NATIONAL IDENTITY AND COST-BENEFIT ANALYSES FOR AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL BEHAVIOURS - Preliminary analyses, July '02

Last semester, you participated in a study for the Psychology participant pool on Australians' national identity and evaluation of the costs and benefits of a variety of political behaviours. Although you have probably forgotten all about it by now, back then you expressed some interest in hearing about the results of the study. We are very glad to be able to send you this short summary of what we've looked at to date. If you have any additional questions and comments, we would be glad to hear them, and you can contact us about the study at wlouis@psy.uq.edu.au.

1. SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
The sample for the study consisted of 220 students enrolled in an introductory first year psychology course. All participants received course credit for participation. Most of the participants were women (n = 167; 76%), Australian (n = 213; 97%), white (n = 194; 88%), and either Christian (n = 144; 66%) or non-religious (n = 62; 28%). Politically, more participants described themselves as left-wing (n = 94, 44%) than right-wing (n = 57, 26%) but many participants self-described as un-political or uninformed (n = 51, 23%).

2. WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR
We were looking at the question of whether identity influences the way people think about the costs and benefits of different political behaviours. This is important because it’s very common in both research and everyday language to contrast an “economic” model of decision-making, in which people base their decisions on costs and benefits, with an “irrational” identity-based model, when people act out of conformity to group norms. In fact, research suggests that the kinds of things that people consider important costs and benefits often are based on who they are. For example, when thinking about whether to test using multiple-choice questions, students might focus on costs like “limited testing methods” whereas staff might focus on benefits like “reduced time grading”. Within particular groups, identity can influence decisions when people who strongly identify with the group consider the costs of sacrifice for the group less important, or the benefits of helping the group more important.

The particular identity that we were evaluating was the national Australian identity, and we were wondering whether people who are more strongly committed to the Australian identity would be more likely to associate patriotic political behaviours with benefits, and anti-social political behaviours with costs. To answer these questions, we excluded some participants in the study who said they weren’t Australians (n = 7, 3%) from our analyses.

3. WHAT WE FOUND
The short answer is that we found identity was indeed associated with different evaluations of the behaviours people who were strongly identified as Australians evaluated the costs and benefits of behaviours differently from those who were less strongly identified. That supports our most general theoretical point, that people should not contrast ‘economic’ and identity-based models of decisions. Instead, it is important to look at how identity influences the way people focus on different benefits and costs, and evaluate them differently in their decision-making. But there were some complications!

A. OUR INDEPENDENT VARIABLE, AUSTRALIANS’ NATIONAL IDENTITY: PRETTY STRONG, AND HARD TO MANIPULATE! First, we measured how strongly people identified with being Australian with seven items assessing how important they thought being Australian was in daily life, how similar people felt to other Australians, how proud people were to be Australians, and so on. This scale had a good reliability, and we found that most participants were quite committed to their national identity. On a scale that could range from 0, not at all identified with Australians, to 10, extremely identified, only 7% of participants identified at the midpoint of the scale (5) or below, and in fact 50% of the sample identified at 7 or above. So most people thought being Australian was important to them.

The problem for us was that we tried to manipulate the how much participants were thinking about their national identity during the questionnaire by a “self-description” task at the beginning of the session, and this manipulation didn’t work. In one condition, people listed traits that they had in common with other Australians, whereas in another condition people listed traits that made them unique as individuals. But we found that participants were strongly identified as Australians in both cases. In the common trait condition, the average identification with being Australian was 7.7, and in the unique trait condition, the average was 7.8. So, what we did then is look at identification with Australians as a continuous (correlational) predictor of cost-benefit analyses. This creates a different
design, which is weaker than an experimental design: because identification is measured instead of manipulated, conclusions about causal relationships can’t be drawn.

B. OUR DEPENDENT VARIABLE, COSTS AND BENEFITS FOR THE BEHAVIOURS:
POLITICAL BEHAVIOURS ARE SEEN PRETTY NEGATIVELY, IN GENERAL. We asked participants to list the costs and benefits associated with behaviours to Australians as a group and to the individual actor who was doing the behaviour. Then, they had to write down how important each cost or benefit was (the ‘subjective value’), and what the probability was that if they did the behaviour, the cost or benefit would occur (the ‘subjective probability’). These three factors—the number of costs and benefits listed, and how important and likely each cost or benefit was—were combined by multiplying the standardized probability judgement x the value, adding up all the benefits, and subtracting all the costs. The result was a number for each behaviour that could range from +5 (benefits very important and probable) to 5 (costs very severe and probable).

There were eight behaviours that we looked at, altogether, and there was a lot of variation in what people thought the costs and benefits were, and how costs and benefits were evaluated as important or probable. On average, though, people positively evaluated “signing a petition to give police more power in the ‘war on terrorism’”, “avoiding contact with people who talk about national politics”, and “filling in your ballot paper at random in the next election”. People were neutral towards “participating in Australia Day celebrations,” “concealing the fact that you don’t agree, in a conversation about national values,” and “challenging those who criticise Australia’s national values”; and they were negative about “signing a petition to let asylum seekers live in the community” and “standing up to people who criticise Australia’s national values”.

C. RELATIONSHIP OF IDENTITY TO COSTS AND BENEFITS. The good news for us was that overall identity was associated with people’s evaluation of the behaviours. First, across the behaviours, the more participants thought that other Australians would do the behaviour, the more likely they were to say that they intended to do the behaviour themselves. That is a traditional “normative influence” effect: intentions to act are almost always associated with believing other people who are similar will do the same thing. So, when you identify with a group, like “Australians”, your decisions to act are usually increased when you think other people in the group also favour the behaviour.

Second, as we had predicted, identification was related directly to people’s perceptions of the costs and benefits associated with the action. For example, the more people identified with being Australian, the more positively they evaluated “avoiding contact with people who talk about national politics” it was seen as leading to probable and important benefits, and improbable and unimportant costs. Identity was associated with cost/benefit analyses for six out of the eight behaviours.

D. UNANSWERED QUESTIONS. At this point in time, we have two issues to pursue. One is trying to establish the cause of the association, which means trying to repeat the experiment with a different and stronger manipulation of identification. If participants can be randomly assigned to conditions that create different levels of identity, we’ll be able to see if it is the different levels of identification that cause the differences in evaluation of costs and benefits.

The second issue we will follow up is how cost-benefit evaluations are learned, and change, as people’s sense of identity changes across time or in different situations. We will be studying this question in future research also.

THANK YOU!

Thank you for your participation in the survey last semester, and for your expressed interest in our results! If you aren’t completely exhausted by your reading of this summary, you can send questions, comments, or requests for the scientific write-up, if & when it is completed, to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, x56406, wlouis@psy.uq.edu.au.

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