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Diverging Ethnic Hierarchies? Cultural Distance, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, and Social Distance Perceptions in the Netherlands

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Abstract

The existence of hierarchies of ethnic preferences in society is well-documented. However, there is little research about how such ethnic hierarchies can be explained. Improving upon previous studies, we investigated whether individuals' cultural distance toward ethnic outgroups and their level of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) contribute to differences in their perception of social distance toward these groups. Our study is based on a survey in the Netherlands ($N = 1249$) and provides robust evidence for an ethnic hierarchy in the majority group's perception of social distance toward 36 ethnic groups. However, this hierarchy is not universal. For more right-wing authoritarian individuals, the ethnic hierarchy is particularly steep, meaning they discriminate more between outgroups. By contrast, less right-wing authoritarian individuals differentiate little between outgroups. Furthermore, the relationship between RWA and social distance is moderated by cultural distance. We interpret this finding with symbolic threat theory, according to which greater cultural distance "activates" authoritarian attitudes, which affect the perception of social distance to varying degrees. Our results contribute to understanding the ethnic hierarchy in social distance perceptions by showing that it is determined by characteristics of the perceiving individual (RWA) and of the perceived group (cultural distance) as well as by their interaction.

Keywords Ethnic hierarchy · Social distance · Cultural distance · Right-wing authoritarianism · The Netherlands

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Introduction

Group membership is an important driver of human emotions, attitudes, and behavior for ingroup and outgroup members. The terms in- and outgroup—popularized in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982)—refer to the social group a person identifies with and all other groups, respectively. In intergroup relations, people strive for a positive group distinctiveness (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Much research shows that individuals generally evaluate their ingroup more positively than outgroups (ingroup bias) or even treat outgroups outright negatively or hostilely (Aboud, 2003; Riek et al., 2006). Ingroup bias, or favoritism, is particularly prevalent in interethnic relations (Coenders et al., 2008; Verkuyten & Zaremba, 2005).

Although the ingroup is generally evaluated positively, not all ethnic outgroups are assessed equally. In 1925, Bogardus developed the concept of social distance as a continuum: someone can perceive oneself as more distant from one and less distant from another ethnic group. Consequently, some ethnic outgroups are evaluated more positively than others. The consensual variation in social distance between ethnic outgroups is commonly referred to as the ethnic hierarchy in society (Hagendoorn, 1995; Hagendoorn & Hraba, 1989; Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000). In our study, we used social distance as an indicator of ethnic preferences. The greater the social distance between a person and an outgroup, the less willing that person is to interact with that group (Bogardus, 1925). Such diverging ethnic preferences are reflected in everyday life in many ways, such as in partnership formation (Potârcă & Mills, 2015), hiring practices (Lancee, 2021), and friendship networks (McPherson et al., 2001).

Previous studies have documented the existence of an ethnic hierarchy in various societies (Bessudnov, 2016; Parrillo & Donoghue, 2013; Verkuyten et al., 1996) and contexts (Hraba et al., 1989; Randall, 2014; Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000), and among majority and minority groups (Verkuyten et al., 1996; Weaver, 2008). Yet, these studies typically analyzed attitudes toward a small number of outgroups (for exceptions, see Bessudnov (2016) on Russia and Parrillo and Donoghue (2013) on the USA). Hence, there is a lack of studies that consider the diversity that is becoming typical of modern immigration societies.

Furthermore, most research does not address the determinants of ethnic hierarchies. There are three different approaches to explaining differences in the perception of social distance. First, they may be due to characteristics of the outgroup. In that regard, a prominent explanation that has been put forward is the cultural distance theory (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2006; Polek et al., 2009; Welzel, 2013), which states that social distance is greater toward individuals from ethnic outgroups that are culturally different from the ingroup. However, research that tests this theory is scant. For example, Verkuyten et al. (1996) found an ethnic hierarchy in Dutch society but did not study why perceptions of ethnic hierarchy vary across groups. Similarly, Bessudnov (2016) included many minority groups in Russia in his analysis but did not explore which group-level characteristics explain the differences in social distance perceptions.

A second explanation is that the ethnic hierarchy in social distance perceptions may vary with the characteristics of the individual. Personality traits, specifically right-wing

authoritarianism (RWA), have been suggested as important determinants of social distance (Duckitt, 1993). People who exhibit a high level of RWA tend to be aggressive followers of established authorities, and RWA has been linked to anti-immigrant sentiment in various contexts (Cantal et al., 2014; Cohrs & Stelzl, 2010; Kreindler, 2005). Yet, it is not clear whether RWA can also explain the variation in social distance perceptions.

A third explanation for variation in the perception of social distance toward outgroups is the interplay between cultural distance and RWA. There is little previous research on how RWA and cultural distance interact. Feldman and Stenner (1997) argue that threats in general moderate the effect of RWA on, for example, racial prejudice. We argue that culturally distant groups are perceived as more threatening to the ingroup's norms and values than culturally less distant groups. This means that for culturally more distant outgroups, the (negative) association between RWA and social distance perceptions is expected to be stronger.

Building on these approaches, this study has three objectives. The first is to test the cultural distance hypothesis and examine whether a person's cultural distance toward an ethnic group affects the person's perception of social distance toward that ethnic group. Second, we aim to examine whether the ethnic hierarchy is more pronounced among individuals who show a high level of RWA. Third, we focus on the interplay between the characteristics of the evaluated group and the rater and examine whether cultural distance moderates the effect of RWA on social distance.

We address these research questions in an empirical analysis based on data collected in the Netherlands, a country that is well suited to the study of ethnic hierarchies in social distance perceptions for several reasons. First, ethnic and religious diversity is particularly high in the Netherlands due to continued migration from its former colonies and, more recently, increasing immigration from all regions in the world (Bovens et al., 2020). Crul (2023) even labels the Dutch majority population the "new minority". Furthermore, the Netherlands has experienced a decline in multicultural policies since around 2000, with increased public pressure to push minority population members toward assimilation (Vasta, 2007; Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). This development goes hand in hand with vast interethnic tensions (Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007), which have become increasingly important issues on both the public and the political agenda (de Vries et al., 2013). Although specific to the Dutch context, our findings can also provide insight into the reasons behind interethnic tensions more generally.

Linking Social Distance, Ethnicity, and Cultural Distance

The concept of social distance has its roots in the work of Bogardus, who describes it as "the degrees and grades of understanding and feeling that persons experience regarding each other" (Bogardus, 1925, p. 299). He operationalizes it as a willingness to interact with outgroup members at varying levels of intensity, from banning them from the county to marrying them. Social distance is based on the idea that "those who are socially close to us are those we feel close to" (Karakayali, 2009, p. 540). Consequently, the social distance between two people who feel comfortable around each other is low, regardless of spatial proximity or frequency of interaction.

Ethnic groups differ in terms of the social distance people perceive between these groups and their ingroup. Previous studies have found differences in the perception of social distance toward ethnic groups in the Netherlands, France, the United States, and the former Soviet Union (Bessudnov, 2016; Hraba et al., 1989; Parrillo & Donoghue, 2013; Verkuyten et al., 1996). Typically, in European countries, the ingroup is at the top of the hierarchy, followed by other Western European, Asian, Eastern European, African, and Middle Eastern groups (Hagendoorn, 1995; Snellman & Ekehammar, 2005; Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000). There is evidence that ethnic hierarchies are shared both within and across societies: individuals from different ethnic backgrounds typically rank social groups in the same order (Hagendoorn, 1995; Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000; Verkuyten et al., 1996). Furthermore, Gesthuizen et al. (2021) found that the ranking of three minority groups is the same in 18 European countries. Thus, ethnic hierarchies are highly similar across countries.

Cultural distance theory can explain the connection between ethnicity and social distance. Cultural distance refers to the degree of (dis)similarity between two cultures regarding values and norms (Schwartz, 2014). In contrast to social distance, which is interpersonal and measured on the individual level, cultural distance refers to group- (macro-) level differences in values and norms. The theory of cultural distance states that an ingroup perceives a greater social distance from an ethnic outgroup if this group is culturally farther away from the ingroup. Cultures that are different from one's own can be hard to understand and make it difficult to find common ground in interactions. Therefore, interactions with culturally different groups induce more intergroup anxiety, leading to more prejudice. Norms, values, and beliefs of ethnic groups that are different from the majority group can also be perceived by the majority group as a threat to their way of life (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). This argument is in line with research by Rohmann et al. (2008), who show that immigrant groups are perceived as a greater symbolic threat if they are described as less willing to give up their way of life in order to adapt to that of the majority. Similarly, Wirtz et al. (2016) link symbolic threat to social distance toward Muslims. Albada et al. (2021) find that symbolic threat mediates the effect of perceived cultural distance in social values between the Dutch majority and migrants on attitudes toward migrants.

In sum, the norms and values of the outgroup play an important role in people's decisions about how willing they are to have an outgroup member as a neighbor, colleague, or classmate of their children (the indicators of social distance). Thus, the greater the cultural distance, the greater the social distance. Put differently, the cultural distance between the majority population and an ethnic outgroup affects the "steepness" of the ethnic hierarchy. Inglehart and Welzel (2005) showed that cultural values vary between societies in two predominant dimensions: the secular and the emancipative. Secular values refer to people's dissociation from authority, emancipative values capture the extent to which people claim authority over their own lives. In our study, we used the indices of secular and emancipative values (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Welzel, 2013) as a measure of cultural distance.

Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Ethnic Hierarchy

The personal characteristics of an individual also affect the social distance between ethnic outgroups. Already in the 1950s, Adorno et al. (1950) argued that people with an authoritarian personality have prejudices against outgroups they view as inferior. We contend that right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) is an important determinant of people's perception of ethnic outgroups and the ethnic hierarchy in society. Altemeyer's RWA scale measures three main personality traits that are typical for right-wing authoritarians: authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism (Altemeyer, 1994, p. 133). Authoritarian submission describes how obediently and uncritically a person accepts authorities. Authoritarian aggression refers to the hostility toward groups that are perceived negatively by established authorities. Conventionalism is the extent to which someone adheres to the rules, values, and beliefs of authorities and to the conviction that others should do the same. This behavior can be traced back to a high level of conscientiousness, low openness to experience, and a socialization that sees the world as a dangerous place (Duckitt et al., 2002; Zubielevitch et al., 2023). Furthermore, individual differences in RWA are (at least partially) attributable to genetic factors (Kandler et al., 2016).

Previous research has shown that RWA is related to increased levels of prejudice against several outgroups, including ethnic outgroups (Cantal et al., 2014; Cohrs & Stelzl, 2010; Duckitt & Sibley, 2007; Oyamot et al., 2012). A high level of RWA affects individuals' perception of ethnic groups in two ways. First, it is related to ethnocentrism, that is, having "a strong sense of ethnic group self-importance and self-centeredness" and the perception "that the ingroup is more important than other groups" (Bizumic & Duckitt, 2012, p. 903). Scheepers et al. (1990) found that authoritarianism strongly predicts both a favorable attitude toward the ingroup and an unfavorable attitude toward outgroups. They explained this relationship between authoritarianism, ingroup favoritism, and outgroup prejudice by (a) connecting authoritarian submission to a need for positive self-perception and (b) connecting authoritarian aggression and conventionalism to a tendency to perceive outgroups negatively (see social identity theory, Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Second, a high level of RWA is associated with greater variation in the perception of social distance toward outgroups. Feldman and Stenner (1997) were among the first to suggest that there is an interaction between perceived threat and authoritarianism. Their results show that "various threats moderate the effect of authoritarian predispositions on a range of dependent variables" (Feldman & Stenner, 1997, p. 761), which include stereotypes, prejudice, and social and political attitudes. Weise et al. (2012) found that right-wing authoritarians evaluate immigrants more negatively if they are reminded of their mortality. In contrast, those with a low level of RWA evaluate immigrants more positively after this reminder. The threat seems to "activate" authoritarian attitudes, which then leads to different evaluations of outgroups. The dual process model (Duckitt et al., 2002) suggests that a high level of RWA results in ethnic prejudice due to people

feeling threatened by outgroups. The maintenance of societal order, cohesion, and security is very important to right-wing authoritarians. Outgroups that represent a symbolic threat, that is, a danger to the ingroup's norms and values, are a threat to this order (Duckitt & Sibley, 2007). Therefore, people with a high level of RWA are likely to perceive ethnic groups that pose a greater symbolic threat as more socially distant than ethnic groups that pose a lesser symbolic threat.

A greater cultural distance between the ingroup and an outgroup is associated with the perception of a greater social distance toward that outgroup. Cultural distance can be interpreted as a symbolic threat. Symbolic threats are "threats posed by the outgroup to any of the central values held by the ingroup" (Stephan & Stephan, 2000, p. 26). Cultural distance is measured as emancipative and secular values. These values are supposed to drive cultural change, ranging from increased political freedom to sexual liberation (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Welzel, 2013). Secular values refer to the extent to which societies uphold secular–rational rather than traditional values. In a very traditional society, religion, making parents proud, and following the rules made by authorities are very important to people. Emancipative values refer to the extent that societies emphasize self-expression rather than survival. In a very survival-oriented society, people perceive their survival to be threatened, which results in a preference for a more closed society, for example, in terms of ethnic diversity or political debates. An overview of all items we used in our study can be found in Table A3 in the Appendix. Ethnic groups that are culturally distant, that is, in terms of emancipative and secular values that differ from one's own, may have a very different view of society. Their members therefore represent a potential symbolic threat. Since individuals with a high level of RWA are particularly susceptible to perceptions of symbolic threat, we anticipate that the relationship between cultural and social distance is moderated by RWA.

Research Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical considerations presented above, we formulate the following hypotheses:

1) The social distance between an individual from the majority population and an ethnic outgroup is positively associated with the cultural distance between the majority population and that ethnic outgroup.
2) Members of the ethnic majority group with a high level of RWA perceive a greater social distance between the majority population and ethnic outgroups than individuals with a low RWA score.
3) Members of the ethnic majority group who have a high level of RWA show greater variance in the perception of social distance toward different outgroups than individuals with a low level of RWA.
4) For members of the ethnic majority group who have a high level of RWA, the negative association between their social distance toward that ethnic outgroup and the cultural distance between the ethnic majority group and that ethnic outgroup is stronger than for those with a low level of RWA.

Data and Methods

To test these hypotheses, we collected data via an online survey in the Netherlands in June 2018 (Soiné & Lancee, 2025). All respondents gave their informed consent before filling out the survey questionnaire. The questionnaire included items that assessed respondents' perceptions of social distance toward several ethnic groups, a scale measuring RWA, and questions on sociodemographic characteristics. We supplemented these data with existing data on country characteristics.

Participants

Using a non-probability quota sample, we conducted an online survey with 1249 members of the Dutch majority group,[1] who were recruited through the online panel Respondi. After completing the online questionnaire in Unipark, participants were redirected to another website and were paid 0.5£. We asked participants to identify as either male or female. Forty-six percent of the sample identified as male. We also asked for their age, highest level of education, and employment status. More detailed descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1.

Operationalization

Social Distance

We measured participants' social distance toward 36 ethnic groups. To describe the ethnic group that is being evaluated, we followed Hagendoorn (1995) and Verkuyten and Kinket (2000) and used a country-of-origin perspective. This means that we described a person who "was from" a certain country. This is typical colloquial language to inquire about ethnicity (Barrett et al., 2022; Birney et al., 2020; Hatoss, 2012). Respondents were then asked to indicate on a seven-point scale how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

It would be pleasant for me…

1. …to have neighbors from [country].
2. …if my children went to a school with pupils from [country].
3. …to work together with colleagues from [country].

Due to the risk of respondent fatigue, respondents were not asked to evaluate all 36 ethnic groups, but six for each domain: neighborhood, school, and work. The six ethnic groups included the ingroup (the Netherlands) and five ethnic groups that were randomly drawn from five different pools of countries that were grouped by geographical proximity (see Table A1 in the Appendix). Each respondent evaluated

[1] We asked respondents whether they, their mother, and their father were born in the Netherlands. The participants were only invited to continue the survey if they indicated that they and their parents were born in the Netherlands. We implemented quotas for gender, age group, and level of education.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the sample at the individual level

	Mean or percentage	Std. dev	Min. value	Max. value	Non-missing observations
Social distance	3.33	1.08	1.00	7.00	1225
Neighbor	3.56	1.12	1.00	7.00	1222
School	3.26	1.20	1.00	7.00	1177
Work	3.14	1.19	1.00	7.00	1220
Avg. soc. dist. toward outgroups	1.47	1.51	−2.20	6.00	1191
Inclination to rank outgroups	0.61	0.67	0.00	3.29	1185
RWA standardized	0.00	1.00	−4.24	2.98	1193
Age (in years)	43.39	12.74	20.00	65.00	1249
Male	46.52%				1249
Education					1248
Primary	2.08%				
Lower secondary	25.16%				
Upper secondary	40.38%				
Tertiary	32.37%				
Employment status					1249
Employed	65.25%				
Self-employed	9.93%				
Unemployed	4.56%				
Not active in labor force	20.26%				
Mean contact with outgroups	2.02	1.02	1.00	6.00	1176
Median contact with outgroups					1176
Never	64.20%				
Yearly	15.14%				
Quarterly	8.16%				
Monthly	7.48%				
Weekly	4.00%				
Daily	1.02%				

Data source: Own data

one ethnic group in each pool for all three domains. The order in which the ethnic groups were presented was randomized. To compute a social distance score, the evaluations were averaged across the three domains (neighborhood, school, and work). To assess our second hypothesis, we constructed two additional indicators: first, the *average social distance toward outgroups*, which we calculated by subtracting the average evaluation of the five outgroups from that of the Dutch ingroup; second, the *inclination to rank outgroups*, an indicator adapted from Snellman and Ekehammar (2005), which we computed as the average standard deviation of respondents' social distance evaluations of the outgroups[2] across the three domains.

[2] Because we were primarily interested in the variation in social distance evaluations of outgroups we excluded the social distance score of the Dutch ingroup.

Right-Wing Authoritarianism

RWA was measured using a shortened version of Altemeyer's (1988) RWA scale, developed by Zakrisson (2005). It consists of 15 items asking respondents to indicate on a seven-point scale in how far they agree or disagree with a statement. The wording of all items and descriptive information about the scale is presented in Table A2 in the Appendix. Item 8 ("Many good people challenge the state, criticize the church and ignore 'the normal way of living'") did not correlate well with the rest of the scale (item–rest correlation, − 0.16), so we excluded it. The Cronbach's α of 0.72 indicated acceptable scale reliability. We inverted the scale so that high values represented high RWA, and we standardized it.

Cultural Distance

We measured the cultural distance between the Dutch ingroup and the outgroups, using Welzel's (2013) indices of secular and emancipative values. To determine these values for each ethnic group, we used the joint European Values Study (EVS) and World Values Survey (WVS) 2017–2021 dataset (EVS/WVS, 2021) and supplemented it with information from previous waves of the European Values Study (EVS, 2020) and the World Values Survey (WVS) (Inglehart et al., 2020).[3] An overview of the EVS/WVS items we used is provided in Table A3 in the Appendix. To compute our measure of the cultural distance between the rater (in this case: the Dutch ingroup) and the rated group, we first calculated the indices of the secular and emancipative values of every EVS/WVS respondent in all countries included in our study. To obtain the respective country indices, we then averaged the weighted[4] emancipative and secular values score of EVS/WVS respondents within each country. Next, we subtracted the average score of secular and emancipative values for the Netherlands from that of the outgroup countries, which resulted in the average distance in emancipative and secular values between the Netherlands and the respective other country. Last, we used the absolute values of these distance measures and standardized them. By definition, using a composite index as a measure of culture is a simplification. However, the measure is unique in that it allows for a quantitative cross-national comparison. It is also important to note that Welzel's (2013) secular and emancipative indices were created within a Eurocentric framework. The indices have been criticized for emphasizing differences rather than similarities between cultures and for labeling countries outside of Protestant Europe as inferior (Simpson, 2020). Considering this criticism, we do not imply that any side of the spectrum (e.g., more vs. less secular) is superior to another.

[3] No data on secular and emancipative values was available for Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles, so we dropped them in our multilevel analyses.

[4] We used the weights described in the online appendix of Welzel (2013) to weigh down cases with missing values on some items.

Control Variables (Group Level)

Firstly, the size of the ethnic outgroup is related to perceptions of realistic threat (Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010). Using data from Statistics Netherlands (2019), we thus controlled for the *proportion of the ethnic group in the total Dutch population*. Secondly, previous research has shown that religion is an important factor in interethnic conflict in the Netherlands (Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). Religion, specifically being Muslim, is associated with a greater perceived social distance toward outgroup members (Wirtz et al., 2016). We thus included the estimated *share of Muslims* in each country of origin in 2020 (Pew Research Center, 2015). Lastly, some ethnic groups might be perceived as more educated than others, which might affect the perceptions of social distance toward them. Therefore, we controlled for the development level of the country of origin with the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) 2018 (United Nations Development Programme, 2018). Table A4 in the Appendix contains the mean value of perceptions of social distance to the 36 ethnic groups, their cultural distance to the Netherlands, and the group-level control variables.

Control Variables (Individual Level)

According to the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), positive intergroup contact can reduce prejudice against outgroups. We controlled for the frequency with which respondents had contact with the ethnic groups they rated (never, yearly, quarterly, monthly, weekly, daily). Research suggests that sociodemographic characteristics are related to different forms of social (Bessudnov, 2016; Parrillo & Donoghue, 2013) and cultural distance (Welzel, 2013) as well as to authoritarianism (Brandt & Henry, 2012; Vasilopoulos & Lachat, 2018). We therefore controlled for respondents' gender, age, level of education (in ISCED categories), and employment status.

Estimation Strategy

All models were estimated using Stata 16.1 (StataCorp, 2019). To test hypotheses 1 and 4, we estimated cross-classified multilevel linear regression models in which social distance evaluations were nested in individual respondents as well as in ethnic groups. We used a cross-classified rather than a strictly hierarchical model because the evaluated ethnic groups were not neatly nested in respondents (each ethnic group was evaluated by multiple respondents), and neither were respondents nested in ethnic groups (each respondent evaluated multiple ethnic groups). Cross-classified models in Stata are formulated as constrained hierarchical models (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2012). To test whether a greater cultural distance toward a group is associated with a greater social distance (hypothesis 1), we estimated the following model:

$$socdis_{ija} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 secu_{ia} + \beta_2 eman_{ia} + \beta_3 rwa_{ja} + C_1\beta_{ja} + C_2\beta_{ia} + u_{ja}^{(2)} + u_{ia}^{(3)} + \epsilon_{ija}$$

where respondent *j's* social distance evaluation $socdis_{ija}$ of an outgroup is nested in ethnic group i (level 2) and an artificial level-3 unit*a*.[5] To test whether the effect of cultural distance on social distance evaluations varies by respondents' level of RWA (hypothesis 4), we included interaction terms between secular values and RWA and emancipative values and RWA.

To examine the relation between RWA and social distance (hypotheses 2 and 3), we used OLS regression models with robust standard errors. We excluded the characteristics of the evaluated ethnic groups in these models, as they were irrelevant for this analysis, and only included variables on the level of respondents, leaving us with one observation per respondent after collapsing the data. The equation reads as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} inoutdist_i = {} & \beta_0 + \beta_1 rwa_{i1} + \beta_2 gender_{i2} + \beta_3 age_{i3} + \beta_4 education_{i4} \\ & + \beta_5 employment\ status_{i5} + \beta_6 contact\ with\ outgroups_{i6} + \epsilon_i \end{aligned}$$

We estimated the distance *inoutdist* between the respondent i's evaluation of the Dutch ingroup and the average evaluation of the outgroups. The model for hypothesis 3 is identical, except we predicted respondent i's *inclination to rank outgroups* measured by the variance in social distance evaluations toward ethnic outgroups.

Results

We first present the descriptive results. Figure 1 illustrates the ethnic hierarchy in social distance evaluations.[6] The ethnic ingroup, with a mean social distance score of 2.14, is evaluated as the closest group to the respondents, while Moroccans, with a mean score of 4.21, have the highest average social distance score. In terms of geographical regions, Western European groups and the USA occupy the top of the ethnic hierarchy, with the lowest average social distance scores. They are followed by the former Dutch colonies—Antilles, Indonesia, and Suriname—and the remaining Asian countries. African, Middle Eastern, and Eastern European groups have the highest average social distance scores.

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the average evaluation of social distance toward the ethnic groups and their cultural distance to the Netherlands. For both emancipative distance ($r = -0.37$) and secular distance ($r = -0.30$), we observe a negative correlation with social distance. The correlation is stronger for emancipative values, primarily because groups with high social distance scores are more similar to the Netherlands in secular values than groups with low social distance scores. This provides initial evidence that cultural distance is associated with social distance evaluations.

In Fig. 3, we explore descriptively whether RWA is related to social distance evaluations. The mean social distance score for each ethnic group is plotted separately

[5] For details on how $u_{ia}^{(3)}$, the random coefficient on respondent level, is calculated in a constrained hierarchical model in Stata, see Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal (2012, p. 437).

[6] Table A5 in the Appendix presents the ethnic hierarchy by domain. The ranking, particularly the order of geographical regions, is similar across the three domains.

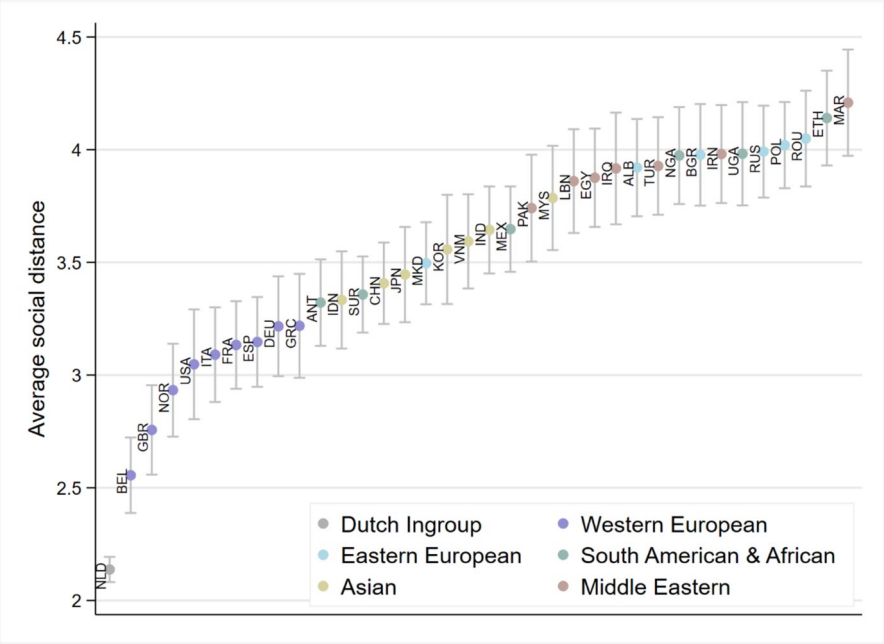

Fig. 1 Social distance scores toward ethnic groups

for respondents scoring one standard deviation below (upper panel) and above the mean RWA (lower panel). Figure 3 indicates that the Dutch ingroup is evaluated significantly more positively than the other groups, but only by respondents with a high RWA score. Moreover, and in line with hypothesis 3, respondents with a high RWA score exhibit greater variation in their evaluation of social distance toward outgroups.

Next, we present the multivariate analysis. Our variance component models, which contain only the dependent variable (see Table A6 in the Appendix), indicate that 11% of the variance in social distance evaluations is between ethnicities, 47% between persons, and 42% between observations.[7] This suggests that although most of the variation is attributable to the rater's characteristics, the characteristics of the rated group also influence social distance evaluations.

Table 2 contains the estimates from the cross-classified multilevel linear regression models predicting social distance evaluations. Model 1 includes only the two cultural distance indicators. Both coefficients are positive, indicating that greater cultural distance toward a group is associated with greater social distance toward that group. For secular distance, the effect is relatively weak, and the confidence interval includes zero [95% CI − 0.07, 0.27; $p = 0.262$]. We cannot reject the null hypothesis that the effect of secular distance on social distance is zero. The coefficient for

[7] The variance between observations that is not explained by the characteristics of the respondent or the rated group might be explained by, e.g., the order of answer options or satisficing behavior.

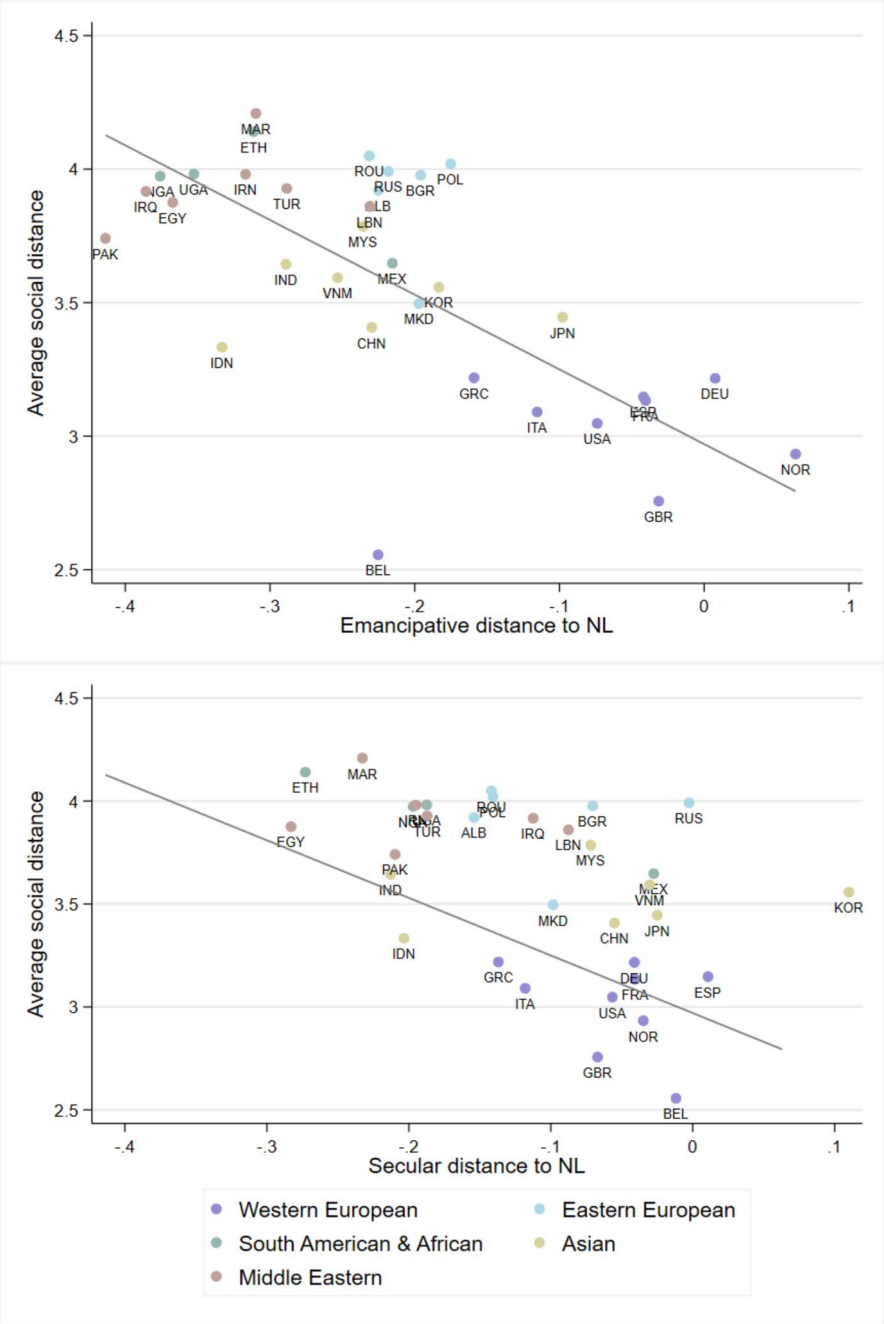

Fig. 2 Emancipative and secular distance by social distance

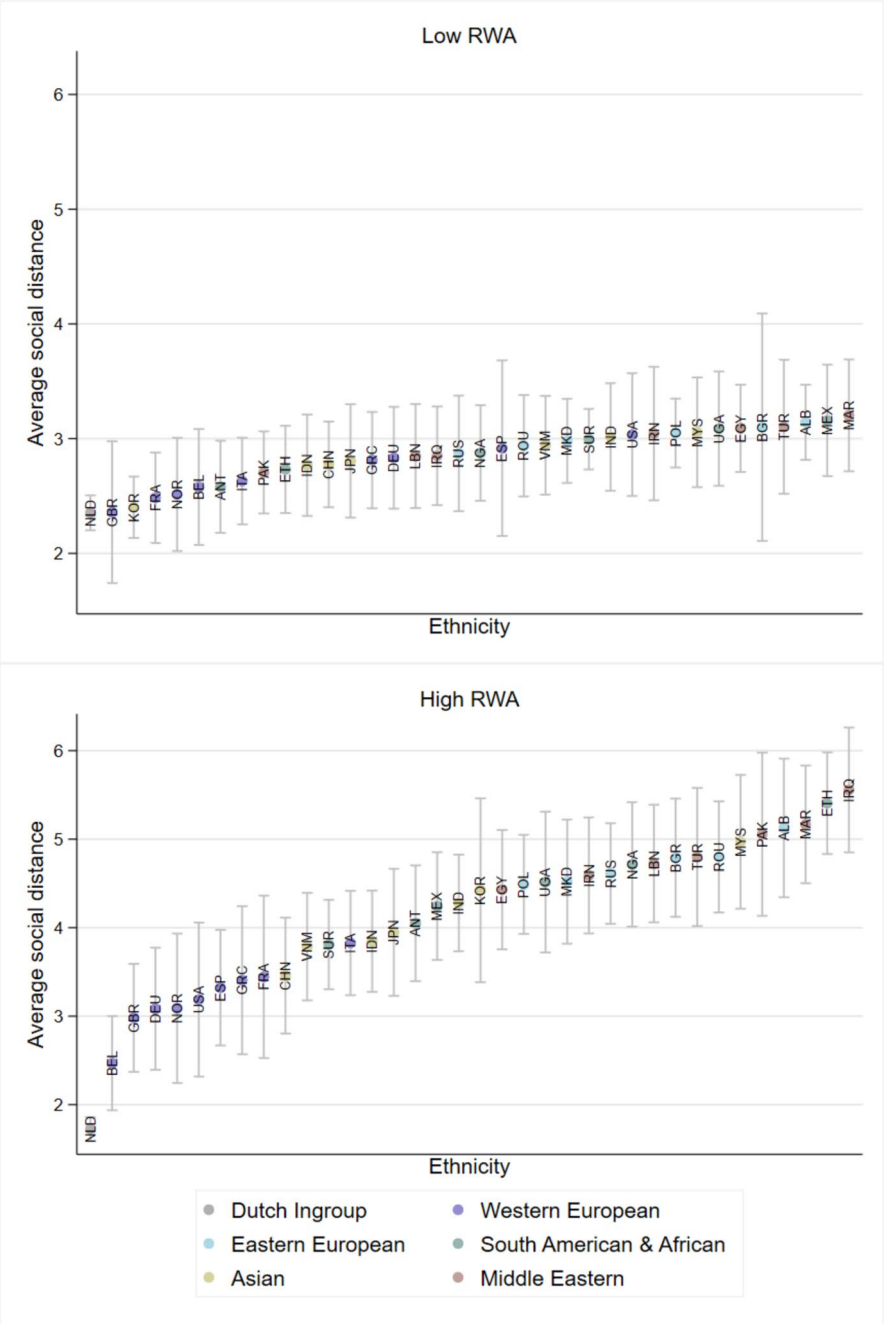

Fig. 3 Average social distance score by ethnic group, for raters low in RWA (1 std. dev. below the mean) and raters high in RWA (1 std. dev. above the mean)

Table 2 Cross-classified multilevel linear regression with social distance as dependent variable

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4a	Model 4b
Intercept	3.45***	2.89***	3.52***	3.55***	3.55***
	(0.06)	(0.26)	(0.63)	(0.63)	(0.63)
Secular distance (std.)	0.10	0.10	0.09	0.08	0.08
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Emancip. distance (std.)	0.31***	0.31***	0.15	0.14	0.15
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)
RWA (std.)		0.26***	0.26***	0.26***	0.26***
		(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Cross-level interaction effects					
Secular distance (std.) * RWA (std.)				0.21***	
				(0.01)	
Emancip. distance (std.) * RWA (std.)					0.24***
					(0.01)
Individual-level control variables					
Gender (ref.: Female)		0.11	0.14*	0.13*	0.14*
		(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Age (in years)		0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
		(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Level of education (ref.: Primary)					
Lower Secondary		0.43	0.34	0.34	0.32
		(0.23)	(0.23)	(0.23)	(0.23)
Upper Secondary		0.30	0.22	0.22	0.21
		(0.23)	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.22)
Tertiary		0.28	0.23	0.22	0.21
		(0.23)	(0.23)	(0.23)	(0.23)
Employment status (ref.: Employed)					
Self-employed		−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02
		(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Unemployed		0.04	−0.01	−0.02	−0.01
		(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.15)
Not in labor force		−0.03	−0.05	−0.05	−0.05
		(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Contact w. ethnic group (ref.: Never)					
Yearly			−0.41***	−0.41***	−0.40***
			(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)
Quarterly			−0.38***	−0.39***	−0.37***
			(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Monthly			−0.44***	−0.45***	−0.46***
			(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Weekly			−0.44***	−0.45***	−0.44***
			(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)

Table 2 (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4a	Model 4b
Daily			−0.88***	−0.86***	−0.86***
			(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Group-level control variables					
% ethnic group in Dutch pop			−0.38	−0.41	−0.40
			(0.39)	(0.39)	(0.39)
% Muslims in country of origin			0.00	0.00	0.00
			(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
HDI of country of origin			−0.41	−0.44	−0.44
			(0.73)	(0.73)	(0.73)
Variance components					
$\sigma^2_{\text{Ethnicity}}$	0.10***	0.10***	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
$\sigma^2_{\text{Individual}}$	0.94	0.84***	0.81***	0.82***	0.82***
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
σ^2_{e}	0.83***	0.83***	0.80***	0.75***	0.73***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)
AIC	18,601	18,516	18,313	17,977	17,850
Observations	6154	6154	6154	6154	6154

Standard errors in parentheses

Data sources: Own data, EVS, Pew Research Center, Statistics Netherlands, United Nations, WVS

*$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$, two-tailed tests

emancipative distance is larger and statistically significant: an increase of one standard deviation in emancipative distance is associated with a 0.3-point increase in the social distance index [95% CI 0.13, 0.49; $p=0.000$].

Adding individual-level control variables (Model 2) does not substantively change the coefficients. However, adding ethnic group-level control variables (Model 3) halves the coefficient size of emancipative distance, which is no longer significant [95% CI −0.10, 0.39; $p=0.234$]. This suggests that cultural distance may no longer influence social distance evaluations once "objective" outgroup characteristics are accounted for. Our results thus do not provide much support for the hypothesis that an increase in cultural distance between the majority population and an ethnic outgroup is associated with an increase in the perception of social distance toward that group (hypothesis 1). Models 4a and 4b include the interaction terms between RWA and secular and emancipative values, respectively. Both interaction terms are positive and significant [secular distance × RWA 95% CI 0.20, 0.24; $p=0.000$; emancipative distance × RWA 95% CI 0.22, 0.27; $p=0.000$]. These results are visualized in Fig. 4, which depicts the marginal effects. People with a high RWA score evaluate ethnic groups that are more culturally distant as more socially distant. Because we found differences in the sequence of groups and the variance composition across the three domains, Table A7 (Appendix) shows the analysis by domain. The effects of secular and emancipative distance and RWA do not change substantively.

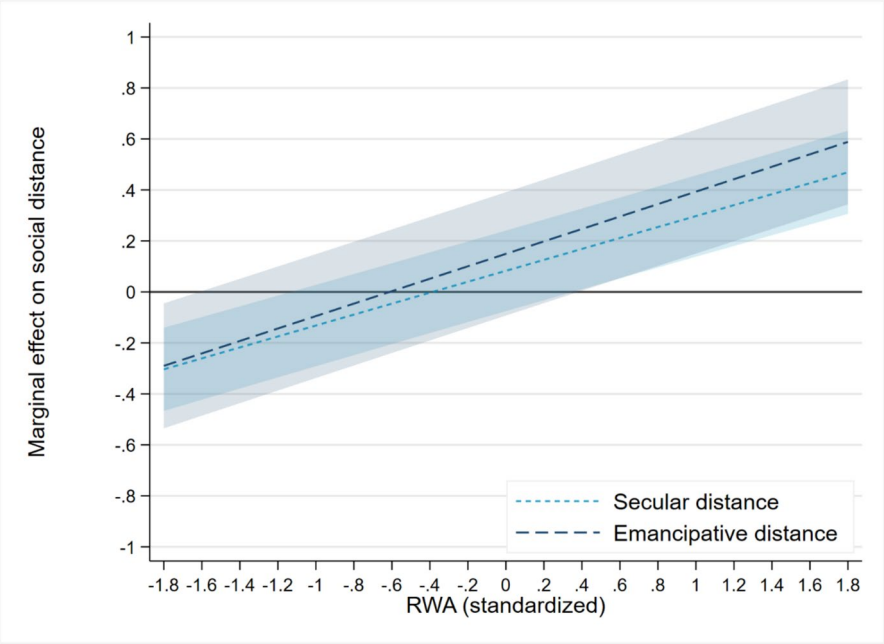

Fig. 4 Marginal effects of secular and emancipative distance on RWA. Note: Estimates are based on Model 4a and 4b in Table 2. Cases in the top 5% and bottom 5% of the RWA distribution are not depicted here

To evaluate hypothesis 2 and hypothesis 3, we estimated OLS regression models with the ingroup–outgroup gap in social distance evaluations as the dependent variable in Models 1 and 2, and the inclination to rank outgroups as the dependent variable in Models 3 and 4. The results, depicted in Table 3, confirm the patterns observed in Fig. 3. A one-unit increase in the standardized RWA variable is associated with a 0.59-point bigger difference between the social distance score for the Dutch ingroup and the average outgroup [95% CI 0.52, 0.67; $p = 0.000$]. After adding the control variables, the RWA coefficient remains virtually unchanged (Model 2). Model 3 indicates that a one-unit increase in the standardized RWA variable is also associated with a 0.2-point bigger variance in the social distance evaluations of outgroups [95% CI 0.17, 0.24; $p = 0.000$], suggesting that right-wing authoritarians differentiate more strongly between different outgroups when evaluating their social distance. This finding remains consistent in Model 4, after adding control variables.

Since both dependent variables have a substantial share of negative values and zeros (the ingroup–outgroup gap variable ~ 20% negative values/zeros and the inclination to rank variable ~ 30% zeros), we repeated our analyses without these cases. We did this to determine whether the results were driven by respondents who do not differentiate between ethnic groups in their evaluations (see Table A8 in the Appendix). Without the non-differentiating raters, we observe a similar effect of RWA on both the ingroup–outgroup gap and inclination to rank.

Table 3 OLS regression models with the ingroup–outgroup gap in social distance and inclination to rank outgroups as dependent variables

	Hypothesis 2: ingroup–outgroup gap		Hypothesis 3: inclination to rank	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Intercept	1.45***	1.73***	0.61***	0.69***
	(0.04)	(0.40)	(0.02)	(0.19)
RWA (std.)	0.59***	0.58***	0.20***	0.22***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Gender (ref.: Female)		0.27**		0.19***
		(0.09)		(0.04)
Age (in years)		−0.01		−0.01***
		(0.00)		(0.00)
Level of education (ref.: Primary)				
Lower secondary		0.12		0.07
		(0.38)		(0.19)
Upper secondary		0.10		0.09
		(0.37)		(0.19)
Tertiary		0.08		0.13
		(0.37)		(0.19)
Employment status (ref.: Employed)				
Self-employed		−0.05		−0.05
		(0.15)		(0.06)
Unemployed		−0.12		−0.08
		(0.21)		(0.08)
Not in labor force		−0.19*		−0.04
		(0.10)		(0.05)
Median outgroup contact (ref.: Never)				
Yearly		−0.50***		−0.04
		(0.10)		(0.05)
Quarterly		−0.43**		0.04
		(0.15)		(0.07)
Monthly		−0.52***		−0.02
		(0.14)		(0.07)
Weekly		−0.52*		0.01
		(0.20)		(0.10)
Daily		−1.35***		−0.47***
		(0.26)		(0.08)
R^2	0.157	0.197	0.094	0.132
Adjusted R^2	0.156	0.187	0.094	0.120
Observations	1096	1096	1091	1091

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) were calculated to assess multicollinearity. When assessing hypothesis 2, the highest VIF observed was 1.27 for RWA, with a mean VIF of 1.16. When assessing hypothesis 3, the highest VIF observed was 1.22 for age, with a mean VIF of 1.13

Data source: Own data

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$, two-tailed tests

Discussion and Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to study the ethnic hierarchy in social distance evaluations. To achieve this, we analyzed how the cultural distance of raters—in our case members of the Dutch ingroup—toward the rated group and the rater's level of right-wing authoritarianism were associated with social distance evaluations.

The hierarchy of ethnic preferences we find in our data aligns with findings from previous studies in the European context (Hagendoorn, 1995; Snellman & Ekehammar, 2005; Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000). Western European groups occupy the top position in this hierarchy, followed by the former Dutch colonies, the remaining Asian countries in the data, and African, Middle Eastern, and Eastern European groups at the bottom. This highlights the disadvantaged position of Black people in Europe. Nationalism in Europe is often tied to "conceptions of culture which present immutable, ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories and experiences of 'black' and 'white' people" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 2). Black people face very high levels of discrimination in the Netherlands (Polavieja et al., 2023), which is in line with the big social distance toward groups such as Ugandans and Nigerians in our data. However, the social distance toward groups from the former Dutch colonies of Indonesia, the Antilles, and Suriname—whose members are predominantly non-White—is relatively low (see also Hagendoorn, 1995). This may be explained by the "blurring of boundaries" (see also Fox & Guglielmo, 2012) between groups from the former colonies and the Dutch ingroup. By contrast, the boundary between the Dutch ingroup and other Black groups remains distinctly clear.

Our findings provide little support for the hypothesis that the cultural distance toward an outgroup explains variation in perceived social distance. The initial correlation between the cultural and social distance that we observed is partly explained by the contact people had with other ethnic groups, which is in line with contact theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Future research might further explore how exactly the interplay between intergroup contact and cultural distance explains variation in social distance evaluations.

Another avenue for future research might be to study cultural distance in more detail. Our two indicators of cultural distance are widely regarded as two important value constructs characterizing societies (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Welzel, 2013), but other indices also serve this purpose (for examples see Hofstede & Bond, 1984; Schwartz, 1992). Furthermore, not all values are equally important. For instance, social value distance may be more influential than personal value distance (Albada et al., 2021), and there is evidence that minority groups who value self-transcendence over self-enhancement are perceived more favorably (Wolf et al., 2019). Although beyond the scope of this paper, a more in-depth analysis of cultural distance might provide further insights into the mechanism linking cultural distance with social distance.

The second main finding is that individuals with a high level of right-wing authoritarianism consistently perceive a greater social distance between their ingroup and ethnic outgroups. In other words, for these individuals, the ingroup–outgroup gap

in social distance is bigger. These results are in line with the second hypothesis that members of the ethnic majority group with a high level of RWA perceive a greater social distance between the majority population and ethnic outgroups than individuals with a low RWA score. They also concur with previous literature linking authoritarianism to ethnocentrism (Adorno et al., 1950) and to the need for ingroup cohesion through the rejection of outgroups (Duckitt, 1989). Moreover, in line with the third hypothesis that members of the ethnic majority group who have a high level of RWA show greater variance in the perception of social distance toward different outgroups than individuals with a low level of RWA, we find that RWA is positively associated with the variance in social distance. This means that right-wing authoritarians differentiate more strongly between outgroups when evaluating social distance.

A likely explanation for this finding is threat perception. Perceived symbolic threat may activate existing authoritarian attitudes. As Feldman and Stenner put it, "manifestations of authoritarianism – intolerance, prejudice, punitiveness […] – will be more pronounced under conditions of threat" (Feldman & Stenner, 1997, p. 764). Since ethnic outgroups vary in their level of perceived threat, they also differ in how strongly they activate authoritarian attitudes (see, for example, Cohrs & Asbrock, 2008; Duckitt, 2006). This means that, compared to less authoritarian individuals, those with a high level of RWA perceive threatening groups as especially socially distant. That is, these individuals discriminate more between outgroups, resulting in a larger variance in social distance evaluations, or put differently, a steeper ethnic hierarchy.

The interaction between the rater's RWA and the cultural distance toward the rated group (hypothesis 3) supports this interpretation. As Stephan and Stephan (2000, p. 26) assert, symbolic threats are "threats posed by the outgroup to any of the central values held by the ingroup". Thus, greater cultural distance implies bigger differences in core values between the ingroup and outgroup, resulting in higher levels of perceived symbolic threat. In line with this argument, a greater perceived threat activates right-wing authoritarianism and translates into a greater perceived social distance. This interpretation aligns with the work of Schnelle et al. (2021), who found that authoritarianism is influenced not only by individual predispositions but also by situational factors.

Research Limitations

Unfortunately, we lacked data on the perceived threat of the rated outgroups. We thus could not test the symbolic threat explanation directly. Future research might empirically investigate this explanation. Another limitation is the measurement of cultural distance. Our group-level measures of cultural distance aptly capture the average core values of an ethnic group. However, we do not know how respondents perceive the value distance themselves. Some studies find few differences between the two, such as Azar (2014), who reports a strong positive correlation between objective and perceived cultural distance in managers'

evaluations of foreign markets. However, other studies suggest that they do not necessarily align (Glazer et al., 2018). A measure of perceived cultural distance toward the ethnic minority groups in the host society would be a valuable addition to future research. Such a measure would also address the concern that our cultural distance indicator is based on data from people in the country of origin of the evaluated group, rather than the values of ethnic minority groups in the Netherlands. Although this is not necessarily problematic, as it is the perceived cultural distance toward an outgroup that affects an individual's judgment of that group, values do differ between origin and destination groups. However, Hamilton (2019) shows that Black immigrants in the United States sometimes fare better than their native-born African American counterparts. These differences might result in different social distance perceptions toward immigrants compared to minorities of the second generation and beyond. In our data, we cannot make a distinction between the social distance toward minorities born in the Netherlands and those of immigrants. Future research might explore whether these differences have implications for ethnic hierarchies. Next, we also want to note again that respondents were recruited using an online access panel. This recruitment method—while comparatively cheap and quick—has several drawbacks: for example, participants self-select into these panels. However, there is also evidence that finds virtually no difference when comparing results from a population-based samples with crowdsourced online access panel sample (Weinberg et al., 2014). Finally, our data was collected in 2018 and the findings must be interpreted considering this timing. In 2024, the world looks different, and some ethnic groups may be perceived differently. For example, the war in Ukraine has influenced perceptions of Russians, which may have spillover effects on other ethnic groups (Moise et al., 2023). Furthermore, the debate regarding decolonization has intensified since 2018, with a "national narrative in favor of a more pluralistic vision of the Netherlands" (Jong, 2022), which may also affect social distance perceptions.

Research Implications

In summary, we find robust evidence for an ethnic hierarchy in the perception of social distance in the Netherlands. However, the ethnic hierarchy is by no means universal: individuals with a high level of right-wing authoritarianism perceive a particularly steep ethnic hierarchy. What is more, the effect of right-wing authoritarianism on social distance judgments intensifies when cultural distance is greater, suggesting that cultural distance can "activate" authoritarian attitudes (see Feldman & Stenner, 1997). By contrast, individuals with low levels of right-wing authoritarianism differentiate little between outgroups when evaluating their social distance toward them. Thus, we conclude that ethnic hierarchies are indeed diverging, with stark differences between individuals with high and people with low levels of right-wing authoritarianism. Cultural distance not significantly affecting social distance perceptions emphasizes the importance of

individual-level characteristics and their interplay with group-level characteristics in explaining the perception of social distance. Individual and group characteristics jointly shape the ethnic hierarchy in society. The importance of this interplay aligns with the work of Joppke (2017). In his analysis of multiculturalism, he concludes that individuals can engage in more open relationships locally, despite the decline of multiculturalism at large. Our findings imply that the pressure on minority group members to assimilate to the Dutch culture originates mainly from majority group members with high RWA: for them, cultural distance is more strongly bound to social distance. This is in line with a study on attitudes toward asylum seekers in the Netherlands by Onraet et al. (2021), who found that especially right-wing-authoritarian individuals express negative attitudes toward asylum seekers. Our findings also have relevance for the design on policies to reduce anti-immigrant sentiment. Because changing how right-wing authoritarian individuals are is difficult, a better strategy to reduce ethnic differences in social distance perceptions may be lowering perceived cultural distance toward ethnic outgroups among right-wing authoritarians. One possible way to do this may be to emphasize the similarities rather than the differences between the ingroup and ethnic outgroups in media targeted at right-wing authoritarians. Such an intervention was tested among supporters of the two major political parties in the USA with some success, resulting, for instance, in stronger feelings of including outgroups in the self (Syropoulos & Leidner, 2023). Another strategy involves increasing intergroup contact, as our findings show that this is associated with the perception of less social distance and a flatter ethnic hierarchy. Previous research has found that intergroup contact interventions can improve relations between ethnic groups (see Lemmer & Wagner, 2015 for a meta-analysis).

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-025-01237-1.

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Data Availability The original data collected for this study is available from the DANS Data Station Social Sciences and Humanities at https://doi.org/10.17026/SS/SLS0D4. The joint EVS/WVS 2017–2021 data are openly available from GESIS at https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13670, study number ZA7505. The EVS data are openly available from GESIS at https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13486, study number ZA4804. The WVS data are openly available from the WVSA Secretariat at https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp. The data on the proportion of ethnic groups in the total Dutch population are openly available from Statistics Netherlands at https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/en/dataset/37325eng/table?ts=1579699854105. The data on the share of Muslims in different countries in 2020 are openly available from Pew Research Center at https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projection-table/. The data on the Human Development Index of the countries in our study are openly available from the United Nations Development Programme at http://hdr.undp.org/en/data.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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