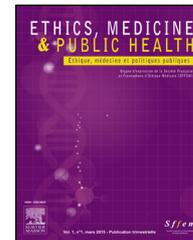




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STUDIES

Conservative worldview and its influence on punishment and bioethical public health issues



Perspective conservatrice : influence sur la punition et les enjeux en bioéthique de la santé publique

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Summary Polarization in U.S. politics and differences in worldview between political liberals and conservatives leads many people to believe that the field of bioethics has been influenced by politics. In 1996 George Lakoff proposed that liberal and conservative individuals possess very different worldviews. This is especially true around topics such as politics, childrearing, family roles, and religion. The ethics and morality of punishment as a means of control and discipline, public health issues, and women's reproductive rights are also understood differently. Lakoff explains these differences in the form of "family metaphors" where conservatives lean toward the model of the authoritarian Strict Father and liberals the model of the supportive nurturing parent. A survey with ratings from 1–6 was given based on Lakoff's family metaphors and Robinett's (2012) Political Worldview Instrument (PWI) which is a 60 statement survey measured on a six-point scale. Questions about the participants view of punishment and their experience with punishment were asked. Results indicated that two of the independent variables (pro-punishment and participants' personal history with punishment) had a significant effect on predicting an individual's political affiliation. Pro-punishment views correlate positively with the participants' political affiliation [$P < .001$, $\beta = .574$] indicating that those with increasingly strong views promoting the use of punishment tended to be more conservative in their political affiliation. Participants with a personal history of punishment were more likely to affiliate with the liberal political stance [$P < .01$, $\beta = -.147$].

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MOTS CLÉS

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 Vision politique

Résumé La polarisation de la politique américaine et les différences entre les libéraux et les conservateurs laissent beaucoup de gens croire que le domaine de la bioéthique a également été influencé par la politique. Selon George Lakoff (1996), les individus libéraux et conservateurs possèdent des visions du monde très différentes. Cela est particulièrement vrai dans le cas des sujets tels que la politique, l'éducation des enfants, les rôles familiaux et la religion. L'éthique et la moralité de la punition en tant que moyen de contrôle et de discipline, les questions de santé publique et les droits reproductifs des femmes sont également envisagés différemment. Lakoff explique ces différences sous la forme de « métaphores familiales », où les conservateurs penchent vers le modèle du père autoritaire strict et les libéraux vers le modèle du parent nourricier. Une enquête basée sur les métaphores familiales de Lakoff et le *Political Worldview Instrument* de Robinett (2012), comprenant 60 énoncés mesurés sur une échelle de six points, a été réalisée. Des questions sur l'opinion des participants sur la punition et sur leur expérience de la punition ont été posées. Les résultats montrent que deux des variables indépendantes (en faveur de la punition et les antécédents personnels des participants en matière de punition) avaient un effet significatif sur la prédiction de l'affiliation politique d'un individu. Les points de vue pro-punition sont en corrélation positive avec l'appartenance politique des participants [$p < 0,001$, $\beta = 0,574$], ce qui indique que ceux qui sont en faveur du recours à la punition ont tendance à être plus conservateurs dans leurs préférences politiques. Les participants ayant des antécédents personnels de punition étaient plus susceptibles de s'affilier à la position politique libérale [$p < 0,01$, $\beta = -0,147$].

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Introduction

With the political polarization of America today, there is research being conducted to understand the underlying tendencies for people to be politically liberal or conservative. The paper will use the dictionary definitions of political liberals and conservatives [1]. A liberal is one who is open-minded and advocates for liberalism (a political philosophy based on belief in progress, the essential goodness of man and the autonomy of the individual and standing for the protection of political and civil liberties) in individual rights. A conservative is one that has a tendency or is disposed to maintain existing views. An adherent or advocate of political conservatism (a disposition in politics to preserve what is established. Based on tradition and social stability, stressing established institutions and preferring gradual development to abrupt change).

According to Everett [2], left- or right-wing political identification has been shown to predict voting behavior and consistency on issues such as nationalism, equality, and system maintenance. In particular, the need for order, structure, closure, certainty, dogmatism, and discipline are often linked to the thinking of conservatives, while a higher tolerance for ambiguity, complexity, and greater openness to new experiences are associated with liberals.

Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski and Sulloway [3] found that conservatism is a consequence of a "psychological need" to manage uncertainty and threat. This is because preserving the status quo allows one to maintain what is familiar and known while rejecting the risky, uncertain prospect of social change. Tradition and hierarchy provide a sense of

reassurance and structure, whereas progress and equality imply chaos and unpredictability.

George Lakoff's book *Moral Politics* [4], promotes the idea that contemporary American politics is about worldview; the way people see and understand the world. It encompasses one's beliefs and assumptions that describe reality, especially the way people view issues of politics, medicine, public health, religion, and morality. Political liberals and conservatives tend to have very different worldviews and applications of moral systems. This prompts them to resonate with particular political rhetoric and beliefs. In fact, it is often the case that liberals and conservatives surmise they just don't "speak the same language".

Due to these differences between political liberals and conservatives and the politically polarized environment in the country, many people believe that the field of bioethics has also been influenced by politics. According to Brown [5], Republicans see politics as "an instrumental activity aimed at preventing domination by establishing institutions and practices that facilitate the public contestation of government decisions". In other words, they are concerned with the way societies should respond to ethical dilemmas associated with biomedical science and technology. Liberalism, on the other hand, is aware of the persistence of power and conflict in bioethics, but views politics in narrow terms of individual and group interest.

Many believe that the intrusion of politics into science endangers public health and wellbeing [6]. For example, in a study by Estep [7], results indicated that "certain attitudes that are correlated with conservative political identity, e.g., commitment to parental rights, suspicion of government

intrusion into personal choices, and distrust of science, also foster opposition to mandatory vaccinations” that can increase the chances for an outbreak of many childhood diseases. Thompson [8] presents another example of politics interfering with public health concerns by discussing the conservative war against the “Affordable Care Act” (ACA) which provides most Americans with access to high quality, affordable health insurance. Since its inception, Congressional Republicans have vowed to fight the passing and implementation of the ACA. By fighting this initiative, conservatives are risking a higher incidence of death, disease, disability, and discomfort in the American public.

In an article on the “war on women”, Wesley [9] indicates that conservative opposition to many women’s issues, including reproductive and preventive healthcare, birth control, unequal pay, and reproductive rights, undermines a woman’s right to full citizenship as well as putting all women at risk by not allowing them to monitor and care for the health of themselves and their children. Further, these inequities in women’s rights likely impose greater burdens on minority and financially challenged women as well as their children.

Lakoff [4] argues that people relate to politics in terms of “family metaphors”. He believes that at the center of the conservative worldview is the “Strict Father” model that supports the notion of a traditional, nuclear family with the father having responsibility for family support and protection. The father has the authority to set strict rules for the family and when disobeyed, he enforces them. On the other hand, liberals relate to the “Nurturing Parent” model that emphasizes love, caring, nurturing, and respect for children however, unlike the strict father they do not emphasize strict rules and punishment as a method of control. Nurturing parents believe in an open, two-way, mutually respectful communication focused on the development and formation of a child that is also empathic, caring, and capable of fulfilling their inner potential.

Although self-reliance displayed by the child is the end goal of most parenting models, Lakoff’s “strict father” often accomplishes this through authoritarian methods. The strict father parenting, while being loving and caring, promotes the use of strict rules and punishment to discipline the children. Similar to operant conditioning in which behaviors are associated with consequences, the parents, especially the father, either reinforces behavior or punishes it. Punishment is most often physical for example, spanking, hitting, slapping. Strict father parenting encourages parents to leave their infants alone when they start to cry and typically requires that the infant sleep in a crib in a separate room so as not to coddle the child.

One of the problems with punishment, especially physical punishment (including spanking), is that it has been related to poor health outcomes for the child [10]. Current research [WU1] by Afifi, et.al. [10] reinforces the findings of previous studies that indicate a childhood history of spanking is associated with an increased likelihood of suicide attempts, moderate to heavy alcohol abuse, and street drug use in adulthood.

What links these family metaphors is the concept of the “Nation-as-Family” metaphor in which the nation is seen as a family, with the government as parent and the citizens as children. This metaphor turns family-based morality

into political morality [4]. Importantly, McAdams, Albaugh, Farber, Daniels, Logan, and Olson [11] indicate that the differences in worldview between liberals and conservatives has been found to be deeply implicated in people’s motivation and identity. It becomes the way they view their life and the lives of others. Therefore, political orientations reflect how a good family (or society) should be organized, how family (or society) members should behave, who the family (society) members obey, and how they (societal members) raise their children.

These liberal and conservative political worldview beliefs are resistant to argument, logic, or facts according to Cahn, et. al. [12]. In fact, cultural research suggests that when facts or empirical evidence conflict with individuals’ viewpoints, they reinterpret or deny the information rather than change their beliefs.

Controversial topics in the field of bioethics such as the death penalty, human reproduction (abortion, stem cell research, and assisted reproduction) and certain genetic manipulations have long been debated by liberals and conservatives. According to Macklin [13], liberalizing existing laws or policies, or to keep existing laws and policies from being made more restrictive and thereby constraining individual choices are hallmarks of liberal politics. Conservatives oppose biotechnology and its use in all things artificial, such as, artificial reproduction and life extension, stem cell research and any efforts to make humans “artificially better”.

Some of the survey questions in this study, such as “How often were you spanked, hit, paddled or corporally punished as a child” and “If you have children, and they are misbehaving badly how often do you spank, hit, use a paddle or corporally punish your child” directly address the participants’ personal experience and opinion of the authoritarian parenting style.

Social policy regarding punishment is also important for those leaning toward the conservative worldview. It has been shown by Okimoto and Gromet [14] that political differences in social policy support may be driven by the tendency for conservatives to show greater sensitivity to deviance than liberals and demonstrate a firm rebuke of deviant others. Conservatives prefer social policies that provide appropriate punishments for those who are wrongdoers or who deviate from the normal. This may be explained by an individual’s motivation to protect and preserve their own self-image, their in-group (a select group in which all members feel a strong sense of identity with the group) and out-group (those not a part of the in-group) goals, and their worldviews.

Due to conservative reluctance to change, they are often suspicious of other groups (out-groups) and desire clear moral and behavioral codes that also include the belief in the importance of punishing anyone who violates these codes [12]. This desire to emulate the attitudes and behavior of typical in-group members produces group cohesion which makes it a key role in the formation and development of social identity and the emergence of group conformity [15]. They tend to be more accepting of inequalities and more resistant to social change than liberals. Those who support conservative viewpoints tend to also score low on openness to experience, integrative complexity, and relatively high on death anxiety, dogmatism, and the need for social order

and closure compared with more liberal individuals. These viewpoints may persist in an effort to feel safe, secure, and linked with other like-minded individuals.

In contrast, the nurturing parent believes that children reach self-reliance through the nurturing love, care, and respect that their parents provide them. This ultimately promotes a secure child-parent attachment, mastery of parental expectations, and moral empathy. They view the family as a community where children have responsibilities but also show empathy for others. Obedience to the nurturant parent does not come from fear of punishment. When children do wrong, nurturing parents favor restitution rather than retribution [4].

According to Jost, Hawkins, Nosek, Hennes, Stern, Gosling et al., [16] religion provides an ideological justification for the existing social order. So, the prevailing institutions and arrangements are perceived as legitimate and just, therefore worth obeying and preserving. Religion also endorses the belief in a “just-world” (or “just societal order”) that people get what they deserve in life. For example, Jost, et al. [16] point out that in the New Testament political authorities are legitimate and should be obeyed. That the political authority or leader is an agent of wrath to bring punishment to the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is important to submit to these authorities or be punished. If a person is a perceived wrongdoer according to the authorities, that person is to be punished because they must “get what they deserve”.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 218 people took part in the study. Younger adults (30 women, 9 men, 3 identifying as other, age range: 18–24 years) were recruited through faculty emailing them the survey. The older adult population (96 women, 80 men, age range: 25–74 years) were recruited through listservs and email. A large number of individuals were known conservative sect members. They were recruited through email, posts on social media, and via the Freedom From Undue Influence website [17].

Materials and procedure

The dependent variable was the participants’ political affiliation (conservative or liberal).

The independent variables were:

- authoritarianism;
- pro anti-coddling;
- freewill;
- strict parent model;
- pro-punishment;
- personal history with punishment.

It was hypothesized that participants with a history of physical punishment, authoritarian (strict father) upbringing, belief in free will, or against coddling would be more conservative in their political position. Conversely, participants raised in a (nurturing parent) environment would be more likely to associate with the liberal political position.

Understanding the participants’ past and current experience with punishment would assist the researcher to elucidate the link between exposure to physical punishment and their current political orientation.

The survey was hosted on SurveyMonkey and distributed through social media platforms, email listservs, and through websites such as surveytandem. Participant responses were used to study the interaction between physical punishment and political orientation. The participant’s stage of behavioral development was also correlated with these variables. The data was exported from the SurveyMonkey platform and converted to a plain text string between 1 and 6 using Microsoft Excel and SPSS. The data for each sample was analyzed independently using a Rasch analysis run in the Winsteps [18] software.

The survey comprised of two parts. The first part of the survey listed 64 statements examining physical punishment, from the perspective of ethics, the law, and personal experience. Participants rated statements on a 1 (Strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree) scale. The participants’ perception of the three factors of physical punishment; ethics, the law, and personal history of punishment were instrumental in determining the participants’ political orientation.

Other questions in the study were adapted by one of the researchers’ previous work. Terri L. Robinett [19] developed a scale called the “Political Worldview Instrument” that included questions regarding moral strength, reward and punishment, and political affiliation. For example, questions such as “the world is a dangerous place” and “fathers must protect their children by implementing strict discipline” represents Lakoff’s moral strength category which connote more of a conservative value than liberal.

Researchers used statements like “It is ethical to imprison those who do not believe or act in accordance with our values”, “To remove one’s rights is a way to keep them in line”, and “It is better to inflict the death penalty on an innocent person than letting a guilty person free” to determine the participants’ opinion on when it is ethical and/or moral to use physical punishment. Similarly, statements such as “The law requires punishment for all law breakers”, “Having lots of rules is okay rather than being permissive” and “The death penalty must be imposed for those who commit serious crimes” were used to gauge the participants’ opinion of physical punishment at the level of the law. Finally, to understand their opinion about physical punishment at a more personal level, the survey contained statements such as “When disciplined I cried”, “When disciplined I became angry”, “Spare the rod, spoil the child”, and “One should force good behavior rather than shape it”. The participants’ political orientation (one of two: conservative or liberal, in both the social and economic sense) was calculated using their responses to the following questions: “I consider myself liberal”, “I consider myself conservative”, “We need strict governmental leaders” and “The government should always act with authority”.

The second part of the survey consisted of a shortened version of Michael Common’s Core Complexity Perspective Taking Instrument (PTI). This instrument was designed to calculate the participants’ stage of behavioral development using the Model of Hierarchical Complexity [20]. This model quantifies the hierarchical order of a task, tasks being defined as sequences of contingencies, each presenting

stimuli and each requiring a behavior or a sequence of behaviors that must occur in some non-arbitrary fashion. Participants provided ratings on a 1 (Terrible) to 6 (Great) scale for the quality of seven “helper” figures’ arguments in support of their specific methods of providing assistance. Each helper’s argument corresponds to one of seven stages in the MHC, ranging from Preoperational Order 7 to Metasystematic Order 13. The PTI was adapted to include the only question that was relevant to the perception of physical punishment: “Based on the paragraph above, how good do you think (helper person’s name) method is?”. An example of the argument would be as follows: Smith recently completed training on providing guidance and assistance for the Person’s problem. Smith says that the best counselors regularly recommend this guidance and assistance. Smith explains the method and tells the Person that it will probably work for the Person as well. Smith also tells the Person about other methods that may work. Smith asks if the Person has any questions. The Person does not have questions, and Smith asks if the Person wants to accept the recommended guidance and assistance. Feeling that Smith knows best, the Person accepts the guidance and assistance. If the participant selects Smith as the best helper, over and above the other helpers, their stage would be computed as Abstract Stage 10. It is at the abstract stage, that the individual can think of concepts that are abstract, and take into account the generalized variables (rather than just concrete instances) in the story.

Variables

Values of independent variables were calculated using the statements rated on a 1–6 scale. The sum of the ratings selected by the participants were calculated for each of the independent variables. The range of scores was determined by the number of statements that fell under the variable being calculated. The number of statements multiplied by 1 gave the lowest possible score for the variable and the number of statements multiplied by 6 produced the highest possible score for the variable. Similarly, the score ranges for the independent variables were as follows. Pro-authority (6 extremely against authority –36 extremely pro-authority), pro anti-coddle (4 extremely pro coddling –24 extremely against coddling), freewill (2 pro freewill –12 against freewill), strict parent (19 extremely against strict parenting –114 extremely in support of strict parenting), pro-punishment (20 extremely averse to using punishment –120 extremely in support of using punishment) and participants’ personal history with punishment (5 participant suffered little or no punishment –30 the participant was severely punished).

The dependent variable was the participants’ political orientation. It was calculated in the same way that the independent variables were calculated. Political orientation can be classified as the political preference of the participants. They could either be “conservative” or “liberal” in their outlook. Under the category of conservative, there are the socially conservative participants as well as economically conservative participants. Socially conservative participants follow the model of complete authoritarianism. Economic conservatives support limiting the government’s

intervention in the distribution of income. They are pro monopoly and against regulations and high tariffs.

Similarly, the category of “liberals” also consists of the socially liberal and the economically liberal. The social liberals tend to favor human rights, a woman’s right to choose whether she wants to keep or terminate a pregnancy, immigration, civil rights, and LGBTQ rights. The economically liberal are in favor of a flat distribution of wealth and social welfare. They are also for the notion of taking care of the elderly population with programs like Medicare and Social Security.

Results

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the data of 218 participants that was collected from two sources: recruiting through faculty and recruiting conservative sect members. The analysis revealed no significant difference [$t_{(218)} = -1.422$, $P > 0.05$] in the participant data despite being collected from two different sources. The data sets were combined and analyzed.

The sum of both the dependent and independent variables were calculated (procedure described under “Variables” section) and their means were extracted. For example, there were four statements associated with the dependent variable, “the participants’ political affiliation”. The lowest possible score was $4 \times 1 = 4$ and the highest possible score was $4 \times 6 = 24$. The range for scores therefore, was between 4 and 24. A participant with the score of 4 was considered extremely liberal. Conversely, a participant whose score was 24 would be viewed as extremely conservative. The mean score for the participant population ($n = 218$) was 10.31. Descriptive statistics for the study are provided in Table 1.

A multi-regression analysis was done to show the strength of the interaction between the six independent variables to the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant positive correlation [$r_{(218)} = 0.679$, $R^2 = 0.461$] with 46.1% of the variance accounted for with all six factors. The results are shown in Table 2.

The coefficients in Table 3 reveal that the last two independent variables (pro-punishment and participants’ personal history with punishment) had a significant effect on predicting an individual’s political affiliation. Pro-punishment views correlated positively with the participants’ political affiliation [$P < .001$, $\beta = .574$]. Participants with strong views promoting the use of punishment tended to be more conservative in their political affiliation. Personal history with punishment correlated negatively with the participants’ political affiliation [$P < .01$, $\beta = -.147$].

To confirm the correlations, another multi regression analysis was performed on just the significant independent variables (pro-punishment and personal history with punishment). The results of the second regression analysis shown in Table 4 revealed that the [$r_{(218)} = 0.672$, $R^2 = .446$] was just slightly different from the $r = .679$ in the first analysis (Table 2) that included all six factors. Even without other variables, pro-punishment and personal history with punishment accounted for 44.6% of the variance.

Table 4 shows the ANOVA results of the correlations between the dependent variable, political affiliation, and

Table 1 Descriptive statistics.
Statistiques descriptives.

	Mean	Std. deviation	n
Dependent variable participants' political affiliation	10.3134	4.03252	218
Authoritarianism	19.5367	4.89814	218
Pro anti-coddle	12.1376	3.09144	218
Freewill	4.1697	2.60337	218
Strict parent	56.3349	11.34555	218
Pro punishment	57.5853	15.43093	218
Participants' personal history with punishment	18.4844	4.64101	218

Table 2 Model summary^b.
Résumé du modèle.

Model	r	R square	Adjusted R square	Std. error of the estimate
1	.679 ^a	.461	.446	3.00183

^a Predictors: (constant), participants' personal history with punishment, strict parent, freewill score, pro-authority, pro anti-coddle, pro punishment score.

^b Dependent variable: dependent variable participants' political affiliation.

Table 3 Coefficients^a.
Coefficients.

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% confidence interval for B		
	B	Std. error	Beta (β)			Lower bound	Upper bound	
1	(Constant)	.958	1.557		.615	.539	-2.112	4.027
	Authoritarianism	.054	.055	.066	.985	.326	-.054	.163
	Pro anti-coddle	.006	.082	.005	.079	.937	-.155	.168
	Freewill score,	.095	.084	.061	1.128	.261	-.071	.261
	Strict parent	.028	.025	.077	1.085	.279	-.022	.077
	Pro punishment	.150	.019	.574	7.747	.000	.112	.188
	Participants' personal history with punishment	-.128	.045	-.147	-2.854	.005	-.216	-.040

^a Dependent variable: dependent variable participants' political affiliation with punishment.

Table 4 ANOVA^a.
ANOVA.

Model	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1592.784	2	796.392	88.447
	Residual	1935.907	215	9.004	.000 ^b
	Total	3528.691	217		

^a Dependent variable: dependent variable participants' political affiliation.

^b Predictors: (constant), participants' personal history with punishment, pro punishment score.

the two significant independent variables, pro-punishment and personal history with punishment $F(2, 215) = 88.447$, $P < .05$.

Discussion

Keeping with the theme of the authoritarian strict father and the supportive nurturant parenting style, this study

connects the participants' political affiliation to their worldviews. Results indicate a significant correlation between the dependent variable, political affiliation, and two of the independent variables; pro-punishment ($r = .655$) and personal history with punishment ($r = -.165$). As expected, those participants who believe in punishment as a means of control and authority, tended to be conservatives. Since Lakoff's strict father metaphor [4] encompasses a

pro-punishment attitude, it is also assumed that these results are consistent with previous research indicating conservatives hold a strict father worldview. Participants with personal histories of punishment tended to be more liberal in both their political beliefs and worldview.

It was hypothesized based upon previous research that a personal history with punishment would also predict a conservative strict father worldview. However, results of this study indicate that when there is a history of punishment, individuals tend toward a more liberal or nurturing parent model. This may be the result of too few participants, or it could be that those who have this history, may have decided not to use punishment due to their own feelings of shame, guilt, anger, and depression, which are often the results of physical punishment.

If Lakoff's family metaphors also apply to society in general, it is understandable why conservatives hold certain political beliefs, for example, punishing those who enter the country illegally (immigration), applying the death penalty to those who commit serious crimes, punishment for doctors performing abortion, a strong military for punishing nations who do not agree with U.S. policies or those who seek to hurt Americans, and support for strong authoritarian leaders. In addition, because of the conservative belief in a family-based moral system that is of utmost importance, it is understandable why they disapprove of any artificial means of enhancing human life, social safety net programs, and women's reproductive rights.

In conducting this study, the researchers also replicated a dissertation "Moral reasoning and political affiliation in liberal and conservative voters: Applying a Model of Hierarchical Complexity [21]. In accordance with the paper, no significant correlations were found between the participants' stage of behavioral development and their political affiliation. Confirming that stage of development does not influence political affiliation.

The results of this study were limited to 218 participants. It would be beneficial for future research to include additional participants from various backgrounds, political orientations, religious views, and lifestyles. For studies in the future, the history of physical punishment faced by the individual can be looked into with greater detail. Questions addressing the specific type of punishment, frequency and severity of punishment will be able to give researchers more of an insight to the individuals' political affiliation.

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Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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