

Left and Right in Personality and Ideology: An Attempt at Clarification

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This paper is concerned with the concept of left/right as a dimension of personality. This dimension is assumed to underly attraction to liberal or conservative ideologies, and to mediate other behaviors and psychological processes. Tomkins' Polarity Theory has made an important beginning toward the understanding of these processes. Stone argues that (1) it is useful to conceptualize all ideologies, including authoritarianism, as lying at some point on the left/right continuum; (2) it is very important to separately define and conceptualize *ideology* and *personality*; and (3) that at the present stage of theoretical development, a critical examination of experimental studies of the behavior of liberals and conservatives may be the most appropriate research strategy.

With the invention of attitude scales, it became possible to measure liberal and conservative leanings. Early work, as represented by Murphy, Murphy and Newcomb's (1937) survey, focused upon measurement. However, there was also in that early period considerable inquiry into the correlation of various individual difference measures with liberalism-conservatism. There were then and continue to be found in the psychological literature an extensive array of hypotheses about personality differences that lead to the acceptance of left-wing as opposed to right-wing beliefs. McCloskey (1958), for example, found conservatives to be timid, distrustful of differences, fearful of change, dreading disorder, and intolerant of nonconformity. Tomkins (1965) found that leftists are more likely to smile in an interview and are more people-oriented. Each of these findings suggested personality mechanisms that may underlie the acceptance of an ideology.

The present paper critically examines our understanding of the relationship of personality to ideology. One of the few attempts at a comprehensive understanding of this relationship is Tomkins' Polarity Theory (1963, 1965). Even in Tomkins' approach, however, left and right ideo-affective dispositions (personality types) are not described independently of normative (right) and humanistic (left) ideologies. Tomkins' important contributions to the

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psychology of ideology include his documentation of the pervasiveness of left and right in widely different ideological domains, and his ideas concerning differences in emotional reactivity between liberals and conservatives.

Three assertions concerning personality and ideology form the basis for the present critique: (1) First, I think that it is useful to conceptualize a basic left-right dimension underlying all "ideologies"; the conventional left-right dimension is seen as encompassing a wide range of attitudinal dispositions. (2) Ideology and the underlying personality dispositions must be conceptually *separated*. One set of terms cannot be applied to both realms without theoretical confusion. Let us not, for example, speak both of fascist attitudes and a fascist personality. (3) Progress in understanding these matters will be furthered by the making of theory-guided observations of the behaviors of leftists and rightists, as they behave in experiments and in natural settings. We should turn away, for the present, from efforts toward refinement of measures, efforts employing mainly correlational and factor approaches. I will elaborate on each of these assertions in turn.

Left/Right: The Basic Dimension of Ideology

Historically, "left" and "right" have rich connotative meanings. Domhoff (1969) found that for the American students that he tested, left represented the forbidden, the feminine, the bad; right connoted light, and things good and acceptable. Anthropological evidence (Hertz, 1960; Needham, 1973) suggests that these connotations of left and right are universal. Over and over again, it has been found that *left* represents change, risk, and threat to the status quo; *right* implies order and stability. Although these few studies, of course, do not provide an airtight case, these and other observations support my assertion that the left-right polarity is the basic dimension of ideology.

This assertion is not widely accepted; some authors have suggested that ideologies differ on more than one dimension (Billig, 1982). Others find great difficulty in the application of the liberal-conservative dimension to the classification of actors (cf. Kerlinger, Middendorp, and Amon, 1976). Others (e.g., Rokeach, 1973) speak of problems of conceptualization and measurement that make comparisons across cultural boundaries difficult. The problem, as I see it, is an inadequate conceptualization of ideology (see Tomkins, 1981). This observation led to the present effort toward reconceptualization.

Ideology is differently defined by social science disciplines. Sociology emphasizes the institutionalization of certain beliefs, psychology the organization of beliefs in the mind of the individual. It seems useful to emphasize ideology as a social product, referring to shared beliefs held in common by a group of people. Rokeach's (1968) definition emphasizes this sharing:

An "ideology" is an organization of beliefs and attitudes—religious, political, or philosophical in nature—that is more or less institutionalized or shared with others, deriving from external authority. (pp. 123-124)

There is more to the definition of ideology than that, of course. The term implies a coherent body of ideas that is held with some passion. Tomkins' definition adds the implication that the ideas involved are matters of opinion not subject to facile verification. He defines an ideology as "any organized set of ideas about which human beings are at once both articulate and passionate and about which they are least certain" (1963, p. 389). This definition invokes none of the disparaging tone used by writers who consider "ideology" to be an irrational, undesirable aspect of social movements (Bell, 1960; Mannheim, 1955). It is possible to recognize the important psychological interlocking of uncertainty and passionate advocacy without making such value judgements. Festinger, Schachter, and Reicken (1956), for example, demonstrate this mechanism in a group whose disappointment at the failure of a prophecy revealed only to them resulted in intensified proselytization. The theoretical explanation employed for this seemingly contradictory behavior was the existence of cognitive dissonance in the minds of the group's members (Rajecki, 1982).

In politics, we can generally cite specific authors or originators of any such set of ideas (e.g., Karl Marx, Edmund Burke), but we do not generally consider the author's point of view to be an ideology unless it has an identifiable body of supporters. There are many domains of ideology other than the political—among others, Tomkins lists scientific theory, child-rearing practices, and mathematics. In each domain we can identify a right-left dimension or polarization. Examples from the philosophy of science and theories of child-rearing will illustrate this polarity.

Right-wing philosophies of science, according to Tomkins, emphasize the existence of reality and facts that are "out there" to be discovered. Wild inference and theorizing are to be avoided; theory must stick close to known phenomena. The emphasis of the left-wing scientist is on creativity and the playful nature of scientific inquiry. An example is Einstein's assertion that "physical concepts are free creations of the human mind . . . not uniquely determined by the external world" (Einstein and Infeld, 1942, cited by Tomkins, 1963, p. 393).

In child-rearing, the polarization is between loving and controlling the child. On the one hand, there is the Calvinist emphasis on training the child to strict standards of morality and manners; on the left, a contrary belief in the essential goodness of children who should be always treated with gentleness, love and respect. Both Stendler (1950) and Bronfenbrenner (1958) have reported regular swings over time in the popularity of these two types of

socialization—left-wing and right-wing socialization, to use Tomkins' terms.

Certain common themes or assumptions pervade all of these ideological domains. Tomkins (1963) has listed ten issues upon which left and right differ in their assumptions. I list the first four:

- (1) "Man is an end in himself" (left) versus "man is not an end in himself: the valuable exists independent of man" (p. 400).
- (2) "The identity of the real and the valuable." Leftists, who see the individual as the most valuable phenomenon, insist that the person is also the most real entity. In contrast, rightists see the Platonic Idea (universal form, essence) as the most valuable phenomenon, and also as "the entity of greatest reality, in comparison with which, as in Plato, both man and nature are poor copies" (p. 402).
- (3) "Values are what man wishes versus values exist independent of man For the left wing, a value is a human wish; we would say, a human affect For the right wing, values are independent of man and therefore men may or may not wish for the good, the true, and the beautiful" (p. 403).
- (4) The fourth controversy concerns the role of pleasure in human life. The left view is that "man should satisfy and maximize his drives and affects." The right wing view is that "man should be governed by norms which in turn modulate his drives and affects" (p. 403). Thus, throughout these seemingly diverse human concerns, certain assumptions about humanity are held in common by right-wingers in science, theology, or art. The opposite assumptions can be discerned in left-wing ideologies that treat of these matters.

Ideology and Psychology: Toward Conceptual Separation

Social psychology has long been dominated by the emphasis on statistics, operational definition and experimentation. As a result, the psychological study of ideology has reflected the concerns of attitude methodologists. We have a multiplicity of measures of political attitudes, much controversy over the number of dimensions that are necessary to describe political ideology, and little agreement about the dimensions of personality that can be expected to relate to ideology. This confusing state of affairs has resulted from the focus upon method and the lack of a theoretical overview. This (distorted) focus was evident in the critical response to *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, et al., 1950), where the center of attack was the F Scale, which was but one aspect of the total investigation. As put by Connell and Goot, "the original force and bite of this theory vanished as, in a welter of psychometric argument, it was assimilated into the mainstream of American academic social science" (1972-1973, p. 187). My solution to this problem is to put more

emphasis on value-conscious theory, in particular the field theory advocated by Lewin and his student, J.F. Brown (Stone and Finison, 1980). The field theorist's emphasis on "the totality of factors influencing social life" (Lewin, 1938) is echoed by many critics of social psychology who recognize that the prevailing value-climate is a significant factor affecting social life (Sampson, 1977).

One problem that has hampered the study of personality and ideology is the confusion of two different levels of analysis. On the one hand, a liberal or conservative ideology refers to a set of ideas in any of the domains that I have mentioned. On the other hand, the same terms are often applied to describe the individual's personality, or one affective-cognitive aspect of it. Only confusion can result from the attempt to discuss, using a single set of terms, both ideologies and the personality dispositions that we presume to underlie differences in attraction to the ideologies. Such practice (the use of a single set of concepts) produces confusion between the psychological and social levels of discourse. Further, this practice asserts an isomorphism between psychology and ideology which is yet to be demonstrated.

Others have recognized the problem of levels of analysis in the psychology of ideology. Levinson (1964), for example, suggests the terms *autocratic* and *democratic* to discuss one important ideological dimension. He labels the right and left of the underlying psychological dimension *authoritarian* and *egalitarian* respectively. The problem with this distinction is that the personality types are characterized by a statement of the beliefs the persons hold. The use of similar terms for ideology and personality implies a particular theory concerning the relation of personality to political attitudes, namely the externalization model. In this model, one learns certain ways of relating to others and *externalizes* these to broader political situations (Christiansen, 1959).

Tomkins (1963, 1965) speaks of the socialization of ideoaffective dispositions, which he describes as humanistic on the one hand and normative on the other. The person who is subjected to humanistic socialization will develop an ideoaffective makeup which predisposes him or her to "resonate" to leftist ideologies. Likewise, normative socialization will produce a personality that vibrates sympathetically upon encountering rightist ideologies. Middle-of-the-road socialization can occur in several ways; for example, the child may have one parent who believes in conformity to norms and another who encourages the child's self-expression (see also Billig, 1982, esp. chap. 9).

This distinction between left/right dispositions in personality and left/right social ideologies that exist outside the person allows us to conceive of the matching of personality to ideology, and to ponder the factors that produce relatively good and poor matches. One variable that leads to better matches is to increase the number of ideological choices. In the United States, the alternatives are seen by some as the rather unprincipled liberalism offered by the Democrats versus the range of conservative beliefs and policies embodied

in the Republican party. In the Soviet Union, there are no apparent political alternatives (although we need to account for the continual expression of dissent). In Norway and Italy, the political choices include eight or ten ideological alternatives, offered by parties whose ideology ranges from far left to far right.

My emphasis on the need for better conceptual separation should not imply that I believe ideology can easily be separated from personality. We must recognize, with Billig (1976), the dialectical nature of ideology. Ideologies, Billig asserts, are "first and foremost social creations, which depend on objective social factors for their existence. In turn the objective factors both create, and are themselves determined by, the subjective variables. The relationship between the objective and the subjective will thus be characterized as a dialectical one" (p. 245). In the present context, ideologies both shape and are shaped by, left/right orientations in personality.

From Theory to Practice:

Inferring Personality from Liberal/Conservative Behavioral Differences

If, as I have suggested, left/right is the fundamental dimension upon which political ideologies vary, and if there are no exclusively good measures of liberal-conservative tendencies, but rather families or fuzzy sets (Cioffi-Revilla, 1981) of ideas that range left to right, then it makes little sense at present to focus on more exact statistical methods. Rather than attempting to develop new and better attitude scales, doing more and more factor analyses and correlating personality factors with attitudes, I suggest that we need to observe the *behavior* of leftists and rightists in many different situations. I believe that this will tell us much more than the strictly correlational types of research tell us, and may help to illuminate such ancient controversies as that concerning left-wing authoritarianism (Stone, 1981).

In particular, I think that careful behavioral observation will reveal some departures from the expected behaviors of liberals and conservatives. It is commonly found, for example, that conservatives are more closed-minded, and that they are defensive, both in terms of ego-defense and their eagerness to defend the status quo. In contrast, liberals are generally open both to their own feelings and to changes in society; in addition, liberals are more intelligent, more open-minded and are better informed; leftists are also less superstitious and better adjusted. We must study these findings carefully, I believe, because they represent a very superficial approach to the questions that concern us here. From a dialectical perspective, both left and right-wing ideologies and adherents are necessary to society—both stability and change are desirable. Martin Jay, in his history of the Frankfurt Institute, cites an unpublished study conducted by members of the Institute (in exile in New

York) during the 1940's—an inquiry into the patterns of help rendered by German gentiles to Jewish victims of Hitler:

Although never published, the study did show that Catholics and conservatives had given more assistance than Protestants and liberals. According to Paul Massing, this conclusion was later used by Horkheimer to support his argument that conservatives were often better preservers of critical ideals than liberals. (Jay, 1973, p. 224)

Obviously, careful behavioral examination of liberals and conservatives, looking at what they do as well as what they say, will help us in uncovering some cracks in the good-liberal, bad-conservative stereotypes. I have been interested for some time in uncovering what I have called anomalous findings, referring to behaviors of liberals or conservatives that contradict the commonly held stereotypes and the prevailing weight of correlational evidence. Essentially, I am interested in unexpected behaviors, whether those of radicals or conservatives. The suggestion that conservative Germans helped Jews more than did liberals would be such a finding. Let me give a couple of other examples from the early attitude research literature.

Many experimental comparisons of liberals and conservatives were made in the early days of attitude measurement. One of the more interesting studies, by Howells (1928), found that liberals had greater tolerance for electric shock than did conservatives, were more adept at a pursuit rotor task requiring eye-hand coordination, and were less suggestible than conservatives. This study was followed by Moore's (1929) experiment; his findings supported those of Howells in showing differences on various skilled tasks, including a mirror drawing task thought to measure ability to break longstanding motor habits. Liberals also gave more remote associations on the Rosanoff word association test than did conservatives, indicating greater creativity. In recent years, interest in experimental or behavioral comparisons of liberals and conservatives has declined. However, two studies done in the 1970's furnish examples of interesting anomalous results. Gaertner (1973) studied the response of members of New York's Liberal and Conservative parties to an appeal for help. Liberals, as expected, were more willing to help a caller with a distinguishably black voice, but they also were found to be more likely to hang up on either black or white callers before the caller had defined the emergency (cf. Jay's observation cited above).

Another study providing food for thought about liberal-conservative behavioral differences was reported by Farina and his colleagues (1972). Farina, Chapnick, Chapnick, and Misiti used an experimental paradigm, called the Buss Aggression Technique, that asks the subject to act as a "teacher," empowered to use electric shock to punish a "learner" (who is actually the experimenter's confederate). They found that liberals and conservatives differ in the delivery of electric shocks to their opposite numbers—

liberals punished conservatives directly (gave them a stronger shock), whereas the conservatives' aggression was less direct (they held the button down longer for a liberal), a result that would hardly be predicted from knowing the liberal and conservative views on punishment for criminals! It is important to note that such potentially significant findings are often of little concern to the investigators; one must in most cases go back and read the studies in detail to find them. The point is, that because few investigators have considered that left and right oriented people actually differ in some of the basic psychological ways that Tomkins has suggested, potentially useful findings have been ignored. Useful, that is, in framing a more comprehensive theory of left-right psychology.

Together with my student, Sarah Williams, I have been reviewing the literature dealing with liberalism-conservatism, in search of such unexpected results. We have found some interesting tidbits, but there are relatively too few studies to be of great application to our goal of inferring the personality of liberals and conservatives from their behaviors. However, having made the point in an earlier paper (Stone, 1981) that both dogmatism and authoritarianism are highly right-wing ideologies, it is but a step farther to suggest that high authoritarian scores represent, largely, extreme conservatism. This perspective, predicating authoritarianism as conservatism, opens up a vast literature, because hundreds of experimental studies of authoritarians and equalitarians have been reported in the last 30 years.

Our search of the authoritarianism literature has just begun, but already we have found some interesting anomalies in the studies of Buss aggression by Authoritarian and Equalitarian subjects. In Epstein's (1965) study, for example, male equalitarians who had *not* been frustrated gave strong shocks to a high status victim; when other male equalitarians were "frustrated" by failing a test, they gave very *low* shocks to the high status victims. Female equalitarians showed no such tendencies. The tendency of equalitarians to express more aggression toward a high status experimenter was found again by Lipitz and Ossorio (1967); this tendency was unchanged by a manipulation designed to anger the subjects. A third study (Epstein, 1966) found that authoritarians gave a stronger shock to a black "learner" than did equalitarians. However, when the equalitarians followed a white model who gave shocks to a black victim, they gave *weak* shocks to the black learner. When the model was black, the equalitarians gave *strong* shocks to the black learner. These scattered findings seem to support the inclusive left/right framework proposed here, and they support my decision to treat authoritarians and equalitarians as "strong conservatives" and "moderate liberals." Our search of the authoritarianism literature is concerned with behaviors that can be interpreted as reflecting the personality differences between liberals and conservatives. Zwillenberg and Christie (1981) on the other hand, assume that "Authoritarians" and "Equalitarians" represent two distinctive personality types; their concern

is mainly with the *situational* factors that make these types behave differently.

What we are trying to do, then, is to broaden our theoretical net, utilizing Tomkins' suggestion that left and right orientations are very pervasive elements of human experience. Liberal or radical people think, feel, and behave differently from conservative or authoritarian people. Given *this* theoretical assumption, we can go back to the literature in a more critical way, believing that there *will* be differences but not content with the superficial findings that attribute more intelligence, education and other good things to the liberal. Obviously, there are very competent and admirable rightists in history; our preliminary survey suggests some very complex and interesting differences between leftists and rightists that will both help to overcome empty stereotypes and to extend the theory-building begun by Tomkins.

Conclusion

The study of personality and ideology is one of the political psychologist's most important concerns. In line with Kurt Lewin's injunction that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory," I have suggested that we make new assumptions about the generality of left-right orientations in personality, and that we try to develop terminology suitable to the description of political personality and to the level of political ideology. Given this conceptual clarification, I think that Tomkins' Polarity Theory will be of great use in furthering the study of personality and ideology. Finally, given these theoretical considerations, I think that there are relevant findings already in existence in the literature, particularly if we look for "anomalies" in the behavior of liberals and conservatives, authoritarians and equalitarians. This approach, which emphasizes the interplay of theory and observation, is in the tradition of critical theory.

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