

An Optimistic Take on  
Avoiding Liberal (and Other Sources) of Bias

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Clark and Winegard (2020) argue that humans have evolved to be particularly tribal, something that fosters ingroup and ideological biases, including tendencies to engage in selective exposure and avoidance (Frimer, Skitka, Moytl, 2017; Stroud, 2010), motivated skepticism or credulity toward respectively displeasing and pleasing information (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979), and hyper-defense of sacred values (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). Moreover, these biases are likely to be compounded and amplified when groups are ideologically homogenous. Given social scientists are overwhelmingly liberal, conditions are ripe for these different kinds of biases to influence what they choose to study, the hypotheses and theories they develop to explain politically sensitive topics like racial disparities or ideological differences, and how (un)critically they evaluate others' work on these topics. In other words, Clark and Winegard (2020), like others before them (e.g., Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim, & Tetlock, 2015; Mullen, Bauman & Skitka, 2003, Redding, 2001; Tetlock, 1994) are alarmed about the potential for liberal biases to undermine a scientific understanding of human psychology.

That the social sciences tend to skew liberal is undisputed. Whether and what to do about it, however, is more controversial. Duarte et al. (2015)'s solution was to develop programs and incentives to promote ideological diversity, which they argued would help to spark more creativity (e.g., Nemeth & Kwan, 1983) and integratively complex theorizing (Tetlock, Skitka, & Boettger, 1989) that is less likely to be biased. Although encouraging more ideological diversity in the social sciences is one possible remedy for liberal bias, we have argued that another and potentially more efficient solution to potential problems with liberal bias in the social sciences is

for researchers to adopt a more perspectivist philosophy of science and to design studies to allow for stronger inferences (e.g., Mullen et al., 2003; Washburn, Morgan, & Skitka, 2015; Washburn & Skitka, 2018).

The basic premise of a perspectivist philosophy of science is one that argues that all hypotheses are true at least under some circumstances (McGuire, 2004). The prescriptions of this philosophy are that before collecting data, researchers should consider not only their initial hypothesis but also its contrary. In other words, if one's initial hypothesis is that *X* will be *positively* correlated with *Y*, one should consider the possibility that *X* could be *negatively* correlated with *Y*. Considering both the initial hypothesis and its contrary generally requires one to think conditionally: Under what *conditions* will *X* be positively versus negatively related to *Y*? A perspectivist approach to hypothesis generation therefore favors the development of multiple competing hypotheses, a crucial step that by itself has considerable potential for debiasing one's research by reducing the researchers' personal investment in any one hypothesis, and by encouraging researchers to think in more integratively complex ways even in the absence of an ideologically oppositional collaborator.

A perspectivist approach to hypothesis generation is also consistent with Platt (1964)'s plea for scientists to take a strong inference approach to their work. Strong inferences require applying the following three steps to scientific problems: 1) Propose alternative hypotheses, 2) Design crucial experiments with multiple possible outcomes, and that can exclude one or more of one's hypotheses, and 3) Recycle the procedure to refine the possibilities that remain. A strong inference approach requires the researcher to use negative in addition to positive testing heuristics. Scientists, much like other humans, naturally gravitate toward using positive testing strategies, that is, focusing on testing their hypotheses in the conditions most favorable for

supporting them (Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956), in other words, a tendency toward confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998). Exclusive reliance on positive testing strategies, however, leads to systematic errors and inefficiencies in decision making (Klayman & Ha, 1987). Strong inferences require researchers to also engage in negative testing strategies, that is, strategies that allow for the possible disconfirmation of one or more hypotheses.

One very encouraging aspect of Clark and Wingard's (2019) review of the Bipartisan Ideological Awareness in the Social Sciences (BIASS) moment and the research that has come out since then is the degree to which researchers have increasingly embraced perspectivist and strong inference strategies to protect from liberal and other kinds of bias. Although some in the field were already using these strategies well before Haidt's SPSP talk and the Duarte et al. (2015) detailed critique of the field (e.g., Son Hing, Bobocel, Zanna & McBride, 2007; Skitka et al., 2002 for some examples), there nonetheless seems to be a recent growth industry in studies taking perspectivist approach, especially among researchers engaged in the ideological asymmetry versus symmetry debate (see Brandt & Crawford, in press for a review). We recently collected a sample of studies, for example, that tested hypotheses about ideological differences post-2015 (many of them overlapping with those included in Clark and Winegard's Table 1) and coded them for whether they tested competing hypotheses and used negative testing strategies: Of the 29 studies we coded, 28 of them had (Washburn & Skitka, unpublished).

Clark and Winegard (2019) appear to think that the field has not yet gone far enough, and would like to see more research that challenges, for example, the degree to which stereotypes are a significant cause of group disparities by studying the viability of explanations that focus more on individual differences, genetic differences, and evolutionary explanations instead of or as well. Fortunately, they seem motivated to do this kind of research, and I look forward to their

contributions to knowledge. In a related vein, some of their closing comments suggest that they continue to believe that bias remains an inevitable outcome in a field dominated by a shared ideological viewpoint—despite recognition of the change in Zeitgeist represented by the BIASS moment-- and therefore by implication, that true progress in preventing liberal bias will not be achieved without an increase of viewpoint diversity in the field.

In contrast Clark and Winegard (2020)'s continued concern, I feel comparatively encouraged. The research reviewed in their Table 1 and our coding of recent studies leaves me optimistic about the capacity of the field to deal with concerns about liberal and other kinds of biases by embracing better research practices that emphasize the importance of competing hypotheses, the need for negative in addition to positive testing strategies, and considering different possible normative perspectives when developing hypotheses and interpreting results (see also Washburn & Skitka, 2017). As a reviewer, I also see evidence that political psychologists are increasingly making use of competing hypotheses not only for themselves but are asking other researchers to adopt a perspectivist mindset as well. Although I would welcome more viewpoint diversity in the field, we do not need to wait for it to happen to begin to address concerns about liberal bias: We *have* tools that can correct for bias and just need to continue to remember to use them.

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