“Wait – you’re a conservative?” Political Diversity and the Dilemma of Disclosure

Jim A.C. Everett

Department of Experimental Psychology
University of Oxford
South Parks Road, Oxford
OX1 3UD, United Kingdom

+44 (0) 1865 271444
jim.everett@psy.ox.ac.uk
www.jimaceverett.com

Abstract
Many of the proposed recommendations for remedying the harmful effects of political homogeneity for psychology depend upon conservatives disclosing their political identity. Yet how likely is this, when disclosure is so harmful to the individual? Considering this issue as a social dilemma clarifies the pernicious nature of the problem, as well as suggesting how the dilemma can be resolved.

Target Article

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“Wait – you’re a conservative?” Political Diversity and the Dilemma of Disclosure

As Duarte and colleagues note in their thought-provoking and insightful article, there is a stunning lack of political diversity in social psychology. Ironically for a field in which one of the biggest topics of study is prejudice, the academy is both subtly and overtly hostile to conservatives (Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Jussim, 2012). Duarte et al.’s article was of particular interest to me, in part because I was one of the just 2% of graduate students who self-identified as conservative in Inbar and Lammers’ survey. I agree with the authors on almost all of their points in the target article, but also suggest that the authors fail to discuss an issue central to ameliorating the lack of diversity in the field: actually having people disclose their non-liberal political identities. Many of the proposed recommendations for improving the state of the field are predicated on having conservatives disclose their political identity. But how likely is this?

As I began my graduate studies in psychology, I faced an important choice: should I attempt to hide my own conservative political beliefs? Indeed, I was specifically advised by more than one social psychology professor to not disclose my own right-of-center politics if I wish to be successful in my career in social psychology. Here, I argue that disclosing one’s political identity in the present climate should be seen as a social dilemma. Considering this state of affairs as a social dilemma – situations in which collective interests are at odds with private interests – helps to clarify the pernicious nature of the problem, as well as suggesting how the problem can be ameliorated.

Social dilemmas have two fundamental characteristics:

1. Each individual receives a higher payoff for defecting from what is in the collective interest (e.g., using all the available resources for your own advantage) than for cooperating, regardless what other individuals do.
2. All individuals are better off if they all cooperate than if they all defect (Dawes, 1980; Hardin, 1968).

How does the issue of disclosing one’s non-liberal identity constitute a social dilemma? In short, the individual non-liberal researcher is better off by not disclosing, but the collective is better off by there being such disclosure.

The first prong of a social dilemma is that the individual researcher receives a higher payoff from defecting from what is in the common interest. Given the hostility in the field,
political conservatives are individually better off by not disclosing their political views. A researcher who hopes to win grants, publish papers in top-tier journals, and gain tenure would be individually better off by attempting to ‘pass’ as liberal. Yet should conservative psychologists – and particularly graduate students – simply try and hide their political beliefs? I suggest not.

The second prong of a social dilemma is that the collective is better off if everyone cooperates. If people do not disclose their non-liberal political identity and conservative social psychologists withdraw from this hostile environment, the field is much worse off – affecting liberals, conservatives, and all those in between. How so? As discussed at length in the target article, lack of diversity is harmful to the field for a number of reasons, including: liberal values and assumptions can become embedded into theories and methods; researchers may concentrate on topics that validate the liberal progression narrative and avoid topics that contest that narrative; and negative attitudes regarding conservatives can produce a science that mischaracterizes their traits and attributes.

Why is disclosure necessary to avoid this collective tragedy? Put simply, having openly conservative psychologists is a prerequisite for some of the most important solutions proposed by Duarte et al. Unless there are openly conservative psychologists, it will be impossible to engage in cross-political collaborations and have a base of non-liberal psychologists to act as reviewers. More broadly, the benefits of intergroup contact are well documented for reducing prejudice and encouraging cooperation (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Fundamentally, however, this depends on group members being identified as such – which is impossible if people hide their beliefs. Further, it is important for group memberships to be salient in intergroup encounters for the positive effects to generalize to other individuals and contexts (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). Unless individuals disclose their non-liberal political beliefs, a hostile climate will remain where prospective students are put off by the perceived lack of diversity. Having openly conservative psychologists is therefore essential to reducing hostility in the field.

What, therefore, is one to do? In their landmark paper, Messick and Brewer (1983) identify two types of solutions to social dilemmas: structural solutions and motivational solutions. Structural solutions are those that come about through organised group action, and often involve regulation or social coercion to constrain individual motivation in the collective interest. In contrast, individual motivational solutions rely on the individual preferences of the actors involved, seeking to maximize those factors that influence individuals to act for the collective good. To help resolve this dilemma, both structural and motivational solutions can
be employed. However, it is too much here to expect that conservatives should simply disclose their identities and face the resulting problems. Motivational solutions aimed at conservatives, therefore, are likely to have limited effectiveness. Rather, the structural features of our system must change to provide additional support and benefits to conservatives and reduce the costs of disclosure. It is liberals that are privileged in social psychology, and therefore liberals that must take the lead in breaking this down.

Perhaps the most important thing liberal psychologists can do is to actively be aware of their advantaged position in the field simply by virtue of their political beliefs, and challenge this wherever possible. It is liberals – not conservatives – that have both the greatest responsibility and the greatest power to create a climate in which open disclosure and acceptance of diversity is celebrated. Only then can we avoid the disastrous effects that political homogeneity will have on our discipline.
References


