



## Conservatives are happier than liberals, but why? Political ideology, personality, and life satisfaction<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Political conservatives are happier than liberals. We proposed that this happiness gap is accounted for by specific attitude and personality differences associated with positive adjustment and mental health. In contrast, a predominant social psychological explanation of the gap is that conservatives, who are described as fearful, defensive, and low in self-esteem, will rationalize away social inequalities in order to justify the status quo (system justification). In four studies, conservatives expressed greater personal agency (e.g., personal control, responsibility), more positive outlook (e.g., optimism, self-worth), more transcendent moral beliefs (e.g., greater religiosity, greater moral clarity, less tolerance of transgressions), and a generalized belief in fairness, and these differences accounted for the happiness gap. These patterns are consistent with the positive adjustment explanation.

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### 1. Introduction

Ever since Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford's (1950) pioneering work on authoritarianism, social psychologists have been interested in the relationship between political ideology and personality. For the most part, this work painted an unflattering portrait of political conservatives (Tetlock, 1994; Tetlock & Mitchell, 1993). For example, reviews suggest conservatives are more dogmatic and intolerant of ambiguity; higher in needs for order, structure, and closure; lower in self-esteem; higher in fear of threat and loss; and prefer less complex modes of thinking (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Even children in nursery school, who 20 years later self-identify as conservatives, have been described as fearful, rigid, inhibited, and vulnerable (Block & Block, 2006).

In contrast to descriptions of conservatives as fearful and low in self-esteem, research repeatedly reveals another curious finding: Conservatives are happier than liberals. In surveys of people from across the globe, conservatives report being more satisfied with their lives than liberals (Carroll, 2007; Napier & Jost, 2008; Taylor, Funk, & Craighill, 2006). For example, from 2005 to 2007, Gallup

reported that 61% of Republicans said they were personally very happy as compared to only 47% of Democrats (Carroll, 2007). Popular books (e.g., Brooks, 2006, 2008; Schweizer, 2008) have similarly documented and amplified this theme, pointing to positive qualities associated with conservatism (e.g., being happier, more helpful and generous, harder working, with closer families) in national samples. The ideology–happiness relationship is reliable, small to moderate in size, and potentially quite meaningful given its implications for understanding political ideologies and behavior.

What explains this life satisfaction gap, and how is it reconcilable with psychological descriptions of conservatives? Arguing from a Systems Justification Theory perspective, Napier and Jost (2008) reasoned that conservatives' desire to perpetuate the existing social order leads them to rationalize away social inequality and justify the suffering of disadvantaged groups. For example, when confronted by evidence of social inequalities (e.g., income or health care disparities between African- and European-Americans), conservatives claim the differences are fair while liberals ruminate over them, thereby producing a difference in happiness. Although demographic factors such as age, income, marital status, and church attendance are sometimes mentioned and sometimes controlled for as other contributors to happiness, system justification has been the predominant social psychological explanation.

In contrast, we suggest that other fundamental personality and ideology differences, which have traditionally been associated with positive adjustment and mental health, exist between conservatives and liberals and better explain the gap. These include differences in personal agency, transcendent moral beliefs

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(e.g., religiosity, moral clarity), and positive outlook. As we will show, individual difference measures of system justification are closely related to an array of other measures that are usually seen as markers of positive adjustment and mental health (e.g., personal control, optimism, trust, moral clarity), not as markers of defensiveness and distortion. Finally, we suggest that objective measures of social inequality do not have the implications attributed to them by Napier and Jost. These ideas will be examined in four studies.

By way of brief review, conservatives believe that the traditions of a developed society represent the collective wisdom of the ages, having been adapted to meet the particular needs and challenges of the culture and environment, and therefore ought to be preserved. In contrast, liberalism is based upon beliefs in progress, the essential goodness of the human race (and the related idea that social inequalities reflect failings of society rather than the individual), and the protection of political and civil liberties. Whereas conservatives generally share the basic values of individual freedom combined with individual responsibility, limited government, economic opportunity, strong national defense (and in-group preservation), and belief in a transcendent moral order, liberals place high value on equality, endorse tolerance and pluralism in matters of morals, religion, and politics, and see government as a vital instrument for solving social injustice (Brooks, 2010; Chambers, Baron, & Inman, 2006; Hunter, 1992; Lakoff, 2002).

As these descriptions suggest, conservatives and liberals differ in the moral values they emphasize. Moral foundations theory (Haidt & Graham, 2009) identifies five psychological foundations of morality. The first two, Harm/Care and Fairness/Reciprocity, are called *individualizing foundations* because they focus on the rights and welfare of individuals. The last three, Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity, are called *binding foundations* because they pull people together into cohesive groups and help to suppress individual selfishness. For Haidt (2008a), morality is not just about how people treat each other (the individualizing foundations), “it is also about binding groups together, supporting essential institutions, and living in a sanctified and noble way.” Krebs (2008), in his evolutionary account of morality, similarly emphasized the role that morality plays in promoting cooperation and suppressing selfishness within groups, thereby maintaining a balance between the interests of the individual and the group. Research indicates that liberals emphasize and use the individualizing foundations more than the binding foundations whereas conservatives emphasize and use the five foundations more equally (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009).

Differences in moral foundations should be associated with more specific demographic, personality, and attitudinal differences. These include the importance of personal agency, transcendent moral beliefs (i.e., religiosity, transcendent vs. relativist moral conviction, tolerance for deviations from prescriptions), and positive outlook.

First, the binding foundations emphasize the effective coordination of activities in groups, promoting intragroup cooperation and minimizing individual selfishness. As such, there is a greater emphasis on a balance between rights and responsibilities, with group members being accountable to one another for regulating their conduct in ways that promote the group’s values and goals while at the same time pursuing their own individual interests to the best of their abilities. One facet is a greater focus on *personal agency*, as expressed in stronger endorsements of personal control (e.g., internal control, conscientiousness, hard work, perseverance), responsibility, and reliability (e.g., trustworthiness). Without personal agency, people can readily shirk responsibilities and excuse transgressions and failures by blaming them on external circumstances. In fact, self-control, along with loyalty and duty, is regarded as a core element in the binding moral foundations

(Graham et al., 2009). Research (Feather, 1984; Phares, 1976) suggests that conservatives generally score higher on internal control as well as the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE), which emphasizes the inherent meaningfulness and value of work and the strong linkage between one’s efforts and outcomes (and is positively associated with achievement; Mirels & Garrett, 1971). Liberals, on the other hand, are more likely to see outcomes as due to factors beyond one’s personal control, including luck and properties of the social system (Mitchell, Tetlock, Mellers, & Ordóñez, 1993). Furthermore, perceptions of internal control, self-efficacy, and the engagement in meaningful work are strongly related to life satisfaction (Myers, 1993; Myers & Diener, 1995). These differences in personal agency could, in and of themselves, explain much of the happiness gap.

System justification theory also mentions aspects of personal agency but considers agency to be the outcome of rationalizing the status quo. For example, people can justify inequality by concluding that better outcomes go to those who work harder (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). However, beliefs in personal agency can exist for many reasons other than rationalization (e.g., Bandura, 1997, describes four origins of self-efficacy beliefs, none of which involve rationalization of injustice), and it is an empirical question whether measures of personal agency will mediate happiness independently of measures of system justification.

Second, the binding foundations play a key role in most religions (Haidt, 2008b). Religion provides the ultimate authority figure, sense of purpose, and clear prescriptions for how to live. Spiritual beliefs contribute to life satisfaction because they instill meaning and direction, offer senses of beauty, uplift, and optimism, provide explanations for events, give a sense of closeness to God, and offer comfort in difficult times, and these characteristics are above and beyond the larger, supportive social networks of those who are religious (Cohen, 2002; Myers, 1993). Indeed, religiosity is closely related to life satisfaction (Brooks, 2008; Myers & Diener, 1995), and surveys show that conservatives are more religious than liberals (Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004). Although Napier and Jost (2008) controlled for church attendance in two of their three studies when testing whether system justification contributed to the happiness gap, they did not test whether the broader concept of religiosity is a contributor in its own right, nor did they discuss possible conceptual reasons why religion may explain the gap.

Religion and type of moral conviction often go together but they are not coextensive. People differ in the extent to which they see moral prescriptions as objective, stable, and universal vs. subjective, changeable, and local (Schlenker, Miller, & Johnson, 2009). By believing in the objectivity of moral principles and having clear prescriptions for how to live, people can derive a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Indeed, people who report greater transcendent moral commitment also display greater purpose in life and less normlessness or alienation (Schlenker, 2008), and purposefulness is associated with greater life satisfaction (Ryan, 1981). A transcendent as compared to relativist moral code also implies less tolerance for deviations. If moral prescriptions are clear and universally applicable, they *should* be followed, transgressions *should* be condemned, and self-serving excuses and justifications for failing to live up to those prescriptions become less acceptable (Schlenker, Weigold, & Schlenker, 2008). A relativist moral code more readily permits people to excuse or justify failures to do the “right” thing. When moral codes lack clarity and promote flexibility, people may come to feel a sense of normlessness (lack of purpose in life) and alienation. Further, if people believe there are acceptable excuses and justifications for morally questionable acts, they are more likely to engage in those acts, which in turn can create problems and unhappiness (Schlenker et al., 2009). Although relevant data are scarce, there are indications that conservatives are more likely to endorse the steadfast commitment

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