Avoiding the Pitfalls of Politicized Psychology

Elizabeth Mullen*
University of Illinois at Chicago

Christopher W. Bauman
University of Illinois at Chicago

Linda J. Skitka
University of Illinois at Chicago

This article provides two arguments for using caution when interpreting the results of a Global Change Game simulation indicating that people high in right-wing authoritarianism are particularly likely to bring the world to ruin. First, we review research that demonstrates that extremists on both the political left and right share characteristics likely to be associated with poor performance in the Global Change Game (e.g., lower levels of integrative complexity) and that there are reasons to be cautious about letting political extremists on either the left or right inherit the earth. Second, we caution that political psychologists need to be aware of how their own values shape the types of research they conduct and the inferences they draw from that research and that the same results can be construed very differently depending on the lens through which they are viewed.

It is difficult to read about what happens in the Global Change Game when the players are high in right-wing-authoritarianism (RWA) without becoming deeply concerned what would happen if the game were real rather than a simulation. The Global Change Game simulations reveal a frightening portrait of what a world dominated by RWAs might be like. People higher in RWA have a propensity to end up destroying their simulated world by nuclear holocaust (Altemeyer, 1996) and, moreover, prefer tyrannical leaders who are likely to bring disastrous consequences to the world that much sooner (Altemeyer, this issue).

---

*Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to: Elizabeth Mullen, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology (M/C 285), 1007 W. Harrison Street, Chicago, IL 60607-7137 [e-mail: emullen@uic.edu].

As disturbing as the implications of this research might be, we feel compelled to sound two cautionary notes. First, failures to recognize contingencies and likely consequences of choices made in situations like the Global Change Game are probably related to people's inability to reason in integratively complex ways. To the extent that this is the case, we should be equally concerned about political extremism on the left as we are the right. Our second concern is a more general one about research that explores individual differences associated with attachments to specific political values or ideological belief systems. Specifically, researchers who study the consequences of ideology need to be especially aware of how their own values are likely to shape what they choose to study and the inferences they draw from their research.

One Should Look Both Ways Before Crossing the Street

Research investigating the relationship between cognitive style and political orientation reveals that individuals on both the political left and the right can, at times, demonstrate low levels of integrative complexity (e.g., Tetlock, 1984). Integrative complexity is defined by two characteristics: (a) differentiation, the number of different aspects of an issue that a person recognizes, and (b) integration, the development of complex connections among the differentiated characteristics (Tetlock, 1986). People scoring high in integrative complexity are able to recognize that there are many different sides to a given issue and they are able to integrate those different sides and determine a way to cope with the necessary trade-offs involved (see Tetlock & Suedfeld, 1988).[1]

In an analysis of interviews of British members of parliament, Tetlock (1984) found that both extreme socialists and extreme conservatives in the British House of Commons scored lower in integrative complexity than their more moderate counterparts. Moreover, parliamentarians who scored higher in integrative complexity were more tolerant of alternative viewpoints, less concerned with assigning blame for society's problems, and more likely to think about issues in nonideological terms, relative to those lower in integrative complexity.

Thus, it seems that thinking about problems in an integratively complex manner would benefit participants in the Global Change Game, because the game is designed to punish isolationism (which only requires seeing one side of things) and reward global cooperation (which requires the ability to view issues from others' perspectives). Thus, moderates may be more likely to succeed in the Global Change game because they are more likely to see the strengths and weaknesses of a variety of political positions and might be more willing to strike deals with both

---

[1] Importantly, Tetlock (1984) argues that there is no relation between the amount of integrative complexity and the correctness or soundness of a position (see Tetlock, 1994 for four examples elucidating this point).

sides of the political spectrum. In contrast, ideologues on both the left and right should be least likely to acknowledge multiple points of view and therefore are likely to be less willing to negotiate (Tetlock, 1994).

Consistent with the notion that extremes on both the political right and left can demonstrate low integrative complexity, other research suggests that high authoritarians exist on both the political right and left.[2] Although left-wing authoritarians (LWAs) might be rare in Western democracies, research conducted in Hungary and Russia supports the notion that communists and other left-wing extremists can be as authoritarian as RWAs (e.g., McFarland, Ageyev, & Abalakina-Paap, 1992; Pentony et al., 2000). For example, using a Russian version of Altemeyer's 1988 RWA scale, McFarland and his colleagues demonstrated that authoritarianism in the former Soviet Union is strongly associated with support for communism and membership in the communist party (McFarland et al., 1992; McFarland, Ageyev, Abalakina, 1993).[3] Moreover, Russian authoritarianism correlated with support for communist principles of distributive justice and egalitarianism, anticapitalist and antidemocratic attitudes, and ethnocentrism (McFarland, Ageyev, & Djintcharadze, 1996). Thus, not only do we find evidence of less cognitive complexity as one moves to the more extreme ends of the political left and the right, we also find some evidence that the political right does not have an exclusive claim to many of the characteristics most would see as authoritarian.

In sum, it is possible to find evidence of cognitive inflexibility and authoritarianism on the left and right ends of the political spectrum, and there are good reasons to believe that extremism on the left may be just as likely to lead to poor performance in the Global Change Game as extremism on the right. Moreover, even a very superficial glimpse at history reveals that regimes and leaders of both the right and the left have been responsible for disastrous world events. For example, striking similarities in political style exist between extreme right-wing leaders such as Mussolini and Hitler, and their left-wing counterparts such as Stalin and Pol Pot (for a thorough review see McClosky and Chong, 1985). All were equally repressive and each leveled disastrous consequences on their citizens (e.g., Stalin murdered more people than Hitler). Thus, it seems that condemnation of only RWAs would fail to recognize the possibility that extremists on both the left and the right may have produced equally dire results in the Global Change Game.

---

[2] Although some researchers have argued that left-wing authoritarians (LWAs) do not exist (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996; Stone, 1980; Stone & Smith, 1993), others have argued that extremists on both the political left (e.g., communists) and right (fascists) are highly authoritarian, possess rigid thinking, and share similar political styles (e.g., Shils, 1954; Eysenck, 1981). For example, McClosky and Chong (1985) have demonstrated similarities between left and right extremists in the United States in, for example, their intolerance for ambiguity, their psychological rigidity, and their tough-mindedness.

[3] Altemeyer (1996) has argued that communists in the former Soviet Union support the status quo, and so, by definition, are right wing. His definition of LWAs emphasizes support for nonestablished authorities.

Is the Glass Half Empty or Half Full?

Our second concern is with how researchers' values can shape what research is conducted and how that research is interpreted. Research devoted to studying the consequences of individual differences in adherence to right-wing versus left-wing political ideologies seems to disproportionately focus on the possible negative implications of political belief systems and, more specifically, on demonstrations of the negative implications of political conservatism. For example, a great deal of research on RWA has revealed that high RWAs are obedient, sexist, dogmatic, mean-spirited, politically conservative individuals (Altemeyer, 1996). Consistent with this tradition, the Global Change Game studies demonstrated some of the potential downsides of conservative belief systems. However, one could alternatively theorize about and demonstrate how greater levels of political conservatism might lead to consequences many would view as positive (e.g., making choices that could optimize personal or collective wealth; greater self-reliance; free markets), or how greater levels of political liberalism might similarly lead to normatively beneficial or destructive choices or behaviors.

The choice of the research paradigm to test hypotheses has important implications for how the phenomena studied will be viewed. For example, there is an enormous literature that has explored how fair procedural treatment increases people's willingness to obey the law and to voluntarily cooperate with authorities in a number of settings (for a review see, Tyler & Smith, 1998). Underlying this program of research is the assumption that obedience to authorities is a normative good. Other research using a very different paradigm, however, has revealed the destructive implications of obedience to authority (Milgram, 1974). Thus, it is easy to see how the lens through which scientists view a particular phenomenon can shape not only scientists' understanding of their research, but also how students and other consumers are likely to interpret the implications of a given study.

Researchers' values not only influence their choices of how they stage their studies, but can also dramatically influence the normative spin placed on given research findings, and influence the points researchers choose to emphasize and downplay (Tetlock, 1994). For example, Skitka and Tetlock (1992) discuss how results of allocation studies can be used to portray liberals and conservatives in either a flattering or an unflattering light. Considerable research indicates that conservatives are less willing than liberals to help people who are personally responsible for needing assistance (Skitka & Tetlock, 1992, 1993). Although some could use this data to argue that conservatives are punitive and lack compassion, Skitka and Tetlock (1993) suggest one can put a positive spin on the same results. Specifically, the same research finding could be used to support the claim that, unlike liberals, conservatives rationally apply principles of operant conditioning to enforce norms for socially appropriate behavior for the good of society. The results themselves are value-neutral; it is the inferences drawn from them that can be biased by the political perspective of the observer.

In the case of the Global Change Game studies, Altemeyer has emphasized that RWAs seem unable to solve the world's problems and indeed produce disastrous consequences when left to their own devices. However, just as it is possible to put a negative spin on these results, one can also infer a more positive spin. For example, political elites who were high in RWA and social dominance orientation (SDO) hoarded less personal wealth for themselves compared to elites high *and* low in RWA. Although one interpretation of these results could be that elites high in SDO hoarded less personal wealth to ensure that their region won (due to their competitive nature; see Altemeyer, this issue), this research finding could also be interpreted as a striking example of the elites putting their region's needs before their own. Similarly, one could criticize the students' focus on solving domestic rather than global problems as selfish, or commend them for placing an appropriate emphasis on domestic problems before taking on the problems of the world as well. Finally, although Altemeyer criticizes RWAs for their lack of charity and the absence of generous loans to help the impoverished in both simulations, Nozick (1974) would be likely to commend this behavior. Specifically, Nozick (1974) advocates that the just acquisition and transfer of goods is the only basis for social justice (i.e., therefore failing to give something to someone for nothing does not constitute an injustice). We do not mean to say that more conservative spins of what the data might mean are any more correct or persuasive than more liberal value spins, nor do we want to appear to be justifying fascism. Our point is that one can interpret the same finding as meaning something positive or negative about people of a given ideological orientation depending on one's own values.

In conclusion, the main aim of this paper is not to contest that high RWAs (especially in the presence of high SDOs) are likely to produce disastrous results in the Global Change Game or in similar real-world situations. Rather, we argue that we need to be cautious when interpreting the results of research that investigates individual differences associated with particular ideological belief systems. Considerable research suggests that extremes on both the political left and right can exhibit low integrative complexity, cognitive rigidity, dogmatic thinking, and intolerance for ambiguity. Moreover, history has revealed the destructive nature of political regimes on both the political left and right (e.g., Stalin and Hitler). In sum, the political right is unlikely to have a monopoly on the capacity to bring the world to ruin, and what one person sees as foolhardy or cruel (e.g., placing priority on domestic problems instead of foreign aid) may well be viewed by another as rational and justified.

References

Altemeyer, B. (1996). *The authoritarian specter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Eysenck, H. J. (1981). Left-wing authoritarianism: Myth or reality? *Political Psychology*, 234–238.

McClosky, H., & Chong, D. (1985). Similarities and differences between left-wing and right-wing radicals. *British Journal of Political Science, 15*, 329–363.

McFarland, S. G., Ageyev, V. S., & Abalakina-Paap, M. A. (1992). Authoritarianism in the former Soviet Union. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 63*, 1004–1010.

McFarland, S. G., Ageyev, V., & Abalakina, M. (1993). The authoritarian personality in the United States and the former Soviet Union: Comparative studies. In W. F. Stone, G. Lederer, & R. Christie (Eds.), *Strength and weakness: The authoritarian personality today*. NY: Springer-Verlag.

McFarland, S. G., Ageyev, V. S., & Djintcharadze, V. (1996). Russian authoritarianism two years after communism. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 22*, 210–217.

Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to authority: An experimental view*. NY: Harper & Row.

Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, state, and utopia*. Basic Books.

Pentony, J. F., Petersen, K. S. E., Philips, O., Leong, C., Harper, P., Bakowski, A., Steward, S., & Gonzales, R. (2000). A comparison of authoritarianism in the United States, England, and Hungary with selected nonrandom samples. *European Psychologist, 5*, 259–268.

Shils, E. A. (1954). Authoritarianism: Right and left. In R. Christie & M. Jahoda (Eds.), *Studies in the scope and method of "the authoritarian personality."* Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Skitka, L. J., & Tetlock, P. E. (1992). Allocating scarce resources: A contingency model of distributive justice. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 28*, 491–522.

Skitka, L. J., & Tetlock, P. E. (1993). Providing public assistance: Cognitive and motivational processes underlying liberal and conservative policy preferences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 65*, 1205–1223.

Stone, W. F. (1980). The myth of left-wing authoritarianism. *Political Psychology, 2*, 3–19.

Stone, W. F., & Smith, L. D. (1993). Authoritarianism: Left and right. In W. F. Stone, G. Lederer, & R. Christie (Eds.), *Strength and weakness: The authoritarian personality today*. NY: Springer-Verlag.

Tetlock, P. E. (1984). Cognitive style and political belief systems in the British House of Commons. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46*, 365–375.

Tetlock, P. E. (1986). A value pluralism model of ideological reasoning. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50*, 819–827.

Tetlock, P. E. (1994). Political psychology or politicized psychology: Is the road to scientific hell paved with good moral intentions? *Political Psychology, 15*, 509–529.

Tetlock, P. E., & Suedfeld, P. (1988). Integrative complexity coding of verbal behavior. In C. Antaki (Ed.), *Analyzing lay explanation: A casebook of methods* (pp. 72–87). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Tyler, T., & Smith, H. J. (1998). Social justice and social movements. In D. T. Gilbert & S. T. Fiske (Eds.), *The Handbook of social psychology*, Vol. 2 (4th ed., pp. 595–629), NY: McGraw-Hill.

ELIZABETH MULLEN is a graduate student in the dissertation stage of her career at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her current work focuses on the role of emotional appraisal in the justice reasoning process and on the implications of a motivated correction model of political reasoning.

CHRISTOPHER W. BAUMAN is a graduate student at the University of Illinois at Chicago and has just completed his master's degree. His research interests include moral conviction, perceptions of fairness, and political psychology.

LINDA J. SKITKA is an associate professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research interests include justice and political psychology, with a particular interest in the cognitive and motivational underpinnings of ideological disagreements. In her current research efforts, she focuses on empirically distinguishing moral mandates from other classes of strong attitudes.