



# Gender differences in two motivational pathways to political conservatism

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## ABSTRACT

Gender differences in strategic interests provide a theoretical framework to account for the heterogeneous landscape of gender differences in political preferences. Men's greater scores on social dominance orientation are consistent with a preference for social hierarchy, and women's greater scores on sexual disgust, a construct tapping aversions to sexually adventurous behavior, are consistent with a preference for restricted sexuality. We analyze how these psychological motives relate to political orientation ( $N = 757$ ) and find that (a) there are indirect effects of gender on conservatism through social dominance orientation and sexual disgust, (b) there is a suppressor effect such that controlling for the indirect effect through sexual disgust leads the direct effect of gender to become substantially larger, (c) gender moderates the effect of sexual disgust on conservatism such that sexual disgust is a stronger predictor of conservatism among women, and (d) conservative moral foundations mediate the effect of sexual disgust on political conservatism.

## 1. Introduction

Gender differences in political preferences are a reliable phenomenon. Women are more likely than men to vote for left-leaning candidates (Pew Research Center, 2016), yet gender differences in ideological orientation are not clear. While some studies find that men identify as more politically conservative than women (Pratto, Stallworth, & Sidanius, 1997), the magnitude of this gender difference varies (Jelen, Thomas, & Wilcox, 1994). In historically older samples, it was not uncommon for women to report greater conservatism than men (De Vaus & McAllister, 1989). Despite the tenuous links between gender and conservatism, differences are clearly revealed when specific policy attitudes are examined. For example, women have more liberal views regarding social compassion for disadvantaged groups (Eagly, Diekmann, et al., 2004). However, there are a number of social issues related to traditional morality, religion, and the structure of the family, on which women report more conservative attitudes (Eagly et al., 2004; Ekehammar & Sidanius, 1982).

Here, we adopt an evolutionary approach to analyze how gender differences in strategic interests lead to gender differences in psychological pathways to conservatism. Evolutionary perspectives on political psychology emphasize the strategic nature of value and policy judgments (Weeden & Kurzban, 2017). We focus on the political implications of gender differences in the strategic logic of social hierarchy and restricted sexuality. Using moral foundations theory (Graham, Nosek, et al., 2011), we also examine how gender-differentiated social

motives impact morality, which may serve as an intermediary between social motives and political orientation. We replicate and extend past findings linking men's preferences for social hierarchy to conservatism (Pratto et al., 1997). Importantly, we advance the study of links between sexual strategy and political conservatism by addressing the importance of women's preferences for restricted sexuality (Terrizzi, Clay, & Shook, 2014; Tybur, Inbar, et al., 2015).

### 1.1. Gender differences in strategic interests

Evolutionary analyses of sex differences center on differences in reproductive strategies. Because of differences in obligate parental investment, men's fitness is more strongly influenced by their access to mates, as this critically affects the quantity of potential offspring (Trivers, 1972). For women, access to mates is less critical than factors that influence offspring quality in determining fitness. As such, opportunities to gain access to mates, such as short-term or varied sexual encounters, have greater motivational salience for men, whereas relationship factors determinative of offspring quality, such as the ability and willingness of one's partner to provide support, have greater motivational salience for women (Buss & Schmitt, 1993).

Differences in reproductive interests not only affect men and women's mate preferences, but also their broader agenda in relation to the organization of society (Weeden & Kurzban, 2017). Because the ability to monopolize resources furthers the goal of accessing mates, men are more likely to benefit from principles of societal organization that allow

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themselves or the groups in which they have membership to establish inequality and ascend hierarchy. Historical and anthropological evidence indicates that as societies increase in complexity and stratification, the variance in reproductive success among men increases, with men at the top of the hierarchy experiencing large gains in relative reproduction (Betzig, 2012). For women seeking support and investment from romantic partners, their agenda is harmed to the extent that sexual encounters are easily obtained in society (Price, Pound, & Scott, 2014). When men can obtain sex by offering women only minimal levels of investment, women who request high levels of investment are more likely to have difficulty establishing a romantic relationship consistent with their preferred arrangement. Because decreasing the availability of sex furthers the goal of increasing the level of romantic investment offered by men, women are more likely to benefit from societal principles that restrict the occurrence of sexual activity outside committed relationships (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). In terms of psychological motives, the strategy of social hierarchy is facilitated by a motivation to establish *social dominance* (Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1994), while the strategy of restricted sexuality is facilitated by a motivation to avoid promiscuous sexual activity, which may psychologically manifest as *sexual disgust* (Tybur, Bryan, et al., 2011).

As a construct, sexual disgust was initially theorized to capture reactions to detrimental sexual encounters, broadly defined (Tybur, Lieberman, & Griskevicius, 2009). Thus, the measure of the construct assesses disgust towards sexual acts that may be considered risky or socially deviant, rather than towards sexual activity in general. Functionally, sexual disgust may be thought of as a psychological reaction that tracks the costs associated with potential sexual encounters (Tybur, Lieberman, et al., 2013). Given that people who are committed to restricted sexuality would generally perceive new sexual encounters to carry greater costs (such as threatening the committed nature of current or future relationships), restricted sexuality should be associated with higher levels of sexual disgust. Indeed, restricted sexuality, measured in terms of sociosexual orientation, is associated with sexual disgust in both men and women (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, & Buss, 2015). Sexual disgust is an affective measure that captures more than a dispassionate cognitive judgment about how much one prefers to engage in certain kinds of sexual activity. The experience of disgust motivates a strong avoidance response, and the stronger the disgust reaction, the more likely an individual is to endorse moral rules condemning the disgusting act (for an illustrative examination of how disgust relates to moralizing incest, see Lieberman, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2007; Tybur et al., 2013). Thus, sexual disgust may be a good indicator of how likely individuals are to treat their aversions as more than mere preferences and moralize improper sexual activity.

### 1.2. Social dominance, political ideology, and morality

A distinguishing feature of conservative ideology is its acceptance of social inequality (Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003). Importantly, men are less supportive of egalitarian ideology and less accepting of minorities (Eagly et al., 2004; Pratto et al., 1997). Strategically, social inequality affords men greater opportunities to dominate in competition, consistent with the logic of their reproductive strategy. Men's inegalitarian attitudes may reflect their greater penchant for coalitional aggression over evolutionary history (McDonald, Navarrete, & Van Vugt, 2012). Research on social dominance orientation (SDO), an individual difference variable capturing one's generalized endorsement of group-based dominance, shows that men's greater preference for social dominance is found across diverse samples and cultural settings (Sidanius, Levin, et al., 2000). In studies that find a gender difference in conservatism, men's greater endorsement of group-based dominance plays a mediating role (Eagly et al., 2004; Pratto et al., 1997), a finding that we seek to replicate in the current study.

Going further, we investigate how social dominance motives play a role in gender differences in morality. In terms of moral foundations

theory, SDO is negatively related to *individualizing* foundations (composed of concerns about harm and fairness) and positively related to *binding* foundations (composed of concerns about ingroup loyalty, authority, and purity; Graham et al., 2011). Furthermore, the superordinate individualizing and binding foundations have opposite relations with prejudice against outgroups (Kugler, Jost, & Noorbaloochi, 2014). The largest gender differences in morality are found for the individualizing foundation (Graham et al., 2011), consistent with our approach emphasizing gender differences in the strategic logic of social competition. Although smaller gender differences exist for the binding foundation (Graham et al., 2011), men's endorsement of the binding foundation may be more related to dominance motivations. While endorsement of the binding foundation generally predicts less regard for outgroup members, this relationship is strongest for individuals with a weak internal moral identity (Smith, Aquino, et al., 2014). Given that social dominance motives may influence how morality is construed, in the current study, we test whether SDO is a stronger predictor of moral foundation endorsements among men compared to women.

### 1.3. Sexual disgust, political ideology, and morality

In addition to acceptance of inequality, conservative ideology is associated with traditional social values that restrict the range of acceptable sexual behavior and prescribe a certain family structure. Conservatives are higher on religious fundamentalism and report more disapproving attitudes towards promiscuous sexual activity and abortion (Crawford, Inbar, & Maloney, 2014; Tybur, Merriman, et al., 2010). Social restrictions on sexuality increase the level of commitment required to enter a sexual relationship and are, thus, consistent with the logic of women's reproductive strategy. Compared to men, women are more disapproving of sexual promiscuity, more supportive of religious instruction in schools, and more opposed to the legalization of prostitution (Cotton, Farley, & Baron, 2002; Ekehammar & Sidanius, 1982; Oliver & Hyde, 1993).

Individuals who are motivated to avoid promiscuous sex, such as those who report high levels of sexual disgust, have higher levels of conservatism and religious fundamentalism (Terrizzi et al., 2014; Tybur et al., 2010). With regards to morality, sexual disgust is positively associated with both individualizing and binding morality (Olatunji, Adams, et al., 2012). Sexual disgust's association with binding morality is functionally critical, given that binding morality is essential to the enforcement of social restrictions on sexual activity. Reliable gender differences in sexual disgust have been consistently documented, with women scoring a standard deviation or higher than men (Olatunji et al., 2012; Tybur et al., 2011). Research on the mediating role of sexual disgust suggests that greater sexual disgust accounts for greater cultural collectivism and religious fundamentalism among women (Terrizzi et al., 2014). In the current study, we examine the role of sexual disgust in gender differences in moral foundations and conservatism.

### 1.4. Current study

We investigated the links between gender and political orientation by testing for the existence of gender differences in psychological pathways relating social motives to political conservatism. Specifically, we examined paths through the motives of social dominance and sexual disgust. Based on considerations of gender differences in the strategic benefits of social hierarchy and restricted sexuality, we predicted the existence of one indirect path linking male gender to conservatism through SDO, and another indirect path linking female gender to conservatism through sexual disgust.

The existence of gender differences in social motives raises the possibility that the association between gender and political orientation is reduced by the opposing effects of different motives. Statistical suppression occurs when the entry of correlated predictors into a regression increases the predictive validity of one or both of the predictors

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