

Authors of target article: José L. Duarte, Jarret T. Crawford, Charlotta Stern, Jonathan Haidt, Lee Jussim, and Philip E. Tetlock

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Title: Political Attitudes in Social Environments

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Abstract:

We agree with the authors that it is worthwhile to study professions' political alignments. But we have seen no evidence to support the idea that social science fields with more politically diverse workforces generally produce better research. We also think that when considering ideological balance, it is useful to place social psychology within a larger context of the prevailing ideologies of other influential groups within society, such as military officers, journalists, and business executives.

Main text:

Although we appreciate several things about the Duarte et al. essay, "Political Diversity Will Improve Social Psychological Science," including its insistence that social scientists should work to minimize the impact of their political views on their research and its sensitivity to political threats to social science funding, we find their central argument unpersuasive. Contrary to the assertion of the authors, we have seen no evidence that social science fields with more politically diverse workforces have higher evidentiary standards, are better able to avoid replication failures, or generally produce better research. As there are no standardized ways to measure these outcomes at the disciplinary or subdisciplinary level, and as reliable data on researcher politics at the disciplinary and subdisciplinary level are scarce, there have never been—to our

knowledge—any systematic attempts to examine the relationship between epistemic quality and variation in the political composition of the social-scientific community. The authors are thus calling for major changes in policy and practice based on sheer speculation. The authors cite some evidence of the benefits of “viewpoint diversity” in collaboration, but there is a scale mismatch between these studies (of small groups) and the field-level generalizations the authors make. In point of fact, research on the history and sociology of social science suggests that scientific/intellectual movements that bundle together political commitments and programs for research—movements of the sort the authors believe to have weakened social and personality psychology—have arisen under a wide range of political conditions, as have countermovements calling for greater objectivity. Until we know more about these and related dynamics, it would be premature to tinker with organizational machineries for knowledge production in the social sciences, however much one may worry, alongside the authors, about certain current trends.

In addition we think it is helpful to consider the Duarte et al. argument in a broader context by considering other fields that lean strongly to the left or to the right. The cleanest analogy, perhaps, is between college professors (who are disproportionately liberal Democrats) and military officers (mostly conservative Republicans; see the research of political scientist Jason Dempsey, 2009). In both cases there seems to be a strong connection between the environment and the ideology. Universities have (with some notable exceptions) been centers of political radicalism for centuries, just as the military has long been a conservative institution in most places (again, with some exceptions). And this is true even though many university professors are well-paid, live well, and send their children to private schools, and even though the U.S. military has been described as the one of the few remaining bastions of socialism remaining in the 21st century. Another example of a liberal-leaning profession is journalism (with its frequently-cited dictum to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” and again the relative liberalism of that profession has been confirmed by polls of journalists, for example Weaver et al., 2003), while business executives represent an important, and influential, conservative group in American society. There has been some movement to balance out the liberal bias of journalism in the United States, but it is not clear what would be done to balance political representation among military officers or corporate executives.

In short, we applaud the work of Duarte et al. in exploring the statistics and implications of political attitudes among social researchers. The psychology profession is, like the military, an all-volunteer force, and it is not clear to us that the purported benefits of righting the ideological balance among social psychologists (or among military officers, or corporate executives) are worth the efforts that would be involved in such endeavors. But these sorts of ideological what-ifs make interesting thought experiments.

References:

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Weaver, D., Beam, R., Brownlee, B., Voakes, P. S., and Wilhoit, G. C. (2003). *The American Journalist Survey*. Bloomington: Indiana University School of Journalism.