



# Cognitive ability, right-wing authoritarianism, and social dominance orientation: A five-year longitudinal study amongst adolescents

Patrick C.L. Heaven<sup>\*</sup>, Joseph Ciarrochi, Peter Leeson

University of Wollongong, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

We report longitudinal data in which we assessed the relationships between intelligence and support for two constructs that shape ideological frameworks, namely, right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO). Participants ( $N = 375$ ) were assessed in Grade 7 and again in Grade 12. Verbal and numerical ability were assessed when students entered high school in Grade 7. RWA and SDO were assessed before school graduation in Grade 12. After controlling for the possible confounding effects of personality and religious values in Grade 12, RWA was predicted by low  $g$  ( $\beta = -.16$ ) and low verbal intelligence ( $\beta = -.18$ ). SDO was predicted by low verbal intelligence only ( $\beta = -.13$ ). These results are discussed with reference to the role of verbal intelligence in predicting support for such ideological frameworks and some comments are offered regarding the cognitive distinctions between RWA and SDO.

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## 1. Introduction

Intelligence has important consequences for everyday life (Gottfredson, 1997) including democracy, political freedoms, and the rule of law (Rindermann, 2008). A number of recent studies have demonstrated that intelligence assessed during childhood predicts social attitudes and political behaviours in adulthood. Indeed, Deary and his colleagues found evidence that intelligent children turn out to be “enlightened adults” (Deary, Batty, & Gale, 2008, p. 1). Analysing data from the 1970 British Cohort Study, they found that intelligence at age 10 years predicted more tolerant social attitudes at age 30. More specifically, intelligence was found to have direct and significant effects on a latent trait identified as liberal, non-traditional social attitudes. This trait was found to underpin a number of attitude domains including pro-working women and anti-racist views (see also the results of Schoon, Cheng,

Gale, Batty, & Deary, 2010). Thus, there is support for Meisenberg’s (2004, p. 139) views that “IQ is a powerful predictor of modern, non-traditional values” (see also Kanazawa, 2010; Stankov, 2009).

A social attitude that has significant political implications for contemporary society is prejudice and, by extension, intergroup hostility. Wars, political turmoil, and natural calamities are still common in the 21st century, and have resulted in the displacement of approximately 42 million persons, thus giving rise to large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2010). Some of this tidal wave of human movement is a direct consequence of prejudice. Even in major western democracies, for example, large pockets of minority groups evoke unease and prejudice amongst the majority population with negative attitudes towards Muslims on the rise in countries such as Britain and France (Bleich, 2009). Conversely, anti-Semitism continues to exist in overt (see Anti-Defamation League, 2010) and covert forms (Cohen, Jussim, Harber, & Bhasin, 2009). In the US there seems to be limited support for race-targeted policies to assist blacks (Rabinowitz, Sears, Sidanius, & Krosnick, 2009), whilst

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author.

E-mail address: pheaven@uow.edu.au (P.C.L. Heaven).

in Australia the value functions related to prejudice varies depending on the minority group in question (Griffiths & Pedersen, 2009).

### 1.1. *The ideological underpinnings of prejudice*

It has been argued that prejudice and intergroup hostility are predicated upon stable and enduring personal characteristics (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1981, 1996, 1998; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). These characteristics are expressed in the form of two major ideological dimensions, or world views, that underpin prejudice and intergroup hostility. The dimensions are right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) and they drive our views of the social world and determine our relationships with members of other ethnic and religious groups.

Individuals high on RWA see the world as a dangerous and threatening place. They deal with this fact through their high levels of social conformity and submission to authority figures who they believe will create order and security within society. In contrast, individuals high on SDO liken the world to a competitive jungle (Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002). In order to survive, high SDO individuals are supportive of the dominance of high status and more powerful groups over weaker and less influential ones. SDO individuals are tough-minded and act to maintain societal inequalities and their privileged position in the social hierarchy (Pratto et al., 1994). On the other hand, RWA individuals are social conformers, usually vote conservative, and are submissive to the legitimate authorities of the day (Altemeyer, 1981; 1998; Duckitt et al., 2002). Many studies have attested to the importance of these ideological dimensions as primary shapers of general social attitudes and intergroup relationships (e.g. Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt et al., 2002; Duriez, Van Hiel, & Kossowska, 2005; Heaven, Organ, Supavadeeprasit, & Leeson, 2006; Kreindler, 2005; Pratto et al., 1994; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2005; Verkuyten & Hagendoorn, 1998).

Although RWA and SDO both predict prejudice, they are qualitatively quite different. RWAs have a need for structure whereas SDOs strive to dominate weaker groups. Whereas RWAs are religious fundamentalists, SDOs are not; RWAs are more likely to be self-righteous than SDOs; RWAs vote for right-wing political parties, whereas there is no relationship between SDO and voting intention (Altemeyer, 1998).

### 1.2. *Aims and rationale of the present study*

Although it has been shown that RWA has a strong genetic component (McCourt, Bouchard, Lykken, Tellegen, & Keyes, 1999), Altemeyer (1981) has emphasised that one's ideological points of view are also shaped by one's parents and peers and that they begin to properly take form during adolescence. As he explains, younger children are too cognitively immature to appreciate the issues of the adult world, but this changes with adolescence when "...these attitudes can develop and become increasingly organized... and finally established at the age of 18" (p. 256; p. 257). New experiences have the ability to alter one's ideological viewpoint but, by and large, it is expected that RWA and

SDO are fairly well established by the time an individual graduates from high school.

Our study extends previous research in a number of important ways. First, previous research (e.g. Deary et al., 2008; Schoon et al., 2010) found childhood IQ to link with social attitudes during adulthood. Nonetheless, it is not clear from this work what effect IQ has on the development of ideology during the formative period of adolescence. As it is not clear when such linkages are formed, it is important to investigate whether intelligence predicts ideological viewpoints during the teenage years. Second, although previous research has found cognitive ability to predict social attitudes, no research has been conducted into the cognitive correlates or underpinnings of overarching ideological frames of reference such as RWA and SDO. The primary aim of this study was therefore to assess whether cognitive ability as assessed during the first year of high school (Grade 7) would predict RWA and SDO assessed during the final year of school (Grade 12).

#### 1.2.1. *Possible confounding factors*

Research evidence shows that RWA and SDO are linked to the major personality dimensions with a number of studies focusing on the Big Five personality domains (see, for example, Ekehammar, Akrami, Gylje, & Zakrisson, 2004; Flynn, 2005; Heaven & Bucci, 2001; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008; Van Hiel, Kossowska, & Mervielde, 2000). In one of the earliest studies using the Big Five measures, it was found that both RWA and SDO tended to be associated with low Openness to experience (O). RWA was also found to correlate significantly with Conscientiousness (C), whilst SDO was negatively related to agreeableness (A) (Heaven & Bucci, 2001). Using structural equation modelling, Ekehammar et al. (2004) found low A to have direct effects on SDO, whilst RWA was best predicted by C, E, and low O.

Finally, a recent meta-analysis of 71 studies (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008) concluded that SDO was significantly related to low agreeableness and O, while RWA was significantly related to Conscientiousness and significantly negatively related to O. Given that RWA and SDO are related to personality dimensions, it was thought prudent to control for these confounding influences in our analyses. Thus, we sought to investigate whether cognitive ability as assessed in Grade 7 predicts RWA and SDO in Grade 12 once personality in Grade 12 has been accounted for.

Ideological preferences are also influenced by one's level of religiosity. Unger (2007) found positive relationships between religiosity and support for the 2003 war in Iraq and the limiting of civil liberties out of concern for national security. These relationships were stronger in the so-called "red" (conservative) than "blue" (more liberal) states of the US. Bertsch and Pesta (2009) found that higher IQ was significantly negatively related to the belief that one's religion was favoured by God. Those with higher IQs were also likely to question their religious beliefs. Religiosity also appears to be differentially related to RWA and SDO. For example, Altemeyer (1998) reported significant relationships between RWA and spirituality and religious fundamentalism, but no significant relations with SDO. Given the possible importance of religiosity, we therefore decided to partial out the effects of Grade 12 religious values in our analyses.

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