

Likes Attract: The Sociopolitical Groupthink of (Social) Psychologists

Richard E. Redding

School of Law and Schmid College of Science, Chapman University

Abstract

Inbar and Lammers (2012, this issue) contribute to the growing empirical evidence 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 presupposes 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.

Keywords

diversity, discrimination, political ideology

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 professors and policy perspectives in the academy. These studies provide strong evidence for what conservatives already knew to be true. Too often they have heard colleagues deride conservatism and conservatives; too often they have seen or experienced political discrimination. What they describe, and what the empirical studies now document, is not implicit prejudice, inconsequential discrimination, or “microaggressions.” It is prejudice and discrimination, straight up.

Surveying 800 social and personality psychologists, Inbar and Lammers (2012) found that many of them (one in three) said they as well as others in their department would discriminate against conservatives in faculty hiring, would be less favorably inclined (one in four) towards grant applications and journal submissions that took a conservative perspective, and would be less likely to invite (one in six) conservative colleagues to participate in a symposium. But as is often the case with discrimination, this negative climate for conservatives often goes unrecognized by those who do not experience it (Inbar & Lammers, 2012).

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

Corresponding Author:

Richard E. Redding, Chapman University, School of Law, One University Drive, Orange, CA 92866

E-mail: redding@chapman.edu

Perspectives on Psychological Science
7(5) 512–515

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1745691612455206

http://pps.sagepub.com



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 ideologically 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 & Amodio, 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, Nacoste, & 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.¹ 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.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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

- Altmeyer, R. (1988). *Enemies of freedom: Understanding right-wing authoritarianism*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- American Psychological Association. (2010). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct* (2002, amended June 1, 2010). Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx>
- Bell, T. (2010). *Three kinds of diversity*. Retrieved from <http://agoraphilia.blogspot.com/2010/10/three-kinds-of-diversity.html>
- Dey, E. L., Ott, M. C., Antonaros, M., Barnhardt, C. L., & Holsapple, M. A. (2011). *Engaging diverse viewpoints: What is the campus climate for perspective-taking?* Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Gartner, J. D. (1986). Antireligious prejudice in admissions to doctoral programs in clinical psychology. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 17, 473–475.
- Glenn, N. D. (2001). Social science findings and the "family wars." *Society*, 13–19.
- Gross, N., & Fosse, E. (2012). Why are professors liberal? *Theory and Society*, 41, 127–168.

- Gross, N., & Simmons, S. (2007). *The social and political views of American professors*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Department of Sociology.
- Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review*, *108*(4), 814–834.
- Haidt, J. (2011, January). *The bright future of post-partisan social psychology*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, San Antonio, TX.
- Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. New York, NY: Pantheon.
- Haidt, J., & Graham, J. (2007). When morality opposes justice: Conservatives have moral intuitions that liberals may not recognize. *Social Justice Research*, *20*, 98–116.
- Haidt, J., Rosenberg, E., & Hom, H. (2003). Differentiating diversities: Moral diversity is not like other kinds. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *33*(1), 1–36.
- Harris, B. (1986). Reviewing 50 years of the psychology of social issues. *Journal of Social Issues*, *42*(1), 1–20.
- Inbar, Y., & Lammers, J. (2012). Political diversity in social and personality psychology. *Perspectives in Psychological Science*, *7*, 496–503.
- Insko, C. A., Nacoste, R. W., & Moe, J. L. (1983). Belief congruence and racial discrimination: Review of the evidence and critical evaluation. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *13*, 153–174.
- Jost, J. T., & Amodio, D. M. (2012). Political ideology as motivated social cognition: Behavioral and neuroscience evidence. *Motivation and Emotion*, *36*, 55–64.
- Jost, J. T., Glaser, J., Kruglanski, A. W., & Sulloway, F. J. (2003). Political conservatism as motivated social cognition. *Psychological Bulletin*, *129*, 339–375.
- Klein, D. B., & Stern, C. (2009a). By the numbers: The ideological profile of professors. In R. Maranto, R. E. Redding, & F. M. Hess (Eds.), *The politically correct university: Problems, scope and reforms* (pp. 15–38). Washington, DC: AEI Press.
- Klein, D. B., & Stern, C. (2009b). Groupthink in academia: Majoritarian departmental policies and the professional pyramid. In R. Maranto, R. E. Redding, & F. M. Hess (Eds.), *The politically correct university: Problems, scope and reforms* (pp. 79–98). Washington, DC: AEI Press.
- Lakoff, G. (2002). *Moral policies: How liberals and conservatives think* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lillis, J., O'Donohue, W. T., Cucciare, M., & Lillis, E. (2005). Social justice in community psychology. In R. H. Wright & N. A. Cummings (Eds.), *Destructive trends in mental health: The well-intentioned path to harm* (pp. 283–302). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lindgren, J. (2007, July). *The centrist authoritarian*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology, Portland, OR. Retrieved from http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/0/4/5/2/pages204526/p204526-1.php
- Lindgren, J. (2011). *What drives views on government redistribution and anti-capitalism: Envy or a desire for social dominance?* Retrieved from http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=945932
- MacCoun, R. J. (1998). Biases in the interpretation and use of research results. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *49*, 259–287.
- MacCoun, R. J. (2005). Conflicts of interest in public policy research. In D. A. Moore, D. M. Cain, G. Loewenstein, & M. Bazerman (Eds.), *Conflicts of interest: Problems and solutions from law, medicine, and organizational settings* (pp. 233–262). London, England: Cambridge University Press.
- MacCoun, R. J., & Paletz, S. (2009). Citizens' perceptions of ideological bias in research on public policy controversies. *Political Psychology*, *30*(1), 43–65.
- Mannix, E., & Neale, M. A. (2005). What differences make a difference?: The promise and reality of diverse teams in organizations. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, *6*(2), 31–55.
- Maranto, R., & Woessner, M. (2012). Diversifying the academy: How conservative academics can thrive in liberal academia. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, *45*(3), 469–474.
- Medin, D. L., & Lee, C. D. (2012, May/June). Diversity makes better science. *APS Observer*, *25*(5), 34–35.
- Murray, C. (1984). *Losing ground: American social policy, 1950–1980*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Niemi, R. K. (2004). The changing shape of the river: Affirmative action and recent social science research. *Academic Questions*, *17*, 7–59.
- Popenoe, D. (1999). *Life without father: Compelling new evidence that fatherhood and marriage are indispensable for the good of children and society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Redding, R. E. (2001). Sociopolitical diversity: The case for pluralism. *American Psychologist*, *56*(3), 205–215.
- Rothman, S., & Lichter, S. R. (2009). The vanishing conservative—Is there a glass ceiling? In R. Maranto, R. E. Redding, & F. M. Hess (Eds.), *The politically correct university: Problems, scope and reforms* (pp. 15–38). Washington, DC: AEI Press.
- Sniderman, P. M., & Piazza, T. (1993). *The scar of race*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tetlock, P. E., & Mitchell, G. (1993). Liberal and conservative approaches to justice: Conflicting psychological portraits. In B. Mellers & J. Baron (Eds.), *Psychological perspectives on justice* (pp. 234–255). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Tetlock, P. E., & Mitchell, G. (2009). Implicit prejudice and accountability systems: What must organizations do to prevent discrimination? In B. M. Straw & A. Brief (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (Vol. 29, pp. 3–38). New York, NY: Elsevier.
- Woessner, M., & Kelly-Woessner, A. (2009). Left pipeline: Why conservatives don't get doctorates. In R. Maranto, R. E. Redding, & F. M. Hess (Eds.), *The politically correct university: Problems, scope and reforms* (pp. 38–59). Washington, DC: AEI Press.
- Yancey, G. (2011). *Compromising scholarship: Religious and political bias in American higher education*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.