

The Psychology of Conservatism: Comment on Stacey

Glenn Wilson

Institute of Psychiatry, University of London

The recent paper by Stacey (1977) provides a valuable overview of the recent literature on conservatism and political affiliation. I would, however, like to comment on his criticisms of the Wilson-Patterson scale. Stacey says it is not unidimensional; this is true, but unidimensionality is not necessarily a good thing — it usually implies redundancy in item content. The scale does measure a general factor in the sense that most of the items are intercorrelated. That this general factor accounts for less than 20% of total variance does not matter at all; the percentage could easily be raised by reducing the number of items, so that at the extreme we would have a one-item test with a general factor accounting for 100% of variance. The importance and stability of the general factor are rather attested by the high alpha coefficients that are found (usually in excess of .9). Stacey cites one exceptional study by Ray (1971) which suggests that the Wilson-Patterson scale is unreliable. I have previously argued (Wilson, 1974) that Ray's results are so aberrant as to suggest a major fault in his computer analysis. For example, he found a +.29 correlation between the liberal and conservative halves of the C-scale whereas all other researchers have found it to be around -.7.

I do not "ignore Kerlinger's conclusion that conservatism and liberalism are independent", but nor do I believe it. I think he has rediscovered Eysenck's two-factor solution to the organization of social attitudes, renaming tendermindedness as liberalism. The fact is that a general factor solution to social attitudes is one possible solution that may be useful for certain theoretical and practical purposes, just like general intelligence. Just as intelligence can be separated into correlated components like verbal, numerical, spatial, and memory, so general conservatism can be split into religious dogmatism, opposition to sexual freedom, punitiveness, and ethnocentrism. These sub-factors may in turn be arranged in relation to a second orthogonal factor called tough versus tender or realistic vs idealistic (Wilson, 1975). The remarkable consistency with which this attitude structure has been found by workers in different countries is documented by Schubert (1977) and in a forthcoming book by Eysenck and myself called *The Psychological Basis of Ideology*.

It is possible to criticize the choice of items in the Wilson-Patterson scale as not providing a balance of issues, but this itself becomes a matter of opinion. Stacey appears to regard sexual freedom as an unimportant area of controversy; he should have been at Swansea recently when the cooks, porters and cleaners took strike action against the International Conference of Love and Attraction because one of the delegates was known to favour radical changes in the laws relating to child sexuality. As regards the paucity of politico-economic items in the scale, this was deliberate because we took the view that party preference and attitudes concerning the distribution of wealth are determined mainly by habit, social class, and expediency rather than the personality characteristic of conservatism that we were interested in. In most Western societies we expect that conservatism would predict right-wing political orientation, but in Czechoslovakia or Cambodia the reverse might well be the case. In our sense of the term, conservatism involves acceptance of authority and the status quo rather than necessarily being aligned with the political right. This is clearly the main difference in the definitions of conservatism followed by myself and Stacey. He sees conservatism as almost synonymous with right-wing politics. I take a more literal definition of conservatism as meaning a preference for what is familiar and safe, a dimension of personality which underlies the organization of attitudes but which cuts across the lines of both social class and political party preference.

References

- Ray, J. J. A new measure of conservatism: Its limitations. *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 1971, 10, 79-80.
- Schubert, G. *Political attitudes and ideologies*. London: Sage Publications, 1977.
- Stacey, B. The Psychology of Conservatism. Part II. Wilson's theory and general trends in the study of conservatism. *New Zealand Psychologist*, 1977, 6, 109-123.
- Wilson, G. D. Evaluation of the Conservatism Scale: A reply to Ray. *New Zealand Psychologist*, 1974, 3, 27.
- Wilson, G. D. *Manual for the Wilson-Patterson Attitude Inventory*. Windsor: NFER Publishing Co., 1975.