



Right-wing attitudes and moral cognition: Are Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation related to utilitarian judgment?



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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated whether and to what extent ideological attitudes relate to moral reasoning. Specifically, in three studies we tested if Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) are associated with a general tendency to make either utilitarian (outcome-based) or deontological (principle-based) decisions in classic trolley-type moral dilemmas. The first study uncovered that both high RWA and high SDO individuals made more utilitarian versus deontological judgments in trolley dilemmas. A second study, using a process dissociation approach, revealed that this increased relative proportion of utilitarian judgments among high RWA and SDO scorers was guided by a decreased preference for the deontological option, rather than an increased preference for the utilitarian option. Finally, a third study using the RWA3D scale showed that especially the 'Authoritarian Aggression' facet scale is related to the decreased preference for the deontological option in high RWA individuals. Overall, these studies provide convergent evidence for substantial differences in moral reasoning tendencies based on ideological attitudes.

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The chasm dividing the political left and right is not merely motivated by a quarrel about specific policy options or economic doctrines, but it also reflects different ethical concerns and divergent value systems (Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012; Koleva, Graham, Ditto, Iyer, & Haidt, 2012). On a wide variety of morally relevant topics liberal and conservative ideologies clash. In the US, for instance, conservatives tend to oppose equal rights for homosexuals, stem-cell research, and abortion, whereas liberals are generally supportive of these issues. Interestingly, both groups use a value-based rhetoric to justify their stance (Clifford & Jerit, 2013). Indeed, psychological research suggests that many of these ideological differences between conservatives and liberals can be explained in terms of underlying differences in moral cognition. In particular, Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) asserted that the moral domain is divided in a number of well-defined subdomains that determine what specific types of content are moralized. Graham et al. further argued that an individual's position on the general left–right dimension is associated with different domains that are considered most relevant for moral judgment. According to this 'Moral Foundation theory' liberals almost exclusively try to minimize 'Harm' and maximize 'Fairness', whereas conservatives also consider (the often competing) domains of 'Loyalty' to the ingroup, submission to 'Authority' and metaphorical 'Purity', as highly relevant in morality.

1. Deontological versus utilitarian moral reasoning

Although the moral foundations research program has uncovered interesting differences between conservatives and liberals with respect to the domains they consider relevant for morality, potential differences between conservatives and liberals in other aspects of moral reasoning remain largely unexplored. For instance, a longstanding debate in philosophy pertains to whether normative ethics should be based in deontological or utilitarian moral theory. Whereas the former tries to determine an action's moral worth by looking at its inherent moral quality through a general system of duties and rights, and uses moral principles to guide reasoning, the latter determines the moral worth of an action solely through its outcome; that is, actions that lead to a net profit in wellbeing are deemed moral whereas those that decrease overall wellness are considered to be immoral. Hence, deontologists argue that some actions are morally right while others are wrong, and that this distinction is based on all-encompassing moral rules (such as 'thou shalt not kill'). Utilitarians on the other hand, argue that whether a specific course of action is right or wrong depends on its consequences. Therefore, to the utilitarian, some actions that might typically be considered wrong can nevertheless be morally appropriate if in that specific context the positive consequences outweigh the negatives.

Utilitarian and deontological thinking have traditionally been considered as two mutually exclusive and opposing perspectives on ethical philosophy. However, a recent psychological model claims that these two perspectives are not incompatible but are simultaneously activated in ordinary moral cognition. According to Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, and Cohen (2004), moral cognition is the result of two

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independent processes, each contending for control: one that leads to utilitarian judgment and one that leads to deontological judgment. When confronted with a moral dilemma our brain will analyze the dilemma both from a deontological and a utilitarian perspective and whichever process happens to be stronger at that moment will determine what type of moral judgment a person will make (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Koenigs et al., 2007).

Research within this moral reasoning domain is typically conducted by examining subjects' responses to a specific class of moral dilemmas: trolley dilemmas (Thomson, 1976). In the archetypal example of these dilemmas a runaway trolley is headed on a collision course with five oblivious workmen. The only way to save these workmen from their imminent demise is to hit a switch that will divert the trolley to another track where it will hit (and kill) only a single worker, effectively sacrificing the one man to save the other five workers. The fundamental idea behind these dilemmas is that according to utilitarian theory you should sacrifice the one man (because this leads to fewer deaths) whilst deontological theory would prohibit you from infringing on the rights of the individual for the sake of the larger collective. A choice to sacrifice the individual is then operationalized as a utilitarian judgment and the choice not to intervene as a deontological judgment. The current research aims to study to what extent differences in ideology are associated with a differential preference for either deontological or utilitarian moral judgment.

2. Dimensions of ideological attitudes

Research that investigated the relations between ideology and morality within the moral foundation theory framework (e.g., Graham et al., 2009) has generally considered socio-political attitudes to exist on a single one-dimensional left–right measure (i.e., only contrasting between liberals and conservatives). However, many political psychology studies have indicated that this left–right dimension is a simplification of the full spectrum of political thought. According to Duckitt's (2001) seminal framework of ideological attitudes, citizens' representation of ideology is better captured by two dimensions of socio-ideological attitudes, each connected with a specific worldview and motivational goals triggered by these world-views. On the one hand, viewing the world as a dangerous place (Altemeyer, 1988) instigates a motivational goal of social control and security at the expense of personal freedom and rights, which gives rise to the adoption of authoritarianism, a construct typically measured through the dispositional Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale (RWA, Altemeyer, 1981). On the other hand, viewing the world as a competitive jungle or a dog-eat-dog world (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010) elicits the motivational goal of social power and superiority at the expense of altruistic concern and equality. This dimension is typically measured with a dispositional measure of Social Dominance Orientation (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Duckitt's dual process model has been verified on numerous accounts (for an overview, see Duckitt & Sibley, 2009). The relationship between RWA and SDO differs across political contexts (i.e., countries, see Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002; Mirisola, Sibley, Boca, & Duckitt, 2007), but they are both unique predictors of a wide variety of political and ideological phenomena. Among other things, RWA is highly associated with religiosity (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992), and having conservative values (Stangor & Leary, 2006; Duriez & Van Hiel, 2002), while SDO is particularly associated with cultural elitism (Pratto et al., 1994), decreased support for equal opportunity and ameliorative policies (Sidanius, Devereux, & Pratto, 1992) or even increased support for the use of cognitive ability tests as part of college admission procedure (Kim & Berry, 2015). Additionally, both RWA and SDO are strong predictors for ethnocentrism, sexism, generalized prejudice, and conservatism (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Roets, Van Hiel, & Cornelis, 2006; Roets, Van Hiel, & Dhont, 2012; Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2002).

Interestingly, SDO and RWA have also been related to the differential appreciation of each of the moral foundations. Two independent studies

have revealed that increased SDO appears to be associated with decreased support for the (liberal) Harm and Fairness foundations, while increased RWA appears to be associated with increased support for the (conservative) Loyalty, Authority and Purity foundations (Federico, Weber, Ergun, & Hunt, 2013; Kugler, Jost, & Noorbaloochi, 2014). This pattern of associations corroborates Graham et al.'s (2009) hypothesis that political differences are rooted in differential moral cognition, but also suggests that it might be worthwhile to study the relationship between moral cognition and political ideology within Duckitt's dual process model for political ideology.

3. Relationships between ideological dimensions and deontological versus utilitarian moral judgment

We are not aware of any prior research that suggests how ideological dimensions and deontological/utilitarian judgment might relate to one another. However, Greene's (2007) model for moral cognition provides a basis to derive hypotheses on how they may be connected. In particular, Greene argues that utilitarian judgment requires that the utilitarian process overcomes the competing deontological process. Importantly, the deontological process is largely driven by a prepotent, negative emotional response to harming others. Hence, when this emotional response is subdued, utilitarian judgment becomes more likely (Greene, 2007). Relevant to the present research question, according to Duckitt's (2001) framework, SDO is characterized by tough-mindedness, a dog-eat-dog world view, and low altruistic concern. Indeed, various studies have empirically corroborated a positive link between SDO and Machiavellianism (Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009), lower empathy (Sidanius et al., 2013), lower importance of the Harm foundation (Federico et al., 2013), and increased aggression (Thomsen, Green, & Sidanius, 2008; Swami et al., 2013). All of these are likely to suppress the emotional restraints against harming others and are hence likely to impact moral cognition. Indeed, in addition to their demonstrated link with SDO, these traits have also been linked to utilitarian judgments (see Bartels & Pizarro, 2011; Conway & Gawronski, 2013; Gao & Tang, 2013). Hence, relying on Greene's (2007) theorizing and combining the previous empirical findings, the prediction for SDO is reasonably straightforward: we hypothesize that high (vs. low) SDO individuals will be more likely to make utilitarian judgments (Hypothesis 1).

In contrast, the link of RWA with moral reasoning seems more ambiguous and the potential effects are less straightforward to predict. In particular, RWA captures the covariation of Conventionalism, Authoritarian Submission, and Authoritarian Aggression (see Altemeyer, 1981), which may not have a uniform influence on moral judgment. On the one hand, high RWA individuals typically show higher regard for conventions and traditional values, they are more religious, and they are more prone to dogmatism (Altemeyer, 1988, 1996). The intuitive prediction would thus be that they are more readily swayed by duty and rule-based moral concerns such as 'thou shall not kill', increasing their tendencies to choose deontological options over utilitarian ones (Hypothesis 2a). On the other hand, RWA is also characterized by Authoritarian Aggression and disregard of personal freedom and rights in favor of the group (Altemeyer, 1981; Duckitt, 2001, see also Kessler & Cohrs, 2008). Hence, the prepotent, negative emotional response to harming another human that is central to the deontological process may also be lowered in high RWA individuals, especially when confronted with 'individual versus group' situations. This is most relevant in trolley dilemmas, which typically reflect exactly this kind of conflict between the rights of an individual versus the benefits to the larger group. This line of reasoning therefore predicts that authoritarians may actually be more willing to make the utilitarian choice to sacrifice the individual in trolley-type moral dilemmas (Hypothesis 2b). In sum, how exactly RWA is associated with moral cognition cannot be straightforwardly predicted and will most likely be determined by what aspect of RWA drives the association: Conventionalism and the inclination

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