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## Creativity and conservatism

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### Abstract

Across a range of disciplines it is assumed that conservatism and creativity are polar opposites. Although conservatism correlates negatively with appreciation of certain art forms, are conservatives in fact less creative? Four hundred and twenty-two undergraduates completed a Creative Behavior Inventory and creative products judged by the consensual assessment technique. Compared to more liberal college students, those endorsing more conservative positions on a brief version of the Conservatism scale had fewer creative accomplishments and devised photo essays and drawings judged as less creative. Results for accomplishments and drawing products held true when controlling for verbal ability and openness.

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### 1. Introduction

Are conservatives less creative than liberals? The opposition of conservatism and creativity is presumed in a number of disciplines – clothing design, crime and corrections, elementary education, data analysis, information technology, and management (Cooper, 2000; Cummings, 1965; Howell, 2004; McShane, 1989; Sanger, 1994; Stacey, Eckert, & Wiley, 2002; Sundgren, Selart,

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Ingelgård, & Bengtson, 2005; Westen, 1978). From the perspective of socio-political history, Seitz (2003) observed that the 17th century rise of liberalism “foster(ed) creative production by encouraging individual creative expression” (p. 388). Although not a central focus of his study, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) reported that a number of his 91 eminently creative interviewees engaged in political action in support of liberal causes (e.g., environmental concerns, anti-war and anti-nuclear activism). Of course, anecdotal evidence of creative conservatives also can be found (Gunter, 1981; Gutterman, 1964; Kopff, 2005; Teachout, 1998). Nevertheless, studies at this level of recognition are quite selective and do not take into account everyday creativity. This study provides evidence on this question.

Before considering how these constructs are linked, we should note that there are many varieties of conservatism (Muller, 2001) and also that creativity has been defined in many ways. Most definitions of creativity include the elements of originality and usefulness (Mayer, 1999). That is, to be creative an idea or product must be novel and functional. In devising her consensual assessment technique, Amabile (1996) argued that appropriate judges do not need definitional consensus in order to achieve agreement on creative products – in effect they “know it when they see it.” Creativity has been variously measured as divergent thinking (e.g., unconventional uses of a chair, e.g. Rubinstein, 2003), a personality trait (Gough, 1979), or as preference for complexity in abstract designs (e.g., Eisenman, Borod, & Grossman, 1972). Literature reviews suggest that creative accomplishments and judge-rated creative products have greater utility (Hocevar & Batchelor, 1989). Hence, the present research used such measures.

Wilson (1973) identified a conservative syndrome including “religious dogmatism, right-wing political orientation (in Western countries), militarism, ethnocentrism, intolerance of minority groups, authoritarianism, punitiveness, anti-hedonism, conformity, conventionality, superstition, and opposition to scientific progress” (p. 257). Focused on social/political issues more so than economic ones, the psychological construct of conservatism is very similar in concept to right-wing authoritarianism (RWA, Altemeyer, 1988), although identified in less pejorative terms. (Altemeyer (1996, p. 296) likewise noted that “When people are ‘conservatives’ – politically, religiously, economically – the odds are pretty good that they are High RWAs. This is not an opinion, but a scientifically established fact.”) Wilson theorized conservatism as based on a generalized fear of uncertainty. However, it can be viewed more broadly as “motivated social cognition” driven by epistemic, existential, and ideological motivations with two core aspects – fear of change and tolerance of inequality (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a). Jost et al. suggested that measures like Wilson’s Conservatism (C) and Altemeyer’s RWA scales primarily tap the first of these aspects.

Given Wilson’s theory, there are at least three reasons to expect less creativity among conservatives. First, individuals who are threatened by uncertainty may be disposed to focus on lower-order needs to increase their safety and security (e.g., Bar-Tal, 2001; Maslow, 1987). This focus is inconsistent with the motivations that prompt creativity. Second, conformity to what is conventionally accepted focuses the individual on traditions (what is old), whereas all definitions of creativity include a focus on what is new (Mayer, 1999). As Runco (2004) noted, creativity not only responds to current problems or challenges but is “one of the engines of cultural evolution” (p. 658). This association with societal change may provoke anxiety in conservatives. Third, the authoritarian and anti-hedonistic elements of the construct would lead conservatives to devalue imagination [cf. Feather (1979)].

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