Greetings!

Earlier in the semester, you participated in a study about rural and urban students' attitudes and behaviour, and indicated that you would be interested in receiving a short summary of the findings. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to have the opportunity to tell you about the results. This write-up gives you a quick look at what we were looking for and what we found. If you would like to ask questions, to comment on what you read, or to find out more, you can contact project staff by phoning (07) 3365-6406, by e-mailing 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 that we've done on political decision-making at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

RURAL AND URBAN NORMS FOR GUN DEREGULATION
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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR

In this study, we exposed students to information that rural and urban students supported versus opposed rural gun deregulation (which we defined as "The view that the high level of bureaucratic oversight of gun ownership in rural communities should be reduced, compared to urban gun owners"). We wanted to see whether that would have an impact on students' attitudes towards the issue, or willingness to express their attitudes behaviourally. This study's theoretical context is a model called "referent informational influence" (Terry & Hogg, 1996), which says that the norms of groups you belong to ('ingroups') are very important in decisions, while the norms of groups that you don't belong to ('outgroups') are generally unimportant in shaping attitudes. When people find out that others in their ingroup have similar attitudes, this research shows that people are more likely to act out their attitudes behaviourally. If people find out that there is a norm in their group opposing their personal views, they are less likely to act, and even change their views. But information about other groups usually has no effect. So, the model says that rural students will be most influenced by reports about the rural (ingroup) attitudes, but not influenced by outgroup views (for urban students, in this case).

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

We recruited 118 students to participate in the study: 91 from the UQ St. Lucia participant pool in psychology in Semester 2 2002, 9 from UQ St. Lucia in Semester 1, 2003, and 18 from UQ Ipswich in Semester 1 2003. The sample was about 75% women, and ranged in age from 17 to 46 (but 83% of respondents were 20 or younger). Students who didn't identify primarily as rural (vs urban) were excluded from the analyses.

WHAT WE FOUND

1. PRE-MEASURES OF ATTITUDES TO RURAL GUN DEREGULATION. Before exposure to the norm manipulation, participants' attitude towards rural gun deregulation was measured. The average was not significantly different from zero, but the distribution was bimodal, meaning that rural students were polarized on this measure into supporting and opposing groups. More specifically, 43% opposed rural gun deregulation, 9% were neutral, and 47% supported it. Men and women and older and younger respondents did not differ in attitudes on the issue.

2. MEASURE OF "ATTITUDES ABOUT REALITY". People at this point completed an
"attitudes about reality" scale (Jackson, & Jeffers, 1989), which measures endorsement of positivist scientific values and conservative political values. This was not a major focus of our study, but we expected that the variable might be linked to students' social attitudes. As predicted, students who scored higher on the scale favoured rural gun deregulation more strongly (as well as greater police powers, mandatory detention for asylum seekers, and support for the 'war on terrorism').

3. EXPOSURE TO NORM MANIPULATION. Participants were then given graphs that ostensibly showed the results of previous studies at UQ St. Lucia, UQ Ipswich, and USQ about rural and urban students' attitudes to gun deregulation. In fact, the graphs were made up so that urban (outgroup) and rural (ingroup) student norms were either high and low in support for the issue. There were four conditions, then: the graphs showed that both rural and urban students opposed gun deregulation, that both supported it, that rural students supported & urban students opposed gun deregulation, or that urban students supported & rural students opposed gun deregulation.

4. MEASURES. In the final questionnaire, we took measures of how salient the rural identity was (i.e., how much people felt they were thinking about being from a rural community while filling in the questionnaire), attitudes to gun deregulation, and self-reported willingness to engage in a variety of actions to support the issue (e.g., to distribute leaflets, sign a petition supporting gun deregulation, etc.). Unsurprisingly, participants who were more favourable to gun deregulation on the pre-measure, also were more favourable to gun deregulation in their later attitudes and more willing to support gun deregulation behaviourally.

5. PREDICTING ATTITUDINAL AND BEHAVIOURAL SUPPORT. What we were most interested in, though, was the effect of our norm manipulations (graphs of rural and urban support for gun deregulation) on people's attitudinal and behavioural support at Time 2. As predicted, controlling for their initial attitudes, participants who had been exposed to an ingroup (rural) norm supporting the issue, and whose rural identity was salient to them as they were filling in the questionnaire, had more favourable attitudes to gun deregulation at Time 2, and were more willing to express their attitudes behaviourally. By contrast, outgroup (urban student) norms had no impact on Time 2 attitudes or behaviour.

This finding provides support, then, for the referent informational influence model. When people's rural identity was salient, their attitudinal and behavioural willingness to support gun deregulation was reinforced if they were led to believe other rural folk supported the issue and undermined if they believed other rural folk opposed gun deregulation. However, for people who weren't thinking about being rural (whose rural identity wasn't salient), the information about what other rural folk thought had no effect.

SUMMARY

These findings show the surprisingly strong influence of even subtle normative information on people's decision-making. When people's rural identity was salient, even being given graphs that demonstrated that other rural students’ attitudes towards a socially important topic were favourable was enough to make participants more favourable in their own attitudes and more willing to support the issue behaviourally, compared to if they got graphs that showed that other rural students opposed the issue. At a theoretical level, the results provide evidence for "referent informational influence" processes. Even for issues that people feel strongly about, when people are deciding whether to act or not, they are influenced by whether they think the social context is supportive of their views.

THANKS AGAIN....
So that's a description of what we found in this 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. You can also read about other studies that we've done on political decision-making at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/. And thank you again for your participation and interest!

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