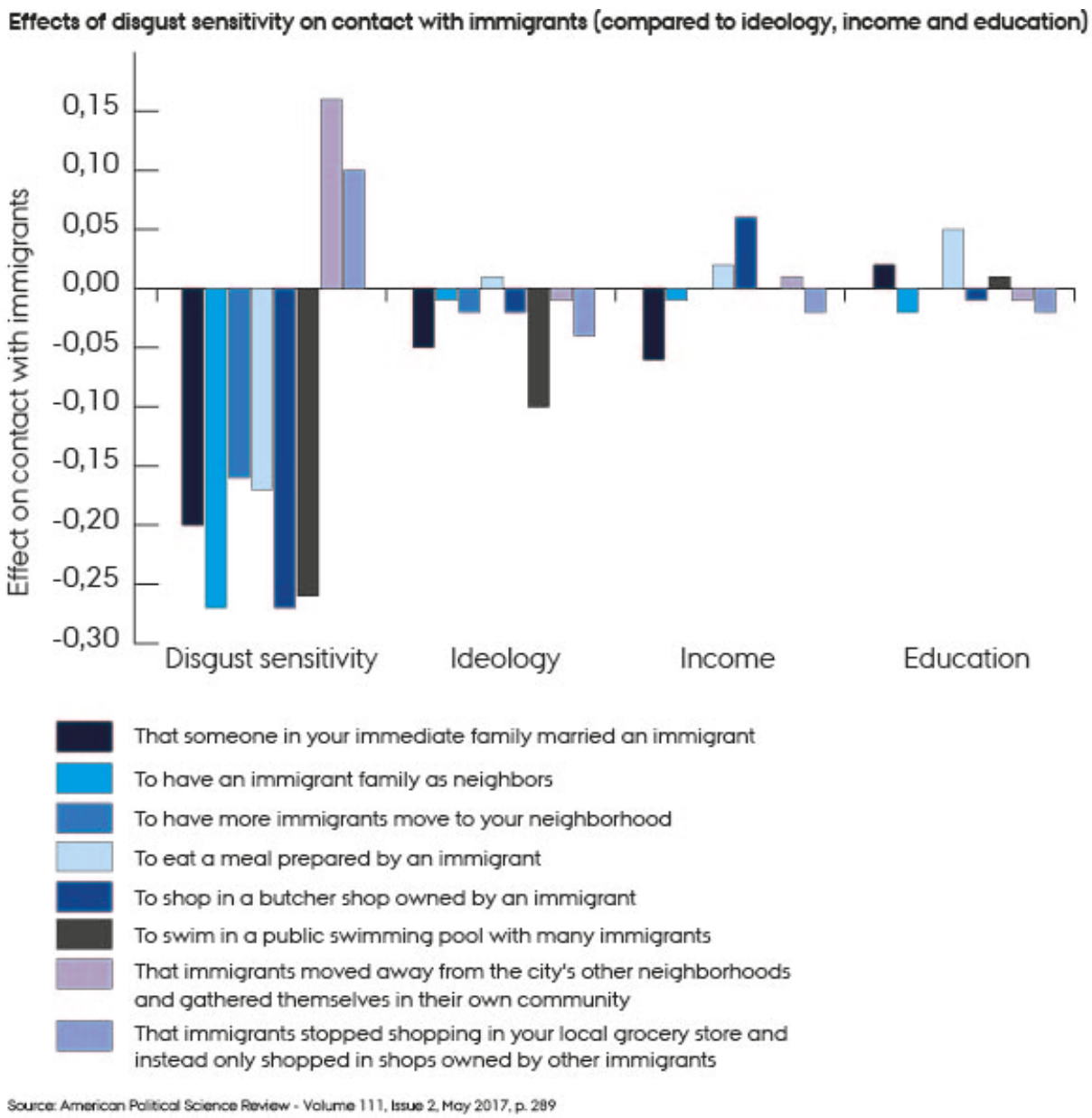
The immune system may explain skepticism towards immigrants

May 1 2017



Source: American Political Science Review - Volume 111, Issue 2, May 2017, p. 289

Graph showing the effects of disgust sensitivity on contact with immigrants compared to political ideology, income and education. Credit: *American Political Science Review* - Volume 111, Issue 2, May 2017, p. 289

There are deep-seated conflicts throughout the Western world about how to handle the influx of refugees and immigrants—should we close our borders or bid the newcomers welcome? New research reveals that such opposing points of view are grounded in more than deliberate thought and reasoned arguments. At the level of preconscious processing, strong feelings about immigrants are controlled by something as surprising as the immune system.

"The research results provide new understanding of why society does not absorb the new arrivals and why integration fails. Those who are very concerned about the risk of infection are those who are most reluctant to seek out social contact with immigrants—something that we otherwise know fosters tolerance," says Associate Professor Lene Aarøe.

"We haven't just found a small, peculiar correlation, but something that can block the integration of immigrants," continues Professor Michael Bang Petersen.

The two political scientists from Aarhus BSS at Aarhus University, Denmark, have collaborated with Professor Kevin Arceneaux, Temple University, on the study, which has just been published in *American Political Science Review*, the leading journal for political science research.

Deeply rooted reaction

Throughout evolutionary history, our ancestors fought pathogens. The

physical immune system evolved to defend us when such pathogens entered the body. Concurrently, humans and other animals have evolved a behavioral immune system, which motivates us to avoid situations where we might become exposed to infection. Avoiding potential sources of infection, such as excrement, blood and rot, has been crucial to our survival, and the motivation to avoid infection remains deeply rooted in us to this day.

The behavioral immune system cannot be controlled. It works on a subconscious level and is particularly sensitive in some people. According to the research team, such people's immune systems overreact and subconsciously misinterpret everything that is different as potential sources of infection.

"People with birthmarks, physical disabilities, abnormalities and something as innocent as a different skin color are subconsciously considered disease carriers by the hypersensitive," says Michael Bang Petersen.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The behavioral immune system shapes our political intuitions and explains why political discussions regarding immigration are so heated in western societies today. Credit: Aarhus BSS at Aarhus University

Better safe than sorry

It is important that these research results are not misunderstood: People with a hypersensitive behavioral immune system do not avoid immigrants because they are consciously afraid of becoming ill if they interact with them. Immigrants are not a source of infection. It is on the subconscious level that the immune system misinterprets differences as a potential sign of infection—the consequence being that hypersensitive individuals avoid interaction with immigrants.

"The behavioral immune system functions according to a 'better safe than sorry' approach," explains Michael Bang Petersen.

This has consequences for integration and tolerance. One of the primary methods for achieving integration and tolerance is in the contact between immigrants and the majority population. But if immigrants are mistakenly interpreted as an infection hazard, contact becomes something to be avoided; if you are hypersensitive to infection, the last thing you want to do is to interact with a pathogen source.

The research also shows that hypersensitive people are completely indifferent to any good intentions that immigrants might have to contribute to society. The fear among the hypersensitive is due to the perceived risk of infection—immigrants' intentions are inconsequential. Thus, another of the primary paths to integration is blocked.

Why is the conflict so persistent?

"Our research provides new perspectives on why the immigrant question creates such deep-seated and emotion-laden conflicts in Western society. It is partly shaped by these psychological differences so deeply rooted in us," says Lene Aarøe.

The research focuses on why it is difficult to arrive at an understanding of each other's points of view when one party does not have a hypersensitive behavioral immune system and does not see the same risks in immigrants.

"If some people see dangers in immigrants that others don't, it's difficult to reach a mutual understanding with reason-based, rational arguments. The fear comes from deeply ingrained unconscious systems that we can't control. You can discuss whether immigrants are a financial gain or burden to society, whether to close the borders or bid the immigrants welcome, but if people are concerned about an entirely different risk—and perhaps one they aren't even fully aware of—it's difficult to achieve a mutual understanding of what is the right policy," says Michael Bang Petersen.

The coupling between immigrants and the risk of infection is a misperception, so a greater awareness of why we have different response patterns might contribute to a better understanding among population groups and thereby to integration.

More information: LENE AARØE et al, The Behavioral Immune System Shapes Political Intuitions: Why and How Individual Differences in Disgust Sensitivity Underlie Opposition to Immigration, *American Political Science Review* (2017). DOI: 10.1017/S0003055416000770

Provided by Aarhus University