

Research Dialogue

# Conservatism as a situated identity: Implications for consumer behavior

Daphna Oyserman\*, Norbert Schwarz

*University of Southern California, United States*

Accepted by Sharon Shavitt, Area Editor

Received 14 August 2017; received in revised form 16 August 2017; accepted 16 August 2017

Available online 24 August 2017

## Abstract

Insufficient attention to political ideology as an organizing axis reduces predictive power. Jost (2017 – this issue) makes a significant contribution by outlining and documenting a set of relationships among personality factors, attitudes, values, and conservatism. The value of this approach is highlighting the possibility that ideology sticks when it fits features of the individual and hence has an enduring quality. This approach needs to be balanced by consideration of the power of the immediate situation to define what an identity means and the potential universality of many features associated with conservatism. We discuss both issues using identity-based motivation theory as our organizing framework.

© 2017 Society for Consumer Psychology. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

“A Jeep driver is one who doesn’t give up when faced with adversity” (Shanghai husband explaining why he bought his wife a Jeep Grand Cherokee; from Barnett, 2016).

“Love, hope, happiness. Whatever your destination, there’re a million ways to get there” (“Recalculating” advertisement for Jeep <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2dnmCmTI90>).

“Yes you can go back, you just have to look in the right place.”  
“It is not about hugging trees. It is not about being wasteful either. Find that balance, when taking care of yourself takes care of more than just yourself. That is the sweet spot.” (Texan actor Mathew McConaughey, promoting Ford Lincoln cars, in a series of sleekly shot commercials <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QEAA94FjHc>).

## Introduction

Are Jeeps for tough tenacious people who value personal happiness, self-direction and new experiences? Are Lincolns for quirky people who are rooted in their past, value family and personal happiness, and are benevolent and want to avoid harm? How did the Jeep and Lincoln people choose these particular descriptors? According to John Jost’s (2017 – this issue) timely and stimulating target article these descriptors are associated with political ideology. The Jeep ‘recalculating’ and the Lincoln McConaughey advertisements mix some descriptors resonating more with conservatives with other descriptors resonating more with liberals. Associates of conservatism are tough-mindedness, individualism, respect and deference to tradition and authority. Associates of liberalism are tolerance, compassion, flexibility, and openness to new experiences. The advertisements cleverly link consumption with all of these attributes (which might variously be defined as attitudes, traits, values, or moral bases; Oyserman, 2015a, 2015b). For example, in the Jeep ‘recalculating’ spot, the theme music comes from Frank Zaruba’s country western tune, providing a link to that identity, while the images and words in the ‘recalculate’ advertisement emphasize self-directed ways to get to a traditional lifestyle. “Go straight to a steady job, recalculating;

DOI of original article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2017.07.003>.

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Southern California, 3620 S. McClintock Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90089-1061, United States.

E-mail address: [oyserman@usc.edu](mailto:oyserman@usc.edu) (D. Oyserman).

tow the company line, recalculating; stay single until you are 34, recalculating (with an image of a diamond ring); be a vegan, recalculating (with an image of a person viscerally enjoying a large steak).” In the Lincoln advertisements, McConaughey, in a subtle southern Texan twang, talks to his dogs about dinner plans but tells them he is the boss, tells a bull in his path that he will show respect, lets the bull have the road, while he himself backs up and takes the long way around. If liberals and conservatives notice identity-relevant cues and fail to notice or process irrelevant ones, advertisements like these can feel equally compelling to both audiences.

Jost’s timely target article asks whether there is a profile of conservatism and liberalism that is relevant to understanding consumer choice and behavior, which consumer behavior theories and marketing strategies should take into account. One implication of these advertising examples is that ads target the sorts of values, attitudes, and traits that Jost (2017 – *this issue*) proposes are associated with political ideology, understood through the lens of a conservatism-liberalism continuum. A second implication is that advertising does so, it seems, by mixing and matching ideologies, perhaps assuming that consumers will only notice and process identity-relevant information, making sense of the whole by focusing on identity-relevant parts. Jost reviews the literature on associative relationships between political attitudes, personality variables, and family background, arriving at three key conclusions (see also Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009).

First, certain kinds of people hold certain political ideologies because these ideologies are good matches with their traits and characteristics. Political ideologies stick because they resonate with personal needs and motivations. Conservatives emphasize tough-mindedness and tenacity, personal happiness, family security, economic prosperity, hierarchy, obedience to authority, and individualism. These values stick more with people who have the personality trait of conscientiousness and have a low need for cognition and high need for cognitive closure. Liberals emphasize self-direction and flexibility. These values stick more with people who have the personality trait of openness to new experience, have a high need for cognition and low need for cognitive closure. Second, political ideologies come from the larger society and express themselves at the individual level in distinctive ways of thinking, kinds of motivation, and even brain structures. Third, all of this might matter for consumer choice and behavior.

### A situated approach

Jost’s message is appealing, not the least because it dovetails with people’s general preference for dispositional ‘at person’ explanations over situational ‘at context’ ones (Nisbett & Ross, 1991). People believe that they know who they are and that who they are matters for what they do; that their own and other peoples’ choices and actions reflect who they are and who they might become— their current and possible future identities (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). People believe that in core and essential ways, they are the same across time and space; their friends usually share this belief about themselves. This essentialist belief is useful for several reasons. First, it allows people to make

predictions about their own and others’ future behavior given what they believe to be true of them now. Second, if “future me” and “me now” are essentially the same “me” it is less painful to refrain from smaller current rewards to accrue future larger ones. This makes long-term strategies, such as saving for one’s retirement, more palatable (Lewis & Oyserman, 2015). Third, if “future me” and “me now” are essentially the same “me,” people should be more willing to take a “no pain, no gain” approach, investing more effort when they experience difficulty working toward their goals (Smith & Oyserman, 2015).

However, the appealing message of essential dispositions comes with an important caveat that matters for those interested in shaping and predicting consumer choice and behavior. As with all dispositional accounts of attitudes and behavior, Jost’s (2017 – *this issue*) emphasis on dispositional variables needs to be balanced by a consideration of immediate contextual variables influencing motivation, identities, attitudes, and behaviors. As with all dispositional accounts, this also requires a realistic assessment of the likely amount of variance that political ideologies expressed in one context can explain in behaviors measured in another context or across contexts over time (e.g., effects of political ideology on charitable giving, Kimmelmeier et al., 2002; and performance, Kimmelmeier et al., 2006). Even though identities feel stable, identities and the content of these identities change as a function of context (for a review, see Oyserman et al., 2012). Rather than being invariant, which identities come to mind and what ‘on-the-mind’ identities seem to mean is sensitively attuned to momentary and chronic features of context. That people are sensitive to the implications of their immediate situation is a design feature, not a design flaw. This sensitivity allows people to make inferences about what people like themselves likely do, which strategies work for them, and what inferences to draw when their current activity progresses smoothly or when they run into difficulties (for reviews Fisher & Oyserman, 2017; Oyserman, 2015a, 2015b; Oyserman et al., 2017).

### Identity as situated

Our organizing framework here is identity-based motivation theory, a situated social cognition theory of motivation and goal pursuit — with special focus on when and how self-regulation works (Oyserman, 2007; Oyserman et al., 2017). Identity-based motivation theory starts with the disjuncture between decontextualized belief and contextualized reality. People experience their own and others’ identities as fixed and always on the mind so that they can predict tomorrow’s tastes and desires from those of today. People prefer to act (action-readiness) and make sense of their experiences (procedural-readiness) in identity-congruent ways. However, contexts influence more than which identities are on the mind; people actively construct what their identities are and imply given contextual cues (dynamic construction). ‘On-the-mind’ identities influence the strategies people are willing to use and the meaning they make of their subjective experiences, especially their experiences of ease and difficulty in considering or trying to work on their self-goals.

People make culturally tuned inferences about what these experiences imply for who they are or could become and what

to do about it (Oyserman, 2007; Oyserman et al., 2017). Although typically considered as differing across groups, some aspects of human culture are likely universal because human culture developed from the survival necessity of connecting with others and adapting to group living (Boyd & Richerson, 1988; Cohen, 2001; Haidt et al., 2015; Oyserman, 2017; Schwartz, 1992). Living together requires that people coordinate and organize their relationships, clarify group boundaries, and notice and reward innovation that can be imitated or exploited (Boyd, Richerson, & Levinson, 2005; Kurzban & Neuberg, 2015; Oyserman, 2011; Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). The implication is that many of the attributes and values currently described as conservative may be quite universal and hence available and identity-congruent, though not necessarily accessible or on the mind, and not necessarily considered as part of a *conservative* identity. If so, then features of situations, including advertisements, which cue elements of honor, collectivistic mindsets, or individualistic mindsets, should be experienced as meaningful even to people who do not identify clusters of these attributes as conservatism.

### Conservative identity

That said; some people do have conservative identities or identities as conservatives rather than liberals (or the reverse). As summarized in Jost (2017 – this issue) and highlighted by our opening examples of car advertisements, the values and attitudes associated with conservatism such as individual initiative, family orientation, and a desire for personal happiness, can be associated with branding and marketing strategies. At the same time, these values and attitudes can be considered aspects of conservative identity. If so, then on the one hand, when on the mind, conservatism should evoke action- and procedural-readiness, a readiness to act and make sense of experience in light of this identity. And, on the other hand, what a conservative (or liberal) identity implies should be, in important ways, dynamically constructed as a function of features of the immediate context.

As Jost (2017 – this issue) outlines, a number of features of what a conservative identity might contain have been documented. For example, conservatism is associated with experiencing the world as a just place (Jost, 2017 – this issue). Conservatives believe in free will and a just world, and this implies that one deserves what one gets. Indeed, conservatism is associated with fewer consumer complaints and less dispute of the resolution of the complaints that one lodges (Jung, Garbarino, Briley, & Wynhausen, 2017).

Conservatism is also associated with beliefs about what is moral and what is not (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007). Higher endorsement of moral values associated with conservatism (loyalty, deference to authority, purity) is associated with more moralizing of self-control successes (e.g., sticking to a diet, saving instead of spending) and failures (e.g., succumbing to temptations, drinking or eating to excess, being unfaithful; Mooijman et al., 2017). This is not the case for higher endorsement of the moral values associated with liberalism (fairness, caring, harm avoidance), which are not associated with whether self-control is moralized (Mooijman et al., 2017). The

implication is that moral values associated with conservatism change self-control from a personal choice or personal skill to a moral imperative: people *should* be self-controlled and self-restrained and *should* be punished if they are not. This, in turn, has implications for action- and procedural-readiness, as a few examples may illustrate.

If conservatism is associated with experiencing self-control as a moral imperative, conservatives should work harder at controlling themselves and should believe that people could control themselves if they only wanted to. Indeed, conservatism is related to higher self-control (Clarkson et al., 2015; Jost, 2017 – this issue; Kimmelmeier, 2008). For example, Clarkson et al. (2015) found that conservatives perform better than liberals at a color Stroop task, a measure of attentional control in which respondents have to read color words while ignoring the color of letters that form the word (e.g. the word ‘red’ written in blue letters). They also showed that the relationship between conservatism and self-control was due, in part, to conservatives’ higher belief in free will (Clarkson et al., 2015). As noted, conservatism is associated with belief in free will, that people deserve what they get and get what they deserve (Jost, 2017 – this issue). These beliefs are congruent with other conservative values such as acceptance of the status quo.

Conservatism might influence what kinds of consumption are deemed morally good or right. “Sin” taxes reflect moralization of decisions of this kind and impose a disincentive on classes of consumption that are considered inappropriate (alcohol, cigarettes), unwise (gas guzzling cars) or unnecessary (luxury goods). The same is true for liberalism. Consider graduated costs of license plate renewal. If newer models or more expensive cars are charged more, it is not because the plate is more costly to make or the paperwork is more costly to process, but because of a decision that people who have more can pay more. Conservative and liberal political ideology may be behind each of these policy decisions, both result in taxes but for seemingly opposite reasons. Conservative moralization of self-control leads some purchases to be taxed since they seem to require punishment and liberal belief in equity leads other purchases to be taxed since they seem to imply that one has more than enough. Indeed, in a recent set of experiments involving hypothetical and real giving, Olson, McFerran, Morales, and Dahl (2016) show that Americans find buying organic food and making greener car choices a marker of morality for people who spend money they earned, but a marker of immorality for people who spend money they received from government assistance programs. Americans also act on these perceptions. Olson et al.’ (2016) participants donated over 50% more to a community charity that aimed to feed the hungry than to an otherwise identical community charity that aimed to feed the hungry with organic food.

On the other hand, the size of the relationships between conservatism and values, and between values and patterns of consumption is small in absolute size. From an identity-based motivation perspective, one reason that the associations are small is that the dispositional approach misses the implications of dynamic construction and how this then influences what actions and meanings come to mind when conservative identity is cued in context. Three examples may illustrate this issue by highlighting

the variable impact of political ideology on the moralization of self-control, the role of free will, and consumers' preferences for stability versus change.

### Evidence for dynamic construction of conservative identity

Identity-based motivation theory predicts that what a conservative identity implies for what do to and how to make sense of one's experience is in part a dynamic function of context. For example, is conservatism always linked to self-control or does it depend on what self-control seems to imply in context? Can anyone be induced to take on a conservative approach to morality and does this lead to more moralizing of self-control? Supporting our situated prediction, Clarkson et al. (2015) started with the finding described earlier, that the conservative-liberal difference in self-control is mediated by conservatives' higher endorsement of the idea of free will. It is as if conservatives conclude that if you can choose your fate, then you better get going to make sure it is a good one. Clark and colleagues wondered if belief in the role of free will could be manipulated. They manipulated participants' theories about the value of freewill for effective self-control. They randomly assigned liberals and conservatives to two conditions. In one condition, participants got the message that the authors assumed conservatives tend to endorse — that people can control themselves because they have the free will to do so and this is energizing. In the other condition, participants got the alternative message — that trying to control yourself is taxing and really not possible because people do not have free will. Performance shifted depending on the match between the message and identity.

Mooijman et al. (2017) started with liberal and conservative differences in endorsement of moral values (Haidt & Graham, 2007), with liberals endorsing more individuating values of caring and fairness and avoiding harm and conservatives endorsing more binding values of loyalty, deference to authority, and purity. They documented that participants randomized to consider morality through a liberal individuating lens were less likely to moralize self-control successes and failures than participants randomized to consider morality through a conservative binding lens. Importantly, participants randomized to consider morality through a liberal lens were no different in their tendency to moralize self-control than participants not led to use either lens, whereas participants led to use a conservative lens were more likely to moralize self-control successes than participants in either of the other groups were. One implication is that a conservative lens matters when it is accessible. A second implication is that elements of conservatism are available to be made accessible, as would be predicted if these elements are universally part of human culture. A third implication is that identity content is dynamically constructed — not all participants randomized to this group would otherwise describe themselves as conservative, yet readiness to make sense of the world in a conservative way is easily evoked.

Other experiments examined the relationships between conservatism and preference for products that represent stability vs. change (Duhachek, Han, & Tormala, 2014; Farmer, Kidwell, & Hardesty, 2014). These studies used experimental methods to guide momentary procedural readiness and showed that

conservatives' proclivity for products that represent stability can easily be changed. Next, consider how the situation may shape the relationship between conservatism and readiness to act in environmentally friendly ways. Gromet, Kunreuther, and Larrick (2013) found that consumers who identified themselves as conservatives compared to liberals placed less value on making choices that would reduce carbon emissions when carbon emissions were described as linked to climate change; but the groups did not differ when carbon emissions were described as linked to energy independence. When given money and the option to buy light bulbs, conservatives purchased energy-efficient compact fluorescent light (CFL) bulbs over equivalently bright incandescent bulbs if the bulbs were the same price and even if the CFL costs more, as long as they were not labeled as environmentally friendly. Once a "protect the environment" sticker was added, conservatives' willingness to buy CFL bulbs declined. This is consequential because, according to Dietz, Leshko, and McCright (2013), 38% of overall United States greenhouse gas emissions stem from household direct energy consumption.

The common theme across these studies is that, like any identity, conservative identity is more likely to influence action and meaning-making when it is on the mind, that it is relatively easily brought to mind, and that what it implies once on the mind is a function of context. Marketing campaigns seem to be aware of this and try to link consumption with values, attitudes, and beliefs related to both conservative and liberal identity, perhaps in the hope that consumers will experience the product only through the lens that is identity-congruent for them. Jost's (2017 – this issue) target article provides a service by reminding consumer researchers that this is a rich topic with many open venues for research and application. One such venue, as we outlined here, is to consider conservative identity as a situated identity, dynamically constructed in context, with implications for meaning making and action.

Though the examples provided in Jost's (2017 – this issue) target article and our commentary focus on the U.S., this does not imply that the topic is limited only to the U.S. or to the West generally. Indeed, as Zhao and Belk (2008) articulate, Chinese and Indian advertisements actively frame consumption of luxury products as congruent with political ideology. We can imagine a situated cultural psychology of political identities and consumption building on Jost's stage setting work.

### References

- Barnett, C. E. (2016). Consumption as postmodern ideology in China. *Inquiries Journal*, 8(11) (Retrieved from <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1497>).
- Boyd, R., & Richerson, P. J. (1988). *Culture and the evolutionary process*. University of Chicago Press.
- Boyd, R., Richerson, P., & Levinson, S. (2005). Solving the puzzle of human cooperation. *Evolution and culture* (pp. 105–132). MIT Press.
- Clarkson, J. J., Chambers, J. R., Hirt, E. R., Otto, A. S., Kardes, F. R., & Leone, C. (2015). The self-control consequences of political ideology. *PNAS*, 112(27), 8250–8253.
- Cohen, D. (2001). Cultural variation: Considerations and implications. *Psychological Bulletin*, 127, 451–471.
- Dietz, T., Leshko, C., & McCright, A. M. (2013). Politics shapes individual choices about energy efficiency. *PNAS*, 110(23), 9191–9192.

- Duhachek, A., Han, D., & Tormala, Z. L. (2014). Stability vs. change: The effect of political ideology on product preference. In J. Cotte, & S. Wood (Eds.), *Advances in consumer research*, Vol. 42. (pp. 59–64). Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research.
- Farmer, A., Kidwell, B., & Hardesty, D. (2014). Political ideology and consumer decision making. In J. Cotte, & S. Wood (Eds.), *Advances in consumer research*, Vol. 42. (pp. 59–64). Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research.
- Fisher, O., & Oyserman, D. (2017). Assessing interpretations of experienced ease and difficulty as motivational constructs. *Motivational Science*, 3(2), 133–163. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/mot0000055>.
- Graham, J., Haidt, J., & Nosek, B. A. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96, 1029–1046.
- Gromet, D. M., Kunreuther, H., & Larrick, R. P. (2013). Political ideology affects energy-efficiency attitudes and choices. *PNAS*, 110(23), 9314–9319. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1218453110>.
- Haidt, M. N., Bolus, M., Collard, M., Conard, N. J., Garofoli, D., Lombard, M., ... Whiten, A. (2015). The nature of culture: An eight-grade model for the evolution and expansion of cultural capacities in hominins and other animals. *Journal of Anthropological Sciences*, 93, 43–70.
- Haidt, J., & Graham, J. (2007). When morality opposes justice: Conservatives have moral intuitions that liberals may not recognize. *Social Justice Research*, 20, 98–116.
- Jost, J. (2017e). The marketplace of ideology: “Elective affinities” in political psychology and their implications for consumer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 27, 502–520 (this issue).
- Jost, J. T., Federico, C. M., & Napier, J. L. (2009). Political ideology: Its structure, functions, and elective affinities. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60(1), 307–337.
- Jung, K., Garbarino, J., Briley, D., & Wynhausen, J. (2017). Blue and red voices: Effects of political ideology on consumers’ complaining and disputing behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research*, ucx037. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucx037>.
- Kemmelmeier, M. (2008). Is there a relationship between political orientation and cognitive ability? A test of three hypotheses in two studies. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 45(8), 767–772.
- Kemmelmeier, M., Jambor, E. E., & Letner, J. (2006). Individualism and good works: Cultural variation in giving and volunteering across the United States. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 37(3), 327–344.
- Kemmelmeier, M., Krol, G., & Kim, Y. H. (2002). Values, economics, and proenvironmental attitudes in 22 societies. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 36(3), 256–285.
- Kurzban, R., & Neuberg, S. (2015). Managing ingroup and outgroup relationships. In D. M. Buss (Ed.), *The handbook of evolutionary psychology*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Lewis, N. A., Jr., & Oyserman, D. (2015). When does the future begin? Time metrics matter, connecting present and future selves. *Psychological Science*, 26(6), 816–825. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0956797615572231>.
- Mooijman, M., Meindl, P., Oyserman, D., Monterosso, J., Dehghani, M., Doris, J. M., & Graham, J. (2017). Resisting temptation for the good of the group: Binding moral values and the moralization of self-control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000149> (Advance online publication).
- Nisbett, R. E., & Ross, L. (1991). *The person and the situation: Essential contributions of social psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Olson, J. G., McFerran, B., Morales, A. C., & Dahl, D. W. (2016). Wealth and welfare: Divergent moral reactions to ethical consumer choices. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 42(6), 879–896.
- Oyserman, D. (2007). Social identity and self-regulation. In A. Kruglanski, & T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (pp. 432–453) (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Oyserman, D. (2011). Culture as situated cognition: Cultural mindsets, cultural fluency, and meaning making. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 22, 164–214.
- Oyserman, D. (2015a). *Pathways to success through identity-based motivation*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Oyserman, D., 2015b. Values, Psychology of. In: James D. Wright (editor-in-chief), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 25, 2nd ed. (pp. 36–40). NY: Oxford Elsevier Science. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.24030-0>.
- Oyserman, D. (2017). Culture three ways: Culture and subcultures within countries. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 68, 435–463.
- Oyserman, D., Elmore, K., & Smith, G. (2012). Self, self-concept and identity. In M. Leary, & J. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (pp. 69–104) (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Oyserman, D., Lewis, N. A., Jr., Yan, V. X., Fisher, O., O’Donnell, S. C., & Horowitz, E. (2017). An identity-based motivation framework for self-regulation. *Psychological Inquiry*, 28(2-3), 139–147.
- Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 25, 1–65.
- Schwartz, S. H., & Bardi, A. (2001). Value hierarchies across cultures: Taking a similarities perspective. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 32, 268–290.
- Smith, G. C., & Oyserman, D. (2015). Just not worth my time? Experienced difficulty and time investment. *Social Cognition*, 33, 85–103.
- Zhao, X., & Belk, R. W. (2008). Politicizing consumer culture: Advertising’s appropriation of political ideology in China’s social transition. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35(2), 231–244.