



## Seize and freeze: Openness to Experience shapes judgments of societal threat



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### ABSTRACT

The Dual Process Model of ideology and prejudice (DPM) proposes specific information-processing mechanisms by which broad-bandwidth personality shapes social worldviews. We adapt a classic anchoring and adjustment paradigm and show that Openness to Experience interacts with exposure to information about safety and threat to shape judgments of societal threat and danger. Those low in Openness to Experience were more sensitive to anchor information about the proportion of dangerous and threatening people in society (Study 1). The moderating effect of Openness to Experience on dangerous worldview estimates was due specifically to an intellect or cognitive component of this personality trait, rather than an aesthetic component (Study 2). These results indicate low Openness increases the tendency to be anchored by threat-relevant cues.

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### 1. Introduction

The broad-bandwidth Big-Five personality trait, Openness to Experience, has drawn attention for its role in the cognitive processes underlying authoritarian attitudes and prejudice (e.g., Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Van Hiel, Mervielde, & De Fruyt, 2004). Openness to Experience, relative to the other four Big-Five personality dimensions, may operate as a *seize and freeze* mechanism; a tendency to be more amenable to stereotype-consistent information, and then resistant to potentially alternative evidence. According to the Dual Process Model of ideology and prejudice (DPM; Duckitt, 2001), low levels of Openness to Experience may lead to higher authoritarianism indirectly via schematic beliefs that the social world is dangerous and threatening. Building on this reasoning, Duckitt and Sibley have argued in various papers that those low in Openness to Experience develop more authoritarian attitudes because they are more attentive to and therefore more influenced by information signaling danger and threat from outgroups (see Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008; Sibley & Duckitt, 2013a; Sibley & Duckitt, 2013b). This proposition has not been directly tested, however. Here we take a motivated social cognition perspective, arguing that perceptions of the world as dangerous arise from an inflated sensitivity to normative information signaling social danger or threat.

We draw upon the classic experimental design used to test cognitive *anchoring and adjustment* as a framework for empirically

examining Sibley and Duckitt's (2008; see also Sibley & Duckitt, 2013a) thesis that Openness to Experience shapes perceptions of societal danger through an increased sensitivity to information signaling threat and danger from outgroup members. The anchoring and adjustment heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) describes a universal cognitive bias in which judgments can be unduly influenced by prior information. We manipulate (i.e., anchor) participants' beliefs about the frequency of dangerous social events by applying a recently developed frequency estimation measure developed and validated specifically for this purpose (Perry & Sibley, 2010; Perry, Sibley, & Duckitt, 2013a). Openness to Experience should only determine beliefs that the world is more dangerous when perceptions of the social world as characteristically high (rather than low) in danger are primed.

#### 1.1. The Dual Process Model

The DPM (Duckitt, 2001) identifies dual cognitive-motivational processes that determine individual differences in prejudice. According to the DPM, these differences are reliably predicted by motivational goals for group-based dominance and superiority – indexed by Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) – and social cohesion and collective security – indexed by Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA; Altemeyer, 1981). More recent research has integrated the Big-Five model of personality (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008; Sibley & Duckitt, 2009) – a model describing five relatively independent and broad-bandwidth dimensions of personality (Goldberg, 1999). The dimensions are labeled: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience. Openness to Expe-

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rience (and possibly Conscientiousness) is thought to be the main dimension of personality underlying RWA, the effects of which are partially mediated by perceptions of the social world as dangerous and threatening – a dangerous worldview (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008).

Forming the other major ideological attitude dimension of the DPM, SDO stems from beliefs that the social world is a ruthless competitive jungle in which the strong rightfully prevail over the weak. This competitive worldview makes values for power, dominance and social superiority salient for individuals, reflected in high levels of SDO. The model further holds that those low in Big-Five Agreeableness should be more sensitive to signs of competition and risks for exploitation in their social environment (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Therefore, those low in Agreeableness should increasingly develop a competitive social worldview, which in turn leads to higher levels of SDO.

Structural equation modeling has shown good data fit to this causal process model, with all hypothesized pathways clearly significant (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002; Sibley & Duckitt, 2009; Sibley, Harding, Perry, Asbrock, & Duckitt, 2010; Van Hiel, Cornelis, & Roets, 2007). Longitudinal research also supports the predicted causal pathways in the model (Asbrock, Sibley, & Duckitt, 2010; Perry & Sibley, 2012; Sibley & Duckitt, 2010; Sibley & Duckitt, 2013b; Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007). While cross-sectional and longitudinal data are suggestive of hypothesized causal associations, experimental study designs are still required to adequately support claims of causality. Moreover, experimental research is required to demonstrate causal mechanisms that have been proposed as driving observed personality effects in particular.

Considering associations between all five personality traits and dangerous and competitive worldviews, Sibley and Duckitt (2009) reported that Openness to Experience might be one of several Big-Five dimensions that predict dangerous worldview beliefs and RWA. In their structural model, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism were all significantly associated with dangerous worldview and, although Openness to Experience was most strongly related to RWA, very little of this effect occurred indirectly through dangerous worldview. Nonetheless, it has recently been argued that, in contrast with the other four personality traits, Openness to Experience may influence dangerous worldview (and hence RWA) because this trait describes variation in information processing – particularly a tendency to *seize and freeze* on readily available information in the social environment (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008; Sibley & Duckitt, 2013a). We detail this reasoning in the following section.

### 1.2. Openness to Experience: a cognitive processing perspective

Conceptually, Openness to Experience seems to be closely related to Weber and Kruglanski's (1994) epistemic need for cognitive closure, a tendency to seize on to the most cognitively available information and freeze on this information in the face of potentially contradictory information. Flynn (2005), for example, observed that majority group members low in Openness to Experience were less influenced by stereotype-disconfirming evidence and more likely to adhere to their negative stereotypes about minority groups. Those higher in Openness to Experience were more likely to abandon their negative stereotypes in the face of alternative evidence.

Discussing their HEXACO model of personality structure, Ashton and Lee (2007) argued that levels of Openness to Experience reflect variation in a tendency toward pursuing idea-related endeavors – such as learning, imagining and thinking. This functional definition emphasizes the possible evolutionary costs and benefits of Openness to Experience. Ashton and Lee (2007) proposed that Openness to Experience should have been beneficial

for our ancestors to the extent that it resulted in material and social gains for the individual and their group, but would also expend energy and time, and increase exposure to social and environmental risks. The costs and benefits of Openness to Experience should be different in different ecological niches. This should contribute to variation at the individual level (Ashton & Lee, 2007).

Sibley and Duckitt (2013a) proposed two lines of evidence supporting a cognitive processing perspective of Openness to Experience and social worldview formation. First, as mentioned, Openness to Experience is similar in many regards to Webster and Kruglanski's (1994) epistemic need for cognitive closure. Studies have demonstrated that a need for closure is strongly and consistently related to different forms of prejudice (e.g., Cornelis & Van Hiel, 2006; Dhont, Roets, & Van Hiel, 2011; Roets & Van Hiel, 2006, 2011; Dhont, Roets, & Van Hiel, 2011; Van Hiel, Pandelaere, & Duriez, 2004). Many of these studies also demonstrated that the relationship is mediated by RWA. Second, Sibley and Duckitt (2013a) highlighted a tendency observed in previous studies for individuals to cluster with others similar in their degree of Openness to Experience at both an interpersonal and intergroup level – this is not the case for the other Big-Five personality dimensions however. On this basis, Sibley and Duckitt (2013a, p. 173) argued that Openness to Experience should predict dangerous worldview beliefs (and subsequently RWA) because closed-minded people “identify with the existing social order as it provides a normative referent for existing social values and the way things should be.”

This cognitive bias remains to be demonstrated with an experimental manipulation of normative stereotype information, however. Here, we test the function of Openness to Experience in the formation of dangerous worldviews by examining whether this personality trait reflects a tendency to seize onto information suggesting the social world is dangerous (anchoring) and to make subsequent estimations about danger levels consistent with this information (adjustment). We describe this specific form of cognitive heuristic below.

### 1.3. The anchoring and adjustment heuristic

Tversky and Kahneman (1974) defined their anchoring heuristic as a response bias in which “different starting points yield different estimates, which are biased toward the initial values” (p. 1128). The extent of this bias varies across individuals, and a number of individual difference factors affecting anchoring have been identified (see Furnham & Boo, 2011 for a recent review). Demonstrating a classic anchoring effect related to Openness to Experience, McElroy and Dowd (2007), for example, asked some people to estimate whether the length of the Mississippi River was greater than or less than 200 miles and others whether it was greater or less than 20,000 miles. Higher levels of Openness to Experience led to longer estimates in the high-anchor (20,000 miles) condition and shorter estimates in the low-anchor condition (200 miles) relative to lower levels of this personality trait, presumably as open-minded individuals were more amenable to new information (McElroy & Dowd, 2007).

Another line of reasoning, however, suggests that it is rather the relatively closed-minded that are most susceptible to anchoring (Flynn, 2005; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). The mechanism by which Openness to Experience operates appears to be the tendency for individuals low in Openness to Experience to *seize* on the most readily available information (typically normative majority-group values) and then *freeze* on this information in the face of alternative or disconfirming information (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway 2003; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996).

McElroy and Dowd's (2007) second study, this time assessing anchoring effects on estimates of the number of African nations in the United Nations, is arguably a more stereotype-relevant

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