



The cognitive roots of prejudice towards same-sex couples: An analysis of an Australian national sample

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ABSTRACT

There are well-known correlations between low cognitive ability and support of prejudicial or non-egalitarian attitudes. This paper adds to existing knowledge by providing the first analyses of the associations between cognitive ability and attitudes towards LGBT issues in a non-US sample (Australia), comparing these across three measures of cognitive ability, and examining the separate, joint and interactive effects of education and cognitive ability. Findings from a high-quality, national Australian dataset ($n = 11,564$) indicate that individuals with low cognitive ability are less likely to support equal rights for same-sex couples. This pattern holds in the presence of confounds, is consistent across measures of ability, and is more pronounced for verbal ability. Education and cognitive ability affect attitudes through similar channels, but retain independent effects.

1. Introduction

Research conducted chiefly in the US, Canada and Western Europe reports correlations between low cognitive ability and support of prejudicial or non-egalitarian attitudes towards certain social groups (including ethnic minorities, migrants, women and people with AIDS), as well as related constructs, such as conservatism, ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, and dogmatism (Brandt & Crawford, 2016; Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Hodson & Dhont, 2015; Onraet et al., 2015; Stankov, 2009; Van Hiel, Onraet, & De Pauw, 2010). However, despite the significance and contemporaneity of the subject matter, few studies have specifically addressed the links between cognitive ability and attitudes towards LGBT issues.

Identifying the individual and social factors that contribute to the emergence and perpetuation of negative attitudes towards LGBT people and/or same-sex couples is important and topical. Even in highly tolerant societies, non-heterosexual individuals remain disadvantaged across life domains—including income and poverty, physical and mental health, labour market outcomes, and homelessness (see e.g. Institute of Medicine, 2011; Perales, 2016; Uhrig, 2015). The dominant paradigm used to explain the comparatively poor life outcomes of LGBT people, the minority stress framework, attributes these deficits to the day-to-day barriers and stressors non-heterosexual people face due to a hostile social environment, which diminishes their capability to function in society (Meyer, 2003). These stressors emerge from cultural and institutionalized heteronormativity, and are enacted by other people within society via discrimination and stigmatization. Individuals'

behaviors follow from their beliefs (Kraus, 1995), and attitudes towards LGBT people predict how the heterosexual majority interacts with the non-heterosexual minority (Mereish & Poteat, 2015; Morrison & Morrison, 2011). Thus, identifying how individual differences such as cognitive ability influence attitudes towards LGBT issues is a necessary step to devising strategies that promote equality of opportunity by sexual identity.

This paper makes three contributions to the existing knowledge base: it provides the first analysis of the associations between cognitive ability and attitudes towards LGBT issues in a non-US sample (and the first focusing specifically on attitudes towards *equal rights for same-sex couples*), (ii) it compares these associations for three widespread and validated measures of cognitive ability (the *National Adult Reading Test*, the *Symbol Digits Modalities Test* and the *Backwards Digit Span test*), and (iii) it delves into the separate, joint and interactive effects of education and cognitive ability. To accomplish this, it relies on data from a high-quality, national Australian dataset, the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey ($n = 11,564$).

2. Background

2.1. Cognitive ability and socio-political attitudes

Cognitive ability refers to a compendium of mental abilities that capture individuals' "psychological resources to process and retain knowledge, solve problems and master challenging tasks" (Dhont & Hodson, 2014, p. 454). Since Adorno's observation that ethnocentric people are

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less intelligent than non-ethnocentric people, (see Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford's 1950) a large and growing body of research in psychology, political science, and sociology has established that low cognitive ability is correlated with intergroup prejudice, ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, dogmatism, conservatism, and other non-egalitarian attitudes (Brandt & Crawford, 2016; Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Hodson & Dhont, 2015; Onraet et al., 2015; Stankov, 2009; Van Hiel et al., 2010).

While the specific mechanisms linking ability to attitudes are not frequently tested empirically, several theoretical explanations have been put forward. Low cognitive ability has been linked to cognitive rigidity, a set of strategies used to deal with unpredictability and ambiguity, and to preferences for simplicity, order and tradition (Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Stankov, 2009). Individuals with low cognitive ability may thus express more prejudicial attitudes because they are less open to new ideas and experiences (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008) and more motivated to maintain strict group boundaries (Brandt & Crawford, 2016; Dhont & Hodson, 2014), which would make them less likely to engage in intergroup contact that can dispel erroneous preconceptions and promote tolerance and acceptance (Dovidio, Love, Schellhaas, & Hewstone, 2017). Similarly, low cognitive ability may enhance the perceived salience of threat from behaviour that is perceived as being non-normative, and induce fear of change, resulting in reactivity against out-groups (Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Stankov, 2009; Wilson, 1973). Other factors argued to connect cognitive ability to non-egalitarian attitudes include right-wing political ideology, perspective-taking abilities, and resorting to stereotypes to make sense of others (Brandt & Crawford, 2016; Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002; Dhont & Hodson, 2014).

Very little research has examined the links between cognitive ability and attitudes towards LGBT issues more specifically. The only study focusing exclusively on this is by Keiller (2010), who examined the associations between abstract reasoning and attitudes towards homosexual men in a convenience sample of 257 US undergraduate college students (see data re-analysis in Hodson & Busseri, 2012). Abstract reasoning was significantly and positively associated with more favourable attitudes towards homosexual men, measured using the Homosexuality Attitudes Scale (Kite & Deaux, 1986). A few other studies have examined LGBT-related attitudes amongst a constellation of other attitudes. Carl's (2014, 2015a) analyses of the US General Social Survey revealed statistically significant, negative associations between vocabulary test scores and beliefs that homosexual relations are wrong, while Brandt and Crawford's (2016) analyses of the American National Election Studies found negative and statistically significant associations between verbal ability and prejudice towards gay and lesbian people.

Although no previous study has examined attitudes towards equal rights for same-sex couples specifically, it can be expected the mechanisms alluded to before also play a role. For example, a lack of openness to new experiences with roots in low cognitive ability will likely reduce intergroup contact between heterosexual and non-heterosexual people and, in turn, reduce acceptance of same-sex couples as equals by the former. Similarly, fear of or perceived threat associated with change and a preference for tradition will motivate less cognitively able individuals to oppose equal rights for same-sex couples. In addition, individuals form attitudes about clusters of social issues which they perceive to be interconnected, and there is evidence of high correlations between attitudes towards different dimensions of LGBT issues (Kite & Deaux, 1986). This suggests that the recognised links between cognitive ability and attitudes towards sexual relationships between two men (Carl, 2014; Keiller, 2010) or legal recognition of gay relationships (Carl, 2015b) as well as feeling thermometers towards gay/lesbian people (Brandt & Crawford, 2016), will also manifest in relation to attitudes towards equal rights for same-sex couples.

A first contribution of this study is therefore to ascertain empirically whether or not the associations previously found between cognitive ability and non-egalitarian or conservative socio-political attitudes

(including attitudes towards other aspects of LGBT issues) in countries such as the US, Canada and the UK hold also for prejudice against same-sex couples in the contemporary Australian context.

2.2. Effect heterogeneity across cognitive ability measures

Associations between low cognitive ability and conservatism, prejudice or non-egalitarian attitudes have been demonstrated for a range of ability measures, including abstract reasoning (e.g. Keiller, 2010), verbal ability (e.g. Brandt & Crawford, 2016; Stankov, 2009), short- and long-term memory (e.g. Deary, Batty, & Gale, 2008), and general ability (e.g. Oskarsson et al., 2015). These different constructs capture different dimensions of cognitive ability and intelligence, and may be differently associated with holding (non-)egalitarian social views. According to a meta-analysis of 90 international studies conducted between 1984 and 2014 (Onraet et al., 2015), the strongest link between cognitive ability and prejudice was via comprehension-knowledge, whereas the strongest link to right-wing ideological attitudes was via long-term memory and retrieval.

Yet, studies comparing the associations between several ability measures and socio-political attitudes within the same dataset remain scarce and, as posed by Brandt & Crawford (2016, p.890), “it will [...] be generative to include multiple measures of cognitive ability” in studies in the field. Thus, a second contribution of this paper is comparing the associations between different markers of cognitive ability and attitudes towards same-sex couples' rights.

2.3. Intersections between education, cognitive ability and attitudes

A third contribution of this study is considering the intersections between education and cognitive ability. Longer exposure to education and higher educational attainment should promote the formation and consolidation of egalitarian socio-political attitudes through exposing individuals to humanistic ideals, liberal values and a meritocratic system of achievement (Carvacho et al., 2013; Schoon, Cheng, Gale, Batty, & Deary, 2010; Surridge, 2016). Participation in tertiary education, in particular, has been argued to expose individuals to left-leaning political beliefs, such as egalitarianism, feminism and support for civil liberties, and to promote critical skills that help counteract prejudice, such as cognitive flexibility and perspective taking (see e.g. Ohlander, Batalova, & Treas, 2005). As previously explained, cognitive ability is thought to affect attitudes through channels such as openness, fear of change, perceived outgroup threat and cognitive rigidity (Dhont & Hodson, 2014). Yet it is clear that there are reciprocal relationships between education and cognitive ability: more cognitively able individuals are more likely to move up the educational ladder while, at the same time, participation in education increases cognitive faculties (see e.g. Brinch & Galloway, 2012). In practice, as Dhont & Hodson (2014, p.455) acknowledge, an important shortcoming of studies of the links between cognitive ability and socio-political attitudes is that they fail to account for individuals' educational attainment –see Deary et al. (2008) and Schoon et al. (2010) for exceptions. Other studies use highly homogenous samples in relation to education –including samples of University students and University applicants (see e.g. Stankov (2009) or Keiller (2010)), which precludes examination of the role of educational attainment.

In addition, it remains empirically unclear whether education moderates the association between cognitive ability and socio-political attitudes. It is for instance possible that the cognitive biases emerging from low cognitive ability described before (e.g. perceiving change and the unfamiliar as a threat and focusing on prevention rather than promotion, Dhont & Hodson, 2014) can be suppressed through increased participation in education. If so, then cognitive ability may display a *smaller* association with such attitudes amongst the highly educated compared to the lowly educated. Though this study does not resolve the endogeneity between education and ability (which would require different data), it contributes

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