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Perspectives on Psychological Science 2012 7: 504

DOI: 10.1177/1745691612455205

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Liberal Privilege in Academic Psychology and the Social Sciences: Commentary on Inbar & Lammers (2012)

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Abstract

This comment is in two parts. The first presents some implications of Inbar and Lammers' (2012, this issue) findings by making salient many of the advantages and privileges enjoyed by scientists when they extol the moral and intellectual superiority of liberals, liberal beliefs, liberal attitudes, and liberal policy preferences over conservatives, conservative beliefs, conservative attitudes, and conservative policy preferences. The second part of this comment refutes (or, at least, vigorously contests) some of the most common arguments that have attempted to defend social psychology from charges of unscientific and distorting liberal biases.

Keywords

discrimination, bias, politics, liberalism

Inbar and Lammers' (2012) research has deep, pervasive, and profound implications for how social psychology, and, by implications, psychology and the social sciences writ large, go about conducting the business of "science." These fields risk sacrificing scientific credibility to advantage researchers who frame their work as supporting liberals, liberal ideas, and liberal policies.

In the first section of this comment, I present a list of the often nonobvious privileges and advantages enjoyed by liberal social psychologists and social psychologists whose research is framed as supporting liberals and liberal ideas—advantages that have nothing to do with any real intellectual or scientific advantages and instead have everything to do with the sort of ingroup favoritism one finds in communities bound together by a common moral and political framework (e.g., Haidt, 2012). This list is written in the first person, from the standpoint of a liberal psychologist who enjoys them and is implicitly yet clearly contrasted with the lack of such privileges enjoyed by psychologists whose research does not actively promote liberal ideas.


If you are reading this, you are most likely a psychologist, and therefore, also most likely a liberal. That is a stereotype. As a probabilistic generalization, it is also accurate (as demonstrated not only by Inbar & Lammers, 2012, but by Abramowitz, Gomes, & Abramowitz, 1975; Haidt, 2011; Rothman, Lichter, & Nevitte, 2005, and Unger, 2011). Regardless, as you read through this list, it is, perhaps, worth keeping in mind the many ways each of these privileges distorts and undermines the objectivity and validity of the "science" that social psychology and other social sciences ultimately produce.

Some Privileges Enjoyed by Liberal Psychologists and Social Scientists

1. I can avoid spending time with colleagues who mistrust me because of my politics.
2. If I apply for a job, I can be confident my political views are more likely to be an asset than liability.
3. I can be confident that the political beliefs I hold and the political candidates I support will not be routinely mocked by my colleagues.
4. I can be pretty confident that, if I present results at colloquia and conferences that validate my political views, I will not be mocked or insulted by my colleagues.
5. I can be pretty sure that my students who share my political views and go on to academic jobs will be able to focus on being competent teachers and scientists and will not have to worry about hiding their politics from senior faculty.
6. I can paint caricature-like pictures based on the most extreme and irrational beliefs of those who differ from me ideologically without feeling any penalty for doing so.
7. I can criticize colleagues' research that differs from mine on issues such as race, sex, or politics without fear of being accused of being an authoritarian, racist, or sexist.

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Perspectives on Psychological Science
7(5) 504–507
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1745691612455205
http://pps.sagepub.com


8. I can systematically misinterpret, misrepresent, or ignore research in such a manner as to sustain my political views and be confident that such misinterpretations, misrepresentations, or oversights are unlikely to be recognized by my colleagues.
9. If I work in politically charged areas, such as race, gender, class, and politics and if my papers, grants, or symposia are rejected, I need not ask each time if political bias led to the rejection.
10. I will feel welcomed and “normal” in the usual walks of my academic life.
11. I will not have to worry whether citations to and impact of my scholarship will be artificially diluted because most of my colleagues do not like its political implications.
12. I do not have to worry that reviewers and editors will require a higher standard to publish or fund my research than they require to publish or fund research with implications for the opposite ideology.
13. In order to publish my research demonstrating moral failures or cognitive biases among those with different ideological beliefs than mine, I will not need to consider camouflaging my results or sugar coating the conclusions to avoid offending the political sensitivities of reviewers.
14. I can be confident that vanishingly few of my colleagues will be publishing “scientific” articles claiming that people holding political beliefs like mine are particularly deficient in intelligence and morality.

Standing on the Shoulder of a Giant

This list was inspired by McIntosh’s (1988) essay that coined the term *White privilege*. White privilege refers to the many hidden and subtle advantages one has simply by virtue of being White. Although that essay is readily available online, here are some of her examples, which I hope convey the simplicity of the translation from racial privilege to political privilege in the social sciences:

I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world’s majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.

I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.

If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.

In my experience, many Whites have one of two reactions when they first come across McIntosh’s essay: (a) “Wow, I

never thought about it like that,” or (b) “Give me a break.” If you are a liberal social scientist, and even if you are not, you may have a similar reaction here to examples of liberal privilege.

Nowhere in this commentary do I claim or imply that discrimination against scholarship that seems to support conservative ideas in academia is comparable to discrimination experienced by any particular demographic group in the broader culture. One does not need a competition for victimhood or “privilegedness” to acknowledge that under the right (or wrong) circumstances, many different groups have been privileged and/or victimized by discrimination. McIntosh’s essay was a good model for communicating the broad and diverse nature of White privilege. It is also a good model for communicating the broad and diverse nature of liberal privilege in psychology and the social sciences.

Failed Attempts to Justify or Defend Liberal Privilege in the Social Sciences

Common attempts to defend psychology from accusations that it engages in discourses and practices that sustain a liberal hegemony within it and that it distorts the extent to which scientific findings support liberal ideology are deeply flawed. Some of the following defenses have appeared in traditional scholarly outlets (e.g., Jost et al., 2009) and others have appeared in online venues for exchanges of ideas among scientists and between scientists and the lay public (e.g., Haidt, 2011; Jost, 2011, and the ensuing discussions).

“*Liberal scientific bias is not like racism or sexism because people choose their politics*”

This defense is both true and a true red herring. Political groups are definitely different from demographic groups in many ways, but none are relevant to determining whether conservative individuals and ideas are stigmatized in psychology. Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot murdered their real and imagined *political* opponents in unimaginably massive numbers. Every reader of this journal knows that discrimination can and does manifest in a myriad of ways that fall short of mass murder (e.g., the McCarthy hearings and Hollywood blacklistings of the 1950s). Each of the following are, like liberals and conservatives but unlike race and sex, groups people choose (to at least some degree) and all have been victims of discrimination in some places and at some points in history: Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Copts, Buddhists, atheists, immigrants, American Communists, and human rights advocates.

“*We are objective scientists, driven by data, not politics*”

This statement represents an ideal, but the proportion of social scientists who share it is unclear. Many people explicitly choose careers in the social sciences to advance their political values (e.g., Unger, 2011) or explicitly advocate infusing

left-wing agendas into “science” (e.g., Jost & Kruglanski, 2002; Lather, 1986). Numerous sources of bias that do not necessarily but can serve political goals have been identified (Freedman, 2010; Ioannidis, 2005; Rosenthal & Fode, 1963; Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011). The room for bias is so great that manifestly false results have been demonstrated by traditional techniques (Simmons et al., 2011), and a leading medical researcher has concluded that most published findings are false (Ioannidis, 2005). Common conclusions in social psychology about stereotypes, self-fulfilling prophecies, interpersonal expectancies, bias, and accuracy are often disconnected from the accumulated bodies of evidence, and the most extreme misinterpretations and misrepresentations consistently bolster a liberal worldview (Jussim, 2012).

If you are critical of Inbar and Lammers (2012) for what you claim are purely scientific reasons, then I have a purely scientific question for you. What could disconfirm your belief that social and personality psychology are objective fields whose conclusions are entirely untainted by political biases? (Here is an empirical, disconfirmable prediction that readers can test for themselves: None of the commentaries critical of Inbar & Lammers, 2012, will provide an answer to this question.) Until you answer that question, and unless your answer applies the same standards routinely used by social scientists to reveal biases in everyone else, we cannot even begin to have a scientific discussion of these issues. Legitimization of liberal privilege damages the very status of the social sciences as *sciences*.

“Scientists are not perfect, but the scientific process of peer review and replication ensures that the truth will eventually win out”

This defense is oblivious to the extensive scholarship on problems with peer review (Armstrong, 1995; Ioannidis, 2005) and with the often dismal fate of failed replications. Both conceptual and exact failures to replicate classic studies often have difficulty getting published, and, even when they do get published, they typically receive a tiny fraction of the attention that the original, irreplicable studies receive. For example, a study showing that stereotypes function as hypotheses leading to their own confirmation (Darley & Gross, 1983), a result clearly consistent with a liberal narrative emphasizing the pervasiveness of inegalitarian and irrational biases, has been cited almost 800 times according to Google Scholar (as of 5/30/12). The paper reporting two failed exact replications (Baron, Albright, & Malloy, 1995) has been cited fewer than 30 times.

“Accusations of bias are antiscientific”

This defense was provided by J. Jost (2011). It is impossible to evaluate this defense without knowing what a scientific claim is, and, unfortunately, J. Jost (2011) did not define it. Therefore, I present some of my own criteria (among others; see Jussim, 2012, for a fuller exposition) that must be met. For a

claim to be considered scientific, it (a) has to be capable of disconfirmation by data, (b) cannot yet be overwhelmingly disconfirmed by data, and (c) should lead to the generation of new knowledge. Inbar and Lammers (2012) research clearly meets these standards. As such, it is one of the many scientific refutations of a claim that accusations of political bias are inherently un- or antiscientific (for other refutations, see, e.g., Abramowitz et al., 1975; Rothman et al., 2005). Their empirical exposure of ideological bias holds out the hope and promise of elevating the scientific quality, credibility, and validity of social psychology.

Comments From Experts in Implicit Bias

In their defense of the validity of implicit biases, J. T. Jost et al. (2009) made some points worth taking to heart here. Once again standing on the shoulders of giants, I suggest that their points (primarily made regarding implicit demographic biases) can just as readily be applied to blatant political discrimination in the social sciences:

“ . . . sincerity (and good intention) has absolutely nothing to do with it. The fact is that many people are sincere in holding egalitarian ideals and yet harbor implicit biases (e.g., Devine, 1989).” (p. 54)

“ . . . strategies for overcoming implicit bias . . . include cultivating egalitarian motives . . . exposing people to favorable, counter-stereotypical exemplars . . . providing opportunities for emotional reconditioning . . . , increasing vigilance about one’s subtle behavior during interactions with disadvantaged others, and educating people about their implicit biases. . . ” (p. 56)

Although Inbar and Lammers (2012) documented explicit, not implicit, support for discriminating against conservative individuals and ideas, educating researchers about their potential for bias is undoubtedly a good thing. Social scientists whose egalitarianism is not restricted to their ideological comrades, and who place science above politics, will be appalled by these findings and, I hope, will be motivated to do something constructive about it. Social scientists committed to defending the privileges of leftwing comrades-in-arms will likely be threatened by it and, consequently, hostile. Which are you?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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

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