Measuring Extremist Ideology across Ethnicity and Sex

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S00285803

Word count: 1702

**Abstract**

While extremist ideology in modern times has often brought to mind Islamic extremism specifically, in large part due to 9/11 and the subsequent fallout, there has been a recent surge in Western far-right extremism. While previous research has investigated perceptions of extremist belief and action in followers of Islam and the effect that these stereotypes have had, there exists a gap in the research comparing the holding of such beliefs against white Westerners, who themselves are a demographic of growing concern. The current study aims to address this gap, and assess the rising concern regarding Western far-right extremist ideology. Seventy-eight participants of both White Australian and Muslim Australian backgrounds were thus recruited in order to measure sympathy for radical violence and their activism intention through a questionnaire. An independent samples t-test demonstrated that white Australians scored significantly higher in sympathy for radical violence than Muslim Australians. Additionally, a two-way between-subjects ANOVA revealed that participant sex had a significant main effect on activism intention. The findings thus support the notion that Wester far-right ideology is a growing concern, and that stereotypes against Muslim people are further unjustified. Additionally, the findings highlight that sex could play a role in activism.

**Measuring Extremist Ideology across Ethnicity and Sex**

Extremist ideology refers to political beliefs which accept or advocate for ideals which are far removed from the mainstream norm (Schmid, 2016). In modern times in the West, ideological extremism has been at the forefront in two main forms – one of which is Islamic extremism, particularly after the events of 9/11 and the aftermath in political discourse and the media (Alsultany, 2013). However, more recently in the West, right-wing extremism has overtaken Islamic extremism as a talking point in these channels with a surge of radical far right groups promoting the radicalisation of individuals (Pantucci & Ong, 2021).

Before the shift in focus to right-wing extremism, the prevalent focus on Islamic extremism was pervasive in Western media and particularly US politics (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015), with the dramatic surge in US media in the years following 9/11 theoretically serving the propaganda to garner citizen support US military action in the Middle-East (Alsultany, 2013). This in turn correlated with a surge in xenophobia towards Middle-Eastern and particularly followers of Islam in the West (Bassioni & Langrehr, 2021). Although al-Qaeda – who claimed responsibility for the 9/11 attacks – is considered a far-right group of Sunni Islamic extremists, the recent surge of Western far right extremist ideology, has not been met with the same level of perceived fear locally in the West (Schmid, 2016). This potentially indicates that Islamic extremism is perceived differently by Western individuals, e.g. that followers of Islam are more dangerous or susceptible to extremist beliefs than white, Western individuals. Additionally, there exists a perception historically whereby are viewed as less likely to take up radical or extremist action (Desan, 2020; Möller-Leimkühler, 2018) – yet despite this, both Muslim men and women report discrimination and fear for their safety in their day-to-day lives in the US (Bassioni & Langrehr, 2021).

Given these circumstances, there appears to be a surprising lack of literature directly comparing the presence of extremist ideologies between Western Muslim Individuals and white Western individuals. Furthermore, men and women have not yet been measured against each other regarding predisposition towards radical action. The current study therefore aims to address this by measuring and comparing sympathy for extremist ideologies in Muslim Australians and white Australians, as well measuring and comparing activism intention between men and women. It is hypothesised that there will be no significant difference in sympathy for violent radicalisation scores between White Australians and Muslim Australians. Additionally, it is hypothesised that sex will have a significant effect when measuring activism intention, but not ethnicity (whether the participant was White Australian or Muslim Australian), and that there would be no significant interaction between ethnicity and sex.

**Method**

**Participants**

Seventy-eight white Australian or Muslim Australian participants were recruited through Prolific, a website that allows researchers to recruit verified individuals as participants. Participant ages ranged between 18 and 71 (M = 37.7, SD = 12.7). Of the 78 participants recruited, 63 (80.1%) were white Australian and 16 (19.9%) were Muslim Australian. The white Australian sample consisted of 27 male and 36 female participants, while the Muslim Australian sample consisted of 4 male and 12 female participants. Participants were paid $5 for their participation through Prolific.

**Materials**

Several measures were employed and presented to participants through questionnaire on Prolific. The first of these measures was the Activism Intention Scale (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009), which includes a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree), in order to measure participant’s predisposition towards action. The other primary measure used was the Sympathy for Violent Radicalisation Scale (Frounfelker et al., 2021), which included another seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disapprove) to 7 (Strongly approve), and was used to measure sympathy for extremist beliefs. The questionnaire also contained queries pertaining to the participant’s demographical information and cultural identity.

**Procedure**

Participants underwent the study online through Prolific. When beginning the study, participants were informed that the study is part of a larger project.

The participants were then asked a series of identification so that participants who did not meet the required criteria were filtered out, and were instead brought to the end of the study prematurely. Participants who made it past this stage were given questions specific to their relevant ethnic identity. The participants then answered the questionnaires, which also comprised of the Activism Intention Scale and Sympathy for Violent Radicalisation Scale. The survey concluded with tasking participants to give their demographical information. A second survey was then presented to community participants where they were given the opportunity to enter their details to go into the draw for a gift voucher. The study took on average 20 minutes to complete.

**Results**

An independent samples t-test was conducted on the results of the Sympathy for Violent Radicalisation between the White Australian (*M* = 2.6, *SD* = 1.0) and the Muslim Australian (*M* = 1.7, *SD* = 0.6) groups, along with a Levene’s test for equality of variances which expressed that the equality of variances was not met, *F* = 9.63, *p* = .003.

The assumption of normality was met by the total sample size. The t-test revealed a significant difference between the groups, *t*(41.58)= 4.65, *p* < .001, CI [0.53, 1.35].

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and sizes of each sex in activism intention.

**Table 1**

*Means, standard deviations, and sample sizes for sympathy for activism intention (AI).*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | *M* | *SD* | *n* |
| AI Men | 3.4 | 1.0 | 31 |
| AI Women | 3.6 | 1.0 | 48 |

A two-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the main effects of sex and ethnicity on activism intention, as well as the interaction effect between sex ethnicity on Activism Intention. The assumption of normality was met based on the total sample size being robust (*N > 30*). The assumption of independence and continuous data were each met by the design of the study.

The results of the ANOVA revealed a significant difference in activism intention across sex, *F*(1, 75) = 6.13, *p* = .016, partial η² = .08, as well as across ethnicity, *F*(1, 75) = 21.85, *p* < .001, partial η² = .23. There was no significant interaction between ethnicity and sex, F(1, 75) = 3.90, *p* = .052, partial η² = .05.

**Discussion**

The results of the independent samples t-test found no supporting evidence for the hypothesis that there would be no significant difference in sympathy for violent radicalisation between White Australians and Muslim Australians. The study instead revealed significantly higher scores in the White Australian group than the Muslim Australian group.

Performing the two-way between-subjects ANOVA demonstrated supporting evidence for the hypothesis that sex would have a main effect on activism intention, and for the notion that there would be no significant interaction between ethnicity and sex. However, ethnicity had a significant main effect on activism intention, which was not congruent with what was hypothesised.

The implications of the current study’s findings support research indicating that Western far-right extremist ideologies are becoming more prevalent (Hutchinson, 2021). These findings also indicate that increased intelligence and domestic security resources targeting Western right-wing extremism would be a justified and intelligent course of action in order to combat what has already been demonstrated and recognised by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) to be a rising threat (Pantucci & Ong, 2021). The findings of the current study also further highlight the concern that males in particular may be more susceptible to extremist ideologies (Möller-Leimkühler, 2018). A post-hoc test in a future study determining the direction of difference between sexes could provide additional clarity on why males are often targeted for radicalisation (Pantucci & Ong, 2021; Schmid, 2016).

However, there were some key limitations to the study. While the total sample size for the study was fairly robust, only 16 (19.9%) of the 78 participants were Muslim Australian. This makes it a potentially inadequate sample for representing an entire ethnic background due to size alone. This concern is made worse when considering that, of the 16 Muslim Australian participants, only four were male. This is of particularly key concern when considering that it is often Muslim men who are stereotyped to be more radical and aggressive than their female counterparts (Bassioni & Langrehr, 2021). Additionally, given the purported regularity with which Muslim individuals residing in the West have to deal suspicion about their political alignment (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015; Bassioni & Langrehr, 2021), the Muslim Australian participants may have answered the questionnaire more cautiously, thus potentially confounding the results. Future research should aim to ensure a large sample size for each demographic measured, whilst also endeavouring to determine the direction of the effect sex has on activism

In conclusion, the results of the current study, while not all congruent with the original hypotheses, indicate that sympathy and potential activism for extremist ideologies is more prevalent in White Australians than Muslim Australians, which supports the growing concerns from ASIO (Pantucci & Ong, 2021). Additionally, the current study also indicates that sex has a significant effect on activism intention. Future studies should seek to uncover the direction of this effect and acquire a larger sample size for each demographic.

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