

CULTURAL AND SEXUAL EFFECTS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL
CONSERVATISM IN CHILDREN*¹

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SUMMARY

The present study investigated psychological conservatism in Indian and white schoolchildren in South Africa. Forty-eight 8-year-old boys and girls completed separate social desirability and psychological conservatism scales. Responses were analyzed by means of 2×2 (race \times sex) covariance analyses, with the social desirability scales as the covariate. White children were more ethnocentric but less conservative regarding sex and religion than their Indian counterparts. Females were more conservative than males regarding punitiveness, religion, and sex. These results may well be a function of the South African racial situation, while the utility of a global index is questioned.

A. INTRODUCTION

The construct of psychological conservatism derives some validity from research which has consistently demonstrated its applicability across different cultural settings. In this respect, a substantially comparable factor structure has been found in South Africa (18), New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (1), the United States (15), and Korea (16). It is therefore surprising that the issue of possible cross-cultural differences in psychological conservatism has been largely neglected. In a single study investigating this issue, no difference between American Indians and American whites emerged on the total conservative score (2). Since consistent factor structures have appeared across different cultural settings, their study (2) which concentrated on a global conservation index only, may provide a narrow

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perspective about the nature of possible cross-cultural differences in psychological conservatism. It would therefore be important when studying this construct cross-culturally to investigate each factor separately as well as the total conservative index. Furthermore, as Nias (10) points out that children's conservatism may reflect parental prohibitions, it is possible that some insight regarding the transmission of social attitudes may be gained when studying their psychological conservatism.

In view of Whiting (14) and Danziger's (3) observation that much cross-cultural research is suspect in that it must frequently study cultures that are situated some considerable distance from each other resulting in what may more accurately be described as cross-national research, the South African situation offers unique possibilities for controlling this variable. Owing to existing legislation in South Africa, different cultural groups live in close proximity to one another, although they are isolated socially and educationally within this context; hence a comparison of Indian and white male and female schoolchildren should be of value particularly if the factors involved in children's psychological conservatism—*viz.*, punitiveness, religion, sex, and ethnocentrism—are also investigated. Differences between these two cultural groups may be expected, since Indian children in South Africa are generally taught to obey strict parental authority (8). More particularly, close religious ties in this group may foster a more conservative attitude in religious beliefs, while the South African sociopolitical structure is likely to promote ethnocentrism in whites. In addition, it is important to investigate whether the tendency for females to be more conservative than males (10) exists regardless of cultural differences.

B. METHOD

1. *Subjects*

Forty eight children (24 Indians and 24 whites, each group comprising an equal number of males and females) participated in this study. The Ss (M age = 8.52 years; SD = .45) were all third grade pupils attending racially segregated schools. Both schools were situated in middle class areas, approximately 25 kilometers from each other.

2. *Instruments*

Two questionnaires were used. (a) Lunneborg and Lunneborg's (7) Social Desirability scale for children, consisting of 20 items answered either "yes" or "no." Satisfactory reliabilities for this scale have been reported (7). (b)

Insel and Wilson's (5) Children's Conservatism scale, comprising 50 items, was fashioned after the adult Conservative scale developed as a result of the methodological problems regarding other authoritarianism and dogmatism scales (17). Reliabilities and validity for the children's scale are acceptable and response set is controlled for (10), although no data exist regarding its possible correlation with social desirability. Scoring of this questionnaire was computed so that in addition to a global conservative index (the summation of all 50 items), four factors were identified: viz., ethnocentrism, religion, sex, and punitiveness. Identification of these four factors followed Nias' (10) suggestions and combines the results of Promax and Varimax factor analyses. This procedure has been shown to be as accurate as an equal-weighting scoring procedure (1, 2). A high score on the global conservative index, as well as the four factors reflects a high degree of conservatism.

3. Procedure

All *Ss* completed the two questionnaires which were administered individually, in counterbalanced order. As previous research has shown that the race of the *E* can influence test responding (13), each child was interviewed by an *E* of the same cultural group. Finally, all interview sessions began after the *E* assured *Ss* that they would not miss anything important while absent from their regular class periods.

C. RESULTS

A significant relationship between social desirability scores and the overall conservatism measure was obtained ($r = -.38$, $df = 47$, $p < .005$); in addition, a 2×2 (race \times sex) analysis of variance with social desirability as the dependent variable revealed a highly significant race main effect ($F = 44.53$, $df = 1/43$, $p < .0001$). It was therefore decided to utilize the social desirability score as the covariate in the ensuing analyses, thereby statistically controlling for its possible effects on psychological conservatism.

A two-way (race \times sex) covariance analysis, with social desirability as the covariate, was performed on the global conservatism score. This analysis revealed a significant main effect for sex ($F = 6.64$, $df = 1/43$, $p < .015$), with females more conservative than males regardless of cultural group membership. No significant main effects for race, or any interaction effects, were yielded on this global index.

Four further 2×2 (race \times sex) covariance analyses were then performed on each of the separate conservatism factors. Females were found to be

more conservative on three of the factors; *viz.*, punitiveness ($F = 5.68$, $df = 1/43$, $p < .025$), religion ($F = 5.17$, $df = 1/47$, $p < .03$), and sex ($F = 4.84$, $df = 1/47$, $p < .035$). With regard to race main effects, whites were, as predicted, more ethnocentric ($F = 10.54$, $df = 1/47$, $p < .002$) but less conservative on the religion factors ($F = 5.54$, $df = 1/47$, $p < .005$) than their Indian counterparts. A further difference was found on the sex factor ($F = 4.84$, $df = 1/47$, $p < .035$) with whites being less conservative. No other significant main effects or interactions were obtained ($p < .05$ in all cases).

D. DISCUSSION

No significant race effects appeared on the total conservatism score, although females were significantly more conservative than males. However, the interpretation to be given these results is open to question. It is doubtful whether the global conservatism score is meaningful, since it consists of the summation of 50 items, containing four conceptually distinct factors, each comprising eight items. This may partly explain Bahr and Chadwick's (2) failure to uncover significant differences between American Indians and American whites, inasmuch as a large proportion of the 50 items in the adult scale they used represents conceptually different factors. More specifically, it is possible that no significant race differences were revealed on the global conservatism score in the present study, since two of the four factors in the original children's scale loaded negatively (*viz.*, ethnocentrism and punitiveness), the other two positively (*viz.*, sex and religion). The problem of simply summing all the items to yield an index of global conservatism is therefore compounded. Moreover, the salience of the significant sex main effects is minimized, especially since females were more conservatively oriented than males on three of the four factors.

The examination of ethnocentrism within the South African context, is of particular interest, since differences may be expected between different societies (12). In the present sample, white children were significantly more ethnocentric than their Indian counterparts. This finding could reflect the white legislature's preoccupation with maintaining current social barriers and distances, which Ritchie (12) maintains is characteristic of ethnocentric societies. Furthermore, some Indian children may aspire to be part of the dominant white culture, an interpretation consistent with studies of children's racial preferences (6). Finally, the tendency for the Indian community as a whole to be viewed as "migrants" within the white society may predispose them to affiliate more with family than cultural groups, which

would be consistent with Danziger's (3) findings regarding an Italian group experiencing acculturation in Canada.

Several studies have shown male children to be more ethnocentric than females (10). This finding was not replicated in the present study which may, in part, reflect the tendency for membership of a particular cultural or racial group to be more important than sex group membership in South Africa, even at a young age.

Ritchie (12) has suggested that ethnocentrism and religion may covary. In the present study, however, Indians were significantly more conservative than whites regarding religion. This finding, however, is not surprising in view of the central role religion plays in the life of the Indian child (4, 8). These religious differences are important, as they may generalize to other areas of personality because of the role of this variable in the Indian child's social and family world. Significant sex differences were also encountered on this factor; females were more conservative than males. This is consistent with Nias' (9) findings concerning a British sample, and therefore further supports the contention that females may be more conservative than males regarding religion, irrespective of culture.

As expected, females were more conservative than males on the sex factor, which again accords with previous findings (9). In addition, that whites were less conservative regarding sex than their Indian counterparts is also to be expected, since strong sex taboos and sex role differentiations prevail within the Indian culture, with women's principal function being that of child-bearing and rearing (4, 8).

On the other hand, no significant differences were obtained between Indian and white children regarding punitiveness. This is somewhat surprising as Indian culture emphasizes a father figure who is distant, admired but feared, with discipline meted out in an authoritarian fashion (4). More specifically, Meer (8) points out that South African Indian children are taught to obey parental authority. Moreover, Ritchie (12, p. 313) maintains that child-rearing practices in ethnocentric societies are characterized by "... punishment, threat and deprivation." Since the white children in the present sample were significantly more ethnocentric than their Indian counterparts, it might therefore be assumed that they were also conservative regarding punitiveness. That no significant differences emerged between the two groups in this regard may thus reflect the tendency for both of them to be punitive. Significant sex differences, with females more punitive than males, were obtained. These findings again accord with those of Nias (9) regarding a sample of British children.

In conclusion, four issues are raised by the present study. First, it has been maintained (10, 11) that children's attitudes are inculcated mainly by parents. That fairly consistent and statistically significant cultural differences emerged regarding psychological conservatism suggests generalizability of these results to Indians and whites in South Africa as a whole. Second, overall mean scores for all items depict the present sample as being rather conservative when compared both with adult, white South Africans (18) and an adult sample in the United Kingdom and America (15). The question therefore arises regarding the relative degree of conservativeness among children in other, nonracially segregated societies and countries. Thirdly, since the differences in the present study occurred in a relatively young sample, it is important to assess when such differences become salient. Finally, the adequacy of a global conservatism score is open to question.

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