Intercultural contact, knowledge of Islam, and prejudice against muslims in Australia

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ABSTRACT

This article empirically investigates the relationship between intercultural contact, factual and self-reported knowledge of Islam, and prejudice against Muslims in Australia. We propose an original measure of factual knowledge of Islam, based on the measurement of political sophistication, used alongside more established measures of intercultural contact and self-reported knowledge. The results show that possessing more knowledge about Islam and having more contact with Muslims is associated with less prejudice against Muslims regardless of whether an individual identifies or not with conservative parties (such as the Liberal–National coalition), whether they are older or younger, female or male, or more or less educated or religious. Moreover, factual knowledge and self-reported knowledge are found to have different effects on prejudice: whereas factual knowledge is associated with less prejudice, self-reported knowledge tends to be associated with more prejudice. Subsequently, we use mediation analysis to clarify the empirical and theoretical relationships between intercultural contact, factual knowledge, and prejudice against Muslims.

Introduction

In the current global environment of heightened risk of conflicts, refugee flows, and economic insecurities, intercultural relations seem under more pressure than ever before (Mansouri, 2015). Nothing captures intercultural tensions and other contemporary social anxieties, and their attendant moral panics, better than the rising fear of Islam and Muslims, no longer confined to right-wing groups (Lee et al., 2009; Bleich, 2011). This fear has been consistently on the rise since the September 11 attacks of 2001 (Vertigans, 2010). Islamophobia, the unfounded hostility towards and fear of Islam and Muslims (Allen, 2010), is therefore a crucial point of debate in many multicultural democracies.

Various factors may explain the rising hostility towards Muslims, in particular those living in the West. The political context undoubtedly matters (Said, 1978; Mansouri et al., 2015). Indeed, academic research (Werbner, 2005) and opinion polls have shown that the growing anxiety about terrorism related to the so-called 'Islamic State', as well as the asylum seeker crises that followed the instability in the Middle East and North Africa, amplified concerns about Muslims in Europe, North America, and Australia (see, for example, Chalabi, 2015; Hassan, 2015; Booth, 2016; Vergani & Tacchi, 2016). These concerns have triggered intergroup anxiety (Hopkins & Shook, 2017) and increased perceived threat (Vedder et al., 2016), which have been found to be associated with prejudice against Muslims, especially in contexts where Muslims are conflated with immigrants by the majority.

Out-group knowledge is one of the most consistent individual-level predictors of negative attitudes towards other religious and

ethnic groups across different country contexts (see Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008; Meeusen et al., 2013; Czerwionka et al., 2015). Recent research suggests that corrective factual information about Islam may cause a positive shift in the ratings of Islam, especially among those who initially viewed Islam more negatively than they did Judaism and Christianity (Moritz, Göritz, Kühn, Brooke, Krieger, Röhlinger, & Zimmerer, 2017). In this article, we extend this line of research by looking at the relationships between prejudice against Muslims and different types of knowledge of Islam and Muslims. Out-group knowledge can be oper-ationalized in different ways: it can be both *knowing* out-group members (i.e., contact) and *knowing about* out-group cultures and traditions. Moreover, the *knowledge about* out-group cultures and traditions can be *perceived* and/or *factual*. This article is the first to examine the extent to which knowledge of Islam in its various forms (factual knowledge, self-reported knowledge, and intercultural contact with Muslims) can influence prejudice against Muslims in Australia, beyond the effect of known predictors of prejudice such as education, political ideology, age, and gender.

Australia is an optimal case study to investigate this relationship because, like other multicultural democracies, it is experiencing high levels of interreligious and intercultural tension. For example, a recent Australia-wide poll conducted by the Scanlon Foundation, although reporting some overall positive findings regarding the state of multiculturalism, found anti-Muslim attitudes to be approximately five times higher than negative attitudes towards other religious groups (Markus, 2016). Other, less scholarly, opinion polls concur: the 2016 Essential Poll, for instance, suggests that almost half of Australians would support a 'ban on Muslim immigration' (Essential Report, 2016). Although this may be an exaggeration of the level of resistance and fear of Muslims and Islam, it echoes the findings of more rigorous academic studies that report an intensification of Islamophobic attitudes, which have po-larized communities along cultural, religious and ethnic lines more deeply than ever before (Mansouri et al., 2015). Indeed, Aus-tralia's recent history has been characterized by a heightened fear of Muslims, who are routinely associated with crime, misogyny, terrorism, and violence in general (Aslan, 2009).

Investigating the relationship between knowledge, intercultural contact, and prejudice has important theoretical as well as policy implications. The latter is of critical importance given the current sociopolitical climate of intercultural tensions, persisting levels of racism in culturally pluralist societies, and rising incidents of conflicts informed by sectarian divisions (Mansouri, 2015). Further, Australia's history as an émigré society provides for complex sociopolitical dynamics and an increasingly diverse cultural and re-ligious demographic profile (Bouma, 2011; Markus, 2016).

In this article, we examine the role of knowledge and intercultural contact in relation to other individual-level predictors of prejudice, and investigate theoretically driven relationships between knowledge of Islam (in terms of factual knowledge, self-reported knowledge, and intercultural contact) and negative attitudes towards Muslims. Before we present the results from a representative, cross-sectional survey conducted Australia-wide, we reflect on some methodological and procedural issues related to the oper-ationalization and the measurement of factual knowledge in social research.

Theoretical approach

Discussing Islamophobia

Islamophobia identifies Islam and Muslims as the 'minority of the worst', characterized by the 'behavior of the least desirable' (Vertigans, 2010, p. 29). Although Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon, its current state is linked to the influential late-twentieth-century report 'Islamophobia: a challenge for us all: report of the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamo-phobia', also known as 'the Runnymede Report' (Allen, 2010). This report was launched in the UK in 1997, during the 'Salman Rushdie affair' which ignited a polarizing debate about freedom of speech, tolerance, and the nature of the sacred in Islam and Muslim societies. The term 'Islamophobia' has increased in prevalence since the 1990s, especially following the 9/11 attacks in the USA, which significantly affected social attitudes towards Arab and Muslim minorities in Western societies (Huddy et al., 2005).

There are philosophical and empirical challenges to conducting research about Islamophobia. At the philosophical level, there is a lack of clarity of the concept 'Islamophobia'. The growing literature on Islamophobia is dominated by empirical analyses that do not address the ontology of the category, which obfuscates the possibility of theoretical clarity and precision (Sayyid, 2014). Then, of course, there is the political contestation of the very concept itself, in an environment where 'questions about national security, social cohesion and cultural belonging' are increasingly associated with the Muslim *other*, even if most acts of violence are perpetrated by the extremist fringe of Muslim communities (Sayyid, 2014, p. 11). In other words, Islamophobia is an ontologically and epistemo-logically underdeveloped concept that indeed needs more scholarly attention.

Previous research has attempted to operationalize Islamophobia by identifying its different manifestations: Imhoff and Recker (2012) distinguished between prejudice against Muslims, which captures the closed views of Islam, identified by the Runnymede Report (Allen, 2010), and secular critiques of Islam, reflecting laicist positions about the relationships between Islam and the state. Uenal (2016) distinguished between anti-Islamic sentiment and prejudice against Muslims. The former was covered in the influential work of Edward Said (1978) whose notion of Orientalism revealed an anti-Islam positionality, rejecting not only the theological manifestations of Islam, but also its civilizational dimensions. By contrast, the latter prejudice is more directly aimed at the level of the individual, where any sign of religious visibility is resisted, rejected, and, in many cases, attacked (Hassan, 2015; Werbner, 2015). Recent studies have pointed to the need to differentiate between these two facets of Islamophobia for practical and theoretical reasons (see, for example, Larsson & Sander, 2015; Uenal, 2016).

In the present study, we focus on the specific aspect of Islamophobia that is most visible and concerning at a societal level, namely prejudice against Muslims – on the rise in increasingly securitized sociopolitical environments. Prejudice against Muslims has been shown to be a key component of the operationalization of Islamophobia in previous research (see Imhoff & Recker, 2012; Uenal,