Greetings,

You recently participated in a study about "Values & Attitudes for Australian students at UQ," run by Alison Pike under the supervision of Winnifred Louis, and you gave us your e-mail address so that we could send you a summary of the results. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to have the opportunity to tell you about the findings. 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/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: ATTITUDES TO AUSTRALIANS AND AMERICANS IN RELATION TO "TALL POPPY ATTITUDES"
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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR

The primary goal of this study was to look at the variables associated with Australian students’ attitudes to Americans in relation to “Tall Poppy” attitudes. “Tall Poppy” research looks at the fact that conspicuously successful people can attract envy and resentment as well as admiration and respect. Research has shown that when conspicuously successful people fail or do something wrong, people can be less sympathetic and more punitive than when average people fail. We wanted to link this tall poppy research to another research literature on intergroup attitudes and prejudice. In prejudice research, researchers find that people evaluate groups by comparing “ingroups” in which they are members to “outgroups” that they don’t belong to. But in this evaluation, people are psychologically motivated to feel that their “ingroups” are different from and superior to “outgroups”. Generally speaking, the more strongly that people identify with a group, the more likely they are to rate their ingroup as different and better than outgroups. Social identity research shows that ingroup-favouring attitudes intensify when people feel their group is threatened, for example by being lower in status and power than another group.

In the present study, participants completed premeasures of anti-Americanism and attitudes to tall poppies. Then, as part of an ostensibly separate study, participants evaluated scenarios of student misconduct (plagiarism). We manipulated target status by depicting the plagiarist (who was discovered, convicted of plagiarism, and suffered academic failure) as a high achieving student or an average student. Following on from tall poppy research, we hypothesized participants would feel less sympathy and more punitiveness to high achievers. We also manipulated target nationality by depicting the student as American or Australian: following from intergroup research, we expected students to be more punitive and less sympathetic to American plagiarists. In addition, because the United States is a high status outgroup compared to Australia, we expected people who favoured the fall of tall poppies in general to display more anti-American stereotyping and hostility (in the first questionnaire), and to be especially negative to high status American targets (in the scenario study).

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS

During the time period May - August 2003, 101 people completed the study. The participants were recruited from first year classes in psychology. Two participants who did not complete the questionnaires, as well as 2 non-Australians, and 9 participants who did not correctly answer the manipulation check items were excluded from the analyses. In the final sample, ages ranged from 17 to 36 (but 58% were 18 or younger). Most participants were female (74%).
WHAT WE FOUND

1. AUSTRALIAN IDENTIFICATION, TALL POPPY ATTITUDES, AND ANTI-AMERICANISM. We included a 5-item measure of identification with Australia (e.g., “How important is your nationality to your sense of self?”) and a 20-item measure of tall poppy attitudes (e.g., “Those who are very successful ought to come down off their pedestals and be like other people”). As a stereotyping measure, first we had people evaluate traits (e.g., arrogant) as good or bad, and then they estimated the percentage of Australians and Americans who had the traits. Finally, people estimated how much they experienced positive and negative emotions (e.g., admiration, anger) when they thought about the two groups.

Looking descriptively at these variables, most people (87%) scored above the midpoint on identification with Australia, stereotyped Australians more positively than negatively (95%), and experienced more positive than negative emotions when they thought about Australians (99%). Most people also stereotyped Americans relatively positively (76%), but 51% experienced more negative than positive emotions when they thought about Americans. Finally, a majority of people thought conspicuously successful people should be rewarded rather than punished (83%).

When we looked at the relationships among these variables, we found that people who identified strongly with Australia had more positive stereotypes of and emotions towards Australians, consistent with intergroup research. Identification with Australia wasn’t related to tall poppy attitudes. However, we found unexpectedly that strongly identified Australians also had more positive stereotypes of and emotions towards Americans, whereas normally we find in intergroup research that the more you identify with one group, the more you derogate others. Part of what’s going on may be that conservatism is a common factor: In this study, we found that people were more likely to be both nationalistic about Australia and positive about the US when they scored higher on measures of authoritarianism (e.g., “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important values children should learn”) and social dominance orientation (e.g., “To get ahead in life, it is sometimes necessary to step on other groups”).

From our perspective, the most interesting part of the intergroup findings was that tall poppy attitudes were also (independently) related to anti-Americanism, such that those who favoured rewarding tall poppies expressed more positive emotions to the US, even though stereotypes were equally positive. Follow-up analyses showed that people who favoured the reward of tall poppies were more likely to see Australia’s low status relative to the US as legitimate and stable, and this promoted their positive attitudes. So it looks as though tall poppy attitudes are relevant to the intergroup attitudes - and specifically, it looks as though Australians consider the US a “Tall Poppy”.

2. EVALUATIONS OF AMERICAN AND AUSTRALIAN HIGH- AND AVERAGE-ACHIEVING PLAGIARISTS. In the plagiarism part of the study, we had measures of how people evaluated the targets before and after the fall (e.g., “How much do you think that you would like this student?”, their emotions in reading about the student’s conviction for plagiarism (e.g., angry, pleased, sorry), and how punitive they felt (e.g., how much they thought the target deserved having all course credit refused).

Before they found out about the plagiarism, most students (78%) liked the target and thought they would like to be like them (68%). They rated the high-achieving target (who had a string of commendations and a high GPA) more positively than the average student, and they rated the American and the Australian target equally. After they found out about the plagiarism, however, participants were more punitive to the high-achieving student who plagiarised than the average achiever (the ‘tall poppy’ effect). In addition, participants were more punitive to American than Australian cheaters, disliked the American cheaters more, were less sorry for them, and were more happy about their
punishment (they showed prejudice to American targets). Finally, we tested to see if people with hostile attitudes to tall poppies were especially punitive to high status Americans, but we didn’t find that was so (the interaction was not statistically significant). What we did find is that people who were more emotionally hostile to Americans were more punitive to high status Americans, and they were more lenient to average Americans. So even though the interaction of tall poppy attitudes with the manipulations wasn’t significant, the interaction with emotional hostility does suggest that prejudice to a high status outgroup can be especially triggered by outgroup tall poppies.

SUMMARY

These findings both replicate the tall poppy effect overall and show that people will manifest intergroup prejudice in the tall poppy paradigm. The results demonstrate that attitudes to tall poppies are relevant to intergroup emotions and prejudice: we found that people who were favourable to tall poppies considered an unequal intergroup relationship more legitimate, and we found that people who were hostile to a high status group were especially punitive when high achieving members of that group committed an offense. These findings are neat from a theoretical perspective in that they integrate two different research traditions, and help researchers understand the relationship between sensitivity to status threat and attitudes to higher status outgroups. Our future research will try to replicate the findings, and to look at the role of ideological factors, like meritocratic and egalitarian values, versus threats aroused by low status positions, in driving intergroup and tall poppy attitudes.

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. And thank you again for your participation and interest!

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