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Spiritual Liberals and Religious Conservatives

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Jacob B. Hirsh¹, Megan D. Walberg², and Jordan B. Peterson²

Abstract

While church and state are officially separated in many Western nations, there is nonetheless a great deal of overlap between the religious beliefs and political orientations of individual citizens. Religious individuals tend to be more conservative, placing a greater emphasis on order, obedience, and tradition. While many religious movements emphasize conservative values, there also exists a tradition of religious thought associated with equality, universalism, and transcendence—values more in line with political liberalism. The current study examined whether these divergent political orientations relate to the distinction between religiousness and spirituality. Political orientation, spirituality, and religiousness were assessed in two large community samples (Study 1: $N = 590$; Study 2: $N = 703$). Although spirituality and religiousness were positively correlated, they displayed divergent associations with political orientation: conservatives tended to be more religious, while liberals tend to be more spiritual. Experimentally inducing spiritual experiences similarly resulted in more liberal political attitudes.

Keywords

spirituality, religion, politics, conservatism, liberalism

The separation of church and state has a long tradition in Western political thought (Locke, 1689). Nonetheless, the overlap between religion and politics appears to be on the rise, with growing political divisions between the religious and non-religious, particularly in the United States (Layman, 1997). Religious individuals often appear more politically conservative than their secular counterparts, as evidenced by the prominence of the Religious Right as an organized political movement (Fowler, Hertzke, Olson, & den Dulk, 2004; Wilcox & Larson, 2006). This relationship is consistent with the fact that political conservatism is associated with a preference for order and tradition (Jost, 2006; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009), which seem to be key aspects of orthodox religious movements.

However, religious ideas have also been employed as justification for social activism and the movement toward greater equality (Smith, 1996). Historically prominent individuals who used religious ideas in a progressive manner include Leo Tolstoy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, and Tommy Douglas. William Wilberforce's campaigns for the abolition of the British slave trade in the early 19th century were similarly driven by his religious convictions about the universality of inalienable human rights (Anstey, 1975). For such individuals, religious ideas were primary political motivators, but their efforts were directed toward the liberal political goals of emancipation, equality, and social welfare (cf. Wallis, 1995).

A conceptual distinction that appears relevant to these diverging political orientations is the difference between religiousness and spirituality (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Fuller, 2001; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Religiousness

is associated with formal institutions and belief systems, while spirituality is associated more with an individual's subjective experience of the sacred (Hill et al., 2000). Individuals who identify as spiritual or religious also have distinct psychological profiles. For instance, religiousness is associated with a pious respect for tradition and authority (MacDonald, 2000; Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006). Conversely, spirituality is associated with the experience of self-transcendence described in mystical traditions, where the boundaries between the self and the world become less rigidly defined (Hood, 1975; Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003). It is important to note, however, that while religiousness and spirituality are distinct from one another, they nonetheless tend to be positively correlated, such that those who report being more religious also tend to report being more spiritual (Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006).

Although the link between traditional religiousness and political conservatism has been examined (e.g., Layman, 1997), the relationship between spirituality and political beliefs is less clear. An interesting possibility is that spiritual experiences may act as a liberalizing force within religion, in contrast

¹ Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

² Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Jacob B. Hirsh, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, 105 St. George Street, Toronto, ON, Canada M5S 3E6
Email: jacob.hirsh@rotman.utoronto.ca

to the broader religiousness–conservatism link. Such a relationship would be consistent with previous research demonstrating a negative association between spirituality and social dominance orientation (SDO; Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006). SDO reflects the motive to maintain hierarchical power relations in a social group and is partially driven by a competitive “us versus them” mind-set (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Along with preferences for order and tradition, the preference for inequality as reflected in SDO is one of the two core motives associated with conservative political ideology (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt, Wagner, Du Plessis, & Birum, 2002; Jost, 2006). Because spiritual experiences involve the dissolution of self-boundaries and an enhanced sense of connection with the world (Hood, 1975), they may also encourage liberal political attitudes by fostering a more inclusive mind-set. We tested this possibility in three studies, hypothesizing that while traditional forms of religiousness would be associated with conservative political attitudes as a result of their emphasis on the value of tradition, spiritual orientations would be associated with liberal political attitudes as a result of their emphasis on the value of inclusiveness.

Studies 1 and 2 Method

Participants

Study 1 participants were 590 members of the Eugene-Springfield Community Sample (ESCS; 342 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 51.22$ years, $SD = 12.3$, range = 18–83). The ESCS is a longitudinal data collection project featuring community members from Oregon (Goldberg, 2005). Participants were recruited by mail from lists of homeowners who agreed to complete questionnaires, delivered by mail, for pay, over a period of many years. The sample spanned all levels of educational attainment, with an average of 2 years of postsecondary schooling. Most participants identified as White (96%). The remaining participants were Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, or did not report their ethnicity. Religious affiliation data were unavailable.

Study 2 participants were a highly diverse sample of 703 online respondents from Canada and the United States (535 Female, $M_{\text{age}} = 30.0$ years, $SD = 14.0$). Participants were recruited via advertisements sent to Departments of Psychology and Religion in both countries, as well as North American theology schools. Advertisements were also posted on spiritual and religious discussion boards, along with flyers posted around the University of Toronto campus. The sample consisted of 76% Caucasians, 13% East Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 11% from other groups. Religious affiliations included 27% Protestant, 18% agnostic, 14% Catholic, 12% atheist, 7% other, 5% undecided, 5% spiritual but not religious, 4% Buddhist, 3% Islamic, 2% Jewish, 1% Taoist, 1% Hindu, and 1% Sikh.

Measures

Political orientation. In Study 1, participants completed two 5-point Likert-type scale items regarding their political

orientation: “Politically, I favor the Republican Party” and “Politically, I favor the Democratic Party.” These 2 items were strongly negatively correlated, $r = -.87$ and were therefore combined to form a single variable by subtracting scores on the former from scores on the latter. In Study 2, political orientation was measured with the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) liberalism scale (Goldberg, 1999), self-rated liberalism versus conservatism, and support for each of the national American and Canadian political parties. These variables were combined in a factor analysis using maximum likelihood estimation. The first factor accounted for 43.6% of the total variance and was used in subsequent analyses as an indicator of overall political orientation. Higher values in both samples indicate greater liberalism, while lower values indicate greater conservatism.

Religiousness and spirituality. The revised Expressions of Spirituality Inventory (ESI; MacDonald, 2000, 2002) was used as a measure of religiousness and spirituality in both studies. The ESI features five subscales, each assessed with six statements to which participants rate their agreement on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Following Saucier and Skrzypińska (2006), the ESI religiousness subscale was used as an indicator of religiousness (Study 1: $\alpha = .93$; Study 2: $\alpha = .92$), and the ESI experiential subscale was used as an indicator of spirituality (Study 1: $\alpha = .91$; Study 2: $\alpha = .90$). While the former dimension assesses one’s general orientation toward religious belief and practice (e.g., I believe that going to religious services is important), the latter dimension assesses the occurrence of personal experiences variously referred to as spiritual, religious, mystical, or transcendental (e.g., I have had an experience in which I seemed to be deeply connected to everything).

Personality. We measured personality to ensure that any observed relationships were not a result of other dispositional factors. Study 1 used the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) (Costa & McCrae, 1992), while Study 2 used the Big Five Aspect scales (DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007), both of which are reliable measures of the five major personality dimensions. The scales asked participants to rate their agreement with 240 and 100 personality descriptors, respectively.

Values. Personal values were assessed in both studies with the Schwartz Value Survey (Schwartz, 1992, 1994), which asks participants to rate the personal importance of 57 values on a 7-point Likert-type scale. These values are then clustered into 10 individual-level value domains with a circumplex structure, indicating the subjective importance of different values.

Studies 1 and 2 Results

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between the study measures. Spirituality and religiousness were entered into a regression predicting liberalism versus conservatism. As hypothesized, religiousness was associated with greater conservatism, while spirituality was associated with greater liberalism in both samples (see Table 2). Given that conscientiousness, openness/intellect, and

Table 1. Zero-Order Correlations Between Study Variables in Studies 1 and 2

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1 Religiosity	3.36/2.84	1.25/1.18																	
2 Spirituality	2.33/2.93	1.15/1.15	.34/.55																
3 Liberalism	0.63/0.00	2.82/0.93	-.25/-.23	.15/1.11															
4 SVS Achievement	-0.17/0.04	0.76/1.08	-.11/-.21	-.11/-.24	-.11/-.11														
5 SVS Benevolence	0.83/1.11	0.61/0.85	.13/22	-.02/12	-.07/00	-.07/-.14													
6 SVS Conformity	0.39/-0.11	0.81/1.02	.29/22	-.22/-.11	-.31/-.38	-.09/-.05	.25/18												
7 SVS Hedonism	-0.64/-0.43	1.29/1.49	-.34/-.45	-.06/-.26	.10/11	-.01/11	-.33/-.29	-.31/-.34											
8 SVS Power	-2.60/-2.34	1.12/1.42	-.13/-.23	-.12/-.37	-.17/-.20	.28/34	-.37/-.42	-.11/02	.21/31										
9 SVS Security	0.15/-0.48	0.76/0.91	.04/-.03	-.32/-.28	-.32/-.33	-.03/09	-.10/-.12	.40/32	-.17/-.13	.12/22									
10 SVS Self-Direction	0.45/0.89	0.69/0.92	-.40/-.30	.09/10	.18/30	-.01/-.12	-.18/-.18	-.50/-.43	.17/12	-.10/-.26	-.32/-.35								
11 SVS Stimulation	-1.18/-0.46	1.26/1.30	-.23/-.28	.05/00	.06/17	.07/01	-.38/-.30	-.46/-.38	.34/30	.10/00	-.29/-.27	.35/46							
12 SVS TRADITION	-0.88/-1.24	1.00/1.16	.52/53	.00/15	-.26/-.29	-.10/-.24	.15/09	.46/37	-.31/-.47	-.03/-.10	.12/09	-.57/-.44	-.38/-.37						
13 SVS Universalism	0.43/0.71	0.84/0.91	-.27/02	.21/33	.54/45	-.35/-.46	-.03/16	-.35/-.26	-.04/-.19	-.39/-.60	-.37/-.32	-.57/-.44	-.38/-.37	-.03/-.03	-.35/-.11				
14 Agreeableness	125.16/3.97	16.84/0.47	.29/27	.06/20	.08/11	-.19/-.21	.32/41	.26/17	-.25/-.23	-.36/-.44	-.05/-.03	-.27/15	-.26/-.21	.29/10	.13/26				
15 Conscientiousness	124.55/3.31	18.86/0.54	.05/10	-.11/-.05	-.18/-.18	.15/20	.07/05	.26/17	-.07/-.13	.05/02	.15/28	-.12/20	-.11/-.23	.08/09	-.20/-.16	.11/09			
16 Extraversion	106.25/3.45	19.89/0.58	.09/19	.15/20	.00/-.02	.14/09	-.06/08	-.18/-.11	.09/-.01	.09/-.11	-.14/-.06	.02/00	.24/14	-.15/-.08	-.04/-.03	.02/22	.16/24		
17 Neuroticism	80.05/2.90	23.25/0.67	.03/-.09	.03/-.08	.06/09	-.04/-.01	.01/-.13	-.04/-.03	.04/05	-.02/12	.00/10	-.02/-.03	-.04/-.07	.03/-.07	.00/02	-.20/-.14	-.44/-.23	-.25/-.31	
18 Openness/Intellect	113.41/3.93	21.24/0.48	-.14/09	.32/38	.34/26	-.09/-.08	-.06/06	-.46/-.25	.10/-.05	-.31/-.37	-.38/-.35	.47/46	.29/26	-.43/-.20	.47/30	.01/21	-.13/02	.34/36	-.02/-.14

SVS = Schwartz value survey.

*Correlations of .08/.07 and above are significant at $p < .05$.

Table 2. Standardized Regression Weights Predicting Political Liberalism

	Study 1 (N = 590)	Study 2 (N = 703)
Model 1:	$R^2 = .12$	$R^2 = .14$
Spirituality	.26	.35
Religiousness	-.34	-.43
Model 2:	$R^2 = .22$	$R^2 = .21$
Spirituality	.15	.23
Religiousness	-.31	-.40
Openness/intellect	.23	.17
Agreeableness	.18	.15
Conscientiousness	-.14	-.14

All values are significant at $p < .001$. Spirituality and religiousness accounted for significantly more variance than personality traits alone in both Study 1, R^2 change = .07, $F(2, 584) = 27.11$, $p < .001$, and Study 2, R^2 change = .10, $F(2, 697) = 44.57$, $p < .001$.

agreeableness are associated with both political and religious orientations (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Hirsh, DeYoung, Xu, & Peterson, 2010; Saroglou, 2010), we entered these personality dimensions into the regressions. Consistent with previous research, liberalism was associated with higher levels of agreeableness and openness/intellect, while conservatism was associated with higher levels of conscientiousness. Even when controlling for these personality characteristics, significant divergent effects were observed for religiousness and spirituality.

We next examined the psychological mechanisms that might account for the diverging relationships of spirituality and religiousness with political orientation. In particular, we examined the personal values that might underlie these effects. We hypothesized that the relationship between religiousness and political conservatism would be due to a heightened emphasis on the personal value of tradition. Conversely, we hypothesized that the relationship between spirituality and political liberalism would result from a greater emphasis on the personal value of universalism, reflecting a more inclusive mind-set. Bootstrapped mediation analyses with 5,000 resamples were conducted to examine each of these possibilities (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The subjective value of tradition emerged as a significant mediator of the religiousness–conservatism link using both standard (Study 1: $z' = -3.75$, $p < .001$; for Study 2: $z' = -5.19$, $p < .001$) and bootstrapped mediation analyses (for Study 1, indirect effect estimate: $-.2022$, $SE = .0524$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = $[-0.0962, -0.3013]$; for Study 2, indirect effect estimate: $-.0067$, $SE = .0012$, 95% CI = $[-0.0092, -0.0043]$). Similarly, the subjective value of universalism significantly mediated the relationship between spirituality and political liberalism (for Study 1, $z' = 4.76$, $p < .001$; indirect effect estimate = $.2539$, $SE = .0519$, 95% CI = $[.1491, .3580]$; for Study 2, $z' = 7.59$, $p < .001$; indirect effect estimate = $.0074$, $SE = .0011$, 95% CI = $[.0055, .0096]$).

Controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status had no impact on the pattern of results. Study 2 allowed for more detailed demographic analyses, and all effects remained when

removing atheists and agnostics from the analysis, and when separately examining Christians and non-Christians. Results were likewise unaffected by examining Caucasian and East Asian participants separately.

Studies 1 and 2 Discussion

In two separate studies, higher levels of religiousness were associated with political conservatism, while higher levels of spirituality were associated with political liberalism. These effects remained when controlling for politically relevant personality traits. Both samples also demonstrated that these relationships were mediated by a greater emphasis on the values of tradition and universalism, respectively. While these studies present intriguing results, they nonetheless remain correlational in nature. Although previous research suggests that priming religious concepts can increase racial prejudice (Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2010), which in turn is associated with political conservatism (Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996), no study has examined the effects of priming spirituality. Accordingly, Study 3 aimed to examine whether inducing a spiritual experience would result in more liberal political attitudes, and whether this could again be accounted for by a more inclusive social mind-set.

Study 3 Method

Participants were 317 respondents from the United States (167 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 33.5$ years, $SD = 12.1$; including 79% Caucasians, 6% African American, 6% East Asian, and 5% Hispanic). Religious affiliations included 22% Protestant, 17% Catholic, 17% agnostic, 17% atheist, 11% spiritual but not religious, 5% undecided, 4% Buddhist, 4% Jewish, 4% Orthodox Christian, 1% Hindu, 1% Islamic, 1% Taoist, and 9% “other.”

Political orientation was measured with the IPIP liberalism scale. Participants also rated their overall political orientation on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *very conservative* to *very liberal*. Higher scores on both measures indicate more liberal political leanings.

In order to examine the pathway by which spiritual experiences may affect political attitudes, we also measured participants' right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and SDO. RWA reflects preferences for order and social control and was assessed with a 15-item Likert-type scale (Altemeyer, 1981; Zakrisson, 2005). SDO assesses an individual's preferences for hierarchical versus egalitarian social structures and was assessed with a 16-item Likert-type scale (Pratto et al., 1994). Together, these two variables constitute the primary motivational bases of political orientation, with conservatives tending to score higher on both measures (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt et al., 2002; Jost, 2006).

Participants were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk, a reliable source of psychological data (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Mason & Suri, 2010) and were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. Participants in the spiritual experience condition completed a guided meditation

exercise administered via streaming video. The video lasted 4 min, during which time the participants were asked to close their eyes and breathe deeply, imagining themselves in a natural setting and feeling their connection with the environment. Meditation has previously been found to help induce spiritual experiences (Astin, 1997) and is an important part of many spiritual practices. Following the video, participants were asked to complete the measures of political orientation. Participants in the control condition did not engage in the spiritual exercise but instead proceeded directly to the political measures. Both groups completed a demographic questionnaire at the end of the study.

To ensure that participants in the spiritual experience condition were actively attending to the exercise, five multiple choice questions about the content of the video were presented at the end of the study. Only participants who correctly answered the majority of these questions were included in the subsequent analyses. Thirty participants (19% of those in the spiritual experience condition) were removed for failing to answer these questions correctly. These participants did not differ from the other participants on any of the study variables, nor did including them in the analyses substantially alter the pattern of results. An additional 10 participants failed to complete the entire study and were removed from the analyses (4 in the spirituality condition and 6 in the control condition), leaving a final sample of $n = 277$.

Study 3 Results

As a manipulation check, participants in both groups were asked to rate the extent to which they felt more spiritual after completing the study on a 7-point Likert-type scale. Participants reported significantly higher levels of spirituality after completing the guided meditation ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.91$) compared to those in the control group ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.70$), $t(275) = 5.84$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = 0.70$. The groups did not differ significantly on any demographic variables.

As hypothesized, significant differences in political attitudes were observed across the two conditions. Participants in the spiritual experience condition reported more liberal attitudes than members of the control group on both the IPIP liberalism scale ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.05$ vs. $M = 2.92$, $SD = .72$), $t(275) = 2.87$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = 0.35$, and self-rated political orientation ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.38$ vs. $M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.12$), $t(275) = 2.45$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.30$.

We next examined whether the two conditions differed on SDO or RWA to get a better sense of the mechanisms underlying the obtained results. Significant differences in SDO were observed between participants in the spiritual experience condition ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 1.13$) and those in the control group ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(275) = -2.64$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = -0.31$, with the spiritual experience being associated with reduced SDO levels. In contrast, the spirituality and control conditions did not significantly differ on RWA ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.20$ and $M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.13$, respectively), $t(275) = -0.32$, $p > .05$, Cohen's $d = -0.04$.

Standard and bootstrapped mediation analyses with 5,000 resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) confirmed that the reduced levels of SDO following the spiritual experience accounted for a significant amount of the variance in subsequent political attitudes as measured by IPIP liberalism (point estimate = -0.1395 , $SE = 0.0530$, 95% CI = $[-0.2509, -0.0400]$; $z' = -2.55$, $p < .05$) and self-reported political orientation (point estimate = -0.2129 , $SE = 0.0812$, 95% CI = $[-0.3807, -0.0600]$; $z' = -2.57$, $p < .05$). In contrast, RWA did not emerge as a significant mediator of these relationships. The same pattern of results remained when removing all atheists and agnostics from the analysis and when controlling for demographic variables.

General Discussion

Across two studies, religiousness was associated with greater political conservatism, while spirituality was associated with greater political liberalism. This pattern of divergence is striking, given that spirituality and religiousness were positively correlated with one another (Study 1: $r = .34$, Study 2: $r = .55$). Individuals with higher levels of traditional religiousness were thus more likely to report higher levels of spirituality and vice versa. Nonetheless, the relative prominence of these dimensions within any given individual appears to be an important predictor of political orientation. The fact that these effects remained after controlling for personality also supports previous research, indicating that spirituality and religiousness reflect important individual differences that are not fully captured by the five-factor model of personality (Piedmont, 1999).

The observed relationships were also mediated by two distinct value orientations. In particular, religious individuals tended to place a greater emphasis on the value of tradition, which was in turn related to a more conservative political orientation. Tradition is an important part of religious life (Eliade, 1959) and is also one of the key components of conservative ideology (Jost, 2006). Spiritual individuals, on the other hand, placed a greater emphasis on the value of universalism, which predicted a more liberal political orientation. Universalism is associated with preferences for equality and inclusiveness (Schwartz, 1992). The current data suggest that the direct experience of self-transcendence associated with spirituality helps to promote a stronger sense of connection with others, along with a preference for tolerance and equality. More generally, spiritual experiences appear to act as a liberalizing force within religion.

Study 3 provided experimental support for the liberalizing effect of spiritual experiences, as participants who completed a guided meditation designed to elicit spiritual experiences subsequently reported more liberal political attitudes than participants in a control group. The mediation analysis indicated that this relationship was driven by decreases in SDO following the spiritual experience. SDO reflects the desire to maintain hierarchical power relations, and along with preferences for order and tradition, is one of the two core psychological dimensions underlying political conservatism (Duckitt, 2001; Jost, Glaser,

Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). The finding that spiritual experiences reduced the desire for hierarchical social relations is consistent with Study 2's demonstration that the relationship between spirituality and liberalism is mediated by a heightened emphasis on the value of universalism. Both sets of findings suggest that spiritual experiences foster a sense of inclusiveness, which promotes liberal attitudes.

It should be noted that our mediation analyses in Studies 1 and 2 present a theoretical model in which religiousness promotes traditional values and spirituality promotes universalist values, both of which in turn differentially affect political attitudes. Such an interpretation is consistent with the experimental finding in Study 3, in which a spiritual experience altered political preferences, and with theoretical models emphasizing the role of religious groups in socializing value priorities (Schwartz & Huismans, 1995). However, it is also possible that individuals are more likely to adopt religious or spiritual orientations that are consistent with their preexisting value preferences (e.g., traditionalist or universalist). Longitudinal designs would be required to address this question more directly, although both directions of causal influence are theoretically plausible (Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004).

Although conservative religious movements have received more attention in recent years, the current results present an empirical reminder of the countervailing historical tradition linking spiritual convictions to liberal political attitudes and to social movements geared toward greater equality and universalism (Olson, 2007). The current results suggest that the distinction between religiousness and spirituality may be useful in understanding these divergent political movements. While the former appears to result in greater concerns for order and tradition, the latter appears to promote a sense of unity and inclusiveness. Clarifying the psychological dynamics underlying these distinct orientations and developing a more nuanced understanding of their relationship to political attitudes remains an exciting and important task for future researchers.

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Bios

Jacob B. Hirsh is an assistant professor at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. His research examines the intersection of decision-making, self-regulation, and motivation.

Megan D. Walberg is a graduate student at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, where she is examining conceptual models of children's well-being.

Jordan B. Peterson is a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, where he studies a variety of topics related to personality, narrative, and performance prediction.