HELPING THE LESS FORTUNATE: THE INTERACTION BETWEEN CULTURAL
AND ECONOMIC CONSERVATISM

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Notre Dame
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

Jeffrey Allen Brooks

Darcia Narvaez, Director
Graduate Program in Psychology
Notre Dame, Indiana
April 2011
HELPING THE LESS FORTUNATE: THE INTERACTION BETWEEN CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC CONSERVATISM

Abstract

by

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Do conservatives take less action for the unfortunate than liberals? We tested this claim by assessing two types of conservatism, economic and cultural, and their relations to just world beliefs, social justice motives, empathy, and taking action for the unfortunate. Students, faculty, and staff (n = 317) from several universities took a survey online. Economic conservatism scores related to higher just world beliefs and lower social justice motives, empathy, and ultimately, taking less action for the unfortunate. Cultural conservatism was positively related to social justice and taking action for the unfortunate. The interaction between economic and cultural conservatism was negatively related to just world beliefs and positively related to empathy and helping the unfortunate. Analyses suggest that cultural conservatism moderates the impact that economic conservatism has on these variables. Religious beliefs and commandments to help the unfortunate that characterize cultural conservatism worldview may temper economic conservatism’s focus on self-interest.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Darcia Narvaez for her patience and expert guidance in helping me develop this project. I would also like to thank Lijuan Wang and Dan Lapsley for being members of my committee. The great suggestions that they had for this project were nothing less than what I would expect from such outstanding scholars.
INTRODUCTION

Do conservatives take less action for the unfortunate than liberals? If this is true, why might it be the case? One perspective suggests that liberals and conservatives have different views of responsibility: liberals emphasize the responsibility to help those who are less well off in society, whereas conservatives emphasize the responsibility to provide for themselves (Janoff-Bulman, 2009). As a result, conservatives should be less likely than liberals to take action to help those who are less well off in society. But are all conservatives the same?

Multi-dimensional perspectives on conservatism may challenge the notion that all conservatives are less likely to help the less fortunate. For instance, Crowson (2009) identifies two dimensions of conservatism: cultural conservatism, which consists of preserving ancient moral (e.g., Christian) traditions, and economic conservatism, which essentially reflects general objections to redistribution of power, income, and resources by the government. Might differences between these two types of conservatism also reflect differences in tendencies to help the less fortunate? This study examines whether or not two kinds of conservatism, cultural and economic, relate similarly or differently to a set of variables posited to strongly influence individual efforts to help the less fortunate: just world beliefs, social justice motives, and empathy. First, each of these psychological phenomena and their relation to conservatism are reviewed.
Just World Beliefs

The belief in a just world construct generally refers to a belief that everyone in the world typically gets what he or she deserves (Dalbert, Lipkus, Sallay, & Goch, 2001; Lerner, 1980). It has been shown to be related to an orientation towards personal success and the Protestant ethic of hard work (Christopher, Zabel, Jones, & Marek, 2008; Ghorpade, Lackritz, & Singh, 2006), as well as to a tendency to attribute blame to victims for their hardships instead of to circumstance. For example, participants who had a tendency to strive toward future goals were more likely to blame a woman for her misfortune in contracting AIDS (despite having protected sex) than people less oriented toward future success (Hafer, Bègue, Choma, & Dempsey, 2005).

A second component of belief in a just world is economic system justification (ESJ), which refers to the justification and rationalization of current economic social systems (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). ESJ largely resonates with conservatism in general. For instance, through the use of system justification scales, Jost and colleagues (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost, Nosek, and Gosling, 2008) conducted several studies that show how conservatives are more willing to accept inequality and more likely to justify current political and economic systems than liberals. Jost and Hunyady (2002) suggest that a justification of inequality may serve a palliative function because it helps individuals cope with current social situations by, for instance, preserving hope that they can change the situation by working hard in light of the belief that good things come to those who earn it. Indeed, across three studies using data from several countries, Napier and Jost (2008) consistently found that conservatives were usually happier than liberals largely...
because conservatives were more likely to justify inequality (their own or someone else’s) than liberals, and were therefore less concerned about it.

**Moral Motive for Social Justice**

Research on moral motivation has greatly increased recently (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009). Moral motivation entails giving priority to a moral value (e.g., caring for less fortunate people) above other values (e.g., spending money on material things) with the intention of fulfilling it (Narvaez & Rest, 1995; Rest, 1983). Conceptually, Janoff-Bulman (2009; Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci, 2008) and colleagues distinguish among moral motives that result from an approach-avoidance motivational system crossed with a focus on self (such as in regulation of one’s own behavior) versus others (social regulation of others’ behavior). Social justice is one of these motives, entailing providing for members of society (particularly those who are less fortunate) and helping them advance.

To support their theory, Janoff-Bulman et al. (2008) developed the Moral Motives Scale and assessed the extent to which conservative and liberal individuals are oriented toward social justice and other motives. Results showed that liberals were consistently higher on social justice, whereas conservatives were consistently higher on the two avoidance motives: social order (focus on inhibiting actions which may threaten the larger community) and self-restraint (focus on avoiding one’s potential negative outcomes by showing inhibition when faced with temptation). No significant differences were found between conservatives and liberals on a fourth moral motive, self-reliance. They thus concluded that liberals emphasize a responsibility to provide for both
themselves and others, whereas conservatives emphasize a responsibility to provide for themselves alone.

**Empathy: Emotional Concern and Perspective Taking**

Empathy can be defined as “the reactions of one individual to the observed experiences of another” (Davis, 1983, p. 113). Broadly speaking, Davis (1983) distinguishes between two classes of empathy: cognitive (ability to understand other perspectives) and emotional (including other-oriented feelings such as concern and sympathy). Committed empathic concern in particular is associated with sensitivity to others feelings (Davis, 1983) and a sense of responsibility in acting for their dignity (Narvaez, 2010). Both facets of empathy are shown to be negatively related to factors of psychopathy (Hare, Hart, & Harpur, 1991) and belief in a just world (Staub, 2003), but positively related to volunteering for community service (Davis et al., 1999) and general prosocial behavior (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Sadovsky, 2006).

Typically, research suggests that liberals are more empathic than conservatives. For instance, McAdams et al. (2008) interviewed midlife adults who were active members of Christian congregations about important moments in their lives, the nature of their faith, and moral and political views, and found that liberal participants were more empathic in their life narratives (e.g., they sympathized more with another person’s emotional state) than conservative participants. Eisenberg and Mussen (1980) administered a self-assessing Q-sort task to adolescents who scored high on liberal and conservative measures, and found that liberal adolescents scored higher in empathy (e.g., used more words such as “sympathetic”) than their conservative counterparts.
Helping Behavior

The evidence presented so far suggests that liberals are more likely than conservatives to show concern for less fortunate people. However, there is contrary evidence. For instance, using data from several national and international survey databases, Arthur C. Brooks (2006) found that conservatives were more likely than liberals to be charitable or volunteer for charitable functions, donate blood and give food to homeless people, even when controlling for income.

What might account for these contradictory findings? One explanation may be that many of the conservatives in Brooks’ (2006) research were religious and had strong family bonds. Indeed, he found that religious conservatives were more likely than secular conservatives to give to charity or volunteer. Similarly, Michel (2007) found that greater attendance at religious services was related to greater perceived personal responsibility among volunteers who helped victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Besides being religious, Brooks (2006) also noted that many religious conservatives were typically considerably older than average.¹ Indeed, substantial increases in the quantity of older adults taking part in formal organizational volunteering have been noted over the past few decades in the United States. Okun, Barr, & Herzog (1998) factor analyzed the Volunteer Functions Inventory (Clary & Snyder, 1991), a measure that assesses how important and accurate certain reasons are for why people volunteer. Among older adults aged 50 and older, they identified three factors positively relating to age: an emphasis on individual values (placing importance on helping others), self-understanding (e.g., gaining a new perspective on things) and self-enhancement (e.g., allowing one to feel better about him/herself) (Okun, Barr, & Herzog, 1998).
**Hypotheses and Plan of Analysis**

Economic and cultural conservatism may influence helping behaviors for the less fortunate, but this relationship may be mediated by other proximal variables. Indeed, just world beliefs, social justice motives, and empathy may act as intervening variables between both types of conservatism and helping the less fortunate. Whereas past research suggests that conservatism is more positively related to just world beliefs and more negatively related to social justice motives and empathy, these findings may apply only to economic conservatism. We thus made the following hypotheses: (1) we expected cultural conservatism to demonstrate opposite (to economic conservatism) direct effects on all three mediating variables (negative with just world beliefs and positive with social justice motives and empathy). As such, it was anticipated that (2) economic conservatism would have a negative indirect effect on action for the less fortunate, whereas (3) cultural conservatism would have a positive indirect effect. Finally, we hypothesized that (4) the interaction between economic and cultural conservatism would reveal opposite effects in comparison to economic conservatism on the mediating variables (negative with just world beliefs and positive with social justice motives, empathy), thus suggesting that cultural conservatism moderates the impact that economic conservatism has on these variables.

Our hypotheses were tested using path analysis. In particular, we tested a mediated moderation model (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Lance, 1988) in which economic and cultural conservatism, as well as their interaction, were mediated by just world beliefs, social justice motives, and empathy. We also controlled as a covariate the direct effect of the participant’s age on taking action for the less fortunate.
METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Participation took place through an online survey. An email invitation was sent to members of a listserv that included faculty, staff, and students from several universities within the United States. If the participants were students, they were given extra credit at their institution. If the participants were faculty or staff, they were given an option to enter into a drawing for Amazon gift certificates.

A total of 317 participants took part in the survey. The mean age of the participants was 20.85 years ($SD = 5.08$, range = 17-47) and were 85% female. A range of ethnicities were represented (47.7% non-Hispanic White, 21.3% Latino/Hispanic, 19.7% Black, 7.8% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2.8% other, .6% Native American/Pacific Islander). All participants were treated in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association and were thanked for their participation.

Materials (see Appendix for items of all measures)

Cultural and Economic Conservatism Scale (Crowson, 2009), and the Radicalism-
Conservatism Scale (Comrey & Newmeyer, 1965). The purpose behind factor analyzing
these scales was to demonstrate the important distinction between economic and cultural
conservatism using uni-dimensional measures, in addition to other hypothesized
dimensions (not discussed in this paper).

Through exploratory and confirmatory analyses, we extracted four factors. Two of
the factors, economic and cultural conservatism, were used here. The 11-item economic
conservatism scale measures general objections to redistribution of power and income by
government (e.g., “The government should take action to decrease income differences”—
reversed), whereas the 10-item cultural conservatism scale measures the desire to
preserve historical, moral (particularly Christian) traditions (e.g., “Unmarried young
people do not do anything wrong when they sleep together”—reversed). Responses to
both scales are made via Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). In
this sample, Cronbach’s alpha’s for economic and cultural conservatism were .85 and .89,
respectively. See Appendix A for the list of items pertaining to both subscales and
references from which each item came from.

Just world beliefs. Two measures of just world beliefs were used. The 7-item
Global Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJWS; Lipkus, 1991) assesses general beliefs that
people essentially get what they deserve and deserve what they get (e.g., “I feel that
people get what they are entitled to have”). It uses a Likert-type scale (1=strong
disagreement, 6=strong agreement). The Economic Systems Justification Scale (ESJ; Jost
& Thompson, 2000) measures an individual’s tendency to legitimize economic inequality
through 17 statements (e.g., “Laws of nature are responsible for differences in wealth in
society”) with a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Both scales demonstrated adequate reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = .79 and .71, respectively).

**Social justice.** Social justice motives were measured using the social justice subscale of the Moral Motives Scale (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2008). The scale consists of five items (e.g., “We should all be responsible for improving the welfare of others beyond our immediate circle of friends and family”) which are answered with a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha for this sample was .76.

**Empathy.** Two 7-item facets of empathy were measured with Davis’ (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index: a cognitive facet (perspective-taking) and an emotional facet (empathic concern). The perspective-taking subscale measures one’s tendency to consider other people’s point of view regarding issues from everyday life (e.g., “I try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement before I make a decision”), whereas the empathic concern subscale measures one’s tendency to experience warm and compassionate feelings for other people (e.g., “When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them”). Items are answered with a Likert-type scale (1 = not at all like me, 7 = just like me) and both scales demonstrated adequate reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = .73 and .74, respectively).

**Action for the less fortunate.** Action for the Less Fortunate is a set of nine items that assesses how and how often respondents have acted on behalf of the less fortunate. The statements are generic so that they can apply to any kind of “less fortunate.” For example, one statement is “I have volunteered at an agency to help the less fortunate.”
Responses are indicated with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = never, 2=once, 3=several times, 4=regularly but infrequently, 5=regularly many times, 6 = almost always). The scores from each statement are totaled and can range from 0 to 45. Cronbach’s α for this sample was .86.
RESULTS

Descriptive statistics showed that there was variability in taking action for the less fortunate between the two types of conservatism (see Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and ranges for all variables). In order to better explore the relationship between all variables of interest, we ran bivariate correlations (see Table 2). Although economic and cultural conservatism were related to each other ($r = .27, p < .001$), economic conservatism had a distinctive profile showing significant negative relations with age ($r = -.17, p = .003$), social justice ($r = -.41, p < .001$), empathic concern ($r = -.13, p = .024$), and perspective taking ($r = -.13, p = .017$). Cultural conservatism was not related to any of these variables. Economic conservatism was also negatively related to taking action for the less fortunate ($r = -.26, p < .001$) whereas cultural conservatism was once again unrelated. Besides a negative relation to economic conservatism, age was also negatively related to both economic systems justification and global just world beliefs ($r$’s = -.16 and -.12, $p$’s = .005 and .030 respectively). Conversely, age was positively related to both empathic concern and perspective taking ($r$’s = .12 and .14, $p$’s = .038 and .011 respectively). Age was also positively related to social justice ($r = .16, p = .004$) and taking action for the less fortunate ($r = .25, p < .001$).

The only two variables that were related to both economic and cultural conservatism were economic systems justification (ESJ; $r$’s = .64 and .25 respectively,
TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR ALL VARIABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20.86 (5.08)</td>
<td>17-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Conservatism</td>
<td>30.95 (7.52)</td>
<td>10-51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Conservatism</td>
<td>27.12 (8.46)</td>
<td>10-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Systems Justification</td>
<td>46.62 (7.02)</td>
<td>20-73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Just World Beliefs</td>
<td>20.74 (4.51)</td>
<td>6-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice</td>
<td>22.60 (5.33)</td>
<td>7-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathic Concern</td>
<td>33.13 (5.50)</td>
<td>15-44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective Taking</td>
<td>32.37 (5.90)</td>
<td>19-46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action for Less Fortunate</td>
<td>22.87 (8.70)</td>
<td>9-50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 317.*

*p’s < .001) and global just world belief (GJW; r’s = .21 and .12, p’s = .000 and .038 respectively). However, simultaneous regressions with both predictors revealed that only economic conservatism remained a significant predictor of ESJ (*b* = .61, *p* < .001) and GJW (*b* = .20, *p* = .001), whereas cultural conservatism was only marginally related to ESJ (*b* = .09, *p* = .052) and completely unrelated to GJW (*b* = .07, *ns*).

Although cultural conservatism appeared to have minimal effect on any of the variables, we suspected part of the reason for this may be due to the contributions of economic conservatism and age. Therefore, we ran a partial correlation between cultural conservatism and the other variables controlling for economic conservatism and age, thus removing their influence on all variables. Results showed that cultural conservatism had a positive partial correlation with social justice (*r* = .19, *p* = .001).

In addition to the main effects of both economic and cultural conservatism, we tested the effects of the interaction between them. Following recommendations (Aiken & West, 1991; Jaccard, Turrisi, & Wan, 1990), we first centered both of the economic and
TABLE 2
CORRELATIONS AMONG ALL VARIABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>--</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Economic Conservatism</td>
<td>-.165**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Cultural Conservatism</td>
<td>-.085</td>
<td>.265**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Economic Systems Just.</td>
<td>-.160**</td>
<td>.636**</td>
<td>.247**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Global Just World</td>
<td>-.123*</td>
<td>.213**</td>
<td>.116*</td>
<td>.339**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Social Justice</td>
<td>.162**</td>
<td>-.414**</td>
<td>.047†</td>
<td>-.357**</td>
<td>-.093</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Empathic Concern</td>
<td>.117*</td>
<td>-.127*</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>-.200**</td>
<td>-.103</td>
<td>.274**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Perspective Taking</td>
<td>.143*</td>
<td>-.134*</td>
<td>-.031</td>
<td>-.178**</td>
<td>-.047</td>
<td>.241**</td>
<td>.513**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Action for Less Fortunate</td>
<td>.254**</td>
<td>-.261**</td>
<td>-.071</td>
<td>-.309**</td>
<td>-.179**</td>
<td>.482**</td>
<td>.260**</td>
<td>.243**</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .05 **p < .01
†Partial correlation, controlling for age and economic conservatism is significant (r = .19, p = .001)

cultural conservatism variables by subtracting the means from each raw score so that the main effects of each variable represent the effects at the main level of the other variable.

We then created the interaction variable by deriving the product of the two centered variables and entered it into a series of simultaneous regressions with each of our variables acting as dependent variables. Results from the regressions showed that the interaction between economic and cultural conservatism had the exact opposite pattern of regression coefficients from economic conservatism for each variable (see Table 3). We further explored the nature of these disparate relationships using structural equation modeling (SEM).
**Path Model for Helping the Less Fortunate**

To test the relations among the independent and dependent variables, a path model analysis was conducted. Figure 1 presents our hypothesized model for helping the less fortunate, with circles representing latent constructs and rectangles representing manifest variables. Action for the less fortunate was the main dependent variable of interest. The model predicted that age, just world beliefs (a latent construct with two indicators-ESJ and GJW), social justice, and empathy (another latent construct with two indicators-empathic concern and perspective taking) directly influenced helping the less fortunate.

The model also predicted that just world beliefs, social justice, and empathy served as mediating variables between cultural and economic conservatism as well as their interaction (economic by cultural interaction). Additionally, age was allowed to correlate with all three conservatism variables. Finally, two sets of residual covariances were estimated: the residual covariances between all three conservatism variables, and the residual variances of all of the mediating variables.

**Model Analysis**

Analyses were evaluated through EQS. First we tested the data for the assumption of multivariate normality. This assumption was severely violated, showing heavy kurtosis, Mardia’s Normalized coefficient = 19.98. Therefore, we estimated the model with maximum likelihood estimation using the Satorra-Bentler scaled chi square (Satorra & Bentler, 1988) to adjust for nonnormality. This resulted in strong support for the hypothesized model, Satorra-Bentler $\chi^2 (17, N = 317) = 15.24, p = .58, CFI = 1.00, \text{RMSEA} = .000.$
TABLE 3
SIMULTANEOUS REGRESSIONS OF ECONOMIC CONSERVATISM, CULTURAL CONSERVATISM, AND THEIR INTERACTION ON VARIABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Econ Systems Justification (R² = .45)</th>
<th>Global Just World (R² = .08)</th>
<th>Social Justice (R² = .21)</th>
<th>Empathic Concern (R² = .04)</th>
<th>Perspective Taking (R² = .03)</th>
<th>Action for Less Fortunate (R² = .10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE B</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE B</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Conservatism</td>
<td>.573</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>.615**</td>
<td>.118</td>
<td>.034</td>
<td>.197**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Conservatism</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td>.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic X Cultural Interaction</td>
<td>-.016</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>-.190**</td>
<td>-.009</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>-.167**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: ^p < .06, †p < .07
Figure 1. Hypothesized model for how economic conservatism and its interaction with cultural conservatism relate to age, just world beliefs, social justice, empathic concern, and action for the less fortunate.

* indicates p < .05, ^ indicates p < .06

**Direct effects.** Action for less fortunate was negatively predicted by just world beliefs (unstandardized coefficient = -.85, \( p < .05 \)), and positively predicted by age (unstandardized coefficient = .29, \( p < .05 \)), social justice (unstandardized coefficient = .63, \( p < .05 \)), and empathy (unstandardized coefficient = .32, \( p < .05 \)). The direct effects of economic and cultural conservatism were not significant.

Regarding the direct effects on the mediating variables, economic conservatism demonstrated very different relations than cultural conservatism and the economic by cultural interaction. Just world beliefs were positively predicted by economic conservatism (unstandardized coefficient = .15, \( p < .05 \)) but negatively predicted by the
economic by cultural interaction (unstandardized coefficient = -.00, \( p < .05 \))² (all moderating effects are explained below). Cultural conservatism was not related. Conversely, empathy was negatively predicted by economic conservatism (unstandardized coefficient = -.10, \( p < .05 \)) and positively predicted by the economic by cultural interaction (unstandardized coefficient = .01, \( p < .05 \)). Once again, cultural conservatism was not related. Finally, social justice was negatively predicted by economic conservatism (unstandardized coefficient = -.33, \( p < .05 \)), but positively predicted by cultural conservatism (unstandardized coefficient = .12, \( p < .05 \)). The economic by cultural interaction marginally, positively related (unstandardized coefficient = .01, \( p < .06 \)).

**Indirect effects.** We also tested the indirect effects that cultural and economic conservatism and the economic by cultural interaction had on action for the less fortunate by examining the significance of the mediating variables (just world beliefs, social justice, and empathy). This is done in EQS by multiplying all of the direct effects along the paths between the two variables (Sobel, 1987) and has been shown to be more powerful than other methods of testing intervening variables (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). Here, because there are 3 indirect paths for all three variables, the products for all three indirect paths were sum-totaled to yield the indirect effects.

Results revealed that similar to the direct effects, economic conservatism demonstrated different relations than cultural conservatism and the economic by cultural interaction. Economic conservatism had a negative indirect effect on helping the less fortunate (unstandardized coefficient = -.37, \( p < .05 \), standardized coefficient = -.33),
whereas cultural conservatism (unstandardized coefficient = .08, \( p < .05 \), standardized coefficient = .07) and the economic by cultural interaction had a positive indirect effect (unstandardized coefficient = .01, \( p < .05 \), standardized coefficient = .08).

A total of 32% of the variance associated with taking action for the less fortunate was accounted for by age, economic conservatism (negatively), economic by cultural interaction, just world beliefs (negatively), social justice, and empathy.

**Explaining the moderating effects.** In order to better understand how cultural conservatism moderates the impact that economic conservatism has on just world beliefs, empathy, and action for the less fortunate, we plotted the interactions between the two variables using Itallasi Interaction Viewer (Version 1.2) from Provalis Research (http://www.provalisresearch.com/Download/download.html). This software generated 3-dimensional interaction plots based off of the bivariate and interaction equations involving the two centered conservatism variables and the three outcomes (see Figure 2). The plots reveal that cultural conservatism largely moderates the effect that economic conservatism has on both the mediating variables, and taking action for the less fortunate. First, cultural conservatism moderates the impact that economic conservatism has on just world beliefs such that as people are more culturally conservative, economic conservatism becomes an increasingly negative predictor of just world beliefs, and an increasingly positive predictor of empathy and taking action for the less fortunate.

We used computational tools (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006) for reporting regions of significance to probe whether conditional levels of cultural conservatism actually causes the positive simple slope of economic conservatism on taking action for the less fortunate to be significantly different from zero. Figure 3 provides the values of
the simple slope of the dependent variable (action for the less fortunate) on the independent variable (economic conservatism) as a function of the moderator (cultural conservatism). Confidence intervals (95%) are plotted across all relevant values of the moderator resulting in a pair of confidence bands (Bauer & Curran, 2005). The points where the bands cross zero marks the region of significance at which the value of the simple slope is different from zero. As the figure shows, economic conservatism has both a significantly positive and negative slope on action for the less fortunate depending on the value of cultural conservatism.
Figure 2. How economic and cultural conservatism interact to influence just world beliefs, empathy, and action for less fortunate. Economic conservatism progresses from left to right with higher values toward the far right. Cultural conservatism progresses from front to back with higher values toward the back.
Figure 3. Simple slopes of the effect of economic conservatism on helping the less fortunate as a function of the moderating variable cultural conservatism. The linear black line represents the value of the simple slope of economic conservatism on helping the less fortunate as a function of the value of the moderating variable, cultural conservatism. The red lines represent the 95% confidence bands for the value of the simple slope with the dotted blue lines marking the points at which the slope is statistically significantly from zero. Here, the slope of economic conservatism on helping the less fortunate becomes negative when the value of the centered cultural conservatism variable is -2.50 (24.62 regular scale) and positive when it equals 6.67 (33.69 regular scale)
DISCUSSION

The relation of economic and cultural conservatism to just world beliefs, social justice, empathy, and taking action for the less fortunate was tested among young and middle-aged adults using structural equation modeling. Specifically, we tested a mediated moderation model (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Lance, 1988) in which economic and cultural conservatism, as well as their interaction, were mediated by just world beliefs, social justice motives, and empathy. The first hypothesis was that economic conservatism would positively influence just world beliefs and negatively influence social justice motives and empathy, whereas cultural conservatism would demonstrate the opposite trends (negative correlation with just world beliefs but positive with social justice motives and empathy). The first hypothesis was partially supported in that economic conservatism had direct effects on all mediating variables (positively with just world beliefs and negatively with social justice motives and empathy), but cultural conservatism was only related to social justice motives.

Similar to the first hypothesis, our next two hypotheses were that economic and cultural conservatism would demonstrate opposite indirect effects on taking action for the less fortunate. Indeed, both of these hypotheses were supported, with economic conservatism demonstrating a negative indirect effect and cultural conservatism demonstrating a positive indirect effect. Finally, we hypothesized that the interaction between economic and cultural conservatism would also reveal opposite effects than economic conservatism on the mediating variables. Indeed, the interaction was negatively
related to just world beliefs and positively related to social justice motives (marginally) and empathy, thus suggesting that cultural conservatism moderates the impact that economic conservatism has on these variables.

**Economic Conservatism Negatively Predicted Helping the Less Fortunate**

As predicted, economic conservatism negatively predicted helping the less fortunate. The mechanisms by which this negative relationship occurs may be represented by the other variables in the study. Specifically, economic conservatism was positively linked to the latent variable just world beliefs (Jost et al., 2004, 2008) but negatively linked to social justice motives (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2008) and empathy (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1980; McAdams, 2008). Together, these findings corroborate Napier and Jost’s (2008) findings that whereas liberals lack ideological rationalizations that would help them justify inequality in a positive or even neutral perspective, economic conservatives do have these rationalizations. Indeed, given the strong relation with just world beliefs, the economic conservative is likely to attribute misfortune to the individual. When people feel a misfortune is undeserved, not self-inflicted, they should show more empathy and appeal to social justice toward others. Despite these findings, however, there seems to be one condition in which economic conservatives appear more likely to help the less fortunate. Specifically, when economic conservatives are also highly culturally conservative, helping behaviors increase.

**Cultural Conservatism Moderated the Effect of Economic Conservatism**

Cultural conservatism had a positive direct effect on social justice motives and an indirect effect on taking action for the less fortunate. Similar to economic conservatism,
the direct effect of cultural conservatism on taking action for the less fortunate was not
significant. This finding suggests that social justice motives completely mediated the
relation between these two variables. Even more, however, cultural conservatism also
played a moderating role on economic conservatism. More specifically, economic
conservatives who were also culturally conservative showed less just world beliefs and
more empathy than economic conservatives who are not culturally conservative.

What may account for the moderating effects of cultural conservatism on
economic conservatism? Religious beliefs and commandments to help the poor that are
associated with cultural conservatism may ultimately cause economic conservatives to
help the less fortunate. Indeed, increased attendance at religious services has been shown
to increase personal responsibility toward helping victims of Hurricane Katrina (Michel,
2007). Moreover, religiosity (observing religious practices) is related to increased social
capital (positive and trusting relationships with others). For example, King and Furrow
(2008) found that among high school students, religiosity had an indirect effect on both
empathy and altruism because its effects were completely mediated through increased
social capital. Mesquita (2010) reviews research that shows how being connected with
more people over time leads to convergence of emotions among individuals through a
process called emoting, in which emotions are experienced as dynamic, relational
processes heavily dependent on context. Through emoting, people may demonstrate more
empathy in the presence of another person’s suffering. As such, just as the religious high
school students from King and Furrow’s (2008) study demonstrated more empathy
through having more positive relationships with others, so too might economic
conservatives who are also culturally conservative demonstrate more empathy through
the same process. Perhaps these data corroborate the benefits of religiosity as source of social capital, as cultural conservatism moderated the effects of economic conservatism on empathy in a more positive direction. This claim was not examined in this study, but could easily be examined in future research.

The moderated effects that cultural conservatism had on economic conservatism in predicting just world beliefs were more difficult to interpret. The reason for this is that cultural conservatism demonstrated a positive relationship with just world beliefs, yet it moderated the effects of economic conservatism on just world beliefs. Simultaneous regressions did show, however, that just world beliefs were not related to cultural conservatism when controlling for economic conservatism. Just world beliefs may be related to the experiences of cultural conservatives in this way. If cultural conservatives in their religious observance obey religious commandments to help the less fortunate, then they may perhaps come into more contact with people who are unfortunate for unjust reasons (e.g., getting laid off or living in sub-par living conditions), counteracting perceptions that unfortunate people bring their misfortune on themselves. In this case, we would expect cultural conservatism to moderate the effect of economic conservatism on just world beliefs, just as we observed. Longitudinal research that observes just world beliefs among culturally conservative people before and after volunteering at homeless shelters, for example, may lend support to this claim.

Although our results seemingly offer a new perspective for how conservatism may actually predict helping behaviors for the less fortunate, it should be noted that our moderation plots seem to imply that it was the absence of both conservatism types that seemed to most strongly predict taking more action for the less fortunate. Figure 4
summarizes our hypothesized model for how likely a person is to take action for the less fortunate according to whether they are culturally conservative, economically conservative, both, or neither. In sum, we suggest that people who are culturally conservative or both culturally and economically conservative are somewhat more likely to demonstrate helping behaviors, whereas people who are only economically conservative are much less likely to. Finally, people who are neither culturally or economically conservative are most likely to demonstrate helping behaviors. As such, our results seemingly support Janoff-Bulman’s (2009) claim that liberals emphasize a responsibility to provide for both ourselves and others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culturally Conservative</th>
<th>Economically Conservative</th>
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<td>Yes</td>
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*Figure 4.* Hypothesized model for how likely a person is to take action for the less fortunate according to whether they are culturally conservative, economically conservative, both, or neither.

This last observation calls into question why our results did not reflect Brooks’ (2006) findings that conservatives tend to be more charitable than liberals. One obvious answer to these seemingly disparate findings concerns measurement. Brooks reviewed data that recorded specific behaviors such as donating blood and donating money to charity, whereas our measure assessed more general behaviors that concern helping the less fortunate (e.g., advocating for the less fortunate in conversations and working to help
them). Another answer may lie in the conservative/liberal divide that Brooks used. He did not include moderate conservatives or liberals in his analysis when making comparisons, and instead used people at the far ends of each pole. Perhaps moderate liberals are more generous than moderate conservatives. Another likely answer for why our results did not replicate Brooks’ (2006) results may lie in the demographics of the participants, particularly age.

**Age was Related to Conservatism and Helping the Less Fortunate**

Although restricted to academic populations of faculty, staff, and students from different universities, this sample contained a fairly broad age range (ages 17-47). Research has documented significant increases over the past few decades in older people taking part in formal organizational volunteering (Okun et al., 1998). Indeed, in this sample age was treated as a covariate and was positively related to helping the less fortunate. Additionally, age covaried negatively with economic conservatism, but positively with cultural conservatism and the economic by cultural interaction. Given that the conservatives who Brooks (2006) found to be most charitable were older, religious, and skeptical of government intervention in economic affairs, these findings concur with his findings. However, the participants in both Okun et al.’s (1998) and Brooks’ (2006) studies were considerably older than our sample even. For instance, Okun et al. (1998) studied participants at least 50 years old. Perhaps when conservatives get past a certain age (e.g., retirement), like older liberals they experience a greater interest than younger people in helping the less fortunate.

Whereas the sample in this study encompassed a fairly broad range of ages (17 to 47), older populations are needed in order to fully determine how one’s political beliefs
encourage helping behaviors across the life span. From a developmental perspective, it is especially important to determine what changes (if any) occur with regard to just world beliefs, social justice motives, and empathy. If Brooks’ (2006) findings regarding older conservatives are correct, then perhaps curvilinear relationships among these variables exist across the lifespan.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study offers a new perspective regarding conservatism and its relation with helping the less fortunate, there are many ways to expand upon the study’s findings in the future. One area of interest that this study neglected but may reveal more significant findings concerns social economic status (SES) and the extent to which one is taxed. Particularly, it may be the case that people who are economically conservative but not culturally conservative are more financially well off than others and fear that they are unfairly targeted for high taxation because of it. As such, they may aim to oppose any government redistribution of economic power that is heavily dependent on the wealth they generate. It would be of special interest to see if cultural conservatism moderates this effect as well.

Additionally, a major limitation of this study was that the data consisted of correlations. As such, we cannot be certain as to whether changes in just world beliefs or empathy actually influence increasing helping behaviors or vice versa (i.e., helping less fortunate people makes people feel more empathic). Perhaps experiments that manipulate beliefs about the world, for example, just vs. unjust world beliefs, may have an impact on the extent to which everyone (conservatives and liberals alike) may be willing to help a less fortunate person. Mock charities in which a participant can choose to donate a
portion of their allotted reward money for participating in a study to a child who was a victim of circumstance vs. a victim of personal failure may reveal essential clues as to when and why various individuals are willing or not willing to help others (see Basil, Ridgway, & Basil, 2006, for an example).

Conclusion

How and whether or not we help the less fortunate likely has strong implications for the well-being of many people. Much of whether or not we help them, however, may largely depend on whether we think their misfortunes are a result of their own personal failures, whether or not we are capable of feeling empathy toward them, and whether or not we are motivated by social justice concerns. Whereas economic conservatism may be negatively associated with helping the less fortunate, cultural conservatism may moderate this impact such that the more culturally conservative a person also is, the more likely she is to also help the less fortunate.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

List of Abbreviations

CECS = Cultural and Economic Conservatism Scale (Crowson, 2009)

SMCAPO = Scale to Measure Conservatism of American Public Opinion (Ray, 1983)

RCS-B = Radical Conservatism Scale–form B (Comrey & Newmeyer, 1965)

CLS = Conservatism–Liberalism Scale (McCloskey & Bann, 1979)

RCS-A = Radical Conservatism Scale–form A (Comrey & Newmeyer, 1965)

MCS = Moral Conservatism Scale (Wald, Owen, & Hill, 1988)

Economic Conservatism (Brooks et al., 2011)

1. The government should take action to decrease income differences (-). CECS

2. The government should do everything it can to eradicate poverty in this country (-). SMCAPO

3. A free dental service should be provided by the federal government (-). SMCAPO

4. Taxes on high incomes should be increased (-). CECS

5. If the government must go deeper in debt to help people, it should do so (-). RCS-B

6. It is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can’t take care of themselves (-). RCS-B

7. The government should see to it that everyone has a decent job and decent standard of living (-). SMCAPO

8. In the matter of jobs and standards of living, the government should let each person get ahead on his own. CLS

9. The wealthy have an unfair advantage in our society (-). CECS
10. The government should guarantee every citizen enough to eat (-). RCS-A

11. Providing medical care for everyone at public expense would greatly improve the health of the nation (-).CLS

**Cultural Conservatism (Brooks et al., 2011)**

1. This country would be better off if religion had a greater influence in daily life. RCS-A

2. Abortion should remain legalized (-). RCS-A

3. Unmarried young people do not do anything wrong when they sleep together (-) CECS

4. Birth control devices should be made readily available to anyone who wants to use them (-). RCS-B

5. Laws against homosexual marriage are old-fashioned and wrong (-). SMCAPO

6. God exists, in the form in which the Bible describes him. RCS-A

7. If a man and a woman want to live together without getting married, that’s their business (-). MCS

8. It should be against the law to do anything which the Bible says is wrong. RCS-B

9. Every child should have religious instruction. RCS-A

10. Erotic and obscene literature should be prohibited from public sale. SMCAPO

**Global just world beliefs scale (Lipkus, 1991)**

1. I feel that people get what they are entitled to have.

2. I feel that person’s efforts are noticed and rewarded.

3. I feel that people earn the rewards and punishments they get.

4. I feel that people who meet with misfortune have brought it on themselves.

5. I feel that people get what they deserve.

6. I feel that rewards and punishments are fairly given.

7. I basically feel that the world is a fair place.
Economic Systems Justification Scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000)

1. If people work hard, they almost always get what they want.

2. The existence of widespread economic differences does not mean that they are inevitable.

3. Laws of nature are responsible for differences in wealth in society.

4. There are many reasons to think that the economic system is unfair.

5. It is virtually impossible to eliminate poverty.

6. Poor people are not essentially different from rich people.

7. Most people who don’t get ahead in our society should not blame the system; they have only themselves to blame.

8. Equal distribution of resources is a possibility for our society.


10. Economic differences in the society reflect an illegitimate distribution of resources.

11. There will always be poor people, because there will never be enough jobs for everybody.

12. Economic positions are legitimate reflections of people’s achievements.

13. If people wanted to change the economic system to make things equal, they could.

14. Equal distribution of resources in unnatural.

15. It is unfair to have an economic system which produces extreme wealth and extreme poverty at the same time.

16. There is no point in trying to make incomes more equal.

17. There are no inherent differences between rich and poor; it is purely a matter of the circumstances into which you are born.
Social Justice Motives (Janoff-Bulman et al, 2008)

1. We should all be responsible for improving the welfare of others beyond our immediate circle of friends and family.

2. It’s an obligation, not a matter of personal preference, to provide for people worse off even if we’re not close to them.

3. It’s important for those who are better off in society to work hard to provide more resources for those who are worse off.

4. If we look after ourselves, we still need to look after others in society.

5. In the healthiest societies those at the top feel responsible for providing better lives for those at the bottom.

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983)

1. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me. (EC)

2. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the “other guy’s” point of view.(PT) (-)

3. Sometimes I don’t feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems. (EC) (-)

4. In emergency situations, I feel apprehensive and ill-at-ease. (PD)

5. I try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement before I make a decision. (PT)

6. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them. (EC)

7. I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of a very emotional situation. (PD)

8. I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective. (PT)

9. When I see someone get hurt, I tend to remain calm. (PD) (-)

10. Other people’s misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal. (EC) (-)

11. If I’m sure I’m right about something, I don’t waste much time listening to other people’s arguments. (PT) (-)

12. Being in a tense emotional situation scares me. (PD)
13. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don’t feel very much pity for them. (EC) (-)

14. I am usually pretty effective in dealing with emergencies. (PD) (-)

15. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen. (EC)

16. I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both. (PT)

17. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person. (EC)

18. I tend to lose control during emergencies. (PD)

19. When I’m upset at someone, I usually try to “put myself in his shoes” for a while. (PT)

20. When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces. (PD)

21. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place. (PT)

Action for the Less Fortunate Scale (Narvaez, Brooks & Mattan, 2011)

1. I have volunteered at an agency that helps the less fortunate.

2. I have written to the newspaper to speak up for the less fortunate.

3. I have donated money to agencies that help the less fortunate.

4. I spend hours every month helping the less fortunate who are not family members.

5. I have organized efforts to help those who are less fortunate.

6. I work to change the system that discriminates against the less fortunate.

7. I vote for officials that seek to make the system fairer for the less fortunate.

8. My work is focused on helping the less fortunate.

9. In conversations with others, I advocate for the less fortunate.