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Individual differences underlying attitudes to the death penalty

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ABSTRACT

There are strongly-held arguments regarding attitudes to the death penalty on both sides of the debate. The current study examines how underlying individual differences in personality, expressed morality, prior victimhood, attitudes to abortion, and gender predict attitudes to the death penalty. An online questionnaire design was used, comprising a measure of personality (the IPIP-50), a measure of socio-moral attitudes, a measure assessing attitudes to abortion, and as an outcome, the death penalty attitude scale. High Extraversion and Conscientiousness, low Openness and Emotional Stability, and lower pro-abortion attitudes all significantly predicted support for the use of the death penalty. In a multivariate analysis all constructs bar Emotional Stability remained independent predictors of support for the death penalty. Males were more in support of the death penalty and more retributive and revenge-orientated in their rationale for such support. These findings reinforce previous research surrounding individual influences on attitudes to the death penalty and indicate personality factors shaping right-wing authoritarianism as key influences on the construct, rather than a priori higher level measures of morality, gender or victimhood.

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1. Individual differences in attitudes to the death penalty

The severity of punishment for a given criminal act is sometimes justified by the claim such punishment acts as a deterrent to further crime, and this is particularly the case for nations that use the death penalty (Becker, 2006). Opponents of the death penalty point out that there is no evidence for the alleged deterrent effect, and that to take the life of a person who breaks a moral boundary by killing is itself immoral (Donohue & Wolfers, 2006). Some individuals support the reintroduction or application of the death penalty in countries where it has been withdrawn. This study examines how general personality traits, gender, self-reported morality (both to, being a victim of crime and attitudes toward abortion (itself a form of State-sanctioned killing to some) influence views toward the death penalty.

McKelvie and Daoussis (1982), and McKelvie (1983) found extraverts supported the death penalty more than introverts. High Extraversion, along with low Openness and low Emotional Stability have been previously and significantly related to authoritarianism, which was itself marked by a greater willingness to deliver harsh punishments (Colemont, Hiel, & Cornelis, 2011). Capital

punishment is supported more by authoritarian individuals (Feather & Souter, 2002), and also favoured by persons with greater numbers of attributes associated with borderline personality disorder (Watson, Ross, & Morris, 2003). Using the five factor model of personality, Robbers (2006) found that high levels of Extraversion, Conscientiousness and low Openness predicted pro-death penalty attitudes, whereas low Agreeableness scores predicted attitudes opposing the death penalty. Higher Extraversion and Conscientiousness traits may be lead to being pro-death penalty due to such persons characteristically favouring an overtly social, orderly, and conventional society (Roberts, Jackson, Fayard, Edmonds, & Meints, 2009).

Gender strongly influence on attitudes to the death penalty; a meta-analysis of 23 studies by Lester (1998) found males more inclined to pro-death penalty attitudes than females. It is possible that gender effects are more complex than these simple associations imply, as gender shows an interaction with personality traits, with females being higher in extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism than males (Schmitt, Realo, Voracek, & Allik, 2008). Males support the death penalty for reasons of retribution and revenge rather than deterrence (Vidmar, 1974), and this could also reflect issues of social dominance, males preferring a sense of hierarchal control (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994).

Morality is a multifaceted phenomenon which governs an individual's perceptions of behaviour perceived to be right or wrong,

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and encompasses views about truth, affiliation, life, law, and legal justice (Gibbs, Widaman, & Colby, 1982; Rest, Edwards, & Thoma, 1997). Killing another person is an inherently immoral act, whether done by an individual or a group (though societies may attempt to morally-diffuse responsibility for the act by defining the act a State-sanctioned penalty). However, society is made up of individuals, who, in aggregate, influence societal decisions; moreover these individuals are active in campaigning for or against how we chose to enforce or laws. It is therefore it is important to examine the relationship between morality, individual differences, and public attitudes.

Morality research has sometimes used dilemmas (e.g., the runaway trolley paradigm; Nichols & Mallon, 2006) to operationalize the construct. One difficulty with such dilemmas is that they are hypothetical, and therefore subject to the argument they more measure self-projection than moral reasoning (Klein, 2011). Kohlberg (1984) proposed that there are four moral orientations typically adopted by individuals; normative orientation (following duties and rights, due to rules); fairness orientation (emphasising justice and equality); utilitarianism orientation (emphasising welfare and happiness for self and others); and perfectionism orientation (good conscience and autonomy). These orientations have been argued to represent progressively higher modes of moral reasoning (Vries & Walker, 1986). Kohlberg and Elfenbein (1981) found persons with a higher moral reasoning level showed greater opposition toward capital punishment. This finding may potentially be mediated through higher moral reasoning being a product of greater abstract thinking surrounding human rights, and the dignity of human beings. If this is true, Openness (which correlates with IQ) should be higher in persons opposing the death penalty.

Internal moral views validate the death penalty as right or wrong depending on individual cognitions. Over 11 studies, O'Neil, Patry, and Penrod (2004) found individuals with favourable attitudes toward the death penalty had an increased willingness to convict in capital jury trials. Their results were explained using the biased assimilation theory (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979), whereby individual characteristics and beliefs influence processing of external information. Other research conducted by Johnson and Tamney (1988) has shown the existence of moral plasticity, suggesting morality has a fluid structure, applied differently depending on the ethical dilemma present. This is exemplified by the often paradoxical attitudes to abortion; persons who are pro-abortion ('pro-choice') are often opposed to the death penalty, whereas persons opposed to abortion are often pro-death penalty. Claggett and Shafer (1991) examined this discontinuity in attitudes to life and found similar results, indicating attitudes to abortion may also help predict support for the death penalty.

A final area potentially informing the genesis of attitudes to the death penalty is being a victim of crime. Tseloni and Zarafonitou (2008) found victimisation led to an increase in fear of crime, and fear of crime leads to a greater willingness to endorse the death penalty (Keil & Vito, 1991). Findings regarding the influence of being a victim on punishment vary; while Dull and Wint (1997) found victims and non-victims showed no difference in their attitudes toward the death penalty, Klama and Egan (2011) found that the combination of fear of crime and greater Conscientiousness predicted greater punitiveness.

Previous research has typically examined the link between individual factors and death penalty attitudes on a construct-by-construct basis, however these constructs are rarely discrete; it is crucial within research to understand how these variables interact, and the example of attitudes to a complex social phenomena such as the death penalty is a strong test of such conjunctions. This study will attempt to understand the extent to which personality, attitudes to abortion, morality, and being a victim of crime (or not) explains attitudes to the death penalty in a multifactorial model.

These findings from previous studies lead the following predictions to be made, all of which suggest an individual differences approach can help understand the basis of attitudes to the death penalty. We predict: high levels of Extraversion and Conscientiousness alongside low Emotional Stability and Openness will predict pro-death penalty views; males will be more pro-death penalty orientated than females; males will show more retributive motives for the use of the death penalty; being a victim of crime will be associated to death penalty support, and support for abortion will predict lower support for the death penalty. As an individual's morality upholds their view of the death penalty and this is typically reciprocal to their attitudes to abortion, we predict that the importance of morality to predict support (or rejection) of the death penalty argument will be less important than the disposition of the person making the decision.

2. Methods and procedure

2.1. Participants

An on-line Internet survey recruited a cohort of 222 participants, of whom 15 were excluded (see below); this left 207 participants with useable data (M:F = 68:139). Participants were aged between 18 and 71 (Mean = 30.12 years, standard deviation (SD) = 11.30). All were recruited by a hyperlink to an online survey through social networking sites such as Facebook or other online survey portal websites. The cohort comprised 151 participants from death penalty-abolished countries, and 56 from death penalty-practicing countries (136 (66%) from the United Kingdom, 52 (25%) from the USA, and the remaining 19 (9%) from Spain, New Zealand, Switzerland, Germany, Canada, India, Australia, South Africa, United Arab Emirates, and Singapore). Of the cohort, 11 participants were aged below 18, so could not provide informed consent; these responses were removed from the data set. A further 4 participants were removed as they failed to complete all scales.

2.2. Design

The study was approved by the University ethics committee. A questionnaire was produced using Google Docs and hosted on the Internet. The study sought to predict attitudes toward the death penalty via scores on standardised questionnaires and demographic information. All participants completed the same questionnaires, which assessed attitudes to the death penalty and abortion, morality, victim of crime status, and personality.

2.3. Materials

All participants were provided an informed consent form and were initially given details of participation, their duties, their right to withdraw, and the anonymity of their data. The following questionnaires were used.

2.3.1. The International Personality Item Pool 50 (IPIP-50: Goldberg, 1992)

The IPIP-50 was used to measure the Big Five dimensions of personality, i.e., Extroversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Openness and Emotional Stability. Participants scored items on a 5-item Likert scale ranging from 'nothing like me' to 'very much like me', 1–5, respectively. The individual subscales held consistent internal reliability and validity (Smith & Snell, 1996); Extraversion (0.83), Agreeableness (0.87), Conscientiousness (0.83), Emotional Stability (0.78) and Openness (0.83).

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