ABSTRACT

How ‘Critically Open-minded’ are we? An Australian Perspective, through the World Values Survey (2005-2012)

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Background:
In terms of theoretical background, the notion of ‘open-mindedness’ has been widely discussed in philosophy, and educational, organizational, and social psychological studies (as an aspect of individuals’ personality influenced by their social environment). However, it has not been a popular concept in sociology and anthropology. Despite a growing attention to the issue of ‘open-mindedness’ outside the realm of sociology, and the popularity of many subjects of sociological investigation that are directly related to this issue, no efforts have been made to develop a uniquely sociological definition or a social theory of open-mindedness.
In terms of social context, Australian society is known for its strong and colorful admiration of multiculturalism. As a modern society historically formed by immigration, Australia has formally adopted multiculturalism as its core value in making cultural and immigration policies. Despite all these historical and political moves towards a more culturally inclusive reorganization of social relations, racism, and negative attitudes towards refugees and ethnic minorities, not only persist but also continue to challenge the social cohesion in this country. Australian economy has also taken significant steps towards corporate globalization by adopting economic rationalization policies and involving in regional and inter-regional trade agreements. Economic globalization, the escalation of population movements into Australia in recent decades as well as the proliferation of new communication technologies are widely, at least in theory, expected to enhance people’s cultural openness and cosmopolitanism. Despite all these advancements, a number of studies and polls have observed that many Australians convey mixed feelings and uncertain, if not fully apprehensive, views about non-Western cultures and their ability to adopt and accommodate Australian/Western values like liberal democracy.

**Objectives:** This paper (re-)introduces ‘critical open-mindedness’ as a new sociological concept, which can be employed particularly in the studies of social attitudes, social values, identities, and racial and perceptual discriminations. It then develops a relevant composite/synthetic Social Index comprising six social indicators/dimensions for both primary and secondary quantitative data analyses.

**Methods:** By drawing on the data produced through the World Values Surveys in Australia in 2005 and 2012, the application of the ‘Critical Open-mindedness Index’ (COI) is examined and the findings are discussed. Australians’ critical open-mindedness, both in general and in reference to its six relatively independent dimensions (i.e. the societal, political, cultural/cosmopolitan, economic, environmental and religious), will be investigated. The paper will also examine the influence of socio-economic, socio-demographic, behavioral/attitudinal and personality factors on each dimension by using multivariate statistical analyses. It will finally discuss the theoretical and methodological implications of COI.

**Results and Conclusion:** From the study, it is evident that Australian society can be described, in general, as a moderately open-minded nation across all the domains, especially in terms of people’s perceptions of modern values. However, Australians also appeared to be slightly less open-minded in domains of cross-cultural relations, politics and environment compared to other dimensions. Political open-mindedness is significantly associated with individuals’ political party affiliation; with those who are more sympathetic towards left-wing political parties being the most politically open-
minded. Australians also display high levels of economic open-mindedness and this is influenced by two main social factors: individuals’ occupation and their social class. In terms of occupation, the findings indicate that those who work in the public sector show higher levels of economic open-mindedness than those who work in the public sector, and the members of the working class are more economically open-minded than those in the upper classes are.

Australian population is relatively divided in terms of their views of major environmental concerns. The results of the study also indicate that Australians are not as much culturally open-minded and multiculturalist as they are commonly perceived or portrayed by the media; this category has the lowest level of open-mindedness when compared to the other dimensions. Family immigration background and ethnicity were tested in relation to cultural open-mindedness. Interestingly, none of these factors has a significant influence on the level of cultural open-mindedness, contesting the stereotypical idea that immigrants and ethnic groups from non-Western background are potential threats to the so-called Australian Multiculturalism or democratic values.

Both the conceptual and operational definitions of critical open-mindedness must be flexibly developed in correspondence to every particular social context, by considering the existing contentional positions on the most critical social issues.

**Main References**


