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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

Educationism and the irony of meritocracy: Negative attitudes of higher educated people towards the less educated

Toon Kuppens^{a,*}, Russell Spears^a, Antony S.R. Manstead^b, Bram Spruyt^c, Matthew J. Easterbrook^d

^a University of Groningen, The Netherlands

^b Cardiff University, UK

^c Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

^d University of Sussex, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Educationism

Attribution

Intergroup bias

Education-based groups

ABSTRACT

Social psychology has studied ethnic, gender, age, national, and other social groups but has neglected education-based groups. This is surprising given the importance of education in predicting people's life outcomes and social attitudes. We study whether and why people evaluate education-based in-groups and out-groups differently. In contrast with popular views of the higher educated as tolerant and morally enlightened, we find that higher educated participants show education-based intergroup bias: They hold more negative attitudes towards less educated people than towards highly educated people. This is true both on direct measures (Studies 1–2) and on more indirect measures (Studies 3–4). The less educated do not show such education-based intergroup bias. In Studies 5–7 we investigate attributions regarding a range of disadvantaged groups. Less educated people are seen as more responsible and blameworthy for their situation, as compared to poor people or working class people. This shows that the psychological consequences of social inequality are worse when they are framed in terms of education rather than income or occupation. Finally, meritocracy beliefs are related to higher ratings of responsibility and blameworthiness, indicating that the processes we study are related to ideological beliefs. The findings are discussed in light of the role that education plays in the legitimization of social inequality.

1. Introduction

Now that people are classified by ability, the gap between the classes has inevitably become wider. The upper classes are [...] no longer weakened by self-doubt and self-criticism. Today the eminent know that success is just reward for their own capacity, for their own efforts, and for their own undeniable achievement. They deserve to belong to a superior class.

Michael Young, in *The rise of the meritocracy* (1958), p. 106

Education, education, education

British Prime Minister Tony Blair, on his three priorities ahead of the 1997 General Election

As Tony Blair pointed out, education matters, and emphasizing this helped to sweep him to power in his first of three consecutive UK election victories. Why, then, is education arguably the most important social division that has *not* been significantly studied in social psychology? This is all the stranger because the relation between education and health and social attitudes is at least as strong as for other demographic characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, or income

(Easterbrook, Kuppens, & Manstead, 2016; Marmot & Wilkinson, 2005). In spite of this, social psychology textbooks address prejudice based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, age, religion, body shape, physical or mental disability, nationality, and study major (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2013; Hewstone, Stroebe, & Jonas, 2012; Hogg & Vaughan, 2008), yet education is conspicuous by its absence. The reasons for this are interesting in themselves; we argue that attitudes to those with few educational qualifications have become one of the last bastions of 'acceptable' prejudice, to the extent that it may not be seen by many as prejudice at all, and that these views are shared in important respects by the target group itself. Here we present the first experimental evidence of education-based intergroup attitudes and in the process challenge the popular view, supported by previous research, that more highly educated people are morally enlightened and thus less prejudiced compared to their less educated counterparts (see also Kuppens, Easterbrook, Spears, & Manstead, 2015; Kuppens & Spears, 2014). We also compare attitudes towards the less educated with attitudes towards the poor and the working class in order to investigate what is special about the less educated as a group, and how this might contribute to the legitimization of social inequality.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: t.kuppens@rug.nl (T. Kuppens).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2017.11.001>

Received 24 August 2016; Received in revised form 31 October 2017; Accepted 1 November 2017
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1.1. The case for studying education-based groups

Why are education-based groups worthy of investigation? *First*, people's level of education matters because educational differences are one of the major divides in contemporary societies. Education is related to outcomes such as unemployment, income, health, and well-being (Grusky & DiPrete, 1990; Marmot, Ryff, Bumpass, Shipley, & Marks, 1997), and also to a wide range of social attitudes such as racism, lack of trust, and political cynicism, for which it is a more consistent predictor than income is (Easterbrook et al., 2016). In addition, education is considered to be a solution for these individual and societal problems (Depaepe & Smeyers, 2008; Labaree, 2008), demonstrating its perceived importance. The societal importance of education is perhaps best illustrated by noting that education is the best demographic predictor of people's opinion on current political conflicts such as those surrounding Donald Trump and the Brexit (Goodwin & Heath, 2016).

Second, contrary to the belief that education is a vehicle for social mobility, opportunities for academic achievement—the gateway to all education's advantages—are distributed very unequally. There is a strong relation between social background and academic achievement (OECD, 2013), and longitudinal data show that these effects of social background are not merely due to differences in intelligence (Bukodi, Erikson, & Goldthorpe, 2014; Bukodi, Goldthorpe, Waller, & Kuha, 2015; Damian, Su, Shanahan, Trautwein, & Roberts, 2014). In experimental studies, students taking the role of teachers discriminate against pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Autin, Batruch, & Butera, 2016) and widespread normative testing has been shown to increase the SES achievement gap (Smeding, Darnon, Souchal, Toczek-Capelle, & Butera, 2013). Tertiary education institutions in the US have also been shown to adopt language and customs that are biased in favor of the middle (vs. working) classes, causing stress and performance deficits among first-generation scholars (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). Clearly, the path to academic achievement is a high-speed freeway for some but a rocky road for others. Thus, differences in educational achievement cannot be considered completely fair and the educational system partly reproduces and legitimizes existing social differences (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Yet even social psychological theories that are directly concerned with the justification of inequality, such as System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), pay scant attention to the role played by educational outcomes. The combination of the importance of education and the unequal access to educational opportunities makes the neglect of educational differences in social psychological research all the more surprising.

1.2. Attitudes towards education-based groups

Given that educational differences are large and at least partly unfair, a central question for social psychology is how educational differences are subjectively perceived. From the point of view of the less educated, this amounts to whether this is the basis of stigma (see Kuppens et al., 2015). From the point of view of the more highly educated, the question is how they evaluate and respond to the less educated. Are their attitudes towards educational groups likely to make things better or worse for the less educated? Large proportions of the population recognize the unfair situation or treatment of disadvantaged groups such as the physically disabled, women, and ethnic minorities, and support social justice via equality legislation. However, we propose that the ideological and motivational foundations of attitudes about education-based groups are somewhat different to these other social groups.

1.3. Existing research on attitudes towards education-based groups

Perhaps unsurprisingly, students see educated people as very competent but also quite warm (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). In a

representative sample, and consistent with the Stereotype Content Model (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008), Spruyt and Kuppens (2015b) found that the higher educated saw themselves as more competent than the less educated, while the less educated saw themselves as warmer than the higher educated. Less educated people also rated the conflict between educational groups to be more important than higher educated people did (Spruyt, 2014; Spruyt & Kuppens, 2015a; Stubager, 2009), which may be an example of a dominant group downplaying intergroup conflict in order to avoid having to address it (Jackman, 1994; Livingston, Sweetman, Bracht, & Haslam, 2015).

To our knowledge, these are the only studies on attitudes towards education-based groups. One basic question we investigate here is whether education-based intergroup bias exists, and whether this goes beyond stereotypes of warmth and competence that are partly based on the social reality of educational qualifications. Education-based intergroup bias is the topic of Studies 1–4 and we now discuss our predictions for those studies.

1.4. Education and moral enlightenment

What *kind* of attitudes should we expect between education-based groups? There are reasons to expect that the higher educated will show less intergroup bias than the lower educated. First, in naturally occurring groups, members of low status groups generally show more intergroup bias than those of high status groups (Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992). This makes sense from the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) because members of low status groups need to strive harder than members of high status groups to achieve a positive identity and social change (Scheepers, Spears, Doosje, & Manstead, 2006b). Second, higher levels of education could be expected to promote tolerance, therefore reducing the intergroup bias displayed by the higher educated. A popular idea is that high levels of education are related to moral enlightenment and better moral judgment, a notion first articulated by Stouffer (1955) and Lipset (1959). The reasoning is that people with higher levels of education have developed a more sophisticated way of thinking, and an understanding that certain values should be universally applied to all groups. There is indeed evidence that higher educated people are more tolerant of some minority or low-status groups (Carvacho et al., 2013; Easterbrook et al., 2016; Wagner & Zick, 1995). According to the moral enlightenment perspective, the tolerant worldview of the more highly educated is a consequence of their superior moral reasoning facilitated by education.

However, research has long shown that the effect of education on egalitarian attitudes often does not translate into support for concrete measures aiming to achieve greater equality (Jackman & Muha, 1984; Stember, 1961; Weidman, 1975). Yet, the notion of moral enlightenment still persists. A recent resurrection has come in the form of two longitudinal studies that presented negative correlations between children's scores on an intelligence test and their level of self-reported prejudice two decades later, a relation partially mediated by educational qualifications (Deary, Batty, & Gale, 2008; Schoon, Cheng, Gale, Batty, & Deary, 2010). According to these authors, the relation between education and tolerance is due to the common influence of intelligence on both, rather than to the effect of education itself on moral reasoning. The underlying idea, however, is the same: The higher educated are more tolerant because of their superior moral reasoning. Based on this research, one could expect the higher educated to show less education bias than the less educated do. Moral enlightenment should prevent the higher educated from showing negative reactions to outgroups, including the less educated.

However, rather than being due to moral enlightenment, the self-reported tolerance of the higher educated may reflect sophisticated ideological discourses that ultimately mask the self-interest of the higher educated (Jackman & Crane, 1986; Jackman & Muha, 1984). For example, the fact that the higher educated defend principles of tolerance and equality while opposing actual measures that could achieve

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