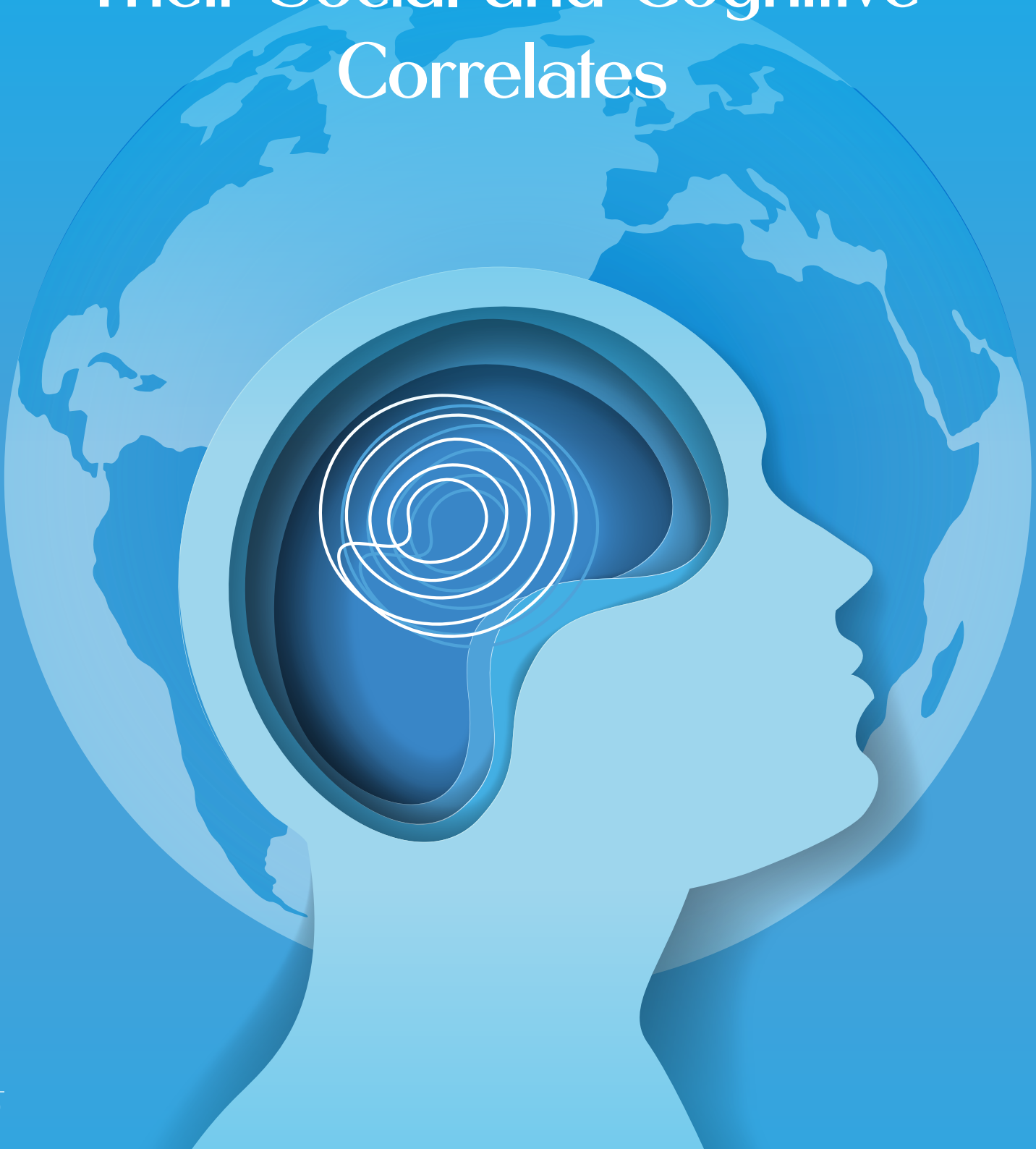
Our Worldviews and Their Social and Cognitive Correlates



Author: **Jonathan Firbank**

How does the way we think shape how we view the world around us, and how is this reflected in our behaviour? ***Rebekah Mifsud*** *is a UM researcher crossing disciplinary boundaries to investigate these questions. She speaks with* ***Jonathan Firbank*** *about her results.*

In this age of global communication, every point of view can have an impact. However, this hasn't created a utopian 'marketplace of ideas', where the best ideas naturally triumph as we communicate freely. Instead, public discourse has become polarised as different worldviews clash. Now, more than ever, it is vital we understand each other. This does not just entail knowing each other's beliefs, but also why we believe them.

Rebekah Mifsud is a researcher in UM's Department of Cognitive Sciences. Along with Professors Gordon Sammut and Noellie Brockdorff, Mifsud is investigating five distinct worldviews, defined as Localised, Orthodox, Pragmatist, Reward, and Survivor.

'Prof. Sammut developed the idea of worldviews, and together with Prof. Brockdorff, I sought to investigate them from a cognitive science point of view,' explains Mifsud, in order to 'determine whether differences in our cognition – the way we acquire knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses – predispose us to particular worldviews over others.' The team found evidence that variations in our cognitive processes predispose us to these worldviews by influencing our relationship with the world around us.

FIVE WAYS TO VIEW THE WORLD

Mifsud's article, 'Worldviews and the role of social values that underlie them', provides definitions for these five worldviews.

The Localised worldview involves the desire to fix problems or address social issues. 'These people are all about helping society,' says Mifsud. 'They're inclusive and want to make society a better place.'

The Orthodox worldview seeks to preserve the status quo and is perhaps the worldview we are most aware of. Conservatism is widely understood to be a powerful social force. 'These are avid rule followers and also tend to be the most religious.'

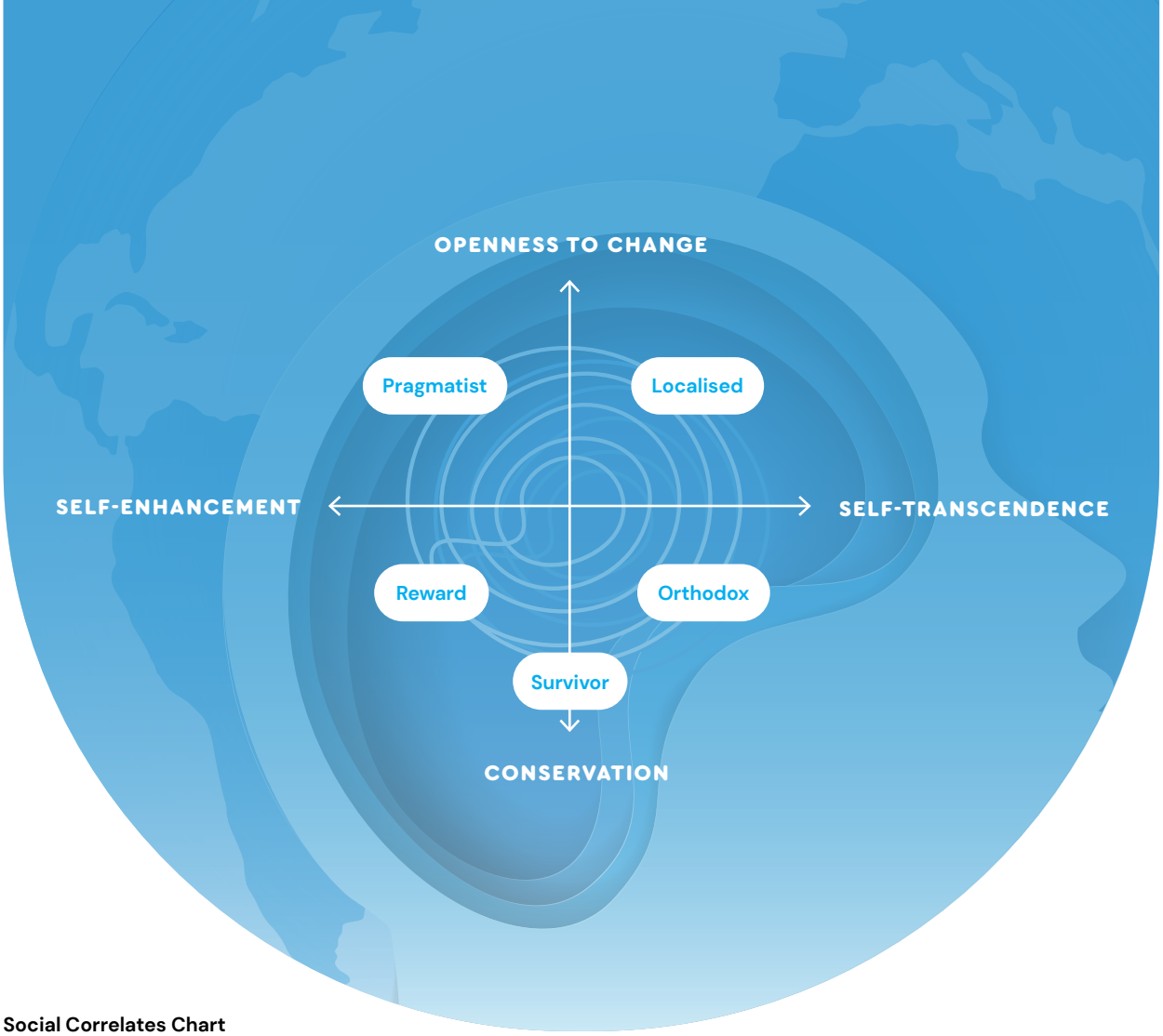
Conversely, a Pragmatist worldview might facilitate bending rules. It is protective and revolves around self-interest: that is, one's 'own interest as well as that of their loved ones.'

The Reward worldview centres around determination to work hard to obtain a desired goal. 'These are the go getters. The sky is the limit for these people.'

This contrasts with the Survivor worldview, which involves fatalism, distrust in others, and the need to overcome adversity. 'I tend to think of these as the opposite of those with a Reward worldview. These guys are quite passive and tend to have a negative view of the world.'

But what predisposes us to having these contrasting worldviews? 'The thing with worldviews is that they are quite abstract and generalised, so hypothesising cognitive correlates–' (that is, the mental processes that accompany these worldviews) 'is a challenging undertaking. In cognitive science, generalised beliefs such as worldviews have not been explored that much.'

'We have done this by first examining the relationship between worldviews and values.' The values Mifsud used are: 'openness to change versus conservation and self-transcendence versus self-enhancement,' as defined by Prof. Shalom Schwartz. Each of the five worldviews have a relationship with these values that is distinct from the other four. 'Identifying the underlying value correlates of worldviews makes the concept of worldviews a little bit more tangible. Therefore, linking it to cognition



Social Correlates Chart

makes it a more manageable prospect,' explains Mifsud.

A DIFFERENT WAY OF THINKING ABOUT DIFFERENT WAYS OF THINKING

'Worldviews are thought to function in a way that allows us to adapt to changing circumstances.' Mifsud's work proposes a link between worldviews and our ability to self-regulate, 'moreover, I proposed that the relationship between worldviews and values can help us predict such a link.' Self-regulation is the goal-oriented management of thoughts, feelings, and behaviour through executive functions. 'Put very simply: executive functions are like the boss of the brain,' facilitating planning and decision making.

Executive functions are split into three processes: 'inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility, and working memory capacity... Inhibitory control describes the ability to resist impulses, helping you stop and think before you act.' Mifsud's work indicates inhibitory control is stronger in those with Orthodox, Reward, and Survivor worldviews, who each follow rules for very different reasons. It is less pronounced in those with Localised and Pragmatist worldviews, who have more cognitive flexibility.

'Cognitive flexibility refers to the ability to adapt thought and behaviour. It helps you attend to and switch between different tasks.' This is more pronounced in those with flexible, independent Localised and Pragmatist worldviews.

'Lastly, working memory capacity is like the workspace of the brain, a "landing bay" in which you hold and manipulate information for a brief amount of time.' In Mifsud's research, it was important to control for working memory differences because it is strongly related to inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility.

People with some of these worldviews are similar to each other in their predisposition to conservation or openness to change, as also evidenced in self-regulatory abilities. However, they are different in their predisposition to 'self-transcendence' or 'self-enhancement'.

Self-transcendence might take the form of charity or unreciprocated kindness, common in those with Localised or Orthodox

worldviews. Self-enhancement, on the other hand, is a desire for self-improvement or power, found in those with Pragmatist or Reward worldviews. Those with Survivor worldviews stand alone in having little inclination to self-transcend or self-enhance.

AN ORTHODOX EXAMPLE

'Let's take someone with an Orthodox worldview,' continues Mifsud. 'Our study found this worldview to be linked to the values of self-transcendence and conservation.' Mifsud found that people demonstrating 'better inhibitory control ability are more likely to hold an Orthodox worldview than any other. This is a big finding in itself because it shows that certain cognitive processes link to beliefs about ourselves and the world around us.'

Additionally, 'I also found that cognitively inflexible individuals are most likely to hold an Orthodox worldview.' Understanding worldviews can 'help us navigate certain social debates. In a previous study, we showed that those with an Orthodox worldview are less receptive to the idea of recreational cannabis.' By referring to 'findings linking inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility to the Orthodox worldview, we may understand why.'

'Strong inhibitory control often corresponds to the ability to adhere to rules and societal standards. However, when a new policy is under consideration, individuals must be willing to consider new perspectives or alternate viewpoints to form a judgement. Those who lack cognitive flexibility, such as those with an Orthodox worldview, might struggle with this. Consequently, this struggle might contribute to a lack of support for certain policies if they seemingly go against existing norms.'

WHAT NEXT?

Mifsud considers the investigation between worldviews and values an essential preliminary step for the much bigger investigation that follows. 'My wish is that at some point in the future, I investigate whether electrophysiological brain activity can be linked to worldviews. This would complete a full circle of bridging the social realm to cognitive processes and ultimately to the physical brain itself.'

This would bring us yet closer to 'understanding how our social interactions are influenced by our cognitive processes and, in turn, by the biological workings of our brains.' Understanding this may prove a prerequisite to adequately understanding society. The implications are profound.

Further Reading

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