The process of educational expansion and the demographic process of generational replacement would have ongoing liberalization effects and therefore lead to a growth of ethnic tolerance. This was the prediction of Hyman and Sheatsley stated in 1956. Nearly half a century later there is little empirical evidence for a rising support of the implementation of racial or ethnic equality principles (Schuman et al., 1997). Ethnic group identifications and ethnic exclusionism still seems to be one of the major reasons for political conflicts around the world and have reached even more actuality through the September 11 attacks and their political consequences. The concept of ethnic attitudes is one of the main components of ethnic identity (Rotheram & Phinney, 1987). According to the conception of Fishbein and Ajzen belief and attitude are the starting points in developing behavioural intention and behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen &
Fishbein, 1980). Hence, unfavourable behaviour against members of other ethnic groups is based on negative attitudes.

There are numerous national studies about reasons for ethnic exclusionism and the circumstances under which they are developed. In some of these studies the students’ views on social and economic politics, such as nationalism, support for right-wing parties and dissatisfaction with the political regime, were found to be strongly connected to attitudes towards the rights of immigrants. For example, in a study analyzing the ideological and social structures of voters of a right-wing party in Flemish Belgium Billiet and De Witte (1995) and Billiet et al. (2001) confirmed the relationship between voting for that party and nationalism. A study of Knigge (1998) traced the evolution of right-wing extremism, conceptualized as latent electoral support for extreme right-wing parties. According to this study rising levels of immigration and public dissatisfaction with the political regime significantly facilitated right-wing extremism.

There are some studies, which focus not on ethnic exclusionism but on ethnocentrism (Adorno et al., 1969; Billiet, Eisinga & Scheepers, 1996) ascertaining that the feelings of pride and superiority towards the own nation is strongly related to negative attitudes towards members of other ethnic groups. In a comparative study about nationalistic attitudes and ethnic exclusionism in 22 countries Coenders focused on the relationship between nationalistic attitudes and ethnic exclusionism, with interesting results (2001). According to his study, a higher level of patriotism was related to stronger exclusionism of immigrants only in Germany and Japan, whereas in other countries this relationship was either reversed or not significant. Patriotism generally seems to be related to actual national achievements with regard to the national economy and the countries political influence in the world. Coenders (2001) found the highest average level of patriotism in the United States and a much lower level in the eastern European countries. Due to their special roles during the Second World War Germany and Japan seem to be exceptional cases.

According to the theory of economic threat (e.g. Fetzer, 2000), the subjective individual perception of economic threat is an important factor in influencing the attitudes towards immigrants. This was reported by Watts (1996) in his study about political xenophobia in Germany. Another German study (Kracke et al., 1998) came to similar conclusions. Many studies analyzed the perception that immigrants take jobs away from people born in the country (e.g. Klein-Allermann et al., 1995; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Legge, 1996). Fetzer (2000), in his research on public attitudes towards immigration in the United States, France and Germany, examined the strength of three major explanations of opposition to immigrants: marginality, economic self-interest and contact. Cultural and economic threats were important significant variables in his analyses. Conversely, Winkler (2003) stated in his paper on reasons for negative attitudes towards immigrants that the influence of relative economic deprivation becomes very small when controlling for social circumstances, contacts with people from other countries and patriotism.

Interaction or contact with immigrants was found to be important in both Fetzer’s and Winkler’s research. According to the contact hypothesis (see Jonas, 1998), the interaction with people from other ethnic or cultural groups but from the same social status groups may lead to more positive attitudes towards immigrants. If the contact is between people from different status groups, this may lead to more negative attitudes.