



Personality and social attitudes: Evidence for positive-approach motivation

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ABSTRACT

Extensive research has linked general personality factors to social attitudes, but there has been comparatively little work on the roles played by specific approach-avoidance personality factors, especially positive-approach ones. Here we relate such factors to the two main clusters of social attitudes (Right-Wing Authoritarianism, RWA; and Social Dominance Orientation, SDO), and related cognitive constructs (Need for Cognition and Need for Closure). Results revealed: (a) positive-approach motivation is consistently related to both RWA and SDO, with little contribution from negative-avoidance motivation; and (b) negative-avoidance motivation played a part in Need for Cognition (negatively related) and Need for Closure (positively related). These data challenge previous theorizing concerning the role of fear/anxiety in social attitude formation and prejudice more generally. We conclude that, to a larger extent than previously thought, approach-related personality factors underpin the positive reinforcement of social attitudes and prejudice. Our results may help to account for the failure of programmes designed to reduce prejudice which have been based on the reduction of negative emotion and motivation.

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1. Introduction

The possibility that basic approach and avoidance motivational systems underlie social attitudes, and prejudice more generally, has received scant attention in the research literature. Building upon Hans Eysenck's pioneering work, started during the 1940s (e.g., Eysenck, 1944), there has long been an interest in the structural overlap of social attitudes and personality, and this work has now been extended to the Five-Factor Model (FFM). However, the significant advances made in our understanding of the major systems of approach and avoidance motivation (Corr, DeYoung, & McNaughton, 2013) have, so far, not been applied. The aim of this paper is to fill this theoretical and empirical lacuna.

1.1. Early work

The earliest psychological literature on social attitudes and prejudice (i.e., negative evaluations of others based on group member-

ship) generally sought explanations through the construct of the 'prejudiced personality' (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Reichard, 1948). Allport (1954) articulated the mainstream view by claiming that the cognitive processes of prejudiced people differed from those of the non-prejudiced. Adorno et al. (1950) contended that prejudice was a general personality factor, which included traits such as cognitive rigidity and adherence to traditional values. Although influential, their *F-scale* (Sanford, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, & Levinson, 1950) fell out of favour as questions were raised regarding its explanatory power and theoretical heft. In time, the notion of a 'prejudiced personality' gave way to social-cognitive perspectives; for example, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and Relative Deprivation Theory (e.g., Guimond & Dambrun, 2002). While these perspectives have much to commend them, typically they fail to account for the existence of significant individual differences in levels and expressions of social attitudes and prejudice.

1.2. Structure of social attitudes

Recent years have witnessed something of a consensus concerning the structure of social attitudes. Duckitt and Sibley (2010) reviewed the literature and presented a dual-process

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motivational model which distinguishes between two major factors: Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) – for reasons detailed in their paper, these are best viewed as social *attitudes* rather than personality factors *per se*.

Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA; Altemeyer, 1988, 1998) was intended as a refinement of Adorno et al.'s (1950) *F*-scale. It includes three of the original nine subscales: conventionalism, authoritarian submission, and authoritarian aggression. People high in RWA favour traditional roles and values, and are submissive to authority figures seen as 'legitimate'. They perceive the world as dangerous and fear-inducing (Altemeyer, 1988), have conservative economic philosophies, and generally support conservative religious institutions (Altemeyer, 1998). RWA is characterised by security, conformity and tradition, as compared with openness, stimulation and self-direction. Importantly, such people have increased prejudice toward ethnic minorities, including African-Americans (Whitley, 1999), homosexuals (Goodman & Moradi, 2008), and people from different religious backgrounds (Baum, 2009). Altemeyer (1998, p. 52) writes that these authoritarian submissives are "equal opportunity bigots".

The second major factor of social attitudes, Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Sidanius, 1993), refers to a general attitudinal orientation to intergroup relations, reflecting preference for equal vs. hierarchical structures. SDO was conceptualised as an individual difference variable reflecting the desire to have one's in-group be superior and to dominate over out-groups. SDO is characterised by self-enhancement (achievement, power and hedonism) as compared with self-transcendence. It results in stereotyping, endorsing traditional societal roles, and a general belief that successful people (or groups) deserve their success (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). SDO is positively correlated with Machiavellianism and generally selfish motivations, and negatively correlated with measures of sympathy or empathy (Altemeyer, 1998).

Compared to RWA, people high in SDO are less likely to be motivated by fear, religiosity, or a belief in a dangerous world (Altemeyer, 1998), but are more likely to support social stratification and oppose attempts to reduce societal inequalities (Altemeyer, 2004). The 20-item SDO scale (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) has been shown to predict prejudice towards people and groups who advocate equality, including ethnic minorities, homosexuals (Whitley & Lee, 2000), and women (Whitley, 1999).

Correlations between RWA and SDO are generally weak in North American samples (e.g., Whitley, 1999) but are larger in European ones (e.g., Ekehammar, Akrami, Gylje, & Zakrisson, 2004). Although there are similarities between SDO and RWA, even beyond their general usefulness in predicting prejudice, they are considered conceptually distinct.

1.2.1. Cognitive constructs related to RWA and SDO

Cognitive biases in social attitudes are often assumed. Two measures are useful for exploring these possible relations. First, Need for Cognition refers to individual differences in the desire for thinking or engaging in cognitively demanding activities (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Previous work has found it has small-to-moderate negative correlations with RWA and SDO (Cornelis & Van Hiel, 2006). Roets and Van Hiel (2006) found, while Need for Cognition has some association with prejudicial attitudes, its effect was mediated through RWA scores.

Secondly, Need for Cognitive Closure is related to an individual's desire for clear cognitive closure, as opposed to ambiguity tolerance (Kruglanski, Webster, & Klem, 1993). This desire to eliminate ambiguity may lead to an over-reliance on heuristics or stereotypes, which may act as a precursor to prejudice. Roets and Van Hiel (2011) found .57 and .25 correlations between Need for Closure and RWA and SDO, respectively.

1.3. Personality and social attitudes

A meta-analysis by Sibley and Duckitt (2008) found that RWA was moderately predicted by low Openness ($r = -.36$) and weakly by high Conscientiousness ($r = .15$); and SDO was moderately predicted by low Agreeableness ($r = -.29$), and weakly by low Openness ($r = -.16$). Increased levels of Agreeableness and Openness had moderate associations with decreased prejudice ($r_s = -.22$ and $-.30$, respectively).

These associations with FFM personality factors are valuable but they do not address the possible contribution from basic approach and avoidance personality factors. Assuming that social attitudes and prejudice are 'motivated', we might usefully explore the role of these more basic personality factors. For example, they could be avoidance-motivated, by either fear or anxiety, elicited by thoughts of the out-group, or approach-motivated by perceived competition with the out-group. The former hypothesis is widespread in the prejudice literature (Allport, 1954). But, there is reason to suppose that the positive-approach factors are related to social attitudes and prejudice. Harmon-Jones (2003) demonstrated that psychometric measures of the Behavioural Approach System (BAS), but not the Behavioural Inhibition System (BIS), are related to anger and physical hostility; therefore, in situations where social attitudes and prejudice are driven by hostility we might expect the involvement of BAS-related negative emotions. Indeed, studies measuring intergroup emotions generally find that anger is the most important motivating factor behind prejudice and offensive action tendencies (e.g., Seger, Smith, Kinias, & Mackie, 2009; Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007), above and beyond feelings of anxiety. We, therefore, expect that BAS-related processes will relate to authoritarian submission and dominance. Whether these putative BAS effects are restricted to anger/aggression or reflect a more appetitive motivation is a major focus of this paper.

1.3.1. Approach-avoidance personality theories

The nature of approach-avoidance personality factors, including their relation to the FFM, has been described elsewhere (Corr et al., 2013). The model applied here is Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST; Corr, 2008), which posits two systems of defence (*fight-flight-freeze system*, FFFS; and *behavioural inhibition system*, BIS) and one of approach (*behavioural approach system*, BAS). The FFFS is responsible for mediating reactions to all aversive stimuli and is related to the emotion of fear (arising through the motivation for avoidance and escape). The BIS is responsible for the detection and resolution of goal conflict in general (e.g., between BAS-approach and FFFS-avoidance) and is related to the emotion of anxiety, which is distinct from fear. The BAS is responsible for mediating reactions to all appetitive stimuli and is related to the emotions of hope and anticipatory pleasure. These systems are often measured by the Carver and White (1994) BIS/BAS scales, but with the development of RST (Gray, 1987) has come the need for more refined scales of the type developed by Corr and Cooper (2013), which contains separate measures of FFFS and BIS, and the BAS (conceptualised in multidimensional terms).

1.4. Aims

The study had several aims. First, to examine the relations between different measures of social attitudes and related cognitive measures; and, secondly, to relate these different measures to general factors of personality as well as more specific approach-avoidance ones. It was expected that we would broadly replicate previous research relating the FFM to RWA and SDO. More importantly, we hypothesized that positive-approach personality factors would significantly correlate with RWA and SDO. If supported, this latter finding would be novel and of theoretical significance, and

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