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**Empathy, Open-mindedness, and Political Ideology: Conservative and Liberal Trends****Dani Cosme, Chrissy Pepino, Brandon Brown**

Key words, names, terms, concepts: empathy; open-mindedness; well-being; multicultural personality; political ideology, conservative political ideology, liberal political ideology; California's Proposition 8, Prop 8; same-sex marriage, gay marriage; voting behavior.

While current research is sparse, the area of positive psychology is blossoming and represents a new and exciting field. Positive psychology is the "scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive" (Seligman, 2007). Among others, positive psychology identifies empathy and open-mindedness as two strengths that help individuals to succeed.

Empathy is a unique characteristic that encompasses the emotional and intuitive aspects of an individual. Empathy is understood as the capability to recognize or understand another's state of mind or emotion. More specifically, it is the process of observing something from another person's point of view, or putting oneself in another's shoes (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008). While empathy does not necessarily mean that the empathic individual experiences compassion for another individual, present research has shown that empathy has strong correlations with sympathetic emotions and other positive outcomes. Open-mindedness is understood to be the process of showing receptiveness to new or different ideas.

Based on these definitions of empathy and open-mindedness, it is clear that the two are drastically similar. Both involve understanding another person's ideas or state of mind, and perhaps as a consequence, gaining some form of acceptance from this understanding. While interesting findings have been produced in relation to each of these traits, little information is available which describes how they interact with each other, or with other personality traits.

The construct of the multicultural personality, first proposed by Ramirez (1991), was established to better understand the traits that allow people to effectively function in the multicultural setting. Since its initial introduction, various studies have been conducted, and most recently this construct has been adapted to fit within the framework of positive psychology. Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000, 2001) identified five factors connected to the multicultural personality, including: cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability,

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social initiative, and flexibility. Ponterotto et al. (2006) further expounded upon these characteristics to include factors such as, "high levels of racial and ethnic identity development, tolerance for and appreciation of culturally diverse people, a spiritual essence and sense of connectedness to others, a self-reflective and cognitively flexible stance in social interactions, initiative in broaching contact with culturally diverse individuals, and activism, demonstrated in a willingness to speak out against social injustice in its varied forms (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia)." These factors have been assessed using the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ), developed by Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000, 2001), and were positively correlated to psychological well-being, physical health, satisfaction with life, and perceived support of peer and adult mentors, among other things (Ponterotto, 2006). Though no research has previously shown the connection between empathy and open-mindedness, as they were both identified as factors contributing to the multicultural personality, it is likely they are in fact related.

Though research on empathy is scarce at present, several studies have shown that significant differences do exist between those who display higher levels of empathic characterization, and those who display lower levels. These characteristics include greater moral reasoning, understanding of others' emotional states, and recognition of others' thoughts and feelings (Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, McNalley, & Shea, 1991; Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008). McAdams et al. (2008) looked at political ideology and its correlates, and found that political liberalism is often associated with empathic feeling and greater openness, both of which are characteristics connected with greater understanding of others. People identifying themselves as liberal have also been found to believe a good society is modeled after leaders who represent care, empathy and inclusiveness (McAdams et al., 2008). It has also been suggested that empathy may be the basis for moral regulatory behavior and concern for others (Eisenberg et al, 1991). Empathy also seems to be a key component in the ability of individuals to gain emotional understanding from other people and maintain stronger relationships, such as in therapist and client relationships (Brown, 2007).

Due to the interpersonal nature of both empathy and open-mindedness, it would seem likely that they would contribute to a person's political ideology and voting behavior. For the purposes of the current study it is understood that political ideology refers to an individual's tendency to identify as politically conservative or liberal without a designation of a specific political party. This would include individuals who believe themselves to be more liberal or conservative in their political action, thoughts or considerations.

Several studies have shown that conservative ideology correlates with classic authoritarian beliefs, greater intolerance and less empathy. Individuals who show greater empathy seem to be less prejudicial, have greater concern for outsider groups, and sustain ideas for greater inclusion (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Similar findings have been seen in the differing narratives of conservative and liberal individuals. When asked to describe how and what they learned as children, conservative individuals tended to describe learning as primarily from authority figures and from enforcement of strict rules, while liberal individuals described that they learned empathic characteristics and to respect diversity. For liberal individuals there is also a strong connection to opening oneself up to differing perspectives (McAdams et al, 2008).

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There is also evidence that supports the notion that political ideology is connected with different levels of flexibility, receptiveness, and tolerance. Tetlock (1983) suggested that conservative individuals may be more intolerant and less receptive to differing ideas. McAdams and colleagues (2008) have also suggested that conservative individuals maintain ideas which often support discriminatory action, exclusivity, and lack of tolerance. Conversely, liberal individuals were found to be more tolerant and to maintain an understanding of inclusion and acceptance of diversity.

Voting behavior is the most direct measure of political ideology, and the present study will use self-reported voting behavior on Proposition 8, a California ballot initiative, as this measure. Proposition 8 is a nationally contentious measure because it effectively eliminated the right for same-sex couples to get legally married. This is an ideal ballot measure to investigate empathy and open-mindedness and their correlations to political ideology because it requires the voter to put themselves in another's shoes that they have most likely never worn before. It requires an understanding of the importance of marriage rights to other individuals and is indicative of an individual displaying openness and anti-discriminatory action.

Based on the previous research, the current study hypothesizes that there will be a positive correlation between empathy and open-mindedness due to the inherent similarities of the traits. It is also hypothesized that individuals identifying themselves as liberal will have higher levels of empathy and open-mindedness. In relation to voting behavior, it is hypothesized that individuals identifying themselves as liberal, and those who have higher levels of empathy and open-mindedness, will be more likely to vote no on Proposition 8.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Sixty students at Chapman University participated in the study, which included both males (N=41) and females (N=19), and all reported being over the age of 18. Participants were primarily Caucasian (77%), and included freshman (15%), sophomores (20%), juniors (20%), seniors (37%), and 8% reporting other. Participants were recruited via e-mail using Blackboard and personal e-mail accounts, offering credit to students enrolled in psychology courses. The study was conducted online using Survey Monkey, and a hotlink to the survey was provided in recruitment e-mails. The survey was entitled "Political Affiliation, Empathy, Open-Mindedness and Voting Behavior," and participants had unlimited time to complete the survey, though only fully completed surveys were included in the study.

### *Materials*

The survey included 6 sections as follows: 1) 20 questions exploring open-mindedness as reported by the short-form Rokeach Dogmatism Scale; 2) 7 questions measuring empathy using the Personal Empathy Response & Regulation Style (PERRS) scale; 3) 5 questions assessing satisfaction with life using the Diener Satisfaction with Life

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Scale (SWLS); 4) 4 questions gathering information on political sources most often used; 5) 10 questions concerning voting behavior; and, 6) 4 questions regarding gender, ethnicity, major and academic year.

#### *Assessment of Open-mindedness, Empathy, and Well-Being*

Open-mindedness was assessed using the short-form Rokeach Dogmatism scale, which is a modified version of the 40-item questionnaire proposed by Milton Rokeach (1960). The short-form version was adapted by Trodahl & Powell (1965) and was reported to have a very strong correlation to the full 40-item scale ( $r=0.95$ ). The short-form consisted of 20 questions and participants were asked to respond on a 6 point Likert-type scale, ranging from "Agree with very much" to "Disagree with very much".

Empathy was assessed using the Personal Empathy Response & Regulation Styles (PERRS) scale, developed by Shari Kuchenbecker (2007). The questionnaire included 7 questions exploring situational and cognitive affective understanding, affective matching, affective mastery, and avoidance of harmful emotional exposures, and these were reported on a Likert-type scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Extremely well".

Well-being was assessed using the Diener Satisfaction with Life Scale, developed by Ed Diener (1985). The scale consisted of 5 questions reported on a Likert-type scale ranging from "Not true at all" to "Absolutely true".

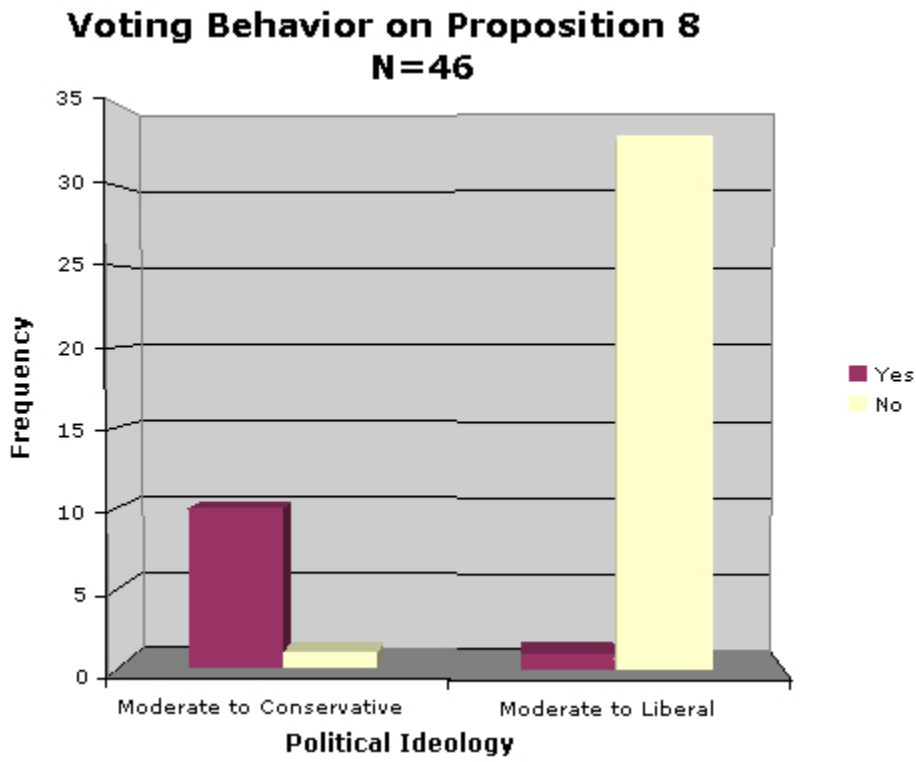
#### *Procedure*

As described, participants were recruited via e-mail using Blackboard and personal e-mail accounts, and were sent a hotlink to Survey Monkey to take the survey. Only participants that reported being over 18 and being a Chapman University student were allowed to move on to the questionnaire portion of the survey. Data collected was then analyzed using Microsoft Excel and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

#### **Results**

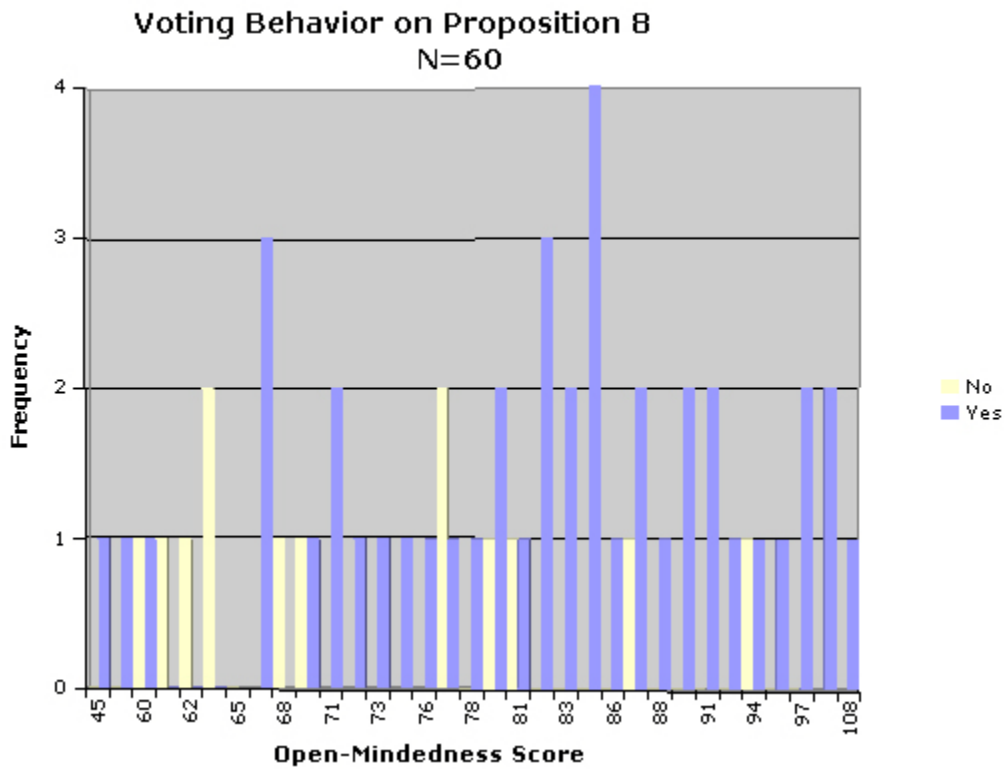
A 1-tailed Spearman's rho test was carried out and a significant correlation between empathy and open-mindedness was found ( $r(60)=.262$ ,  $p=.022$ ). Using a Mann-Whitney U test, a significant difference in open-mindedness was found between moderate to liberal and moderate to conservative political ideologies. Moderate to liberals had a higher mean rank score than moderate to conservatives ( $U=118.50$ ,  $p=.032$ ). Using the Mann-Whitney U test again, a very significant difference in voting behavior on Proposition 8 between moderate to liberals and moderate to conservatives was found. Moderate to liberals tended to vote no on Proposition 8 more often than moderate to conservatives ( $U=56.50$ ,  $p<.001$ ; figure 1). A significant difference in voting behavior between varying levels of open-mindedness were found, with more open-minded people voting no on Proposition 8 more often than less open-minded people ( $U=171.50$ ,  $p=.013$ ; figure 2).

Figure 1



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Figure 2



**Discussion**

Individuals who are open-minded are more likely to be empathic, when compared to close-minded individuals. This correlation is also integrated with open-minded individuals who are likely to share similar political ideologies. Some shared political ideologies may include different levels of flexibility, receptiveness, and tolerance (Tetlock 1983). The correlations in this study are theorized, and can be confirmed with previous research. Open-mindedness and empathy can be supported by the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ). The MPQ is similar to the Rockeach Scale for open-mindedness used in this experiment because both use the total sum of the ranked questions to receive a raw score; as compared a scale that would provide self-reporting measures and may not provide accurate data (Ramirez 1991).

As mentioned previously, open-mindedness is understood to be the process of showing receptiveness to new or different ideas. Open-mindedness is positively correlated with high empathy, as well as with political ideology. Voting practices provide an application of behavior to previous theoretical studies.

The behavioral measure chosen for this study was voting on Proposition 8, which eliminated the right for same-sex couples to get legally married, and so may be regarded as a social injustice. This behavioral measure supported the

theoretical ideals by showing that open-minded individuals who show more empathy and share similar political ideals are more likely to vote 'No' on Proposition 8. Results suggest that a vote 'No' on Proposition 8, demonstrates open-mindedness and empathy for different minority groups and appreciation for diversity. These groups of open-minded and empathic individuals are categorized as 'moderate to liberal' political voters. Therefore, voters who selected this category have similar political beliefs including: respect for diversity, empathy, and compassion more than individuals who selected 'conservative to moderate', who tend to be less empathic.

This is a strong correlation showing that open-minded individuals are supportive of identity development and appreciation of diversity when dealing with social interactions. When examining political ideologies and open-mindedness, both resulted in a strong positive correlation with voting 'No' on Proposition 8. This provides insight to the significance in previous research by supporting theoretical ideas with behavioral measures. Conservative to moderate voters share similar ideologies, and as the data shows, all but one 'conservative to moderate' voter voted 'Yes' on Proposition 8, which can be considered a behavioral response that is not empathic or open-minded. This is in contrast to 'moderate to liberal' voters, in which all but one voter selected 'No' on Proposition 8, which demonstrates a willingness to speak out against social injustice in its varied forms (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2000, 2001).

The emergent significant relationships between open-mindedness and empathy could be investigated further by incorporating the MPQ into future studies, therefore providing one more variable that may support the theoretical ideas. Empathetic responsiveness provided in the PEERS, along with Rokeach Scale of open-mindedness could provide interesting results when used with MPQ to determine voting behavior. This recent significance can provide a foundation for other experiments when looking at theoretical and behavioral ideologies. Exploring the development of empathy along with appreciation of diversity and willingness to understand other viewpoints is a very interesting and new area of research waiting to be further explored.

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