COGNITIVE STYLES IN CREATIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEVEL AND STYLE

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Summary.—This study investigated the relationship between two measures used to assist change and transformation efforts, the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory which assesses style or manner of cognition and problem-solving, not level or capability, and the Leadership Practices Inventory which measures the extent to which leaders exhibit certain leadership behaviors associated with accomplishing extraordinary results. These two measures of level and style should be conceptually distinct and show no or only modest correlation. Analysis yielded statistically significant and meaningful relationships between scores on the Kirton Inventory and two scales of the Leadership Practices Inventory. Implications and challenges for research and practice were outlined.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between a measure of preferred cognitive style of problem-solving, decision-making, and creativity and a measure of the level of leadership practices that produce extraordinary results. The conceptual basis for this study is drawn from a line of research known as the level-style distinction. This distinction contrasts level as related to how much creativity an individual possesses, with style as how an individual prefers to manifest their creativity (Martinsen & Kaufmann, 1999). The results of the study were interpreted within this theoretical framework.

When focusing on level, the emphasis is on ability, capacity, potential, or competence. Creative level refers to how well one uses their creative capacity or how much of these abilities or skills an individual possesses. When dealing with style as the main issue, the emphasis is on modality, preference, propensity, manner, or form. Creative style refers to how a person prefers to use the creativity they have.

The sharpest distinction drawn within this area of inquiry has been provided by Kirton (1987, 1989, 1994). He asserted that the adaption-innovation theory of cognitive style is conceptually independent of creative cognitive capacity, success in creative endeavors, learned procedures, and techniques, as well as coping behaviors. Kirton (1994) described the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory and stated that

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Adaption–innovation is assumed to be a dimension of cognitive process and, as such, is not context specific. There is no implication here, for example, that artists are creative and engineers are not. The theory's instrument—the KAI—is not a measure of cognitive or intellectual level, and, therefore, should not be confused with concepts such as level of creativity, capacity for cognitive complexity, or extent of some ability (p. 7).

There are many implications as a result of separating style from level (Isaksen & Dorval, 1993; Talbot, 1997). Since behavior is influenced by both level and style factors, clearly distinguishing these specific influences can help researchers and practitioners be more precise about what they are measuring. Some investigators have explored the relationships between style and level measures (Isaksen & Puccio, 1988; Tefft, 1990; Isaksen, Dorval, & Kaufmann, 1992), and others have focused on relationships among style measures (Joniak & Isaksen, 1988; Hourz, Selby, Esquivel, Okoye, Peters, & Treffinger, 2003; Isaksen, Lauer, & Wilson, 2003).

From the point of view of those who develop and use assessments, there is a need to identify explicitly whether focus of testing is on pure style, pure level, or some mixture of factors. There are important benefits derived from improved clarity by distinguishing the style factors that influence specific behavior. For example, Hammerschmidt (1996) reported the results of a four-year study tracking the problem-solving success rates of 952 managers comprising 119 different 8-person teams. The study examined the effects of homogeneity or heterogeneity of KI Adaption–Innovation Inventory scores within the teams and found that coordination of the team task with the appropriate KI Adaption–Innovation Inventory-based orientation significantly increased groups' success rates.

Kirkton asserts that all people solve problems and are creative and that individuals have a natural and preferred style for creativity, problem-solving, and decision-making (Kirkton, 1976, 1989, 2000; Holland, Bowskill, & Bailey, 1991). Kirkton defined cognitive style on a continuum, ranging from adaptive (a natural preference to do things better), to innovative (a natural preference to do things differently). Kirkton's conception of cognitive style was derived, in part, from his study of management initiative (Kirkton, 1961). He asserted that both ends of the continuum are important and valuable for the successful functioning of any organization and, on a personal level, are value neutral. Further, both adaptive and innovative styles can be found at every level.

Kirkton (1994) described those with more adaptive preferences as being seen by others as more precise, sound, reliable, disciplined, and dependable. They are more concerned about how things get done or the means. They tend to accept the given problem definition and are more concerned with resolving problems than finding them. People with more adaptive preferences will generally prefer to focus on change that promotes incremental improvement, perfecting existing systems, or "doing things better."
Kirton (1994) described those with a more innovative preference as being seen as unique, visionary, and ingenious. Those with a more innovative preference prefer to challenge the definition of the problem by manipulating and questioning existing assumptions. They may be seen as undisciplined and the kind of change on which they focus is perceived as more radical and often described as breakthrough. When these characteristics are operating together, more innovative people will generally prefer changing the existing system or “doing things differently.”

While the theory and measure were originally designed to measure a unitary concept and all the items are statistically related to the other items, repeated factor analysis has shown the Kirton Adaption–Innovation Inventory to include three subscales of style (Kirton, 1999). The subscales are Sufficiency–Proliferation of Originality (SO), Efficiency (E), and Rule/Group Conformity (R). The Sufficiency–Proliferation of Originality subscale deals with differences in the handling of original ideas or concepts. According to Kirton’s (1994) theory, all people produce original ideas, but there are differences in the way they are produced. Adaptors prefer to generate a smaller, yet sufficient quantity of original ideas but not an abundance. They prefer novel ideas that are likely to be viewed as useful and relevant to the situation at hand. Those with an adaptive preference choose to confine their idea and solution generation to the agreed structure more closely than innovators. Innovators prefer a profusion or proliferation of original ideas. The ideas they prefer to generate may cut across traditional boundaries or paradigms. Their ideas are less likely to be accepted immediately and more likely to “stretch” in new ways or to challenge the problem definition.

The Efficiency subscale indicates preference for detail, precision, and thoroughness. Those with more adaptive preferences tend to be thorough, to pay attention to the details and fine points when handling tasks, define the problem more carefully and tightly, and work closer within the system or structure. Those with a more innovative Efficiency preference tend to deal with the task in a broader, more spontaneous way, and to be less concerned (and often clearly bored) with the details. They prefer to pay less attention to the immediate structure surrounding the problem or task.

The Rule/Group Conformity subscale deals with preferences for working within established rules, guidelines, or systems, and differences in the management of structures within which problem-solving occurs. The adaptor places greater emphasis on conforming to the established procedures or ways of doing things, accepts the rules, and works to ensure group consensus. Those with more innovative Rule/Group Conformity preferences are more likely to emphasize the importance of unique pathways and less likely to feel constrained by rules and pressures toward conformity or consensus. They are more likely to solve problems by bending or breaking the rules.
Kirton has asserted that his theory and measure focus on style and not level (Kirton, 1976, 1987, 2000). Kirton (1999) asserted that “Adaption–innovation theory is quite explicit that only style is its domain and that level should theoretically lie orthogonally to it . . . Creative level should relate significantly to other measures of cognitive capacity; creative style should yield an insignificant relationship [to level measures]” (p. 142). A more detailed description of adaptive and innovative preferences is provided in Kirton (1976, 1987, 1999).

Kouzes and Posner have identified five practices of exemplary leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 1987, 1997). They developed their original concept of leadership based on 38 initial in-depth interviews and case study analysis of approximately 1,100 people describing their best personal leadership experience (Posner & Kouzes, 1988, 1992). Their assumption was that they would find patterns within leadership excellence by asking ordinary people to describe extraordinary experiences. By studying the times when leaders were at their personal best, Kouzes and Posner were able to identify five practices common to most extraordinary leadership achievements. These practices encompass clusters of behaviors and strategies that are available to everyone who takes on a leadership role. The practices are Challenging the Process, Inspiring a Shared Vision, Enabling Others to Act, Modeling the Way, and Encouraging the Heart.

Challenging the Process, as defined by Kouzes and Posner (1995), involves changing the status quo in radical or revolutionary ways. Leaders experiment with new and better approaches to old problems and compulsively toy with ideas. Challenging the Process includes two main strategies. The first is searching out challenging opportunities to change and improve. The second strategy associated with Challenging the Process is experimenting, taking risks, and building opportunities, as well as learning from the successes and mistakes that may occur from experimenting and taking risks (Kouzes & Posner, 1994).

Kouzes and Posner (1995) defined Inspiring a Shared Vision as articulating an image of a desired future state and inviting others to participate in the possibilities. Leaders who accomplish extraordinary results have a desire to do something significant which no one else has achieved. The first strategy within Inspiring a Shared Vision includes envisioning an uplifting and ennobling future. The second strategy involves enlisting others in a common vision by appealing to their values, interests, hopes, and dreams (Kouzes & Posner, 1994).

Enabling Others to Act, as defined by Kouzes and Posner (1995), involves fostering collaboration and building spirited teams. Extraordinary achievement occurs as a result of active involvement and support of many people. The first of two main strategies in Enabling Others to Act includes
fostering collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust. The second strategy is about strengthening others by sharing information and power and increasing their discretion and visibility (Kouzes & Posner, 1994). Enabling Others to Act is aimed at developing competence and offering visible support to others.

Kouzes and Posner (1995) defined Modeling the Way as creating standards of excellence and setting an example for others to follow. Leaders take every opportunity to show others, by their own example, that they are deeply committed to their shared aspirations. The two main strategies for Modeling the Way include setting an example for others by behaving in ways that are consistent with their stated values and planning small wins that promote consistent progress and build commitment (Kouzes & Posner, 1994).

Kouzes and Posner (1995) defined Encouraging the Heart as keeping hope and determination alive. Accomplishing the extraordinary takes personal energy and commitment. The two main strategies for Encouraging the Heart are recognizing individual contributions to the success of every project and celebrating team accomplishments regularly (Kouzes & Posner, 1994).

Kouzes and Posner assert that the behaviors which the Leadership Practices Inventory measure are derived from an understanding of a leader’s success in accomplishing extraordinary results. This would place their inventory within the realm of level or capacity of behavior rather than of cognitive style. They also clearly differentiate their measure from one of IQ, personality, or general management skills (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). A more detailed description of Kouzes and Posner’s leadership practices can be found in Kouzes and Posner (1993, 1995, 1999).

Wunderley (1996) investigated the relationship between the Kirton Adaption–Innovation Inventory and Leadership Practices Inventory by using a sample of 48 male, mid- to senior-level executives. Wunderley’s results (1996) suggested that “...with regard to the relationship between the five leadership factors and the KAI innovative factors, there are no significant correlations” (p. 29). Kirton (1999) included the results from Wunderley’s study in his manual to support the distinction between Kirton Adaption–Innovation Inventory as a measure of style and the Leadership Practices Inventory as a measure of level. This current study served as a replication and extension of Wunderley’s previous research.

**Method**

**Participants**

The total sample consisted of data collected from 186 participants who completed both the 1993 version of the Leadership Practices Inventory and the Kirton Adaption–Innovation Inventory. Seven of these participants provided only subscale scores and a total score for the Kirton Adaption–Inno-
vation Inventory, based on a previous response. These results were deleted for this study. This left a total of 179 participants. The data were collected from a diverse population across companies and groups. These included 81 participants who worked for a multinational direct mail company. Thirty-eight participated in public creative problem-solving courses and worked in a variety of professions. Twenty-four worked for a manufacturer of household goods in the USA. Thirty-six worked for an international accountancy firm. The sample included 109 men and 67 women. Three participants did not indicate sex but were included in the analysis. Ages of participants ranged from 20 to 63 years. The average age for this sample was 38 yr.

Measures

The Kirton Adaption–Innovation Inventory is a 32-item paper-and-pencil self-report measure of cognitive style. The total scale ranges from 32 to 160; the theoretical mean is 96 (Kirton, 1999). The total score is comprised of three ipsative subscales: Sufficiency–Proliferation of Originality, Efficiency, and Rule/Group Conformity (defined earlier). According to one’s total score on the measure, individuals can be placed on a continuum from Highly Adaptive to Highly Innovative (Kirton, 1984). Each stem question asks "How easy or difficult do you find it to present yourself, consistently, over a long period as..." The response scale for each question is a line of 17 dots anchored by four headings which are labeled Very Hard, Hard, Easy, and Very Easy.

Based on a main sample (N = 562) and a replication sample (N = 276), the mean for the total score is 95.0, the standard deviation is 17.9, and the observed range is 45 to 145 (Kirton, 1999). Kirton (1999) reported that the Kirton Adaption–Innovation Inventory's internal reliability coefficient, using the Kuder-Richardson Formula 20, was .88 and accounts for 78% of the internal variance. For this same sample, Kirton (1999) reported results for the three subscales. The Sufficiency–Proliferation of Originality subscale had a mean of 40.8 (SD = 8.9, range 17–63) and an internal reliability of .83. The Efficiency subscale had a mean of 18.8 (SD = 5.6, range 7–33) and an internal reliability of .76. The third subscale, Rule/Group Conformity, had a mean of 35.4 (SD = 8.6, range 14–56) and an internal reliability of .83.

The Kirton Adaption–Innovation Inventory has been shown to have content validity based on its relationships to the theories of Rogers, Weber, and Merton in early factorial studies (Kirton, 1999). Foxall, Payne, Taylor, and Bruce (1990) provided support for concurrent validity, the extent to which scores on the inventory correlate with other descriptive measures and distribute normally within different populations. Mudl (1986) reviewed 43 published reports. He reported an observed mean for the general population to be 95.0 with a standard deviation of 14.9 (N = 1,719), an internal reliability coefficient of .86 (N = 2,777), and a consistent factorial composition that
loads on three subscales (N = 1,280). Mudd (1986, 1996), Goldsmith (1986), and Kirton (1999) also reported on a variety of studies that support the convergent, divergent, criterion-related, and predictive validity of the Kirton Adaptation–Innovation Inventory. Studies by Goldsmith and Kerr (1991), and Murdock, Isaksen, and Lauer (1993) supported Kirton’s assertion that cognitive style is highly resistant to change. All the evidence provided by Kirton (1999) and reviewed by Mudd (1996) supported the premise that the inventory measures style, not level or capacity.

The Leadership Practices Inventory consists of a 30-item paper-and-pencil questionnaire in both LPI-self and LPI-observer format and can be used for 360-degree feedback when the respondent asks observers to complete it. The stem question asks “To what extent do you engage in the following actions and behaviors?” The scale for each question is anchored by 1: rarely or very seldom and 5: very frequently or almost always, with 5 representing most use of a particular leadership behavior. The nature of the stem equates more or higher to better, making the Leadership Practices Inventory a measure of level rather than cognitive style.

The developmental efforts utilized in constructing the Leadership Practices Inventory, as reported by Posner and Kouzes (1988), included qualitative and case study analyses and tests of internal reliability, test-retest reliability, and social desirability. Means and standard deviations for self and other for Challenging the Process were 22.5 and 4.0; for Inspiring a Shared Vision 20.0 and 5.0; for Enabling Others to Act 23.7 and 4.2; for Modeling the Way 22.3 and 4.1; and for Encouraging the Heart 22.3 and 4.9, respectively. Internal reliability coefficients of the LPI-self and LPI-observer for Challenging the Process were .73 and .79, for Inspiring a Shared Vision .83 and .89, for Enabling Others to Act .70 and .86, for Modeling the Way .72 and .81, and for Encouraging the Heart .84 and .91, respectively. Posner and Kouzes (1988) also conducted discriminant analysis to classify high- and low-performing managers and found scores on the inventory correctly classified 93% of the cases. They also reported no significant correlations between scores on a test of social desirability and the inventory.

Fields and Herold (1997) conducted a confirmatory factor analysis on the Leadership Practices Inventory and found support for the five-factor solution. They also found evidence for predictive validity, as the inventory scores discriminated between transactional and transformational leadership behavior. Carless (2001) examined the construct validity by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis which yielded support for the five-factor solution, but also discovered that a higher order model accounted for more of the variance and yielded a better fit. Carless concluded that the Leadership Practices Inventory assessed a higher order transformational leadership factor model and had weak discriminant validity.
Procedure

Item and scale information for the two inventories were collected for each participant. Interitem reliability for each scale was computed using Cronbach alpha, and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed for all scales of each measure.

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, ranges and coefficients alpha for the Kirton Adaption–Innovation Inventory and the Leadership Practices Inventory. Means for the Kirton Adaption–Innovation Inventory reported in Table 1 are higher than those reported by Kirton (1999), suggesting an innovative bias in this sample. The ranges in Table 1 are narrower than those reported by Kirton and produced smaller variances. The reliabilities of the KAI Total and each subscale are consistent with the reliabilities reported by Kirton (1999).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>No. of Items</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kirton Adaption–Innovation Inventory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>112.4</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>68–159</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficiency–Proliferation of Originality</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>31–65</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>11–35</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule/Group Conformity</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>20–60</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Practices Inventory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging the Process</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>14–30</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiring a Shared Vision</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>10–29</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enabling Others to Act</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>17–30</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling the Way</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>12–29</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging the Heart</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>11–30</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Leadership Practices Inventory means reported in Table 1 are consistent with those reported by Posner and Kouzes (1988) for the self version of the measure. The ranges in Table 1 are wider than those reported by Posner and Kouzes and produced broader variances. The reliability coefficients of the subscales shown in Table 1 are similar but consistently lower than the reliabilities reported by Posner and Kouzes (1988).

Table 2 presents the correlations of these two measures. Both Challenging the Process and Inspiring a Shared Vision scales on the Leadership Practices Inventory correlate significantly to the Kirton Adaption–Innovation Inventory across all three subscales, as well as Total score.
TABLE 2
PEARSON PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATIONS BETWEEN LEADERSHIP PRACTICES INVENTORY AND KIRTON ADAPTATION-INNOVATION SUBSCALE SCORES (N = 172)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Challenging the Process</th>
<th>Inspiring a Shared Vision</th>
<th>Enabling Others to Act</th>
<th>Modeling the Way</th>
<th>Encouraging the Heart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kirton Total</td>
<td>.58*</td>
<td>.42*</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficiency-Proliferation of Originality</td>
<td>.59*</td>
<td>.45*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule/Group Conformity</td>
<td>.51*</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.001.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the relations between cognitive style and leadership practices as measured by the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory and Leadership Practices Inventory. Statistically significant positive correlations were found between two dimensions of the latter (Challenging the Process and Inspiring Shared Vision), used to assess leadership behaviors associated with extraordinary accomplishment, and the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory, used to measure cognitive style of creativity, problem-solving, and decision-making.

The observed relationship between an innovative preference on the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory and a higher score on Challenging the Process would be expected as a result of their conceptual overlap. Kirton's innovators prefer to question and explore the assumptions of any given problem structure. They also prefer to generate a broad scope of ideas, less restricted by the cognitive structure legitimized by consensus. Leaders who challenge the process do so by challenging the status quo and doing things differently. They focus on radical departures from the past and doing things never done before.

Likewise, the relationship observed between an innovative cognitive style and scores on Inspiring a Shared Vision is also conceptually consistent. Those with a more innovative preference are more likely to challenge the current theories, focusing on the future possibilities rather than focusing on existing and ongoing requirements. Leaders who inspire a shared vision work with other individuals to investigate a wide range of future-oriented possibilities to create something new. Inspiring a Shared Vision includes the capacity to co-create a dream or unique image of the future that goes beyond current reality and existing boundaries and to enlist the support of others. For example, Martin Luther King inspired others in his "I have a dream" speech given during the Civil Rights March on Washington on August 28, 1963, enabling his constituents to share the image of a future state that transcended the existing circumstances.
The results of this study also bring to light issues regarding the clarity of the level-style concepts in theory and assessment. Kirton (1999) asserted that, when interpreting results such as those found in this study, the measures could be psychometrically poor or invalid; the measures might focus on pure level or pure style, or the measures may mix aspects of level and style. If we assume that the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory is a pure measure of style, then the Leadership Practices Inventory includes dimensions that mix style and other factors which are more purely level-oriented. Contrary to Wunderley's findings (1996), the statistically significant correlations of scores on the Leadership Practices Inventory scales with those on the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory scales here indicate that the former is a measure that includes aspects of both level and style.

The leadership practices of Enabling Others to Act, Modeling the Way, and Encouraging the Heart are unrelated to the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory and thus seem to measure something unrelated to "cognitive style" in creative problem-solving. It appears that adaptors and innovators both demonstrate equal preferences for behaviors like building cooperative goals that promote trust, setting an example of excellence for others to follow, and rewarding and recognizing others.

Although the present sample included a larger number of both male and female subjects than the study of Wunderley (1996), this sample was not fully representative. For this sample the score distribution of the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory is more innovatively skewed than that of the Wunderley sample, so that care must be taken not to overgeneralize the results. Further research involving these two measures should include broader and random sampling as well as collection and analysis designs with which to explore the possible influence of extraneous variables, e.g., level in the organization, amount of education, professional experience, on the relationship of the Leadership Practices Inventory and Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory. Research should include improved and more highly differentiated conceptualizations of cognitive style, beyond the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory and could possibly include more detailed examination of style factors influencing specific behavioral outcomes.

There are a number of implications for research and practice that can be identified from this study. From a practical perspective, those who score higher on the Leadership Practices Inventory are perceived as better and more successful leaders. Given the correlations found in this study, innovators on average scored higher on two dimensions of the Leadership Practices Inventory. Those with a more adaptive preference should score lower, giving the impression that they have less value as leaders. Since cognitive style as conceptualized and measured by the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory is value neutral, both adaptors and innovators have important and poten-
tially valuable contributions to make to any leadership role. Those who interpret results from the Leadership Practices Inventory need to consider the bias inherent in this limited measure. Those who develop leadership measures should strive to become ever more aware of the full spectrum of cognitive styles and then incorporate items that include that full spectrum, particularly for those conceptions of style that are value neutral.

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