

Social Scientist Sees Bias Within (Published 2011)

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SAN ANTONIO — Some of the world’s pre-eminent experts on bias discovered an unexpected form of it at their annual meeting.

Discrimination is always high on the agenda at the Society for Personality and Social Psychology’s conference, where psychologists discuss their research on racial prejudice, homophobia, sexism, stereotype threat and unconscious bias against minorities. But the most talked-about speech at this year’s meeting, which ended Jan. 30, involved a new “outgroup.”

It was identified by Jonathan Haidt (<http://people.virginia.edu/~jdh6n/>), a social psychologist at the University of Virginia who studies the intuitive foundations of morality and ideology. He polled his audience at the San Antonio Convention Center, starting by asking how many considered themselves politically liberal. A sea of hands appeared, and Dr. Haidt estimated that liberals made up 80 percent of the 1,000 psychologists in the ballroom. When he asked for centrists and libertarians, he spotted fewer than three dozen hands. And then, when he asked for conservatives, he counted a grand total of three.

“This is a statistically impossible lack of diversity,” Dr. Haidt concluded, noting polls showing that 40 percent of Americans are conservative and 20 percent are liberal. In his speech (<http://www.authorstream.com/Presentation/jhaidt-819710-haidt-postpartisan-social-psychology/>) and in an interview, Dr. Haidt argued that social psychologists are a “tribal-moral community” united by “sacred values” that hinder research and damage their credibility — and blind them to the hostile climate they’ve created for non-liberals.

“Anywhere in the world that social psychologists see women or minorities underrepresented by a factor of two or three, our minds jump to discrimination as the explanation,” said Dr. Haidt, who called himself a longtime liberal turned centrist. “But when we find out that conservatives are underrepresented among us by a factor of more than 100, suddenly everyone finds it quite easy to generate alternate explanations.”



Credit...Viktor Koen

Dr. Haidt (pronounced *height*) told the audience that he had been corresponding with a couple of non-liberal graduate students in social psychology whose experiences reminded him of closeted gay students in the 1980s. He quoted — anonymously — from their e-mails describing how they hid their feelings when colleagues made political small talk and jokes predicated on the assumption that everyone was a liberal.

“I consider myself very middle-of-the-road politically: a social liberal but fiscal conservative. Nonetheless, I avoid the topic of politics around work,” one student wrote. “Given what I’ve read of the literature, I am certain any research I conducted in political psychology would provide contrary findings and, therefore, go unpublished. Although I think I could make a substantial contribution to the knowledge base, and would be excited to do so, I will not.”

The politics of the professoriate has been studied (http://www.criticalreview.com/2004/pdfs/cardiff_klein.pdf) by the economists Christopher Cardiff and Daniel Klein and the sociologists Neil Gross and Solon Simmons. They’ve independently found that Democrats typically outnumber Republicans at elite universities by at least six to one among the general faculty, and by higher ratios in the humanities and social sciences. In a 2007 study of both elite and non-elite universities, Dr. Gross and Dr. Simmons reported (http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~ngross/lounsbery_9-25.pdf) that nearly 80 percent of psychology professors are Democrats, outnumbering Republicans by nearly 12 to 1.

The fields of psychology, sociology and anthropology have long attracted liberals, but they became more exclusive after the 1960s, according to Dr. Haidt. “The fight for civil rights and against racism became the sacred cause unifying the left throughout American society, and within the academy,” he said, arguing that this shared morality both “binds and blinds.”

“If a group circles around sacred values, they will evolve into a tribal-moral community,” he said. “They’ll embrace science whenever it supports their sacred values, but they’ll ditch it or distort it as soon as it threatens a sacred value.” It’s easy for social scientists to observe this process in other communities, like the fundamentalist Christians who embrace “intelligent design” while rejecting Darwinism. But academics can be selective, too, as Daniel Patrick Moynihan found in 1965 when he warned about the rise of unmarried parenthood and welfare dependency among blacks — violating the taboo against criticizing victims of racism.

“Moynihan was shunned by many of his colleagues at Harvard as racist,” Dr. Haidt said. “Open-minded inquiry into the problems of the black family was shut down for decades, precisely the decades in which it was most urgently needed. Only in the last few years have liberal sociologists begun to acknowledge that Moynihan was right all along.”

Credit...Viktor Koen

Similarly, Larry Summers, then president of Harvard, was ostracized in 2005 for wondering publicly

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/18/national/18harvard.html>) whether the preponderance of male professors in some top math and science departments might be due partly to the larger variance in I.Q. scores among men (meaning there are more men at the very high and very low ends). “This was not a permissible hypothesis,” Dr. Haidt said. “It blamed the victims rather than the powerful. The outrage ultimately led to his resignation. We psychologists should have been outraged by the outrage. We should have defended his right to think freely.”

Instead, the taboo against discussing sex differences was reinforced, so universities and the National Science Foundation went on spending tens of millions of dollars on research and programs based on the assumption that female scientists faced discrimination and various forms of unconscious bias. But that assumption has been repeatedly contradicted, most recently in a study published Monday

(<http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2011/02/02/1014871108.abstract>) in The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences by two Cornell psychologists, Stephen J. Ceci and Wendy M. Williams. After reviewing two decades of research, they report that a woman in academic science typically fares as well as, if not better than, a comparable man when it comes to being interviewed, hired, promoted, financed and published.

“Thus,” they conclude, “the ongoing focus on sex discrimination in reviewing, interviewing and hiring represents costly, misplaced effort. Society is engaged in the present in solving problems of the past.” Instead of presuming discrimination in science or expecting the sexes to show equal interest in every discipline, the Cornell researchers say, universities should make it easier for women in any field to combine scholarship with family responsibilities.

Can social scientists open up to outsiders’ ideas? Dr. Haidt was optimistic enough to title his speech “The Bright Future of Post-Partisan Social Psychology,” urging his colleagues to focus on shared science rather than shared moral values. To overcome taboos, he advised them to subscribe to National Review (<http://www.nationalreview.com/>) and to read Thomas Sowell’s (<http://www.tsowell.com/>) “A Conflict of Visions.”

For a tribal-moral community, the social psychologists in Dr. Haidt’s audience seemed refreshingly receptive to his argument. Some said he overstated how liberal the field is, but many agreed it should welcome more ideological diversity.

A few even endorsed his call for a new affirmative-action goal: a membership that's 10 percent conservative by 2020. The society's executive committee didn't endorse Dr. Haidt's numerical goal, but it did vote to put a statement on the group's home page (<http://www.spsp.org/>) welcoming psychologists with "diverse perspectives." It also made a change on the "Diversity Initiatives" page (<http://www.spsp.org/divprog.htm>) — a two-letter correction of what it called a grammatical glitch, although others might see it as more of a Freudian slip.

In the old version, the society announced that special funds to pay for travel to the annual meeting were available to students belonging to "underrepresented groups (i.e., ethnic or racial minorities, first-generation college students, individuals with a physical disability, and/or lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered students)."

As Dr. Haidt noted in his speech, the "i.e." implied that this was the exclusive, sacred list of "underrepresented groups." The society took his suggestion to substitute "e.g." — a change that leaves it open to other groups, too. Maybe, someday, even to conservatives.

A correction was made on

Feb. 10, 2011

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Because of an editing error, the Findings column on Tuesday, about political bias among social scientists, omitted the last four words of a sentence that countered the notion that female scientists face discrimination and various forms of unconscious bias. The sentence should have read: But that assumption has been repeatedly contradicted, most recently in a study published Monday in The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences by two Cornell psychologists, Stephen J. Ceci and Wendy M. Williams.

How we handle corrections

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