Liberal Norms and Their Discontents

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Abstract

Recent analyses of the predominance of liberals in personality and social psychology have raised the possibility that this ideological imbalance is driven in part by active discrimination against conservatives. In this article, I review empirical evidence relevant to this possibility and find little support for it. The evidence points instead to a predominance of liberal views in academia more generally, driven by multiple factors including the consonance of academic work with the goals and values of liberals. Within the field of personality and social psychology, this concentration of liberal views has fostered strong liberal norms, which both intensify and exaggerate the field's ideological homogeneity. These liberal norms have unfortunate narrowing effects on research in personality and social psychology; remedies for these effects should focus on weakening the norms.

Keywords

Every decade or so, personality and social psychologists (hereafter referred to as PSPs) pause to reflect on the field's liberal bias. These moments of collective self-scrutiny tend to inspire less soul-searching and self-flagellation than the moments spent reflecting on the heavy use of college-student participants, for example, or the reliance on laboratory settings and now Amazon's Mechanical Turk to conduct research. Compared with these methodological conventions, liberal bias seems more natural, more endemic to what PSPs study, and less like a result of the conscious choices of individual investigators. Asked to explain the bias, most PSPs cite the properties of conservatives that make them ill-suited to or uninterested in a career in personality and social psychology: Their comparatively high scores on authoritarianism and social dominance orientation and low scores on openness to experience, their interest in careers that provide access to money and power, their anti-intellectualism and bias against science (see Haidt, 2011 and comments; Gross & Fosse, 2012). The validity of these claims is a matter of considerable debate, of course, but the point is simply that PSPs believe them and therefore see the liberal bias in the field as caused by conservatives, rather than by liberals.

Now Inbar and Lammers (2012, this issue) are urging PSPs to reconsider that view. They present survey data from a sample of members of the Society of Personality and Social Psychology showing that a nontrivial proportion say they would be negatively disposed toward conservative articles, grant proposals, and job candidates. Inbar and Lammers interpret these results, along with the open-ended comments of their respondents, as evidence that conservative views are not tolerated in personality and social psychology, that conservative PSPs face

a hostile climate as well as outright discrimination, and that the field is in denial of this situation. There are ample reasons to question this interpretation: The survey had a very low response rate; it asked biased questions, probing negative (but not positive) responses to conservative (but not liberal) views; and the key questions about discrimination focused on abstract, hypothetical scenarios that were open to multiple construals and that most respondents had probably never experienced. For all of these reasons, these survey data likely will not and should not prompt PSPs to see the error of their ways and devote themselves to increasing the ranks of conservatives among them. However, they do prompt this PSP to consider the nature and implications of liberal norms for research in personality and social psychology.

To say that the field has liberal norms should be uncontroversial. Surveys, formal and informal, consistently reveal PSPs to be overwhelmingly liberal in their political views, especially on social issues. This ideological homogeneity alone is enough to produce strong liberal norms, which in turn give rise to all of the phenomena Inbar and Lammers (2012) documented and more: felt pressures to conform to liberal views (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950); a reluctance to express nonliberal views (Miller & Morrison, 2009); an assumption that liberal views are even more prevalent and extreme than they are (Prentice & Miller, 1996); a tendency to explain the field's liberal bias in terms the properties of conservatives, not liberals, that produce it (Hegarty & Pratto,

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2001; Miller, Taylor, & Buck, 1990); and, yes, an inclination to derogate and punish PSPs who express conservative views (Schachter, 1951). In other words, regardless of why the field is populated mainly by people who hold liberal views, once this became the case, a variety of social perception and social influence processes kicked in to consolidate and perpetuate the liberal norms. By now, the norms are well-entrenched; active discrimination against conservatives is not necessary to sustain them.

What gives liberal norms—or any norms—the power to shape social reality? To put it simply, their power resides in people's desire to be right—to see the world correctly (Festinger et al., 1950). Given the immense difficulty of this task, one of the main ways people approach it is by comparing their own perceptions and opinions with those of their peers. Agreement suggests they are correct; disagreement raises the threatening possibility that they are wrong. People go to great lengths to avoid that threatening possibility, including preemptively changing their own opinions to align with the majority view and censoring the expression of minority opinions by both self and others. Remaining disagreements trigger explanations designed to adjudicate who is right and who is wrong or to account for why reasonable people might see the world differently. The latter type of explanation is essential to support diversity within a group or community. Research in personality and social psychology has provided empirical underpinnings for a number of such explanations, including explanations for cultural differences (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and racial differences (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010). It has also suggested that specific explanations may not be necessary if people see differences between particular individuals or groups of people as normal and natural (Miller & Prentice, 1999).

Ideological differences have been less amenable to diversity-supporting explanations, either within personality and social psychology or outside of it. Instead, explanations for differences tend to be divisive: Liberals claim that conservatives are anti-intellectual, and conservatives claim that liberals are immoral. In addition, both groups gravitate to separate spheres where their worldviews are normative. Academia is one of the most liberal spheres. National surveys of faculty members show there are very few conservative faculty in any discipline or any university across the country. For example, approximately three quarters of U.S. faculty members across disciplines agree that women have the right to decide whether or not to have an abortion, that it is acceptable for a couple to live together without intending to get married, and that homosexuality is as acceptable a lifestyle as heterosexuality (Rothman, Kelly-Woessner, & Woessner, 2011). Although agreement with these statements is somewhat higher among faculty in the humanities and social sciences than among faculty in the natural sciences and professions (82% vs. 70% agreement), even the more conservative members of the academy, including the 11% who self-identify as Republicans, hold views well to the left of most Democrats outside of academia (whose responses to similar questions average approximately 40%–42% agreement).

Doctoral students, too, appear to be predominantly liberal, though there are fewer data available for this population. For example, data from the AddHealth longitudinal survey collected in 2007–2008 showed that 49% of doctoral degree seekers considered themselves liberal, whereas 18% considered themselves conservative (Fosse, Freese, & Gross, 2011). Similarly, a 2004 HERI survey of college seniors showed that liberal students were twice as likely to intend to pursue a doctoral degree than were conservative students, and this difference held both within and across academic specialties (e.g., among social science majors, 16% of conservatives compared with 30% of liberals intended to get a doctoral degree; see Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2009). Additional data from both of these surveys suggested that the primary reason for this ideological imbalance appears to be self-selection: Academic work is more consonant with the values of liberals than conservatives, and therefore liberals are more likely to self-select into the academy and conservatives are more likely to self-select into more highly structured and lucrative professions. Moreover, the 2004 HERI survey showed that conservative students found their coursework in the humanities and social sciences much less satisfying than did liberal students, an additional indicator that the ideological imbalance might be especially strong in these fields (Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2009). The surveys provided no evidence that the imbalance is driven by active discrimination against conservatives, though, of course, more subtle forms of discrimination may play a role (Fosse et al., 2011; Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2009). Faculty surveys, likewise, have shown no evidence that conservative and Republican faculty members face discrimination for their political views and no evidence that they are more inclined than liberals and Democrats to self-censor their views (Rothman et al., 2011).

Taken together, the available evidence does not support the claim that conservatives are systematically excluded from the academy or from the field of personality and social psychology through acts of discrimination. Although this finding might, at first blush, seem to speak well for the health of the field, I would argue for the opposite conclusion. The strong liberal norms that characterize personality and social psychology have insidious effects on research in the field. Specifically, they predispose PSPs to achieve consensus on many fundamentals in their view of human nature: the power of situational influences on behavior, the significance of unconscious biases, and the importance of self-determination, to name just a few. Given the field's ideological homogeneity and the norms that exaggerate that homogeneity, few PSPs ever encounter a colleague committed to a view of human nature that privileges personal responsibility, good manners, and material definitions of success. Instead, debates within the field center on how to measure what everyone knows to be true and whether the underlying psychological mechanisms have been nailed down with sufficient precision. Although the nature of these debates reflects, in part, the increasing maturity of the science, it also reflects the ideological narrowness produced by liberal norms. Of course, it is alluring to feel right,

especially for PSPs, whose work is often devoted to identifying biases and errors in people's thinking. However, the field's research agenda is shaped by disagreement and by competing points of view. PSPs, like all scientists, conduct research to prove each other wrong. They study the questions on which they disagree. With so much ideological common ground, many of the big questions about what drives human behavior receive little attention.

If conservatives were beating down the door and PSPs were holding them at bay with discriminatory practices, the solution to this problem would be straightforward (albeit not easy). Given that conservatives are not beating down the door, the answer will have to lie in more carrots rather than fewer sticks. Taking seriously conservative points of view would go a long way toward bringing renewed vitality to fundamental questions in personality and social psychology, giving voice to conservative PSPs, and signaling to conservative students that the field has a place for them. Research collaborations are an excellent way to channel disagreement in scientifically productive directions (Kahneman, 2011). Finally, the development of noninvidious explanations for ideological disagreement is critical for building a more diverse field. Indeed, if PSPs could enable liberals and conservatives to agree to disagree or, even more ambitiously, to see each other's point of view, they would be doing an enormous service, not just for the field but for the world at large.

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