Chapter 51: Are Czechs prejudiced?

Pat Lyons

Which group of people do you dislike? Do you find this question uncomfortable? In many societies, such as the Czech Republic, it is unacceptable to openly express prejudiced views, and so it is difficult to accurately measure such negative attitudes in national surveys. What this means is that direct measures of prejudice are likely to result in what sociologists call *socially desirable* answers.

For example, asking "Do you hold negative attitudes toward people from Africa?" is likely to lead to the politically correct answer "No, of course not. I am not racist!" Notwithstanding such protestations, it is well-known that dominant groups in all societies do have prejudices against specific minorities. Consequently, in order to study prejudice and intolerance it is necessary to use indirect measures. In this chapter, the question of Czech attitudes toward minorities will be explored using survey data from late 2015.

Most often Czech society is viewed as an example of a post-communist country with little experience of large-scale migration of groups from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. A closer look at the past and present suggests less insularity. Czech society currently hosts hundreds of thousands of Slovaks and Ukrainians, and also has a significant number of Roma (many from Slovakia), and Vietnamese (who first arrived in the 1960s under a communist programme for education and training). In addition, the twentieth century history of Czechs includes the mass deportation of Germans (about 3 million) following the end of the Second World War. In short, minority issues have been an important feature of Czech society and politics for a century.

What is prejudice?

It is important first to be clear about what social scientists mean by the term "prejudice". Gordon Allport, an American social-psychologist, who pioneered the study of relations between different groups in society defined prejudice in the following way.

> An avertive or hostile attitude towards a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities of that group ... it is antipathy based on a faulty and inflexible generalisation..

Using this definition of prejudice in real-world (survey) research involves assuming that prejudice (1) is a negative social attitude, (2) is based on perceptions of group membership, (3) individuals are automatically given the negative characteristics of the group to which they belong, and (4) these negative attitudes are not checked for their truthfulness. In short, prejudice is an overly simplified view of a particular minority group that is discriminatory.

The question of where prejudice comes from has been answered in a number of ways. These explanations typically refer to four main sources: frustration, aggression, hatred and anxiety, and control of sexual relations between dominant and minority groups. Early research on prejudice during the 1950s and 1960s assumed that individual personality traits are the key to understanding why one person is prejudiced and another is not. In part this assumption was a legacy of fascism in Europe during the 1930s, and the notion of an *authoritarian personality*: a person who is predisposed to show complete obedience to those with power combined with an ability to terrorise subordinates and anyone considered inferior.

Today prejudice is most often viewed as a form of biased thinking that is "caught rather than taught". This has led some social psychologists such as Gabrielle Filip-Crawford (University of St. Catherine, Minneapolis) and Steven Neuberg (Arizona State University) to explain opposition towards tolerant views of gays and lesbians as a form of infection in society that can be controlled through expressions of prejudice. Other social psychologists such as Susan Fiske argued in here book *Envy Up, Scorn Down: How Status Divides Us* (2011) contends

that the origins of prejudice stem from minority groups having an emotionally charged meaning for members of dominant groups.

These biased thinking explanations suggest that prejudice may have pre-conscious foundations. Milton Lodge and Charles S. Taber, two political scientists (Stony Brook University, New York), in their book *The Rationalizing Voter* (2013) show that many attitudes such as prejudice have unconscious foundations and lead to *motivated reasoning* (a theme also discussed in **Chapter 20**). What this means is that prejudice is a spontaneous (negative) attitude that is later justified using various "rationalizing" arguments, e.g. "Africans are dirty and poor because they are all stupid".

How can prejudice be measured?

Studying prejudice is difficult because those who are prejudiced are often reluctant to admit in survey interviews their dislike of members of a minority group. Consequently, an indirect approach to measuring prejudice is needed. Here a wide variety of methods have been developed that are technical in nature. Here the focus will be on two long established approaches that have been influential in shaping current scientific understanding of why some people are more prejudiced than others.

Within social psychology one influential way to study prejudice is through the idea of *social distance*: an approach first developed during the 1920s by an American social psychologist called Emory Bogardus (1882–1973). Here groups that are liked are considered to be "close" in a social or psychological sense, and in contrast disliked groups are considered to be "distant". The *Bogardus Social Distance Scale* is very time consuming to implement in a national survey as it requires asking if a person is willing to have a minority group member across a long list of relationships ranging from close relative, friend, neighbour, to refusing someone entry into the country. Often survey companies, ask just one prejudice question typically about willingness to have specific minorities as a neighbour.

An alternative approach to examining prejudice is to observe how people describe minority groups using pairs of words that have opposite meaning (known technically as a *Semantic Differential Scale*) such as good-bad and clever-stupid. The Semantic Differential Scale ap-

proach was developed by Charles Osgood, George Suci, and Percy Tannenbaum in the 1950s, and is based on a sophisticated (many-sided) theory of the structure of prejudiced attitudes. Here the focus will be on how Czechs evaluate different groups of foreigners and the Roma community.

Are Czechs more prejudiced that other Europeans?

Exploring Czechs' attitudes towards minorities requires knowing past trends. Here data from the Institute for Public Opinion Research (CVVM, an academic polling outfit) may be used. Here Czechs were asked about who they would not like to have as neighbours. This question is a shortened version of the Bogardus Social Distance Scale (described above), and is sometimes used as a summary measure of prejudice. Most of the trends in prejudice toward the 15 groups examined (e.g. drug addicts, alcoholics, foreigners resident in the Czech Republic, and homosexuals) were largely constant in the set of 10 surveys fielded irregularly between 2003 and 2016.

However, there have been some important changes in Czech public attitudes over the last decade. The CVVM survey data show that there has been a strong decline in prejudice towards gays and lesbians, i.e. 42% did not want homosexuals as neighbours in 2003; however, in early 2016 this number had fallen by half to 21%. These survey data also reveal increases in prejudice toward four minorities, i.e. the mentally ill, non-whites, foreigners, and those with different religious beliefs.

Are Czechs more prejudiced than their European neighbours? This is not an easy question to answer because prejudice has many facets and comparable survey data are scarce. Fortunately, the European Social Survey (ESS, a biannual academic survey) has asked respondents in most European countries if they agree that gays and lesbians should be free to live life as they wish? In the absence of a broad range of questions, this single question may be interpreted as a general indicator of prejudice. Using data from the two most recent waves of ESS in 2012 and 2014 the results reveal that a net majority of Czech are tolerant towards gays and lesbians. However, Czech society is slightly below the average (median) level of prejudice in all European countries surveyed in 2012 and 2014.

This comparative evidence indicates that Czechs are broadly the same as their fellow European in terms of tolerance of homosexuality. Unfortunately, there is little information about European attitudes towards a wide swathe of minorities, and so knowledge of which countries are more tolerant is limited. For some groups such as the Roma there is reason to think that Czechs have relatively high levels of prejudice. Moreover, the recent surge in migration to Europe has led to a hardening of Czech attitudes against those from countries perceived to be Islamic. Here fears of terrorism associated with attacks on various European cities over the last decade, e.g. Madrid (2004), London (2005), Paris (2015), and Brussels (2016) have fuelled suspicions of foreigners and other minorities (see also **Chapter 50**).

Czechs' attitudes to foreigners and Roma

In an academic survey undertaken in late 2015, a semantic differential scale was used to explore in an indirect way Czech attitudes towards half a dozen groups of foreigners (many of them with large migrant communities in the Czech Republic) and the Roma (the largest indigenous minority group). The semantic differential question used a five point scale where "1" indicates a positive feeling and "5" a negative one, where intermediate values referred to less intense positive or negative feelings. Each of the 7 minority groups studies were examined in terms of 9 attributes. The 9 attributes were: beauty, morals, cleanliness, peacefulness, intelligence, level of family closeness, degree of obeying laws, work ethic, and politeness.

This is a little complicated to explain, but the idea is simple enough as the question text and table presented below shows. At the risk of repetition, a "1" on the semantic differential scale indicates a strong positive attribute and a "5" denotes a corresponding strong negative attribute. Czechs' attitudes towards Slovaks, Syrians, Ukrainians, Muslims, Vietnamese, Roma, and Russians were examined using 9 pairs of opposite adjectives (or antonyms) as listed above. Answers on the midpoint of scale, i.e. point "3" are often interpreted by social scientists as responses that may indicate (a) apathy, (b) indecisiveness, or (c) the attribute is not seen to apply to the group examined. In the absence of additional information which of these three scale midpoint explanations is most valid is often unknown.

Question text: Now, please tell me, what you think about the characteristics of different groups of people. I will read you a pair of opposing characteristics and on a scale of "1" to "5" please tell me where you would place yourself on this scale.

Members of this group (e.g. Slovaks) are...

Beautiful	1	2	3	4	5	Ugly
Moral	1	2	3	4	5	Immoral
Clean	1	2	3	4	5	Dirty
Peaceful	1	2	3	4	5	Violent
Intelligent	1	2	3	4	5	Stupid
Close-knit family	1	2	3	4	5	Distant family
Law-abiding	1	2	3	4	5	Criminal
Good workers	1	2	3	4	5	Bad workers
Polite	1	2	3	4	5	Rude

By taking the average of the 9 scores for each of the 7 groups it is possible to create an estimate of which of the 7 groups Czechs like the most. The results of a survey fielding this question in late 2015 show that Czechs were most positive toward Slovaks, followed in descending order by the Vietnamese, Russians, Ukrainians, Syrians, Muslims, and Roma. These results suggest that Czechs have least prejudice towards Slovaks and most antipathy toward the Roma with Ukrainians being somewhere in the middle.

A word of caution is warranted here. Great care is required in interpreting these semantic differential scale data. This is because these are survey data estimates and the differences observed in Czech attitudes toward different minority groups may not be real, but due to technical factors such as measurement error. Moreover, Slovaks are not really "foreigners" in the Czech Republic as Czechs and Slovaks shared a common state between 1918 and 1992 (see **Chapters 9, 50 and 54**), and most (older) Czechs and Slovaks understand each other's languages. What this research highlights is the difficulty in studying

prejudice. Yes, it is true Czechs like some minorities more than others; however, public opinion is divided and so average 'dislike scores' obscure the important fact that not all Czechs view minorities in the same way.

Who is most (dis)liked and why?

This chapter has shown that the social science study of prejudice, or dominant group's dislike of minorities, is fraught with difficulty because prejudice towards minorities is a sensitive issue. Consequently, respondents when interviewed may not always reveal their true attitudes not wanting to be called prejudiced or racist. Use of indirect methods of measuring prejudice (such as the Semantic Differential Scale used in this chapter) may yield more honest answers from respondents, but the results are difficult to understand. With all these caveats, it seems safest to conclude that Czechs like Slovaks, Vietnamese, Russians, and Ukrainians, and tend to have less positive attitudes towards Syrians, Muslims, and Roma.

How do we interpret these results? Here the survey data is much more limited and we are down to making inferences using additional evidence from other sources. One possibility which fits with other studies of prejudice is that the broad division of minorities into two groups noted above may reflect prejudice in society in the sense that positive attitudes are linked with groups that are seen to make a contribution to the Czech economy through their business activities, investment, and work (i.e. Slovaks, Vietnamese, Russians, and Ukrainians). In contrast, negative attitudes are associated with groups (e.g. Roma) that are a burden on Czech's collective wealth through social welfare payments.

Small minority groups such as the Syrians and Muslims may elicit feelings of fear in Czechs because of their association with violence and terrorism, and not least because these groups are largely unknown to most Czechs beyond what they have seen in the media. In sum, the reasons for Czechs liking and disliking various groups are not clearly understood by social scientists, and this partly reflects the difficulty of asking questions, interpreting the results, and the sensitive nature of prejudice as a topic for discussion.

Tuček, M. 2015. Tolerance k vybraným skupinám obyvatel – únor 2015. *Tisková zpráva, Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění (CVVM)*, Sociologický ústav AV ČR, v.v.i. Available at http://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/tiskove-zpravy

Chapter 51

Adorno, T. W., E. Frenkel-Brunswik, D. J. Levinson, and R. N. Sanford. 1950. *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper and Row.

Allport, G. W. 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.

Bogardus, E. S. 1926. Social distance: A measuring stick. *The Survey* (May 1) 169–208.

Bogardus, E. S. 1928. *Immigration and Race Attitudes*. New York: D.C. Heath and Company.

Bogardus, E. S. 1933. A social distance scale. *Sociology and Social Research*, 17: 265–271.

Bogardus, E. S. 1947. Measurement of personal-group relations. *Sociometry*, 10(4): 306–311.

Bogardus, E. S. 1950. Stereotypes versus sociotypes. *Sociology and Social Research*, 34 (March-April): 286–291.

Bogardus, E. S. 1959. *Social Distance*. Los Angeles, CA: University of Southern California Press.

Bogardus, E. S. 1967. *A Forty-Year Racial Distance Study*. Los Angeles, CA: University of Southern California Press.

Filip-Crawford, G. and S. L. Neuberg. 2015. Homosexuality and pro-gay ideology as pathogens? Implications of a disease-spread lay model for understanding anti-gay behaviors. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 72(2): 291-310.

Fiske, S. T. 2011. *Envy Up, Scorn Down: How Status Divides Us*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Lodge, M. and C. S. Taber. 2013. *The Rationalizing Voter*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Osgood, C. E. and G. J. Suci and P. Tannenbaum. 1957. *Measurement of Meaning*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Roesch, C. 2015. The social distance scale, Emory S. Bogardus and Californian interwar migration research offside the Chicago School. J*ournal of Migration History*, 1(2): 200–214.

Wark, C. and J. F. Galliher. 2007. Emory Bogardus and the origins of the social distance scale. *The American Sociologist*, 38(4): 383-395.