Perceptions of social dangers, moral foundations, and political orientation

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ABSTRACT

What underlies people’s tendency to be politically liberal or conservative? Conservatism has been explained as being a consequence of fear- and anxiety-related variables and, recently, of emphasizing moral foundations pertaining to group loyalty, respect for authority, and purity (which are referred to as the “binding” foundations, as opposed to the “individualizing” foundations pertaining to justice and care). Aiming to integrate these two explanations of political orientation, we conducted a study in which 140 students in the Netherlands completed the belief in a dangerous world scale, the moral foundations questionnaire, and explicit and implicit measures of political orientation. Consistent with previous research, both higher perceptions of social dangers and greater emphases on the binding moral foundations (relative to the individualizing foundations) were associated with explicitly and implicitly measured conservatism. More importantly, there was evidence that a “conservative pattern” of moral attitudes mediates the relationship between perceived social dangers and political conservatism. By integrating conceptually distinct explanations, the present findings take initial steps toward a more complete picture of what underlies individual differences in political orientation.

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1. Introduction

Judging by what appears on the news, people seem to be obsessed with three things: dangers, politics, and sports. These three things, it turns out, are not unrelated. If you are someone who is especially concerned about dangers, you are probably politically more conservative, and you are likely to place more importance on exalting your own group, organization, or team.

Political conservatism – the focus of the present research – has been explained by one group of researchers as a consequence of psychological needs to manage uncertainty and threat (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003) and by another group of researchers as a consequence of moral intuitions emphasizing group loyalty, respect for authority, and bodily and spiritual purity (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, in press; Haidt & Graham, 2007). The present research was intended as a first step toward conceptually integrating these independent explanations of political orientation. In a study conducted among university students in the Netherlands, we tested the hypothesis that a specific pattern of moral intuitions – a tendency to place greater emphasis on loyalty, authority, and purity – mediates the relationship between perceptions of social dangers and political orientation.

1.1. Conservatism as a response to uncertainty and threat

The distinction between political liberals (those with a “left-wing” orientation) and conservatives (those with a “right-wing” orientation) is generally regarded as the single most important dimension of political attitudes (Jost, 2006). The main difference between liberals and conservatives is that liberals focus on progress towards equalitarianism whereas conservatives show resistance to change and tolerate inequality (Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2003). Political conservatism (sometimes measured as right-wing authoritarianism; Altemeyer, 1981; Altemeyer, 1998) has been found to be correlated with several psychological variables associated with needs to manage uncertainty and threat (e.g., death anxiety, system instability, intolerance of ambiguity, need for order, and fear of threat; Jost et al., 2003). For example, people who perceive the world as a dangerous place tend to score higher on measures of conservatism (Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt, Wagner, Du Plessis, & Birum, 2002), and several studies have shown that manipulating situational factors associated with these psychological variables (e.g., making threats salient) makes people more inclined towards conservative politicians or conservative political opinions (Cohen, Ogilvie, Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2005; Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004; Landau et al., 2004; Willer, 2004).

In order to explain the link between conservatism and environmental stimuli connoting uncertainty and threat, Jost et al. (2003)
labeled conservatism motivated social cognition and proposed the uncertainty-threat model of political conservatism: people adopt a conservative ideology to fulfill psychological needs related to managing uncertainty and threat. Uncertainty and fear lead to specific epistemic, existential, and ideological motives (intolerance of ambiguity, terror management, and system justification, respectively), which can be satisfied by adopting a conservative ideology associated with resistance to change and endorsement of inequality. As Haidt and Graham (2007) have pointed out, this view of conservatism suggests that conservatives are somehow morally deficient, as they will endorse ideas that oppose equitability in order to assuage their anxiety. Are conservatives really “less moral” than liberals?

1.2. Political orientation as an expression of moral attitudes

Quite separately from the motivated social cognition view of conservatism, other researchers have been investigating other correlates of conservatism. Specifically, political attitudes appear to be related to individual differences in moral psychology. Several studies on the relation between moral development (Kohlberg, 1969, 1984) and political orientation have shown that conservatives are more likely to engage in conventional moral reasoning (i.e., reasoning based on duties and laws) whereas liberals are more likely to engage in postconventional moral reasoning (i.e., reasoning based on rights and universal moral principles; Cande, 1976; Elmer, Renwick, & Malone, 1983; Feather, 1988; Fishkin, Keniston, & Mackinnon, 1973; for an overview see Elmer, 2002). From this perspective it might seem that liberals are “more moral,” or at least more morally developed than conservatives. In contradistinction to this perspective, Haidt and colleagues (Graham et al., in press; Haidt & Graham, 2007) have argued that conservatives are not less morally developed but that moral psychology has focused on the part of morality that is most important for liberals.

Haidt and Graham (2007) explain the different political attitudes of liberals and conservatives by referring to moral intuitions, and argue that for liberals morality is about issues of harm, rights, and justice, whereas for conservatives morality is also about issues of group loyalty, respect for authority, and bodily and spiritual purity. The different patterns of moral intuitions are argued to result from differences in sensitivity to the distinct moral foundations. This group of researchers has described five moral foundations: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004, 2007). They refer to the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity foundations as “individualizing” foundations because of the focus on individual rights, and they refer to the ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity foundations as “binding” foundations because of the focus on binding individuals within groups through duties and loyalty.

Haidt and Graham (2007) have suggested that moral foundations can be seen as a kind of taste buds, “producing affective reactions of liking or disliking when certain patterns are perceived in the social world” (p. 104). The sensitivity of these moral “taste buds” depends on socialization processes: different cultures might emphasize different values and virtues, thereby stimulating moral intuitions about certain social patterns, but not about others. Results of a large Internet survey conducted by Haidt and colleagues (see Graham et al., in press; Haidt, 2007; Haidt & Graham, 2007) showed that conservatives find issues related to group loyalty, respect for authority, and purity more important for moral judgment than do liberals, who find issues related to harm, rights, and justice most important for moral judgment. The description of moral foundations as psychological systems serving moral intuitions implies that moral intuitions are causally prior to political attitudes. From this perspective, a specific pattern of moral intuitions incline a person to adopt a political ideology that fits one’s intuitions regarding what is right and wrong.

1.3. Integrating perceptions of social dangers and moral intuitions

To recapitulate, the different perspectives on political orientation described above have identified two distinct antecedents of political conservatism: (a) elevated fear- and anxiety-related dispositions and (b) specific patterns of moral intuitions – specifically, the tendency to emphasize morals pertaining to group loyalty, respect for authority, and purity. A sensible question then is whether the two antecedents can be conceptually integrated. Addressing such a question could offer a means of tying together existing research on motivated social cognition, moral attitudes, and political orientation. The primary objective of the present research was to attempt such a conceptual integration grounded in empirical data.

To offer a more specific hypothesis, we began with the assumption – following the literature – that political orientation is the outcome variable. Furthermore, we expected fear and anxiety dispositions to precede moral intuitions: specifically, we hypothesized that a heightened tendency to perceive dangers leads to a stronger emphasis on the ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (the binding) foundations, because of the potential protection offered by emphasizing these foundations. In other words, perceiving dangers may lead one to modify one’s moral attitudes in order to avoid or prevent those dangers, which in turn could influence one’s political orientation. Stated more formally, we hypothesized that a greater emphasis on the binding foundations mediates the relationship between perceiving high levels of social dangers and greater political conservatism.

1.4. Overview of the present study

One objective of the present study was to replicate the recent findings linking liberalism with a relatively stronger emphasis on the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity foundations (relative to the remaining foundations). We thus employed methods that were similar to those used previously (participants completed the moral foundations questionnaire and an explicit and an implicit measure of political orientation), but our methods also included some differences that potentially make the previous results more generalizable. First, whereas previous explicit measures of political orientation used the labels “liberal” and “conservative” (e.g., Haidt, 2007; Haidt & Graham, 2007), we used the labels “left” and “right.” Second, whereas Graham et al.’s (in press) implicit measure of political orientation assessed the degree to which the concept self (relative to other) was implicitly associated with conservative versus liberal concepts, our implicit measure of political orientation measured the degree to which positive (relative to negative) concepts were implicitly associated with conservative versus liberal concepts.

A second, more important objective of the present study was to test the hypothesis that concerns about dangers may serve as a psychological precursor to the different patterns of moral intuitions. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that the link between perceptions of dangers and political orientation may be mediated by differences in moral intuitions. To test this hypothesis, we included a questionnaire (the belief in a dangerous world scale; Altemeyer, 1988) to assess individual differences in perceptions of social dangers (as mentioned above, past research has already shown correlations between belief in a dangerous world and political orientation).
2. Method

2.1. Participants

One hundred and forty students (27 men, 113 women; mean age = 20.23, SD = 3.81) from the University of Groningen participated in exchange for course credit. (Data from 25 additional participants were excluded for various reasons. Following the scoring instructions for the moral foundations questionnaire, we excluded 21 participants who exhibited highly unusual responses – inclusion of these participants did not substantially alter the correlations of moral foundation scores with the other measured variables. Following the scoring instructions for the IAT, we excluded two participants who exhibited extreme responses. One participant did not follow the instructions properly, and another participant’s data were lost due to computer error.) Dutch (n = 120) or German (n = 15) was the native language for most of the participants. The study sessions were completed in separate cubicles where all of the materials were presented on computers in Dutch.

2.2. Procedure

Participants first completed the 41-item moral foundations questionnaire (which was the recommended version when this study was conducted in 2007; this has since been replaced by a 30-item version; see Graham et al., in preparation). The questionnaire comprises a filler item and 40 items measuring two aspects of moral attitudes. In the part measuring moral relevance (comprising 20 items), participants indicated the extent to which various considerations (e.g., whether someone was harmed, whether someone did something disgusting) are relevant when deciding whether something is right or wrong. Participants responded on a 6-point scale (endpoints labeled not at all relevant and extremely relevant). In the part measuring moral judgments (comprising 20 items), participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with various statements (e.g., “One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal,” “Chastity is an important and valuable virtue”). Participants responded on a 6-point scale (endpoints labeled strongly disagree and strongly agree). Combining both the relevance and judgment items, we computed scores for the harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity foundations. Our hypothesis pertained to individualizing and binding foundations broadly. Thus, for statistical efficiency, we computed scores for the individualizing foundations (mean of the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity subscales; Cronbach’s α = 0.73) and the binding foundations (mean of the ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity subscales; α = 0.80); these values were used in subsequent analyses.

Participants then completed a single-item explicit measure of political orientation, on a 7-point scale (1 = very left, 2 = left, 3 = somewhat left, 4 = neither left nor right, 5 = somewhat right, 6 = right, and 7 = very right).

Next, participants completed an implicit measure of political orientation. This measure consisted of an implicit association test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) assessing cognitive associations between conservative–liberal concepts on the one hand and positive–negative concepts on the other (we used the labels “conservative” and “liberal” instead of “right wing” and “left wing” because of the possibility that the latter labels might interfere with the IAT, which involves pressing keys with the right and left index fingers). The words used in the IAT were (a) for conservative concepts, authority, hierarchy, moderate, religion, tradition; (b) for liberal concepts, change, freedom, open-minded, progress, tolerant; (c) for positive concepts, beautiful, cheerful, luck, nice, success; and (d) for negative concepts, angry, bad, disaster, failure, pain. For each participant, the IAT effect – the extent to which conservative or liberal concepts were associated with positive or negative concepts – was calculated using the recommended algorithm (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003). More positive scores indicated stronger associations between conservative and positive concepts.

Finally, participants completed the belief in a dangerous world (BDW; Altemeyer, 1988) scale, which consists of 12 items assessing individual differences in perceptions of and concerns about social dangers (e.g., “There are many dangerous people in our society who will attack someone out of pure meanness, for no reason at all.” “Our society is not full of immoral and degenerate people who prey on decent people. News reports of such cases are grossly exaggerating and misleading” [reverse scored]). Responses were provided on a 7-point scale (α = 0.83).

3. Results

3.1. Moral foundations

Participants’ individualizing foundation scores (M = 3.59, SD = 0.45) were significantly higher than their binding foundation scores (M = 2.62, SD = 0.50, t(139) = 20.70, p < 0.001). This likely reflects the generally liberal orientation of the sample.

As noted above, conservatives are hypothesized to place equal importance on all five foundations whereas liberals are hypothesized to place greater importance on the individualizing foundations. To examine this effect, we created difference scores in which the mean of the scores for the binding foundations (ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity) were subtracted from the mean of the scores for the individualizing foundations (harm/care and fairness/reciprocity). These difference scores were used in later analyses.

3.2. Political orientation

The mean value on the explicit measure of political orientation was 3.38 (SD = 1.28), which is lower than the scale midpoint of 4, t(139) = −5.76, p < 0.001. Similarly, the IAT data revealed a mean tendency to implicitly associate liberalism with positivity (and conservatism with negativity), M = −0.98, t(139) = −21.25, p < 0.001. The explicit and implicit measures were positively correlated (r = 0.22, p = 0.011; this correlation was reduced by one participant who was very conservative on the explicit measure and very liberal on the implicit measure; excluding this participant increased the implicit–explicit correlation to .28, but only trivially altered the key results reported below). For comparison, Nosek (2005) reported a higher correlation between implicit and explicit political orientation (r = 0.56).

3.3. Moral foundations and political orientation

Higher binding foundation scores predicted higher explicitly measured (r = 0.27, p = 0.001) and implicitly measured (r = 0.31, p = 0.001) conservatism; higher individualizing foundation scores predicted lower explicitly measured conservatism (r = −0.25, p = 0.003). Moreover, the results showed that the moral foundations difference scores predicted lower explicitly measured (r = −0.45, p < 0.001) and implicitly measured (r = −0.27, p = 0.001) conservatism. These results, which replicate previous findings, are depicted in Fig. 1 (for the sake of visual presentation, these graphs depict political orientation as the predictor variable – with higher values indicating greater conservatism – and the importance of the five moral foundations as the outcome variable; the key finding to note is that a greater tendency to emphasize the
individualizing foundations relative to the binding foundations is associated with greater liberalism).

3.4. Perception of social dangers and test of mediation

We had hypothesized that the perception of social dangers might serve as a psychological precursor to the relatively greater emphasis placed on the binding moral foundations. Consistent with our expectation, BDW was negatively correlated with the moral foundations difference scores ($r = -0.37$, $p < 0.001$): people who perceived more social dangers also tend to place greater emphasis on the binding foundations relative to the individualizing foundations.

Moreover, consistent with previous findings linking conservatism with fear and anxiety variables, BDW predicted both explicitly ($r = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$) and implicitly ($r = 0.23$, $p = 0.007$) measured political orientation. The main hypothesis of the present research was that this association – between higher BDW and greater conservatism – may be mediated by the tendency to place relatively more emphasis on the binding moral foundations. Using the difference scores as the hypothesized mediator, we conducted two parallel mediation analyses, one for each measure of political orientation. We used the recommended bootstrapping method (Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Shrodt & Bolger, 2002) to estimate 95% confidence intervals for the indirect (mediated) effects (with 10,000 bootstrap samples). For the explicit measure, the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect was 0.11–0.33 (unstandardized regression coefficients); the standardized regression coefficient representing the direct effect of BDW was reduced from 0.31 ($p < 0.001$) to 0.17 ($p = 0.036$) when controlling for the mediator. For the implicit measure, the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect was 0.0054–0.11 (unstandardized regression coefficients); the standardized regression coefficient representing the direct effect of BDW was reduced from 0.23 ($p = 0.007$) to 0.15 ($p = 0.091$) when controlling for the mediator. For both the explicit and implicit measures, the effect of the mediator (difference score) on political orientation remained significant when controlling for BDW: the standardized partial regression coefficients were –0.38 ($p < 0.001$) and –0.21 ($p = 0.016$), respectively. In sum, these results showed evidence of at least partial mediation (see Fig. 2).

4. Discussion

One objective of the present research was to replicate and extend recent research linking moral intuitions and political attitudes. Consistent with previous findings, the results showed that political conservatives and liberals differ in the importance they place on different moral foundations: compared with conservatives, liberals place greater emphasis on the individualizing foundations (harm/care and fairness/reciprocity) relative to the binding foundations (ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity; e.g., Graham et al., in press; Haidt and Graham, 2007). By using somewhat different measures than those previously used and by testing a culturally divergent sample (mostly Dutch students), the results reveal that the link between moral foundations and political orientation is fairly robust.

The major objective of the present research was to provide conceptual integration by linking perceptions of social dangers, moral foundations, and political orientation. The results were consistent with our hypothesis that perceptions of social dangers predict the tendency to emphasize specific moral foundations, which in turn predicts political orientation. In other words, the pattern of moral attitudes mediates (at least partially) the relationship between perceptions of social dangers and political orientation. These findings complement and extend past research on the psychological antecedents of political orientation. In their recent article, Graham et al. (in press) wondered which comes first: political identity, moral concerns, or some third variable. Our research offers one answer to their question.
Of course, these results are preliminary and demand further research. Given that we used only a single scale (belief in the dangerous world) to represent the uncertainty and threat variables purported to underlie conservatism, an important next step is to test the hypothesis with more measures of the fear- and anxiety-related variables.

The present results suggest that future research on the antecedents of political attitudes may benefit from focusing simultaneously on both the direct and mediated effects outlined above. For example, rather than simply measuring fear- and anxiety-related variables, researchers could experimentally manipulate situational threats and assess effects on both moral intuitions and political orientation. Similarly, researchers might attempt to manipulate the level of emphasis that people place on certain moral foundations and assess the impact on political orientation. Of course, neither moral intuitions nor political orientation are likely to be easily swayed by fleeting laboratory manipulations, so this approach might be best complemented by developmental approaches focusing on the acquisition of fear- and anxiety-related dispositions, moral intuitions, and political attitudes.

The present study provided support for the moral foundations hypothesis and showed that both moral and political attitudes are affected by perceptions of social dangers. More importantly, the results supported the hypothesized link between perceptions of social dangers, patterns of moral attitudes, and political orientation. These results represent an important step toward integrating distinct predictors of political orientation in the existing literature, and they open up avenues for further research.

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