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Understanding The Relationship Between Moral Reasoning And Liberalism-Conservatism

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Abstract

This thesis aims to clarify the nature of the relationship between moral reasoning, as per the neo-Kohlbergian DIT approach of Rest and his colleagues, and liberalism-conservatism. Moral reasoning and liberalism-conservatism are consistently found to be related but the resultant interpretation that liberals are more moral-cognitively advanced than conservatives has been challenged by Emler and his colleagues who argue that the DIT is liberally biased. Subsequent research on this issue has produced a methodological quagmire that this thesis aims to proceed beyond.

The specific aim of this thesis is to test several different (or competing) hypotheses purporting to explain the relationship between Kohlbergian moral reasoning and liberalism-conservatism. These are (1) that liberals are more morally advanced than conservatives; (2) that "advanced moral reasoning" is merely social presentation; (3) that moral reasoning is separately constrained by moral development and conservatism; (4) that moral development and liberalism represent distinct paths to postconventional reasoning preference; (5) that moral reasoning differences between liberals and conservatives are broader than usually thought; (6) that the political content of moral issues affects moral reasoning differences between liberals and conservatives; and (7) that moral reasoning instruments have exaggerated moral reasoning differences between liberals and conservatives.

Study 1 found that a non-ipsative, indirect moral reasoning measure was correlated with liberalism-conservatism thus disconfirming hypotheses 2 and 7. Additionally, hypothesis 5 was not supported by several DIT findings. Opposing hypotheses 2 and 6, Study 2 found that a conservative version of the DIT was correlated

with liberalism-conservatism although a potential methodological issue arose. Study 3 developed an objective measure of moral comprehension, broader in scope than previous moral comprehension measures, which demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity. Employing this measure, Study 4 found that moral comprehension and liberalism were weakly correlated and that they independently predicted moral reasoning, although their interaction did not. Together, these findings provide some support to hypotheses 1 and 4 but not hypotheses 3 and 6.

Overall these findings reveal that liberals appear more moral-cognitively advanced than conservatives but, compared to conservatives, liberals appear to indicate preference for advanced moral reasoning earlier in their moral-cognitive development. This latter mechanism appears stronger and suggests that, although DIT scores are still somewhat reflective of moral-cognitive development, the DIT's estimate of liberals' moral-cognitive development is elevated. Future research can continue to explore these hypotheses (e.g., via longitudinal and/or "faking" studies) and, in so doing, further clarify the relationship between Kohlbergian moral reasoning and liberalism-conservatism.

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Preface

Because morality and politics span similar terrain, the fact that they are related should not come as a great surprise. This thesis aims to explore part of this relationship by examining how neo-Kohlbergian reasoning (e.g., as formulated by Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau & Thoma, 1999a) is related to liberalism-conservatism. Prior research has indicated that liberals appear to prefer postconventional reasoning whereas conservatives appear to prefer stage 4 reasoning. It has, however, been suggested (e.g., Emler, Renwick & Malone, 1983) that the content and structure of the instruments employed may be inappropriately influencing these findings. To examine this possibility, this thesis develops several new measures of moral reasoning, liberalism-conservatism and moral comprehension.

Addressing this issue, however, forms only part of the overall aim of this thesis, which is to investigate why liberals and conservatives appear to prefer different types of moral reasoning. Prior theorising has focussed on two main accounts (that liberals are more morally advanced than conservatives and that the distinction between postconventional and stage 4 reasoning is merely political in nature) and this thesis tests these two accounts. Additionally, this thesis develops and experimentally evaluates several new accounts.

In summary, the essence of this thesis is a systematic, neutral exploration of the relationship between Kohlbergian moral reasoning and liberalism-conservatism.