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The relationship between ethnocentric attitudes and avoidance behavior among Belgian students

Reference:

Dejaeghere Yves, Hooghe Marc.- *The relationship between ethnocentric attitudes and avoidance behavior among Belgian students*
Social behavior and personality - ISSN 0301-2212 - 40:1(2012), p. 15-30

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2011

Ethnocentric Attitudes and Avoidance Behavior.

**A Field Experiment on the Relation between Ethnocentric Attitudes and Behaviors
among Belgian Students.**

Social Behavior and Personality, 39, 2011, accepted.

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ABSTRACT

Measurements of ethnocentric attitudes are routinely included in survey research. These measurements, however, have been criticized because they lack external validity and are often hardly related to real behavior. There is almost no research looking at this relation in a European context, with a different pattern of inter-ethnic relations than in North-America where most of the existing research has been performed. In a field experiment we investigate whether a typical European survey measure for ethnocentric attitudes is related to avoidance behavior toward ethnic minorities. Respondents were first year university students ($n=344$), that were first questioned about ethnocentric attitudes, and two months later, in an independent observation, were given the opportunity to interact with either a member of the own ethnic in-group or a member of an ethnic out-group. Ethnocentric attitudes had a strong predictive effect on the independently observed avoidance behavior, thus providing support for the external validity of the ethnocentrism scale.

S U M M A R Y

The relation between attitudinal measures and actual behavior has been an important research topic in social psychology and social sciences for decades, especially in the research on prejudice. Already in 1934 LaPiere demonstrated that an attitudinal measure could be associated with the opposite actual behavior. Since then, however, only a handful of studies have looked into this relation. During the '*Decade of Behavior*' of the American Psychological Association, some authors have even openly questioned the reliance of current social psychological research on self-reports of behavior without any 'reality check' (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007). Especially in Europe where often different prejudice measures are used than in North America, this is an understudied field (Schütz & Six, 1996). In this paper we present the results of a field experiment to test whether a standard explicit ethnocentric survey-measure concerning immigrants predicts avoidance behavior toward this group.

(...)

In this paper we report on a twofold test that was conducted on a large student sample to validate this scale both internally as externally. First we investigated whether the items included in the scale are coherent and one-dimensional. In a field experiment we subsequently tested whether this five-item scale also predicted avoidance behavior towards a member of an ethnic minority. The main question in this paper is therefore whether ethnocentric attitudes will lead to avoidance behavior with regard to ethnic minorities in a European context.

Method

Participants

Participants were first year bachelor students at a Belgian university enrolled in an introductory course in political science who completed an online survey as part of a course requirement (n=534). Participants in the field experiment¹ were those of the first group that also participated two months later in an annually held mock exam that helps freshmen to assess the difficulty level of the upcoming exams (which will be their first at university) and who subsequently mailed to get their grade on this exam (n=344).

(...)

Results

Using the intranet identification number that was in the survey-dataset and the dataset on their mail-choice we first coupled the dataset from October with that from December and subsequently erased the student matriculation number to ensure complete anonymity of the results. This provided us with a dataset with 534 respondents that participated in the first survey, 463 that took part in the exam and 344 students that mailed either ‘Fatima’ or ‘Hanna’ to receive their grade mark³. The final analysis is only possible for those 344 students for whom we have data for both survey and experiment.

(...)

Table 3. Logistic regression with Avoidance Behavior as a dependent variable

	B (se)	Wald	Sign.	Exp (B)
Constant	-1.023 (0.577)	3.150	.076	0.359
Gender (male=1)	1.019 (0.239)	0.006	.936	1.019
Exam-score	0.043 (0.025)	2.883	.090	1.044
Left-Right (10=right)	0.022 (0.071)	0.095	.758	1.022
Progressive – Conservative (10=conservative)	0.017 (0.073)	0.055	.814	1.017
Ethnocentrism	0.466 (0.147)	9.204	.002	1.561
Nagelkerke R ²				.082

Note: Data from student experiment (n=344). -2LL for the model is 439.461. Dependent variable: odds that the ethnic minority name will be avoided.

Discussion

Attitude measures in social psychology or social sciences are often studied because of their assumed predictive capacity for social behavior. This is especially the case for prejudice measures: by studying the level of prejudice in a population we want to make inferences on why discrimination occurs in the job market or how political parties that openly call for discrimination are electorally successful. This relation between measures in surveys and actual behavior is an understudied field in Europe with only a handful of studies investigating this relation. To ascertain whether a typical ethnocentric measure used in European research has such predictive value for behavior we conducted a field experiment using a student sample. With more than two months between the measurement of the scale and the field-experiment we can safely claim that

our results are robust for temporal contamination that might occur when both measures are observed at the same moment or in the same experimental setting. The results of the analysis show that the survey scale is one-dimensional and predicts avoidance behavior. This measure is very similar to other scales used in European population surveys and therefore the validation can be seen as an indication that such measures consisting of a limited number of items can be externally validated even if they lack the detail of more extensive measures used in psychological research. Our study has shown that a five item measure can aptly measure ethnocentrism and is a valid measure for related (even minimal) prejudiced behavior. The scale might still be cognitively biased, as respondents that are high on education ‘know’ better what is the socially desired answer. But still this biased answer might have highly salient behavioral consequences, e.g., in the way how potential employers will react to application letters from people from different ethnic status. The fact that we found that those low on ethnocentrism mailed more to the outgroup person could be related to the concept of ‘aversive racism’. A number of US-based studies have found that those openly endorsing nonprejudiced beliefs (such as university students) will respond more positively to an outgroup person compared to an ingroup person in an experimental setting where race is salient (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004: 7).

Whether this attitudinal measurement also has an impact on more consequential forms of behavior, is something that needs to be investigated further in the future. For the time being, however, we can conclude that the attitudinal measurement of ethnocentrism can have significant real life behavioral effects. A standard ethnocentrism scale as is routinely used in survey research indeed has a strong effect on behavior in these conditions.