

What is the relevance of attachment and life history to political values?

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Abstract

Conservatives and liberals have markedly different ideologies. Conservatives, in comparison to liberals, are risk averse and prefer social inequality, traditionally established and familiar in-group values, and familial allegiance. Liberals are risk prone, are open to new views and ways, value equality and out-group relations, and exhibit high independence and self-reliance. We hypothesize that this variation was functional and socially strategic in human evolutionary history. Conservatives, we propose, are familial and in-group specialists, while liberals are out-group specialists. Furthermore, we hypothesize that the different values are caused proximately by attachment style and associated childhood stresses. Accordingly, low avoidant and high secure attachment and associated low childhood stresses ontogenetically generate conservatives, whereas high avoidant and low secure attachment and associated high childhood stresses give rise to liberals. Results from our study of 123 young adults support the hypotheses. We focus on the psychometric scale of conservatism–liberalism but also examine participants' scores on two additional political scales: social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism. We also analyze participants' scores on time preference scales and life expectancy to test whether political values are related to future-versus-present life history tradeoffs or participants' perceptions of the past. We found no support for conservatism–liberalism's relationship to a future-versus-present tradeoff. Conservatism–liberalism, however, is related to how one understands the past in ways that support the notion that the degree of childhood stress affects political values.

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1. Introduction

As measured in questionnaire-based research by political scientists, conservatism–liberalism is a dimension of individual variation in which the more liberal one is, the less conservative such individual is and vice versa (reviewed in Knight, 1993). Moreover, conservatism–liberalism questionnaire scale scores coincide with people's political involvement and party voting preferences (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996; Knight, 1993). Liberals tend to be: against, skeptical of, or cynical about familiar and traditional ideology; open to new experiences; individualistic and uncompromising, pursuing a place in the world on personal terms; private; disobedient, even rebellious rulebreakers; sensation seekers and pleasure seekers, including in the frequency and diversity of sexual experiences; socially and economically egalitarian; and risk prone; furthermore, they value diversity, imagination, intellectualism, logic, and scientific progress. Conservatives

exhibit the reverse in all these domains. Moreover, the felt need for order, structure, closure, family and national security, salvation, sexual restraint, and self-control, in general, as well as the effort devoted to avoidance of change, novelty, unpredictability, ambiguity, and complexity, is a well-established characteristic of conservatives. Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003) show that the ideology of conservatism is for the establishment and maintenance of security or safety and that this is accomplished by fear and associated management of uncertainty and threats to security. The labels “conservatives” and “liberals” are used widely across cultures and correspond to the differences between the two ideologies we have mentioned (see meta-analysis by Jost et al., 2003 involving 12 countries, 88 samples, and 23,000 people; see also Feather, 1979; Forabosco & Ruch, 1994; Knight, 1993).

Although the differences in values between conservatives and liberals have been thoroughly described across decades of political science research, there is no evolutionary theory for this variation. An open question then is: “Which psychological adaptation(s) yields individual differences in

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political ideology?” A related question is: “Are the feelings and behaviors associated with politics incidental byproducts of responsible psychological adaptation, or are they, at least to some degree, functional (i.e., the reasons why the underlying psychology was favored directly by natural selection)?” We hypothesize that, proximately, individual differences in political values are manifestations of species-typical psychological adaptation of attachment, which in turn ontogenetically arises from experiences of early childhood stressors. Specifically, we propose that conservative ideology is caused by relatively low levels of childhood stress and associated secure attachment, whereas liberal ideology is caused by higher childhood stress and associated avoidant attachment.

In ultimate causal terms, we hypothesize that past selection favored major aspects of attachment because of their adaptive (ancestrally) associated political values and behavior, with conservative values providing advantage in familial and other in-group social relations and with liberal values providing advantage in out-group relations. Hence, we suggest that individual differences in conservatism–liberalism are ontogenetically condition-dependent social tactics that functioned historically in in-group or out-group behavior and that salient ancestral cues affecting individual differences include the degree of childhood stress experienced.

There are three attachment styles described briefly: avoidant persons restrict intimacy and closeness in relationships, avoiding strong emotional connections to others; ambivalent–anxious persons strive to merge with relationship partners and fear loss of closeness in relationships through partner’s divestment or abandonment; and secure-attachment persons also strongly value close and intimate relationships but do not fear abandonment. A person’s attachment style arises at an early age (measured by caretaker–infant interaction) and has significant but imperfect stability across the life span in romantic relationships in adulthood (see reviews in Kirkpatrick, 2005; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). Prior research on attachment styles has tied them empirically to the degree of early childhood stresses. Avoidant and ambivalent–anxious attachment styles (often combined by researchers into a variable called “insecure attachment”) are associated with higher childhood stress than is secure attachment (Chisholm, 1999; Chisholm, Quinlivan, Petersen, & Coall, 2005).

We used anonymous responses on questionnaires to determine the relationships among individual differences in conservatism–liberalism, attachment styles, and childhood stresses, allowing the testing of predictions that high conservatism is associated with high secure and low avoidant attachment and low childhood stress, whereas liberalism correlates positively with avoidant attachment and childhood stress and negatively with secure attachment. We also collected participants’ scores on right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO)—two dimensions of political values related to

conservatism–liberalism. In addition, we collected data on personality in order to control its effects on analyses of relationships between political ideology and other key variables.

Attachment style is related to time preference, a central variable in life history theory (Chisholm, 1999; Chisholm et al., 2005). We examine the relationship between time preference, and hence life history theory, and political values. Our time preference questionnaires determined participants’ attitudes about past, present, and future time frames. Attitude about the past addresses childhood stress, and present-time and future-time preference address life history theory. According to life history theory, rearing stresses, when predictive of reduced adult life span, cause individuals to adopt a present-time preference rather than a future-time orientation. Present-time preference, compared to future-time preference, is associated with allocation of less somatic effort and more reproductive effort and risk taking (e.g., Charnov, 1993; Chisholm, 1999). We collected data on participants’ expected life span as this also is central to life history and time preference.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and demographics

The 123 participants were enrolled in a nonmajor science course at a US university. Participants filled out an anonymous confidential questionnaire at their desk during a class period. They reported their sex (males, 38; females, 85) and age (mean \pm S.D. = 20.06 ± 3.40 years; range, 18–46 years) and their “religious/spiritual affiliation” as “no religion, non-Catholic Christian, Catholic Christian, or other religion.” In analyses, we used a religion variable, with 1 = *religion* ($n=91$) and 0 = *no religion* ($n=32$). The participants indicated socioeconomic status by marking a rung on a ladder scale corresponding to the interpretation of their standing in their self-described community (Singh-Manoux, Adler, & Marmot, 2003). Ladder Rung 1 is the highest in one’s community, and Ladder Rung 10 is the lowest. The mean ladder rung selected was 5.2 (S.D. = 1.77, $n=113$). Participants also reported their life expectancy (Chisholm et al., 2005): expected longevity (mean \pm S.D.) = 80.96 ± 11.23 years ($n=120$).

2.2. Other questionnaire measures

We measured conservatism–liberalism with the 28-item C-scale (Eaves et al., 1997). The C-scale assesses numerous political values: attitude about death penalty, abortion, minorities, immigration, racial segregation, censorship, gay’s and women’s rights, X-rated movies, military draft, aesthetics, pacifism, nuclear power, and so on across most domains that separate reliably the two political wings according to several decades of research. This measure is calculated such that higher scores align with greater conservatism and less liberalism. Cronbach’s α for our

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