

When Self-Interest Contradicts Ideology: A Reply to Hoffarth and Jost (2017)

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Received 3/15/17; Revision accepted 7/11/17

In their Commentary, Hoffarth and Jost (2017) report an association between political conservatism and opposition to same-sex marriage among sexual minorities. They argue that this finding challenges the theoretical framework from which we derived our hypotheses, a framework that emphasizes self-interest (defined in terms of evolved strategies and motives) in explaining political attitudes (see Weeden & Kurzban, 2014). We appreciate the additional perspective provided by Hoffarth and Jost; nevertheless, their Commentary might paint a misleading picture of the psychological factors underlying attitudes toward same-sex marriage by understating the role of self-interest, as well as a variety of evolved motives beyond system justification.

Misunderstandings and Alternative Interpretations

First, Hoffarth and Jost appear to have misunderstood our approach when they claim that heterosexual individuals should not, from a rational point of view, be concerned about sexual promiscuity among gay men and lesbians because they trade in different “sexual marketplaces” (2017, p. ♦♦♦). This appears to conflate our approach—which emphasizes self-interest in terms of *evolved strategies and motives*—with a more general rational-actor approach (see Weeden & Kurzban, 2014, pp. 34–43). In our article, we did not claim that opposition to same-sex marriage was driven by conscious cost-benefit analysis. On the contrary, we argued that it was driven by unconscious mental associations, evolved mating strategies, explicit stereotypes (which themselves are the product of unconscious processes; Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996), and their interaction. We hypothesized that sexually restricted individuals would, because of features of their evolved psychology, perceive same-sex marriage to be a threat, regardless of whether it is actually a threat. Is this evolved

psychology sensitive to the difference between homosexual and heterosexual promiscuity? Or does it operate according to a more general, moral heuristic along the lines of “all promiscuity is bad” (see Cosmides & Tooby, 2006)? These remain open questions. Nevertheless, our research suggests that the latter possibility is more likely to be correct (see Pinsof & Haselton, 2017).

Second, we agree that “ideology” (e.g., adherence to a set of beliefs or moral principles) may occasionally override self-interest (depending on one’s definition of self-interest; see Weeden & Kurzban, 2014, pp. 34–43). Such a finding is consistent with a variety of approaches beyond system-justification theory, including moral-foundations theory (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), social-identity theory (Tajfel, 2010), costly-signaling theory (e.g., Sosis & Alcorta, 2003), and evolutionary theories of conformity (Claidière & Whiten, 2012; see also Murray, Trudeau, & Schaller, 2011). In other words, self-identification as a conservative may reflect a variety of evolved motives unrelated to system-justification—for instance, motivations to promote the interests of one’s social group (e.g., evangelical Christians), enforce the norms of that group, signal one’s commitment to that group, or conform to the beliefs of that group. Such motives tend to advance the interests of group members in most—but not all—cases. These motives, and their effects on policy preferences, are not at odds with our approach (Pinsof & Haselton, 2016). Moreover, any of these motives may be able to account for the correlation between conservatism and opposition to same-sex marriage among sexual minorities.¹

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What about the correlation between conservatism and implicit stereotypes about homosexual promiscuity among sexual minorities? Hoffarth and Jost suggest that this finding can be explained by out-group favoritism, which stems from a general motivation to justify existing social hierarchies. However, an alternative interpretation is that, compared with liberal sexual minorities, conservative sexual minorities are more frequently exposed to opponents of same-sex marriage—and the stereotypes that opponents of same-sex marriage tend to hold. Thus, any correlation between conservatism and implicit stereotypes could simply result from greater exposure to such stereotypes, independent of any motivation to justify the system.

The Role of Self-Interest

Nevertheless, even if we assume that system-justification theory does explain Hoffarth and Jost's results in the way that they claim, we might still question the overall significance of these results. For instance, we do not find it surprising that at least some sexual minorities oppose same-sex marriage or hold stereotypes about gay people; one can find at least some individuals willing to subscribe to just about any belief system, no matter how harmful it may be to their interests (e.g., Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956; Wright, 2013). Instead, we might be more interested in the overall prevalence of these individuals. The rarer they are, the less of a challenge they pose to approaches emphasizing self-interest; the more common they are, the more of a challenge they pose to such approaches.

Just how prevalent are gay, lesbian, or bisexual opponents of same-sex marriage? According to data from the Social Justice Sexuality Project (Battle, Pastrana, & Daniels, 2012)—a large, ethnically diverse sample of sexual minorities ($N = 4,701$) used by Hoffarth and Jost in their Commentary—fully 96% of sexual minorities supported same-sex marriage in 2010, the year the survey was administered.² This finding is not very difficult to reconcile with the idea that self-interest generally plays an important role in shaping political attitudes. Whereas we agree that most definitions of self-interest are unlikely to account for the 4% of sexual minorities who opposed same-sex marriage in 2010, we do not regard this as a serious problem for the self-interest approach. Arguably, the more important finding is that self-interest *can* account for the remaining 96%, which we regard as a noteworthy scientific achievement.

Nevertheless, one might argue that this finding is irrelevant to Hoffarth and Jost's contention that ideology contradicts self-interest. After all, many of the sexual minorities in the data set may have been liberal, and liberals are, according to system-justification theorists,

less motivated to justify existing social hierarchies than are conservatives (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Thus, rather than focusing on sexual minorities in general, one might focus instead on conservative sexual minorities in particular. These individuals are, presumably, confronted with a strong inner conflict, torn between their ideology on the one hand and their self-interest on the other. If ideology is more powerful than self-interest, then the majority of these individuals will oppose same-sex marriage. If self-interest is more powerful than ideology, by contrast, then the majority of these individuals will support same-sex marriage.

How do conservative sexual minorities resolve this inner conflict? Turning to the Social Justice Sexuality Project (Battle et al., 2012) again, we find that of 633 conservative sexual minorities, the overwhelming majority—fully 91% of them—supported same-sex marriage in 2010.³ This is in stark contrast to conservatives in general, only 23% of whom supported same-sex marriage that year.⁴ Indeed, conservative sexual minorities are even more likely than liberals to support same-sex marriage, only 67% of whom supported same-sex marriage that year (Pew Research Center, 2016).⁵ These results imply that when self-interest is pitted against ideology, self-interest tends to win. Whether self-interest overrides ideology in other domains, however, is a question for future research.

Of course, we acknowledge that no single theory can explain everything, and system-justification theory may well be useful for explaining the cases in which people defy their self-interest in favor of ideologies. We also believe that collaborations between authors with expertise in each perspective could substantially aid our understanding of the relative roles of ideology and self-interest (depending on one's definitions) in shaping political attitudes. For now, we are not convinced that Hoffarth and Jost pose a significant challenge to the theoretical framework that guided our research. Indeed, given the available evidence, it appears that they got it backward: More often than not, self-interest contradicts ideology.

Action Editor

D. Stephen Lindsay served as action editor for this article.

Author Contributions

D. Pinsof performed the data analysis under the supervision of M. Haselton. D. Pinsof drafted the manuscript, and M. Haselton provided critical revisions. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Notes

1. For instance, if one's fellow conservatives (or one's fellow Christians) oppose same-sex marriage, then one might be inclined to endorse this belief to signal solidarity with them (even if it is personally costly to do so; Sosis & Alcorta, 2003). If same-sex marriage is perceived to violate one's conservative moral principles (which tend to benefit oneself and one's group in most—but not all—cases), then one might oppose same-sex marriage in order to uphold these principles. Finally, if opposition to same-sex marriage is the prevailing view within one's conservative community, then one might conform to this view out of either informational or normative conformity, both of which reflect evolved motives that are adaptive in most—but not all—cases (Claidière & Whiten, 2012).
2. Findings were similar for the American National Election Study (2014) sample ($N = 238$), in which 94% of sexual minorities supported either same-sex marriage or civil unions (81% favored same-sex marriage; 13% favored civil unions), and for the Amazon Mechanical Turk sample we used (Pinsof and Haselton, 2016; $N = 94$), in which 94% of sexual minorities supported same-sex marriage (i.e., were below the midpoint on a 7-point scale measuring opposition).
3. Findings were similar for the American National Election Study (2014) sample ($N = 55$), in which 49 of the 55 conservative sexual minorities in the sample supported either same-sex marriage or civil unions (36 favored same-sex marriage; 13 favored civil unions), and for our Amazon Mechanical Turk sample (Pinsof and Haselton, 2016), in which 5 of the 7 conservative sexual minorities in the sample supported same-sex marriage (i.e., had scores below the midpoint on a 7-point scale measuring opposition).
4. This figure rose to 29% by 2016.
5. This figure rose to 78% by 2016.

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