

## Majority groups support assimilation -- except when they're not majorities

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We generally think that views about how to integrate a diverse society depend on people's positions in that society—that is, whether they're in the racial, religious, or cultural majority or a member of a minority. In the U.S., “people tend to believe that blacks prefer pluralism and whites prefer assimilation,” says University of Delaware psychologist Eric Hehman. Assimilation asks minorities—whether newly arrived or historically rooted—to drop their cultural identities and adopt the ways of the majority. Pluralism recognizes and even celebrates minority cultures, which live cooperatively within the majority culture.

Now a study by Hehman—along with University of Delaware colleagues Samuel L. Gaertner and David C. Wilson; John F. Dovidio of Yale University; Eric W. Mania of Quinsigamond Community College; Rita Guerra of Lisbon University Institute; and Brian M. Friel of Delaware State University—suggests that our views are more fluid and contextual than that. “The role the group occupies in a particular environment influences its preferences,” says Hehman. The study appears in [Psychological Science](#), a journal published by the Association for [Psychological Science](#).

The researchers analyzed questionnaires given to students about integration nationally and on campus at two universities that differ little except in their racial makeup—the University of Delaware, where 85 percent of the students are white; and Delaware State University, where blacks comprise 75 percent of the student body. The results confirmed the assumption that regarding national life, whites prefer assimilation

and blacks pluralism. Unsurprisingly, at the mostly white University of Delaware, whites also wished minorities to assimilate, whereas blacks chose pluralism. At DSU, there was little support for pluralism among either blacks or whites (the latter anomaly might be explained by the fact that many students attend DSU as part-time commuters, so whites' minority status on campus isn't their predominant experience of life). But the strongest finding was also at DSU: "When blacks were the dominant group, in a majority group position, they preferred assimilation in that environment," says Hehman.

What accounts for the flexibility of views on this seemingly fundamental principle? "We take a functional perspective," says Hehman. "Both groups seek to enhance their collective group identities." For the majority, he explains, "the feeling is: the other group can come join us and give up their values. That preference benefits the majority by maintaining the status quo with no cost to them." Meanwhile, "the minority wants to maintain its group-esteem and cultural identity. It's threatening when the majority wants to assimilate them."

Citing the French ban of the Muslim veil as a well-intentioned assimilationist policy with hurtful consequences to a minority, Hehman says the findings could help coexistence in diverse nations. "It's hard to integrate a [society](#) to maintain minority identities and not make the majority feel their values are being rejected. Understanding these feelings and motivations could aid practices to satisfy the needs of both groups and avoid harming either one."

Provided by American Psychiatric Association

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