Likes Attract: The Sociopolitical Groupthink of (Social) Psychologists
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Sociopolitical Discrimination Is a Fact of Academic Life

Inbar and Lammers’ (2012, this issue) study is the most recent in the last decade to empirically document substantial levels of discrimination against conservative (i.e., right-of-center) people and ideas not only in social and personality psychology, but within the academy generally. Because sociopolitical values are often a core component of self-identity that significantly impact our interpersonal relationships, sociopolitical discrimination is difficult to overcome. There is a tendency to marginalize the sociopolitical “other,” along with a groupthink that implicitly presumes that this form of discrimination is acceptable (e.g., because conservatives are self-interestedly motivated, conservative ideas are incorrect, or conservatism is well represented elsewhere in society and thus need not be in the academy). Yet discrimination must be overcome because sociopolitical diversity is vital for scholarly inquiry, pedagogy, and for ethical professional practice. Recent research suggests that the assumptions underlying psychology’s value system of promoting racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual orientation diversity—that is, that doing so recognizes people’s personal identities, ameliorates discrimination, and has educational benefits—may be all the more compelling with respect to sociopolitical ideas.

Discrimination begins in college or graduate school and continues throughout the conservative academic’s career. Gartner’s (1986) study using a mock admissions file for graduate school in clinical psychology, in which the only variable manipulated was whether the applicant indicated that he was a religious conservative, found that professors rated the nonconservative applicant more likely to be admitted to their graduate program. True, conservatives self-select out of academic careers, but they may do so because the professoriate “has been politically typed as appropriate for and welcoming of people with broadly liberal political sensibilities and as inappropriate for conservatives” (Gross & Fosse, 2012, p. 155) and because of the discrimination they already feel. In college, they found academic psychology to be a relatively unwelcoming place for their political views and recognized it would likely be all the more so as a graduate student or professor. Results of the UCLA Higher Education Institute survey of 15,569 college seniors at 149 colleges suggest that conservative students lack academic role models, have fewer opportunities to do research, and have more distant relationships with
their professors. Such negative experiences will likely deter conservative students from pursuing graduate school, though they do as well academically as their liberal peers (Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2009). In any event, given the dearth of conservative faculty, how likely are they to find a professor, at a school they can attend, who is willing and able to mentor them on conservative-friendly research?

Those who do successfully complete graduate school may find it difficult to obtain academic jobs if their conservative politics are evident. Rothman and Lichter (2009) found strong statistical evidence that conservative academics must publish more to get the same jobs than their liberal peers. In a nationwide survey of academics across nine disciplines, professors say that being a Republican (or an evangelical or an NRA member) damages the chances of a faculty candidate being hired whereas being a Democrat (or an ACLU member) enhances it, particularly in the social sciences (Yancey, 2011). Forty-three percent of professors (and 81% of conservative professors) say faculties favor hiring those with liberal views (Gross & Simmons, 2007). Discrimination against conservatives is likely the result of groupthink (a belief in the inherent morality of the liberal ingroup, negative stereotyping of the conservative outgroup, liberal bias in information processing, and a failure to consider conservative perspectives; Klein & Stern, 2009b). Like other organizations (Mannix & Neale, 2005), academic departments tend to favor and select those most like themselves, particularly when it comes to ideology (Klein & Stern, 2009b).

Over time a snowball effect accumulates, with departments becoming less ideally diverse. The ratio of liberals to conservatives in psychology has increased from 3 to 1 in the 1960s to roughly 10 to 1 today and to 20 to 1 or more in many disciplines; (Inbar & Lammers, 2012 ; Klein & Stern, 2009a). Along with this increased imbalance there are more professors, particularly liberal professors, who say it is acceptable to import politics into their work (see Gross & Simmons, 2007). Less than half of college students say that their schools and faculty place a high priority on viewpoint diversity (Dey, Ott, Antonaros, Barnhardt, & Holsapple, 2011).

When conservatives do land academic jobs, usually at less prestigious institutions (see Gross & Simmons, 2007), Inbar and Lammers’ (2012) findings reveal the discrimination they encounter. Those who have been successful in the academy often counsel junior colleagues to be cautious about revealing their conservative views, at least until they get tenure or their scholarly reputation is established (Maranto & Woessner, 2012). No wonder there is so little psychological research on policy questions from anything but the liberal perspective or that so few textbooks and courses seriously engage conservative points of view.

**Sociopolitical Diversity Is as Important as Demographic Diversity**

Like most academic disciplines today, diversity is a core value of psychology. It is central to our ethical code (American Psychological Association, 2010). Diversity, as it is typically understood and applied (a diversity of physical or cultural characteristics—i.e., “demographic diversity”), is based on three psychological assumptions.

The first assumption is that people’s physical traits and cultural background are central to their personal identity, influencing their view of themselves, their world, and their interpersonal relationships. The second assumption is that people frequently suffer discrimination due to such characteristics. The third assumption is that with demographic diversity comes a diversity of life experiences, values, and ideas, which produces benefits for learning and scholarship. From these assumptions flow the goals of giving voice to these identities, fashioning remedies for discrimination, and ensuring sufficient representation of identities among faculties and students in pedagogy, scholarship, and throughout university life.

Political beliefs are an important component of culture, and therefore, an important aspect of diversity (see Medin & Lee, 2012). A substantial body of emerging research, which space limitations allow me to only mention in passim, compels the conclusion that the assumptions supporting demographic diversity apply as well to sociopolitical diversity. Rooted in deep-seated worldviews and moral values (Haidt, 2001, 2012), and closely linked to personality and cognitive styles arising out of gene and early environment interactions (see Jost & Inbar & Lammers, 2012), people’s sociopolitical values are fundamental to their personal identity. As people often make judgments based on their sociopolitical values in an emotional and automatic fashion (Haidt, 2001), people frequently are discriminated against because of their political beliefs, especially when they are a small political minority within an organization (e.g., the conservative academic). Sociopolitical attitude congruence is a potent factor in hiring, career success, and interpersonal relationships (see Haidt, Rosenberg, & Hom, 2003; Insko, Nacoae, & Moe, 1983; Mannix & Neale, 2005). Opposing sociopolitical values challenge our worldview and the sense of understanding, purpose, security, and belongingness it provides. Yet, it is precisely because they challenge our thinking that exposure to diverse political perspectives has educational benefits as well as benefits for moral development and personal growth (see Mannix & Neale, 2005; Redding, 2001).

Indeed, ideological diversity could not be more important to a discipline like social psychology that so often tackles controversial issues. (For its importance in clinical practice, see Redding, 2001.) Professors acknowledge that their political views influence their choice of research topic and perspective (Gross & Simmons, 2007), and it is natural for researchers to frame research agendas and interpret their findings in ways that confirm rather than disconfirm their political beliefs. Biases of this sort are hard to avoid (see MacCoun, 1998). It is no coincidence that virtually all the research and commentary on important social issues by psychologists is liberal leaning or that the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues advances liberal rather than conservative causes (see Harris, 1986; Redding, 2001), as do other disciplines in psychology.
(Lillis, O’Donohue, Cucciare, & Lillis, 2005). That the policy-relevant research of academic psychologists yields mostly liberal answers is not because research on these issues lends itself only to liberal paradigms or that the data only support liberal positions (see Glenn, 2001; Murray, 1984; Nieli, 2004; Popenoe, 1999; Sniderman & Piazza, 1993). Nor is it necessarily the case that the portrait psychology paints of conservatives and conservatism versus liberals and liberalism (e.g., Altmeyer, 1988; Jost et al., 2003; Lakoff, 2002) must be unfavorable to the former but favorable to the latter (see Haidt, 2012; Lindgren, 2007, 2011; Tetlock & Mitchell, 1993).

Particularly with respect to research having political or policy implications, a dialectical research program may best produce results that stand the test of time. Tetlock and Mitchell’s (2009) critique of the validity of implicit prejudice research alongside their call for “adversarial collaboration” with implicit prejudice researchers to work toward agreed criteria for validity and to conduct multimethod research by those with differing ideologies provides a good model for ensuring unbiased policy-relevant research (see MacCoun, 2005). More politically-inclusive research agendas will broaden and improve the policy research of psychologists and its credibility with policymakers and the public (see MacCoun & Paletz, 2009). And, to the extent psychologists wish to advocate against conservative policies, they will be more effective in doing so if they understand conservatism and conservatives (see Haidt & Graham, 2007) and do so phenomenologically “from the inside out.” An excellent example is Haidt’s (2012) research on conservative and liberal worldviews, which helps liberals to understand the moral foundations of conservatism (rather than pathologizing conservatism or framing it as cognitively inferior to liberalism) and vice versa and provides a constructive model for facilitating understanding across political divides.

**Overcoming Discrimination Requires an Affirmative Commitment**

Over a decade ago, I observed that we should encourage conservatives to join our ranks and make our profession a place where “conservative views [are] sayable (comfortably so)” (Redding, 2001, p. 212). Regrettably, Inbar and Lammers’ (2012) findings show that little has changed. The self-reported discriminatory intent and behavior they uncover is a candid admission because social and personality psychologists eschew discrimination and have been at the forefront of advocacy research against it. Ironically, a discipline responsible for exposing groupthink, prejudice, and discrimination has not confronted its own. Apropos, a few courageous social psychologists (Haidt, 2011; Inbar & Lammers, 2012) are calling for the profession to get its own house in order.

Haidt (2011) challenges psychology to increase the number of conservatives in the profession. Without a “critical mass” of conservatives, we are unlikely to achieve a more politically inclusive research program and have an academic climate that attracts rather than deters conservatives from entering the academy, and conservatives will thus continue to feel too isolated to manifest their sociopolitical identity in scholarship, professional activities, or daily academic life. Achieving critical mass will likely require a kind of “soft” affirmative action for conservatives that includes efforts to attract and encourage them to enter graduate school as well as efforts to diversify faculties by using sociopolitical ideology as a “plus” factor in hiring, particularly in research areas having political or policy implications. It will require a commitment to sociopolitical diversity as deeply felt as our commitment to demographic diversity, especially since the transaction costs of achieving viewpoint diversity are likely to be greater than those of achieving demographic diversity (Bell, 2010). Because psychology values diversity, I am optimistic that it will meet the challenge of becoming a more inclusive profession for diverse political perspectives and for those who hold them.

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**Note**

1. Some will criticize such suggestions on the basis that most conservatives oppose affirmative action, but that is misplaced. Conservatives do not necessarily oppose “reaching out” efforts or the use of modest “plus” factors, especially when doing so is directly relevant to the work of the organization—in this case, ideological diversity improves teaching and research. We cannot be selective diversity advocates, supporting efforts to diversify only when it benefits the groups we favor. Even if one cares nothing about helping conservatives, the strongest reason to diversify is that doing so benefits the science and profession of psychology. I enthusiastically support demographic diversity, but we also need sociopolitical diversity, which is especially important for scholarship and pedagogy.

**References**


