

CONSERVATISM AND ART PREFERENCES¹

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Starting with the proposition that a generalized fear of uncertainty is the psychological variable which accounts for the organization of social attitudes along a general factor of liberalism-conservatism, it was hypothesized that conservatives would express an aversion to highly complex and abstract art works. Twenty paintings were chosen by an art expert, five to represent each of four categories differing in degree of uncertainty: simple representational, simple abstract, complex representational, and complex abstract. As predicted, high scorers on the Conservatism Scale preferred paintings in the simple representational category and showed a definite dislike of the complex representational and complex abstract works, while liberals preferred the more complex and abstract paintings. It was further demonstrated that the complexity dimension was the primary discriminator of the judgments of liberals and conservatives ($r = -.56$, $p < .01$) rather than abstraction ($r = -.14$, ns).

Studies in several cultures have confirmed the importance of a general factor, best described as conservatism, underlying the entire field of social attitudes (Bagley, Wilson, & Boshier, 1970; Schneider & Minkmar, 1972; Wilson, 1970). The "ideal" conservative is characterized as conventional, conforming, antihedonistic, authoritarian, punitive, ethnocentric, militaristic, dogmatic, superstitious, and antiscientific. There is evidence that under normal conditions this syndrome is transmitted from parent to child, but theories which stress developmental factors, such as imitation learning and identification, fail to account for the constellation itself; that is, they do not explain how attitudes came to be organized this way in the first place.

One theory of the organization of this syndrome holds that the psychological basis of conservative attitudes is a generalized susceptibility to feeling threat or anxiety in the face of uncertainty (e.g., ambiguity, complexity, change, novelty, deviance, individuality,

anomie). In this view, the tendency for the conservative person to subjugate his inner needs and feelings to the social order (Wilson & Patterson, 1969) is interpreted as a means of reducing choice (response uncertainty), thus simplifying the cognitive world. Most discussions of the dynamics of conservatism concentrate on the response phase of behavior and neglect to explore the possibility that stimulus uncertainty (in the information theory sense) may be equally aversive to the extreme conservative. This study was designed to test this proposition in the context of esthetic preferences, using paintings that differ a priori in their amount of complexity and abstraction.

METHOD

Twenty paintings were selected by an art expert, five to represent each of four categories: simple representational, simple abstract, complex representational and complex abstract. The two dimensions of art involved in this four-way classification were conceptualized as independent. Simplicity-complexity referred to the number and concentration of different elements (lines, shapes, colors, objects, etc.) contained within the painting. The abstract-representational dimension concerned the extent to which elements were familiar and identifiable and the degree to which the whole picture showed isomorphism (correspondence) with visual reality. It is relevant to note that whereas the latter dimension is inevitably related to the traditional-modern distinction, the former was intended to be completely independent of both.

¹ This experiment was conducted while the first author was visiting professor at California State University, Los Angeles.

Thanks are due to Brian Allison, Department of Art Education, Leeds Polytechnic, for the selection of paintings.

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The subjects were 16 females and 14 males aged between 23 and 34 years. It has previously been established that conservatism scores are little affected by age or sex within this age range (Wilson & Patterson, 1968). To minimize social effects, the subjects were tested individually in their own homes, the art preferences test being presented as a series of slides with a hand viewer. The subject was asked to rate each picture according to his *personal* preferences, by selecting one of the following statements from a 7-point scale: dislike extremely (1), dislike moderately (2), dislike slightly (3), indifferent (4), like slightly (5), like moderately (6), like extremely (7). The 20 slides were presented in a fixed, cyclic order, after which the Conservatism Scale (Wilson & Patterson, 1970) was administered. The two tasks were taken in this order because it was felt that *C* scores were less likely to be influenced by the art judgments than vice-versa.

The Wilson-Patterson *C* Scale differs from most current attitude scales not so much in its content as in its simplified item format. The propositional statements of traditional questionnaires such as the California *F* Scale and Rokeach Dogmatism Scale are replaced by brief, nondirectional catchphrases representing a variety of controversial issues (e.g., death penalty, evolution theory, legalized abortion, Bible truth, patriotism). The respondent indicates which of these he "favors or believes in" by choosing one of three response alternatives: "yes", "?", or "no". This new item format has been shown to give relative freedom from the effects of acquiescence (Cloud & Vaughan, 1969) and social desirability. The *C* scale has been shown to maintain high reliability in several "European" cultures—England, New Zealand, The Netherlands, Germany, and South Africa (Orpen & Rodenwoldt, in press; Schneider & Minkmar, 1972; Wilson & Patterson, 1970), and there is substantial evidence to support its construct validity (e.g., Caine & Leigh, 1972; Patterson & Wilson, 1969; Thomas, Shea, & Rigby, 1971; Wilson, 1973).

RESULTS

C scores ranged from 11 to 57 with a median of 36.5. Splitting the 30 subjects at the median *C* score gave two groups which were labeled "liberal" and "conservative." Mean ratings for the four styles of art quadrants are shown for each of these two groups in Figure 1. Using *t* tests, the differences between liberals and conservatives were significant beyond the .05 level for each category except simple abstract, where the difference was not significant. Product-moment correlations between conservatism scores and the four art categories were: simple representational .22, *ns*; simple abstract $-.26$, *ns*; complex representational $-.53$, $p < .01$; complex abstract $-.35$, $p < .05$.

There are three points to note here: (a) There was a general tendency for the conservatives to prefer simple and representational paintings while the liberals preferred the complex and abstract. (b) The simple-complex dimension apparently discriminated the liberals and conservatives more strongly than the abstract-representational dimension. (c) The ratings of the conservatives on the complex paintings are clearly on the negative side of the indifference point; that is, they are actively *disliked*, not just preferred less than other types. This discovery is particularly interesting when it is considered that the conservative group, with scores ranging from 37 to 57 on the *C* Scale, is actually fairly liberal by comparison to the general population, which has a mean of about 50.

In order to test the validity of the observation concerning the relative importance of the two art dimensions in distinguishing the conservative and liberal groups, a further analysis was conducted. A complexity score was calculated for each subject by adding his ratings on the two complex categories and subtracting his ratings on the two simple categories (complex representational plus complex abstract minus simple representational minus simple abstract). An abstractness score was similarly calculated (simple abstract plus complex abstract minus simple representational minus complex representational). These scores, being within-subjects

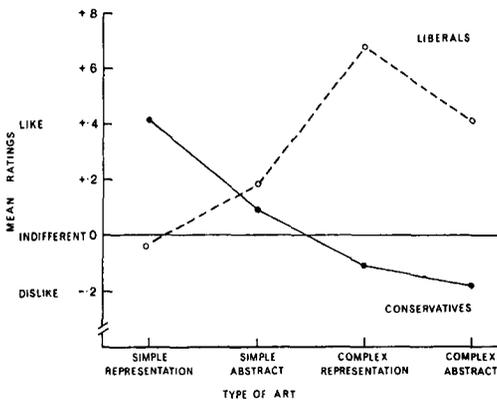


FIG. 1. Mean ratings on the four art categories for liberals and conservatives. (The four types of art are arranged on an a priori scale of stimulus uncertainty.)

measures, have the advantage of partly correcting for between-subjects differences in overall rating level. Correlations of these complexity and abstractness scores with conservatism were $-.56$ ($p < .01$) and $-.14$ (ns), respectively, thus clearly establishing that the complexity–simplicity dimension in the paintings is the primary discriminator of the judgments of the liberals and conservatives. The correlation between the two art dimensions themselves was $.07$, supporting the presumption of independence between them. Because it was supposed that the differences between liberals and conservatives on the complexity–simplicity dimension might be even more striking where all the stimuli are meaningful (i.e., representational), complex representational–simple representational scores were calculated for each subject. This time the correlation with conservatism rose to $-.65$.

Finally, it is worth noting that neither age nor sex were significantly related to conservatism or any other variables investigated.

DISCUSSION

If a difference between liberals and conservatives had appeared only for the abstract–representational dimension, this might have been regarded as tautological and trivial considering the high conceptual relationship between abstractness and modernism. As it turned out, however, it was the complexity factor that was the primary discriminator of the groups, suggesting that this may be the more fundamental psychological antecedent of conservatism as a dimension of personality. These results may be interpreted as providing support for the theory that conservatism represents a reaction against uncertainty, whether it be in terms of the alternatives in action that are available, or merely complexity and ambiguity in the environment to which the individual is exposed. Apparently, the extreme conservative perceives the world as “falling apart,” which leads him to

seek and place value upon order, simplicity, and security.

These results are also seen as providing further construct validation of the *C* Scale. Although it is widely used in Britain and the Commonwealth, this is one of the first studies to use the test with a United States sample, and the fact that a median split of only 30 subjects yielded significant results suggests that it may have considerable predictive power.

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(Received October 25, 1971)