

## SHORT NOTE

### PERSONALITY AND CURRENT POLITICAL BELIEFS

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A sample of 328 subjects completed a questionnaire measuring various political beliefs. Part of the sample also filled in the Dutch NEO-FFI personality inventory. The aims of this study are as follows: (1) to determine the dimensional structure of current political beliefs and (2) to examine the relationship between the dimensions of political beliefs and personality. Factor analysis of the 126 political items reveals four factors referring to general conservatism, humanitarian military interventions, fairness of taxation and general social welfare. Joint factor analysis indicates relationships between personality and political beliefs similar to those reported by Riemann, Grubich, Hempel, Mergl and Richter, 1993.

#### Introduction

The five factors referred to as Extraversion (I), Agreeableness (II), Conscientiousness (III), Emotional Stability (IV) and Openness to Experience (V) provide a dimensional representation of personality structure that gradually becomes more acceptable, as a general framework, to personality theorists (Angleitner, Ostendorf, & John, 1990; Digman, 1990; Mervielde & Vandierendonck, 1994). In contrast to the many studies bearing on Eysenck's PEN-model (e.g., Eysenck & Coulter, 1972; Eysenck & Wilson, 1978), the relation between the Five-Factor model (FFM) and the domain of political beliefs has so far been neglected with the notable exception of the study of Riemann, Grubich, Hempel, Mergl and Richter (1993). Eysenck's model posits that extremists are more likely to score high on psychoticism. Furthermore, negative relationships are expected between Extraversion and conservatism whereas Neuroticism is expected to be positively related to conservatism. Empirical verification, using Eysenck's PEN-model, supports the extremism model (e.g., Heaven & Connors, 1988) but shows that the correlations between Extraversion/Neuroticism and conservatism are rather weak or inconsistent (e.g., Powell & Stewart, 1978; Riemann et al., 1993).

Because Eysenck's Extraversion and Neuroticism dimensions correspond to the Extraversion (I) and Emotional Stability (IV) dimensions of FFM (McCrae & Costa, 1985a), we expect no relationship between the latter dimensions and conservatism. Eysenck's Psychoticism dimension correlates

with the low poles of Agreeableness (II) and Conscientiousness (III) (McCrae & Costa, 1985a). Therefore, we expect both personality dimensions to be related to extremism. As central aspects of conservatism are opposed to Openness to Experience (V) (McCrae & Costa, 1985b), we also expect a negative relation between conservatism and Openness (V).

### Method

A large sample of statements ( $N = 748$ ) covering a wide range of political issues was collected from newspapers by graduate students in political sciences ( $N = 18$ ) and sorted in the following categories: Interior politics, Foreign affairs, Finance, Justice, Welfare, Public health, Environment, Family, Education, Economy, Culture, Sciences, Infrastructure, Traffic and Defense. A set of least redundant and most prototypical items ( $N = 126$ ) was selected. A heterogeneous sample ( $N = 155$ ) marked these items on a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). A second group (first year psychology students,  $N = 173$ ) filled in the Dutch NEO-Five-Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Hoekstra, Ormel, & De Fruyt, in preparation) as well as the political belief items, as a part of the course requirements. As a result, the whole sample rated the political items ( $N = 328$ ). Conclusions with regard to the relationship between personality and political beliefs, however, are solely based on the student sample data.

### Results

Because of the rather low inter-correlations among the 126 political belief items, item selection was based on recurrent factors in 4 x 2 random halves of the sample<sup>1</sup>. One of the eight factor solutions was dismissed because more than 100 iterations were needed to converge. Items that loaded on a comparable factor in five out of seven remaining analyses were selected. Next, the remaining 57 items were submitted to a reliability analysis, computed on the whole sample, to increase the homogeneity of the scales. The factor structure of the selected items is reported in Table 1. Factor extraction was based on principal components analysis followed by VARIMAX rotation. These factors accounted for 16.6%, 9.3%, 8.1% and 6.1% of the total variance.

The items loading the first factor are interpreted as marking *general conservatism* with high-loading items referring to nationalism, xenophobia and punitiveness. The second factor is identified as beliefs about *humanitarian*

<sup>1</sup>Because of missing values, these analyses are based on a sample of 291 subjects.

Table 1  
 VARIMAX-Rotated Factor Matrix of Selected Political Beliefs (N = 291)

	I	II	III	IV
<i>I. General conservatism</i>				
Severe punishment for employing illegals.	<b>.65</b>	.03	.18	.19
Right to vote for immigrants living at least five years in Belgium.	<b>-.64</b>	.05	.20	.08
Increased aid for third world countries.	<b>-.62</b>	.26	.18	.19
Liberalization of softdrugs.	<b>-.61</b>	.09	.05	.04
Independency of Flanders.	<b>.58</b>	-.16	.11	.07
No interventions of Walloon government in Flemish affairs.	<b>.57</b>	-.04	.12	-.16
More police control to reduce criminality.	<b>.57</b>	.05	-.10	.08
Limitation of the number of Dutch students at Belgian universities.	<b>.54</b>	.20	.00	-.04
Permission for drug addicts to exchange their injection needles.	<b>-.52</b>	.26	.23	-.08
Legalisation of euthanasia.	<b>-.41</b>	<b>.31</b>	-.02	.05
<i>II. Humanitarian military interventions</i>				
Less commitment to UN humanitarian actions.	.21	<b>-.72</b>	-.10	-.01
Integration of a part of the Belgian forces in a standing UN army.	.16	<b>.66</b>	.07	.02
Belgium should have remained neutral during the Gulf War.	-.11	<b>-.59</b>	.09	<b>.30</b>
More UN military actions with humanitarian purposes.	-.22	<b>.58</b>	.07	<b>.33</b>
No Belgian army operations in Zaire or Ruanda.	.19	<b>-.52</b>	.06	.02
<i>III. Fairness of taxation</i>				
Tax increase on capital gains.	-.14	-.12	<b>.65</b>	.17
Stronger measures against tax evasion.	.12	.04	<b>.65</b>	.10
Registration of property.	-.03	-.04	<b>.63</b>	.16
Lifting of bank-secret to fight fraud.	-.02	.15	<b>.61</b>	-.03
The rate of taxation is too high.	<b>.37</b>	.00	<b>-.37</b>	.25
<i>IV. General social welfare</i>				
Ban heavy trucks from the road during weekends.	.02	-.06	.13	<b>.69</b>
Better spreading of holidays.	.08	-.04	.02	<b>.54</b>
Stricter regulation for commercial television.	.07	.08	.29	<b>.53</b>
Stop nuclear weapons.	-.20	-.02	.05	<b>.49</b>
Reduction of hours of labour without wage loss.	-.13	.03	-.05	<b>.47</b>

Note. Reliabilities (Chronbach's alpha) of the four scales respectively: .79, .61, .57, .52.

*military interventions*. In particular, the items refer to international military actions for humanitarian purposes. The third factor consists of items referring to taxation. More particularly, the items refer to *fairness of taxation* and a negative attitude towards fraud (Furnham, 1984). The fourth factor consists of items reflecting a strong belief in the need for *general social welfare*.

The joint factor analysis of the factor scores on the five personality dimensions and the factor scores on the political belief dimensions is reported in Table 2. Five principal components were Varimax rotated and accounted for 14.9%, 12.3%, 12.1%, 11.4% and 11.1% of the total variance.

Table 2  
VARIMAX-Rotated Joint Factor Analysis of the Big Five Personality  
Dimensions and the Current Political Beliefs (N = 167)

	I	II	III	IV	V
Openness (V)	<b>-.78</b>	.02	-.04	.05	-.11
General conservatism	<b>.77</b>	.09	-.04	.08	-.09
Extraversion (I)	.10	<b>.75</b>	.07	.09	-.13
Fairness of taxation	.02	<b>-.71</b>	.07	.03	-.21
Agreeableness (III)	.00	-.12	<b>.73</b>	.10	.15
Military interventions	.02	-.19	<b>-.64</b>	.19	<b>.35</b>
Emotional Stability (IV)	.00	-.04	.11	<b>-.86</b>	.15
General welfare	.05	.05	<b>.34</b>	<b>.52</b>	<b>.38</b>
Conscientiousness (III)	.01	.07	-.02	-.07	<b>.83</b>

The results indicate relationships between the personality factors and political beliefs. Both Openness to Experience (V) and *general conservatism* have high loadings on the first factor, confirming the results obtained by Riemann et al. (1993). Extraversion (I) and an unbelief in *fairness of taxation* constitute the second factor (see also, Riemann et al., 1993). Agreeableness (II) and a positive belief in *humanitarian military interventions* load on the third factor. The fourth joint factor consists of low Emotional Stability (IV) and a positive belief in *general social welfare*. Conscientiousness (III) does not merge with any of the political belief factors.

The hypothesis that high psychoticism is related to extremism is investigated by correlating the subject's scores on Agreeableness (II) and Conscientiousness (III) with the absolute values of the political beliefs dimensions. In line with the results of Riemann et al. (1993), these correlations did not reach the appropriate significance levels ( $r$ 's < 0.13,  $p$ 's > 0.20).

## Discussion

Despite the low inter-correlations between the items measuring current political beliefs convergent conclusions can be drawn from the present study and the research conducted by Riemann et al. (1993). First, both studies show (see also, Boski, 1993) that a limited number of dimensions underlie the domain of political beliefs. However, the low average inter-correlations among political items require special attention to the replicability of the obtained factor structure. Furthermore, these low inter-correlations indicate the fallibility of an item-level approach often applied within the public opinion and survey research tradition (see also, Forgas, Laszlo, Siklaki, & Moylan, 1995). Indeed, item-level responses can be very specific and may not generalize to other related items. On the contrary, aggregated behavior can be very stable across time and situations (Epstein & O'Brien, 1985).

Second, both studies failed to provide evidence for the relation between extremism and Agreeableness (II) and Conscientiousness (III) as expected from Eysenck's extremism theory.

Third, interesting relationships between the FFM-personality dimensions and the dimensions of political beliefs emerged. Most striking is that both studies indicate a negative relationship between Openness to Experience (V) and *conservatism*. Furthermore, four out of five personality dimensions correlate with political belief factors. These personality dimensions seem to be meaningfully linked to the domain of political beliefs (see also, Riemann et al., 1993). The present study as well as the one by Riemann et al. (1993) point to the fact that the *content* of beliefs may be important to our understanding of the relations between personality and political beliefs (see, Reicher & Emler, 1985).

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