CHOICE OF RESEARCH TOPICS AND THE VALIDITY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE: THE CASE OF POLITICAL BIAS

Carlos David Navarrete
Department of Psychology
Ecology, Evolutionary Biology and Behavior Program
Michigan State University

(with Josh Tybur, UV University Amsterdam)
Political Bias as a Scientific Hurdle: Roadmap

- Cultural blinders in psychology
- Addressing cultural blinders
- Commitment to Objectivity/Rigor
  - Example: Evolutionary Psychology

J. Tybur
L. Jussim
J. Haidt
S. Pinker

P. Tetlock
Research Questions/Topics

• Our understanding of human condition influenced by choice in research questions and topics
• Life experiences shape interest in research questions
• ...but so does culture
Culture Blindness and the Validity of Psychological Science

- **WEIRD** (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010)
  - Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic
- U.S. researchers (Lee, 2009)
- Disciplinary insularity (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992)
- IQ, Conscientiousness, Openness (Barrick & Mount, 1992)
Culture Blindness and the Validity of Psychological Science

- Left-leaning political orientation (Duarte et al. in press)
  - Contributions of political diversity to furthering social/political psychology well-demonstrated (e.g. Tetlock, 1972…2015)
- Conclusions suspect where liberal narrative unchallenged
  - Race bias, gender roles, stereotyping, environmentalism, power, inequality, morality, political psychology, sexual orientation, intelligence, genetic and cultural contributions to inequality, avoidance of sexual coercion, sex differences
Addressing Cultural Blinders: Demographics

- WEIRD and interdisciplinarity
  - Funding incentives
  - Centers, meetings, colloquia
  - Research initiatives
- Progress is being made
Addressing Cultural Blinders: Personality

- Intelligence, conscientiousness, openness relative to general public?
Addressing Cultural Blinders: Liberal Bias  
(Tetlock, 1994)

- Political bias addressed by commitment to *objectivity*
- Turnabout test: Imagine opposite question, if it sounds loaded, it probably is not objective in its original form
  - e.g. “Endorsement of the myth of meritocracy” vs. “Denial of the efficacy of hard work.”
- Theoretical integration: Are there strong theoretical reasons to choose one or the other?
  - e.g. gravity, kin altruism, etc.
Addressing Cultural Blinders: Liberal Bias
(Duarte et al. in press)

• Political bias addressed by commitment to *diversity*
  • Formulate anti-discrimination resolution
  • Study challenges/obstacles of non-liberals
  • Sensitivity to bias in language
  • Encourage and support training programs to attract, retain, and promote non-liberals early career scholars
• Affirmative action for conservatives
Solutions Depend on Cause of Lack of Political Diversity

• Self-Selection vs. Discrimination
  • Preferences or aptitudes are held constant?
• Self selection argument must consider related disciplines
  • Economics, political science, behavioral biology, etc.
    • Formal models?
  • I/O psych, JDM, behavioral genetics, etc.
  • Game theory and *evolutionary psychology*
Evolutionary Psychology

- EP characterized as right wing. Why?
- EP foundations draw on evolutionary biology, game theory, economics, anthropology but is apolitical
- Novel research findings on edgy topics found by evolutionary scholars by commitment to
  - Rooting hypotheses in strong theory (e.g. parental investment and sexual selection)
  - Mindfulness to levels of explanation (ultimate and proximate)
  - Mindfulness of facts vs. values distinction
    - Avoiding naturalistic and moralistic fallacies
- …and this in spite of stigmatization and bias
Evolutionary Psychology: A Pseudo-Scientific Political Agenda?

• “The political agenda of evolutionary psychology is transparently part of a right-wing libertarian attack on collectivity, above all the welfare state.” - Rose & Rose, 2000

• “Darwinian psychologists seem to have a right wing bias…they favor the status quo.” - Dagg, 2005

• “As a feminist and a scholar, I feel duty-bound to protect the unwary journal readership from this type of inherently sexist scholarship.” - anonymous JPSP reviewer
Right Wing Evolutionary Psychologists?
(Tybur, Miller, & Gangestad, 2007)

• “Individual Civil Rights” (six items)
  • E.g. “Homosexuals should have the same marriage rights…”

• “Political Compassion” (five items)
  • The U.S. Government should provide universal health care..
  • “The minimum wage should be raised significantly”

• “Wealth Redistribution” (five items)
  • I’m in favor of a flat tax…” (Reversed)
Right Wing Evolutionary Psychology?

EPs no less liberal than Non-EPs

Tybur, Miller, & Gangestad, 2007
Commitment to Scientific Rigor?

• “Strong Science” (seven items)
  • “Science is the best tool for understanding how the world works”
  • “We must use strong scientific methods to truly understand social problems like racism, sexism, and sexual assault”

• “Scientific Skepticism” (five items)
  • “Scientific researchers are inherently biased, and effects of their ideological motives should be critically considered”
  • “Many academic papers reflect how the author wishes the world was rather than how it actually is”
Commitment to Science?

EPs no less committed to scientific rigor than Non-EPs

Tybur, Miller, & Gangestad, 2007
Conclusions/Extensions

- How does political ideology differ across disciplines, sub-disciplines, and perspectives?
- Are some disciplined less politically biased than others or are less likely to conflate facts and values?
- How is ideology and scientific progress linked?
- How is theoretical integration within research areas linked to problems, fraud and best practices?
- If objectivity is impossible, is the answer to institute even more partisanship, or is working to minimize our own biases a better way forward?