Greetings,

This summary describes the results for our study on perceptions of the United States. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to tell you about the findings. The study was conducted by Angela Nickerson and Janie Busby under the supervision of Dr. Winnifred Louis. If you would like to ask questions, to comment on what you have read, or to find out more, you can contact project staff by phoning (07) 3346 9515, by emailing w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au, or by writing to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, McElwain Building / University of Queensland / St. Lucia, QLD 4072. You can also read about other studies we’ve done on political attitudes at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: SOCIAL ATTITUDES ON THE UNITED STATES

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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR

Research shows that people who are conspicuously successful (Tall Poppies) will sometimes be targeted by resentment and hostility from lower-status individuals (Feather, 1989, 1994). In earlier studies, we found that “Tall Poppy attitudes,” of hostility that people feel to high status individuals, were associated with hostility to a high status group as well. Specifically, Australians who said they felt negative to high status individuals were more likely to feel negative to the USA.

In the present study, we wanted to replicate this finding over time (longitudinally), as well as control for possible confounding variables such as political views and authoritarianism.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS

During March and April 2005, the study was conducted in two phases, with a gap of two weeks between them. In total, 118 Australian first-year psychology students completed both phases of the study. They were given credit for their participation. Participants were aged between 17-48 years with a median of 18 years (86% females). In terms of political affiliation, 48% of participants supported the Liberal Coalition, 33% supported Labour and 19% supported the Greens.

WHAT WE FOUND

1. OVERALL RESULTS. In the first session, we measured personality attributes of participants that were relevant to the study. A large majority of participants (92%) felt favourable attitudes towards Tall Poppies, not hostility. An overwhelming majority of participants (99%) felt good about themselves (had high self-esteem), with a similar proportion (97%) feeling the same about the groups they belonged to. Most people (68%) had positive or mixed views towards authorities, but did not support groups that were more powerful (85%). They were also generally committed to their Australian identity (83%), but, politically, they did not identify themselves strongly with particular groups (63%).

In the second session, we determined the political attitudes the participants had of America. Most participants (81%) felt that Australia was lower in status than America, America was threatening (86%), and had negative feelings for her (53%). This is interesting because of course Australia is a very close economic and military supporter of the USA.

2. PREDICTORS OF THREAT AND HOSTILITY TO AMERICA. As predicted, the more negative people’s Tall Poppy attitudes at Time 1, the more threatened by the USA people reported they were two weeks later. This finding was present even after the other effects were factored out. Support of authority was negatively related to perceived threat from the USA, and so was support for powerful groups. In contrast, contrary to expectations, political affiliations did not affect perceptions of threat from America.
Also as predicted, negative Tall Poppy attitudes at Time 1 were associated with hostility to the USA two weeks later. This effect was partly influenced (mediated) by threat perceptions of the USA. That is, when perceived threat was included in the relationship between Tall Poppy attitudes and perceived hostility, the strength of the relationship weakened, providing evidence that perceived threat from America was an explanation for the perceived hostility participants with Tall Poppy attitudes have for the USA.

CONCLUSIONS

Across time and social contexts, a key source of hostility and perceived threat towards a nation is likely to be that nation’s actions and behaviour. Other research has shown that the USA’s perceived military and economic predations are a driver of hostility. However, this study replicates the finding that within a given context, Australians who have negative Tall Poppy attitudes toward high status individuals also show more hostility to the USA, which is perceived as a high status group. The relationship between hostility to Tall Poppy attitudes and the USA occurs in part via perceptions of the USA as more threatening. Importantly, the relationship holds across time and even when other variables such as authoritarianism are controlled for. So the findings of the study are quite strong.

THANKS AGAIN…

So that’s a description of what we found in the study. If you have any questions, or would like a copy of the longer write-up when we get that done (in several months) please get in touch. And thank you again for your participation and interest!