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## Dimensions and Correlates of Social Axioms Among a Portuguese Sample

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**ABSTRACT** - Social axioms are generalized beliefs about the social and physical environment, or the spiritual world. In this study a measure of social axioms was developed and validated in a sample of college students ( $N=170$ ) from Portugal. The four dimensions of the Social Axioms Survey (SAS) – Religiosity, Social Cynicism, and Social Flexibility, and Reward for Application – were predictably related to the established measures. Social cynicism correlated positively with ageism and loneliness, and negatively with self-esteem. Social complexity correlated positively with mastery and self-esteem, and negatively with ageism. Reward for Application correlated positively with mastery. Attendees scored higher on Religiosity than believers non attendees. No significant association was found between social axioms dimensions and social desirability. While the Portuguese data lend support to the validity of the SAS, validation in other cultures is needed. In addition, the emic aspects of social beliefs in individual cultures should be explored.

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Social axioms are formally defined as “generalized beliefs about oneself, the social and physical environment, or the spiritual world, and are in the form of an assertion about the relationship between two entities or concepts” (Leung et al., 2002, p. 289). Following this definition, a social axiom has the structure – A is related to B. A and B can be any entities, and the relationships may be causal or correlational. Social axioms differ from values and other types of beliefs (i. e., normative beliefs). In general, a value states that something is important, desirable or favourable, e.g., “Going to school is important”. Conversely, social axioms have two concrete objects such that something is related to something

else. For example, “Hard work leads to reward”. Values are about what is important; beliefs are about what is true.

Leung et al. (2002) have provided the initial attempt at identifying a pan-cultural structure of social axioms across five cultural groups. Based on qualitative research conducted in Hong Kong and Venezuela, and the Western literature on beliefs, Leung et al. (2002) developed a social axioms survey. Using this survey, they identified 5 factors of beliefs, which were replicated in the U.S.A., Japan, and Germany, suggesting that they may be culture-general. These authors labelled and described the five dimensions in these terms: Factor one is labelled *social cynicism*, because the items represent a negative view of human nature, especially as it is easily corrupted by power; a biased view against some groups of people; a mistrust of social institutions; and a disregard of ethical means for achieving an end. The second factor is labelled *social complexity*, because the items in this factor suggest that there are rigid rules, but rather multiple ways of achieving a given outcome, and that apparent inconsistency in human behavior is common. The third factor is labelled *reward for application*, because the items represent a general belief that effort, knowledge, careful planning and the investment of other resources will lead to positive results and help avoid negative outcomes. The fourth factor is labelled *spirituality* (now Religiosity – Leung & Bond, 2004), as the items assert the existence of supernatural forces and the beneficial functions of religious belief. The fifth factor is labelled *fate control*, as the items represent a belief that life events are pre-determined and that there are some ways for people to influence these outcomes. It is interesting to note that lay people accept the logical contradiction between pre-determination and their ability to alter pre-determined events. In fact, practices for avoiding bad luck are commonplace in many cultures, and the contradiction involved in simultaneous belief in pre-determination and possibilities for altering one’s fate may be widespread in every day life.

One step toward establishing these five dimensions of social axioms as universal is to replicate them in other cultural contexts. Leung et al. (2002, study 2) evaluated the replicability of these five axiom dimensions in the U.S.A., Japan, and Germany. In their study the dimension of fate control seemed problematic, whereas the other four dimensions were reasonably congruent.

The purpose of the current study is twofold: (1) to examine the dimensionality of the social axioms survey in Portugal and (2) to validate the Social Axioms Survey in a Portuguese sample. Convergent validity will be demonstrated by using various established scales that are hypothesized to correlate with a particular dimension of the social axioms survey. In this vein a relationship between social axioms dimensions and a number of psychosocial dimensions relevant to social axioms were examined. These dimensions were ageism, mastery, self-esteem, loneliness, and social desirability.

Butler (1978, p. 14) has described ageism as a “... profound psychosocial disorder characterized by institutionalised and individual prejudice against the

elderly, stereotyping, myth-making, distance, and/or avoidance". Fraboni, Saltstone, and Hughes (1990) proposed a research instrument, which provides an operational definition of ageism. The items of the Ageism Scale (Fraboni, Saltstone, & Hughes, 1990) were developed to reflect the construct of ageism as defined by Butler (1978). As social cynicism indicates a biased view against some groups of people, our hypothesis is that social cynicism is positively linked to ageism. As social complexity indicates an actor's judgments about the variability of individual behavior, our hypothesis is that social complexity is negatively associated with ageism.

Mastery and internal locus of control are used in this paper interchangeably. There has been a vast amount of research using the locus of control construct and developing new methods to measure it. Although there are some inconsistencies and difficulties in interpreting the results, reviews of research on locus of control (Lefcourt, 1991; Hurrell & Murphy, 1991) generally conclude that internality tends to be associated with adaptive functioning, successful coping and high achievement levels. Thus our hypothesis is that mastery is positively linked to social complexity and reward for application.

Self-esteem, or self-evaluation, is the aspect of the self-concept, which has received the most theoretical and empirical attention during the last decades (Baumeister, 1995). The conceptualisations of self-esteem vary considerably among theories and investigations, as well as the way it is operationalized and measured. The most common way of measuring self-esteem, however, is to ask a series of simple questions about global self-regard (e.g., Neto & Mullet, 2003; Rosenberg, 1986). As people high in social cynicism seem unable to cope with their social world effectively, resulting in negative psychological outcomes (Leung & Bond, 2004), the present study focuses on self-esteem, which is expected to be negatively related to social cynicism.

In addition to self-esteem, one companion construct was considered in the present study: perceived loneliness. Loneliness is typically defined as "the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relationships is deficient in some important way, either qualitatively or quantitatively" (Perlman & Peplau, 1981, p. 31). People high in social cynicism are likely to run into interpersonal problems (Leung & Bond, 2004). Considering that (i) a person who tends to feel alone much of the time may not be extremely motivated to believe in the value of social relationships, and (ii) a person who tends to reveal cynicism with relatives, friends, and colleagues is at high risk for quickly finding himself/herself alone, loneliness and social cynicism may be positively correlated.

As regards religiosity, we are not in position to formulate hypotheses concerning the psychosocial constructs used. For instance, as regards ageism, "few areas in the psychology of religion have generated as much interest, research, and controversy as the relationship between religion and prejudice" (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996, p. 358). As the effect of religion

on prejudice is paradoxical, since “it makes prejudice and it unmakes prejudice” (Allport, 1954, p. 444), we can not formulate an hypothesis about the relation between religiosity and ageism. Similarly, the association between religiosity and psychological well-being remains a complex and intriguing area for investigation. Findings are frequently mixed and appear to depend on the measures employed and the sample studied. Thus we can not formulate hypotheses about the relation between religiosity, and self-esteem and loneliness. However, if we can not formulate hypotheses concerning the psychosocial constructs, we can advance an hypothesis about the religious involvement: attendees score higher on religiosity than believers non attendees.

## Method

### *Participants*

One-hundred and seventy college students from University of Porto completed questionnaires for this study. Fifty four percent of these were female ( $n=91$ ), forty five percent were male ( $n=77$ ), and two did not report their sex. Mean age of participants was 22.3 ( $SD=5.5$ ). The number of participants who declared themselves as regular attendees was 72; the number of believers non attendees was 77; the number of non-believers was 11; and eleven did not report the religion. All sample self-reported their ethnicity as Caucasian. All participants were unpaid volunteers.

### *Materials*

The materials consisted of a series of six questionnaires, and a demographic data sheet. The demographic data sheet asked participants to specify information regarding age, gender, ethnicity, and religion. Five of the questionnaires were previous Portuguese adaptations of existing scales. The remaining scale (Social Axioms Survey) was adapted for the current study.

*The Social Axioms Survey.* The Social Axioms Survey consisted of 60 items (Leung et al., 2002), each of which is phrased in simple language. The Social Axioms Survey asks respondents to rate on a five-point Likert scale the degree to which they believe each statement to be true (with anchors of “strongly disbelieve” and “strongly believe”). For a list of these 60 items, see Leung et al. (2002).

*The Ageism Scale.* The original scale is composed of 29 items (Fraboni et al., 1990). The scale has been found to have adequate construct validity and high internal reliability. Relationships to other constructs measured supported the uniqueness of the scale and revealed a lack of influence from social desirability (Fraboni et al., 1990). The Portuguese adaptation of this scale is composed of 25 items (Neto, 2004). Sample items included, “Old people deserve the same rights and freedoms as do other members of our societies”; “I would prefer not to go to an open house at a senior’s club, if invited”. Response choices were presented

in a 7-point Likert format (1- strongly disagree to 7- strongly agree).

*Mastery Scale.* Mastery was measured using a six-item scale that evaluated the degree to which individuals feel a sense of mastery and control of their lives (Neto, 2002). It was based on several existing scales: Connell (1985), Levenson (1981), Paulus (1983) and Pearlin and Schooler (1978). Sample items included: "What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me" and "I often feel helpless in dealing with problems of my life". Responses were given on a five-point scale ranging from "Disagree completely" to "Completely agree".

*Self-esteem.* The Self-esteem questionnaire (Neto, 2003; Neto & Mullet, 2004; Rosenberg, 1986) was composed of ten questions expressing the value the person attributes him/herself. Sample items were "On the whole I am satisfied with myself", and "I have a positive attitude toward myself". Responses were given on a five-point scale ranging from "Disagree completely" to "Completely agree".

*Loneliness.* The brief Portuguese version of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980; Neto, 1992) was composed of six questions expressing the degree of satisfaction with personal relationships. An example of an item is "People are around me but not with me". The correlation between the longer scale and ULS-6 was .87. Responses were given on a four-point response scale ranging from "Never" to "Often".

*Social desirability.* Four items (N's 14, 15, 28, and 30) from the original scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) were selected according to previous analyses (Barros, 2004) to determine whether the social axioms survey was related to social desirability. An example of an item is: "There have been occasions when I took advantage of someone". Responses were given on a seven-point scale ranging from "Disagree completely" to "Completely agree".

### **Procedure**

Each participant was given a questionnaire packet and instructed to begin. The order in which the questionnaires was administered was randomly assigned to participants. After completing the questionnaire, each participant was debriefed. The average length of time needed to complete the study was approximately 40 min.

The questionnaire was self-explanatory, but a standard instruction was given at the start of the session in which students were informed that participation was voluntary, and that responses were confidential.

### **Results**

Prior to examining the internal consistency reliability of the social axioms survey, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. Using scree tests to determine the number of factors arising from this analysis, four interpretable factors emerged, with an eigenvalue higher than 1, accounting for 34.7 per cent

of the variance. This four-factor solution was retained and subjected to varimax rotation. Oblique rotation was also tried, but the results were very similar to those from the varimax rotation, so we will focus on results from this varimax rotation.

**Table 1**  
*Items and Factor Loadings for the Social Axioms Survey*

Factor	Item	Loading
<i>Factor 1 - Religiosity: the belief in religion and/or higher power</i>		
	9	
There is a supreme being controlling the universe.		.66
Belief in a religion makes people good citizen.		.36
Ghosts or spirits are people's fantasy.		.50
Belief in a religion helps one understand the meaning of life.		.71
Religious faith contributes to good mental health.		.48
After life on earth, one carries on an existence in another form.		.72
Art is compensation for the dismal features of everyday life.		.55
All things in the universe have been determined.		.50
Good luck follows if one survives a disaster.		.42
<i>Factor 2 - Social Cynicism: the overall belief that people, institutions, etc. cannot be trusted</i>		
	10	
Power and status make people arrogant.		.51
Powerful people tend to exploit others.		.49
To care about societal affairs only brings trouble for yourself.		.38
Significant achievement requires one to show no concern for the means needed fro that achievement.		.68
People deeply in love are usually blind.		.45
Females need a better appearance than males.		.39
Old people are a heavy burden on society.		.61
Humility is dishonesty.		.52
Young people are impulsive and unreliable.		.49
Harsh laws can make people obey.		.42
<i>Factor 3 - Social Complexity: the belief that human behavior is unpredictable and cannot be restricted by rigid rules</i>		
	7	
Human behavior changes with the social context.		.53
One has to deal with matters according to specific circumstances.		.44
People may have opposite behaviors on different occasions.		.47
Individual effort makes little difference in the outcome.		.52
One's behaviors may be contrary to his or her true feelings.		.46
To plan for possible mistakes will result in fewer obstacles.		.58
There are phenomena in the world that cannot be explained by science.		.52
<i>Factor 4 - Reward for Application: the belief if one works hard, one will be rewarded.</i>		
	7	
One will succeed if he/she really tries.		.53
Failure is the beginning of success.		.50
Mutual tolerance can lead to satisfactory human relationships.		.52
Every problem has a solution.		.51
The just will eventually defeat the wicked.		.35
Completion brings about progress.		.41
Adversity can be overcome by effort.		.36

Four social axioms dimensions were formed by averaging the constituent items that loaded greater than or equal to .35 on one factor and less than .30 on the other factor. The factor loadings based on factor analysis of these 33 items are given in Table 1. Factor 1 is defined by 9 items, and is labelled *religiosity* as the items refer to existence of supernatural forces and the functions of religious beliefs. Factor 2 is defined by ten items and is labelled *social cynicism*, as the items represent a negative view of human nature, a biased view against some groups of people, a mistrust of social institutions, and a disregard of ethical means for achieving an end. The third factor is defined by seven items and is labelled *social complexity* because the items suggest that there are no rigid rules but rather multiple ways of achieving a given outcome and that inconsistency in human behavior is common. The fourth factor is defined by seven items and is labelled *reward for application* because the items represent a general belief that effort, knowledge, and careful planning will lead to positive results. The variances accounted for by these four factors are: 10.9%, 9.8%, 7.1%, and 6.9%, respectively.

Cronbach alpha reliabilities for the social axioms dimensions are reported in the diagonal of Table 2. Several of these dimensions had lower than desired reliabilities: Reward for Application ( $\alpha=.52$ ) and Social Complexity ( $\alpha=.61$ ). It should be noted that these low reliabilities attenuate correlations with other variables. Nonetheless, the analyses that follow demonstrate distinct and significant relationships of these less internally consistent factors with established constructs. Reliabilities for the established scales used in the study for validation purposes were: .85 for Ageism scale, .83 for Loneliness Scale, .84 for Self-esteem scale, .74 for the Mastery Scale, and .70 for the Social Desirability Scale.

**Table 2**  
*Dimensions of the Social Axioms Survey: Reliabilities and Correlations*

	1	2	3	4
1. Religiosity	<u>.75</u>	.25**	.01	.17*
2. Social Cynicism		<u>.68</u>	-.16*	.01
3. Social Complexity			<u>.61</u>	.18*
4. Reward for Application				<u>.52</u>

Reliabilities are reported on the diagonal.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Correlations among the social axiom dimensions are presented in Table 2. Although there were several significant correlations between the dimensions, all of the coefficients indicate quite weak relationships (less than  $r = 0.20$ ), except the correlation between Religiosity and Social cynicism ( $r = .25$ ).

Understandably, Religiosity was also positively related to Reward for Application. Social Cynicism was negatively associated with Social Complexity. Finally, Social Complexity was positively related to Reward for Application. All other correlations in the matrix are .01, suggesting that the social axioms dimensions are distinct. This pattern supports the four factor structure found previously.

As can be seen in Table 3 men and women differed on social cynicism,  $F(1, 166) = 5.0, p < .05$ ). Men scored higher on social cynicism ( $M = 2.6; SD = 0.5$ ) than women ( $M = 2.4; SD = 0.4$ ). No other dimension of social axioms was significantly different by gender.

As can be seen in Table 4 attendees and believers non attendees differed on religiosity,  $F(1, 147) = 9.8, p < .01$ ). Attendees scored higher on religiosity ( $M = 3.1; SD = 0.5$ ) than believers non attendees ( $M = 2.9; SD = 0.6$ ). No other dimension of social axioms was significantly different by religion.

**Table 3**  
*Dimensions of the Social Axioms by Gender*

	Men		Women		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Religiosity	2.9	0.6	3.0	0.6	1.9	.17
Social Cynicism	2.6	0.5	2.4	0.4	5.0	.03
Social Complexity	4.1	0.4	4.1	0.3	.57	.45
Reward for Application	3.7	0.4	3.6	0.4	.84	.36

**Table 4**  
*Dimensions of the Social Axioms by Religion*

	Attendees		Believers-Non-Attendees		F p	
	M	SD	M	SD		
Religiosity	3.1	0.5	2.9	0.6	9.8	.01
Social Cynicism	2.5	0.5	2.4	0.5	.75	.39
Social Complexity	4.1	0.3	4.1	0.5	.05	.82
Reward for Application	3.7	0.4	3.7	0.4	.08	.78

Table 5 reports the correlations between the social axioms dimensions and self-report measures. As predicted, Reward for Application was positively correlated with Mastery ( $r = .18, p < .01$ ). Social Complexity was negatively correlated with ageism ( $r = -.20, p < .01$ ), and positively correlated with self-esteem ( $r = .18, p < .05$ ) and mastery ( $r = .25, p < .01$ ). Social cynicism was positively correlated with ageism ( $r = .49, p < .01$ ) and with loneliness ( $r = .27,$

$p < .01$ ), and negatively correlated with self-esteem ( $r = -.25, p < .01$ ). No significant correlations were found between social axioms dimensions and social desirability.

**Table 5**  
*Correlations between Social Axioms Dimensions and Other Psychosocial Measures*

Variables	Religiosity	Social cynicism	Social Complexity	Reward for application
Ageism total	.07	.49**	-.20*	-.06
Mastery	-.02	-.03	.25**	.18*
Self-esteem	-.08	-.25**	.18*	.10
Loneliness	.08	.27**	-.11	-.03
Social desirability	-.05	.12	-.01	.03

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

This study sought to establish the dimensionality of the social axioms survey in Portugal and to examine the convergent validity of those dimensions. This study suggested that at least four factors identified work in Portugal. In fact, a five-factor structure, with the exception of Fate Control, was replicated with college students from Portugal. At this point, it is too early to tell whether fate control is culture-specific, and the remaining four factors are culture-general. Even if we need data from many more cultures to ascertain the probable truth of these two conjectures, what these results seem to point is that future research needs to clarify the meaning of fate control in Portugal. It seems that in a country where the most famous and popular song style is "Fado" (Fate) which seems closer to the belief that life events are pre-determined than they are some ways for people to influence these outcomes. Perhaps these two facets need to be dissociated in this country.

Whatever, at least four of the belief factors identified are likely to be pancultural dimensions that may be used to classify individuals in any culture and to compare individual across cultures. This possibility is exciting because cultural dimensions using psychological constructs are currently based on values. The belief dimensions identified may eventually lead to the development of a new perspective on cross-cultural psychology. The present article represents only a modest step in this research exploration.

The four factors identified seem to be meaningful related to other psychological constructs. *Religiosity* refers to the belief in the existence of supernatural factors and in the positive impact of religion on people's lives. In the current study spirituality was not associated with any of the psychological

constructs. However, attendees showed more religiosity than believers non attendees. This finding is consistent with much of the theory and empirical findings in the psychology of religion on the relation between church attendance and religiosity (Argyle, 2000), and with Singelis et al. (2003) reporting that spirituality was related to seeking advice from a spiritual adviser, praying, reading scriptures, and going to churches. The current findings corroborate the relationship between religiosity and religious activities.

*Cynicism* is reminiscent of Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970), the belief that being manipulative is an effective general strategy for getting ahead of others. However, cynicism is broader in scope because it includes a negative view of people. As expected, this study showed particularly that social cynicism was strongly associated with ageism. The Fraboni Scale of Ageism used in this study was designed to include an affective component to supplement the cognitive component of myth, beliefs, and misinformation measured more exclusively by other scales. Cynicism was related to antagonistic, discriminatory attitudes and avoidance desire toward old people. Future studies may wish to explore the possibility that social cynicism be related to any kind of prejudice and discrimination. Besides the negative view toward old people, cynicism appears also associated with negative view about the self, and with dissatisfaction with social relationships. This study suggests that social cynicism has extensive effects on the ways that people view their social world, showing considerable negative psychological outcomes.

*Social complexity* concerns whether the social world is complex, whether there are no general rules that will always work, and whether a person's social behavior may be contradictory across different contexts. As expected, an internal locus of control and a positive view of old people appeared related to social complexity. This makes some sense. People who believe social behavior is changeable would see people with less prejudices. They are less inclined to make categorical judgments because they see members of any category as being too heterogeneous. Although we have not advanced an hypothesis about the relation between social complexity and self-esteem we found a significant association between the two constructs. This makes sense as social complexity suggests a belief in the inconsistency in human behavior, which may be linked to a positive self-esteem.

*Reward for application* is reminiscent of the Protestant work ethic, which emphasizes the benefits of effort and hard work. People need to know whether trying hard is useful in their environment and coping strategies are different, depending on whether outcomes from one's social environment are judged to be contingent or non contingent on effort. In this vein, as could be expected in the current study, reward for application was associated with internal locus of control.

In sum, the theoretically predictable relationships of the social axioms dimensions with other self-report inventories (i.e., Ageism Scale, Mastery Scale,

Self-esteem Scale, Loneliness Scale, and Social Desirability Scale) provide evidence of convergent validity. Of course, the lack of relationships between theoretically unrelated scales is evidence of discriminant validity. Future validation studies in other cultures are also necessary to increase the usefulness of the social axioms survey.

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