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Attitude Similarity and Stereotypicality in Leader Evaluation

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Stereotypicality and attitudinal similarity are variables broadly studied in the research about leader's acceptance and evaluation. However, the interaction between these variables has not been deeply studied. An experimental research in which we analyze the influence of both variables and their interaction on leaders' evaluation is presented. A 3×3 (attitudinal similarity [none, moderate, high] × leaders' stereotypicality [none, moderately and very stereotypical]) design was used. Participants were 215 Psychology students. Results show that both variables influenced leaders' evaluation, although the influence of stereotypicality was stronger than that of attitude similarity. The significant interaction between both variables indicates that, when a very stereotypical leader is not at all similar or moderately similar to the perceiver, his or her evaluation diminishes.
Keywords: stereotypicality, attitudinal similarity, leadership, evaluation

La estereotipicidad y la semejanza actitudinal son dos variables ampliamente estudiadas en los estudios sobre la aceptación y valoración de los líderes. Sin embargo, la interacción entre ambas no ha sido abordada en profundidad. Aquí se presenta una investigación experimental en la que se estudia y compara la influencia de estas dos variables y de su interacción sobre la evaluación de un líder. Se utilizó un diseño 3 (semejanza actitudinal: ninguna, moderada y alta) × 3 (estereotipicidad: líderes nada, moderadamente y muy estereotípicos). Participaron 215 estudiantes de Psicología. Los resultados muestran que ambas variables influyen significativamente en la evaluación de los líderes, aunque la estereotipicidad lo hace en mayor medida que la semejanza. Sin embargo, la interacción significativa entre ambas variables indica que cuando el líder muy estereotípico es moderadamente o no es nada semejante al perceptor, su evaluación disminuye.
Palabras clave: estereotipicidad, semejanza actitudinal, liderazgo, evaluación

There have been various approaches and perspectives in the study of leadership, with the first investigations focusing on the leaders' figure, their characteristics and qualities (Molero, 2004; Zaccaro, 2007). Leaders were assumed to have certain personality characteristics or special traits that distinguished them from the rest of the people, and leaders were assumed to present the same leadership style towards all their followers. However, the results of the empirical investigations do not support this belief (Hollander, 1985) and these theories were discarded in favor of others that considered not only the leaders but also the followers and the leader-follower interaction (Bass, 1990; Lord, Foti, & DeVader, 1984; Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994; Stogdill, 1974). This new approach is reflected in the literature about the charismatic leader (Conger & Kanungo, 1987), the attributional theories of "leadership romance" (Meindl, 1990), *the leader-member exchange* (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975), and the paradigm of information processing (Lord, 1985). Within the last paradigm are included the studies of the implicit theories of leadership.

This investigation falls mainly within the framework of the leader-member exchange theory and the implicit theories of leadership. Among the former, as indicated by its name, the concept of exchange is particularly relevant: The leader is the person who facilitates achieving group goals; therefore, group members will assign more capacity of influence, status, and esteem to the leader, because in exchange, the leader will allow them to obtain a series of benefits (Hollander & Julian, 1969). Moreover, it is understood that leaders can develop different types of relations with the diverse group members. In this sense, the theory considers that exchanges between leaders and their followers can be placed along a continuum whose poles will be high and low quality (Graen & Wakabayashi, 1994). The higher the quality of the exchange, the more benefits seem to be gained by the group, such as mutual support between leaders and followers, subordinates' better performance, more employee satisfaction, less absenteeism, and fewer resignations, etc. (Deluga, 1998; Engle & Lord, 1997). It is obvious that for leaders to be able to achieve the group goals they pursue, they must be perceived as having a series of qualities, such as being capable of facilitating decision-making, planning what is to be done, coordinating the activities of the group, paying attention to followers' affective needs, solving group conflicts, etc. Traditionally, these qualities were grouped into two blocks: those task-related qualities (organizing, planning, etc.) and socio-emotional qualities (reducing hostilities among the group members, paying attention to their feelings, etc.).

In contrast, the implicit theories of leadership consider that the fact of being perceived as a leader by the followers is what constitutes the person as a leader (Lord & Maher, 1993). Moreover, these implicit theories indicate that there are a series of stereotypes about how leaders should be perceived in order to be considered leaders (Wofford & Goodwin, 1994). Many experimental studies support this

idea (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Lord & Maher, 1993), stressing that the implicit theories of leadership are more dynamic that static, because leader stereotypes may differ depending on the context in which leaders must act, the position they occupy, the type of culture, and the degree of identification with that culture (Brown, Scott, & Lewis, 2004; Castro, 2006; Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001). Other investigations, however, have found that sometimes there are no differences in the implicit theories of leadership in different contexts or with participants who present individual differences, with the sole exception of the followers' level of intrinsic motivation, and implicit theories can even be stable over time (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004, 2005). According to the implicit theories of leadership, approval of a leader can come from two alternative processes: from the leader's effectiveness, understood as the results of the leader's salient events, successes, and failures, and from the match between the characteristics attributed to the leader and the followers' implicit ideas.

The term leader "stereotypicality" is used to refer to the degree to which the leader is perceived as having the characteristics considered desirable in a good leader (Hogg, Hains, & Mason, 1998); the more characteristics attributed to leader, the more accepted and valued the leader will be. Cronshaw and Lord (1987), among others, found that stereotypicality, thus conceived, affected followers' approval of their leaders, and after an extensive review, they noted that the most stereotypical traits of a good leader that appeared in all the contexts and situations they studied were: to delay actions until arriving at a decision, to plan carefully what was to be done, to emphasize group goals, to coordinate group activities, and to let the followers to know what was expected of them.

So, a first factor that seems relevant to leader acceptance and evaluation refers to the perception of the characteristics considered appropriate or suitable for leaders. In this sense, relating the exchange theories and the implicit theories of leadership, Epitropaki and Martin (2005) found empirical evidence of an issue that was already pointed out by Lord and Maher (1993): The difference between the stereotypical traits that followers believe leaders should have and those that are attributed to the current leader is what affects followers' assessment of their exchanges with the leader.

Up to now, leaders' levels of stereotypicality seem to be expected to affect the followers' approval of them, so that a more stereotypical leader will receive more approval. However, research has revealed that this is not the only factor, there being other factors that affect leader evaluation. One of them is the mutual interpersonal attraction between the leader and the followers.

In the specific case of leader-follower exchange, correlations of .74 and .73 (in a laboratory study and a field study, respectively) were found between attraction and the quality of the leader-follower relation (Wayne & Ferris, 1990). Such attraction can sometimes even better predict leaders'

opinions of the leader-follower dyadic unit than their perceptions of followers' performance. In line with the phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy, it is not surprising to find that leaders' attraction towards their followers affects their expectations about follower performance, as well as their own behaviors and future exchanges (Turban, Jones, & Rozelle, 1990). However, the attraction followers feel towards their leaders is essential for the latter to be accepted and valued (Engle & Lord, 1997). This attraction to leaders derives, to a great extent, from leaders' capacity to facilitate achievement of group goals.

Attraction is a multidimensional phenomenon that depends on many factors, and one of the factors that has been more consistently related to it is similarity (Moya, 1999). Many investigations have revealed the strong link between attitude similarity (Byrne, Clore, & Smeaton, 1986), similarity of demographic characteristics or personality traits and interpersonal attraction (Byrne, 1971). And complementarily, negative reactions towards people who are different from oneself have also been found (Kramer, 1991). Specifically, in the experimental studies carried out within the "similarity-attraction" paradigm, it was found that the greater the attitude similarity between two people, the more mutual attraction they felt (Byrne et al., 1971).

In the field of organizational leadership, it was reported that leaders' and followers' perceptions of their similarity in values or attitudes predicted more favorable leader evaluation (López-Zafra, Berrios, & Cejas, 2003; Turban et al., 1990) and a better relationship between them, either concerning work-related values (Steiner & Dobbins, 1989) or more general values (e.g., "seeing things the same way," "having similar perspectives and values," etc.) (Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993; Philips & Bedeian, 1994). Specifically, Turban et al., considering perceived attitude similarity in various social issues, found that individuals who were perceived as having similar attitudes to those of the evaluator—in this case, supervisors perceiving their subordinates—received more favorable assessments than those who were perceived as different. Engle and Lord (1997) also found that perceived attitude similarity between supervisors and subordinates was closely related to the quality of the exchanges and to attraction.

Summing up, both stereotypicality (or the presentation of traits that followers desire in their leaders) and attitude similarity of followers and leaders have an important impact on the leader approval. However, the interaction of these variables has not been addressed. The purpose of this experimental study is, precisely, to analyze the effect of the interaction of stereotypicality and similarity on leader evaluation. Moreover, we expect to find simple effects of stereotypicality and similarity in accordance with previous investigations, so that: (a) the more stereotypical leaders are, the better will be leader evaluation; and (b) the more similar leaders' attitudes are to those of the perceivers, the better will be leader evaluation.

Method

Participants

In this study, initially, 238 students participated, selected from the 1st course of Psychology. As a consequence of the fact that the experiment was performed in two stages, carried out on different days, there was an attrition rate of 90.34% of the initial sample, so the final sample was made up of 215 participants, mean age 18.81 years ($SD = 4.35$), of whom 176 were female and 39 were male.

Instruments

First, in order to legitimize the statement that, in each case, the hypothetical representative to be assessed by the participants was or was not similar, participants completed a questionnaire about diverse personal attitudes. Specifically, the six attitudes included were about concern for the environment, religion, attitudes towards immigrants, Gypsies, other minorities, and gender equality (see Annex).

Subsequently, varying degrees of mirror images were used to present the responses of the hypothetical leader to be assessed. That is, if a potential leader was presented who was exactly like the participant, this hypothetical leader gave the same responses as the participant; if the potential leader was not at all similar, then the responses were completely different. We included a third level of similarity (moderately similar), in which three of the six responses were similar and the other three were discordant. The response format for the attitudinal questions (both those of the participants and of the hypothetical leader) was true or false.

The dependent variable was measured by means of the responses to a 10-item questionnaire about the assessment of the hypothetical leader. This questionnaire has been previously used by Hains et al. (1997) and refers to qualities, image suitability, behavior, effectiveness, leader capacity to win followers' liking, capacity to show empathy and positive feelings towards group members, leader support, leader approval, leader respect and influence (i.e., "to what extent does this person have leader qualities?," or "to what extent would this person be an efficient leader?"). This questionnaire has a Likert-type response format, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*completely*), with 5 as a mid-point (*indifferent*). The sum of the responses to all the items was the measurement used as the dependent variable. This score could range between 10 and 90 (the higher the score, the better the leader evaluation). The questionnaire was translated to Spanish by the authors of this work and reviewed by a native English-speaker. The internal consistency of the scale was very high, with a Cronbach alpha of .97.

Procedure and Design

The experiment has two phases, with a two-day interval between them. In the first, the group of participants was informed that we were going to organize a series of group discussions to discuss the problem of the "botellón" [*Translator's note*: a gathering on the street or in a park of adolescents and youths over the weekend with the almost exclusive purpose of drinking alcohol] with representatives from the City Hall. These discussion groups would be made up of the representatives of diverse faculties that would be elected by their own classmates. Each participant should elect a representative from the faculty to offer opinions about the problem of young peoples' leisure. As they would need some references to be able to elect a representative, they were informed that they would be asked about their attitudes towards a series of current social problems and, in a second phase, about a series of leaders who, to a greater or lesser extent, had these attitudes, so they could assess them. None of the participants showed any reaction of disbelief about the truth of the instructions, because they knew that the City Hall was carrying out such tasks because of the problem of the "botellón." Briefly, in the first session, we only wished to obtain some information about their attitudes and personal traits, using a questionnaire about various attitudes (see Annex). It was stressed that their collaboration was anonymous. Nevertheless, they were asked to write a personal code (known only to themselves) on the questionnaire. This code allowed the manipulation of the variable attitude similarity in the second phase (as the hypothetical leader presented in this second phase was specific to each participant, depending on their previous attitudinal responses). In the second stage, a possible leader or representative was presented to each participant for him or her to assess, on a scale that measured leader approval by Hains, Hogg, and Duck (1997). The description of the attitudes of the stimulus-person that each participant received as a possible leader was manipulated in the degree of stereotypicality (high, moderate, or low) and of similarity to the specific participant (very similar, moderately similar, not at all similar), so the design was a 3 × 3 between-group design. Leader attitude similarity to each participant was manipulated between groups by presenting a series of leader attitudes that were similar, in varying degrees, to those of the participant in the experiment. This variable had three levels: 100% similarity (the six leader attitudes were similar to the six attitudes that the participant had previously expressed); 50% similarity (of the six leader attitudes, only three were similar to those of the participant); and 0% similarity (all six leader attitudes were different from those of the participant). The variable *leader's stereotypicality* was manipulated by means of the presentation of the stereotypical or suitable characteristics of a good leader. Their definition was based on the above-mentioned dimensions from Cronshaw and Lord's (1987) study. We

were not sure whether these dimensions were really stereotypical of the leader for our group, and they might seem very long and elaborate, causing the participants to have doubts about the experimental intention of the session. Therefore, they were transformed into twelve traits, from which we chose six.

For this purpose, four days before the experiment, a questionnaire was administered in the same faculty to another group of 87 students. They were requested to rate the degree to which they thought that the characteristics listed in the questionnaire were suitable for a good leader. The following traits were included: coordinator, competent, able to listen, friendly and accessible, intelligent, good planner, capable of encouraging others, capable of deciding after thinking, capable of getting the group to clarify its attitudes, capable of stressing group goals, and capable of making decisions about what is to be done and how to do it. We used a Likert-type scale response format, ranging from 0 (*not at all suitable for a good leader*) to 10 (*very suitable for a good leader*). The six characteristics selected had a mean higher than 8.97, with a standard deviation lower than 0.87.

Thus, the variable stereotypicality was manipulated between groups with three levels: (a) *high stereotypicality*: participants were told that the supposed leader had the previously defined characteristics to a great extent (the specific instructions were: "The person you have to assess is very competent, is a very good listener, is very friendly and accessible, and very intelligent, very capable of getting the group to clarify its attitudes, and is very capable of making decisions about what is to be done and how to do it."; (b) *moderate stereotypicality*: the leader was said to have these same characteristics to a moderate degree (using expressions such as "fairly competent" or "somewhat accessible"; (c) *no stereotypicality*: participants were informed that the leader did not have any of the characteristics that are typical of a leader (for example, the leader was "not very competent").

It is important to note that at no time was reference made to the gender of the person to be assessed by each participant, so that this would not affect the measure of attraction emitted. Participants were randomly assigned to each experimental condition. The dependent variable was *leader approval*.

Results

Firstly, we determined whether the composition of the experimental groups was equivalent in sex, despite the fact that random assignation of participants to the groups usually guarantees this prerequisite. For this purpose, we performed a chi-square test that confirmed the equivalent distribution with regard to the variable sex in the two experimental groups. Subsequently, we performed analyses to test whether the ANOVA assumptions (variance homogeneity or

homocedasticity and normal curve fit) were met. The results of the Pearson's chi-square contrast did not support the fit of the data to the normal curve, $\eta^2(64) = 99.72$, p < .003. However, the consequences of violating this assumption barely affect the contrast statistics, as noted in the specialized literature (Ramos, Catena, & Trujillo, 2004). The results of the homocedasticity test also revealed that this assumption was not met, Levene's $F(8, 216) = 6.532$, $p < .000$. In view of these results, we performed a robust Welch-type analysis, which does not assume variance homogeneity. In order to determine the simple effects of the independent variables, as well as of sex, in accordance with the prior literature, we conducted an ANOVA with three independent variables (Sex × Stereotypicality × Similarity).

The results revealed that neither the main effect of sex, nor the interaction of sex with both variables, nor with either one of them, was statistically significant, which justifies omitting the variable sex from subsequent analyses. Main effects of stereotypicality, $F(2, 206) = 79.19$, $p < .00$, $\eta^2 = .43$, similarity, $F(2, 206) = 58.27$, $p < .00$, $\eta^2 = .36$, as well as of the interaction of these variables, $F(2, 206) = 6.47$, $p < .00$, $\eta^2 = .11$, were found, thus, confirming both hypotheses. So, leader evaluation was high when leaders were very stereotypical ($M = 58.04$, $SD = 19.99$), lower when they were moderately stereotypical ($M = 50.72$, $SD = 19.64$), and lower still when leaders had none of the desirable leader characteristics ($M = 33.44$, $SD = 18.04$) (see Table 1).

When examining Figure 1 with the 9 experimental groups, it can be observed that, when stereotypicality is moderate or high (levels 50 or 100), the pattern is similar, whereas when it is low (level 0), the pattern is inverted. These impressions were supported by the corresponding comparison of means, using Tahame's robust T2 (see Table 2).
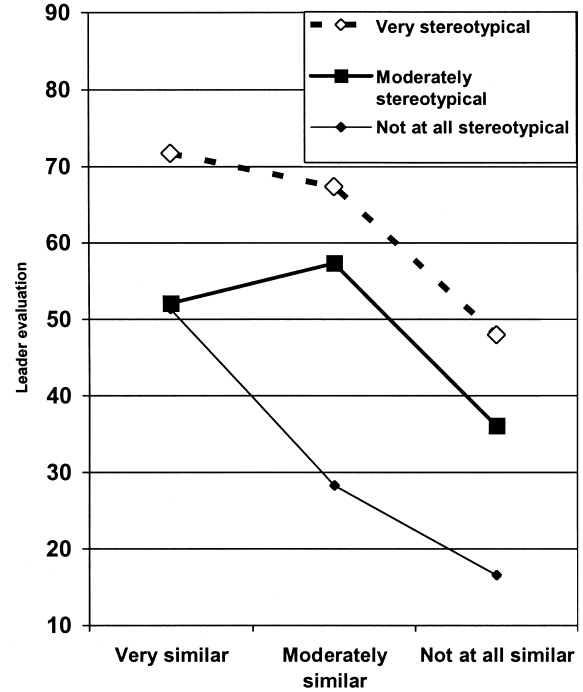

Figure 1. Leader evaluation as a function of stereotypicality and similarity.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the comparisons of the three levels of similarity when the level of stereotypicality was low revealed that, although there were no significant differences between the leader who was not at all similar and the moderately similar leader ($p < .11$), the comparison of the not-at-all similar leader and the moderately similar

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the ANOVA

Stereotypicality	Similarity	*M*	*SD*	*N*
0	0	16.62	7.64	24
	50	28.29	11.01	24
	100	51.39	19.87	23
	Total	31.83	19.81	71
50	0	36.08	8.87	26
	50	57.35	12.14	26
	100	52.12	15.55	25
	Total	48.47	15.32	77
100	0	48.00	19.40	23
	50	67.36	8.72	22
	100	71.72	18.36	22
	Total	62.15	19.14	67
Total	0	33.44	18.04	73
	50	50.72	19.64	72
	100	58.04	19.99	70
	Total	47.24	21.76	215

Table 2
Comparison of Means. Tahame's T2 Test

Stereotypicality-Similarity	0-0	0-50	0-100	50-0	50-50	50-100	100-0	100-50
0-0								
0-50	0.11							
0-100	0.00	0.00						
50-0	0.00	0.62	0.00					
50-50	0.00	0.00	0.89	0.00				
50-100	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.93			
100-0	0.00	0.00	0.99	0.11	0.39	0.98		
100-50	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.32	0.01	0.00	
100-100	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.98

leader with the very similar leader was significant ($ps < .00$). When the level of stereotypicality was moderate, the comparisons between the low and moderate conditions of similarity and the low and high conditions were both significant ($ps < .000$), but the comparison of the moderate and high similarity conditions was nonsignificant ($p = .93$). Lastly, the same result was observed in the level of high stereotypicality: the comparisons of the low and moderate conditions of similarity and the low and high conditions were both significant ($p = .001$ and $p < .000$, respectively), but the comparison of the moderate and high similarity conditions was nonsignificant ($p = 0.98$). These analyses show that all the comparisons of the three levels of stereotypicality were significant when the level of similarity was low ($p < .02$ when comparing the moderately stereotypical with the very stereotypical leader and $ps < .000$ when comparing the not-at-all stereotypical leader with the moderately stereotypical and with the very stereotypical leader). This same outcome occurred when the level of similarity was moderate (all $ps < .01$). Lastly, at the high level of similarity, the comparisons of the not-at-all stereotypical and the very stereotypical leader ($p = .002$) and of the moderately and the very stereotypical leader ($p < .02$) were significant, but the comparison of the not-at-all and the moderately stereotypical leaders was nonsignificant ($p = .84$).

Discussion

In accordance with previous literature, the results of this study show that the approval received by leaders is affected both by the perception of their traits and by their attitudes being perceived as similar to those of their followers, that is, the more similarity with the perceiver, the better the evaluation; and also the more prototypical the leaders, the better the evaluation. Moreover, variations in stereotypicality seem more important when assessing leaders than variations in similarity. One way of considering this greater importance of stereotypicality is that, when similarity is low or intermediate, the most stereotypical leader is always more positively evaluated, followed by the moderately stereotypical leader, with the not-at-all stereotypical leader in the last place. However, when leaders are very stereotypical, they are more highly valued than when they are moderately stereotypical, but there are no differences as a function of whether they are very or only moderately similar.

Also, in this study, we found an interaction between stereotypicality and attitude similarity that can be explained by the evaluation received by very similar leaders who were only moderately or not at all stereotypical. Thus, when similarity is very high, very stereotypical leaders are more highly valued, but the assessment of moderately and not-at-all stereotypical leaders is almost identical (and lower, for example, than the evaluation of moderately similar but very stereotypical leaders). This could be interpreted in the light of a phenomenon found in investigations about attraction and similarity: When the similar person has a clearly negative or stigmatizing characteristic, then similarity does not lead to attraction (Novak & Lerner, 1968). In our investigation, if the hypothetical leaders were completely similar to the participants but did not possess any appropriate leader characteristics or had these characteristics only moderately, they could be perceived as not very reinforcing, which leads to a considerable decrease in the evaluation of these individuals as good leaders.

In our opinion, these results may be important when choosing leaders or representatives in political or organizational contexts, underlining two important implications. Firstly, it seems plausible that in situations where there is more uncertainty about the qualities of the leaders (for example, in political elections), similarity may become an essential criterion for the assessment of candidates. The second implication refers to the reconsideration of leader evaluation based only on stereotypical traits or on similarity. It is important to take both dimensions into account simultaneously: Leaders who are very similar but who have few leadership qualities will not be well assessed, the same as an individual with many leadership qualities but who is not at all similar to the perceiver.

Attitude similarity has sometimes been conceived as a negative element for organizations (Eagleson, Waldersee, & Simmons, 2000), considering that heterogeneous experiences, skills, demographic characteristics, attitudes, etc. are related to better organizational performance. However, as revealed in our study, leaders who are very similar to the assessor obtain high approval, even when they do not present any stereotypical characteristic.

This work has some important limitations. First, we did not verify whether the experimental manipulation was correct and, although the results seem to confirm this point, it would have been better to include a measure of manipulation. Secondly, and also contributing an idea for future research, with regard to the debate of whether or not implicit theories of leadership can be generalized, it would be interesting to verify whether the stereotypical traits used in this study (from a normative study carried out with a group from the same context) are common to diverse contexts, and if this is not the case, the extent to which they can be generalized.

Lastly, it would be interesting to take into account when designing future investigations that a high level of stereotypicality could indirectly generate higher attraction. Engle and Lord (1997) suggest that this could happen through the influence of congruence. In implicit theories, congruence can affect similarity through three processes: it may influence perceived similarity, provide a basis for common understanding, and it allows more automatic, intuitive social interactions. Thus, with regard to the implicit theories, congruence between two people could be perceived as an increase in their similarity and so, lead to increased attraction, and thereby, to higher approval. This interesting suggestion that could be explored in detail in future studies, by means of an experimental design in which the degree of congruence and attitude similarity were manipulated.

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ANNEX

Attitude Questionnaire used to manipulate attitude similarity

Below are presented a series of general issues about your attitudes and personal characteristics in order to form different work teams for a subsequent phase. Please answer the items as sincerely as possible, circling the alternative (True or False) that you consider the most correct in your case. Remember, this questionnaire is anonymous.

Name or Code:

Course:

Age:

1. I am quite concerned about the problematic of the environment.	T	F
2. I am a fairly religious person.	T	F
3. I think there should be some kind of control over the entrance of immigrants in our country.	T	F
4. I think that more opportunities should be provided to the Gypsy collective.	T	F
5. I think I do not have any prejudices against other races or ethnic groups.	T	F
6. I think that the incorporation of women into the working world should be facilitated more than is currently done.	T	F