



Conservative parenting: Investigating the relationships between parenthood, moral judgment, and social conservatism

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ABSTRACT

Strategic perspectives on moral and political attitudes suggest that people often tailor such attitudes to serve the current or future needs of themselves and their families. Given the critical importance of parenting in human life, we were interested in whether parenthood was associated with individual differences in political and moral attitudes, and whether parenthood and parenting motivation might partly explain age differences in these attitudes. Given that a key element of social conservatism is vigilance towards uncertainty and threat and, given that parenting is often associated with risk aversion, we predicted that parents (and those high in parenting motivation) would be more morally vigilant and more socially conservative. Across four studies including over 1500 participants, both objective parenthood and subjective parenting motivation independently predicted both outcomes. Further analyses revealed that both parenthood and parenting motivation mediated the relationships between age and both social conservatism and moral vigilance.

1. Introduction

Becoming a parent is one of the keystone experiences in human life, and is associated with psychological and physiological changes in both mothers and fathers (e.g. Berg & Wynne-Edwards, 2001; Eibach & Mock, 2011; Gilead & Liberman, 2014; Gordon, Zagoory-Sharon, Leckman, & Feldman, 2010). Despite the functional necessity and psychological potency of parenthood, however, relatively little psychological research has explored the effects of parenthood on the development of individual differences in social and moral cognition. Here, we investigate how parenthood and individual differences in parenting motivation (i.e. people's feelings of tenderness and motivation to care for children) are associated with moral cognition and political attitudes.

Traditional accounts of moral and political values have typically depicted them as being largely a product of deliberative reasoning and rational thought (e.g. Kohlberg, 1971). More recently, some researchers have argued that many moral and political attitudes are, to some extent, strategic, in that people tend to express attitudes that encourage behavior which would benefit themselves and their kin, either now or in the future (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009; Weeden & Kurzban, 2014, 2017). In simulated laboratory games, for example, participants tend not only to choose the rule that most benefits their randomly-assigned role in the game, but they also temporarily report this rule to be the most morally justified (DeScioli, Shaw, & Kurzban, 2014).

The argument for strategic variation in moral cognition is further

supported by research showing that moral and political attitudes are influenced by superficially unrelated factors such as cues of success and dominance, physical formidability, reproductive strategy, and environmental threats. For example, people's mating strategies predict their attitudes to drugs and sexual minorities (Kurzban, Dukes, & Weeden, 2010; Pinsof & Haselton, 2016, 2017; Quintelier, Ishii, Weeden, Kurzban, & Braeckman, 2013). More formidable men adopt less egalitarian or more self-serving attitudes to egalitarianism, as a result of perceiving themselves to be in a position of greater power (Petersen, Sznycer, Sell, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2013; Price, Sheehy-Skeffington, Sidnaius, & Pound, 2017). Similarly, people respond to sporting success cues—in the form of their team winning—by advocating less egalitarian attitudes (Kerry, Murray, Harman, & McCord, 2018). Other research suggests that people who are more concerned about the threat of disease (either dispositionally or due to experimentally-manipulated disease cues) judge moral violations more harshly, presumably due to many moral norms having historically served disease-protective functions (Murray, Kerry, & Gervais, 2017). Even more strikingly, participants in one series of studies preferred people with a range of explicitly immoral traits when those traits served the participant's current goals (Melnikoff & Bailey, 2018). Thus, there is ample evidence that people tailor their political and moral views according to their motivational goals and their current situations.

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1.1. Parenthood, social conservatism, and moral vigilance

Human children are critically dependent on parenting for longer than any other animal on the planet, and during this time they are vulnerable to myriad hazards and threats. Strategically speaking, it logically follows that becoming a parent may increase behavioral and attitudinal caution, insofar as such caution may benefit the survival and welfare of one's children. Consonant with this, preliminary research suggests that parents are more risk-averse, and that priming parental motives further increases risk-aversion in parents (Eibach & Mock, 2011). This risk-aversion may be related to biases against other groups: Gilead and Liberman (2014) found that people who were exposed to parenting cues (both experimental and natural, i.e. their own baby) were more sensitive to cues of outgroup danger, and more likely to respond by increasing outgroup prejudice. Further, other research suggests that evoking parental motives may cause people to visually perceive potentially threatening individuals to be physically larger (Fessler, Holbrook, Pollack, & Hahn-Holbrook, 2014).

Functional accounts of socially and morally conservative values often characterize them as responses to perceived threat or danger (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Supporting this perspective are studies showing that conservative individuals tend to be more fearful towards potentially threatening stimuli on both implicit and explicit measures (see Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost, Stern, Rule, & Sterling, 2017; Van Leeuwen & Park, 2009), and are more likely to believe false information about threats (Fessler, Pisor, & Holbrook, 2017). It has more recently been argued that this association between conservatism and threat is specific to social conservatism (Crawford, 2017). Therefore, the logic linking parenthood to social conservatism is straightforward: Parenthood should predict social conservatism, to the extent that socially conservative attitudes and values serve as motivational buffers against perceived threats.

A second key reason for predicting a relationship between parenthood and social conservatism, is that many political issues that are considered integral to social conservatism (or lack thereof) relate directly to sexuality and mating behavior, such as abortion choice, gay marriage, and sex education. For example, negative attitudes to gay marriage are well predicted by people having a long-term mating strategy and associating homosexuality with promiscuity (Pinsof & Haselton, 2016). There are also issues which relate to this tangentially, such as drug-use, which is perceived to increase promiscuous behavior (Kurzban, Dukes, & Weeden, 2010). Parenthood is not only likely to be the result of a long-term mating strategy, it is also likely to be a cause; becoming a parent increases the practical advantages of having a long-term partner to provide additional support for one's children. Consistent with this, there is evidence of a motivational trade-off between parenting motivation and short-term mating goals, such that experimentally inducing an increase in one leads to a decrease in the other (Beall & Schaller, 2017). Some people leading more promiscuous lifestyles may pose a threat to other people's long-term mating goals (e.g. through mate-poaching). It may therefore be more in the interest of parents to adopt political stances which oppose things which might be perceived to facilitate promiscuous lifestyles, such as abortion and drug-use (Weeden & Kurzban, 2014).

There is an additional reason to logically predict a relationship between parenthood and both social conservatism and certain types of moral judgment. Socially conservative attitudes are often group-focused, and the moral preferences associated with conservatism often relate to ingroup-strengthening norms, such as those relating to authority and loyalty (e.g., Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). These moral values have been shown elsewhere to be associated with collectivism (e.g., Van Leeuwen, Park, Koenig, & Graham, 2012; Yilmaz, Hama, Bahçekapili, & Cesur, 2016). Strengthening ingroup ties, through stronger ingroup preferences and greater conformity, may also be a form of threat-management, and people tend to become more conformist and favor their own group more when at greater risk of social or

ecological threats (e.g., Murray & Schaller, 2012; Murray, Trudeau, & Schaller, 2011; Navarrete & Fessler, 2006; Schaller, Park, & Mueller, 2003; Thornhill & Fincher, 2014). Thus, if parenthood leads parents to engage in more threat management, in order to protect their children, we might expect them to advocate attitudes and moral proscriptions which promote ingroup cohesion.

There exists some evidence that experimentally triggering parenting motivation can increase aversion to moral violations. Eibach, Libby, and Ehrlinger (2009) found that parents who were reminded of their parenthood judged moral violations more harshly. Similarly, Buckels et al. (2015) found that scores on the Parental Care and Tenderness (PCAT) scale correlated with harshness of moral judgment, especially if the moral violations in question put children at risk. However, no work has yet established a fundamental difference in moral vigilance between parents and non-parents. Further, despite the multi-dimensional nature of moral foundations (e.g., Haidt, 2012), no research has yet examined the potential differential relationships between parenthood (or parenting motivation) and sensitivity to specific domains of moral violations.

Other research on the lifespan trajectory of individual differences suggests that social conservatism increases with age (Cornelis, Van Hiel, Roets, & Kossowska, 2009; Truett, 1993). Some evidence suggests that this shift in political attitudes may be due to changes in cognitive style (Cornelis, Van Hiel, Roets, & Kossowska, 2009). Other research suggests that conservatism may confer psychological benefits such as increased self-esteem in some individuals (Van Hiel & Brebels, 2011). Whilst insightful, these explanations are incomplete and somewhat circular, as they fail to identify either a catalyst or any functional reason for why these changes occur in the first place. Other related research suggests that normative values such as obedience, religion and tradition—which are conceptually related to social conservatism—rise and fall in line with different developmental stages, as well as showing an overall increase across adulthood (Gouveia, Vione, Milfont, & Fischer, 2015). However, functional explanations for why such a shift might occur are sparse.

Other work examining the lifespan trajectories of the Big Five personality traits consistently shows that Openness to Experience steadily decreases with age throughout adulthood—a change that is more pronounced than any of the other Big Five traits (e.g. Lucas & Donnellan, 2009; Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2011; Wortman, Lucas, & Donnellan, 2012). At least one large four-year longitudinal study directly assessed the impact of major life events on personality change (Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2011). Although not the authors' focal question of interest, results revealed no evidence for an effect of becoming a parent on Openness. Given the relatively small timespan on which the study was conducted and given that Openness is a broad, multifaceted construct, however, this lack of a relationship does not speak strongly against the plausibility of a more specific effect of parenthood on social conservatism.

1.2. Overview of the current studies

Across four studies, we report results addressing four related research questions. First, in Studies 1a, 1b, and 2 we investigate whether parents and non-parents differ in general and domain-specific moral vigilance. Specifically, we investigated whether parenthood was more closely associated with vigilance in domains pertaining to traditionalism and group cohesion ("Binding" moral foundations—Authority, Loyalty, and Purity), relative to 'Individualizing' moral foundations (Harm and Fairness). Second, in Studies 1b and 2 we examined whether parents and non-parents differ in conservatism and—as the conceptual framework predicts—whether this relationship is specific to social (rather than economic) conservatism. Third, in Studies 2 and 3 we investigated whether not only parenthood, but parenting motivation is associated with increased social conservatism and moral vigilance (and, in Study 3, we investigate whether a subtle parenting prime influences

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