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Increasing ideological tolerance in social psychology

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Abstract

We argue that recognizing current ideological diversity in social psychology and promoting tolerance of minority views is just as important as increasing the number of non-liberal researchers. Increasing tolerance will allow individuals in the minority to express dissenting views, which will improve psychological science by reducing bias. We present four recommendations for increasing tolerance.

Increasing ideological diversity in social psychology is crucial. However, we believe that recognizing the ideological diversity that currently exists in the field is just as important. In our surveys of the politics of social-personality psychologists, we found considerably more political diversity than we had expected—at least on economic and foreign policy (Inbar & Lammers, 2012). In our first survey of 508 individuals, 18.9% described themselves as moderate and 17.9% as conservative on economic issues. Likewise, on foreign policy 21.1% described themselves as moderate and 10.3% as conservative.

These data should not be taken to indicate that social psychology does not have an ideological diversity problem—over 90% of respondents described themselves as liberal on social issues, and in a second survey 85% described themselves as liberal overall. However, we believe that they do suggest that there is a substantial amount of diversity in some areas, and that fostering tolerance of existing political differences may improve the quality of social psychological science just as much as recruiting more non-liberal researchers. These goals are not mutually exclusive—in fact, increased tolerance of existing differences also makes the field more welcoming to non-liberal newcomers. Here, we present four specific recommendations:

Avoid signaling that non-liberals are not welcome in social psychology. In papers, presentations, and casual conversations, many social psychologists assume that their audience consists entirely of political liberals. Professional talks contain jokes at the expense of Republican politicians (and Republicans only), and speakers sometimes openly disparage conservative beliefs. If the audience is entirely liberal, this is harmless

(if somewhat unprofessional) comic relief. But the audience is not entirely liberal. Casually disparaging conservatives in a professional setting alienates colleagues who don't share the majority's political beliefs, and it sends a message to students and junior researchers that there is only one acceptable political ideology in the field. This will likely encourage those who do not share the majority ideology to choose a different line of work. As Bloom (2011) observed, "Nobody wants to be part of a community where their identity is the target of ridicule and malice." When giving a talk, writing a paper, or even just chatting with colleagues, we recommend keeping in mind that the audience might be more politically diverse than expected. Avoid sending signals that only one political point of view is correct or acceptable. Does this mean censoring one's beliefs? Of course not—but it does mean treating others' beliefs with respect, not derision.

Be especially careful around students. There is an obvious power imbalance between students and faculty, and faculty can wittingly or unwittingly take advantage of this imbalance to pressure students to adopt the "correct" political beliefs. In our surveys, multiple students and post-docs indicated that they felt pressured or intimidated by senior colleagues. For example, one post-doc described being insulted publicly by a senior colleague for having voted Republican. Duarte (2014) described being pressed by a faculty member to "clarify" his views on Jimmy Carter during a graduate school admissions interview (the admissions committee had discovered a blog post of Duarte's where he criticized Carter's views on the Middle East). Most social psychologists realize that this sort of blatant intimidation is unacceptable. However, they may be less aware of the more subtle ways in which they are communicating what the "correct" political

beliefs are. We therefore propose that our first recommendation is particularly important in faculty members' interactions with students, and that faculty need to be especially mindful of how they talk about politics around them.

Take conservative beliefs seriously. Simply dismissing conservative beliefs as the product of ignorance, religious fanaticism, or stupidity is itself lazy and ignorant. Of course, liberal social psychologists need not be less critical of political ideas they disagree with, but it is always wise to remain open to the possibility that one is wrong—or at least to the possibility that there is value in opposing opinions. This can also have personal benefits. When people are largely surrounded by the like-minded, their views become more extreme (Lamm & Myers, 1978). Although extremists tend to think that they are more right than their opponents (Toner, Leary, Asher, & Jongman-Sereno, 2013), their beliefs are less based on their understanding of the facts than they think (Ferbach, Rogers, Fox, & Sloman, 2013). Seriously engaging with opposing views is one way to combat this.

Practice tolerance. This may seem easier said than done. But we often need to interact with people with whom we disagree politically. Generally, we manage to do this: If we disagree, we can disagree respectfully; if we find we are unable to disagree respectfully, we can avoid certain hot-button topics. Most working people manage to do this in their professional lives, as most professions are nowhere near as ideologically homogenous as psychology is. If so many people manage to tolerate those who disagree with them—if

we ourselves are able to do so in many areas of life—it should not be too much to ask that social psychologists do it as well.

Conclusion. Recruiting more non-liberal psychological scientists is a worthy goal, but it will take time—and, moreover, we see no reason that we should *ever* expect social psychology to perfectly mirror the demographics of the general population. People will choose to do what interests them, and some of these preferences may be correlated with demographic differences. Ideological imbalance is most problematic when the minority is silent because they fear personal or professional retribution if they express their views. Individual scientists will be biased by their values, but this bias is mitigated as long as there is a diverse scientific community that critically examines their conclusions (Nagel, 1961). But when some views are systematically excluded, a scientific field is likely to pursue biased research questions and produce biased conclusions. We strongly believe that establishing a more ideologically tolerant climate is the easiest and quickest way to combat this pernicious tendency.

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