

Social psychologists espouse tolerance and diversity—do they walk the walk?

September 6 2012

Every ten years or so, someone will make the observation that there is a lack of political diversity among psychological scientists and a discussion about what ought to be done ensues. The notion that the field discriminates against and is skewed toward a liberal political perspective is worthy of concern; scholars, both within and outside the field, have offered various solutions to this diversity problem.

As psychological scientists Yoel Inbar and Joris Lammers point out, however, we have few of the relevant facts necessary to understand and address the issue.

In an article to be published in the September 2012 issue of [Perspectives on Psychological Science](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, Inbar and Lammers, of Tilburg University, pose several questions in an attempt to better understand the ideological diversity between and within [social psychologists](#).

Inbar and Lammers contacted members on the mailing list for the Society for Personality and [Social Psychology](#) and asked them to participate in an anonymous [online survey](#). Across the two studies, the researchers received nearly 800 responses.

Their findings confirm the field's liberal bias, but they reveal some surprises as well.

Although only 6 percent of the respondents described themselves as

conservative "overall," there was much more ideological diversity than anecdotal evidence would suggest. Inbar and Lammers found an overwhelming liberal majority when it concerned [social issues](#), but greater diversity on economic and foreign policy issues.

So why does the field appear to be less politically diverse than it actually is? It seems that conservative social psychologists hide their views because they perceive the field as hostile to their values. The more conservative respondents were, the more likely they were to report that they had experienced an intellectually unfriendly climate. Importantly, self-defined [liberals](#) did not seem to have the same perceptions of [hostility](#).

Furthermore, liberal [respondents](#) were more likely to say that they would discriminate against psychologists who displayed clear conservative views in the context of a paper or grant review, a symposium invitation, and in faculty hiring.

The September issue of *Perspectives on Psychological Science* includes five commentaries from scholars in the field who explore and discuss these new findings. While some of the commentators question the rigorousness of the methodology used by Inbar and Lammers, they all agree that ideological bias among social psychologists has serious implications for psychology as a scientific discipline.

Social tolerance and fairness are important values for many psychological scientists, so it's surprising to find intolerance of a different kind in the field. And despite the fact that psychological scientists are well aware of the potentially harmful effects of cognitive biases, they are clearly not immune to such biases themselves.

Several of the commentaries raise serious questions about how ideology might be shaping the issues and questions that social psychologists

systematically choose – and do not choose – to explore.

It may be the case that the field attracts a certain kind of inquiring and open mind that tends to embrace liberal values, and that conservatives self-select out of the field. But this, most of the commentators agree, does not change the fact that pervasive liberal bias is unhealthy for intellectual inquiry.

As Inbar and Lammers and all five commentators suggest, the time is ripe for self-examination in the field.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Social psychologists espouse tolerance and diversity—do they walk the walk? (2012, September 6) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-09-social-psychologists-espouse-tolerance-diversitydo.html>

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