

# Coherence seeking in attitudes to free trade in services

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## BACKGROUND

Holyoak and Simon (1999) show how coherence seeking influences attitudes in fictional decision making. This study tests if the same effects can be found for attitudes in a real issue, by applying the theory on one of the most hotly debated labor market issues in the EU.

In Sweden and EU countries, free trade in goods has become more or less generally accepted. However, free trade in services seems to be less accepted. The main conflict concerns the extent to which service providers from other EU countries with temporarily posted workers should be bound by wage regulations in the host countries or by wage regulations in their original countries.

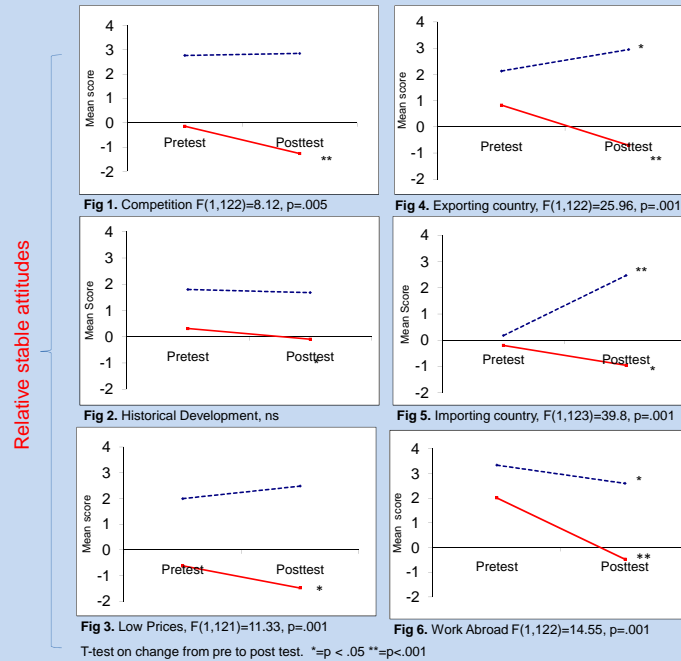
In the public debate, various specific attitudes and arguments are put forward to support the general attitude. Theoretically, Fishbein & Ajzen, (1975) suggest that an overall attitude is based on an integration of specific attitudes. However, the reverse could be true. i.e. that the general attitude influences the specific attitudes, especially when the attitude is questioned or value-expressive (Abelson, 1986; Lydon & Zanna, 1990). Holyoak and Simon's paradigm makes it possible to disentangle these theoretical perspectives on attitude formation.

To find out whether specific attitudes related to free trade are stable across contexts or constructed to support the general attitude, we conducted an experiment involving 125 participants (psychology and economy students as well as a sample of Stockholm citizens).

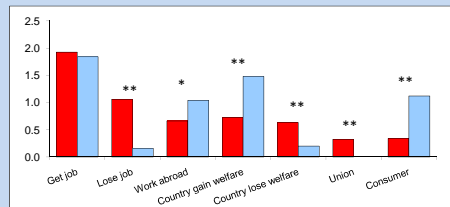
## METHOD

Six specific attitudes were chosen from the various arguments present in the public debate and from a pilot study where participants listed arguments that supported their opinion on free trade in services; (1) **Competition**, (2) **Low prices**, (3) **Long-term consequences for exporting country**, (4) **Long-term consequences for importing country** (5) **Low-wage work abroad** and (6) **Historical Development**. Two questionnaires were constructed to tap the specific attitudes before, and after, participants took position on their general opinion towards free trade in services (see figure with experimental design). The participants were asked to read two debate articles on free trade and then choose the article that corresponded to their own attitude. One article argued for free low-wage competition for foreign service providers and the other argued for the so called Swedish model, which implies that wages must be bound by a Swedish collective wage agreement.

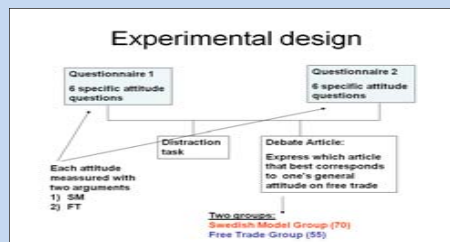
To analyze the specific attitudes and their patterns of change, we categorized participants according to their decision on the debate articles. 70 participants were classified as the "Swedish Model" group and 55 participants were classified as the "Free Trade" group. We were also interested to see if the two groups differed in terms of identification, i.e. which groups (e.g. trade union or consumers) the participants identified themselves with.



**Figure 7:** Differences in identification between attitude groups  
Red = Swedish Model  
Blue = Free Trade  
\*\* =  $p < .001$ ,  
\* =  $p < .05$



**Figure 8:** Experimental design

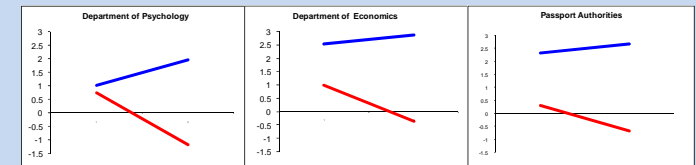


## RESULTS

We conducted several ANOVAS to test whether mean scores in specific attitudes shifted as a result of attitude group and from pre-test to post-test. Significant Group X Pre-/Post-test interactions for all specific attitudes except historical development indicated that attitudes towards different types of free trade largely were formed constructively by means of coherence seeking. That is, the specific attitudes had more extreme values in line with the direction of the general attitude when they were assessed in the context of free trade issue (post-test) compared to the baseline assessment (pre-test). However, attitudes towards competition, low prices and historical development were relatively stable (less coherence seeking), at the same time as they differentiated between the two attitude groups, whereas attitudes to consequences for exporting and importing country and attitudes towards work abroad changed more clearly from pre- to post-test (more coherence seeking).

The psychology students differed from the other two participation groups by being more coherence seeking, i. e., showing a greater attitude change from pre to post-test.

The two attitude groups also differed on the identification task. The Swedish Model group identified themselves more with groups who might lose from free trade in services (people that might lose jobs, countries that might lose welfare, and trade unions). The Free Trade group, on the other hand, identified themselves more with groups that would gain from low wage competition in services (people who might work abroad, countries that might gain welfare, and consumers).



## CONCLUSION

Previous research on coherence seeking has used fictional decision cases. This study applied the theory on a highly topical issue. We found coherence seeking also in this realistic case. In addition, the results made it possible to differentiate between stable specific attitudes that characterized the two attitude groups and those specific attitudes that were formed as a result of activating the general attitude. These results suggest that some specific arguments that politicians and debaters use are not that important for the general opinion as they may seem.

It may be suggested that those attitudes that consistently differentiate between the two attitude groups originate from different identifications (e. g., with employees versus consumers). This remains to be investigated in future research.

## REFERENCES

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