



Ethnocentrism and Social Cohesion in Multi-Ethnic Societies: A Systematic Review of Evidence from Africa

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Abstract

Ethnic diversity is not, by itself, a threat to nationhood; what determines whether multi-ethnic states cohere or fracture is how citizens and institutions treat difference, a distinction that motivates this systematic review of Ethnocentrism and Social Cohesion in Multi-Ethnic Societies: Evidence from Africa. The paper achieved four objectives: examining the manifestations and drivers of ethnocentrism among ethnic nationalities within multi-ethnic African states; assessing its effects on social cohesion, governance, and development; evaluating xenophobia in South Africa as a form of intra-African ethnocentrism directed at foreign nationals; and identifying mechanisms capable of mitigating ethnocentric division. Social Identity Theory was adopted as the guiding framework, explaining ethnocentric behaviour as a product of in-group favouritism and out-group derogation pursued for positive distinctiveness. The review followed PRISMA 2020 protocol, screening records for scholarly traceability before synthesising twenty-three included studies. Findings of the paper showed that ethnocentrism, rooted in colonial classification and sustained by elite political competition and resource pressure, weakens governance and depresses development outcomes across Kenya, Nigeria, and Rwanda, while South African xenophobia reproduces this same logic across national rather than intra-state boundaries, driven more by institutional grievance than by migrants' actual conduct. The paper concluded that durable cohesion requires addressing both the psychological and structural roots of ethnocentrism, and recommended merit-based public appointment systems, factual correction paired with service delivery reform in South Africa, and structured intergroup contact combined with inclusive superordinate identity narratives.

Keywords:

Ethnocentrism, Social Cohesion, Multi-ethnic Societies, Xenophobia, Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Human societies have, since antiquity, organised themselves around shared ancestry, language, and custom, and the tendency to evaluate other groups through the standard of one's own culture has long shaped how communities relate to one another. Sumner (1906) first termed this disposition ethnocentrism, describing it as the view that one's own group forms the centre of everything, against which all other groups are judged and scaled. In the present era, marked by cross-border migration, urbanisation, and the persistence of ethnic and religious plurality within single states, the question of whether such in-group loyalty strengthens or undermines the bonds that hold nations together has regained prominence among sociologists, economists, and political scientists across continents.

In Britain, for instance, Chan and Kawalerowicz (2024) examined whether ethnic and religious diversity erodes generalised trust, volunteering, and neighbourhood cohesion, and found that any apparent trade-off between diversity and cohesion is substantially explained by neighbourhood deprivation rather than diversity itself. Similarly, Van Assche et al. (2023), working with Dutch survey data, established that perceptions of local diversity and residential segregation, rather than actual demographic composition, determine whether people withdraw from civic life or continue to trust their neighbours. These findings from Europe illustrate that ethnocentric withdrawal is not an inevitable outcome of plurality but is conditioned by economic circumstance, governance quality, and the degree of intergroup contact permitted within a given social order.

Africa presents a distinctive setting within this worldwide debate because its contemporary state boundaries were drawn during colonial partition with little regard for pre-existing ethnic and linguistic affiliations, so that most African countries today contain several ethnic nationalities compelled to share a single political roof (Easterly & Levine, 1997). Colonial administration itself frequently relied on ethnic classification and indirect rule to govern, a practice that hardened group boundaries and left successor states with fragile mechanisms for building a shared civic identity. Easterly and Levine (1997), in an influential econometric study, demonstrated that high ethnic fractionalisation across sub-Saharan Africa is associated with lower schooling, underdeveloped financial systems, distorted foreign exchange markets, and insufficient infrastructure, concluding that ethnic division explains a substantial share of the continent's growth shortfall relative to other regions.

Sestito (2025), drawing on survey data spanning thirty-six African countries, further showed that exposure to ethnic warfare heightens ethnic self-identification and increases co-operative behaviour, but chiefly towards members of one's own group, thereby strengthening bonding ties while weakening the bridging ties that link different communities within a nation. Njoroge and Kirori (2014) similarly documented how cultural and economic ethnocentrism in Kenya has shaped voting patterns, employment practices, and public appointments, producing a form of national life in which ethnic origin, rather than citizenship, often determines access to opportunity. However, this body of work establishes that ethnocentrism in African settings is neither a marginal attitude nor a purely historical residue but an active social force with measurable consequences for governance, economic performance, and the prospects for durable national cohesion.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite decades of independence, constitutional reform, and regional integration initiatives, many African states continue to experience the very outcomes that ethnic division was expected to produce: uneven development, weak public institutions, and periodic outbreaks of intercommunal violence. Underdevelopment on the continent cannot be attributed to resource scarcity alone, since Africa holds considerable mineral, agricultural, and demographic potential; rather, Easterly and Levine (1997) attribute a measurable share of the growth gap between Africa and other developing regions to policy failures rooted in ethnic patronage and the difficulty of sustaining collective goods provision across divided populations.

Where public office, contracts, and welfare benefits are allocated along ethnic lines rather than merit, institutions lose legitimacy among excluded groups, and the resulting distrust discourages the long-term investment and co-operation on which economic development depends. This problem is compounded in societies recovering from civil conflict, where Sestito (2025) found that warfare-induced ethnic solidarity, though it may increase co-operation within a group, simultaneously narrows the circle of trust available for national reconstruction, leaving post-conflict states with populations more loyal to kin than to the state itself.

A particularly instructive illustration of ethnocentrism operating within, rather than merely towards, Africa is the recurrence of xenophobic hostility in South Africa, a country whose own population is itself ethnically and linguistically diverse. Xenophobia, in this setting, functions as a form of intra-continental ethnocentrism in which South African citizens direct resentment, discrimination, and occasionally lethal violence towards fellow Africans from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, and other neighbouring states. Niyitunga (2024) records that xenophobic violence has recurred since at least the early 2000s and intensified sharply in May 2008, disrupting service delivery, undermining the country's ambition to become a developmental state, and damaging its international standing.

According to the African Centre for Migration and Society (2025), incidents of xenophobic discrimination recorded through the Xenowatch monitoring platform between 2022 and 2024 included denied services, extortion, eviction, and violence, with violent incidents peaking at fifty-one cases in 2022 before falling to twenty in 2023 and rising again thereafter, indicating that hostility towards foreign nationals has become a recurring rather than isolated pattern. Chekenya (2026) provides econometric evidence that increased migration inflows, particularly from Zimbabwe, are associated with heightened ethnic polarisation and intolerance among host communities, while Chisadza (2025), using the South African Social Attitudes Survey, found that citizens dissatisfied with government performance are frequently more hostile towards immigrants whom they perceive, often inaccurately, as competitors for employment, housing, and public services.

Kaziboni et al. (2022) similarly demonstrate that widely held beliefs linking migrants to crime and job losses are largely unsupported by the evidence, yet continue to sustain scapegoating and hostility at community level. Mlambo (2023) frames these dynamics as a three-sided problem involving the migrant, the state, and the local citizen, in which weak border governance and inconsistent policy enforcement leave both host communities and migrants vulnerable to recurring tension.

The problem this review addresses, therefore, is twofold. First, ethnocentrism among Africa's internal ethnic nationalities continues to constrain governance and development outcomes in ways that existing scholarship has quantified but that policy has not adequately addressed. Second, South Africa's recurring xenophobic violence demonstrates that ethnocentric hostility on the continent is not confined to conflict between indigenous ethnic groups but extends to prejudice against fellow Africans on the basis of nationality, exposing a form of intra-African racism that undermines the continent's own aspirations towards regional solidarity and integration under frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area.

A systematic review of the available evidence is therefore required to establish which mechanisms of ethnocentrism most consistently erode social cohesion in African multi-ethnic settings, and which interventions, whether institutional, economic, or educational, have demonstrated capacity to reduce such division and support more durable coexistence.

AIM OF THE PAPER

The aim of this paper was to systematically review existing scholarly evidence on the relationship between ethnocentrism and social cohesion in multi-ethnic African societies, with particular attention to how such dynamics manifest both within individual states and across national borders, as illustrated by xenophobic hostility in South Africa.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- i. To examine the manifestations and drivers of ethnocentrism among ethnic nationalities within multi-ethnic African states.
- ii. To assess the effects of ethnocentrism on social cohesion, governance, and development outcomes in Africa.
- iii. To evaluate xenophobia in South Africa as a form of intra-African ethnocentrism directed at foreign nationals from other African countries.
- iv. To identify, from the reviewed evidence, mechanisms and interventions capable of mitigating ethnocentric division and strengthening social cohesion in multi-ethnic African societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature for this paper was done under conceptual review, empirical review and theoretical framework as follows:

Conceptual Review

The key concepts used in this paper are reviewed as follows:

Ethnocentrism

Sumner (1906) originated the term ethnocentrism to describe the outlook in which one's own group is treated as the centre of everything, with all other groups scaled and rated in reference to it, a definition that has endured as the starting point for subsequent scholarly treatment of the concept. Njoroge and Kirori (2014), applying this foundational view to Kenyan society, distinguish between cultural ethnocentrism, which rests on the belief that one's own norms and symbols are superior to those of other groups, and economic ethnocentrism, which treats other ethnic communities as rivals whose access to resources and opportunity ought to be restricted; their account extends Sumner's largely attitudinal formulation into a framework with observable political and economic consequences.

Sestito (2025) offers a further point of departure by treating ethnocentrism not as a fixed disposition but as a dynamic that intensifies under conditions of conflict, whereby heightened ethnic identification produces greater co-operation within the group without a corresponding extension of trust towards outsiders. These positions converge on the same essential claim, namely that ethnocentrism combines a belief in in-group superiority with practical exclusion of out-groups, even though they differ in emphasis, with Sumner concerned with attitude, Njoroge and Kirori with structural discrimination, and Sestito with conflict-driven intensification.

For the purposes of this paper, ethnocentrism is adopted as the tendency of members of an ethnic group to regard their own culture and interests as superior to those of other groups, a tendency that manifests both attitudinally and in the practical exclusion of out-groups from opportunity, following the combined positions of Sumner (1906) and Njoroge and Kirori (2014).

Brief History of Ethnocentrism Around the World and Africa

Ethnocentric sentiment has accompanied group life since early recorded history, with Sumner (1906) observing that the practice of judging outsiders against one's own customs recurs across societies irrespective of period or region, so that the term itself was coined to capture a pattern already ancient rather than a new social development. In the African context, van Staveren (2025) traces how the academic treatment of ethnic division gained particular prominence from 1997 onward, when Easterly and Levine introduced the ethnic fractionalisation variable into development economics and linked Africa's growth shortfall to the ethnic patchwork left by colonial boundary-making, a boundary-making process that grouped rival communities under single administrations and often relied on one group's elevation over others for purposes of indirect rule.

Njoroge and Kirori (2014) situate Kenya's post-independence political history within this same trajectory, showing how ethnic allegiance, first hardened under colonial classification, continued to determine access to land, public appointment, and political office well after 1963. Read together, these accounts indicate that ethnocentrism in Africa is not a recent phenomenon but one whose modern political salience was substantially shaped by colonial administrative practice and has persisted through the institutions inherited at independence, a historical trajectory this paper adopts as the basis for situating present-day ethnocentric dynamics on the continent.

Social Cohesion

Moustakas (2023) defines social cohesion in broad terms as the glue that binds societies together, mobilized as a set of collective attributes and behaviours mobilized by positive social relations, a sense of belonging, and an orientation towards the common good, while noting that considerable disagreement persists over which components properly belong within the concept.

Leininger et al. (2025), writing specifically on the African continent, narrow this broad formulation into a definition built around three attributes, namely inclusive identity, trust, and co-operation for the common good, each operating at both a horizontal level among citizens and a vertical level between citizens and the state; their approach was developed partly in response to the scarcity of social cohesion research grounded in African data and partly to permit measurement using Afrobarometer survey evidence. Where Moustakas offers a general sociological definition applicable across settings, Leininger et al. supply an mobilizing version suited to contexts of high inequality and recurrent conflict such as those found in many African states, and their definition is therefore better equipped to capture how ethnocentrism erodes both citizen-to-citizen trust and citizen-to-state confidence.

This paper accordingly adopted the definition offered by Leininger et al. (2025), understanding social cohesion as the combination of inclusive identity, trust, and co-operation for the common good operating horizontally among citizens and vertically between citizens and public institutions.

Multi-Ethnic Societies

Easterly and Levine (1997) mobilized multi-ethnic societies, particularly within the African context, as states composed of numerous distinct ethnic and linguistic communities brought under a single political authority through processes of colonial partition rather than through organic nation formation, a composition they measure using indices of ethnic mobilizing. Van Staveren (2025), reviewing decades of subsequent research built on this measure, cautions that the mobilizing index captures ethnic diversity as such but says little about the quality of relations between groups, so that two states with identical diversity scores may differ substantially in the degree of tension or accommodation between their constituent communities. Sestito (2025) applies this understanding empirically to thirty-six African countries, treating them as multi-ethnic settings in which sub-national identities remain politically salient and continue to shape co-operative and exclusionary behaviour depending on the presence or absence of conflict.

Combining the compositional emphasis of Easterly and Levine with van Staveren's caution against equating diversity with discord, this paper adopted a working definition of a multi-ethnic society as a state comprising several distinct ethnic communities, often assembled through colonial boundary-making rather than voluntary association, whose relations may range from co-operative to exclusionary depending on historical, political, and economic circumstance.

The Manifestations and Drivers of Ethnocentrism among Ethnic Nationalities within Multi-Ethnic African States

Ethnocentrism in African states manifests through electoral mobilized along ethnic lines, discriminatory allocation of public appointments and resources, competition over land between settled and migrant communities, and, in its most severe form, mobilized violence directed at rival ethnic groups. Kenya offers one of the most extensively documented cases of this pattern. Kagwanja (2009) traces the disputed presidential election of December 2007 to a long-standing practice of mobilizing ethnicity for intra-elite competition, in which political entrepreneurs from the Kikuyu and Luo communities, together with their allied ethnic blocs, mobilized supporters around communal rather than policy loyalties; the resulting post-election violence claimed more than a thousand lives and displaced several hundred thousand people within weeks.

Opondo (2014) extends this account historically, arguing that ethnic favouritism was already entrenched under President Jomo Kenyatta between 1963 and 1978 and persisted through the Moi and Kibaki administrations, so that the 2007/8 crisis represented the culmination of decades of ethnic patronage rather than an isolated event. Njoroge and Kirori (2014) corroborate this pattern at a societal level, showing that Kenyan citizens continue to report ethnic favouritism in employment, university placement, and public appointment as a routine feature of national life, with cultural ethnocentrism reinforcing economic ethnocentrism in a manner that channels loyalty towards kin networks rather than the state.

Competition between farming and pastoralist communities

A second recurring manifestation concerns competition between farming and pastoralist communities, particularly in Nigeria. Njoku et al. (2024), using multinomial regression on secondary conflict data from the Mid-Benue Trough, found that ethnicity exerted a stronger statistical effect on the lethality of pastoralist–farmer clashes than climate change, economic development, or population density, indicating that identity-based hostility between predominantly Fulani herders and non-Fulani farming communities amplifies violence beyond what resource competition alone would predict. This finding is significant because farmer–herder disputes in Nigeria are frequently framed in policy circles as purely environmental or economic conflicts, yet Njoku et al. demonstrate that the ethnic and religious classification of the disputing parties, Muslim Fulani herders against predominantly Christian or animist farming communities in the Middle Belt, independently drives fatality rates. A comparable dynamic is documented across the Sahel more broadly, where Cambridge-published comparative research on Plateau State in Nigeria and Central Darfur in Sudan shows that governments perceived to favour one ethnic category of land user over another intensify rather than resolve the underlying contest for territory.

Historical hardening of ethnic classification

A third manifestation is the historical hardening of ethnic classification through state administration, most starkly illustrated by Rwanda. Colonial authorities in Rwanda formalised the Hutu and Tutsi categories through identity documentation and differential access to education and administrative office, a classification that successive post-colonial governments continued to exploit for political mobilisation until it culminated in the 1994 genocide, during which close to a million people were killed within roughly a hundred days (Aslan, 2026). This

case illustrates that ethnocentrism in Africa is not confined to informal social prejudice but has, in specific instances, been embedded within the administrative architecture of the state itself, a pattern also evident in Sestito's (2025) finding, drawn from thirty-six African countries, that exposure to ethnic warfare measurably increases in-group identification and co-operative behaviour directed specifically at co-ethnics rather than at the national community.

Across these cases, several drivers recur with sufficient consistency to merit emphasis.

First, colonial administrative practice, whether through indirect rule in Kenya and Nigeria or direct ethnic classification in Rwanda, established the institutional and cognitive infrastructure on which later ethnocentric mobilisation was built (Njoroge & Kirori, 2014; Aslan, 2026).

Second, political competition for scarce state resources, including land, public office, and development spending, provides the immediate incentive for elites to mobilise ethnic constituencies, as demonstrated in the Kenyan case (Kagwanja, 2009; Opondo, 2014).

Third, resource scarcity interacting with pre-existing group boundaries, rather than resource scarcity alone, escalates disputes into ethnically framed violence, as the Nigerian farmer–herder evidence indicates (Njoku et al., 2024).

Fourth, conflict itself generates a self-reinforcing dynamic in which ethnic identification intensifies as a direct consequence of violence, producing the parochial co-operation documented by Sestito (2025) across the wider African continent.

These drivers operate cumulatively rather than in isolation, so that a colonial administrative legacy, contemporary elite competition, and resource pressure frequently combine within a single national setting to produce the ethnocentric outcomes observed across Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and comparable states.

The Effects of Ethnocentrism on Social Cohesion, Governance, and Development Outcomes in Africa

The consequences of ethnocentrism for African states extend across social relations, institutional governance, and measurable economic performance. On social cohesion, Leininger et al. (2025) define cohesion as the combination of inclusive identity, trust, and co-operation for the common good operating both among citizens and between citizens and the state, and their application of this framework to Afrobarometer survey data across African countries demonstrates that ethnically defined trust deficits reduce willingness to co-operate with fellow citizens from other groups even where formal legal equality exists.

This finding is consistent with Sestito's (2025) evidence that conflict-induced ethnic identification increases co-operation within a group while simultaneously narrowing the pool of people towards whom such co-operation extends, a process that leaves post-conflict societies with strong bonding ties but weak bridging ties across ethnic boundaries. The practical outcome of this narrowing is visible in Kenya, where Kagwanja (2009) shows that the 2007/8 crisis fractured cross-ethnic civic association built up over previous decades, with informal boycotts of ethnically identified businesses and residential displacement along communal lines persisting well beyond the immediate violence.

On governance, ethnocentrism undermines the impartiality that public institutions require to function effectively. Easterly and Levine (1997), in their now-established analysis of ethnic fractionalisation across sub-Saharan Africa, found that higher ethnic diversity correlates with lower schooling investment, underdeveloped financial systems, and distorted infrastructure spending, effects they attribute to the difficulty of sustaining collective public goods provision where political constituencies are organised around ethnic rather than national interests.

Van Staveren (2025), reviewing seventy-three subsequent empirical studies employing this fractionalisation variable, confirms that the association between ethnic diversity and weaker public goods outcomes remains one of the most consistently replicated findings in African development economics, although she cautions that the fractionalisation index measures diversity rather than the quality of inter-group relations, meaning that ethnocentric hostility rather than diversity itself is the operative mechanism. Opondo's (2014) account of Kenya provides a governance-level illustration of this mechanism, showing how successive administrations under Kenyatta, Moi, and Kibaki allocated senior civil service appointments disproportionately to co-ethnics, producing a pattern of institutional capture in which state resources were channelled through ethnic patronage networks rather than needs-based criteria.

On development outcomes, the economic costs of ethnocentric governance are measurable rather than speculative. Easterly and Levine (1997) attribute a substantial share of the growth gap between Africa and other developing regions between 1960 and 1989 to policies shaped by ethnic division, including underinvestment in education and inefficient allocation of foreign exchange. Njoku et al. (2024) provide a more localised illustration of these costs in the Mid-Benue Trough of Nigeria, where ethnically inflected pastoralist–farmer violence has repeatedly disrupted agricultural production in a region that supplies a considerable share of the country's food output, generating losses that extend beyond the immediate casualties of conflict into regional food security.

Similarly, Kagwanja (2009) notes that Kenya's tourism and horticultural export sectors, both central to national foreign exchange earnings, suffered sharp contraction in the months following the 2007/8 violence as investor confidence collapsed. Taken together, this evidence indicates that ethnocentrism operates as a mechanism that simultaneously weakens the social trust required for collective action, distorts governance towards particularistic rather than universal service delivery, and imposes direct and measurable costs on economic growth, thereby linking the social, political, and economic dimensions of underdevelopment on the continent rather than allowing them to be treated as separate phenomena.

Xenophobia in South Africa as a Form of Intra-African Ethnocentrism Directed at Foreign Nationals from Other African Countries

Xenophobia in South Africa constitutes a specific and well-documented instance of ethnocentrism operating not between indigenous ethnic groups within a single state but between South African nationals and migrants from other African countries, a distinction that positions it as a form of intra-continental rather than purely domestic ethnic prejudice. Niyitunga (2024) records that xenophobic violence has recurred since the early 2000s, intensifying sharply in May 2008 when nationwide attacks left twelve people dead and displaced tens of thousands of foreign nationals, and argues that this recurrence has directly undermined South Africa's post-2007 policy ambition of becoming a developmental state by disrupting the labour market and

service delivery contributions that migrants would otherwise provide. This violence has not receded with time.

The African Centre for Migration and Society (2025), drawing on data recorded through the Xenowatch monitoring platform, documents that violent incidents against foreign nationals peaked at fifty-one recorded cases in 2022, fell to twenty in 2023, and rose again thereafter, alongside a marked increase in denial of services, extortion, and eviction targeted specifically at migrants and refugees between 2022 and 2024.

The specificity of this hostility to national rather than racial or purely ethnic categories is what marks it as intra-African ethnocentrism. Mlambo (2023) frames the phenomenon as involving three interacting parties, namely the migrant, the South African state, and the local citizen, and demonstrates that hostility is directed disproportionately at nationals of Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Somalia rather than at foreign nationals in general, indicating that the underlying logic mirrors ethnocentric in-group favouritism transposed onto the category of national origin. Chekenya (2026), applying econometric analysis to migration flows from Zimbabwe into South Africa, found that increased migration is associated with heightened ethnic polarisation and reduced tolerance among host communities, providing quantitative support for the claim that demographic pressure interacts with pre-existing in-group identification to produce hostility, in a manner directly analogous to the ethnocentric dynamics documented within Kenya and Nigeria.

Chisadza (2025), using successive waves of the South African Social Attitudes Survey between 2003 and 2018, further shows that citizens dissatisfied with government service delivery are more likely to hold anti-immigrant attitudes, particularly the belief that migrants increase crime and reduce access to jobs, suggesting that xenophobic sentiment functions partly as a displaced response to institutional underperformance rather than a reaction to migrants' actual conduct.

The gap between perception and evidence in this context is considerable. Kaziboni et al. (2022) systematically tested the most common justifications offered for anti-immigrant hostility in South Africa, including claims that migrants disproportionately commit crime, occupy jobs that would otherwise go to citizens, and place strain on public services, and found that available data do not support any of these claims at the scale commonly asserted, describing the persistence of such beliefs as a pattern of scapegoating rather than an evidence-based response to migration.

Gordon (2024) adds a further dimension by showing that anti-immigrant sentiment intensified during the Coronavirus pandemic not primarily through fear of contagion but through pre-existing narratives of relative deprivation, in which economic anxiety was reinterpreted as a grievance against foreign nationals. The practical manifestations of this hostility are concrete rather than abstract: attacks on foreign-owned spaza shops and informal trading operations in townships across Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, selective enforcement of municipal by-laws against migrant traders, and the denial of healthcare access to non-nationals recorded under the category of health xenophobia by the African Centre for Migration and Society (2025).

As a whole, the South African case demonstrates that ethnocentrism on the African continent is not confined to conflict between a state's own ethnic nationalities but extends outward to structure how citizens of one African country treat citizens of another, undermining the continent's stated commitment to regional solidarity and free movement even as such hostility is frequently misattributed to economic competition alone.

Mechanisms and Interventions Capable of Mitigating Ethnocentric Division and Strengthening Social Cohesion in Multi-Ethnic African Societies

The evidence reviewed above points towards several interventions with a demonstrated or plausible capacity to reduce ethnocentric division, the first of which concerns the correction of institutional quality and impartiality in resource allocation. Van Staveren (2025) notes that the negative association between ethnic diversity and development outcomes operates chiefly through weak public goods provision rather than through diversity itself, implying that strengthening the impartiality of civil service recruitment, budget allocation, and infrastructure spending, so that ethnic origin ceases to determine access to state resources, would directly address the governance channel through which ethnocentrism damages development. Leininger et al. (2025) support this direction by showing that vertical trust between citizens and state institutions forms one of the three core attributes of social cohesion in African contexts, meaning that reforms perceived by citizens as fair and non-discriminatory carry cohesion benefits beyond their immediate administrative purpose.

A second mechanism concerns the correction of misinformation that sustains ethnocentric and xenophobic hostility. Kaziboni et al. (2022) demonstrate that a considerable proportion of anti-immigrant sentiment in South Africa rests on beliefs about crime and job displacement that are not supported by available evidence, indicating that structured public information campaigns and media accountability regarding the accuracy of claims about migrants could plausibly reduce scapegoating, provided such campaigns are paired with visible improvement in service delivery, since Chisadza (2025) shows that hostility is closely tied to dissatisfaction with government performance rather than to migrants themselves. Addressing the underlying grievance, rather than the immigrant population blamed for it, therefore appears necessary alongside any communication-based intervention.

A third mechanism draws on the finding, established outside Africa but relevant to it, that the association between diversity and reduced cohesion is substantially explained by neighbourhood deprivation rather than diversity as such. Chan and Kawalerowicz (2024), examining diverse communities in Britain, found that apparent trade-offs between ethnic diversity and generalised trust, volunteering, and neighbourhood cohesion diminish considerably once local economic deprivation is accounted for, suggesting that targeted investment in deprived and ethnically mixed areas, rather than measures aimed at reducing diversity itself, is the more effective route to sustaining cohesion. Applied to African cities experiencing both ethnic plurality and high poverty, such as the townships in which South African xenophobic violence recurs most frequently (African Centre for Migration and Society, 2025), this finding implies that economic upgrading of informal settlements could reduce the resource competition that both domestic ethnic tension and anti-migrant hostility feed upon.

A fourth mechanism concerns structured intergroup contact. Van Assche et al. (2023) found that perceptions of local diversity and segregation, rather than actual demographic composition, determine whether residents withdraw from civic life, indicating that reducing residential and economic segregation between ethnic or national groups, thereby increasing routine contact, can lower the perceived threat that sustains ethnocentric withdrawal. This has direct relevance for Kenya, where Njoroge and Kirori (2014) recommend deliberate integration of ethnic communities within schools, workplaces, and residential areas as a means of reducing the cultural and economic ethnocentrism they documented, and for South Africa, where Mlambo (2023) argues that formal channels for regularising the status of migrants, combined with community-level dialogue between citizens and foreign nationals, would reduce the ambiguity that currently allows hostility to escalate into violence. Finally, Niyitunga (2024) recommends that South Africa treat migrant economic contribution as integral to its developmental state ambitions rather than as a threat to be managed, a reframing that, if adopted in public policy and political rhetoric, would address the political incentive structure that currently rewards anti-immigrant mobilisation. Collectively, these mechanisms indicate that mitigating ethnocentric division in Africa requires simultaneous attention to institutional impartiality, factual public communication, targeted economic investment in deprived and diverse areas, structured intergroup contact, and a shift in political incentives away from ethnic and national scapegoating.

Empirical Review

Njoku et al. (2024) examined the socio-ecological drivers of the pastoralist–farmer conflict in Nigeria's Mid-Benue Trough, introducing ethnicity as an explanatory variable alongside climate, economic, and demographic factors. The study area covers Benue and Taraba States in central Nigeria, a zone that has experienced recurrent violent clashes between predominantly Fulani herders and non-Fulani farming communities. The authors do not name a single theoretical framework explicitly, but the study proceeds from a resource-conflict perspective in which ethnic identity is treated as an independent factor operating alongside ecological pressure rather than as a mere by-product of resource scarcity.

The research design is quantitative and correlational, drawing on secondary geo-referenced conflict incident data rather than a primary survey; the sample therefore consists of the full set of documented pastoralist-farmer conflict events recorded within the study area, analysed through total enumeration rather than a probability sampling technique applied to human respondents. Data were collected from existing conflict databases and satellite-derived land surface temperature indices, and analysed using multinomial regression. The major finding is that ethnicity exerted a statistically significant effect on the lethality of conflict incidents ($p = .038$, $\chi^2 = 16.339$), with lethal incidents concentrated in areas affected by climate stress (87.4%), low economic development (77.3%), and low population density (58.9%).

The authors concluded that ethnic polarisation, rather than resource scarcity alone, is the strongest predictor of conflict lethality in the region. This study is commended for quantifying a factor often treated only descriptively in the herder-farmer literature, though its reliance on secondary incident data limits insight into individual-level attitudes; the present paper addressed this gap by drawing on individual and household-level evidence to complement the incident-based approach.

Sestito (2025) investigated identity conflict, ethnocentrism, and social cohesion using a novel dataset on ethnic warfare across the African continent. The study area spans thirty-six African countries, drawing on four rounds of Afrobarometer surveys (rounds 3 to 6) covering the period from March 2005 to September 2015. The theoretical framework rests on the ethnocentric or parochial altruism hypothesis, according to which exposure to inter-group conflict strengthens ethnic self-identification and increases co-operative behaviour directed specifically towards co-ethnics rather than the wider national community.

The research design was quantitative, employing an Ordinary Least Squares regression with cell-district and time fixed effects to compare individuals exposed and unexposed to ethnic conflict within the same locality. The sample comprises a large cross-national pool of individual respondents drawn from nationally representative Afrobarometer surveys within each of the thirty-six countries, geographically subdivided into cells of 0.5 by 0.5 degrees and matched to conflict events recorded through the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, which mapped more than 1,900 armed actors to specific ethnic groups.

Data were collected through household survey interviews combined with geo-coded secondary conflict event records. The major finding is a positive relationship between exposure to ethnic conflict and measures of social cohesion, but one confined to co-ethnic in-group behaviour, including attendance at community meetings, participation in collective action, and membership of community associations, with no corresponding increase in cross-ethnic trust. The study concluded that conflict strengthens bonding social capital while eroding the bridging ties necessary for national cohesion.

This work is commended for its methodological rigour in linking geo-coded conflict data to survey-based cohesion measures, though it stops short of examining the governance and policy consequences of this bonding-bridging imbalance, a gap the present paper addressed by connecting ethnocentric dynamics directly to governance and development outcomes.

Chisadza (2025) examined the association between anti-immigrant attitudes and quality of life in South Africa, considering access to public services, social interaction, and national identity. The study area is South Africa nationally, rather than a single city or province. The theoretical framework draws principally on intergroup contact theory, which holds that sustained interaction between citizens and foreign nationals can reduce prejudice, alongside a competing perspective linking anti-immigrant sentiment to economic competition and government dissatisfaction.

The research design was quantitative and longitudinal in structure, employing regression analysis on repeated cross-sectional survey data. The sample is drawn from successive waves of the South African Social Attitudes Survey, a nationally representative, repeated cross-sectional survey of South African adults aged sixteen years and above, conducted annually by the Human Sciences Research Council since 2003, with the analysis covering waves from 2003 to 2018; sampling within each wave follows the survey's established nationally representative design. Data were collected through structured household interviews administered as part of the annual survey rounds.

The major finding is that citizens dissatisfied with government performance were not necessarily more hostile towards immigrants in general, but hostility was strongly associated with specific beliefs that immigrants increase crime, take jobs, and strain public resources, beliefs the author identifies as largely unsupported by evidence. The study concludes that xenophobia in South Africa functions partly as a displaced response to institutional underperformance rather than a direct reaction to the presence of foreign nationals. This study is commended for isolating the specific beliefs driving hostility rather than treating xenophobia as an undifferentiated attitude, though it relies on data no more recent than 2018; the present paper addresses this temporal gap by incorporating more recent incident-level evidence from 2022 to 2024.

Nyam et al. (2026) applied a systems thinking approach to identifying strategies for mitigating xenophobia in South Africa for socio-economic development. The study area is South Africa, with stakeholders drawn from across the country rather than a single locality. The theoretical framework is explicitly the Driver-Pressures-States-Impacts-Responses model combined with Causal Loop Diagramming, tools developed within systems thinking to trace the causal pathways linking social, economic, cultural, and institutional drivers to outcomes and policy responses. The research design was a mixed-methods study combining primary survey data with secondary sources. The sample was drawn purposively from key institutional and community stakeholders, including universities, government departments, civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, local communities, and private sector actors such as small and medium enterprises and street vendors, using a purposive rather than probability sampling technique; the authors note that certain relevant stakeholder groups, such as farmers, were excluded owing to time constraints.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire containing both closed and open-ended items, administered between February and April 2024, capturing respondents' socio-economic characteristics, their classification of xenophobia, and their perceptions of its cultural, social, economic, political, and institutional drivers. The major finding is that xenophobia in South Africa results from interlinked feedback loops in which competition for scarce resources, weak institutional response capacity, and negative social narratives reinforce one another rather than operating as isolated causes. The study concluded that effective mitigation requires co-ordinated intervention across multiple system levels rather than isolated policy measures targeting any single driver.

This study is commended for moving beyond linear causal explanations to model reinforcing feedback between drivers of xenophobia, though its stakeholder-based sample excludes the perspectives of affected migrants themselves and of certain economic sectors; the present paper addresses this gap by drawing together governance, economic, and migrant-focused evidence to provide a more complete account of both the drivers of ethnocentric hostility and the interventions capable of addressing it.

Theoretical Framework

This paper was built on the theoretical framework of Social Identity Theory as reviewed below:

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory was propounded by Henri Tajfel and later developed jointly with John Turner in 1979. The theory rests on several assumptions that Tajfel first demonstrated through minimal-group experiments in which individuals were divided into arbitrary categories with no prior history or material stake between them.

The central assumption is that individuals engage in social categorisation, sorting themselves and others into groups, and derive part of their self-concept from membership in these groups through a process of social identification. A further assumption holds that individuals engage in social comparison between their own group and relevant out-groups in order to achieve positive distinctiveness, meaning a favourable sense of their group's standing relative to others. Because self-esteem is bound up with the perceived status of the group, individuals are motivated towards in-group favouritism and, where group boundaries are salient, towards out-group derogation, even in the absence of any real conflict of interest between the groups concerned (Jian, 2024). This last assumption is what distinguishes Social Identity Theory from purely material or resource-based explanations of intergroup hostility, since it demonstrates that discriminatory behaviour can arise from group membership alone, prior to and independent of any competition over land, employment, or political office.

The strength of the theory lies first in the depth of empirical support behind it, built up over decades of experimental and field research showing that in-group favouritism emerges reliably even under minimal and artificial group conditions, which gives the theory a firm evidential base rather than a purely speculative one (Jian, 2024).

A second strength is its continuing application to real-world intergroup settings well beyond the laboratory, including recent econometric work on ethnic conflict and cohesion in Africa, where the same logic of heightened in-group identification and reduced out-group trust following conflict exposure has been demonstrated using large cross-national survey data (Sestito, 2025).

A third strength is the theory's capacity to explain why hostility towards an out-group can persist even where the material justification for that hostility, such as claims that a group takes jobs or increases crime, is not supported by evidence, since the theory locates the source of hostility in identity maintenance rather than in accurate threat assessment, a pattern documented directly in the South African case (Kaziboni et al., 2022).

Against these strengths, the theory carries clear weaknesses.

It was developed and validated principally through controlled experiments involving artificially created groups, which limits its capacity, on its own, to capture the layered and historically constructed nature of African ethnic identities, many of which were hardened through specific colonial administrative practice rather than through spontaneous psychological categorisation alone (Njoroge & Kirori, 2014). The theory also under-specifies the role of material and

ecological conditions, such as land scarcity or climate stress, that interact with group identity to determine when and where hostility becomes violent, a limitation evident when set against evidence that ethnicity operates alongside, rather than independently of, ecological and economic pressure in producing lethal conflict (Njoku et al., 2024).

A further weakness is the theory's relatively static treatment of group boundaries, which pays insufficient attention to the way political elites actively manufacture and harden ethnic categories for strategic purposes, as occurred in the deliberate mobilisation of ethnic constituencies during Kenya's 2007/8 crisis and in the administrative construction of the Hutu and Tutsi categories that preceded the Rwandan genocide (Kagwanja, 2009; Aslan, 2026).

Applied to this paper, Social Identity Theory offers a coherent explanation for the manifestations of ethnocentrism documented across multi-ethnic African states, since the discriminatory allocation of appointments and resources along ethnic lines in Kenya, the ethnic framing of pastoralist-farmer disputes in Nigeria, and the extreme out-group derogation that culminated in genocide in Rwanda can each be read as instances of positive distinctiveness being pursued through the elevation of one's own ethnic category at the expense of another.

The theory extends with equal force to xenophobia in South Africa, where foreign African nationals are categorised as a national out-group against which South African citizens define a positive collective identity, producing hostility that persists even where the underlying economic justifications advanced for it do not withstand evidence, precisely as the theory would predict where identity maintenance rather than material threat is the operative driver. The theory also accounts for the effect of ethnocentrism on social cohesion identified in this review, since it explains why conflict-induced identification strengthens bonding trust within the in-group while simultaneously narrowing the bridging trust extended to out-groups, producing cohesive communities that nonetheless remain fragmented at the national level.

Finally, the theory informs the mechanisms proposed for mitigating ethnocentric division, since interventions built around structured intergroup contact and the fostering of an inclusive superordinate identity, whether a shared South African or shared African identity that recategorises citizens and migrants, or members of different ethnic nationalities, within a single overarching group, follow directly from the theory's own logic that redrawing the boundary between in-group and out-group is the most direct route to reducing the favouritism and derogation that ethnocentrism produces.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted a systematic review methodology, structured in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021), which builds on the original PRISMA guideline (Moher et al., 2009). The review proceeded through four stages, namely identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion, each documented to allow the process to be traced and, in principle, replicated.

At the identification stage, records were located through structured search-engine and database queries built around the core concepts of ethnocentrism, social cohesion, multi-ethnic societies, and xenophobia, together with country- and case-specific terms such as Kenya, Nigeria,

Rwanda, and South Africa. Reference lists of retrieved studies were further examined to identify additional records through citation snowballing.

At the screening stage, titles and abstracts were assessed against the objectives of the paper, and records were excluded where they were not scholarly in origin, including blogs, general websites, newspapers, and organisational pages without a named and traceable author, or where the named author or the outlet could not be independently verified.

At the eligibility stage, the full text or full abstract of the remaining records was examined against defined inclusion criteria, namely that a source be a peer-reviewed journal article, book chapter, or comparably vetted scholarly output, that it report identifiable authorship, and that it bear directly on one of the paper's four objectives. Records were excluded at this stage where methodological detail was insufficient for empirical citation, where authorship or the publishing outlet could not be verified, where the content substantially duplicated an already-included study, or where the source was not peer-reviewed. The final set of records meeting all criteria was retained for narrative synthesis and citation throughout the paper.

Justification for the Approach

A systematic review process was considered appropriate for this paper because the literature on ethnocentrism and social cohesion in Africa is dispersed across sociology, economics, political science, and development studies, with no single body of work bringing these strands together. The PRISMA framework was adopted specifically because it is the most widely recognised standard for transparent and traceable evidence synthesis (Page et al., 2021), and because the paper's own requirement, that every citation be verifiable and drawn from an identifiable scholarly source, is best served by a structured screening process that documents why sources were included or excluded rather than a narrative review compiled without a defined trail.

Limitations

Several limitations attend this application of the method. Searches were conducted through general search engines rather than a single curated bibliographic database such as Scopus or Web of Science, which may have omitted indexed literature that database-specific search syntax would otherwise surface. Screening and eligibility assessment were conducted by a single reviewer rather than the two independent reviewers recommended under PRISMA guidance (Page et al., 2021), which increases the risk of selection bias relative to a dual-screened review. The exclusion of grey literature, institutional reports, and news sources, while consistent with the paper's citation requirements, may have removed some current, practice-based evidence on fast-moving events such as xenophobic incidents in South Africa. Finally, the restriction to English-language and readily accessible sources may have excluded relevant scholarship published in other languages or held behind access barriers that could not be resolved within the scope of this review.

Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of sources for this systematic review (adapted from Page et al., 2021).

IDENTIFICATION

Records identified through search-engine and database searching (n = 220)	Additional records identified through citation snowballing of reference lists in included studies (n = 15)
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Records after duplicate and near- duplicate records removed (n = 150)
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SCREENING

Records screened by title and abstract (n = 150)	Records excluded (n = 95) Not relevant to objectives; non- scholarly source (blog, website, newspaper, or organisation); or author not independently traceable
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ELIGIBILITY

Full-text / full-abstract articles assessed for eligibility (n = 55)	Full-text articles excluded (n = 32) Insufficient methodological detail (10) Authorship/source not verifiable (8) Substantial duplication with an already-included study (9) Non-peer-reviewed source (5)
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INCLUDED

Studies included in the qualitative synthesis of this review (n = 23)
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DISCUSSION

This paper set out to examine the manifestations and drivers of ethnocentrism among ethnic nationalities within multi-ethnic African states, the effects of ethnocentrism on social cohesion, governance, and development, the specific case of xenophobia in South Africa as a form of intra-African ethnocentrism, and the mechanisms available for mitigating ethnocentric division. Read against one another, the studies reviewed do not always agree on emphasis, and interrogating these disagreements clarifies what the evidence, taken as a whole, actually supports.

On the question of manifestations and drivers, a tension emerges between accounts that treat ethnic mobilisation as the product of deliberate elite manipulation and accounts that treat it as a structural or ecological outcome. Kagwanja (2009) and Opondo (2014) both locate the origin of Kenya's 2007/8 crisis in the instrumentalisation of ethnicity by political elites competing for state power, implying that ethnocentrism is, in large part, manufactured from above rather than spontaneously generated among ordinary citizens. Njoroge and Kirori (2014), by contrast, document ethnocentrism as a lived societal condition, present in everyday decisions about employment and university placement, which suggests that ethnic favouritism operates independently of any single election cycle or elite strategy.

Njoku et al. (2024) complicate both positions by showing, through multinomial regression on conflict incident data from Nigeria's Mid-Benue Trough, that ethnicity exerts a statistically significant effect on conflict lethality even after climate stress, economic development, and population density are accounted for, which indicates that ethnic identity functions as an independent driver of violence rather than merely a label attached after the fact to disputes that are, at root, about land or water. Sestito (2025) adds a further complication by demonstrating that the causal arrow can run in the opposite direction, since exposure to ethnic conflict itself intensifies ethnic identification and in-group cooperation.

In sum, these findings suggest that ethnocentrism in Africa is not adequately captured by a single directional model in which either elite manipulation, historical grievance, or resource competition operates alone; rather, the evidence points to a self-reinforcing cycle in which pre-existing ethnic categorisation provides the raw material that elites exploit, resource pressure provides the occasion, and the resulting conflict itself deepens the ethnic identification that produced it in the first place.

On the effects of ethnocentrism on social cohesion, governance, and development, Easterly and Levine (1997) offer the earliest and most widely cited claim, namely that ethnic fractionalisation across sub-Saharan Africa explains a measurable share of the region's growth shortfall through underinvestment in schooling and distorted public spending. Van Staveren (2025), reviewing seventy-three subsequent studies employing this same variable, cautions that fractionalisation measures diversity as such rather than the quality of relations between groups, meaning that Easterly and Levine's finding, while statistically robust, risks being misread as evidence that diversity itself is harmful rather than evidence that ethnocentric governance practices built upon diversity are harmful.

This distinction matters practically: two ethnically diverse states could, in principle, achieve very different development outcomes depending on whether public office and resource allocation are distributed on an ethnic or a needs-based footing, a point illustrated concretely by Opondo's (2014) account of how successive Kenyan administrations under Kenyatta, Moi, and Kibaki channelled civil service appointments towards co-ethnics rather than towards the most qualified candidates nationally. Leininger et al. (2025) resolve part of this tension by defining social cohesion in terms of inclusive identity, trust, and co-operation operating both horizontally among citizens and vertically between citizens and the state, a definition that allows the governance mechanism, rather than diversity itself, to be identified as the operative variable.

Sestito's (2025) finding that conflict strengthens bonding cohesion within ethnic groups while eroding bridging cohesion across them further specifies how this mechanism operates in practice: a state can appear cohesive at the level of individual communities, each rich in internal trust and mutual assistance, while remaining fragmented and ungovernable at the national level, precisely the pattern documented in Kenya's post-2007 recovery, where communal associational life persisted even as cross-ethnic civic co-operation, noted by Kagwanja (2009), did not.

On xenophobia in South Africa, the reviewed studies converge more than they diverge, though the point of convergence is itself worth interrogating. Chekenya (2026) frames rising hostility as a response to increased migration flows, particularly from Zimbabwe, associating demographic pressure with heightened ethnic polarisation, an account that implies xenophobia is, at least in part, a rational response to a genuinely changing social environment. Chisadza (2025), however, complicates this reading by showing that hostility correlates more strongly with dissatisfaction over government service delivery than with immigration itself, suggesting that migrants function as a proxy target for grievances whose true source lies elsewhere.

Kaziboni et al. (2022) sharpen this point further by demonstrating that the specific justifications most commonly offered for hostility, namely that migrants increase crime and displace local workers, are not supported by the evidence available, which means that Chekenya's migration-flow explanation, while statistically associated with polarisation, cannot be read as evidence that migrants pose the material threat popularly attributed to them. Mlambo's (2023) three-party framing, involving the migrant, the state, and the local citizen, usefully locates the source of this gap in weak institutional governance of migration status rather than in migrants' conduct, a reading consistent with Niyitunga's (2024) argument that xenophobia has itself undermined the developmental state project it is often, incorrectly, blamed for protecting.

The practical illustration of this dynamic is visible in the recorded pattern of xenophobic discrimination between 2022 and 2024, where violent incidents rose and fell independently of any corresponding change in the size of the migrant population, moving instead in step with periods of heightened political rhetoric and service delivery protest (African Centre for Migration and Society, 2025). Gordon's (2024) finding that pandemic-era hostility was driven by relative deprivation rather than fear of contagion offers a further concrete illustration of the same underlying pattern, namely that anti-immigrant sentiment in South Africa tracks economic and institutional grievance more closely than it tracks the objective behaviour of foreign nationals.

On mechanisms for mitigation, Chan and Kawalerowicz (2024) and Van Assche et al. (2023), working outside Africa, both find that the apparent association between diversity and reduced cohesion is substantially explained by local deprivation and perceived rather than actual segregation, implying that economic investment in mixed and deprived areas offers a more direct route to cohesion than any attempt to manage diversity as such. Nyam et al. (2026), applying a systems thinking approach within South Africa itself, arrive at a compatible though more structurally elaborated conclusion, showing that xenophobia results from reinforcing feedback between resource competition, weak institutional capacity, and hostile social narratives, which implies that no single lever, whether economic, informational, or institutional, will be sufficient on its own. Read together, these studies caution against interventions that treat ethnocentrism or xenophobia as a matter of attitude alone, correctable through information campaigns, since Kaziboni et al.'s (2022) evidence that myth-correction has not, on its own, halted xenophobic violence in South Africa suggests that factual correction must be paired with the material and institutional reforms that Chan and Kawalerowicz (2024) and Nyam et al. (2026) each identify as necessary.

The theoretical framework adopted in this paper, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), provides the organising logic that ties these four sets of findings together rather than leaving them as separate empirical observations. The theory's core assumption, that individuals derive self-esteem from favourable comparison between their own group and relevant out-groups, directly accounts for why ethnic favouritism in Kenya's civil service (Opondo, 2014) and hostility towards migrants in South Africa (Chisadza, 2025; Kaziboni et al., 2022) follow the same underlying logic despite operating at different scales, one intra-state and the other cross-border: in both cases, a group boundary is defended even where, as Kaziboni et al. (2022) demonstrate for South Africa, no material justification for that defence can be substantiated.

The theory's account of in-group favouritism as psychologically self-sustaining, rather than dependent on real conflict of interest, explains why Chisadza's (2025) and Gordon's (2024) findings on displaced grievance make theoretical sense: hostility persists because it protects group standing, not because it reflects an accurate assessment of migrants' impact. The theory's implicit distinction between bonding within the in-group and exclusion of the out-group further clarifies Sestito's (2025) empirical finding that conflict increases cohesion within ethnic groups while reducing it across them, providing a psychological mechanism for a pattern that purely economic models such as Easterly and Levine's (1997) can document statistically but cannot, on their own, explain.

Finally, the theory's proposition that redrawing group boundaries through a shared superordinate identity reduces intergroup hostility offers the conceptual basis for the interventions recommended by Van Assche et al. (2023) and Nyam et al. (2026), both of which point towards structured contact and inclusive institutional narratives as central to any durable solution. At the same time, the limitations of the theory identified earlier, namely its comparative inattention to material and ecological conditions, are precisely what the findings of Njoku et al. (2024) and van Staveren (2025) supply, so that the paper's use of Social Identity Theory alongside empirical evidence on resource competition and institutional quality produces an account of African ethnocentrism that is psychologically grounded without being economically or historically naive.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined ethnocentrism and social cohesion in multi-ethnic African societies, tracing its manifestations and drivers, its effects on cohesion, governance, and development, its specific expression as xenophobia in South Africa, and the mechanisms available for its mitigation. The evidence reviewed shows that ethnocentrism in Africa is neither a simple residue of colonial classification nor a purely elite-manufactured phenomenon, but a self-reinforcing process in which historical ethnic categorisation, elite political competition, and resource pressure interact to produce discrimination, and in some cases violence, that in turn deepens the very ethnic identification from which it arose.

This same dynamic weakens social cohesion not by eliminating trust altogether but by concentrating it within ethnic in-groups while eroding the bridging trust that governance and development require, with measurable consequences for public goods provision and economic growth. Xenophobia in South Africa was shown to be a specific instance of this same logic operating across national rather than intra-state ethnic boundaries, sustained less by the actual conduct of migrants than by institutional grievance and unsubstantiated narrative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. African governments should institutionalise merit-based and transparent criteria for public appointments, contracts, and development spending, since the evidence reviewed shows that ethnic patronage in civil service allocation, rather than ethnic diversity itself, is what erodes governance quality and depresses development outcomes independent oversight bodies with power to audit appointment and procurement patterns along ethnic lines would give this recommendation practical effect.
2. South African authorities and civil society organisations should prioritise correcting the specific factual claims that sustain xenophobic hostility, particularly those linking migrants to crime and job displacement, while simultaneously addressing the service delivery failures underlying source of displaced grievance, since myth-correction alone has not halted xenophobic violence where institutional dissatisfaction remains unaddressed.
3. Mitigation efforts should combine structured intergroup contact with targeted economic investment in ethnically mixed and deprived communities, following the finding that apparent trade-offs between diversity and cohesion diminish once local deprivation is addressed and should be pursued alongside a shared national or continental identity narrative that recategorises citizens and migrants within an inclusive superordinate group, consistent with the redrawing of group boundaries that Social Identity Theory identifies as necessary for reducing in-group favouritism and out-group derogation.

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