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## DIT scores and political ideology: evidence of a non-significant relationship

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**DIT SCORES AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY:  
EVIDENCE OF A NON-SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIP**

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**DIT SCORES AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY:  
EVIDENCE OF A NON-SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIP**

**ABSTRACT**

*The present study was motivated by concern about the validity of the DIT and methodological issues in Fisher and Sweeney (2001, 1998) studies. Our study of 98 accounting students from three private institutions in the eastern U.S. generates results that directly contradict those of Fisher and Sweeney's (1998). Using the nine-point scale, we could reject our three hypotheses relating to DIT scores associating with political orientation. First, we find that there was not a significant difference between the pre-test DIT scores of liberal and conservative politically orientated students. Second, the follow on DIT test scores for those students who were not politically conservative did not decrease when responding from a conservative perspective. Third, the follow on DIT test scores for those students who were not politically liberal did not increase when responding from a liberal perspective.*

## INTRODUCTION

During the past 10 years, ethics research in accounting using the DIT has dramatically increased. This increase is not only due to an increased emphasis on ethics as an important consideration in accounting research, but it is also due to an increase in the new graduates of doctoral programs (Ponemon, 1988; Bernardi, 1991; Massey, 1997; Thorne, 1997) who felt the need to challenge the existing ethical beliefs of accounting. A common thread in their research interests is the use of Rest's Defining Issues Test (1979). Ponemon examined the average level of moral development by staff level in public accounting. Bernardi found that high-moral development managers detected fraud at a significantly higher rate when they were provided with information concerning client integrity ratings. Massey and Thorne developed tests of moral reasoning based on the Defining Issues Tests that used auditing based dilemmas.

Fisher and Sweeney (2001, p. 3) question the continued use of the Defining Issues Test DIT because research to date provides only "*relatively modest relationships found between moral reasoning of accountants . . . and professional judgments and behavior*". Perhaps a more cogent argument would be that the DIT uses generic dilemmas and that the use of auditing-based-dilemmas (Massey, 1997; Thorne, 1997) might provide clearer results. Fisher and Sweeney's argument continues that scores on the DIT "*favor those with political liberalism to political Conservatism*" (p. 3). Similar arguments were voiced by Gilligan (1988) who maintained that the DIT was favored (opposed) the male (female) justice (care) oriented reasoning. Bernardi and Arnold (1997) found that, rather than scoring lower than men, women actually scored significantly higher than men on the DIT. Bernardi and Arnold note that Gilligan's results may have resulted from sampling bias since her sample only consisted of 32 subjects divided into eight groups of four (two men and two women). Our research examines the

same hypotheses as Fisher and Sweeney (1998) to determine whether their findings might be the result of faulty assumptions about sample distribution.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Moral Development**

We can partially describe the theory of moral development through its four characteristics: cognitive, structural, developmental and sequential. First, moral development theory maintains that cognition is an integral part of the ethical decision process. Second, cognitive structures frame the six levels of moral reasoning. Third, moral development is a cognitive process that develops over time. Fourth, the developmental process is sequential because moral reasoning progresses in one direction only (Ponemon & Gabhart, 1993).

While an individual may progress to higher levels of moral reasoning structures over time, they cannot regress. Rest and Narváez (1994) describe this developmental process using a staircase as an example. Increases in moral reasoning are likened to an individual climbing a staircase; development (climbing the staircase) occurs in discrete steps. According to this developmental perspective, how morality is perceived is a function of an individual's level of moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1958, 1979). The three levels of Kohlberg's moral reasoning are: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional or principled (Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Although in the early course of his research, Kohlberg (1958, 1969) noted an apparent retrogression in some subjects' moral development, upon closer examination, Kohlberg (1973, 1976) later realized that these seemingly retrogressive responses were the result of subjects' "transitioning" from lower to higher levels of moral reasoning. That is, transitioning from lower

to higher levels of moral reasoning can be likened to a child's transitioning from crawling to walking. During a child's transitioning, s/he might at one time walk to a desired destination but later, because it is a more effortless method of self-propulsion, get to that same destination by crawling. Similarly, during the moral reasoning transitioning process, although people may focus on higher-stage moral considerations, for ease of consideration, they may later focus on moral considerations from the previous stage in Kohlberg's model. Thus, the levels in Kohlberg's model are sequential; people move from one to the next and do not revert to previous levels once they have mastered the next level.

### **Stability of DIT Scores**

McGeorge (1975) finds that the DIT is immune to artificial score inflation. In an experiment, he had three groups of subjects complete the DIT twice. In a fully randomized design, each of the groups completed the DIT once with ordinary instructions. In one group (Control Group), the other completion of the DIT was also according to the original instructions. In the second group (Experimental Group), McGeorge asked subjects to "fake good" on their other completion of the DIT. In the third group (Experimental group), McGeorge asked subjects to "fake bad" on their other completion of the DIT. Importantly, although McGeorge found no significant differences in DIT scores for any other condition, he found subjects' DIT scores were significantly different in the "fake bad" conditions (whether they were in the ordinary-bad or bad-ordinary group).

Thus, while subjects could lower their scores on the DIT in response to instructions to "fake bad," they could not artificially inflate them. These results reinforce the notion that moral reasoning is a cognitive skill. That is, while subjects can understand and therefore utilize moral

reasoning below their level of moral development, because they do not comprehend moral reasoning considerations above their level of moral development, they cannot utilize moral reasoning above their level of moral development.

### **Political Ideology and the DIT – Current Debate**

The DIT is grounded in Kohlberg's (1969) cognitive theory of moral development. It appears often in psychology and social science studies (Rest, 1986; 1999). It is very popular with accounting researchers as a measure of moral judgment in ethics based research. In general ethics researchers find that the moral judgment of accounting students and public accountants is less advanced than that of individuals at similar educational levels.

Some researchers question the validity the DIT and believe that the DIT produces a biased measure of moral reasoning ability. Emler et al. (1983) assert that the DIT score is a measure of political attitude. Fisher and Sweeney (1998, 2001) argue and present evidence that the DIT confounds political ideology with moral reasoning development. If this is so, the results for much of the ethics based research in accounting are questionable and this body of research becomes extremely difficult to assess and interpret.

A primary assumption of moral development theory is that an individual at a given stage of moral development is incapable of understanding higher order moral arguments. This gives rise to the basic tenet that DIT scores can be "faked downward" but not "faked upward". In essence an individual can lower his/her score on the DIT by identifying lower order responses but should not be able to identify higher order responses as they are beyond the cognitive capacity of the individual.

Fisher and Sweeney (1998, 2001) argue that the DIT has an underlying political content that over (under) states an individual's true capacity for moral reasoning. This may cause an individual to consciously or unconsciously reject more advanced responses even though the individual understands the underlying moral reasoning. Their basic arguments are as follows:

*“But if a politically conservative person comprehends the cognitive complexity of principled DIT responses and chooses to avoid ranking those responses as important because he or she associates this viewpoint with liberalism, then the P score would not be measuring this person's most advanced moral thinking. . . . Similarly, a politically liberal test-taker may overstate his or her DIT P score by ranking higher-order response items as important because of their association with liberal ideology, without comprehending the underlying moral content (Fisher and Sweeney, 2001, p. 7).”*

### **Fisher and Sweeney Studies**

In their 1998 study, Fisher and Sweeney had 112 undergraduate student accounting majors as experimental subjects. Subjects first responded to the three-story version of the DIT, a National Election Survey, and also indicated on a seven-point scale how liberal or conservative they were concerning important political and social issues. After a two-week period the subjects were instructed to complete the DIT from either the perspective of an “extremely conservative” or “extremely liberal” person, which was done on a random basis. As discussed in the introduction of this paper, we question the methodology of Fisher and Sweeney for this experiment. In that study subjects decreased their P scores by responding to the DIT from an



“extremely conservative” perspective and increased their P scores by responding to the DIT from and “extremely liberal” perspective. As a result, they suggest that some items in the DIT may have a political content separate from their contribution to the assessment of moral judgment.

In their 2001 study, Fisher and Sweeney had 221 undergraduate student accounting majors from two Midwestern universities as experimental subjects. A between-subject-design was utilized and subjects were randomly assigned to either the control or experimental condition. Both groups completed the six-dilemma DIT. The control group completed the DIT under standard test instructions. In the experimental group, subjects received modified instructions informing them that:

*The Defining issues Test is a standardized measure of moral judgment. We are interested in whether you can identify the statements designed to represent the highest level of moral judgment.*

Subjects indicated on a seven-point scale how liberal or conservative they were concerning important political and social issues and this served as the basis for classifying subjects as liberal, moderate or conservative. Again, as indicated in the introduction, we question this methodology.

The experimental results show that, for conservatives, the mean DIT P score was significantly higher ( $p < .05$ ) under the modified instructions than under the standard instructions. As a result, they suggest that the DIT systematically understates the moral reasoning abilities of political conservatives. There were no significant differences for moderates. The mean DIT P score for liberals was significantly lower ( $p < .10$ ) under the modified instructions than under the standard test instructions. As a result, they suggest that the DIT systematically overstates the moral reasoning abilities of political conservatives. When the

standard instructions were used, the mean P score for liberals is significantly higher ( $p < .001$ ) than the mean P scores for moderates and conservatives. When the modified instructions were used, the mean P scores did not differ by political ideology ( $p = .920$ ). As a result, they suggest that instructions may be causing subjects to pursue DIT statements consistent with their preferred political ideology, preventing the instrument from presenting a true measure of the person's moral competence. Given Fisher and Sweeney's research and our concern about their basic methodology for determining political orientation, we propose to test the same three hypotheses that they used in their research:

**H1:** *Accounting students with a liberal political identification will, on average, attain higher DIT P scores than accounting students who are not liberal.*

**H2:** *Accounting students who are not politically conservative will decrease their DIT P scores when responding from a conservative perspective.*

**H3:** *Accounting students who are not politically liberal will increase their DIT P scores when responding from a liberal perspective.*

## **SUBJECTS AND MEASURES**

### **Sample**

One hundred and twenty-six students enrolled in accounting classes at three schools were initially sampled as part of this research. Of these, 28 were eliminated because they failed the meaningless or consistency tests on the Defining Issues Test. This left a final sample of 98 students in the sample. These students took the DIT twice during a three-week period. The

present study was motivated by concern about the validity of the DIT and methodological issues in Fisher and Sweeney (2001, 1998) studies. They assigned subjects to the experimental groups: “extremely conservative”, “moderate”, and “extremely liberal” on a random basis. Our research methodology controls for political orientation by assigning students to the three treatment groups based on their actual political orientation and P score. Furthermore, Fisher and Sweeney use a 7-point Likert scale to classify political ideology (conservative, moderate, liberal) while the current study uses a 9-point Likert scale.

### **Defining Issues Test**

We used the shortened version (i.e., three dilemmas) of the Defining Issues Test (DIT) to measure the subjects' moral development (Rest, 1979b). Twelve considerations that reflect reasoning at the upper five stage levels of moral development follow each dilemma (e.g., Stage One considerations are not used in the DIT). The test directs individuals to rank the four most important considerations for each of the three dilemmas. These four considerations are used to measure the percent of Stage Five and Six considerations in a subject's decision process. Test scores range from zero to 90; a score of zero (90) indicates that all ranked considerations were in the lower four (upper two) stage levels.

### **Political Attitudes Survey**

We also use the National Election Survey (NES, Appendix A, items a to e, Miller, 1992) that asks subjects to indicate their opinions about social and economic issues on a seven point Likert scale. We asked our subjects to indicate their political orientation on a modified version of the scale used by Fisher and Sweeney (2000, 1998). Fisher and Sweeney use a seven-point Likert scale that is unevenly apportioned to classify subjects as liberal, moderate, or conservative

(i.e., 1-to-3 are for conservative, 4 is moderate, and 5-to-7 are for liberal). While this is convenient and provides an approximately equal distribution between liberals, moderates, and conservatives, we believe it is inappropriate to assign only one data point to the moderate classification and three each to the liberal and conservative classifications. Our study utilizes a nine point Likert scale that is evenly apportioned when assigning subjects to categories (See Appendix). This expanded scale provides an equal number of data points for each of the three classifications.

## **RESULTS**

### **Political Identifications and DIT P Scores (H1)**

Table 2 presents the DIT scores by political orientation for the sample of 98 students. In addition to providing the P scores, we also provide scores for stages three, four, five and six. For comparison, we also provide the average scores for Fisher and Sweeney's sample (1998) and the data from Rest's (1987) standardization sample. Hypothesis One tests whether accounting students with a liberal political identification will, on average, have a higher average DIT P score than accounting students who are not liberal in their political identification. It is evident that Hypothesis One is not supported by the data in Table 2. While those students having both moderate and conservative political identifications scored higher on the DIT, the differences were not significant.

Insert Table 2 about here

### **Political Perspectives and Changes in DIT P Scores (H2 & H3)**

The data in Table 3 provide the two sets of average scores for each manipulation of political perspectives. Hypothesis Two examines whether accounting students who are not politically conservative will decrease their DIT P scores when responding from a conservative perspective. The data in Table 3 indicate that, rather than decreasing, there was a slight increase in P scores for both of the group who were not conservative and who were told to respond from a conservative perspective. However these increases in the DIT p scores were not significant.<sup>1</sup>

Insert Table 2 about here

Hypothesis Three examines whether accounting students who are not politically liberal will increase their DIT P scores when responding from a liberal perspective. The data in Table 3 indicate that there was a slight increase in P scores for both of the group who were not liberal and who were told to respond from a liberal perspective. While this follows the anticipated direction for Hypothesis Three, these increases were not significant.

### **Inconsistencies between Fisher and Sweeney's and Rest's Data**

There is an interesting contrast in Table 2. Fisher and Sweeney (1998) report an average stage five score of 20.49 with an average P score of 38.16. This means that the average stage six score for Fisher and Sweeney's sample was 17.67 or about 46 percent ( $17.67/38.16$ ) of their average P score. This is approximately twice as high as the average stage six score reported by Rest for his standardization sample of 270 college graduates. Rest's average stage six score is only 8.16 or about 19 percent ( $8.16/43.19$ ) of the average P score for his sample of college students. Yet Rest's average P score (43.19) is 46 percent higher than Fisher and Sweeney's average P score (38.16). Further, the highest stage six score is 26.7; consequently, Fisher and Sweeney's sample was attaining an average stage six score that was 66 percent of the maximum

attainable. If this were true, then their sample should also have a stage five score close to the maximum of 63.3 (90 – 26.7). However, this is not the case.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Our results put into question the findings of Fisher and Sweeney (1998). The data indicate that rather than following a predictable pattern, the changes in P scores appear to be random. While we waited three weeks prior to the second testing, it appears that the changes in P scores may be attributable to a learning-curve effect in the sample results. Additionally, the inconsistencies in the Fisher and Sweeney data are cause for concern. We are unable to provide an explanation for their sample's extremely high stage six scores (17.67 versus 8.16) compared to their below average stage five scores (20.49 versus 35.03) when compared to Rest's standardization sample of college students.

Rather than affirming the validity of the DIT, our research questions the methodology used by Fisher and Sweeney. While our results do not indicate that political orientation can affect DIT P scores, we also believe that a single study cannot stand alone. We do not believe that their method of dividing the sample is a valid procedure. Consequently, our study suggests that further empirical research is necessary.

Two limitations can be identified. First, the research sample includes students from three schools. While this sample includes one more school than Fisher and Sweeney's sample, the generalizeability of our findings may be restricted and may not be applicable to the entire population of accounting students. Second, the research assumes that Rest's Defining Issues Test is capable of measuring moral development.



## ENDNOTE

1. We also tested to determine whether politically liberal individuals who receive instructions to answer from an extremely liberal perspective were affected by the manipulation. While there was a five-point difference in scores (30.43-25.43), the difference was not significant. Had the sample size been at least 40, the five-point difference would have been significant at the .05 level.



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**TABLE 1**

**SIX STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT**

<b><u>Levels/Stages</u></b>	<b><u>Description of Primary Reasoning at Specific Stage Level</u></b>
<b>PRECONVENTIONAL LEVEL -- Focus on Self</b>	
Stage 1	Obedience: You do what you are told primarily to avoid punishment.
Stage 2	Instrumental egoism and simple exchange: Let's make a deal or only consider the cost and/or benefits to oneself.
<b>CONVENTIONAL LEVEL -- Focus on Relationships</b>	
Stage 3	Interpersonal concordance: Be considerate, nice, and kind, and you'll get along with people. The focus is on cooperation with those in your environment.
Stage 4	Law and duty to social order: Everyone in society is obligated and protected by the law. Focus is on cooperation with society in general.
<b>POST CONVENTIONAL LEVELS -- Focus on Personally Held Principles</b>	
Stage 5	Societal consensus: You are obligated by whatever arrangements are agreed to by due process procedure. Focus in on fairness of the law or rule as determined by equity and equality in the process of developing the rule.
Stage 6	Non-arbitrary social cooperation: How rational and impartial people would organize cooperation is moral. Focus is on fairness of the law or rules derived from general principles of just and right as determined by rational people.

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Adapted from Rest (1979b)

**TABLE 2****Comparison of DIT scores by self-defined political orientations**

	<b>Stage 3</b>	<b>Stage 4</b>	<b>Stage 5</b>	<b>Stage 6</b>	<b>P Score</b>
Liberals (n = 16)					
Mean	22.71	35.82	18.59	5.99	24.58
Std Dev	14.71	13.57	14.81	6.76	13.94
Moderates (n = 48)					
Mean	21.81	32.03	25.10	3.13	28.23
Std Dev	12.05	13.18	13.89	5.24	14.38
Conservatives (n = 34)					
Mean	19.73	33.85	23.67	3.06	26.73
Std Dev	11.68	15.10	13.01	5.33	12.30
Overall (n = 98)					
Mean	21.45	32.76	23.73	3.64	27.37
Std Dev	12.24	13.53	13.82	5.61	13.52
Rest's College (n = 270)					
Mean	14.33	28.35	35.03	8.16	43.19
Fisher & Sweeney (1998)					
Mean	7.82	21.98	20.49	17.67	38.16

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Rest's data from Guide for the Defining Issues Test (1987, 3-13)

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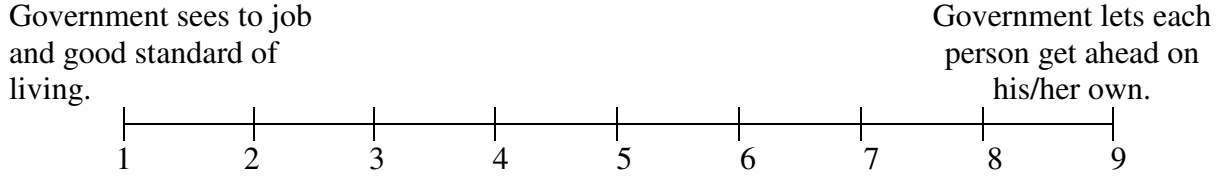
**TABLE 3****Effects of political perspective on DIT scores**

	<b>Stage 3</b>	<b>Stage 4</b>	<b>Stage 5</b>	<b>Stage 6</b>	<b>P Score</b>		<b>Stage 3</b>	<b>Stage 4</b>	<b>Stage 5</b>	<b>Stage 6</b>	<b>P Score</b>
<b>LIBERALS</b>											
Self-Presentation (n = 8)						Self-Presentation (n = 8)					
Mean	25.80	33.30	19.96	3.79	23.75	Mean	19.63	38.34	17.23	8.20	25.43
Std Dev	15.57	17.30	18.00	4.55	17.14	Std Dev	14.13	9.00	11.91	8.13	10.99
Extremely Conservative Perspective						Extremely Liberal Perspective					
Mean	25.04	34.89	19.95	4.21	24.18	Mean	22.10	32.14	20.85	9.58	30.43
Std Dev	11.82	16.09	17.47	6.46	20.69	Std Dev	12.45	10.76	8.81	5.43	10.90
<b>MODERATES</b>											
Self-Presentation (n = 20)						Self-Presentation (n = 28)					
Mean	22.02	37.30	20.99	4.52	25.50	Mean	21.73	27.28	28.70	2.26	30.96
Std Dev	12.19	12.66	13.19	5.20	12.86	Std Dev	12.39	11.10	13.49	5.21	14.87
Extremely Conservative Perspective						Extremely Liberal Perspective					
Mean	20.48	33.67	22.90	4.02	26.92	Mean	15.20	38.12	23.68	5.01	28.69
Std Dev	15.12	13.47	14.78	5.14	17.63	Std Dev	15.09	16.49	14.57	6.14	16.76
<b>CONSERVATIVES</b>											
Self-Presentation (n = 18)						Self-Presentation (n = 16)					
Mean	18.72	33.30	24.43	3.15	27.58	Mean	22.10	33.01	22.83	3.14	25.97
Std Dev	10.57	13.35	14.28	5.78	13.37	Std Dev	12.23	16.67	12.30	5.10	11.76
Extremely Conservative Perspective						Extremely Liberal Perspective					
Mean	16.54	36.20	22.98	3.50	26.48	Mean	17.81	34.98	20.72	6.04	26.76
Std Dev	9.60	21.90	16.85	4.80	15.73	Std Dev	17.82	19.19	14.01	4.76	16.54

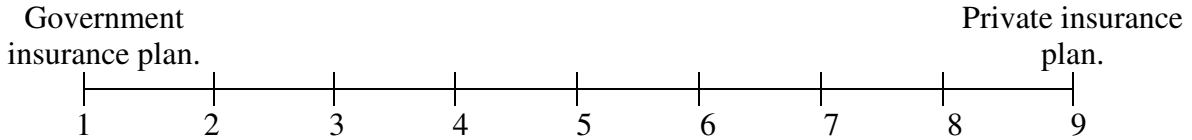
**APPENDIX**

**Political Attitudes Survey**

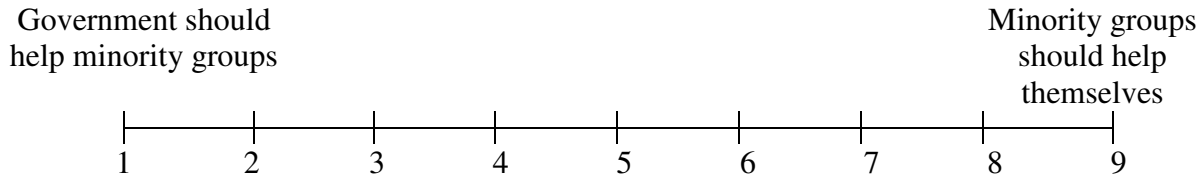
- a. Some people feel that the federal government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and good standard of living. Others think that the government should just let each person get ahead on his/her own. And of course, other people have opinions somewhere in between. Where would you place yourself on this scale?



- b. There is much concern about the rapid rise in medical and hospital costs. Some feel that there should be a government insurance plan that would cover all medical and hospital expenses. Others feel that medical expenses should be paid by individuals and through private insurance like Blue Cross. Where would you place yourself?



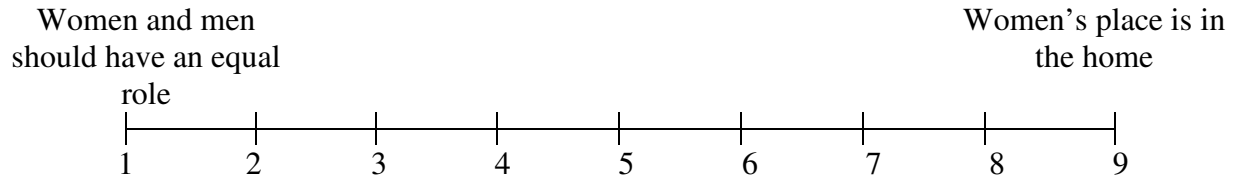
- c. Some feel that the federal government in Washington should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of African-Americans and other minority groups. Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help minorities because they should help themselves. Where would you place yourself on this scale?



d. There has been much discussion concerning abortion during recent years. Which of the following opinions best agrees with your view?

1. Abortion should never be permitted.
2. Abortion should be permitted only if the life and health of the woman is in danger.
3. Abortion should be permitted if, due to personal reasons, the woman would have difficulty in caring for the child.
4. Abortion should never be forbidden, since one should not require a woman to have a child she doesn't want.

e. There has been a lot of talk about women's rights. Some people feel that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry, and government. Others feel that the women's place is in the home. Where would you place yourself on this scale.



f. Concerning important political and social issues, where would you place yourself on this scale?

