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A Biased View of Liberal Bias

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A year ago in the *American Psychologist*, Redding (March 2001) cautioned that psychologists should be aware of the role that their values play in their research. We agree wholeheartedly with this general caution. Social science unavoidably occurs in a social context, and it is crucial that psychologists be mindful of the role values play in their choice of research questions and in their interpretations of the answers to those questions.

However, in the same article, Redding (2001) argued that those with liberal political views dominate the field of psychology and that, as a result, conservative viewpoints are underrepresented in empirical research. To support this argument, Redding drew on a highly selective sample of nonrepresentative psychological articles.

For example, Redding (2001) quoted Anne Fausto-Sterling as saying, "I impose the highest standards of *proof*. . . on claims about biological inequality" (quoted on p. 207). This is an extreme and unfortunate statement, but Redding failed to mention that Fausto-Sterling (1992) acknowledged her bias in the same sentence: "my high standards stemming directly from my philosophical and political beliefs in equality" (pp. 11–12). Few would argue that Fausto-Sterling's statement demonstrates a biased viewpoint—in fact, she acknowledged this herself—but Redding only presented part of the statement in order to support his view of liberal bias.

Redding (2001) also reported the results of a content analysis of *American Psychologist* articles. According to three independent raters, 97% of articles reflected a liberal agenda, compared with 3% (one article) that reflected a conservative agenda. We see two problems with this analysis. First, articles drawn from the *American Psychologist* are more likely to reflect an ideological viewpoint than are articles from empirical

journals. Analyzing selected articles from a journal likely to reflect ideologies and generalizing the results to the entire field of psychology is inappropriate. Second, forcing articles into the extreme categories of liberal and conservative ignores the potentially large percentage of articles that do not fall into either category. As a result, using these categories may present a biased representation of the field of psychology.

To address these problems and conduct a stronger test of Redding's (2001) hypothesis, we performed a content analysis of our own. Following Fausto-Sterling's (1992) example, we would like to acknowledge that the majority of the authors of this comment are politically liberal. However, a minority of us is conservative, and one of us claims to be neither liberal nor conservative. We chose three journals that either report empirical research or review empirical research. We then selected at random one issue from each journal from the 2000 volume, resulting in a survey of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* from July 2000, *Psychological Bulletin* from January 2000, and *Psychological Review* from July 2000. All 23 articles in these three journals were coded as being liberal, conservative, or neutral (i.e., no political views expressed). Raters were instructed to rate an article liberal if they believed it could be used to support a liberal position (vice versa for a conservative rating). If an article was judged to be irrelevant to the support of a political position or if the raters believed it could be used to support either a liberal or a conservative position, then raters were instructed to assign it a neutral rating. Interrater reliability was 83%.

Overall, 3 (14%) of the articles were rated as liberal, 1 (5%) was rated as conservative, and 19 (81%) were rated as neutral. Anecdotally, the most conservative among the raters rated 26% of the articles as liberal and 9% as conservative, but still rated the large majority (65%) as neutral. These ratings present a rather different view of the field of psychology than the one presented by Redding (2001). Although the percentage of liberal articles was higher than the percentage of conservative articles, focusing only on these two categories ignores the large percentage of articles that are best described as politically neutral.

In conclusion, Redding's (2001) article made a valuable point about the role personal values play in psychologists' research endeavors. However, his selection of examples used to argue for a bias against conservative viewpoints served to show his own biases rather than to reflect the true state of the field. Values undoubtedly guide psychologists' research questions, but, according to the data presented here, much of what gets reported in psychology journals does not appear to support or promote any particular political agenda.

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