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Moral Considerations in Political Decision-Making: Differences by Political Orientation and Gender

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Abstract

There may be many factors determining the moral dimensions used by individuals when making political decisions. Two important dimensions worthy of examination are political orientation and gender. Based on Moral Foundation Theory (Graham et al., 2009), the present study examined how both of the aforementioned factors influence the moral dimensions used in political decisions. Participants (n = 338) completed a demographic survey, rated their self-perceived political orientation and then completed the Moral Relevance Scale (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009) and the Ideological Consistency Scale (Pew Research Center, 2014), which was used to place participants in liberal, moderate or conservative political orientation groups. A MANOVA showed no differences in participants based on gender, but significant differences in decision-making based on political ideology. Discussion focused on how moderates differ in their views from other ideologies, a relatively new finding.

Keywords

Decision-Making, Political Orientation, Gender

1. Introduction

Moral decision making often proceeds from an individual's subjective belief system, aligning and interacting with various social categories (Haviv & Leman, 2002; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004). As noted by these authors, social categories of culture, age, political affiliation, gender, and class are often of great influence in our moral and ethical belief systems. The present study examines how two of these factors, gender and political orientation, relate to deci-

sion-making using the factors presented by Moral Foundations Theory (MFT: [Graham et al., 2009](#)).

1.1. Moral Foundation Theory

When examining the factors people consider when making decisions, Moral Foundation Theory (MFT) presents five factors that are used to evaluate social situations that contain moral elements ([Graham et al., 2009](#)). These five factors are: purity, harm, fairness, authority, and in-group loyalty. Purity refers to an individual's spiritual mindset. Harm reflects the individual's perspective on care and empathy. Fairness involves the outlook on reciprocity and justice. Authority is the individual's take on issues related to respect and obedience to authority. Finally, the in-group factor includes perspectives related to loyalty and devotion to group membership. So, for example, if individuals were asked to support or oppose funding for a controversial social issue, such as Healthcare for All, MFT proposes that individuals will use the five components to evaluate and inform their support or opposition. Using this example, we can make general predictions regarding some of the likely connections between use of specific factors and individuals' backgrounds ([Graham et al., 2009](#); [Haidt & Graham, 2007](#); [Haidt & Joseph, 2004](#)). For instance, we could likely assume someone with a strong, evangelist religious background likely favors purity over the average person. Conversely, someone with a progressive political orientation would likely favor fairness as a value when making moral decisions ([Dawson & Tyson, 2012](#)). What is unclear and a question to be addressed in the current study is how political moderates use the factors of MFT in making moral judgements.

1.2. Gender in Moral Decision-Making

Of particular interest to the present study is how gender and political affiliation each relate to the factors used in making decisions with moral components. One theory used to explain gender differences is Social Dominance Theory (SDT: [Sidanius et al., 2000](#); [Sidanius & Pratto, 1999](#)). SDT posits that individuals with higher social dominance want their group to be in power in the socio-political system. Historically, men have been found to be higher in social dominance than women ([Sidanius & Pratto, 1999](#)). Translated into politics, men and those with higher social dominance would support moral positions that keep their group in power, such as use of power and in-group loyalty ([Ho et al., 2015](#); [Pratto et al., 1994](#)).

Carol Gilligan also hypothesized that men and women make decisions differently, weighing and prioritizing different areas of concern ([Gilligan, 1993](#)). [Gilligan \(1993\)](#) theorized that women more often use a care orientation in moral decision-making, while men focus more attention on justice. However, not all studies found support for this viewpoint ([Walker, 1984](#); [Walker et al., 1987](#); [White Jr., 1999](#)). In two reviews of the literature on gender and moral decision-making, [O'Fallon & Butterfield \(2005\)](#) and [Craft \(2013\)](#) both found a fairly even balance between studies showing gender differences in moral reasoning

and those who found no gender difference. More recent studies have attempted to link physical changes to moral decision-making differences in men and women. [Singer et al. \(2021\)](#) induced stress in participants and then measured participants' cortisol levels. Females were more likely to report the tendency to engage in prosocial behavior after stress-induction than male participants. [Vanutelli et al. \(2020\)](#) utilized a brain imaging method and also showed differences in brain activity between female and male participants when making economic and moral judgements.

Specific to the framework used in this study, [Niazi et al. \(2020\)](#) found a significant difference between male and female Pakistani respondents on the harm dimension of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ), which is based on MFT ([Graham et al., 2011](#)). In this study, women were more likely to express concern for others (i.e. harm avoidance) when making moral judgments, indicative of an interpersonal focus on concern for others in their moral decision-making. In contrast though, in a study verifying the structure of the MFQ, [Andersen et al. \(2015\)](#) found no gender-differences in any of the factors. Likewise, [Davies et al. \(2014\)](#) also found no gender differences on any factors of the MFQ.

Taken as a whole, these studies reveal a mixed understanding of how gender plays a role in making moral judgments. Social Dominance Theory ([Sidanius & Pratto, 1999](#)) and [Gilligan \(1993\)](#) present strong theoretical arguments for gender differences in moral decision-making with men favoring decisions based in power, authority and in-group loyalty, while women factor in social relationships and care concerns. [Singer et al. \(2021\)](#) focused on how gender-based differences in physiology might impact decision-making, rather than emphasizing social differences. Whatever the hypothesized causes of gender differences in moral decision-making, not all studies have found differences ([Wiss et al., 2015](#); [Davies et al., 2014](#)). This factor in decision-making needs greater consideration, and in the present study we examine how gender and political orientation relate to moral decision-making.

1.3. Political Orientation in Moral Decision-Making

As mentioned above, the present study explores how political orientation relates to use of specific factors in decision-making. [Sowell \(2002\)](#) argued that liberals exhibit an unconstrained or optimistic view of human functioning, while conservatives favor a pessimistic or constrained view of human nature. These differences in how humans are viewed as fundamental beings then influences our foundational moral beliefs, how we transmit moral values to others, and how we reason about moral situations ([Graham et al., 2009](#)). Graham et al. predicted and showed support for the belief that as a result of differences in beliefs about human nature, conservatives will favor purity, authority and in-group factors in their moral reasoning in order to maintain social order, duty and loyalty. On the opposite political spectrum, liberals will favor harm and fairness factors in their moral judgements in order to support the health and welfare of individuals.

Graham et al. (2011) validated the MFQ with a large multicultural sample. Related to political ideology, the factors of authority, purity and in-group loyalty were more strongly endorsed by conservatives, while harm and fairness dimensions were more strongly endorsed by liberals, with moderates falling between the two groups on all dimensions. In research done in New Zealand using the MFQ, Davies et al. (2014), found that the dimensions of authority, purity and in-group loyalty were significantly and positively correlated with conservatism. Harm and fairness were significantly and negatively correlated with conservatism but the correlations were of modest strength. While both of these studies, in large samples, show that liberals and conservatives differ in their views, only one of the studies examined moderates' decision-making. Additionally, Graham et al. (2011) assumed moderates fall somewhere between the liberal and conservative perspectives, rather than having a separate and unique ideology that would influence their reasoning. Both of the studies mentioned were multicultural or done outside of the United States and before the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Since that time, in the United States, a great deal has shifted in traditional political ideologies (Dimock & Gramlich, 2021), and it is important to revisit ideological differences in moral decision-making in the U.S. based on these substantive changes.

1.4. The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine how gender and political ideology (conservative, moderate or liberal) relate to the type of thinking used when making moral decisions. We tested the following hypotheses:

H1: There will be a main effect of gender such that women will score higher in use the moral dimensions of harm when making decisions, with no differences expected on the other 4 dimensions.

H2: There will be a main effect of political ideology such that conservatives will endorse higher use of authority, purity and in-group loyalty dimensions in decision-making, and lower levels of fairness and harm-based decision-making. Moderates would be expected to fall in between conservatives and liberals in levels of their endorsement of each of the 5 moral judgement factors.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

There were 338 participants in the present study: 110 were female and 228 were male. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 30, with the average age being 26.8. There was no significant difference in age between men and women in the study. Those who participated ranked themselves on their political orientation using a scale from 1 to 7. A response of 1 was the most conservative while 7 was the most liberal. Of those who participated: 7.4% were a 1 (most conservative), 4.4% were a 2, 6.5% were a 3, 13.6% were a 4, 18% were a 5, 29.6% were a 6, and 20.4% were a 7 (most liberal).

2.2. Measures

Demographic Survey. Participants were asked to report their gender, age and political orientation. Political orientation responses were rated on a 1 - 7 scale with 1 = most conservative and 7 = most liberal.

Moral Relevance Scale (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). This scale examines 5 dimensions individuals use when making moral judgments: harm, fairness, in-group relevance, purity and authority. The scale has 23 items with each factor including 4 - 5 responses. Participants are asked to endorse each item using a 1 - 6 point Likert scale with 1 = never relevant to 6 = always relevant. This provides responses for each dimension between 4 - 24 or 5 - 30 depending on if the dimension is based on 4 or 5 responses. Internal reliability for factors ranged from .64 to .76 indicating acceptable levels.

Ideological Consistency Scale (Pew Research Center, 2014). The Ideological Consistency Scale measures political orientation from -10 to 10. Ten politicized items are presented to individuals who select which of two viewpoints (conservative or liberal) they endorse. Each item is scored -1 for selection of the liberal choice and +1 for the conservative choice. A summed score of -10 would be the most liberal while a positive 10 would be the most conservative. From this scale, we broke up people into the groups of liberal, conservative and moderate. Someone who scored between a -10 to -3 as liberal, a -2.99 to a 3 as moderate, and someone from 3.1 to 10 as conservative.

2.3. Procedure

Data was collected via an online survey that was posted on Amazon's MTurk data collection platform. Criteria were set requiring participants to be 18 years of age or older.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Information

Demographic and moral decision-making information about the present sample is included in **Table 1** and **Table 2**.

Table 1. Demographic information of study participants.

	Age Mean (Std)	Conservative Political Orientation	Moderate Political Orientation	Liberal Political Orientation	Total N
Female	27.04 (2.53)	8	42	60	110
Male	26.75 (2.57)	23	88	117	228

Table 2. Means and standard deviations on moral decision-making variables for men and women.

	Harm	Fairness	In-group	Authority	Purity
Female	16.32 (2.84)	16.05 (2.65)	16.76 (5.17)	16.30 (4.60)	16.86 (5.73)
Male	15.64 (3.33)	15.36 (3.37)	16.64 (4.65)	16.39 (5.09)	17.24 (4.64)

3.2. Gender and Ideology Differences in Moral Decision Making

In order to test Hypotheses 1 and 2, a Gender (2) by Ideology (3) multivariate analysis of variance was used, with the scores on the 5 moral decision-making dimensions entered as the dependent variables. The Box's test of inequality of variances was significant, so in evaluating the significance of gender or ideology as a predictor, the p -value was set at $p < .01$ and Hotelling's Trace was chosen as the F-test. Results of the analyses showed no significant main effect of gender on moral decision-making ($F = 1.04$, ns, partial eta-squared = .02, observed power = .37). There was a significant main effect for ideology ($f = 7.02$, $p < .01$, partial eta-squared = .10, observed power = 1.0). The gender x ideology interaction term was also not significant ($F = .74$, ns, partial eta-squared = .01, observed power = -.40).

Analyses for the main effect of ideology showed significant differences between groups on all 5 moral reasoning dimensions: Harm ($F = 8.85$, $p < .01$, partial eta-squared = .05, observed power = .97), Fairness ($F = 8.96$, $p < .01$, partial eta-squared = .05, observed power = .97), In-group ($F = 8.67$, $p < .01$, partial eta-squared = .50, observed power = .97), Authority ($F = 12.80$, $p < .01$, partial eta-squared = .07, observed power = .99), and Purity ($F = 5.92$, $p < .01$, partial eta-squared = .03, observed power = .89). Specific post-hoc differences between political ideology groups are presented in **Table 3** and can be viewed graphically in **Figure 1**.

Of note in the post-hoc analysis, it is not always the conservative and liberal groups who differ in their levels of moral decision-making. Liberals consider harm in decision-making to a greater extent than both conservatives and moderates. For fairness, liberals have higher levels of fairness in considerations than moderates or conservatives, but moderates also have higher levels of fairness than conservatives. In-group reasoning is greater in moderates than it is for conservatives or liberals, who do not vary from one another. The same results are shown for authority-based reasoning as for in-group reasoning. For purity, moderates have higher scores than for liberals.

Table 3. Post Hoc difference between conservatives, moderates and liberals on moral decision-making variables.

	Conservative Mean (std. error)	Moderate	Liberal
Harm	14.42 (.64) _a	15.40 (.29) _a	16.66 (.25) _b
Fairness	14.11 (.63) _a	15.16 (.29) _b	16.39 (.24) _c
In-group	15.93 (.97) _a	18.16 (.44) _b	15.79 (.38) _a
Authority	15.78 (.98) _a	18.10 (.45) _b	15.17 (.38) _a
Purity	17.03 (1.02) _{ab}	18.28 (.46) _a	16.19 (.39) _b

Different subscripts across rows indicate a significant difference between groups, $p < .05$.

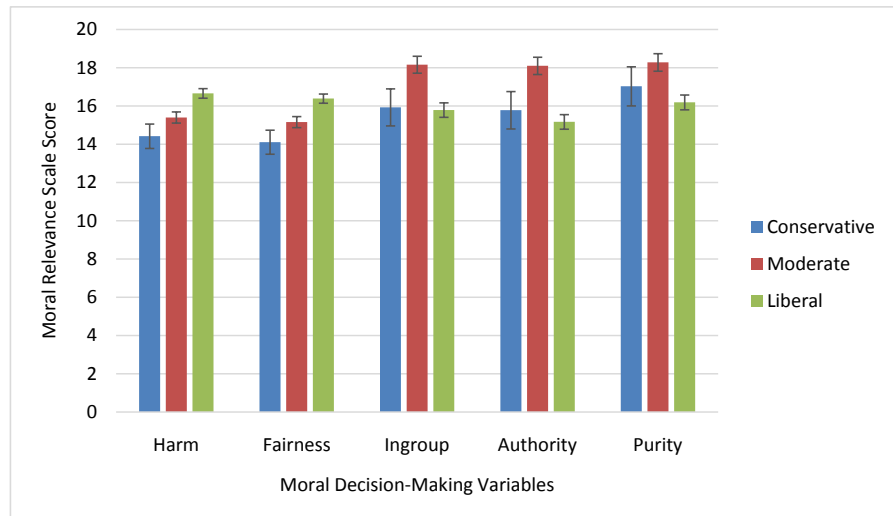


Figure 1. Ideological responses in moral decision-making.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the effects of gender and political ideology on moral decision-making. Contrary to expectations, there was no difference in the use of harm used in moral decision-making between men and women. However, there were differences based on political ideology between liberals, conservatives and moderates. Conservatives and liberals differed in their adoption of harm and fairness dimensions, both of which liberals viewed as more important than conservatives.

What was perhaps most interesting and a new finding was that moderates tended to judge different evaluative factors than liberals or conservatives. Moderates were less likely to deem harm as a moral factor than liberals and were more likely to use fairness as a factor than conservatives, but less likely to use fairness than liberals. However, moderates considered in-group, authority and purity standards more than either conservatives or liberals. These differences based in political ideology are only partially supportive of hypothesis 2. Based on the results of this study, moderates are a unique group in comparison to conservatives and liberals adopting different moral foundations to make judgments. They are a group worthy of more investigation.

One of possible limitations of this research was that the surveys used were developed more than 5 years ago, prior to the current political climate. Research related to this topic largely came during the Obama administration, while the data gathered for this experiment was done during the latter part of the Trump administration. Not only have we seen a substantial shift in the Republican Party and an overhaul of conservatism in recent years, but similarly in the Democratic Party and liberalism with the Progressive Movement. Because of this, the constructs used in making moral decisions may no longer follow predicted patterns and may be in flux for years to come. Future research should continue to examine moral reasoning differences across all political ideologies, as they contin-

ue to evolve.

5. Summary and Key Points

The present studied found no gender differences in moral decision-making. This contrary to what would be predicted Gilligan (1993) and Sidanius & Pratto (1999). Political orientation was found to relate to moral decision-making, however contrary to expectations, moderates seemed show the most difference in their viewpoints, compared to conservatives or liberals. This finding would suggest that moderates are a separate and distinct political group, at least in regards to their moral decision-making. More research is needed to understand how liberals, moderates and conservatives make decisions related to moral dimensions, as political parties have become more polarized in recent years across the United States and in other areas of the world (Lu et al., 2019).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Abbreviations

MANOVA: Multivariate Analysis of Variance

MFT: Moral Foundations Theory

MFQ: Moral Foundations Questionnaire

SDT: Social Dominance Theory