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Psychological Inflexibility Predicts Attitudes Toward Syrian Refugees and National Security Policies

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Introduction

We sought to examine some psychological factors that may influence opinions regarding the settlement of Syrian refugees in the United States, as well as support for law enforcement policies that specifically target Muslims.

Psychological inflexibility (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lilis, 2006) has been linked not only to psychopathology, but also implicated in prejudice. This may be because contact with out-groups causes internal distress, and inflexibility captures the degree to which a person seeks to avoid that internal distress (Levin, Luoma, Vilardaga, Lilis, Nobles, & Hayes, 2015). We hypothesized that people who are higher in inflexibility would more strongly oppose Syrian refugees settling in the United States, and more strongly favor law enforcement policies that profile Middle Easterners and Muslims.

Methods

Undergraduate students (N = 449) were recruited from a southern University to participate. Students were given the AAQ-II, a standard measure of psychological inflexibility, and afterward asked their opinions regarding various policies. Participants indicated their level of agreement or disagreement with three relevant policies using a six-point scale (1 - strongly disagree; 6 - strongly agree):

- Allowing authorities to stop people on the street at random to search their possessions, based on Middle Eastern ethnicity.
- Allowing authorities to stop people on the street at random to search their possessions, based on having a Muslim name, Muslim religious items, or Muslim clothing.
- Banning refugees from Syria or the surrounding areas from settling in the United States.

Results

Scores on all three opinion items loaded onto a single factor (Table 1). A single variable was computed containing the factor score of all three items, representing total support for policies that profile Muslims and Middle Easterners.

Bivariate correlations were run on AAQ-II scores (inflexibility) and support for the three security policy opinions. Inflexibility was significantly correlated with the computed factor of all three policies, as well as support for banning Syrian refugees from the US (support for other two policies approached significance). Results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 1: Factor Loadings for Support for Prejudicial Policy Opinions

	Factor 1 Loadings
Allowing authorities to stop people on the street at random to search their possessions, based on Middle Eastern ethnicity.	.946
Allowing authorities to stop people on the street at random to search their possessions, based on having a Muslim name, Muslim religious items, or Muslim clothing.	.932
Banning refugees from Syria or the surrounding areas from settling in the United States	.814
Eigenvalue	2.426
% of Total Variance	80.881

Table 2: Bivariate Correlations of Inflexibility and Prejudicial Opinion Items

Item	1	2	3	4
1. AAQ-II (Inflexibility)	-			
2. Total Prejudicial Policies Factor	.109*	-		
3. Random searches based on Middle Eastern ethnicity	.092	.927**	-	
4. Random searches based on Muslim name, items, or clothing	.089	.949**	.877**	-
5. Banning Syrian refugees from US	.117*	.817**	.592**	.660**

*p<.05, **p<.01

Table 3: Linear Regression of Participant Factors on Prejudicial Policy Support

Variable	B	SE(B)	Beta	df	R²	Adj. R²
Step 1				3, 336	.221	.214**
AAQ-II	.010	.005	.097*			
Religiosity (Centrality of Religiosity Scale)	.024	.047	.026			
Liberal or Conservative	.263	.029	.458**			
Step 2				7, 332	.272	.256**
AAQ-II	.009	.005	.085			
Religiosity	.039	.046	.042			
Liberal or Conservative	.251	.028	.438**			
Yearly Income	.039	.022	.085			
Educational Level	.025	.064	.020			
Sex	-.157	.089	-.086			
Age	.042	.013	.168**			

*p<.05, **p<.01

Results, cont.

Finally, a linear regression was conducted on the participant factors we included in the survey to see which factors significantly predict scores on the computed Prejudicial Policy Opinions factor. The results are displayed in Table 3.

In Step 1, the psychological and personality factors of inflexibility, religiosity, and liberal/conservative were included. Inflexibility and conservatism were both significant predictors of support for prejudicial policies. The overall model was significant.

In Step 2, more demographic characteristics were included, i.e. income, educational level, sex, and age. After these were included, inflexibility was no longer significant (p = .08). Conservatism and older age were significant predictors of support for prejudicial policies.

Discussion

Our results suggest that:

1. Support for law enforcement targeting Middle Eastern and Muslim minorities, as well as opposition to Syrian refugees entering the United States represent a single factor.
2. Inflexibility plays a role in predicting support for policies that specifically target Muslims and Middle Easterners.
3. Self-labeled conservatism is more strongly predictive of support for these policies than inflexibility.
4. Inflexibility reduces in significance when other demographic factors are included in the model.

Because inflexibility represents a type of negative reactivity toward distressing internal events, and has been linked to prejudice in past research, our results may suggest that support for policies that place restrictions on Muslims, Middle Easterners, and Syrian refugees in the United States may be associated with attempts to down-regulate unwanted internal distress caused by the implied presence of those out-groups in the United States.

More research is needed to determine the generalizability and direction of this effect, as well as whether it can be generalized to other groups in the US.

References

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