



## The relationship of conservatism and cognitive-complexity

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**Summary**—An investigation of the relationship of conservatism and cognitive-complexity was completed. Forty-one males and 43 females participated in the study with each completing the Wilson–Patterson Conservatism Scale (C Scale) and the Role Repertory Grid (Rep Grid). Analysis indicated that High-Conservatives possessed significantly lower Ordination scores than Low-Conservatives and that these lower scores were related to significant differences in Ordination–Person scores and not due to differences in Ordination–Construct scores. No differences between High- and Low-Conservatives were evident concerning Functionally Independent Construct scores. These results suggest that High-Conservatives possess a somewhat restricted range of construct assignment flexibility that may lead to viewing others in a categorical manner. This restriction may be related to a dislike of ambiguity or an attempt at anxiety reduction. This research is consistent with previous research and it is likely that low cognitive-complexity is another component of the value pattern of conservatives. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

### INTRODUCTION

Wilson (1973) theorized that conservative attitudes reflect a fear of uncertainty. According to this view, the conservative's adherence to external authority, conventionality, rigid morality, and opposition to sexual freedom stems from the threat of complexity, loss of control of one's own feelings and desires, plus novelty which are forms of uncertainty. It follows from this latter proposition that conservatism is inversely related to the cognitive-complexity dimension.

Cognitive-Complexity is often viewed as the degree of differentiation of one's construct system and has been reported to be related to one's ability to predict and control (Landfield & Epting, 1987) and one's level of dispositional optimism (Hinze, 1995). Landfield and Epting (1987) reported that high degrees of Cognitive-Complexity may result in a fragmentation of one's construct system leading to disorganization, ambiguity of information construal, and uncertainty.

Cognitive-Complexity has also been viewed in terms of components. Ordination (ORD) is one component and is believed to be related to one's ability to hierarchically prioritize or integrate 'varying construal contexts' during decision making. It has been described as an indication of one's flexibility in construct meaningfulness assignment. Another component called Functionally Independent Constructs (FIC) has been referred to as the degree of separateness or independence of one's constructs contained within their construct system. ORD and FIC can also be conceptualized as being composed of two components themselves with ORD or FIC each being in reference to persons or constructs (Landfield & Epting, 1987). Thus, it is hypothesized that Ss high in conservatism will exhibit lower degrees of Cognitive-Complexity (ORD and FIC).

### METHOD

#### *Subjects*

Ss were 41 males and 43 females recruited from introductory psychology classes at the University of North Texas. All S participation was voluntary and each was offered class credit points in return for their participation. The average age of the Ss was 23.9 years, with a range from 18 to 48. Participation of individual's ethnicity included: 73.8% Caucasian, 9.5% African-American, 7.14% Asian-American, 7.14% Hispanic, and 2.38% other.

#### *Procedure*

Ss attended one of several testing sessions. Each session took place in a small conference room located within the psychology clinic where each S received a packet of questionnaires relating to several topical areas of research interest. Ss were instructed to complete each enclosed questionnaire and were requested to read the directions given at the top of each questionnaire—further clarification of completion directions were given on an 'as needed' basis. As part of the packet of tests, each S completed the Wilson–Patterson Conservatism Scale (C Scale) (Wilson & Patterson, 1968) and the Role Construct Repertory Grid (Rep Grid) (Kelly, 1955). Order of completion was counterbalanced for these two scales.

### RESULTS

A median split was completed on the C-Scale as an efficient means by which to form groups of high-conservatives and low-conservatives. Those scoring above the median were considered High-Conservatives (HC) and those scoring below the median were considered Low-Conservatives (LC). Univariate *F*-test analysis was completed to compare ORD scores for HC and LC. The results supported the hypothesis that HC would possess significantly lower ORD scores than LC,  $F(1,82) = 4.593$ ,  $P = 0.035$ . Further pre-planned analysis concerning the two components of the ORD scores revealed significant differences between HC and LC. A Bonferroni correction was employed to counter increased Type-I error

associated with further comparisons. This analysis indicated that HC had significantly lower ORD-Person scores than LC,  $F(1,82) = 5.766, P = 0.019$ ; however there was no difference between ORD-Construct scores,  $F(1,82) = 2.503, P = 0.117$ . No differences between HC and LC concerning FIC scores were evident,  $F(1,82) = 0.007, P = 0.935$ . Thus, further analysis of FIC components was precluded.

#### DISCUSSION

These results suggest that a high-conservative person possesses a somewhat restricted range of construct assignment flexibility that may lead to viewing others in a categorical manner—either good or bad, black or white, acceptable or non-acceptable. Why? Possibly it is related to the dislike of ambiguity reported by Joe (1974) or an attempt to reduce stimulus and response uncertainty by not utilizing the full range of a given construct (McAllister & Anderson, 1991). It is quite possible that the lower cognitive-complexity is related to reduced ambiguity anxiety (of which the counterpart is discussed in Landfield & Epting, 1987). It is also likely that low cognitive-complexity is another component of the value pattern of conservatives described by Joe, Jones and Miller (1981).

The present results are consistent with previous research where high-conservative subjects show a preference for simple representational paintings over complex abstract paintings (Wilson, Ausman, & Mathews, 1973), and where they also showed a preference for simple over complex poems (Gillies & Campbell, 1985). Continued research is recommended to help clarify the relationship of Conservatism and Cognitive-Complexity.

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