



How a liberal learned to respect

conservative thinking

(and accept the fact that, yes,

the right is happier than the left)

What It Means When You Dye Your Hair Purple

Should a 20-something information technology specialist, by all accounts a competent employee, be able to dye her long, wavy brown hair purple without getting grief from management? That question was at the heart of the conversation at a recent dinner for a group of intelligent and age-diverse women.

“Management went apoplectic,” the woman said. “Sure, they said my hair wasn’t relevant to my job performance; they agreed I did my job well. But I had to dye it back.”

The group nodded and rolled their eyes in sympathetic outrage. The owner of the hair didn’t even interact with the public! The business didn’t have a published dress code! To redye hair, it has to be bleached, and that’s a health risk!

I kept quiet. Like others who grew up in an age of personal freedom, I, too, reasoned, “Back off. I’m not hurting anyone else by doing x.”

Inside, however, I was coming down on the side of management, and here’s why: dyeing your hair purple as a 20-something shows a lack of respect to your managers and fellow employees. It makes you stand out. You are defiantly not fitting in with the group. You are imposing on others by shrieking, “Look at me!”

I was also aware that my thoughts about the purple hair incident were very different from what they would have been a few years ago. They were changed by several things, but the most powerful forces were my readings in social and cross-cultural psychology and my experiences in other cultures.


Overseas Education

It was May 2008. Weeks earlier I had returned from a semester-long sabbatical in China, where I had traveled with my Taiwanese doctoral student for two research projects, both about language, but quite different. One project studied the cognitive processing underlying reading Chinese script, and the other involved interviews and questionnaires on the comfort and frequency of use of the phrase *Wo ai ni* (I love you). My husband and I had lived in rented apartments, and I’d traveled by bus or bike to meet every day with student assistants. I’d hung out in parks with my laptop, writing my academic papers, observing people playing and exercising, trying to communicate with interested locals who wanted to have their first conversation with an American.

Once, during a visit to a local Starbucks, I was startled to see a woman, a foreigner, who appeared to have some sort of facial dysmorphism. The bony

protuberances of her cheekbones made me try to remember the name of the disease that could cause it. Then something clicked. She was a normal woman with a strong nose and cheekbones, characteristically Germanic features.

It turned out that three months of living as the rare Caucasian in Chinese neighborhoods had reconfigured my face recognition system (think of fumbling for words in your native tongue when you’ve been daily using another language). Back in Massachusetts, my face recognition system had almost instantly popped


Catherine Caldwell-Harris is a College of Arts & Sciences associate professor of psychology and a research associate at the nonprofit Institute for the Bio-Cultural Study of Religion.

back to its normal setting. But the China trip had sensitized me to the virtue of minimizing individualist displays and respecting the desires of those above one in the social hierarchy. In the collectivist cultures of East Asia, people have been less concerned with expressing their individuality and more concerned about harmonious relations with others, including being sensitive to negative

appraisal by others. One result is a well-behaved classroom of 30 preschoolers led by one teacher and an assistant.

As I sat at dinner with my female friends, I thought about the subtle power of social norms and respect for authority. In addition to the lessons of living in China, I remembered social psychologist (and author of the 2012 book *Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*) Jonathan Haidt’s five foundations of morality. I’d admired Haidt’s work since I started assigning his 2007 *New Yorker* video to my cross-cultural psychology and cognitive psychology classes. Haidt had once given a colloquium to my department and visited my lab. In recent years the New York University professor has become something of a rock star of social psychology, largely because of his persuasive analysis of the value systems of liberals and of conservatives. Haidt proposes that the moral worldview of liberals focuses on justice and fairness, with equal treatment for all, and on care vs. harm, which involves having compassion for others. Political conservatives also have these values, says Haidt, but they are influenced by three other moral systems: respect for hierarchy, favoring one’s in-group over the out-group, and valuing purity (a complex concept that involves sexual propriety, nobility, and avoiding disgusting objects).

The idea that different groups embrace different value systems was, of course, not new, but prior to reading Haidt I had considered respect for authority,

in-group favoritism, and purity to be components of collectivist cultural groups, which are usually associated with developing nations and are often described in opposition to the individualist values that are hallmarks of modern, developed regions (especially North America, Europe, and Australia). Collectivism is widespread throughout the rest of the world, particularly in what researchers call small-scale societies, but it is also present in large and well-organized societies such as China, where traditional values and wisdoms from premodern times, such as Confucian teachings, remain influential.

Neither System Is Better

When I teach these concepts in a cross-cultural psychology class, I typically ask students to discuss “cross-cultural teasers” like these:

A researcher in Turkey is helping you translate your sociological questionnaire into Turkish, but she claims that a question on homelessness won't be understood because homelessness does not exist in Turkey.

Many Americans think it is good for all teenagers to have an after-school job, but Indians feel this should be done only if the family needs the money.

An American entrepreneur explains to his elderly Polish relatives that his son has succeeded in business without having his father pull any strings or offer any financial assistance. The Polish relatives are horrified.

A graduate student from Kazakhstan has to forgo completing her PhD to return home to earn money so

to borrow a cup of sugar. City dwellers usually have bank and insurance accounts, which means we don't have to store up favors with friends to be assured of having their back when an emergency hits. In fact, many Americans recall being warned not to loan money to friends, because that puts friendships in danger. In contrast, my Turkish collaborator, Ayse Aycicegi-Dinn, explains that Turkish friends loan money to deepen mutual obligations while avoiding paying interest to banks.

Cross-cultural psychologists do not view either individualism or collectivism as inherently superior or inferior. They understand that each system has evolved to solve the problem of how individuals can benefit from living in groups, and they see both systems as having pros and cons. Individualist societies like ours allow people to pursue their dreams (pro), but when big aspirations crumble because of bad luck or intense competition, they may lack a safety net, either in terms of government services or family support (con). In individualistic societies, transactions are abstract and conveniently monetized (pro). But when we don't trade our labor and time with our neighbors for mutual benefit, we miss an opportunity for friendships to be built around helping each other (con). And indeed, friendships in individualist societies are typically many, diverse, and often shallow. They are easily initiated and routinely abandoned, as when, for example, we choose to relocate for a better paying job.

In collectivist societies, the familial ties and deep friendships that arise from never leaving your hometown and investing daily in relationship management provide a buffer against loneliness and depression. The downside is that collectivist cultures can have an oppressive small-town mentality that punishes

nonconformists who challenge religious, gender, or sex role norms.

As a liberal, I spent many years holding conservative values in contempt. Not care about global warming? Exploit and vilify immigrants? Hold men and women to different standards of sexual behavior? Dismiss those living in poverty? Enact legislation to help those who were already successful keep their wealth? Harmful, wrong, and unfair!

So what hit me so hard when reading the work of Jonathan Haidt was the realization that the three moral systems that liberals disavow, but conservatives embrace (that is, respect for authority, prioritizing in-group members, purity) are the hallmarks of the collectivist value systems I learned about as part of doing cross-cultural research and living overseas. My current and more sympathetic understanding is that

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that her nephews can finish high school.

Americans are urged to say “I love you” regularly to family members; many Chinese young adults say their parents have never once said “*Wo ai ni*” to them.

The Turks, Indians, elderly Polish, Kazakhs, and Chinese presumably grew up in cultures where a premium was placed on sharing resources with in-group members, and where family members are expected to subordinate their own goals to those of the group. In contrast, individualistic societies are tolerant of nonconformity and celebrate the pursuit of one's individual goals and self-expression. The kind of urban living that most of us experience, for example, offers options that reduce the need to rely on other people. If there is a 24-hour convenience store down the street (or if you have a car and can stock up on supplies), then you don't need to knock on your neighbor's door

CATHERINE CALDWELL-HARRIS wonders if big-picture, abstract thinking causes liberals to be less happy because it removes them from the here and now.



the central goal of collectivist societies (and social conservatism as a political ideology) is reserving resources for the in-group, a strategy that was necessary in earlier eras when the neighboring tribe was encroaching on your territory and daily survival was often uncertain. Purity rules and emphasis on obedience to authority are tools that help small-scale societies increase group cohesion and survival.

Collaborating with Scholars On “the Other Side”

My research, my teaching, and my traveling showed me that for the majority of cultures that have thrived on our planet, socially conservative political views made a lot of sense. But what really made me more tolerant about “the other side” was when I started rubbing shoulders in a collaboration with scholars who self-identified as centrist, middle-of-the-road, politically moderate, religious, and even conservative. Theologian Wesley Wildman, a School of Theology professor, religious studies scholar, and wide-ranging thinker, asked me to become a research associate at the Institute for the Bio-Cultural Study of Religion. Sitting in meetings with fellow members of the institute’s Spectrums Project, whose goal is to find strategies for mitigating the problems associated with religious extremism and polarized religious discourse, allowed me to ask hard questions of people I respected. For example, why are ideological conservatives pro-big business, slashing food stamps in order to “shrink government” while subsidizing agribusiness?

Many scholars and thinkers have grappled with just how the Republican party married probusiness, antiworker, neoliberalism ideas with small-town social conservatism. One could even say that conservatives in Congress have to prioritize supporting their in-group, and their in-group is probusiness. Free-market capitalism does seem to be a different beast from social conservatism. One of my conservative colleagues pointed me to enlightening essays about this in the *American Conservative*, a magazine I found to be far more reasonable than one would think from the constant vilification of conservatives on a website I enjoy, www.alternet.org.

All of the above, the travel, the research, teaching, and the collaboration, has led me to a place where, instead of inching away when I meet someone who expresses conservative political values, I take the opportunity to learn. And not just because some conservatives join forces with liberals by being against patriarchy, racism, and my-country-first patriotism. There’s something else about conservatives that is interesting: they’re happier than liberals.

I have long appreciated the optimism about human progress that is a key ideal of liberalism (think of the term “progressive”). While I still embrace this view, I wonder if conservative ideals are more natural ideals.

That is, does human nature, as it emerged under the pressures of natural selection of our small-group-living ancestors, include the urge to curtail individual expression, enforce authority, and hoard resources for the in-group? Compared to liberals, social conservatives may well be living lives that are more similar to what humans have lived for tens of thousands of years. And if so, is their more natural mind-set the reason that conservatives are, at least according to surveys, often happier than liberals?

Circle the answers you think best complete this sentence: If you are the houseguest of a friend-of-a-friend, your stay might be physically and socially more comfortable if your hosts are a) liberal b) conservative, but the conversation will be more intellectually stimulating if your hosts are a) liberal b) conservative.

If you answered b and a, then your intuitions are consistent with a growing literature on how personality and cognitive function match up with ideological beliefs. Conservatives are (on average) sociable, agreeable, and conscientious, as well as concerned about pleasing and fitting in with others of their group. When compared to conservatives, liberals are (on average), less socially astute and less attuned to the needs of others, less agreeable, and overall, less happy. On the intellectual side, liberals, compared to conservatives, prefer abstract, intellectual topics, as is consistent with their broader moral scope. Liberals are concerned with starvation in Africa, climate change, the threatened biosphere, factory farming, and issues that, important as they are, are far removed from the ordinary American’s day-to-day existence.

Social scientists have a long way to go to figure out the tangled causal relations holding among the observed correlations, but here’s a question: does big-picture, abstract thinking cause liberals to be less happy because they are removing themselves from the embodied here and now? After all, the ability to live in the moment and appreciate our lives as they exist does seem to be a key ingredient in day-to-day contentment. Or is it conservatives’ concern with lasting marriage, strong family cohesiveness, and day-to-day sociality that tips the scales toward greater daily contentment and happiness?

These ideas—from cross-cultural psychology to cognitive/personality styles—have been at the heart of my personal and intellectual journey during the last decade (when, perhaps not incidentally, I got married and gave birth to twin boys). It makes more sense to me now to incorporate into one’s tool kit all the strategies for a fulfilling life. When we understand more of the full set of ways to be human, we can be more human. ■