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A conservative's social psychology

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Commentary on Duarte et al. [BBS 38, 2015] – revised by CCE>

<RH>*Commentary/Duarte et al.: Political diversity will improve social psychological science*

<CT>**A conservative’s social psychology**

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<http://www.brynmawr.edu/psychology/McCauley1.html>

<C-AB>**Abstract:** I suggest that social psychologists should stick to studying positive and negative attitudes and give up stigmatizing some attitudes as “prejudice.” I recommend that we avoid assuming that race and ethnicity have no biological foundations, in order to avoid a collision course with modern biology. And I wonder how much difference the target article recommendations can make in the context of hiring a social psychologist for an academic position.

<C-Text begins>

“Conservative” means different things to different people. In my case it means a conservative Catholic, fearful of big government, big business, and the decline of individual liberties that accompanies and outlasts every war the United States engages.

I point out two issues in social psychology that call for conservative attention, then reflect briefly on recommendations for increasing political pluralism in social psychology.

<CB>***Social psychology without prejudice.*** Duarte et al. summarize studies showing that liberals can be prejudiced against conservatives, just as conservatives can be prejudiced against liberals. But I want to take this issue a step further to problematize – as postmodern liberals like to say – the very concept of prejudice.

The empirical warrant for the concept of prejudice is that some attitudes, both negative and positive, cannot be understood with social psychology's everyday armamentarium of attitude theory and research. This logic led to research on the authoritarian personality and other efforts to show that there is something special and defective about the kind of people who have conservative prejudices. But if now we begin to see that self-serving bias is part of the human condition, perhaps we can do without the concept of prejudice.

Suppose I sit farther away from someone I know to be a smoker, I'm less friendly in conversation with smokers than with non-smokers, and I associate positive words faster with non-smokers and negative words faster with smokers. I might argue that I do not have a prejudice against smokers, rather I have a negative attitude toward smokers because they threaten me in various ways: Smoking is disgusting, smokers smell bad, smokers lack self-control, and smokers are an expensive drag on our health care system.

And so might conservatives find reasons for seeing liberals and their policies as threatening in various ways, just as liberals find reasons for seeing conservatives and their policies as threatening. It might help the much-mourned political dialogue between liberals and conservatives if we could do without stigmatizing “their” views as “prejudice.” Let’s go back to studying attitudes and erase “prejudice” from our textbooks and journals.

<CB> **Constructions of race and ethnicity.** Race and ethnicity are social constructions; we are not born with access to these categories, we must learn them. But are they only social constructions? Do race and ethnicity exist only in our minds or do these categories have some objective foundation? Here I want to raise the possibility that there are biological differences between groups socially recognized as racial and ethnic groups.

In medicine, ethnic profiling has emerged in several domains (Burchard et al. 2003). There are ethnic group differences in diseases, such as Tay-Sachs and sickle-cell anemia. There are ethnic differences in response to drugs, such as weaker response to beta-blockers for African Americans and greater sensitivity to opioids for Chinese. Ethnic profiling in medicine can be controversial (Wade 2003), but sometimes discrimination is in the patient’s interest.

It is in genetics that the most controversial results have emerged. Rosenberg et al. (2003) studied 4,682 alleles from 377 markers in 1,056 individuals from 52 tribal and national groups across 5 continents. Results showed 94% of genetic variation was within group, 2% between groups of the same region, and 4% between regions. Clustering by similarity produced seven regions: Africa, Europe, Middle East, Central/South Asia, East Asia, Melanesia, and America.

These clusters are uncomfortably close to the old-fashioned “races of man,” and the work has led to extended arguments about the clustering techniques used and the fuzzy boundaries between clusters (Lewontin 2006). Will biology find genetic correlates of ethnicity and race? It may be dangerous to bet against a modern biology that can already test DNA to predict eye color coupled to hair color (Walsh et al. 2013). Can genetic differences contribute to cultural differences? There is broad genetic variation in every sizable human group, but it is possible that small statistical differences at a few loci may push groups in different cultural directions.

Taken together, developments in medicine and genetics suggest that social psychologists should avoid assumptions that might put us on a collision course with modern biology. Human groups can be socially constructed without denying the possibility of biological group differences, just as breeds of dogs can be socially constructed without denying the biological substrate that breeders work with.

<CB> ***Will the recommendations make a difference?*** In the concluding paragraph of the target article, Duarte et al. recognize that bias against conservatives is a problem, not just for social-personality psychology but for most of psychology and indeed most of social science. This is a key observation because it points to the vulnerability of conservatives applying for an academic position.

In the current job market, where hundreds of applications are submitted for each job opening, the first winnowing of applications almost begs the selection committee to exercise their values in fast and furious reactions to the pile of applications. The selection committee for a social psychology position usually includes department members who are not social psychologists, but this is no help when psychologists in general run 10:1 liberal versus conservative.

Worse yet, psychology department selection committees in recent years are likely to include non-psychologists who are selected for liberal values. Pressures to hire more minority faculty will often bring a provost's representative onto the committee to make sure that at least one finalist is a minority candidate. The same pressures will usually ensure that a minority student is a member of the committee.

Imagine the reactions of these professional liberals to a job candidate whose research suggests that stereotypes are not all wrong, or that liberals are prejudiced against conservatives, or that race and ethnicity are more than arbitrary constructions. Now imagine that the social psychologist on the committee wades through these liberal

reactions to suggest that social psychological science might be improved by giving more attention to this candidate . . .

The target article is a heartening start, but so long as psychology, the social sciences, and academic institutions are all dominated by liberal values, I fear that the recommendations suggested by Duarte et al. can do little to raise political diversity in social psychology.

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