Rational Versus Irrational Prejudices: How Problematic Is the Ideological Lopsidedness of Social Psychology?

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Inbar and Lammers (2012, this issue) posed a set of straightforward survey questions and obtained a seemingly straightforward set of answers. Only 6% of social psychologists described themselves as conservative overall, although larger minorities saw themselves as at least somewhat conservative on economic and foreign policy issues. And though conservatives are quite rare in the field, social psychologists underestimated even these numbers. This underestimation may stem from an understandable desire among conservatives to be invisible. They feared discrimination—and apparently for good reason. Substantial fractions of social psychologists admitted they would treat conservatives differently or worse. Indeed, if social psychologists' estimates of the percentage of their colleagues willing to discriminate are roughly accurate, there is roughly a one in three chance that the next social psychologist a conservative encounters will be willing to discriminate against that conservative in peer review, grant review, symposium invitations, and hiring decisions. If the authors' focus had been on race or sex or age bias, their article could be seamlessly woven as evidentiary support into a plaintiffs' brief in a hostile-work-environment class-action suit targeting social psychology programs around the nation.

In addition to these obvious issues of procedural and distributive justice in professional workplaces, Inbar and Lammers’ data are worrisome on epistemological grounds. The mixture of ideological homogeneity and apparent intolerance for a widely held ideological outlook in the larger society sets the stage for scientific groupthink that forecloses research programs and research discoveries that the field of social psychology would be making in a counterfactual world in which social psychologists were more ideologically diverse and/or tolerant. On its face, it does not look like a good career move to challenge research findings that mesh well with liberal political causes liked by the vast majority of one’s colleagues or to endorse lines of research that mesh well with conservative political causes disliked by the vast majority of one’s colleagues (e.g., Redding, 2001).

Of course, one should expect defenders of the disciplinary status quo (would it feel pejorative to call them “system justifiers”?) to put the best possible spin on the data. For instance, they could rightly point out the survey-methodological shortcomings of the study and the far-from-perfect representativeness of the sample (Skitka, 2012, this issue). Or, they could invoke a conversational-norm critique of the wording of the survey questions (Grice, 1975; Tetlock, Lerner, & Boettger, 1996). Survey respondents naturally look for conversational clues as to why their interlocutor is posing certain questions.
rather than others. Some respondents might draw the inference that the survey questions are not just referring to a social psychologist who happens to be a conservative but rather to a social psychologist who uses psychological research to advance a conservative political agenda that stresses the adaptive advantages of adherence to traditional values or of free-market competition or of a strong national security posture. From this standpoint, far from engaging in ideological bigotry, respondents are defending the value neutrality and scientific integrity of their discipline.

But this defense is potentially vulnerable to the following identity-substitution thought experiment: suppose that the data had shown that social psychologists are quite convinced that one third of their colleagues would discriminate against an African-American social psychologist. It seems unlikely that anxieties about this result would be mollified if defenders of the status quo were to argue that survey respondents were not really biased but merely conjuring an image of a prototypical African-American social psychologist using science to promote research on how severely disadvantaged African-Americans are in American society. Extenuation here seems more like exacerbation.

Of course, there are no knockout blows in a debate of this sort. Defenders of the disciplinary status quo could counter that this thought experiment is suspect, for there is something inherently oxymoronic about simultaneously being a conservative and being a scientist but that there is no such inherent contradiction between being an African-American and being a scientist. In this view, social psychologists are correct in holding an image of conservatives as "antscientific" (Mooney, 2012). Insofar as conservatism implies a willful rejection of well-established scientific theories, such as the dogmatic embrace of creationism and categorical rejection of evolution, scholars who embrace such an outlook are rightly scientifically suspect, at minimum, for their views on the origin of species and perhaps for a broader range of their views.

The debate then inevitably shifts to the accuracy of the rather sweeping ideological stereotype of conservatism as an antiscience worldview. One problem for the stereotypers is that conservatism is not, as Inbar and Lammers (among others) have shown, a one-dimensional construct. Conservatism is a complex coalitional construct in contemporary political science, a loose alliance of moral traditionalists, economic libertarians and national-security hawks who, in American politics, come together periodically to compete, more or less effectively, in two-party winner-takes-all presidential elections (Lilla, 2007). The burden of proof should fall on the stereotypers to specify which antiscientific opinions these diverse subgroups of conservatives allegedly hold. A second problem for the stereotypers is that of estimating the probative value of these various antiscientific opinions in making scientific personnel decisions: How much does the likelihood of a social psychologist making important contributions to social psychology decline as a function of his or her holding various extrascientific beliefs and values? Does the likelihood of a social psychologist making important contributions to social cognition or group dynamics change as a function of whether that psychologist is skeptical of the claims of various climate change researchers? And if we are to introduce belief litmus tests for entry into our science or for promotion within it, why stop with conservatives? Does the likelihood of a Marxist social psychologist contributing to the same fields change as a function of whether that researcher is oblivious to the downsides of state-planned economies documented by economic historians or to the heritability coefficients for IQ documented by behavioral geneticists?

And the questions just keep getting harder. How should a reasonable social psychologist go about assessing the relative risk of making a false-negative judgment about a conservative colleague with a given profile of extrascientific beliefs and values (rejecting valuable scientific work of that colleague because of the colleague’s conservatism) versus making a false-positive judgment about the same colleague (accepting flawed scientific work of a conservative colleague because one is afraid of committing ideological bias)?

I suspect that social psychologists, peering into this epistem-etic abyss, will largely reject ideological litmus tests of colleagues, which means that Inbar and Lammers have made their intended point. They have hoisted a useful warning flag that too many of our colleagues are allowing extrascientific opinions to sway what should be purely value-neutral professional evaluations, something that is especially dangerous to the self-corrective capacities of a science that is ideologically homogeneous; drawn to ideologically charged topics, such as unconscious bias or stereotype threat; and has a propensity to attach labels to ideologically charged topics, such as opposition to affirmative action and income redistribution, that conservatives deem tendentious (e.g., system justification and symbolic racism; for reviews, see Mitchell & Tetlock, 2009; Snidman & Tetlock, 1986).

Closing at this juncture, however, runs the risk of being premature. There is a more fundamental argument over whether social psychology is an inherently political science whose success hinges on its achieving and maintaining a robust ideological dialectic. The deeper problem highlighted by Inbar and Lammers is not how fairly social psychologists treat each other; it is whether social psychology has an adequate critical mass of traditional conservative, economic libertarian, national-security hawk research talent to correct the potential research excesses of a largely liberal left-leaning field. No one knows how many research programs social psychologists have failed to launch, or how many research discoveries they have failed to make, as a result of the skew in the distribution of views within their discipline. Answering historical-counterfactual questions of this form is notoriously difficult (Tetlock & Belkin, 1996), but it is worth noting that Crawford et al. (2012) have drawn on a variety of lines of social psychological research (including work on the
cognitive-debiasing benefits of diversity, perspective taking, and minority influence) to make a strong case that these episodic opportunity costs are substantial. This conversation is long overdue, and the longer we postpone it, the greater the costs to our collective credibility in the political arena.

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References


