

Conservatism is not the missing viewpoint for true diversity

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ABSTRACT

The target paper diagnoses a dominance of liberal viewpoints with little evidence, promotes a conservative viewpoint without defining it, and wrongly projects the US liberal-conservative spectrum to the whole field. Instead, we propose to anticipate and reduce mixing of theorizing and ideology by using definitions that acknowledge perspective divergence, promote representative sampling and observation of the field, and dialogical publication.

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We agree with Duarte and colleagues in two regards: Yes, there are problems with under-representation of some viewpoints among academics in social psychology, and, yes, theory and ideology are occasionally mixed in theory building and testing. However, we do not think their examples of under-representation and ideology-driven social psychological research are typical of the field. We also believe their proposals are neither necessary nor sufficient.

We question three basic assumptions of the target article: Are “liberal” ideologies biasing social psychological theorizing more than other, more “conservative” ideologies? Is there solid evidence for under-representation of conservatives? Would conservative viewpoints render social psychology more representative in any meaningful way?

Social psychologists often hold an individualist conceptualization of human nature, and neglect relational and collective self-aspects. This fits the conservative viewpoint better than more liberal or left worldviews. The same is true for the neglect of culture’s role in human evolution, leading to sometimes questionable biologicistic hypotheses in evolutionary psychology. Together, these have probably done more harm to psychological theorizing than the prominence of some liberal ideology in some specific social psychological theories that are rightly pointed out by the target article.

The evidence for the claims of under-representation is rather weak. One of the target article’s data points is a show of hands at the 2011 Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP) meeting. One of us was present at this occasion, but could not raise a hand because the categorization used did not fit the political orientation of this researcher. Better investigations of researchers’ standing on various issues would be needed before such claims of homogeneity could be made.

The target article’s stated goal is to promote non-liberal worldviews in general, but in practice it relies solely on contrasting liberals and conservatives within the political spectrum of the United States. It is troubling that the conservative viewpoint, in contrast to the liberal narrative, is never properly characterized or defined. Historic changes in the U.S. conservative ideology since the 1980s or today’s fissures in the conservative political movement of the United States are completely ignored. It is also surprising that U.S. political worldviews are generalized *pro toto* to the whole field of social psychology. Contrasting liberalism and conservatism is misleading in at least four ways:

1. Even from a U.S. perspective, conservatism may not be the most important missing viewpoint or group – there are also nonvoters, various immigrant groups whose ideology fits neither conservatism nor liberalism, and people who do not categorize

themselves as either conservatives or liberals, including some of the authors of the target article.

2. From a European perspective, the differences between U.S. conservatives and U.S. liberals often seem marginal, and often both seem to the right of the political spectrum. For instance, many representatives of U.S. liberals and conservatives alike are much more skeptical towards the idea of a welfare state than are the majority of Europeans.

3. From a global perspective, using political orientation as a criterion would in fact require the recruitment of far more diverse viewpoints, such as environmentalists, pacifists, communists, fascists, separatists, jihadists, and so forth. People from North America and Western Europe are in many respects very exceptional and not representative of the majority of cultures (Henrich et al., 2010).

4. Political orientation is only one of a number of dimensions by which to categorize people, including academics. This is briefly acknowledged in the target article, but other dimensions such as ethnicity, race, and gender are reduced to demographic diversity and dismissed as adding nothing beyond the conservative-liberal dimension. This is clearly too narrow. Cultural psychology has accumulated ample evidence for the diverse psychologies shaped by socialization.

In sum, the heterogeneity of today's societies in the United States and the West in general, as well as globally, undermines the basic assumption that especially conservative viewpoints are needed for a more representative social psychology.

Political diversity as such does not prevent the mixing of ideology with theory. Nothing is to be gained from counterbalancing well-established but allegedly liberally biased theories with conservatively biased theories. Instead, social psychologists need to distinguish between their roles as researchers and political citizens (Waldzus et al., 2012). Perspective dependency is unavoidable and has therefore to be accounted for in the theoretical and empirical process. The following measures can help achieve this.

Define psychological constructs such that they incorporate diverging perspectives where appropriate. For example, Mummendey and Wenzel (1999) define discrimination as "an ingroup's subjectively justified unequal, usually disadvantageous, evaluation or treatment of an outgroup, that the latter (or an outside observer) would deem unjustified" (p. 159).

Define the target population, also with the help of sociological and anthropological literature, and seek to understand it before testing hypotheses. The goal is to adapt manipulations, hypotheses, and measures to divergent perspectives. Useful methods include observation, interviews, and surveys with open questions. Anticipate misunderstandings between subcultures (Rozin, 2001). This requires changes in the

culture of editorial decision making and reviewing to value and publish descriptive data that cannot (yet) be theoretically explained or predicted.

Establish and promote publication formats that reinforce or even require debate (such as the dialogical publication scheme used by Behavioral and Brain Sciences), across disciplinary boundaries as well. The goal is to help discover blind spots and mistakes caused by a too narrow perspective.

The target article could have provided a great service to the field if it had characterized the pitfalls of the liberal viewpoint properly and promoted concepts of diversity beyond it in general. However, by promoting an undefined conservative viewpoint as the main missing perspective, we are afraid that the target article does more harm than good: It proposes a pseudo-solution that could create an illusion of objectivity through “diversity” while preventing the field from taking effective necessary steps to overcome its actual ideological biases.

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