John H. Faasse
Inter/View Nederland B.V.
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

READING SPEAKS VOLUMES
STYLE OF INFORMATION PROCESSING AND PUBLICATIONS READ

SYNOPSIS

Cognitive Psychology, specifically the schemata theory, has yielded new insights into the way people deal with the enormous amounts of information that confront them daily. Two styles of information processing can be distinguished, central and peripheral. The concepts Self-Monitoring and Need for Cognition are useful in determining the style of information processing people use when confronted with (commercial) information.

To be able to use these concepts for media planning purposes, there also has to be a relation between Self-Monitoring and Need for Cognition on the one hand and the publications people read on the other hand.

In a large experimental survey, instigated by Initiative Media Nederland, the Self-Monitoring scale and the Need for Cognition scale were submitted to respondents to the Dutch national readership survey - the SUMMO-Scanner.

The survey results show there is an explicit relation between reading behaviour and the scores on the Self-Monitoring scale and the Need for Cognition scale. Most hypotheses formulated in advance are supported by the data. Readers of specific magazines and newspapers differ considerably in their scores on Self-Monitoring and Need for Cognition.

This result has consequences, not only for the planning of press schedules, but also for the editorial content of magazines and newspapers and for advertising content itself.

Shortened versions of both scales were incorporated in the SUMMO Target Group Index. The first results will be presented during the Hong Kong Readership Symposium.

Self-Monitoring and Need for Cognition offer new and surprising insights into the communication values of print media.

INTRODUCTION - THE SCHEMATA THEORY

We are daily confronted with enormous amounts of information. This quantity of information is so large, no one can possibly process it all. The number of visual and auditive stimuli is so huge that it amounts to an information overload. Man has to protect himself in order not to drown in this sea of information. Not all stimuli are actually processed. First they have to pass our perceptual screen. Only the information which can be meaningfully interpreted is processed.

Cognitive psychology is the science which deals with information processing, i.e. all processes that have to do with the intake, saving, retrieval and use of information. One of the more promising theories in cognitive psychology is the schemata theory of information processing. Schemata are related experiences from the past. Everyone possesses a lot of these schemata which are related in network-like structures. The theory says that all incoming information, including commercial messages, is interpreted by means of schemata. Schemata are our window and filter on reality. Self-schemata occupy a special position in the theory. The self-schema contains information regarding the person one is, in relation to different spheres of life.

Information which is relevant for the self-schema will be noticed sooner, processed faster and remembered better than irrelevant information. When a self-schema is activated by incoming information, more associations and connections are made in the memory, with the consequence that this information will be stored better and will be more easily available. The theory states that all incoming information will be checked for relevance to the self. Therefore, to say that all (advertising) information offered, whether in the form of text or images, will have the same effect on all receiving persons, is in the light of this theory not justified.

When information, for example advertising, activates a self-schema, high involvement occurs automatically together with a systematic or central processing of information. When there is no self-schema activated, peripheral processing of information follows.

These two types of information processing do fundamentally differ. With central information processing there is lively attention and high involvement, resulting in an active and creative processing of the message. With peripheral processing of information involvement is low. Information is processed more or less automatically by means of heuristics. Peripheral information processing offers great advantages in terms of time and energy. Confronted with an overload of information, one can still get an impression or form an opinion with a minimum of effort and memory strain.

SELF-MONITORING AND NEED FOR COGNITION

The practical relevance of the schemata theory would be enhanced if one could characterize the self-schemata, or the conglomerate of self-schemata which can be called a personality, in such a way that not only tastes and preferences of the consumer, but also his style of information processing (central or peripheral) could be predicted. In recent literature two personality measures are mentioned which seem to live up to these criteria. They are the Self-Monitoring concept of Snyder (1974) and the Need for Cognition of Petty and Cacioppo (1986).

Using the concepts of the personality traits Self-Monitoring and Need for Cognition, a bridge can be built between the more or less abstract schemata and the practice of readership research. These concepts not only reveal the tastes and preferences of the consumer, but also his style of information processing.

Self-Monitoring concerns the image one wants to establish of oneself and the kind of information one is sensitive to in relation to that image. The most important questions are: How does the outside world see me, and how much am I able and willing to change that image? A high Self-Monitoring person is someone who strives for a smooth adjustment of his or her behaviour in different social situations. Such people are sensitive to social relations and pay attention to their own image and the images of other people. A typical quotation regarding a high Self-Monitor would be:

Be thyself, I said to someone, but he could not, he was no one (Huygens).

A high self monitor is a different person in each different situation.

Low Self-Monitoring people try to keep their behaviour in conformity with their own inner values.

To thine own self be true; and it must follow, as the night the day: thou canst not then be false to any man (Shakespeare; Hamlet,1,3)

This is the low Self-Monitor *par excellence.*

Snyder and DeBono (1985) showed that persons with a high score on the Self-Monitoring scale not only have a preference for image oriented advertising, but that they are also prepared to try products sooner and also pay more for products thus advertised.

Low Self-Monitors on the other hand have a preference for quality oriented advertising. Contrary to High Self-Monitoring persons they are more prepared to purchase and even spend extra on products where quality is a central theme in the advertising.

The concept Need for Cognition was developed by Cacioppo and Petty (1982). Their idea was, that just as there are individual differences in the inclination to physical exercise, there will also be differences in the inclination towards mental exercise. People with a high score on the Need for Cognition scale pay attention to the quality of argumentation and are interested in background information. People with a low score on the Need For Cognition scale do, as a rule, avoid complex thought processes. They have a preference for peripheral information processing and usually reach decisions based on simple heuristics. The most appropriate example of a person with a high Need for Cognition would be Hercule Poirot.

By combining the concepts Self-Monitoring and Need for Cognition with media-reach research, here the Dutch National readership survey - the SUMMO-Scanner -, it will be possible in the future, not only to establish the number of people reached by a publication, but also, the attractiveness of the publication for a certain group of people. Following this it would be conceivable that also the advertising message in form and content could be fine-tuned to the way in which the readers of a certain publication process information. But before that a lot of research remains to be done. The survey reported here is only the first step.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In 1989 Inter/View Nederland conducted a survey, commissioned by Initiative Media Nederland, to explore the practical usefulness of the concepts Self-Monitoring and Need for Cognition in media research.

To test the concepts Self-Monitoring and Need for Cognition for their practical usefulness a Dutch version of both measurement instruments was developed, based on the original American questionnaires (See appendix). Both lists of statements were presented by phone and in print to a sample of people of 18 years and over who had previously participated in the SUMMO-Scanner. During fieldwork no practical obstacles of any importance were encountered. Only on the cost reduction aspect would the telephone version be preferable.

HYPOTHESES

Based on the theory, statements can be made relating the concepts of Self-Monitoring and Need for Cognition to the consumption of media. Readers of glossy magazines, with information on fashion, image and the outer aspects of life, will score relatively highly on the Self-Monitoring scale. Readers of magazines with more functional product information, like consumer magazines, will score fairly low.

Readers of quality newspapers will score on average higher on the Need for Cognition scale than people who do not read these papers. The same goes for readers of news magazines. On the whole it can be expected that papers and magazines which demand a certain amount of intellectual effort will be read by people with a high score on the Need for Cognition scale.

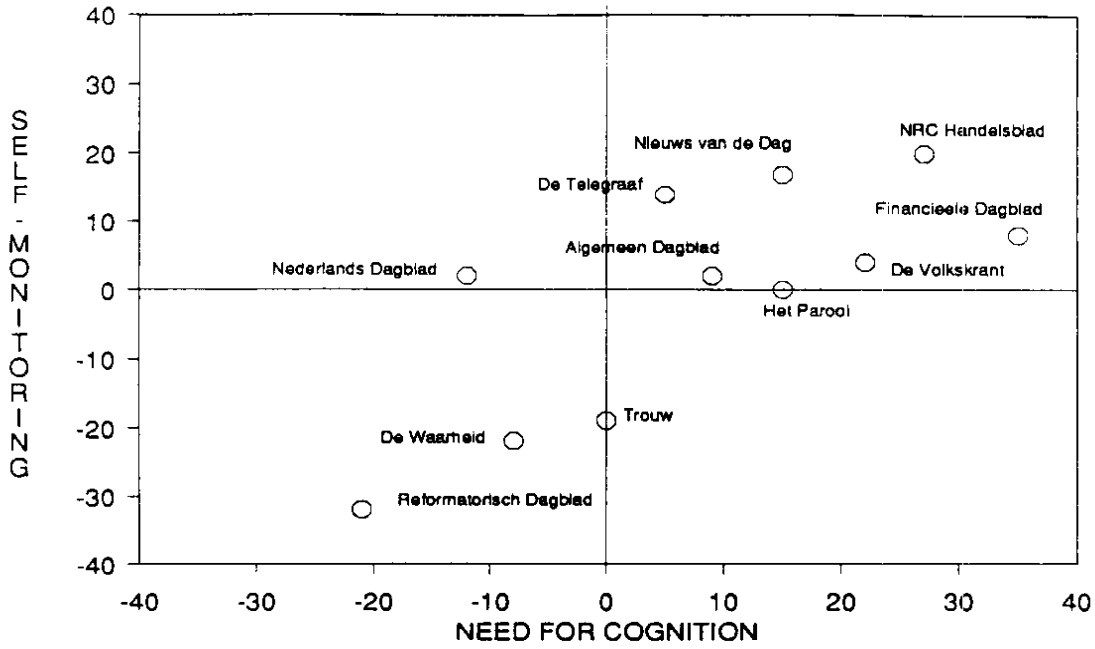
RESULTS

Both the Self-Monitoring scale and the Need for Cognition scale, based on the survey results, demonstrated an adequate reliability: Cronbach's alpha of .66 and .84 respectively. With that, one of the survey's questions is answered positively. It is indeed possible to incorporate the measurement of Self-Monitoring and Need for Cognition in a regular media-survey in a satisfying way.

The question that follows is naturally, whether a relation can be established between readership behaviour on the one hand and Need for Cognition and Self-Monitoring on the other hand. This is indeed the case. In most cases the hypotheses were substantiated by the research findings. However it should be noted that the effects, though unmistakably there, are rather small.

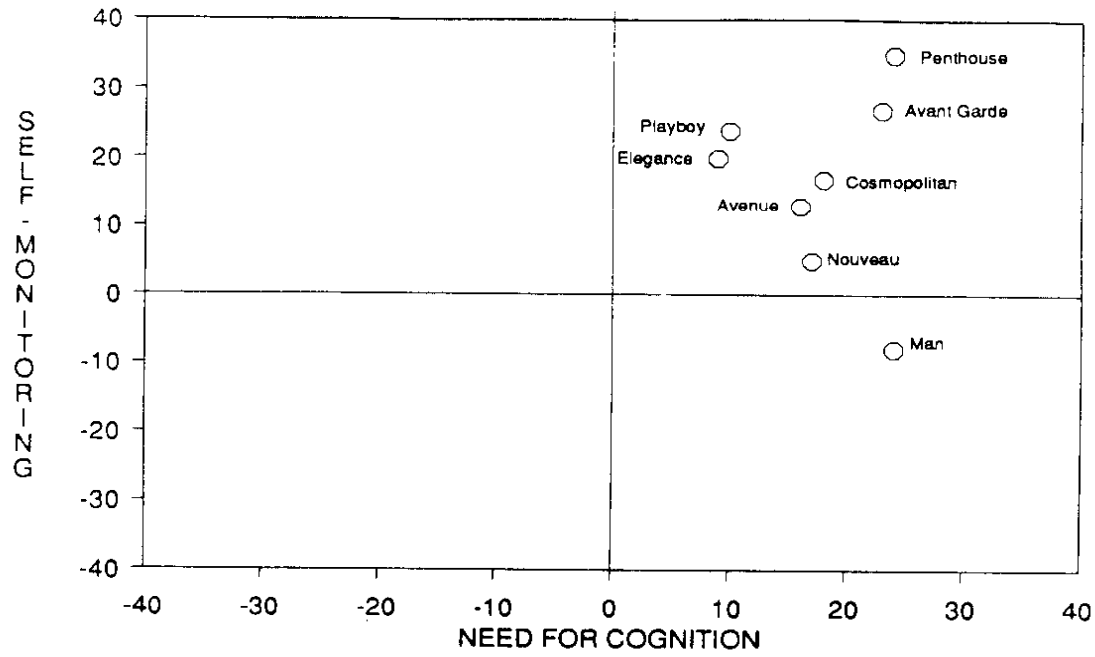
In figures 1-5 these relations are depicted. For the readers of each publication, the average scores on the Self-Monitoring scale and the Need for Cognition scale are related to the overall average and then projected onto an axial graph.

NATIONAL DAILIES



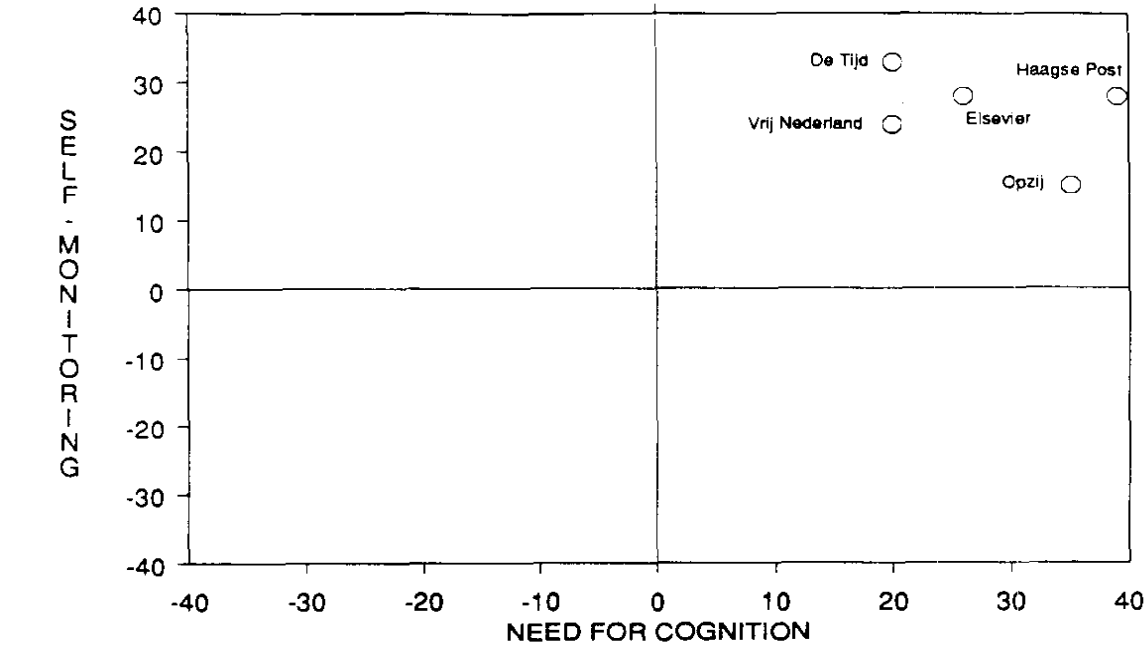
Inter/View Nederland B.V.

GLOSSIES



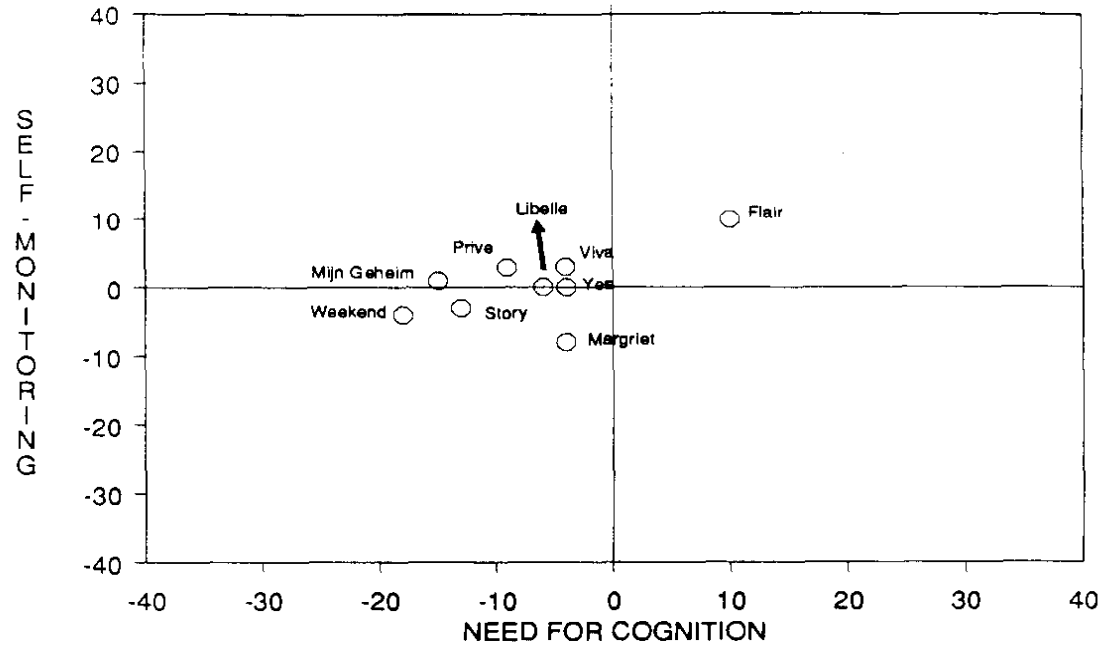
Inter/View Nederland B.V.

NEWS MAGAZINES



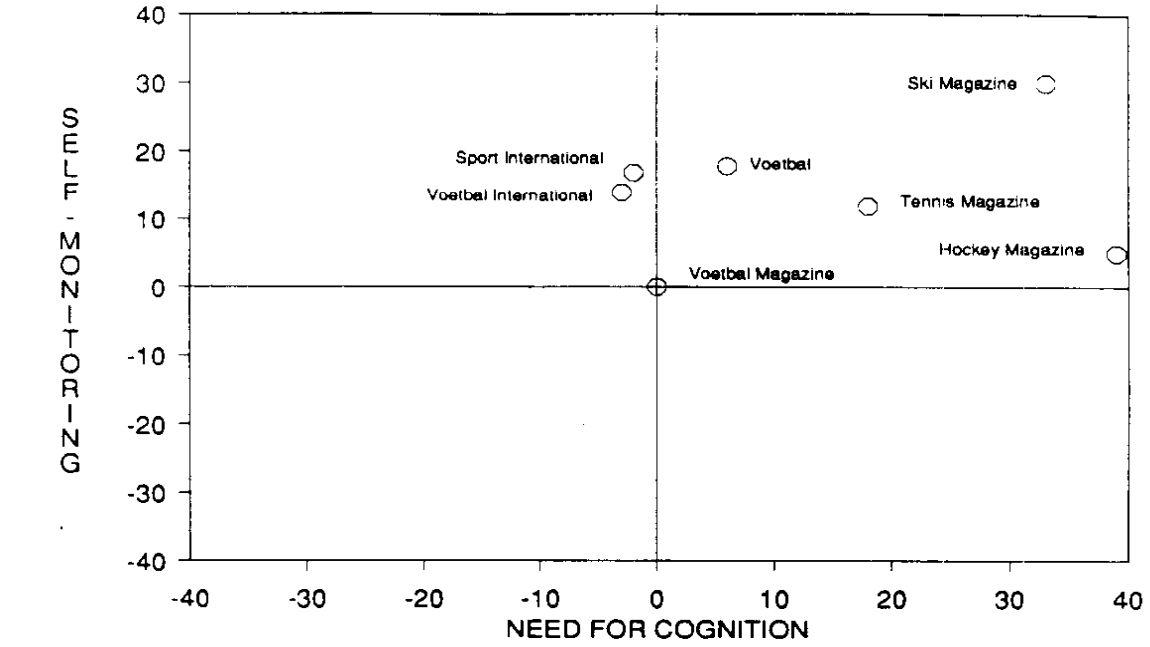
Inter/View Nederland B.V.

WOMEN'S WEEKLIES



Inter/View Nederland B.V.

SPORT MAGAZINES



Inter/View Nederland B.V.

CONCLUSION

The survey results show there is an explicit relation between reading behaviour and the scores on the Self-Monitoring scale and the Need for Cognition scale. Most hypotheses formulated in advance are supported by the data. Readers of specific magazines and newspapers differ considerably in their scores on Self-Monitoring and Need for Cognition.

In view of the insights offered by the schemata theory of information processing it can be said that a new dimension can be added to the planning of press schedules.

The theory offers not only a new starting point for the selection of the surroundings in which a commercial message has the best chance of succeeding, but also for the creation of convincing and persuasive communication.

The first results looked so promising that SUMMO decided to incorporate a shortened version of both the Self-Monitoring and the Need for Cognition scale into the Target Group Index. By the end of 1991 therefore, the 13.500 respondents of this survey will be able to be characterized not only in terms of their media-behaviour, product use and brand preferences, but also in terms of their style of information processing. The first results will be presented at the Hong Kong Readership Symposium.

Amsterdam, January 1991

LITERATURE

Beek, Lejo van, De koper als uitgangspunt, een funktionele benadering van attituden en beinvloeding toegepast in de reclame, Skriptie Arbeids- en organisatiepsychologie, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Oktober 1988.

Beijk, Jan en W. Fred Van Raaij, Schemata, informatieverwerking, beinvloedingsprocessen en reclame, VEA, Amsterdam, februari 1989.

Cacioppo, J.T. en R.E. Petty, The Need for Cognition, in: Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 42, 1982, pp. 116-131.

Cacioppo, J.T., Petty & Kao, The efficient assessment of need for cognition, in: *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 48, 1984, pp. 306-307.

Christie, A., The Mysterious Affair at Styles, John Lane, Bodley Head, London, 1920.

Hauwermeiren, P. van, Het Leesbaarheidsonderzoek, Tjeenk-Willink, Groningen, 1975.

Petty, R.E. en J.T. Cacioppo, The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion, in: L. Berkowitz (red.),Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 18, New York, Academic Press, 1986, pp. 123-205

Pieters, Rik G.M., Verplanken en Modde, 'Neiging tot Nadenken': Samenhang met beredeneerd gedrag, in: Nederlands Tijdschrift voor de Psychologie, 42, 1987, pp. 62-70.

Snyder, M., The Self-Monitoring of expressive behaviour, in: Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 30, 1974, pp. 526-537.

Snyder, M., Public appearances, Private realities, The Psychology of Self-Monitoring, W.H. Freeman and Company, New York, 1986.

Snyder, M. en K.G. DeBono, Appeals to image and claims about quality: Understanding the psychology of advertising, in: Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 49, 1985, pp. 586-597

SUMMO, Technische Verantwoording SUMMO-Scanner 1988-IV t/m 1989-III, SUMMO, Amsterdam, januari 1990.

APPENDIX

Self Monitoring Scale, list of statements

1. I find it hard to imitate the behavior of other people
2. At parties and social gatherings, I do not attempt to do or say things that others will like
3. I can only argue for ideas which I already believe
4. I can make impromptu speeches even on topics about which I have almost no information
5. I guess I put on a show to impress or entertain others
6. I would probably make a good actor
7. In a group of people I am rarely the center of attention
8. In different situations and with different people, I often act like very different persons
9. I am not particularly good at making other people like me
10. I'm not always the person I appear to be
11. I would not change my opinions (or the way I do things) in order to please someone or win their favor
12. I have considered being an entertainer
13. I have never been good at games like charades or improvisational acting
14. I have trouble changing my behavior to suit different people and different situations
15. At a party I let others keep the jokes and stories going
16. I feel a bit awkward in public and do not show up quite as well as I should
17. I can look anyone in the eye and tell a lie with a straight face (if for a right end)
18. I may deceive people by being friendly when I really dislike them

Need for Cognition Scale, list of statements

1. I would prefer complex to simple problems
2. I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking
3. Thinking is not my idea of fun
4. I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities
5. I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is likely chance I will have to think in depth about something
6. I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours
7. I only think as hard as I have to
8. I prefer to think about small, daily projects to long-term ones
9. I like tasks that require little thought once I've learned them
10. The idea of relying on thought to make my way to the top appeals to me
11. I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems
12. Learning new ways to think doesn't excite me very much
13. I prefer my life to be filled with puzzles that I must solve
14. The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me
15. I would prefer a task that is intellectual, difficult and important to one that is somewhat important but does not require much thought
16. I feel relief rather than satisfaction after completing a task that required a lot of mental effort
17. It's enough for me that something gets the job done; I don't care how or why it works
18. I usually end up deliberating about issues even when they do not affect me personally