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**Pre-pandemic Cognitive Function and COVID-19 Vaccine Intentionality: Prospective Cohort Study**

G. David Batty (E. [david.batty@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:david.batty@ucl.ac.uk) / ORCID: 0000-0003-1822-5753)

*Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College London, UK*

Ian J. Deary ([i.deary@ed.ac.uk](mailto:i.deary@ed.ac.uk) / 0000-0002-1733-263X)

*Lothian Birth Cohorts, Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh, UK*

Chloe Fawns-Ritchie ([c.fawns-ritchie@ed.ac.uk](mailto:c.fawns-ritchie@ed.ac.uk) / 0000-0002-7493-2228)

*Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh, UK*

Catharine R. Gale ([crg@mrc.soton.ac.uk](mailto:crg@mrc.soton.ac.uk) / 0000-0002-3361-8638)

*Medical Research Council Lifecourse Epidemiology Unit, University of Southampton, UK*

*Lothian Birth Cohorts, Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh, UK*

Drew Altschul ([drew.altschul@ed.ac.uk](mailto:drew.altschul@ed.ac.uk) / 0000-0001-7053-4209)

*Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh, UK*

Correspondence: David Batty, Department of Epidemiology & Public Health, University College London, 1-19 Torrington Place, London, UK, WC1E 6BT. E. david.batty@ucl.ac.uk

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Access to data: Researchers who would like to use Understanding Society need to first register with the UK Data Service (<https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/>) before being allowed to apply for, or download, datasets.

**Abstract**

*Importance*: Whereas several predictors of COVID-19 vaccine intentionality have been examined, the role of cognitive function has been little tested.

*Objective*: To test the association between scores from an array of tests of cognitive function with self-reported vaccine hesitancy.

*Design, Setting, and Participants*: We used individual-level data from a pandemic-focused study (the COVID Survey), a prospective cohort study nested within Understanding Society (Main Survey). Data on vaccine intentionality were collected in 11740 individuals (6702 women) in November/December 2020 when study members were aged 16-95 (mean 53). Pre-pandemic scores on general cognitive function, ascertained from a battery of six tests, was captured in 2011/12 in the Main Survey.

*Main Outcomes and Measures*: Self-reported intention to take up a vaccination for COVID-19. To summarise our results, we computed odds ratios with accompanying 95% confidence intervals for tertiles of general cognitive function adjusted for selected covariates.

*Results*: Of the study sample, 17.2% (N=1842), indicated they were hesitant about having the vaccine. After adjustment for age, sex, and ethnicity, study members with a lower baseline cognition score were markedly more likely to be vaccine hesitant (odds ratio per standard deviation lower score in cognition; 95% confidence interval: 1.76; 1.62, 1.90). Adjustment for mental and physical health plus household shielding status had no impact on these results, whereas controlling for educational attainment led to partial attenuation but the probability of hesitancy was still elevated (1.52; 1.37, 1.67). There was a linear association for vaccine hesitancy across the full range of cognition scores (p for trend: p<0.0001).

*Conclusions and Relevance*: Erroneous messaging around the period of vaccine distribution might have complicated decision-making, leading to people with lower cognitive ability test scores to be less willing to take up the future offer of vaccination for COVID-19. With this group also experiencing higher rates of the disease, these new findings may represent an additional burden.

**Introduction**

Cognitive function – also known as mental ability or intelligence – refers to psychological functions that involve the storage, selection, manipulation, and organisation of information, and the planning of actions.1,2 Assessed using standard tests, there is marked inter-person variation in how rapidly and precisely people carry out these mental tasks.1,2 Health protection and health care can also be regarded as a complex set of assignments that require assimilation of knowledge, decision-making, and planning. It has been posited that people with higher cognitive function manage preventative behaviours and treatment more effectively,3 and there is growing evidence that this is the case.

In well-characterised cohort studies, relative to their lower-performing counterparts, people with higher ability are more likely to have a healthy diet,4 choose dietary supplements,5 and be physically active.4 People who score better on cognitive tests are also less likely to smoke cigarettes,6,7 drink harmful levels of alcohol,8 and have associated problems.9 Cessation rates are also elevated in smokers with higher mental ability.10 Further, in people with a greater risk of a first cardiovascular disease event,11 in those at increased risk of re-infarction,12 and in patients with respiratory disease,13 improved compliance with known efficacious drug therapies is apparent in higher ability individuals.

These observations provide circumstantial evidence for a link between cognitive ability and another health-protecting behaviour, vaccine uptake. Vaccination is central to controlling the present pandemic, with success reliant on a sufficiently high uptake to achieve herd immunity.14 In the only empirical investigation of which we are aware, investigators administered a very brief measure of analytical reasoning to people in two small cross-sectional studies from the UK (N=2025) and Ireland (N=1041).15 Relative to the group who indicated they would be likely to accept a COVID-19 inoculation if one became available, somewhat lower cognition scores were apparent in study members indicating vaccine reticence.15 These data were collected in March/April 2020 when no vaccine was available. Around 8 months later, the development of the first efficacious vaccine for COVID-19 was announced.16 Time series analyses across multiple countries suggests that the successful testing of this and other vaccines may have positively impacted upon intentionality.17 Accordingly, in the present study, we investigated the link between cognitive function and COVID-19 vaccine intentionality in a large UK general population-based sample in which data collection took place immediately following the announcement of vaccine discovery.

**Methods**

Understanding Society, also known as the UK Household Longitudinal Study, is a nationally-representative, on-going, open, longitudinal study (hereinafter, the ‘Main Survey’). Based on a clustered-stratified probability sample of households, participants have been interviewed annually since 2009.18 Households who had participated in at least one of the two most recent waves of data collection (wave 8, 2016-18; wave 9, 2017-19) comprised the target sample for a pandemic-focused study initiated in April 2020 (hereinafter, the ‘COVID Survey’).19,20 The derivation of the analytical sample from the Main and COVID surveys, including the whereabouts of relevant data, is depicted in figure 1. The University of Essex Ethics Committee gave approval for data collection in the COVID-orientated surveys (ETH1920-1271); no further ethical permissions were required for the present analyses of anonymised data.

The COVID Surveys took place monthly or bimonthly between April (wave 1) and November 2020 (wave 6), with questions on vaccine intention first administered in the latest round of data collection when study members were aged 16-95 (mean 53).20 Data collection in wave 6 (starting 24th November) commenced the day immediately following the announcement of the Oxford University/AstraZeneca vaccine16 and continued for one week, finally comprising a total of 12,035 individuals of 19,294 invitations issued (response proportion, 62%).20

*Assessment of cognitive function*

In the third wave of data collection in the Main Survey (2011-2013), six cognitive function tests were administered following piloting.21,22 Representing a range of cognitive skills, these tests have been repeatedly deployed in large-scale, population-based studies.23-27 Verbal declarative memory was assessed using both *immediate word recall* and *delayed word recall* tasks. Respondents listened to a list of ten words delivered by a computer; they were then asked to immediately recall the words and, again, at a later stage in the interview without having heard the words again. The number of correct responses was recorded on each occasion. For *semantic verbal fluency*, respondents named as many animals as they could in one minute; the final score was based on the number of unique correct responses. Using components of screening instruments for *cognitive impairment* including the Mini Mental State Examination28 and the Cambridge Cognitive Examination (CAMCOG),29 respondents were asked to subtract 7 from 100 and then again to subtract 7 from their answer on four more occasions. The number of correct responses of a maximum of five was recorded. *Fluid reasoning* was assessed using a number sequence in which the respondent populated the gap(s) in a logical series. Respondents were initially presented with simple examples to test their understanding; those who seemed confused or unable to understand test requirements after the relaying of two examples took no further part in the test. Remaining study members were administered two sets of three number sequences, with the difficulty of the second set determined by their performance on the first. A score was derived which accounts for the difficulty of the items. For *numerical reasoning skills*, individuals were given three numerical problems to solve and, depending on their responses, were then administered a further one (simpler) or two (more difficult) problems. The total number of correct responses was recorded.

*Assessment of covariates*

Covariates were self-reported and included age; sex (both wave 10, Main Survey); ethnicity (wave 10, Main Survey; denoted as white or non-white); highest education level (wave 10, Main Survey; categorised as degree & other higher degree, A’ level or equivalent, GCSE or equivalent, other qualification, and none); and National Health Service-recommended shielding status for any household member (waves 1-5, COVID Surveys; denoted by yes/no). A history of physical morbidities was also captured (wave 10, Main Survey) and based on cardiometabolic disease (congestive heart failure, coronary heart disease, angina, heart attack or infarction, stroke, diabetes, and/or hypertension); respiratory disease (respiratory disease comprised bronchitis, emphysema, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and/or asthma); and/or cancer of any type. Current psychological distress (wave 6, COVID Survey) was ascertained using the administration of the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire. Validated against standardised psychiatric interviews,30,31 this is a widely used measure of distress in population-based studies. Consistent with published analyses,32-34 we used a score of ≥3 to denote psychological distress.

*Assessment of vaccine intentionality*

At wave 6 in the COVID Survey, study members were asked “Imagine that a vaccine against COVID-19 was available for anyone who wanted it. How likely or unlikely would you be to take the vaccine?” Possible responses were “Very likely”, “Likely”, “Unlikely” and “Very unlikely”. The latter two categories were combined to denote vaccine hesitancy.

*Statistical analyses*

It is well-replicated that performance on tests of cognitive abilities tend to be positively inter-related, whereby people who perform well on a test of one cognitive ability tend to score well on another.2 This had led to the use of the term ‘general cognitive ability’, usually known as ‘g’. Accordingly, using scores from the six tests of cognitive function we generated a single general cognitive function variable. Computed using principal components analysis, the first unrotated component of the six cognitive tests was used as a single measure of cognitive function (variance explained: 42%; loadings: immediate recall = 0.74, delayed recall = 0.72, verbal fluency = 0.59, serial 7s = 0.49, number series = 0.64, numerical problem solving = 0.66). To summarise the relation between cognition and vaccine hesitancy, we used logistic regression to compute odds ratios with accompanying 95% confidence intervals. In these analyses we calculated effect estimates for tertiles of cognitive function scores and those for a unit (standard deviation) disadvantage in score. The most basic analyses were adjusted for age, sex, and ethnicity. Retaining these covariates, we then explored the impact of separately controlling for existing medical conditions, education, and shielding status.

**Results**

In the sample of 11740 individuals, 17.2% (N=1842) indicated that they were hesitant in having the vaccine for COVID-19. In table 1 we show study member characteristics according to vaccine intention, not adjusted for any covariates. Relative to the group who indicated a willingness to have the vaccine, those who were hesitant were more likely to be young, female, from an ethnic minority background, and be less well educated. The hesitant were also less likely to carry an array of existing somatic morbidities and less likely to be shielding or live with someone who was; the prevalence of psychological distress was somewhat higher in the vaccine hesitant.

There were differences in cognitive function between the vaccine groups, such that the vaccine hesitant study members had lower general ability scores (Hedges’s *g* = 0.26; p-value for difference: <0.0001). We investigated these differentials in table 2 where we present the results of regression analyses incorporating potential explanatory variables in an analytical sample of 7361 people without missing data for the variables depicted. In age-, sex- and ethnicity-adjusted analyses, a 1 SD lower score in general cognitive ability was associated with a 76% greater risk of being vaccine hesitant (odds ratio [OR] = 1.76; 95% confidence interval: 1.62, 1.90). Adding in separate adjustments for somatic comorbidity, psychological distress, and shielding made no impact on the OR. Adjustment for education reduced the OR to 1.52 (1.37, 1.67). The Kendall rank correlation between cognition and educational attainment was 0.27 (p<0.0001). Adjustment for all covariates at once had no greater attenuating effect than the adjustment for education.

To gain some information about whether the association was linear, the analyses were repeated by tertiles of cognitive function. In age-, sex- and ethnicity- adjusted analyses, relative to people in the highest-scoring cognition tertile, those in the lowest were twice as likely to be vaccine hesitant (odds ratio; 95% confidence interval: 1.99; 1.66, 2.40). Separate adjustment for comorbidity – whether physical or psychological – and shielding status had no impact on these effect estimates. Only controlling for educational achievement led to any attenuation in risk (lowest scoring cognition tertile vs. highest: 1.64; 1.35, 1.99). Simultaneous adjustment for all covariates had no additional impact on effects estimates relative to those apparent in the statistical model featuring education.

In these analyses there was evidence of a linear relationship between cognition and vaccine intention, such that the lowest scoring ability tertile had the highest prevalence of hesitancy, and the intermediate group had an intermediate risk (p-value for trend: <0.0001). In order to explore inflections in the cognition–hesitancy association, we utilised deciles of cognition in further analyses. Again, there was evidence of a clear trend, although this was not perfectly stepwise across all categories (figure 2).

**Discussion**

**Our main finding was that, net of several covariates, people with lower scores on tests of cognitive function were less minded to take up an offer of vaccination for COVID-19 if it was made. These data were collected immediately following the announcement in the UK of an efficacious vaccine produced by Oxford-AstraZeneca.16 That we were able to replicate known predictors of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy – being female,35-37 younger,35,37 less well educated,38,39 non-white ethnicity,37,40 and having a lower morbidity load41 – gives us some confidence in our novel results for cognitive function.**

We have recently shown that, of a range of baseline psychosocial factors which included socioeconomic status, education, personality type, and mental health, cognitive function was the most strongly associated with subsequent incidence of severe COVID-19, whereby a doubling of the risk of hospitalisation was apparent in the lowest scoring group.42 This supports other data that individuals with higher cognitive function experience a lower risk of death from other respiratory diseases, including influenza and pneumonia.43 The notion that people with lower cognitive ability may have greater rates of severe COVID-1942,44 and are simultaneously less likely to take up the offer of vaccination, may represent a double burden, as may also be the case for people from ethnic minority groups and the socioeconomically disadvantaged.

***Plausible explanations***

Various explanations may be germane to the cognition–vaccine intention link, including the observation that people with higher cognitive ability are better equipped to obtain, process, and respond to disease prevention advice. There has been a deluge of health advice in the current pandemic during an era when news outlets and social media platforms have never been more ubiquitous. Preventative information has ranged from the simple and practical to the complex, contradictory, false, and fraudulent. In order to diminish their risk of the infection, people have to acquire, synthesise, weigh up and deploy this information but the ability to do so seems to vary by levels of health literacy45 just as it may for its close correlate, cognitive function.

***Study strengths and weaknesses***

**While the present study has its strengths, including its size, national representativeness, and timing of data collection on vaccine hesitancy relative to the announcement of a successfully-tested vaccine for COVID-19, there are also some weaknesses. We used vaccine intentionality as an indicator of likely vaccine uptake but the correlation is imperfect. In a small scale longitudinal study conducted during the period of the 2009 H1N1 pandemic in Hong Kong, less than 10% of people who expressed a commitment to being inoculated subsequently reported that they had received a vaccination two months later.46 Elsewhere, in a US adult population at high risk of seasonal influenza, over half of those intending to be vaccinated had been so 5 months later.47**

**In conclusion, people with lower scores on standard tests of cognitive function reported being less willing to take up the future offer of vaccination for COVID-19. It is possible that erroneous messaging around the distribution of vaccines may have complicated decision-making; special efforts should be made to communicate clear information about vaccines’ efficacy and safety so that everyone—including those who report being less likely to choose vaccination—can make well-informed choices about vaccination.**

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**Figure 1. Flow of cohort members into the analytical sample:**

**Main Survey and COVID Survey in Understanding Society**

50,994 participants in Wave 1 of Main Survey (2009-11)

Wave 6 (N=12,035) of COVID Survey

(Nov 2020)

*(vaccine hesitancy, psychological distress)*

Wave 1 (N=17,761) COVID Survey

(April 2020)

34,318 participants in Wave 10 of Main Survey

(*educational level, ethnicity, history of comorbidity*)

40,730 participants in Wave 3 of Main Survey (2011-13)

(*cognitive function*)

42,330 participants in Waves 8 (2016-18) and 9 (2017-19) of Main Survey

**Figure 2. Odds ratios (95% CI) for the relation of cognitive function with COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in Understanding Society**

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  |
| All covariates are: age, sex, ethnicity, somatic comorbidity, psychological distress, shielding, and education. In both models, the p-value for trend across deciles was <0.0001 |

**Table 1. Study member characteristics according to COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in**

**Understanding Society**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Vaccine hesitant** | | **P value** |
|  | **Yes** | **No** |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Numbers of people | 1842 | 10113 |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Demographic factors** |  |  |  |
| Age, yr, mean (SD) | 45.0 (14.5) | 54.6(15.6) | < 0.0001 |
| Female, N (%) | 1162 (63) | 5530 (55) | < 0.0001 |
| Non-white ethnicity, N (%) | 406 (22.0) | 698 (7.0) | < 0.0001 |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Socioeconomic factors** |  |  |  |
| No university education, N (%) | 939 (51.0) | 4298 (42.5) | < 0.0001 |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Comorbidities** |  |  |  |
| Cardiometabolic disease, N (%) | 268 (15.0) | 2513 (25.2) | < 0.0001 |
| Respiratory disease, N (%) | 219 (12.3) | 1372 (13.8) | 0.144 |
| Any cancer, N (%) | 45 (2.5) | 525 (5.3) | < 0.0001 |
| High psychological distress, N (%) | 509 (27.6) | 2399 (23.7) | < 0.0001 |
| Shielding in the household, N (%) | 196 (10.6) | 1187 (11.7) | < 0.0001 |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Cognitive function** |  |  |  |
| *g* factor, mean (SD) | 96.6 (15.7) | 100.5 (14.8) | < 0.0001 |
|  |  |  |  |

\*Numbers corresponds to those with complete data on vaccine intentionality

**Table 2. Odds ratios (95% CI) for the relation of cognitive function (*g*) with COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in Understanding Society**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Number hesitant / Total at risk** | **Age, sex, & ethnicity** | **Age, sex, ethnicity, & somatic comorbidity** | **Age, sex, ethnicity, & psychological distress** | **Age, sex, ethnicity, & shielding** | **Age, sex, ethnicity, & education** | **All covariates** |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Tertile 3 (high) | 236 / 2048 | 1 (ref) | 1 (ref) | 1 (ref) | 1 (ref) | 1 (ref) | 1 (ref) |
| Tertile 2 | 352 / 2566 | 1.28 (1.07, 1.54) | 1.29 (1.08, 1.55) | 1.28 (1.07, 1.54) | 1.29 (1.08, 1.55) | 1.17 (0.98, 1.41) | 1.18 (0.99, 1.42) |
| Tertile 1 (low) | 365 / 1794 | 1.99 (1.66, 2.40) | 2.01 (1.67, 2.43) | 1.99 (1.66, 2.40) | 2.01 (1.67, 2.42) | 1.64 (1.35, 1.99) | 1.67 (1.37, 2.03) |
| P for trend |  | p < 0.0001 | p < 0.0001 | p < 0.0001 | p < 0.0001 | p < 0.0001 | p < 0.0001 |
| Per SD decrease | 953 / 7361 | 1.76 (1.62, 1.90) | 1.77 (1.63, 1.91) | 1.76 (1.62, 1.90) | 1.78 (1.64, 1.91) | 1.52 (1.37, 1.67) | 1.54 (1.40, 1.69) |

Thresholds for categories of g: Tertile 1 (>=108.3); tertile 2 (108.2- 93.3); and tertile 1 (>=93.2). A standard deviation (SD) in general cognitive function was 15 units.