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Attitudes of the selfless: Explaining political orientation with altruism

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on political orientations, which can be understood as one's left- versus right-wing attitude, has shown that some personality factors yield explanatory power. In the current work, we consider the role of altruism – a personality construct which does not exclusively map onto one of the broad personality dimensions typically studied. Altruism was predicted to relate to left-wing attitudes due to an overlap regarding concerns for social equality, and a discrepancy between well-known attributes of right-wingers and altruistic individuals, respectively. Moreover, altruism was expected to explain unique variance in political orientation beyond the 'Big Six' broad dimensions as it relates to aspects not covered by the latter. Both hypotheses were tested in a web-based questionnaire study ($N = 137$). Besides replicating findings of previous research, results corroborated a strong positive association between altruism and left-wing attitudes, and altruism was found to account for substantial variance in political orientation after controlling for the HEXACO factors of personality. We conclude that altruism is an important construct which deserves attention whenever political attitudes or other topics relating to social equality are at stake.

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1. Introduction

If there is one simple truth to politics, it is that people differ in their political attitudes. In fact, most balanced societies will naturally comprise individuals with different global political orientation which has thus been a variable of interest for a long time (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008). Mostly, a person's ideology is seen as a continuum with the poles liberal and conservative (e.g., Napier & Jost, 2008) or left-wing and right-wing (e.g., Cavazza & Mucchi-Faina, 2008), respectively. This latter distinction, though rather crude and not always sufficiently fine-grained (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003), is the most common way to classify political attitudes (Thorisdottir, Jost, Liviatan, & Shrout, 2007). Within this view, left-wingers (liberals) are typically described as flexible thinkers with a preference for social change and equality, whereas right-wingers (conservatives) tend to resist change and accept hierarchy and inequality among groups or individuals (Carney et al., 2008; Thorisdottir et al., 2007). Previous research has established that political attitudes relate to important factors such as prejudice (Ekehammar, Akrami, Gylje, & Zakrisson, 2004), subjective well-being (Napier & Jost, 2008), and others (e.g., van Hiel & de Clercq, 2009). It is thus not surprising that political orientation and related

constructs such as, for instance, right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, or conservatism represent variables of substantial interest.

Naturally, researchers have focused on the importance of personality, values, or motives for political orientations (e.g., Carney et al., 2008; Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci, 2008). Regarding the influence of personality, much attention has been given to the so-called five-factor-model of personality (e.g., Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Zimbardo, 1999). According to this approach, neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness – commonly referred to as the Big Five – are proposed to provide a broad account of individual differences in affect, cognition, and behavior (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1999). Of those five basic dimensions, openness to experience is most consistently linked to political orientations (e.g., Van Hiel, Kossowska, & Mervielde, 2000) and experiential openness was distinguished by McCrae (1996) as 'the major psychological determinant of political polarities' (p. 325).

Empirically, openness to experience correlates positively with left-wing ideology and negatively with conservatism or similar constructs (e.g., Van Hiel, Mervielde, & De Fruyt, 2004). Aggregating such results, the meta-analytic bivariate correlation between openness to experience and right-wing authoritarianism is $-.36$ ($N = 15,570$, Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), and openness to experience and political conservatism correlate with $-.32$ ($N = 2,606$, Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), respectively. Note that, though we would not propose to equate right-wing ideology with author-

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itarianism or conservatism, we assume that the latter are more likely to be found in right-wingers.

Some researchers have additionally demonstrated an association between one of the four other Big Five-factors (or further personality variables) and criteria reflecting political attitudes (e.g., Akrami & Ekehammar, 2006; Carney et al., 2008; Cohrs, Maes, Moschner, & Kielmann, 2007; Riemann, Grubich, Hempel, Mergl, & Richter, 1993; Thorisdottir et al., 2007). However, none have explicitly or directly focused on the impact of dispositional altruism so far – a factor which we deem vital for political attitudes, as we will reason in what follows.

Herein, we consider altruism an important predictor of political orientation, even beyond the entire five-factor-approach. Altruism can be defined as 'a willingness to pay a personal cost to provide benefits to others in general' (Fowler & Kam, 2007, p. 813). It emphasizes aspects of being sympathetic, soft-hearted, and benevolent, such that altruistic individuals are more willing to accept personal drawbacks for the sake of others. Also, helpfulness, generosity, and a prosocial orientation have been used to describe people high in altruism. On the behavioral level, actions such as giving money to a stranger, donating blood, or volunteering for a social cause are typically named whenever altruism is concerned (e.g., Lee & Ashton, 2006; Lee, Lee, & Kang, 2003; Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981).

Within Ashton and Lee (2007) and Lee and Ashton (2004, 2006) HEXACO model of personality (Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, eXtraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience, which we will refer to as the Big Six), altruism can be located interstitially among honesty–humility, agreeableness, and emotionality. Since altruism divides its loadings between these three factors (rather than loading on just one of them), it is not sufficiently unique to be referred to as an own, broad, personality dimension and/or facet scale (as, for instance, the facet altruism of the NEO-PI-R, cf. Costa & McCrae, 1992). More precisely, 'the overall tendency to be altruistic or to be antagonistic will represent a blend of those three dimensions' (Lee & Ashton, 2006, p. 185). So, not surprisingly, strong correlations (ranging from .37 to .60) between altruism and these three factors have been found (Lee & Ashton, 2006).

We propose a relation between altruism and political orientation for two related reasons: firstly, altruism and a left-wing ideology share the goal of social equality. Secondly, some aspects of being altruistic appear to conflict with notions typically attributed to right-wingers.¹ With respect to the first point, those high in altruism are usually understood to invest effort and/or personal endowments to improve the well-being of others who may be disadvantaged or, more generally, somehow in need. Thereby, altruists strive to lessen social inequality – an aspect which is typically considered to set left-wingers apart from right-wingers (Carney et al., 2008; Thorisdottir et al., 2007). In a similar vein, supporting open exchange of opinions and opposing prejudice, which, in turn, have been associated with altruism (e.g., Cavazza & Mucchi-Faina, 2008; Fowler & Kam, 2007; Jost & Thompson, 2000; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), are often attributed to left-wingers. So, a common focus on social equality should link altruism with a left-wing ideology.

Secondly, right-wing ideology has been proposed to coincide with toughness, aggressiveness, or rigidness (Block & Block, 2006; Carney et al., 2008) – attributes which seem difficult to reconcile with the soft-heartedness of altruists. Therefore, it appears to be less likely that individuals high in altruism tend to be right-wingers – though, of course, this should not be considered a deterministic proposition. In sum, altruism should therefore be

connected with a left-wing attitude, both due to a common interest in social equality as well as a rather unlikely fit between altruism and characteristics typically attributed to right-wingers.

Hypothesis 1: Individuals high in altruism will endorse a left-wing ideology.

In addition to this simple association, we deem altruism to unveil novel parts of the big picture, because it is related to differences between left- and right-wingers which openness to experience (and other personality variables) will not be sensitive to. Stated bluntly, we consider altruism an important factor *beyond* those previously investigated. Regarding the most consistently replicated predictor of political orientations, openness to experience, more flexible and open-minded individuals are differentiated from those who tend to prefer order, structure, or discipline (Thorisdottir et al., 2007). Those high in altruism, on the other hand, set more store by matters of social equality in the sense of rejecting individual or group differences, or a support of wide participation (Fowler & Kam, 2007; Pratto et al., 1994). Consequently, we propose that these aspects of altruism are not completely covered by openness to experience or other broad personality dimensions (cf. Lee & Ashton, 2006). That is, altruism should additionally explain differences in peoples' political orientation.

Note that, in approaching this conjecture, we will control for the Big Six rather than the Big Five dimensions of personality for two reasons: firstly, previous research has shown moderate to strong correlations between honesty–humility and altruism (Lee & Ashton, 2006). It is thus important to ensure that altruism explains unique variance while controlling for honesty–humility – thereby testing whether altruism involves specific and exclusive aspects which are linked to political orientation. Secondly, controlling for six rather than for five broad personality dimensions represents a more conservative test of incremental validity. At the same time, note that the dimensions of the HEXACO model do cover all aspects of the five-factor approach (e.g., Ashton & Lee, 2007, 2008a). Thus, if altruism is shown to explain variance beyond the Big Six, it can also be deemed to comprise unique explanatory power over and above the Big Five.

Hypothesis 2: Altruism will explain unique variance in political orientation beyond the Big Six.

2. Study

2.1. Methods and measures

The entire study was run via the internet. The Big Six were assessed by means of the German short version (100-items) of the HEXACO-PI which has been used in previous online-studies successfully (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009). As such, all six factors were based on 16 items each – while altruism comprised four items. So, to obtain a more reliable altruism score, we additionally included the remaining four items belonging to altruism from the full version of the HEXACO-PI (208 items, Lee & Ashton, 2006). Sample items of the HEXACO-PI altruism scale are 'I have sympathy for people who are less fortunate than I am', or 'I like the idea that only the strong should survive' (reverse coded). Because all altruism items are typically measured at the end of the 100-item HEXACO-PI, we completely re-randomized the order in which all 104 items were presented, to avoid recency effects.

We asked participants to rate their political orientation on a 7-point-scale, the end-points of which were labelled 'left' and 'right', respectively. Similar measures have recently been used by Carney

¹ Necessarily, both views are simplifications. For example, some conservatives may also be interested in bringing about equality, though they would typically strive for equality of opportunity rather than condition.

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