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# You don't have to be well-educated to be an aversive racist, but it helps



Toon Kuppens<sup>\*,1</sup>, Russell Spears<sup>1</sup>

Cardiff University, School of Psychology, 70 Park Place, Cardiff CF10 3AT, UK

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## ABSTRACT

People with higher levels of formal education report less prejudice in survey research. Here we present novel evidence on the nature of educational differences in anti-Black attitudes among Whites. We replicate the education effect on explicit self-report measures of anti-Black attitudes, but we find that education is much less related to implicit measures of anti-Black attitudes. Implicit measures differ from explicit measures in that they do not allow respondents to control the measurement outcome; they therefore measure more spontaneous aspects of attitudes. These results shed new light on intergroup attitudes of the higher educated. Higher educated people are more likely to be aversive racists, that is, to score low on explicit, but not implicit measures of prejudice. Given the differential relation of explicit versus implicit measures to behavior, they have wide-ranging implications for the kind of intergroup behavior and discrimination we can expect from less and more highly educated people.

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## 1. Introduction

Juan Williams, a senior news analyst and author of several books on the US civil rights movement, admitted to feeling nervous when on a plane with people in Muslim garb (Shiffman, 2011). Mahzarin Banaji, a famous researcher of stereotyping and prejudice, was perplexed to find she had a spontaneous preference for White over Black people (U.S. News, 2005). Contrary to what many would intuitively expect, even people who are highly educated regarding intergroup relations apparently fall prey to spontaneous and unintentional prejudices. These anecdotes point to possible limits of the effect of education in reducing prejudice. In this article we therefore investigate when we should (and should not) expect education to be related to racial prejudice.

Survey research using representative samples invariably finds that people with higher levels of formal education report lower levels of prejudice (for an early example, see Smith, 1948). This relation exists for a wide range of dependent variables: both subtle and blatant racial prejudice (Wagner and Zick, 1995), anti-immigrant prejudice (Quillian, 1995) preferred social distance from ethnic minorities and immigrants (Hello et al., 2006; Jenssen and Engesbak, 1994), preferred immigration level (Coenders and Scheepers, 2003), and support for repatriation policies of migrants (Coenders et al., 2008). This could be seen as a very hopeful message. If education makes people less prejudiced, this opens up possibilities for ways to decrease prejudice because it then becomes merely a practical problem of how we can deliver the right kind of education to those who are not yet receiving it. However, surveys traditionally use self-report measures to assess attitudes. Attitudes such as

\* Corresponding author. Address: Social Psychology Department, Grote Kruisstraat 2/1, 9712 TS Groningen, The Netherlands.

E-mail addresses: [toon.kuppens@gmail.com](mailto:toon.kuppens@gmail.com) (T. Kuppens), [r.spears@rug.nl](mailto:r.spears@rug.nl) (R. Spears).

<sup>1</sup> Present address: University of Groningen, Social Psychology Department, Grote Kruisstraat 2/1, 9712 TS Groningen, The Netherlands.

prejudice consist of many aspects and not all of them can be reliably assessed using self-report. More recently, implicit measures of attitudes have been developed in psychology and these measure more spontaneous aspects of attitudes. In this paper we predict that education has no (or a much weaker) relation with implicit measures of prejudice than it does for explicit, self-report measures.

### 1.1. *The nature of the education effect*

The lower prejudice of the higher educated has been regarded with some suspicion. For example, many tolerant higher educated people opposed the forced racial desegregation of schools in the US (also called ‘busing’, because children travelled by bus between home and school) since the 1970s (e.g., Weidman, 1975). This could create the impression that the higher educated support equality only when it does not affect them. Similarly, it has been suggested that the education–prejudice relationship depends on the nature of the prejudice measure. The most well-known form of this argument is that the relation between education and reported prejudice does not reflect actual differences in prejudice but rather differences in whether people choose to express prejudice or not (Crandall and Eshleman, 2003; Jackman and Muha, 1984). Jackman and Muha (1984) have suggested that the higher educated might simply be more skilled at expressing attitudes without appearing prejudiced. In short, the education–prejudice relation might reflect social desirability rather than the real underlying attitude. Supporting this reasoning, there are indications that the higher educated are more susceptible to social desirability bias, for example when reporting voting behavior (Karp and Brockington, 2005).

One virtue of an explanation in terms of social desirability is that it can be easily tested. However, three independent studies (Heerwig and McCabe, 2009; Ostapczuk et al., 2009; Wagner and Zick, 1995) found that experimentally attenuating social desirability effects did not eliminate or even attenuate the education–prejudice relation (if anything, it made it even stronger). For example, Heerwig and McCabe (2009) used a list experiment to assess the effect of social desirability. They compared two groups of respondents. The first group simply answered whether they agreed with a statement supporting a Black presidential candidate and then they indicated with how many out of three (other) statements they agreed. The second group of respondents had to indicate with how many out of four statements they agreed (the fourth statement being the one about supporting a Black presidential candidate). In the latter group individual respondents were not directly required to reveal their attitude about a Black presidential candidate, thus reducing social desirability concerns. Because the four statements were the same in both groups, a comparison of the percentages of statements that respondents agree with, reveals the effect of asking directly or indirectly about the Black presidential candidate. Unexpectedly, educational differences in prejudice were larger rather than smaller when the effect of social desirability was reduced. Although the social desirability explanation for the education–prejudice relation asserts that the higher educated are more influenced by social desirability concerns, the opposite was true in this study. Specifically, while college graduates’ responses were unaffected by reducing social desirability concerns, responses of less highly educated participants were significantly more prejudiced in the low social desirability condition.

The two other studies on education and social desirability used similarly explicit and self-reported measures of racial prejudice. Ostapczuk and colleagues (2009) asked whether respondents would mind their 20-year old daughter having a relationship with a dark-skinned Nigerian. Wagner and Zick (1995) asked their German respondents to rate Turks on a series of 24 positive and negative adjectives. In neither study was the education effect attenuated by experimentally decreasing social desirability concerns. The education effect thus arguably reflects a genuine difference in this kind of explicit and self-reported attitudes rather than a superficial conformity to norms of social desirability. That the education–prejudice relation is not due to social desirability does of course not mean that it does not depend on the nature of the prejudice measure in some other way. In terms of attitude measurement, the most important recent development is arguably the popularity of ‘implicit’ or ‘indirect’ measures of attitudes (Gawronski and Payne, 2010; Wittenbrink and Schwarz, 2007). The terms ‘implicit’ or ‘indirect’ refer to measurement outcomes that do not rely on direct self-assessment (i.e. self-reports as typically used in questionnaires) by research participants. They are contrasted with ‘direct’ or ‘explicit’ measures that do rely on self-assessment and self-report.

An important motivation for the development of indirect measures was their supposed ability to bypass social desirability concerns. Researchers therefore thought that they now could measure the ‘real’ attitude without the distortion of social desirability (Fazio et al., 1995; Greenwald et al., 1998). Although we do not question the value of bypassing social desirability concerns, it is important to note that explicit and implicit measures not *only* differ in how sensitive they are to social desirability – and this might not even be the most important distinction between them (a point that is reflected in the current literature, see Gawronski and Payne, 2010).

In order to understand the difference between explicit and implicit measures, it is instructive to know that when people are asked to give intuitive responses on explicit measures, the results are very similar to those of implicit measures (Hofmann et al., 2005; Jordan et al., 2007). So it seems that explicit measures can give comparable results to those of implicit measures when they tap more intuitive or spontaneous processes. The situation is different for implicit measures. Because implicit measures do not allow control over the measurement outcome (see De Houwer and Moors, 2007), implicit measures force people to reveal spontaneous processes and are much less affected by deliberative processes. So, in contrast to explicit measures, implicit measures do not really offer a choice between spontaneous or deliberative responding and seem to tap mainly intuitive or spontaneous processes. We do not aim to provide a definitive answer to the question of what series of features distinguishes explicit from implicit measures (for a discussion, see Fazio and Olson, 2003; Gawronski and Payne, 2010)

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