compared to my Singaporean counterparts who would explain certain things to me very differently, even quite dismissively, acting as if I were of a lower standard or even have lower intelligence than them. However, from my experience, this was more prominent in places where the distinction between groups of people was quite clear, as my example previously was based on a construction company in which immigrants were mostly viewed as laborers and were not as educated as Singaporeans. Another explanation of xenophobia is in Singapore's unique cultural values and norms. Singapore is very unique in having a blend of Western and Asian influence, being a former colony of the British Empire. However, it can be seen that Singapore has a very strong traditionalist culture, which could clash with the ongoing trend of a diverse and globalized society. For example, the concept of "kiasu" (fear of losing out) in Singaporean culture might intensify xenophobic attitudes in locals who may perceive foreigners as competitors in education or the job market. Furthermore, similarly to some examples prior, the portrayal of foreigners in media could influence how the general public in Singapore views them, be it positively or negatively. Media could be the news, in which negative or sensationalized reporting could reinforce negative stereotypes towards foreigners. One such example is online forums or news comments that allow anonymous xenophobic comments to be spread around and basically create an echo chamber of negative stereotypes and views being bounced off and reinforced and normalized. Finally, government policies could also exacerbate negative sentiments towards foreigners. The way Singapore approaches its immigration policy by managing the foreign population could inadvertently reinforce the distinction between locals and non-locals. For example, certain economic policies such as CECA could be used by misguided individuals as a way to justify their own discriminatory views and be used to spread misinformation and terror to Singaporeans, leading to more xenophobic tendencies. A personal example is in the way foreigners require work passes to work in Singapore. Companies are required to have a minimum wage for foreigners before they are even approved and are given work passes. This could lead to negative sentiments from Singaporeans as they might assume that the foreigners naturally get more salary than their local counterparts as locals are also required to contribute to their CPF, unlike foreign workers. However, Singaporeans may fail to see that this policy is a way for Singapore to filter out the best foreign nationals to come to Singapore and it also incentivizes companies to hire Singaporeans as they would generally be cheaper to hire. Personally, I feel that this may be the strongest explanation of xenophobia as after all, this behavior is a social issue that is not only unique in Singapore but could be found in other cultures and countries.

## Conclusion

Xenophobia in Singapore is a multifaceted issue that may be analyzed from a variety of psychological approaches. The biological viewpoint emphasizes the neurological and genetic elements that may incline people to in-group favoritism. The behavioral perspective highlights how xenophobic sentiments can be learned and reinforced by environmental factors. According to the evolutionary viewpoint, our aversion to strangers may have its roots in our ancestors. The humanistic perspective casts xenophobia in terms of identity, belonging, and personal development. Finally, the social-cultural approach explains how Singapore's distinctive socio-political framework influences sentiments toward foreigners. Personally, I feel that the socio-cultural perspective offers the most comprehensive explanation for such undesirable behavior. This is due it acknowledging the strong influence of cultural norms in shaping attitudes towards out-groups. Secondly, it also takes into account how group dynamics and societal structure could contribute to the formation of xenophobic tendencies. It also accounts for xenophobia in different cultures and also in different time-periods. Finally, it also accounts for the role of media and other sources of education and institutions that could inhibit or combat xenophobia. While other perspectives provide useful insights, the socio-cultural approach offers a more comprehensive framework for comprehending the numerous social and cultural elements that contribute to xenophobia.