

A “cohesive moral community” is already patrolling behavioral science

A commentary on Duarte, J. L., Crawford, J. T., Stern, C., Haidt, J., Jussim, L., & Tetlock, P. E. (2015). Political diversity will improve social psychological science. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 38, 1-57.

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Abstract: Authors of non-liberal proposals experience more collegial objections than others do. These objections are often couched as criticism of determinism, reductionism, or methodological individualism, but from a scientific viewpoint such criticism could be easily answered. Underneath it is a wish to harness scientific belief in service of positive social values at the cost of reducing objectivity.

Text: Scientists are subject to the same distorting influences as everyone else. These include not only prejudice, ideology, and confirmation bias (sect. 4.1 and beyond); we are also subject to the social pressures generated when people harness belief as a self-control device. For instance, people have been shown to form exaggerated beliefs about the addictive effects of a single drug use, arguably to keep themselves from trying it (Hammersley & Reid 2002; Heyman 2009, pp. 27–38). This kind of effort readily becomes communal and brings social pressure to bear on scientific inquiry. For instance, there was outrage in the recovering alcoholic community at the Rand report that 15% of alcoholics could successfully return to controlled drinking (Roizen 1987). Many beliefs about psychological issues can be interpreted as advancing or hindering communal efforts at impulse control. Diversity of opinion interferes with any resulting “cohesive moral community” (sect. 3, paras. 1–2; sect. 3.1.1, para. 9), which relies on the consensus of all right-thinking people. Going by the findings of one of the coauthors (Haidt 2012), liberals are most apt to see immorality in callousness toward or belittling of disadvantaged people, whereas conservatives are more apt to see immorality in threats to social bonds, particularly as maintained by received wisdom.

A liberal moral community is already apparent within behavioral science. Among target articles in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* are many topics that one side or the other could see as

exciting people's lower impulses. Comparing just articles on which I happen to have written commentaries, the greater risks taken in making non-liberal arguments are evident. (I know nothing of the authors' personal politics.)

Liberal: Atran and Norenzayan (2004) argued that religious belief has been shaped by its adaptive functions, thus arguably replacing its sacredness with utility.

Non-liberal: Nell (2006) argued that cruelty serves an adaptive function, for both "perpetrators and spectators," thus potentially making it seem more normal.

Liberal: Müller and Schumann (2011) discussed potential instrumental uses of recreational drugs. Most of these are currently illegal, and the movements to at least reduce restrictions on them are favored by liberals (although also by libertarians).

Non-liberal by implication: Van de Vliert (2013) presented a statistical analysis suggesting that countries' cultural strengths are a function of climate and wealth. Since wealth is not a truly independent variable, this thesis would seem to support climatic determinism, which has been anathematized by liberals.

The psychological origin of religion is largely taken for granted among scientists, and only one of 25 commentators (Glassman) complained that Atran and Norenzayan belittled theology. With Müller and Schumann, only one of 19 commentators (Wu) seemed critical of a political implication ("Müller and Schumann . . . propose a staged drug policy that matches well the neoliberal governance scheme" [abstract]). On the other hand, several commentators blamed Nell for failing to uphold an environmental-pathology view of cruelty, leading him to comment, "There is a need for a "negative psychology" as a balance to the mandatory optimism of current Western (and especially American) psychology that holds to Enlightenment notions of an inexorable march to perfection, and blocks serious empirical research on, yes, evil." (p. 249)

Van de Vliert did not incur liberal criticism, but his complex model suggests wariness of political push-back (see my commentary [Ainslie 2013]). He was at pains to distance his proposal from climatic determinism, noting that it was "a sensitive subject" (p. 478). His own proposal was that both cold and hot climates impose stress, which interacts with a society's wealth to affect culture – in effect, stress that does not overwhelm you makes you stronger. However, cold stress had much greater effects than heat stress, and he did not analyze, or even mention, the dual role of wealth as both cause and effect. Even more remarkably, when a commentator pointed out the relevance of IQ as a factor (Allik & Realo 2013), the author acknowledged that "heat demands, cold demands, monetary resources, and their four interactions accounted for 62% of the variation in IQ across 106 countries" (p. 514); but he said that this was a negative finding, since "none of the four interaction effects reached significance." Van de Vliert appears to have found evidence that the absence of cold demands is associated with both lower IQ and less cultural advance – much as in climatic determinism – but this simple conclusion is obscured within a more complex one that does not offend liberal opinion.

The issue of determinism has been especially polarizing since E. O. Wilson's *Sociobiology* was published in 1975. Wilson's argument that many human character traits have a genetic basis led

to charges that “biological determinism” was an apology for a racist status quo (reviewed by Segerstråle 2000). The controversy endures (Laland & Brown 2011), and with it the suggestion that the genetics of some behavioral traits should not be studied to begin with (Hayden 2013). We might think that the critics mean climatic or biological *fatalism* – that is, sole determinism. However, there are some for whom determinism itself, which used to be accepted as a fundamental tenet of science, lays too heavy a hand on human choice – at least in the form of its implication, *reductionism* (the assumption that behavioral traits have a mechanistic basis):

Reductionism is a plague that grows proportionally as our society gets more sophisticated at controlling human behavior. We come to experience and conceptualize ourselves as powerless victims of mechanism, and thereby enter into a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Miller 2003, p. 63)

Also in question is the assumption that a group’s choices must be made entirely within the brains of the individual members – often criticized as “methodological individualism” (Udehn 2001).

Critics of determinist/reductionist/individualist approaches often fault them for precluding social influence. In doing so, they avoid recognizing three conciliatory possibilities:

- That an inborn or environmentally imposed predisposition is not complete “determination,” but is just prepared or prewired, a groove in the Lockean blank slate from which the chalk of behavior can deviate given adequate motivation.
- That individuals may derive reward from vicarious experience, so individual interests need not be selfish. (Indeed, they are sometimes overwhelmingly altruistic [Marsh et al. 2014].)
- That seeing the individual as the sole seat of motivation is compatible with studying the emergent properties of groups in their own right (Ross 2014, pp. 254–312) – “ontological individualism” as a component of “emergentism” (Sawyer 2002).

Thus, from a scientific point of view, socially oriented critics could easily find compatibility with more mechanistic approaches. But logical solutions notwithstanding, liberal criticism seems to be inspired by a wish for behavioral science to advance our humanistic values and forestall our invidious impulses.

This wish is the real root of the moral community that non-liberal dissent threatens to make less cohesive. My reaction is that censoring science to serve social policy has dire implications – this was, after all, what Pope Urban VIII was trying to do with Galileo. In any case, society needs to decide whether keeping non-liberals out of social science departments (sect. 2) will actually serve the goal of controlling base social impulses, and even if so, whether this goal is worth the divorce of belief from the best available research findings as judged in wide-ranging debate.

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