

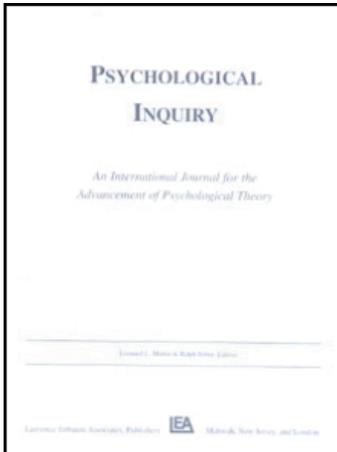
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The End of Equipotentiality: A Moral Foundations Approach to Ideology-Attitude Links and Cognitive Complexity

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The End of Equipotentiality: A Moral Foundations Approach to Ideology-Attitude Links and Cognitive Complexity

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One of the dearest ideas in all of psychology is the old behaviorist notion of “equipotentiality”—the idea that any response an animal can make can be linked with equal ease to any stimulus the animal can perceive. In fact, animals of each species come into the world prepared by evolution (Seligman, 1971) to learn some connections effortlessly—for example, to fear heights or snakes—whereas other connections are hard or impossible to learn—for example, to fear flowers (Mineka & Cook, 1988). The two questions posed by the editor invite us to consider whether equipotentiality applies in political psychology. Question 1 asks whether some political attitudes (e.g., support for women’s suffrage or free-market capitalism) could just as easily become associated with liberal or conservative ideologies. Question 1 could also be applied to Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) as a request to elaborate upon the process by which people with particular patterns of what we called “level-2 adaptations” (the five moral foundations, need for cognitive closure, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, etc.) come to hold particular patterns of attitudes on a menu of controversial issues. Are some people “prepared” to moralize some issues more than others, and in some particular ways? Or could anyone be brought to adopt any side of any issue if the right framings and persuasion techniques were used? Question 2 asks us to focus on integrative complexity and “motivated correction” of intuitive responding and use MFT to comment on whether political equipotentiality is true for these phenomena as well—are people on the left side of the ideological spectrum always more complex in their judgments and value systems, or are there conditions in which the reverse could be true?

In this commentary we explain how MFT allows us to reject equipotentiality in response to both questions yet still understand the substantial degree of “looseness” between ideologies (or political parties) and issue positions across the nations and historical eras documented in the articles cited by the editors. The key idea, as we said in our target article, is that moral foundations are just *foundations*; there is always a great deal of cultural construction necessary to connect specific

issues, framed in culturally and historically variable ways, to the specific moral intuitions of any one individual. Nevertheless, the moral foundations can help explain why equipotentiality does not apply to political ideology.

Question 1: Shifting Relations between Ideologies and Political Attitudes

The editors cite two studies (Kossowska & Van Hiel, 2003; Sugar, Viney, & Rohe, 1992) showing that “liberalism” and “conservatism” are not always good predictors of individuals’ positions on specific issues. Can MFT explain why this might be?

There are actually two issues here: first, how the moral foundations posited by our theory lead to particular attitudes, and second, how MFT accounts for shifts in attitude-ideology relations over time and across cultures or nations. On both issues, perhaps the most important aspect of an MFT explanation is that, despite the important role played by innate intuitive mechanisms, a great deal of moral and political cognition is a function of cultural meaning and social context. For example, as Sugar et al. (1992) pointed out (p. 95), although Social Security was strongly opposed by conservatives (on grounds that we would classify, very roughly, as Ingroup-related) *before* it was implemented, today it has become deeply entrenched in American political and social life, and thus something to be *conserved*. In other words, the *meaning* of Social Security changed, at least for conservatives, once it became the status quo. From an MFT standpoint, then, the relevant questions to ask about specific attitudes or issue positions are (a) what is the meaning of the “pro” position in an individual’s mind (e.g. salient moral intuitions, moral and political concepts, associations with particular social groups) and (b) what is the meaning of the “anti” position? We have argued (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Koleva, Graham, Haidt, Iyer, & Ditto, 2009) that the meanings of political and ideological positions will always be in part *moral* meanings and have shown that MFT can be useful in delineating the moral

nature of those meanings. For instance, Authority-related concerns of respecting status quo institutions could help partially explain the conservative shift on Social Security found by Sugar et al. (1992) while their overall pattern of findings could be speculated to be evidence of a general historical shift from a five-foundation to a primarily two-foundation morality in the West over the last several decades: Perhaps In-group, Authority, and Purity concerns have dwindled in public discourse, and Harm and Fairness concerns have taken over, as Western democracies have become more diverse, wealthy, individualistic, and secular.

As for Kossowska et al.'s (2003) study, one of its key implications from our point of view is the inadequacy of a single bipolar dimension (liberal-conservative) to account for all differences in political attitudes, in this case across nations and cultures. In our target article we used a cluster analysis of data from the Moral Foundations Questionnaire to make this point, showing for instance that social conservatives and economic conservatives (libertarians) have very different patterns of moral concerns. Kossowska et al. found that in Flanders, Need for Cognitive Closure was positively correlated with economic conservatism, whereas in Poland the relationship was negative. Kossowska et al.'s own interpretation—that in Poland communism was the “traditional” economic system—makes a great deal of sense and suggests that the relation between need for closure and support for the status quo persists regardless of whether the status quo system would be described as economically liberal or conservative. Here, too, we posit that moral intuitions based on the Authority foundation play a role, in that preserving the existing social order (whatever form it takes) will seem like a moral obligation to some more than others. And here, too, we reject equipotentiality by predicting that social conservatives characterized by a broad five-foundation morality will always be more likely to want to preserve that existing social or economic system.

The status quo psychological approach to understanding what is going on would involve an investigation into the relations and moderating/mediating influence between moral foundations, need for closure, social and economic ideology, and other level-1 and level-2 variables. There is much value in this, but as we argue in our target article, such an approach could benefit by also including the level-3 analyses of the ideological narratives, worldviews, and frameworks of meaning that cultures and individuals attach to the political issues and economic systems discussed in these articles.

Question 2: Ideology and Integrative Complexity

The second question focuses on the relationship between liberalism-conservatism and complexity of

thinking about political and social issues. The editors cite several studies—one on complexity of thought and Supreme Court decision making (Tetlock, Bernzweig, & Gallant, 1985), one on willingness to help victims of various forms of suffering (Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002), and one on the effects of time constraints on voting preferences (Hansson, Keating, & Terry, 1974)—that suggest a pattern, namely, that “when individuals are in situations (low value pluralism, time pressure, distraction) that lead them to make simple judgments, they make judgments that reflect a conservative orientation” (Martin & Erber, this issue, p. 160). Next we consider these findings on integrative complexity and motivated correction from the perspective of MFT.

The approach underlying Tetlock et al.'s article is the *value pluralism model* (see, e.g., Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Tetlock, 1986; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000; Tetlock, Peterson, & Lerner, 1996). Briefly, this model states that “people are likely to think about an issue domain in integratively complex ways to the degree that the issue domain activates conflicting values that people perceive as (a) important and (b) approximately equally important” (Tetlock, 1986, p. 819). The model distinguishes between “monistic” ideologies, in which “high priority is attached to only one value or set of values that are claimed to be highly consistent with each other,” from “pluralistic” ideologies, in which “high priority is attached to values that are recognized to be in conflict with each other” (Tetlock, 1986, p. 820).

As Tetlock and his colleagues have noted, pluralistic value structures tend to be associated with more complex thinking, because many of the policy choices and social judgments involved in political life invoke conflicting values, which pull toward incompatible conclusions. Monistic ideologies have an easier time dealing with political issues, because they recognize only one value (or tightly integrated set of values), so trade-offs between values are rarely necessary (one trumps all).

Tetlock's work raises an interesting puzzle for MFT. On one hand, we have demonstrated that liberals tend to rely primarily upon two sets of moral intuitions (Harm and Fairness), whereas social conservatives seem to rely more equally on all five foundations (Graham et al., 2009). This finding suggests that conservatives should more frequently face the sorts of conflicts among values that lead to higher integrative complexity, yet few studies have ever found greater integrative complexity to the right of the center than at an equivalent distance to the left. How can we explain this apparent contradiction?

First, both MFT and the value pluralism model assume that people's moral and political judgments are based on values that they regard as fundamental. In other words, “underlying all political ideologies are core or terminal values that specify what the ultimate

goals of public policy should be” (Tetlock et al., 1985, p. 1236). Like the value pluralism model, MFT assumes that there is *an irreducible plurality of core values* that often generates conflicting imperatives in choice situations, as well as conflicts between people and groups who vary in their assessments of their relative importance (on the irreducible plurality of moral goods, see, e.g., Shweder & Haidt, 1993; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). We have previously argued that psychologists must broaden their conception of morality to understand and study the full range of core moral values that underlie these conflicts. In our target article we made an additional argument about the importance of McAdams’s (1995) third level of personality to understanding political ideology: Personal and ideological narratives can reveal how and why different core values can take precedence for different people at different times in their lives—and, we predict, these narratives can also shed light on how different values may become central for different issues.

As previously mentioned, there are consistent differences between (social) conservatives and liberals in patterns of salience of the five foundations. In particular, self-described liberals place much higher importance on Harm and Fairness than on Ingroup, Authority, and Purity (Graham et al., 2009; McAdams et al., 2008; van Leeuwen & Park, 2009). This finding implies some predictions about integrative complexity from a moral foundations perspective. For example, liberals should display greater integrative complexity when an issue is perceived to implicate both Harm and Fairness (and when they pull in different directions), but they should display *lower* complexity when the values in conflict are either Harm or Fairness (on one side) and either Ingroup, Authority, or Purity (on the other). Conversely, conservatives should experience greater value conflict (and thus higher complexity) in situations that require them to reconcile conflicting demands of Ingroup, Authority, or Purity.

Tetlock et al. (1985) noted the need for research on “the degree to which different policy issues activate values that prescribe contradictory courses of action” (p. 1237). MFT can, we think, make at least two contributions in this regard. First, it can help to enumerate the core values of various ideological groups (including, but not limited to, the classical categories of “liberal” and “conservative”), identifying which values cause the most acute conflicts for members of these groups.

Second, by focusing attention on fundamental moral intuitions, MFT can inform the design of future research on integrative complexity and ideology by specifying the conditions in which liberals might reason in integratively *simple* ways and conservatives might reason in integratively *complex* ways. As Tetlock has pointed out (see Tetlock, Armor, & Peterson, 1994), liberals (which includes the majority of academic social scientists) tend to make normative attributions to

cognitive style (i.e., complex is good and simple is bad), but there are cases (such as debates about slavery before the Civil War) in which integratively complex thinking is actually associated with positions and outcomes that liberals regard as bad (e.g., banning slavery in the Northern states while allowing it to continue where it already existed). MFT can help conceptualize and predict the issues that will elicit more or less integrative complexity from individuals on the Left and the Right, based on which foundation-related values are put into conflict in a particular issue.

Next, let us consider the work by Linda Skitka and her colleagues (2002) on the “motivated correction hypothesis.” According to this hypothesis, both liberals and conservatives make “very automatic” personal attributions when making moral judgments and decisions about assisting people in need (e.g., about AIDS patients needing subsidized drug treatment), but they differ in “their motivation to correct these first-pass attributions about the causes of behavior in domains where ideological differences have been observed” (Skitka et al., 2002, p. 471). Why are liberals more motivated than conservatives to correct their initial intuitive judgments and attributions?

To answer this from a moral foundations perspective, we focus on Skitka et al.’s (2002) Study 4, which examined the effects of cognitive load on willingness to help AIDS patients in need of subsidized medical treatment. Briefly, they found that although liberals were more willing than conservatives to help patients who were judged responsible for their illness, this difference disappeared when cognitive load was added; liberals under cognitive load were no more willing to help than conservatives. Skitka et al. explained these findings in terms of the motivated correction hypothesis: Cognitive load does not interfere with the attributional phase, which is automatic, but it *does* interfere with the second stage, in which the intuitive attributions of liberal participants are presumably suppressed or overridden by their concern for the victims.

This study seems to involve an explicit conflict between two moral foundations: *Purity*, evoked by the subject matter of blood, sex, homosexuality, and disease, and *Harm*, evoked by the patients’ need for subsidized treatment. It may be that the stimulus scenario activates intuitions and concerns related to both foundations for both liberals and conservatives, but in liberals (when not under cognitive load) the Purity concerns are suppressed or “corrected” because they conflict with the Harm concerns; for conservatives’ explicit judgments, the reverse may be the case. The cognitive load effect suggests that for liberals, resolving the conflict between the Harm and Purity appraisals is effortful in a way that it is not for conservatives. This introduces the possibility that the implicit or automatic moral reactions of liberals could be similar to those of conservatives—at least, more similar than the

ideological differences we've found in explicitly endorsed moral values. Liberals may suppress their intuitive responses related to Ingroup, Authority, or Purity (especially when they directly conflict with Harm and Fairness concerns), and giving them time constraints (as in the Hansson et al. study) or cognitive load (as in the Skitka et al. study) makes them unable to do this. More research will be needed to test this intriguing hypothesis generated by viewing these findings in light of the moral foundations.

MFT also predicts that under the right circumstances, conservatives under cognitive load or time pressure might reason more like liberals. For instance, a proposal for generous universal health care for children would evoke positive Harm-foundation-related intuitive responses from everyone because they care for the most vulnerable and innocent members of society, but conservatives might suppress this initial response with more explicitly endorsed moral concerns of social order, personal responsibility, and moral disgust at cheaters who would abuse the system.

In sum, our moral foundations perspective suggests that depending on which foundation-related concerns or values are in conflict, opposite ideological patterns are possible for both integrative complexity and morally motivated correction. However, this does not mean that liberals and conservatives are equally likely to show either effect. Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003) showed that there is a consistent difference between liberals and conservatives on self-report measures related to cognitive complexity and tolerance of ambiguity.

Conclusion

Although MFT is still in its infancy, the foregoing considerations suggest a number of potentially fruitful interactions between the theory and other work in political and moral psychology. The results of the studies cited strongly suggest that equipotentiality does not apply when it comes to the degree of integrative complexity that liberals and conservatives bring to political cognition. Particularly in liberal democratic societies such as the United States, liberals are predisposed toward more integratively complex thinking (because they are more likely to recognize value pluralism and thus experience value conflict). However, under some circumstances, such as when the individualizing and binding moral foundations activated by an issue conflict for conservatives but lead to no conflict at all for liberals (e.g., gay marriage), one is likely to find greater integrative complexity among moderate conservatives.

Perhaps the most general implication of MFT for political psychology and the study of ideology is that, although innate structures (like the five foundations) and stable individual differences (such as Need for

Cognitive Closure) are important, it is equally true that *meaning matters* (Medin, Ross, & Cox, 2006)—the cultural narratives and meanings associated with policy issues and social contexts are crucial determinants of cognition and reasoning, and even of ideological self-identification (Conover & Feldman, 1981). This is a focus of our current work on MFT, and we look forward to work from other researchers that will explore these connections in diverse ways.

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