



## Review

## Psychological processes common to social conservatism and terrorism



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## ABSTRACT

There are areas of overlap between contemporary social conservatism and psychological aspects of terrorism. This paper summarizes empirical evidence from our large-scale cross-cultural surveys linking the two domains. Two component processes of both domains – Religiosity and Nastiness – are closely related. On their own, these processes are unlikely to lead to a significant increase in terrorist activity, even if the number of conservative-leaning members of the population were to increase. Our research, however, identified another component of the militant extremist mindset (MEM) – Grudge – that might precipitate a new wave of terrorism by groups linked to extreme conservative right-wing/populist political parties.

## 1. Introduction

This paper explores the relationship between two constructs – social conservatism and psychological aspects of terrorism – that are not usually seen as being related. Of course, it is hard to imagine typical present day terrorists as fighters for liberal causes or as revolutionaries. Our empirical studies suggest that there may be a closer link between conservatism and militant extremism than previously thought.

## 2. Terrorism and conservatism defined

Encyclopedia Britannica defines terrorism as the “systematic use of violence to create a general climate of fear in a population and thereby to bring about a particular political objective.” Two related terms – radicalism and extremism – have stronger psychological connotations. They suggest a pattern of thinking, or what [Saucier, Akers, Miller, Stankov, and Knezevic \(2009\)](#) refer to as a *Militant Extremist Mindset* (MEM), that is, a set of beliefs, feelings, thoughts and motivations among those who plan or actively engage in terrorism. Psychological components of MEM belong to the category of social attitudes – states of mind and feelings that involve evaluations (e.g., like or dislike) of a specific object or social interaction. [Monahan \(2015\)](#) sees MEM scales as useful instruments for the individual risk assessment of terrorism.

Conservatism reflects human fear of sudden change and a tendency to rely on habitual activities. The term is commonly used in public discourse in connection with various forms of conservatism – political, fiscal, cultural, or social.<sup>1</sup> The issues of interest to psychologists usually

fall under the category of ‘social conservatism’, since psychological interpretations tend to invoke the notion of traits (i.e., personality dimensions and aspects of social attitudes) and dispositions that are expressed in our interactions with social environment (e.g., values, social axioms, social norms). [Stankov \(2009\)](#) referred to a constellation of such constructs as *Conservative Syndrome*. At one level, Conservative Syndrome can be thought of as a broad dimension that is conceptually similar to, say, Extroversion/Introversion. Consequently, from the psychological point of view, individuals and countries that score low on measures of Conservative Syndrome can be described as liberal. Indeed, [Stankov \(2016b\)](#) argued that at the countries’ level correlations among the components are high enough to allow us to classify countries as broadly Conservative or Liberal.

The traits and dispositions captured by this label should not be seen as negative (or pathological) in nature. Like the concept of “authoritarian syndrome”, which is commonly used in political science (see [Raden, 1999](#)), our construct refers to both trait-like habitual patterns of behavior and to processes that are significantly influenced by the environment. At the individual level correlations among the components of the Conservative Syndrome do not show high correlations among themselves and therefore can be viewed as a ‘collection of symptoms’ – i.e., as a ‘syndrome’ – not a strong source trait.

Although Conservative Syndrome is broader than MEM, the two share common psychological processes. These include social attitudes such as those captured by measures of proneness to aggression, materialism, proviolence, ethno-nationalism, materialism, Machiavellianism and religiosity, among others ([Stankov & Lee, 2016a](#)). Compared to the measures

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<sup>1</sup> Social conservatism is different from fiscal conservatism which, like classical liberalism, advocates low taxes, reduced government spending, free trade and minimal government debt. Members of contemporary conservative political parties (e.g., Republicans in the US, conservatives in the UK and their equivalents in Australia and Canada) may have preference for both or, perhaps, for either one of these two brands of conservatism.

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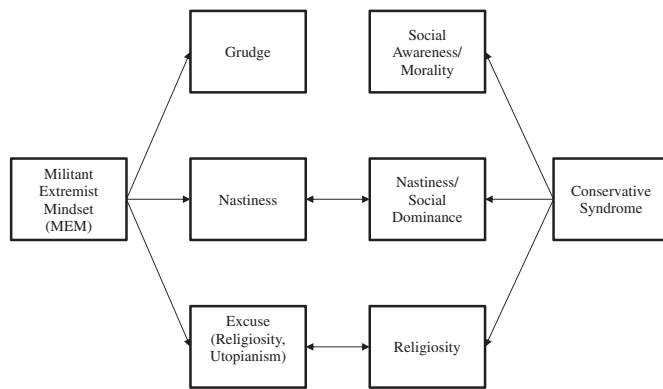


Fig. 1. The structure of MEM and Conservative Syndrome and relationships between components in each domain. Note: This is an illustration, not the outcome of structural equation modeling.

from other psychological domains such as personality or values, these social attitudes tend to be more powerful determinants of behavior and cross-cultural differences (Stankov & Lee, 2016b).

### 3. Assessment issues

This paper compares the findings from two different lines of survey work, one on Conservative Syndrome and the other on the MEM (see Fig. 1). Two psychological processes proved to be unique to each domain – Social Awareness/Morality to Conservative Syndrome and Grudge to MEM. Both lines of enquiry also identified psychological processes – Religiosity and Nastiness – that are similar across the domains. It is important to state at the outset that the presence of common processes between two psychological domains may or may not imply causal relationship. Our evidence to date is based on cross-sectional data. The direction of the observed effect is also difficult to discern without experimental manipulations or longitudinal studies. In the absence of such information, we should refrain from claiming that conservatism is the cause of MEM and terrorism or vice versa.

Our studies of conservatism (Stankov, 2011, 2016b) were based on two datasets ( $N_1 = 2029$  and  $N_2 = 8883$ ) each from 33 countries. The selection of variables was guided by a desire to measure the constructs that have been well researched by cross-cultural psychologists and which have shown reliable mean differences between countries and world regions. The main aims of the projects were to: a) Identify the structure that underlies measures from the domains of personality, social attitudes, values, axioms, and norms; b) Identify groups of individuals and countries that have similar patterns of scores; c) Identify the psychological domains that show small and those that show large cross-cultural differences.

Our studies of MEM (Stankov, Saucier, & Knežević, 2010) were also based on international samples (total  $N = 2424$ ) from 10 countries. The aims of this work were to: a) Develop and pilot-test close to 400 new MEM items; and b) Establish convergent and discriminant validity of the scales that were constructed following item analyses. The items did not contain words linked to a particular group (e.g., Islam). Three approaches to item development were employed: a) Themes were extracted from texts written by members of known terrorist groups and items were developed to capture these themes; b) Psychological, literary (Dostoyevsky, Marquis de Sade) and revolutionary (e.g., anarchist) texts were consulted and matched to the identified themes; c) Linguistic analysis of propaganda material and terrorist texts available on the internet was used to identify radicalization-related words, and actual statements containing such words were used as items.

New scales of MEM constructed from item analyses of all statements were correlated with widely used, established scales such as Saucier's (2009) Big Six measure of personality, Schwartz and Bilsky's (1990)

values, and House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta's (2004) social norms, to examine their convergent and discriminant validity (see Stankov, Saucier et al., 2010; Stankov et al., in press; Stankov, Higgins, Saucier, & Knežević, 2010; Stankov, Saucier, & Knežević, 2011). This process led to the identification of three MEM factors, which were labeled Excuse, Nastiness and Grudge (as shown on the left-hand side of Fig. 1). As pointed out by Stankov et al. (in press), components of MEM fit into the model of vulnerabilities and propensities to extremist ideologies and terrorism that was proposed by Borum (2014).

Although Grudge was an important MEM ingredient, subsequent work indicated that it plays a negligible role in the Conservative Syndrome. As I elaborate below, this was not the case with the other two component processes of MEM. Religiosity, which is a component of Excuse and Nastiness in MEM research, proved to be an important aspect of conservatism.

Our team developed no new measures of conservatism. Instead, we employed well-known measures of personality, -isms, values, social axioms, and social norms that had been developed and used by other investigators and which had previously demonstrated significant cross-cultural differences. Thus, there was no a priori plan to focus on Conservative Syndrome itself. Our studies were intended to be exploratory and as previously noted one of the objectives was to identify measures that show large or small differences between countries and regions. The data were analyzed using factor analysis (exploratory and confirmatory) and latent profile analyses in which both individuals and countries were employed as units (Stankov, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Stankov & Lee, 2008, 2009, 2016a, 2016b; Stankov, Lee, & van de Vijver, 2014; Stankov & Saucier, 2015). In the outcome, three factors were identified: Religiosity, Nastiness/Social Dominance and Social Awareness/Morality (as shown on the right-hand side of Fig. 1). One of these – Social Awareness/Morality – turned out to be somewhat less important for our purposes in this paper. Cross-cultural differences on this dimension were comparatively small ( $ICC = 0.093$ ) and, in latent profile analyses at individual and country levels, differences between the groups on this dimension were also small. Religiosity and Nastiness/Social Dominance, however, were important for understanding the Conservative Syndrome. The percentages of total variance accounted for by countries' differences on these two factors were large (42.3% and 21.7%, respectively; Stankov, 2016b) in comparison to all other scales employed in our work.

### 4. The core of Conservative Syndrome: Religiosity and Nastiness/Social Dominance

#### 4.1. Religiosity

Stankov (2009) defined the Conservatism Syndrome by two religiosity measures (Saucier's Traditional Religiousness and belief in paranormal experiences), values of Tradition and Conformity, and personality traits of Conscientiousness and (negative) Openness to Experience. In other studies, several Religiosity measures would all load on the same factor, but some of the additional scales would have low or no loadings. Religiosity, therefore, appears to be a hallmark of Conservative Syndrome.

Three scales assessed Religiosity directly. Items in the Alphaism scale pertain to the acceptance of one or more traditional religious sources of authority, such as a religious text or scripture, or a religious figure, institution, or organization (Saucier, 2000). The Religion scale used in Social Axioms studies (Bond, 2009) refers to the acceptance of the existence of a supernatural being and to the beneficial functions of religious practice (Example statement: "Belief in a religion helps one understand the meaning of life"). The Duke Religiosity Index captures both behavior and personal spiritual feelings (e.g., "How often do you attend church, mosque, temple, or other religious meetings?"). The Religiosity factor in Stankov and Lee (2016b) also has small loadings from the Family Values scale (e.g., "The father should be the head of the

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