The Happiness Gap Between Conservatives and Liberals Depends on Country-Level Threat: A Worldwide Multilevel Study

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Abstract

In the present study, we investigated the much debated "happiness gap" between conservatives and liberals, approaching the issue from a multilevel person × context perspective. More specifically, we investigated whether this relationship depends on country-level threat. We used individual-level data for right-wing attitudes and psychological well-being from 94 large, representative samples collected worldwide (total $N = 137,890$) and objective indicators of country-level threat as the contextual variable. Our results suggest that, especially in countries characterized by high levels of threat, individuals with right-wing attitudes experienced greater well-being than individuals with left-wing attitudes. In countries with a low level of threat, this relationship was considerably weaker or even absent. Our findings corroborate the view that right-wing attitudes may serve a self-protective function, helping individuals to manage and cope with threat.

Keywords

attitudes, well-being, political psychology

What processes are involved in making us happy? This question has puzzled researchers in the field of psychology for many decades. Subjective well-being is used as the central construct, referring to positive moods and emotions and positive evaluations of perceived life satisfaction (Diener, 1984; Diener & Lucas, 1999). There is a broad consensus that subjective well-being can be measured using self-reports (e.g., Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Krueger & Schkade, 2008). One specific question that has attracted scholarly and media attention is whether subjective well-being depends on one's ideological attitudes. Are conservatives happier than adherents to progressive views, or are liberals the happier ones? Political scientists have reported that citizens of liberal countries are generally happier than those of conservative countries (e.g., Bok, 2010; Radcliff, 2001). They have argued that liberal governments tend to implement policies that create more livable conditions, such as better education and health care, and invest in strategies to reduce unemployment, crime rate, and poverty, thus increasing well-being among citizens (Bok, 2010; Veenhoven & Ehrhardt, 1995).

Psychologists who have examined the relationship at the individual level (*personal* ideology and well-being) have obtained less univocal results, leading to an ongoing debate about whether this relationship is meaningful (e.g., Van Hiel et al., 2015; Wojcik, Hovasapian, Graham, Motyl, & Ditto, 2015). The hypothesis of increased happiness among left-wing adherents builds on the classic work on right-wing attitudes. Originally, scholars argued that right-wing attitudes were associated with psychological ill-being, such as psychopathology and personality disorders (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Tomkins, 1965). Some empirical evidence corroborated these theoretical claims, as evidenced by significant relationships of authoritarianism with, for example, psychopathologies (Duriez, Klimstra, Luyckx, Beyers, & Soenens, 2011; Rokeach & Fruchter, 1956), low self-esteem (Boshier, 1969), and neuroticism and low positive affect (Peterson & Duncan, 2007). Other studies have shown that right-wing attitudes are "good for the self," showing relationships with increased personal well-being (MacInnis, Busseri, Choma, & Hodson, 2013; Napier & Jost, 2008; Schlenker, Chambers, & Le, 2012; Van Hiel & Brebels, 2011).

Triggered by these inconsistencies, Onraet, Van Hiel, and Dhont (2013) conducted a meta-analysis on the basis of 97 samples ($N = 69,211$). Weak and often nonsignificant overall

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effect sizes emerged for this relationship for a range of well-being indicators, including positive and negative affect, life satisfaction, and self-esteem. Given the weak direct relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being, as well as the inconsistencies among findings, we wanted to move this research program one step further. Specifically, the nature of the relationship may be determined by possible moderators, and knowledge of such moderators constitutes an interesting path toward a better understanding.

In the present study, we focus on threat as a contextual factor that influences. Other scholars have already examined whether threats emanating from one's personal life as well as threats at the collective level influence the relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being. Van Hiel and De Clercq (2009) reported that for people experiencing mental distress caused by negative life events, authoritarianism is related to improved general health, whereas this relationship is absent for people who experience little mental distress. Similarly, Brandt, Henry, and Wetherell (2015) found that authoritarianism has more psychological benefits for members of stigmatized social groups, who typically experience threats to their collective worth and reputation, than for members of high-status groups. Other studies provided evidence for similar interaction effects, using country-level measures that may relate to threat. Napier and Jost (2008) used data from 10 countries and found that political conservatism was more strongly related to well-being in countries with a high quality of life (operationalized with the Human Development Index) than in countries with a lower quality of life. They also found that increasing social inequality in the United States has more pernicious effects on the well-being of liberals compared to that of conservatives (see also Schlenker et al., 2012). In sum, some evidence already indicates that the happiness gap between right- and left-wing adherents depends on threat or indicators related to threat. However, the underlying processes are less clear.

Possible Mechanisms

One possible explanation that has been put forward in the above studies is that right-wing attitudes serve an ego-defensive function and provide a buffer for the possible negative impact of threatening events. More specifically, whereas living in a threatening environment would normally have negative personal implications, right-wing views offer individuals aid to manage these threats by providing a sense of stability, certainty, and group cohesion (Henry, 2011; Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Stenner, 2005). In a threatening context, this would have beneficial effects on the well-being of right-wing adherents. Left-wing adherents do not have this coping mechanism at their disposal and would experience more negative consequences of threatening events.

Another explanation may be that, compared to left-wing adherents, right-wing adherents might experience a better person-culture fit in a threatening environment. Various studies have already observed that threatening contexts, such as times of economic crisis or terrorist threat, create a shift in a country's population toward the political right (e.g., Doty, Peterson, & Winter, 1991; Onraet et al. 2013; Sales, 1972). As the general public shifts to stronger right-wing attitudes, right-wing adherents may experience a better person-culture fit because they are surrounded by others with similar beliefs and attitudes. Scholars have already demonstrated that a match between an individual-level trait and the prevailing traits in one's environment has beneficial effects for one's well-being (Fulmer et al., 2010). This effect has also been found for beliefs and values. For example, religious people experience greater well-being in cultures that value religion than in cultures that do not (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011; Gebauer, Sedikides, & Neberich, 2012). Being similar to other people in one's environment evokes the feeling that one meets the expectations of the society at large (Fulmer et al., 2010) and increases feelings of being respected and the likelihood of receiving social support (Diener et al., 2011), which all have positive effects on well-being. The same processes may be at work for right-wing attitudes. Having right-wing attitudes in a fitting environment can have beneficial effects for well-being. In other words, a right-wing climate (RWC) may explain the moderating effect of country-level threat on the relationship between individual right-wing attitudes and well-being.

The Present Study

In the present study, we further investigated the "happiness gap" between right- and left-wing adherents. More specifically, we examined whether the relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being depends on country-level threat. Our study extends the previous studies in three important ways.

Firstly, previous studies typically investigated the happiness gap in Western societies. A unique feature of the present study, therefore, is the inclusion of non-Western societies as well. By taking this cross-national perspective, we reacted to the call to not only focus on Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic societies in psychological research but also take a broader lens and more fully tap into human diversity (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

Secondly, we aimed to expand the measures typically used in previous studies on the relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being. Previous studies of the happiness gap typically considered only general left–right (or liberal–conservative) political orientation as a rather crude measure (e.g., Napier & Jost, 2008; Schlenker et al., 2012; Wojcik et al., 2015). We additionally investigated specific dimensions of the left–right continuum. In particular, we included a measure of social–cultural right-wing attitudes, referring to the adherence to traditional values and norms and resistance to change (Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009), as well as a measure of economic-hierarchical right-wing attitudes, referring to a preference for hierarchy and inequality between social groups (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994).

Finally, scholars have typically explained the beneficial effects on well-being for right-wing adherents in a threatening context by emphasizing the self-protective function of

right-wing attitudes. We took a novel perspective by investigating whether person-culture fit might explain this effect.

Method

Participants

We used data from representative samples included in the World Values Survey (WVS; http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org) and the European Values Study (EVS; http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu). Both use practically identical questionnaires and methodologies. The choice of countries was determined by availability in Waves 5 (2005) and 6 (2010) of the WVS and the 2008 wave of the EVS. If a particular country was included in two or three waves, we used the most recent data for further analyses. In total, we collected samples from 94 different countries (40 European, 5 North American, 7 South American, 26 Asian, 14 African, and 2 Oceanian countries) and total of 137,890 participants, consisting of 47.1% males and 52.9% females with a mean (*M*) age of 42.79 (*SD* = 17.06).

Measures

Individual-level indicators

Well-being. Subjective well-being was measured with 2 items: "Taking all things together, would you say you are (1) *very happy*, (2) *rather happy*, (3) *not very happy*, (4) *not at all happy*?" (*M* = 1.89, *SD* = 0.73) and "How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?" (1 = *completely dissatisfied*, 10 = *completely satisfied*; *M* = 6.90, *SD* = 2.27).

Left–right political orientation. Political orientation was measured in 88 countries using the item "In political matters, people talk of 'the left' and 'the right.' How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking?" (1 = *left*, 10 = *right*; *M* = 5.71, *SD* = 2.33).

Social–cultural attitudes. We included the same items as Onraet et al. (2013). These authors selected items from the WVS and EVS that were closely related to the construct of social–cultural right-wing attitudes. First, obedience as a child-rearing value was measured by giving participants a list of qualities, including obedience, which children can be encouraged to learn at home. Participants received a score of 1 if they selected "obedience" as an important quality and 2 if they did not (*M* = 1.63, *SD* = 0.48). Second, respect for authority was measured using the question "Do you think if there would be greater respect for authority in the near future, it would be a good thing or a bad thing?" (1 = *good thing*, 2 = *don't mind*, 3 = *bad thing*; *M* = 1.51, *SD* = 0.70).

Economic-hierarchical attitudes. We included the items selected by Onraet et al. (2013) that fit the construct of economic-hierarchical right-wing attitudes. First, preference for income inequality was measured on a 10-point Likert-type scale by agreement with "*Incomes should be equal*" (coded as 1) and "*There should be greater incentives for individual effort*" (coded as 10; *M* = 5.51, *SD* = 2.95). Second,

attitudes toward competition were measured by the level of agreement with the following items: "*Competition is good. It stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas*" (coded as 1) and "*Competition is harmful. It brings out the worst in people*" (coded as 10; *M* = 3.82, *SD* = 2.51).

Country-level indicators

Threat. The same country-level threat indicators as Onraet et al. (2013) were used. These indicators are based on national, statistical, and social threat indicators used by Sales (1973), Doty, Peterson, and Winter (1991), and McCann (1991, 1999). More specifically, on the basis of the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, we gathered measures for gross domestic product (GDP; per capita), unemployment rate, inflation rate (consumer price index) and life expectancy. Moreover, using data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, we obtained a measure for homicide rate (per 100,000 individuals in a given population). For all these measures, we used data from the year of the data collection of the respective EVS/WVS wave (2005, 2008, or 2010). For missing data (7%), we used techniques previously used by Onraet et al. (2013). We first looked for data from a preceding or subsequent year; 22 out of the 470 (= 5 [indicators] × 94 [countries]) data points were imputed this way. If these were unavailable, we computed the mean score of the indicator for all neighboring countries and assigned this value to the target country; 10 out of the 470 data points were imputed this way. A principal component analysis showed that all five indicators loaded on one single factor, explaining 53% of the variance. Component loadings all exceeded .63, with GDP and life expectancy loading negatively and inflation, unemployment and homicide rate loading positively on the threat component.

Right-wing climate. To obtain measures for RWC, we aggregated the individual scores of left–right political orientation, social–cultural attitudes, and economic-hierarchical attitudes at the country level.

Control variables. In our analysis, we controlled for age, sex, education, and religiosity.

Education. The EVS reports the International Standard Classification of Education ranging from 0 ("*preprimary education or no education*") to 6 ("*second stage of tertiary education*"; *M* = 3.08, *SD* = 1.33). The WVS reports the highest level of education ranging from 1 ("*no formal education*") to 9 ("*university-level education, with degree*"); (*M* = 5.56, *SD* = 2.45). Moreover, both WVS and EVS asked participants at what age they completed their full-time education (*M* = 19.57, *SD* = 6.98). All indicators were z-standardized and averaged.

Religiosity. As religiosity is related to both right-wing attitudes (e.g., Altemeyer, 1988) and subjective well-being (e.g., Ferriss, 2002), we included religiosity as a control variable. Religiosity was measured using three items. The first item asked participants how often they attended religious services

(apart from weddings, funerals, and christenings), ranging from 1 ("*more than once a week*") to 7 ("*never, practically never*"; $M = 4.19$, $SD = 2.17$). The second item was "Independently of whether you attend religious services or not, would you say you are 1 = *a religious person*, 2 = *not a religious person*, 3 = *a convinced atheist*" ($M = 1.36$, $SD = 0.58$). The last item measured the importance of God in the participant's life on a 10-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("*not at all important*") to 10 ("*very important*"; $M = 7.46$, $SD = 3.09$).

Data Analytic Procedure

Multilevel modeling (MLM) with respondents (individual level) nested within countries (contextual level) was conducted. All analyses were performed using SPSS software (version 22.0; IBM Corp., 2013). We used full information maximum-likelihood estimates with robust standard errors. The proportion of missing data was not higher than 1.7% for any of the variables. A *random coefficient model* in which the intercept and slope coefficients vary across countries was applied (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). All variables were group-mean centered (Enders & Tofighi, 2007). For each construct, a single component was extracted within each country using principal component analysis. For "left–right political orientation", we *z*-standardized the scores on the single item. As such, we removed all between-country variation in right-wing attitudes, yielding a pooled-within (i.e., Level 1) estimate for the relation between right-wing attitudes and well-being. MLM output produces only unstandardized coefficients. However, by *z*-standardizing all variables prior to the analyses, these coefficients correspond to β weights (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, & Congdon, 2004; Snijders & Bosker, 2012).

First, we estimated an empty (intercept-only) model, which provides insight into the variances at the individual and contextual level. The intraclass correlation was medium sized (intraclass correlation [ICC] = 0.14), indicating that there was substantial between-level variance in well-being, justifying the use of MLM. Next, all predictors were added in blocks to the model. At the individual level, we tested the associations of our control variables with well-being. Next, also at the individual level, we explored the within-country associations of the right-wing orientation (RWO) measures with well-being beyond the associations of the demographic variables. Subsequently, at the contextual level, we tested the effect of country-level threat; that is, the relationship between threat and well-being, while controlling for individual differences in demographics and right-wing attitudes. Finally, we explored whether the relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being varied across countries and whether our threat indicator explained (part of) this slope variance. In other words, do country-level threats explain why the relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being differs across countries? A more detailed description of the MLM procedures is provided in the Online Supplemental Materials.

Table 1. Pooled Average Within-Country Correlations Among Individual-Level Variables.

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age						
2. Education	−.23***					
3. Religiosity	.14***	−.06***				
4. Left–right political orientation	.04**	−.03**	.12***			
5. Social–cultural attitudes	.03**	−.07***	.09***	.07***		
6. Economic-hierarchical attitudes	.02**	−.05**	.02**	.11***	.02**	
7. Well-being	−.09***	.09***	.06***	.08***	.02**	.07***

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 2. Changes in Model Fit (i.e., ΔDeviance Provided by $\chi^2(df = 1)$ Change in −2* Log-Likelihood) in Multilevel Hierarchical Regression Steps.

Steps	Model 1 Left–Right Political Orientation	Model 2 Social–Cultural Attitudes	Model 3 Economic-Hierarchical Attitudes
Step 1–2	19,900.80***	19,900.80***	19,900.80***
Step 2–3	42,176.59***	42,176.59***	42,176.59***
Step 3–4	78,365.92***	17,173.48***	15,449.63***
Step 4–5	5.42*	6.75**	6.65**
Step 5–6	394.53***	187.32***	480.09***
Step 6–7	7.59**	4.59*	8.40**

Note. In Step 1, the one level intercept-only model is regressed upon well-being. In Step 2, the two level intercept-only model is regressed upon well-being. Step 3 adds the within-level effects of gender, age, education, and religiosity. Step 4 adds the within-level effects of the specific right-wing attitudinal indicator. Step 5 adds the between-level effects of country-level threat (i.e., intercept predictor), and Step 6 explores whether there is significant slope variance across contextual units. Finally, Step 7 includes the cross-level interaction(s) (i.e., slope predictor).
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Results

First, we explored the overall associations between all individual-level study variables and outcomes (see Table 1).

Second, we ran several multilevel hierarchical linear regressions investigating whether the relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being was moderated by country-level threat. The step-by-step addition of predictors improved the goodness-of-fit statistics of each multilevel model significantly (see Table 2).

In Step 1, the one level intercept-only model is regressed upon well-being. In Step 2, the two level intercept-only model is regressed upon well-being. Step 3 adds the within-level effects of gender, age, education, and religiosity. Step 4 adds the within-level effects of the specific right-wing attitudinal indicator. Step 5 adds the between-level effects of country-level threat

Table 3. Unstandardized Estimates (Standard Errors in Brackets) of Multilevel Regression Analyses on Well-Being.

Independent variables	Model 1 b (SE)	Model 2 b (SE)	Model 3 b (SE)
Intercept	0.02 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)
Within-level effect			
Gender (1 = male)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01* (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)
Age	−0.08*** (<0.01)	−0.07*** (<0.01)	−0.07*** (<0.01)
Education	0.08*** (<0.01)	0.09*** (<0.01)	0.08*** (<0.01)
Religiosity	0.07*** (<0.01)	0.07*** (<0.01)	0.07*** (<0.01)
Political orientation	0.07*** (0.01)		
Social attitudes		0.02*** (<0.01)	
Economic attitudes			0.05*** (<0.01)
Between-level effect (intercept predictor)			
Threat	−0.09* (0.04)	−0.10** (0.04)	−0.10** (0.04)
Cross-level interaction effect (slope predictor)			
Political orientation × Threat	0.02** (0.01)		
Social attitudes × Threat		0.01* (<0.01)	
Economic attitudes × Threat			0.03*** (<0.01)
Explained variance			
By Level 1 (individual)	8.30%	4.31%	5.32%
By Level 2 (country)	19.81%	22.36%	23.70%
Total explained variance	9.91%	6.85%	7.91%
Explained slope variance			
Political orientation—Well-being	9.66%		
Social attitudes—Well-being		2.17%	
Economic attitudes—Well-being			10.79%

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

(i.e., intercept predictor), and Step 6 explores whether there is significant slope variance across contextual units. Finally, Step 7 includes the cross-level interaction(s) (i.e., slope predictor).

We constructed three similar models. More specifically, in predicting individual-level well-being, we examined the cross-level interaction between contextual threat (at Level 2) and the following right-wing attitudes (at Level 1): left–right political orientation (Model 1), social–cultural attitudes (Model 2), and economic-hierarchical attitudes (Model 3).

Table 3 shows the unstandardized estimates of the multilevel regression analyses.[1] Given the large sample size, p values are less informative and regression coefficients (bs and βs) should be interpreted to claim support for the hypotheses. At the individual level, right-wing attitudes were significantly and positively related to well-being ($\beta = .07$, 95% CI: [0.06, 0.09], $p < .001$ for left–right political orientation in Model 1; $\beta = .02$, 95% CI: [0.02, 0.03], $p < .001$ for social–cultural attitudes in Model 2; and $\beta = .05$, 95% CI: [0.05, 0.06], $p < .001$ for economic-hierarchical attitudes in Model 3). At the societal level, threat was negatively related to well-being, indicating that individual well-being tended to be lower in countries with high threat levels ($\beta = -.09$, 95% CI: [−0.17, −0.01], $p = .02$ in Model 1; $\beta = -.10$, 95% CI: [−0.17, −0.02], $p = .01$ in Model 2; and $\beta = -.10$, 95% CI: [−0.17, −0.02], $p = .01$ in Model 3). Most importantly, significant interaction effects emerged between country-level threat and our three measures of right-wing attitudes ($\beta = .02$, 95% CI: [0.01, 0.04], $p = .006$ in Model 1; $\beta = .01$, 95% CI: [0.00, 0.01], $p = .03$ in

Model 2; and $\beta = .03$, 95% CI: [0.03, 0.04], $p < .001$ in Model 3).

Multilevel simple slope analyses (see Figure 1) indicated that right-wing attitudes were most strongly positively related to well-being in countries with very high threat (2 *SD* above *M*; $\beta = .11$, $b = .11$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI: [0.08, 0.15], $p < .001$ in Model 1; $\beta = .04$, $b = .04$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI: [0.01, 0.06], $p = .007$ in Model 2; and $\beta = .10$, $b = .10$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI: [0.07, 0.13], $p < .001$ in Model 3) and somewhat weaker in countries with moderately high threat (1 *SD* above *M*; $\beta = .09$, $b = .09$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI: [0.07, 0.11], $p < .001$ in Model 1; $\beta = .03$, $b = .03$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI: [0.01, 0.05], $p < .001$ in Model 2; and $\beta = .08$, $b = 0.08$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI: [0.06, 0.10], $p < .001$ in Model 3). In countries rather low in threat (1 *SD* below *M*), the relationship between RWO and well-being further diminished ($\beta = .05$, $b = .05$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI: [0.03, 0.07], $p < .001$ in Model 1; $\beta = .01$, $b = .01$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI: [0.00, 0.03], $p = .09$ in Model 2; and $\beta = .03$, $b = .03$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI: [0.01, 0.05], $p = .002$ in Model 3), and in countries with extremely low threat (2 *SD* below *M*), this association was lowest and even nonsignificant ($\beta = .03$, $b = .03$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI: [−0.01, 0.06], $p = .12$ in Model 1; $\beta = .01$, $b = .01$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI: [−0.02, 0.03], $p = .62$ in Model 2; and $\beta = .01$, $b = .01$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI: [−0.02, 0.04], $p = .51$ in Model 3).

To ensure that the results were not due to the impact of one particular threat indicator, additional analyses were performed for each indicator separately. These analyses yielded a similar
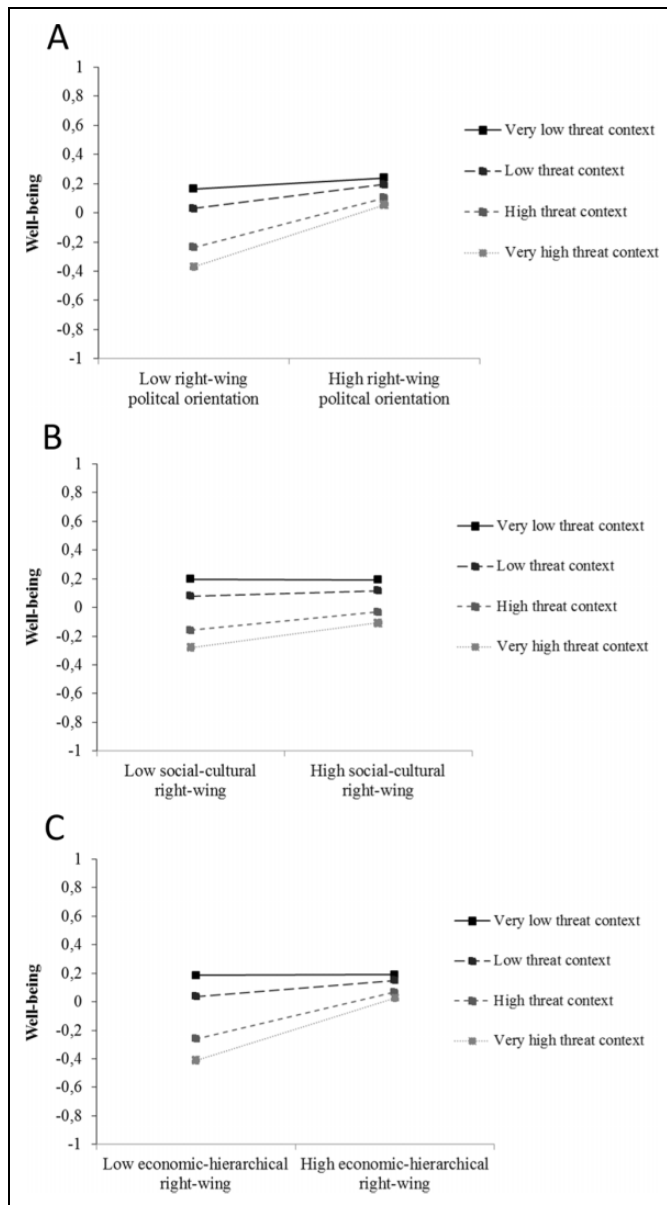
Figure 1. Cross-level interaction between three individual right-wing attitudes and contextual threat on subjective well-being: left–right orientation (Panel A), social–cultural right-wing attitudes (Panel B), and economic-hierarchical right-wing attitudes (Panel C).

pattern of results (see Table A in the Online Supplemental Materials). However, the interaction effects appear to be most pronounced for the moderator variables country-level unemployment and country-level inflation, and they are most revealing for individual economic-hierarchical attitudes and individual left–right orientation.

Finally, we tested a multilevel mediated moderator model to investigate whether the RWC in one's country explains the moderating effect of country-level threat on the relationship between individual-level threat and right-wing attitudes. More specifically, we tested whether the effects of country-level threat are reduced when RWC is taken into account. For this purpose, we performed three stepwise multilevel regression

Table 4. Unstandardized Estimates (Standard Errors in Brackets) of Multilevel Regression Analyses on Well-Being.

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Independent variables	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)
Left–right orientation			
Intercept	.02 (.04)	.03 (.04)	.02 (.04)
Right-wing orientation (RWO)	.07*** (.01)	.07*** (.01)	.07*** (.01)
Threat	−.09* (.04)	−.11** (.04)	−.11** (.04)
RWO × Threat	.02** (.01)	.02** (.01)	.02* (.01)
Right-wing climate (RWC)		.17 (.13)	.17 (.13)
RWO × RWC			.05 (.03)
Social–cultural attitudes			
Intercept	.00 (.04)	.00 (.03)	.00 (.03)
Right-wing orientation	.02*** (.00)	.02*** (.01)	.02*** (.00)
Threat	−.10** (.04)	−.16*** (.04)	−.16*** (.04)
RWO × Threat	01* (.00)	.01 (.01)	.00 (.00)
Right-wing climate		.23* (.09)	.23* (.09)
RWO × RWC			.01 (.02)
Economic-hierarchical attitudes			
Intercept	.00 (.04)	.00 (.04)	.00 (.04)
Right-wing orientation	.05*** (.00)	.06*** (.01)	.06*** (.01)
Threat	−.10** (.04)	−.09* (.04)	−.09* (.04)
RWO × Threat	.03*** (.00)	.02** (.01)	.03*** (.01)
Right-wing climate		−.07 (.11)	−.07 (.11)
RWO × RWC			.05* (.02)

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

analyses for each type of right-wing attitude separately. In the first step, we added one of three individual RWO, country-level threat, and their interaction term (RWO × Threat). In the second step, we added the corresponding RWC. In the final step, the interaction between right-wing attitudes and RWC (RWO × RWC) was added. These analyses (see Table 4) revealed that the inclusion of RWC in the second step of the multilevel regression analyses did not increase the predicted variance in well-being (except for social–cultural RWC) and did not reduce the moderating influence of threat (except for social–cultural right-wing attitudes). Moreover, although adding the RWO × RWC interaction term in the third step of the multilevel regression analyses increased the predicted variance in well-being (except for social–cultural RWC), more importantly, it did not reduce the moderating influence of threat. In other words, RWC does not account for the effects of country-level threat. These results are thus not in line with the person-culture fit hypothesis and instead show that country-level threat plays a stronger, clear, additive, and interactive role as opposed to country-level ideological climate.

Discussion

The present study took a person × situation interactionist approach to the relationship between right-wing attitudes and

well-being. The first important finding involves the direct relationships between right-wing attitudes and well-being. Overall, taking all countries together, we found that right-wing adherents reported higher well-being than left-wing individuals. Furthermore, the relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being varied across countries, attesting to the fact that findings obtained in one particular country cannot be straightforwardly extrapolated to other countries. Having stronger right-wing attitudes compared to other inhabitants in one's country does not relate to well-being to the same extent in different contexts. This finding underlines the need to study this relationship beyond Western contexts.

A second important finding involves the significant cross-level interactions with country-level threat, which partly explain the variances in the relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being among countries. Specifically, the happiness gap between left-wing and right-wing adherents was largest in countries characterized by high levels of threat in which right-wing individuals experienced higher levels of well-being than left-wing individuals. In countries with lower levels of threat, the relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being was weaker or even nonsignificant. This interaction pattern was stable across the three indicators of right-wing attitudes.

A third important finding is that we did not find evidence for a mediated moderation model in which threat leads to a RWC, which in turn moderates the relationship between individual right-wing attitudes and well-being. Hence, our results did not provide evidence for the person-culture fit hypothesis to explain the happiness gap.

A fourth interesting finding is that the well-being of right-wing adherents seems to be rather stable irrespective of the level of threat, whereas left-wing adherents show a steeper decrease in well-being with increasing threat levels. This finding is reminiscent of previous studies showing that right-wing adherents show less adverse effects from negative events than left-wing adherents do (Brandt et al., 2015; Van Hiel & De Clercq, 2009) and that increasing inequality is associated with a decrease in well-being for liberals but not for conservatives (Napier & Jost, 2008; Schlenker et al., 2012). These findings align with the hypothesis that right-wing views may assist individuals in coping with threat (Henry, 2011; Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Stenner, 2005). Several studies show that being confronted with threatening contexts, such as experiencing unemployment and inflation or living in an environment with a high homicide rate, is related to lower well-being (e.g., Di Tella, Robert, & Andrew, 2001; Veenhoven, 2005). Adhering to right-wing attitudes can, however, have an ego-defensive function in these contexts, providing a buffer against the negative consequences of threatening events. In other words, right-wing attitudes allow people to successfully handle these threats and to remain equally happy. Left-wing adherents, by contrast, do not have these coping mechanisms at their disposal. For these individuals, being confronted with threat can have more pernicious implications, such as a steeper decrease in well-being.

Economic-Hierarchical Versus Social–Cultural Right-Wing Attitudes

Previous studies on coping functions of right-wing attitudes have mainly focused on social–cultural attitudes. In the present study, we also included a measure of economic-hierarchical right-wing attitudes, which have rarely been addressed in previous studies of the relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being. Our results show significant direct relationships and cross-level interactions similar to the other right-wing attitudes. An interesting question is whether the same coping processes might be involved in explaining the relationship between these distinctive right-wing attitudes and well-being. The dual process model (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009) offers a valuable interpretative framework that may explain how, in the face of threat, social–cultural and economic-hierarchical attitudes are related to distinct processes. On the one hand, social–cultural right-wing attitudes are related to personal values of security, conformity, and tradition. Hence, they may serve a protective, ego-defensive mechanism in the face of threat by offering individuals a sense of an ordered, predictable, and certain social environment with a stable set of values and strong authority figures (Henry, 2011; Jost & Hunyady, 2002). On the other hand, economic-hierarchical right-wing attitudes relate to the personal values of hedonism, power, and ambition as well as to a sense of supremacy over and disdain of other, inferior groups. Such attitudes may help people to cope with threat through promoting a sense of superiority, power, domination, and privilege.

These coping processes imply a causal relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being. Unfortunately, we do not have longitudinal data at hand to test the directional relationships implied here. An alternative option is that individuals with higher well-being are more prone to develop right-wing attitudes when being confronted with threat or that threat makes people more right-wing, causing them to experience increased well-being. We encourage future studies to formally test the nature of these relationships.

As a cautionary note, we would like to bring attention to the fact that although the explained variance in the obtained effects was significant, the effects were rather small in magnitude. Studies investigating the relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being typically report small effects (e.g., Napier & Jost, 2008; Schlenker et al., 2012). Claims that conservatives are happier than liberals should therefore not be blown out of proportion (Onraet et al., 2013; Van Hiel et al., 2015). However, small effects do not imply that the obtained results are not meaningful. First, given that well-being has multiple antecedents (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2001), one should not expect effects of single predictors to be too strong. Moreover, according to MacInnis, Busseri, Choma, and Hodson (2013), the use of specific indicators of both right-wing attitudes and well-being might curb the relationship between these concepts. These authors reported stronger effect sizes when the general underlying tendencies of right-wing attitudes and well-being were analyzed. Finally, it should be acknowledged that our results

do not show any advantage of left-wing ideological attitudes in terms of increased well-being, not even in extreme low-threaten environments.

Well-Being: Conceptualization and Measurement

Many studies investigating the association between right-wing attitudes and well-being employ a rather narrow view of the construct of well-being, mostly studying happiness and life satisfaction. However, well-being is a much broader, multifaceted concept that also includes other aspects, such as experiencing positive and negative emotions, self-esteem, feelings of fulfillment, and satisfaction with marriage and work (e.g., Diener, 1984; Diener & Oishi, 2003).

Moreover, a recent issue addressed in the literature on ideological attitudes and well-being concerns the exclusive use of self-report measures of well-being. Wojcik, Hovasapian, Graham, Motyl, and Ditto (2015) showed the importance of using both behavioral and self-report measures of well-being. These authors reported that liberals generally display more ''behavioral'' signs of happiness, such as smiling behavior and the use of positive language, than conservatives do, suggesting that although conservatives may say that they are happy, liberals actually display greater happiness.

Unfortunately, the WVS and EVS solely include measures of life satisfaction as an indicator of well-being and do not allow the comparison of self-report and behavioral measures of well-being. To obtain an exhaustive understanding of the relationship between right-wing attitudes and well-being, we encourage future research endeavors to employ a combination of different methodologies that use self-report as well as behavioral measures and cover various aspects of well-being.

Conclusion

The present study further illuminates the nature of the frequently discussed relationship between ideological attitudes and well-being by showing that this relationship is context dependent. More specifically, adhering to right-wing attitudes provides a buffer for the negative personal implications of threat.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Supplemental Material

The online supplements are available at http://spps.sagepub.com/supplemental.

Note

1. As all standard deviations for the predictors as well as the outcome variable were equal to 1, the standardized estimates were identical to the unstandardized estimates for all multilevel regression analyses (see Hox, 2002; Raudenbusch et al., 2004). This does not change the estimates of the individual-level and contextual-level effects, as the fixed part of a multilevel regression model is invariant for linear transformations (Hox, 2002).

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