

Measuring Attitudes and Points of View: Social Judgment of Proposals for the Revision of Student Stipends in Higher Education

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This paper revisits a cognitive debate concerning social judgment and the measurement of attitudes. Whilst use of the Likert scale is pervasive in social research, this paper demonstrates that this method fails to address a critical psychological operation in social judgment, that of interacting with an alternative proposal from the perspective of another. This paper reports a study undertaken with students at the University of Malta ($N=247$) concerning the issue of revision of the student stipend system. Student attitudes regarding this issue were highly unfavourable to proposals suggesting the curbing of stipends. We hypothesized that strongly held attitudes as well as high ego-relatedness would be associated with closed-mindedness, in terms of the explicit rejection of alternative proposals. Our hypotheses were refuted by the data. The findings demonstrate that students are mostly open-minded about alternative proposals and open to dialogue. The study shows that high ego-relatedness and strongly held attitudes do not short-circuit cognition into closed-mindedness and that in spite of strongly held attitudes, respondents retained ability for cognitive complexity.

A long-standing interest in the social sciences concerns the understanding and measurement of subjective evaluations of social stimuli. Such interest stems from the ability to ascertain how favourably disposed individuals might be towards some social object or event. Typically measured as attitudes, these dispositions characteristically involve a process of judging encountered alternatives according to subjective standards (Eiser, 1990). The concern featured very prominently in the sixties and seventies, as scholars sought to overcome cumbersome measurement procedures that were circumscribed by context (see Fishbein, 1967). The Likert measure has had an unparalleled influence in the social sciences since, notwithstanding the fact that according to its proponent (Likert, 1967), persons with different points of view ought to respond to an attitude stimulus differentially. This, as Thurstone (1967) notes, is hardly the case, as two individuals could be attributed the same attitude by virtue of their evaluative articulation of it, despite differences in their outlooks or in their choices of action.

Whilst Likert (1967) himself, sensitive to these contextual demands, argued that his scales required standardisation for particular cultural groups, and that scales devised for one group should not be thus utilised for another, the measurement of attitudes on five-point or seven-point Likert scales ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree with a presented stimulus has become a universal and seemingly culture-proof method for the measurement of attitudes. The global application of the Likert scale is sustained not least by the fact that the attitude, which has for a long time been better measured than defined (Allport, 1967), has become synonymous with evaluative expressions individuals make regarding elements in their environment (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2005). Whilst attitudes can be cognitive, affective, or behavioural in their origin, their expression is characteristically evaluative. In aggregate, such attitude measures are held to constitute public opinion for a certain group of

people (Shamir & Shamir, 2000). Indeed, the popularity of the Likert scale can largely be attributed to its pragmatic utility in measuring public opinion (Fraser, 1994). The bottom line measure of public opinion is represented by aggregate shifts in the mean of percentage agreement with certain attitudes over an entire population (Himmelweit, 1990).

Arguably, the measurement of individual orientations to elements in the environment has been much refined through the application of advanced statistical procedures (Fraser, 1994; but see Wagoner & Valsiner, 2005, and Toomela & Valsiner, 2010, for a different appraisal). Much of these developments, however, retain the original Likert scale as the primary datum, and proceed to extract from this measure, through statistical operations, latent variables, such as factors or components, that are held to account for observable differences in the psychological variables manifest in a population.

In this paper, we do not take issue with the use of these procedures. However, in spite of these statistical refinements, this paper argues that in adopting an exclusive data gathering procedure such as the Likert scale, qualitative distinctions between mental outlooks are essentially overlooked. We argue that even if individuals report the same evaluation of a social stimulus on a standard attitude measure, their mental outlooks could be marked by underlying differences in their cognitive organization. Wagoner & Valsiner (2005) have alerted psychologists to the fact that rating tasks assume a 'single interpretational trajectory' that is only possible if we assume subjects to have an immediate, unitary and accurate access to their mental states, and that these are quantifiable. They go on to argue that these assumptions are untenable. For instance, two individuals reporting a similar attitude (e.g. strongly agree) could be differentially predisposed to entertain an alternative view. Whilst attitude research typically makes the assumption that a strongly held attitude is to some degree resistant to alternatives (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), this need not be the case when the attitude is underpinned by an open-minded point of view.

In this paper, we report a study undertaken in Malta concerning a proposal to revise the student stipend system in higher education. We demonstrate that, whilst students' attitudes towards this issue are typically strongly held, many students report an open-minded point of view that is open to the consideration of alternatives. Public opinion research typically holds that individuals reporting a neutral (i.e. neither agree/nor disagree) attitude, unlike those who adopt a clear stand towards the issue, can be swayed to a favourable or unfavourable position through persuasion and social influence (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Sammut & Bauer, 2011). We argue, however, that such a conclusion is unwarranted due to the fact that this dynamic is better measured in the categorization of points of view. In essence, we demonstrate that the mere measurement of attitudes in the study of social issues, that is measuring percentage agreement or disagreement with presented stimuli in a population, overlooks the relative propensity to relate with an alternative perspective. We therefore conclude that attitude research may benefit from an added concern with this variable, insofar as such research aims at a fuller understanding and measurement of the degrees to which public opinion is predisposed to entertain proposals for social change.

SOCIAL JUDGMENT

A different line of research that concerned itself with similar evaluative processes that inhere in attitude measurement is that of social judgment. This line of research, by contrast, has focused on perspectives as a phenomenon subject to certain variable properties. Upshaw

(1965), for instance, argued that perspectives can be broad or narrow depending on whether they incorporate an unfamiliar alternative within their original outlook. Pettigrew (1959) similarly reported three variations in the category width of perspectives: subjects tended to be consistently (a) broad, (b) medium, or (c) narrow in their evaluations. In a corollary theory of social judgment, and one that discusses the attitude construct specifically, Sherif & Hovland (1961) distinguish between latitudes of acceptance, rejection and noncommitment. These refer to the respective ranges which subjects find acceptable, unacceptable, or about which they hold no firm opinion. Presented alternatives falling within the latitude of acceptance are assimilated, those falling within the latitude of rejection are contrasted, and those falling within the latitude of noncommitment receive a neutral response. Moreover, Sherif & Hovland claim that this latitude structure is associated with ego-relatedness, that is the extent to which an issue applies to oneself.

The tripartite typology characterizing mental outlooks has been reliably documented in research findings. In the study of narrow-mindedness, Rokeach (1951a, 1951b) argued that cognitive organisation that describes variable perspectives ranges from comprehensive, to isolated, to narrow. A subject's mental outlook was comprehensive if able to relate disparate bits of information, isolated if broken down into substructures, and narrow if failing to relate an entire series of concepts. Rokeach's types are fashioned on Krech's (1949) dynamic systems model, which claims that systems vary in their propensity to relate to other systems. According to Rokeach (1951a), the intensity of attitudes and their resistance to change are a function of this underlying variable of cognitive organisation that describes individuals' characteristic points of view. More recently, Sammut & Gaskell (2010) have documented the same typology of points of view in their study of atheism and religious belief. The authors argued that points of view varied according to individuals' relative propensity to take the perspective of the other. Other scholars have further documented this typology in studies concerning immigration and rights of citizenship (Tsirogianni & Andreouli, 2011).

Rokeach's work has served as foundational for the study of open/closed-mindedness in psychology. More recently, the study of closed-mindedness has been advanced by Kruglanski (1989, 2004). However, a critical problem inheres in this work that is also traceable to Rokeach. Despite noting qualitative distinctions between the three types of cognitive organization, Rokeach proceeded to collapse the measurement of this variable onto a single quantitative continuum. The categorization of points of view in this measurement method is problematic, as isolated and comprehensive organisers are able to entertain alternatives in a manner which narrow organisers are not (see Sammut & Gaskell, 2010). Consequently, in recent works, the classification of points of view along these three types has been relegated in favour of measuring a 'need for cognitive closure' presumed to underlie closed-mindedness in turn (Kruglanski, 2004; Manetti et al., 2002). We contend, however, that whilst this line of research is highly important in its own right, the exclusive concern with the need for cognitive closure has led to a dismissal of interest in open/closed-minded mental states, which in themselves are different psychological phenomena to the processes that underpin them such as the need for cognitive closure. As Kruglanski notes, the two may be associated but "the road leading from need for closure to close mindedness isn't a straightforward one" (2004, p. 17). We thus return to this antiquarian (Billig, 1987) debate, warranted by recent critiques of methodological thinking in the social sciences (see Toomela & Valsiner, 2010) and by recent advances in associated disciplines, namely stylistics and critical linguistics (Simpson, 1993), which have enabled a better operationalisation of points

of view in terms of their characteristically variable rhetorical features. We argue that the rehabilitation of this concept serves contemporary social research that seeks an understanding of public opinion and the potential to entertain proposals for social change better than attitude measures and the consideration of percentages reporting neutral attitudes in a population.

STUDY: THE REVISION OF STUDENT STIPENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALTA

Higher education institutions have served a key function in the advancement and dissemination of knowledge for as long as they have existed. This end is achieved through the undertaking of research and scholarly activity on the one hand, and the teaching and education of students in disciplinary frameworks on the other. In acquiring a tertiary qualification, higher education students undertake an instructive process spanning a number of years, during which they are meant to acquire specialist skills and knowledge that the institution itself is engaged to advance. In this way, universities serve a latent social purpose. Other than being repositories of knowledge, tertiary institutions also fulfill the purpose of advancing and disseminating knowledge that serves society.

The contemporary practice of funding research establishes this social purpose for modern universities de facto. In addition, universities can serve further social functions. Primary amongst these is the promotion of social mobility and the achievement of an egalitarian society. In acquiring qualifications, individuals from deprived backgrounds are held to acquire the potential to move up the social ladder and out of relative deprivation. Tertiary qualifications thus constitute cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) that can be exchanged for better jobs, higher salaries, and a better quality of life. This opportunity afforded by tertiary institutions presents itself in contradistinction to the feudal system of ascribed status, assigned at birth, that permeates social inequalities throughout the lifespan.

A key criterion for this added social function to be achieved, however, is that of equal access to education. The problem of social status is endemic in the educational system, in that those who command higher resources also command heightened possibilities for academic success. The provision of higher education involves numerous costs, not least in servicing teaching. In higher education, passing on this cost directly to the clientele means that only those who command enough resources to afford the service at the outset become able to improve their lot through its benefits. Many Western democracies have redressed this anomaly through state incentives in the interest of equal opportunities and social mobility. These include, for instance, the availability of scholarships and cheap loans to students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Other societies have extended incentives yet further by making tertiary education freely available to all at taxpayers' costs. Such measures ensure not only equal opportunity, but also serve to create a knowledge society where, over a number of generations, increasing numbers of citizens acquire a high-level education. This is held to be a desirable end in itself, as society develops a highly educated workforce in every sphere of activity. The most far-reaching measures have offered students stipends as a monetary enticement in an effort to incentivise all capable of higher education to undertake a tertiary qualification. Such, for instance, is the case in Malta. These incentives serve the dual aims of individual social mobility on the one hand, and the achievement of a knowledge-based society on the other.

These laudable aims have, however, recently been put into contestation. Various governments in Europe have advanced the idea that hard times call for hard measures, and that the socialist aims of easily accessible higher education require revision. These calls were made on the back of an economic recession that hit the entire world, including Western countries, in the closing years of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Governments in certain European countries, such as Italy and the United Kingdom, adopted varying measures to curb the state financing of tertiary institutions. A key argument sustaining these revisions was that the aim of establishing a knowledge society had effectively been achieved and that this, consequently, required no further impetus. Whilst many disagreed, governments in both countries pushed forward revisions, instituting fewer and weaker measures to support the state financing of higher education.

Malta was not spared such controversy. The issue of revising the university stipend system was originally put on the agenda by the Labour administration of 1996, and attracted stiff opposition from students and the general public alike. The matter was put to rest by a premature change in government in 1998. It was resurrected in 2009 by the Rector of the University of Malta, who, in the context of a reform in tertiary education, proposed that the stipend system be revised and for the funds to be utilised towards further investment in the sector. Rector's suggestions were this time endorsed by other high-ranking public officials, but once again attracted stiff opposition. This time, however, the debate was arguably less one-sided, with a poll conducted by the university students' council suggesting that certain students were also wanting the removal of stipends. The proposal received further endorsement from a portion of the general public who expressed frustration at their imposed taxation burden for financing others' studies. On the other hand, others, including government, suggested that stipends remained an investment towards achieving a knowledge-society and useful in helping those who lack financial means to pursue tertiary education.

This context provided the socio-political backdrop of the present study. Whilst the prevailing method for the investigation of social issues in the social sciences remains attitude research, employing the much used Likert scale, the present study investigated the role of points of view as a psychological variable in terms of individuals' cognitive capacity to appraise a salient social issue. The study was undertaken with a sample of students at the University of Malta, all of whom presently receive stipends throughout their undergraduate studies. The findings reported in this paper demonstrate that whilst attitude measures of these students suggest a very strong public opinion against the revision of the stipends system, the analysis of points of view reveals that this is far from a determined conclusion. Elsewhere (Sammut & Gaskell, 2010; 2012; Sammut, 2012), we have labeled the three point of view types monological, dialogical, and metalogical. *Monological* points of view were demonstrated to be exclusive and unable to consider an alternative point of view in their social judgment, manifesting closed-mindedness. *Dialogical* points of view were demonstrated to be considerate but dismissive of an alternative, manifesting a bounded mental outlook. *Metalogical* points of view were open and able to relate with an alternative according to the alternative's own background of intelligibility (Daanen, 2009), manifesting open-mindedness. In their vast majority, respondents in this study demonstrate a cognitive complexity that, whilst adopting a position in favour of the retention of stipends, is nevertheless open-minded and thus capable of dialogue with an alternative and potentially less favourable position.

METHOD

Hypotheses

The tripartite distinction that inheres in points of view has been previously associated with attitude intensity (Rokeach, 1951a) and ego-relatedness (Sherif & Hovland, 1961), as noted above. We therefore hypothesised that the more strongly individuals evaluated an attitude statement (attitude intensity), the less predisposed they would be in relating with an alternative perspective (point of view types). We expected that this would transpire in a higher likelihood of adopting a closed, or monological, point of view. We further hypothesised that the higher the level of ego-relatedness, the less open-minded their point of view. We therefore expected variables to be correlated in two ways: (1) that point of view types be correlated with attitude intensity; (2) that ego-relatedness be correlated with point of view types.

Participants & Procedure

A representative sample survey was undertaken with students at the University of Malta. A questionnaire was emailed to a representative random sample of 1000 students, stratified by faculty of studies, through the Office of the Registrar in November 2009. Three email reminders were subsequently sent during the following three months. The survey was closed in February 2010. At the time of closure, the survey attracted 247 fully completed questionnaires. The survey thus attracted an effective response rate of 24.7% ($N=247$), which is deemed satisfactory for an online survey. The distribution of respondents across faculties in the stratified sample mirrored that of the population.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was presented in two parts. The first page of the questionnaire presented a series of five statements to which respondents were required to react on a five-point Likert scale ranging from totally disagree to totally agree as a measure of attitude intensity. The statements were selected from articles and comments published by the *Times of Malta* regarding the issue of stipends, and were selected in view of their linguistic characteristics that conform to the rhetorical strategies of different point of view types (Simpson, 1993), detailed above.

The first statement ["Stipends are a privilege not a right, and one that the country cannot afford. Students in Malta are already lucky to not have to pay tuition fees, so stipends should be removed"] and the second statement ["Stipends are a necessity. Stipends are for everyone because everyone has a right to education, so stipends must be untouched"] were high in deontic modal terms (Simpson, 1993) that indicate an obligation, duty, or commitment to a particular position.

The third ["It is important for the stipend system to be sustainable and not hinder investment in quality education, whilst also assisting those in need. However, revising the system might mean not all will continue to receive a stipend"] as well as the fourth statements ["Whilst certain students do not need stipends and they spend their monthly allocation on non-essentials, for others the stipend is the only way they can afford university. It is important that some form of the stipend system be retained"] included an epistemic

rhetoric that distinguishes non-categorical from categorical assertions by signaling a qualified commitment to the truth, or validity, of an utterance. These epistemic terms validated an opposing social position, but the argument retained a deontic position.

The argument presented in the fifth statement [“Stipends provide students with spending money. Some students benefit from stipends as they do not have other means of financial support. Other students spend their stipends on luxuries. The stipend system should ensure that the funds allocated for stipends support needy students and are a good investment in higher education”] was epistemic and open-ended in rhetorical form, and unassuming any particular deontic position¹.

Following the rating of these five arguments on a Likert scale (i.e. attitude intensity), respondents were requested to choose the one that comes closest to their own view. In this way, respondents self-classified their point of view type. The first (against the issue) and the second (for the issue) statements were considered monological, in view of the fact that these presented a unilinear argument that does not concede alternatives any valid ground. The third (against the issue) and the fourth (for the issue) statements were deemed dialogical, in view of the fact that these acknowledged the legitimacy of an alternative position but proceeded to stand against it on the basis of a different argument. The fifth statement was deemed metalogical in view of the fact that it voiced different positions and conceded equal legitimacy to all of them. This method of vignette selection has been reliably used in much research in the social sciences characterized by diversity of opinions and multicultural issues (see Georgas & Papastylianou, 1998).

Following the presentation of statements requesting respondents to quantify their attitudes towards the statements in the first instance and to self-classify their points of view accordingly in the second instance, a measure of ego-relatedness was presented to respondents asking them to rate the extent of how important the issue was to them personally ranging from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). This measure is similar to that adopted by Sherif & Hovland (1961) in their study of ego-relatedness. Demographic data for respondents was gathered in the last set of questions.

FINDINGS

Distribution of Attitudes and Points of View

Responses for the first statement were positively skewed with most students expressing themselves against this statement. Responses to the second statement demonstrated an opposite trend, with most students expressing themselves in favour of this statement in a negatively skewed distribution. The third statement received a different response. Responses for the third statement were negatively skewed and the distribution was platykurtic, with most students agreeing with this statement. Responses to the fourth

¹ Whilst the last clause of this argument appears deontic in mandating a certain purpose for the use of stipends, this is considered as not the case in view of the fact that the recommendation made is already in place. Students receive restricted use lump-sum payments that can only be spent at certain outlets and towards the purchase of certain products that are deemed relevant for the purposes of higher education. Students receive further regular and unrestricted contributions that cover little more than transport costs to university. Consequently, this argument can be used to support the present system as is, as much as argue for revisions.

statement were also negatively skewed, but the distribution was leptokurtic, with most students expressing themselves very strongly in favour of this statement. Finally, responses to the fifth statement were negatively skewed and the distribution was leptokurtic for this variable also (Tables 1, 2).

Following the Likert-type rating for each of these statements, respondents were asked to choose the one statement that came closest to their own views. This measure enabled the self-classification of respondents' points of view. When choosing their own points of view from amongst the range of presented stimuli, 8 respondents (3.2%) chose the first statement as coming closest to their own view, 43 (17.4%) chose the second statement, 27 (10.9%) chose the third statement, 108 (43.7%) chose the fourth, and 61 (24.7%) chose the fifth statement as coming closest to their own views. These responses were recoded into points of view. Responses for the first and second statements were combined as monological points of view, responses for the third and fourth responses were recoded as dialogical points of view, and responses for the fifth variable were recoded as metalogical. In these categories, 51 respondents (20.6%) demonstrated a monological point of view, 135 (54.7%) demonstrated a dialogical point of view, and 61 (24.7%) demonstrated a metalogical point of view. Responses for the ego-relatedness variable were negatively skewed on a leptokurtic distribution (see table 1).

Table 1.
Distribution of Attitudes Regarding Point of View Statements

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neither/Nor		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Statement 1	122	49.4	56	22.7	48	19.4	17	6.9	4	1.6	247	100
Statement 2	8	3.2	24	9.7	40	16.2	62	25.1	113	45.7	247	100
Statement 3	18	7.3	33	13.4	77	31.2	69	27.9	50	20.2	247	100
Statement 4	3	1.2	4	1.6	20	8.1	48	19.4	172	69.6	247	100
Statement 5	4	1.6	18	7.3	33	13.4	78	31.6	114	46.2	247	100

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistics for Point of View Statements

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Statement 1	1.89	1.049	.931	.155	-.067	.309
Statement 2	4.00	1.142	-.932	.155	-.125	.309
Statement 3	3.40	1.164	-.336	.155	-.623	.309
Statement 4	4.55	.810	-2.052	.155	4.420	.309
Statement 5	4.13	1.009	-1.084	.155	.485	.309
Ego-relatedness	8.37	2.085	-1.473	.155	1.671	.309

Relationships between Attitudes, Point of View types, and Ego-Relatedness

Responses to the various attitude statements demonstrated cognitive organization. Responses to the first statement were significantly correlated with responses to the second statement ($r = -.664, p < 0.01$), to the third statement ($r = .374, p < 0.01$), and to the fifth statement ($r = -.485, p < 0.01$). These correlations were also in the expected direction (i.e.

statements 1 and 3 against the revision of stipends, and statements 2 and 4 in favour of the revision). Responses to the second statement were further correlated with responses to the third statement ($r = -.344, p < 0.01$) and the fifth statement ($r = .535, p < 0.01$), which is also in the expected direction. Responses to the third statement were further correlated positively with responses to the fourth statement ($r = .174, p < 0.01$) and negatively with the fifth ($r = -.344, p < 0.01$). The positive correlation between the third and the fourth statements violated expectations, seeing that the latter statement takes a position in favour of reform whereas the former seeks to preserve aspects of the present system. The fourth statement in particular seems to present anomalous findings throughout and is deemed to require revision in future research. This is considered a limitation in the accurate representation of student views towards stipend reform. However, this limitation does not detract the analysis of the relations between psychological variables that constituted the primary aim of this study.

As detailed above, responses to the attitude statements indicated the salience of the issue to respondents in both the skewness of responses and the distribution of the attitude variables in the sample. A measure of ego-relatedness was adopted to investigate this level of salience. Ego-relatedness was significantly correlated with responses on the first statement ($r = -.393, p < 0.01$), the second statement ($r = .435, p < 0.01$), the third statement ($r = -.296, p < 0.01$), and the fifth statement ($r = .349, p < 0.01$). This measure was not correlated with the fourth statement ($r = .003, p = 0.962$).

As noted earlier, theorists have argued that cognitive organisation is associated with attitude intensity and resistance to change. Considering the various significant correlations between attitude statements and ego-relatedness, it was reasonable to expect that ego-relatedness demonstrate a similar correlation with point of view types. This tested our second hypothesis, as detailed above. The relationship between ego-relatedness and points of view, however, was not significant ($r = -.043, p = 0.506$).

Table 3.
Correlations Between Statements 1-5 and Point of View Type

	Point of View Type	
Statement 1	Pearson Correlation	-.028
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.662
	N	247
Statement 2	Pearson Correlation	-.042
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.506
	N	247
Statement 3	Pearson Correlation	-.078
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.222
	N	247
Statement 4	Pearson Correlation	.041
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.519
	N	247
Statement 5	Pearson Correlation	.195**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002
	N	247

Finally, the relationship between points of view and the various attitude statements was investigated (table 3). This tested our first hypothesis, as detailed above. All of the

correlations between attitude statements and point of view types were not significant except for the fifth statement, which demonstrated very weak correlation ($r = .195, p < 0.01$).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that students at the University of Malta are overwhelmingly against the removal of the stipends and in favour of the retention of this system in one form or another. For every statement presented, students' aggregate responses were mostly skewed and peaked in favour of stipend provision. Very few indeed agree that stipends should be removed outrightly. Moreover, students feel very strongly about this issue and that it applies to them quite strongly. This is not surprising, considering the material way in which this issue applies to the population under study. In many ways, such findings would represent the prevailing aspiration of much social research that measures and presents attitudinal findings in various statistical forms. All in all, on the basis of responses to attitude statements alone, one would be justified in concluding that any alternative proposition to reform the stipend system will be met by stiff resistance on the part of students.

However, in this study, whilst responses to the attitude statements were characteristically skewed, the same was not true of points of view. If anything, the vast majority of students were not monological with regards to this social issue, despite the fact that this applies to them in a very material way, despite the fact that they also feel very strongly about it, and despite the fact that alternative propositions were mostly regarded as unfavourable.

We expected that the more strongly students evaluated attitude statements and the higher their level of ego-relatedness, the less predisposed they ought to have been in relating with an alternative proposition. In the affirmative of this hypothesis, it ought to have transpired as a higher likelihood of adopting a monological point of view. We therefore expected these variables to be correlated in two ways: (1) that points of view should be correlated with the attitude statements themselves. This would have meant that the more open the outlook, the less extreme the evaluation of the attitude statements. The findings demonstrated no correlation between points of view and four out of the five attitude variables. We also hypothesised (2) that ego-relatedness would be associated with points of view, considering that ego-relatedness was found to be significantly correlated in most cases with the individual attitude statements. Both of these hypotheses were reasonable in view of the prevailing presumption that cognitive organisation determines attitude intensity.

Both of our hypotheses were unsupported by the data. Ego-relatedness was not found to be correlated with points of view. This suggests that whilst the more strongly one feels that the issue applies to oneself (i.e. ego-relatedness) the more extreme one's attitudes regarding the issue, how strongly one feels about the issue and however extreme one's attitude might be, in most cases, is not related to one's variable capacity to relate with the perspective of another. That is to say that feeling strongly towards some issue does not short-circuit cognition into adopting a monological mindset. Students at the University of Malta were able to retain an open mind in their judgment of alternative propositions, even if they subjectively disagreed with these propositions very strongly.

This is a seemingly straightforward conclusion derived from the findings of this study, but one that bears very significant implications for social research. It means that, on the basis of

attitude measures alone, one is unable to draw conclusions as to whether individuals' articulated positions are definitive. In mainstream attitude research, the more extreme the attitude expressed, the more definitive the conclusion made about the attitude. The ones that are held to be open to negotiation are traditionally the ones that fall in the grey area of neither agree nor disagree (see Wagoner & Valsiner, 2005). These respondents are held to not have made their minds up with regards to the issue, and to thus stand to be convinced one way or the other. In political opinion polls, for instance, these are traditionally considered to be 'floating voters' who could, without prior notice, tip the balance one way or another by joining the ranks of the agree or disagree. Conversely, the more strongly individuals agree or disagree with the presented stimulus, that is the higher the attitude strength, the less likely they are held to change their attitude in response to persuasive appeals (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

The findings reported above suggest that these conclusions may be erroneous. It seems that how strongly individuals feel about some issue does not deter their capacity to relate to an alternative perspective. It is this capacity, rather than expressed evaluation of some attitude statement, that determines their propensity to dialogue and, as a function of dialogue, to change their original position to reconcile it with the perspective of another. In other words, it is this cognitive operation that determines whether individuals stand to be corrected in their views through dialogue, rather than their indecisiveness to agree or disagree with some attitude statement at a particular point in time. Attitude research has neglected this argumentative and relational aspect of having a point of view (Billig, 1987, 1991). It is only in monological cases that views are determined, due to the fact that such views are closed by their very nature to any opportunity for dialogue and relating with an alternative. In monological points of view, the alternative is not legitimated and thus dismissed without a hearing. Such closure detracts the opportunity of influence, meaning that for such individuals the prospect of persuasion is unlikely. Yet, even with regards to an issue about which respondents felt very strongly, as in the present case, attitude intensity in and of itself does not necessarily deter the individual from dialogue, and insofar as the individual is open to dialogue, then that same individual stands to be persuaded otherwise. Human subjects can feel very strongly about particular issues due to the relevance these might have in their lives, but, as the findings of this study demonstrate, they retain cognitive complexity to consider alternative positions that at face value disagree with their own.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study offer hope and promise for dialogue. The present study demonstrates that even when individuals' attitudes are highly predisposed for or against some alternative, most retain a capacity for dialogue and thus stand to be convinced otherwise. Whilst research on closed-mindedness demonstrates that the ability to take the perspective of another is a psychological variable and by no means a given of adult human cognition, this study demonstrates that need for closure (Kruglanski, 2004) is less perverse than what one might presume. On the basis of attitude data, with regards to the present case, one might have been justified in concluding that the student population is unable to engage in dialogical relations towards a solution for the funding of higher education. The findings of this study, however, demonstrate that this is a hasty conclusion. This paper demonstrates that with regards to human social cognition, there is more than meets the attitudinal eye. A deeper appreciation of the positions that individuals are ready to negotiate and take up

requires sensitivity to situational aspects of the issue and awareness of the dialogical potential of human social cognition.

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