

TARGET ARTICLE: Political Diversity Will Improve Social Psychological Science

- José L. Duarte, Arizona State University
- Jarret T. Crawford, The College of New Jersey
- Charlotta Stern, Stockholm University
- Jonathan Haidt, New York University—Stern School of Business
- Lee Jussim, Rutgers University
- Philip E. Tetlock, University of Pennsylvania

COMMENTARY: Meta-Ethical Pluralism – A Cautionary Tale about Cohesive Moral Communities

Jennifer Cole Wright
Associate Professor, Department of Psychology
Affiliate Member, Department of Philosophy
College of Charleston

ABSTRACT

Meta-ethical pluralism gives us additional insight into how moral communities become cohesive and why this can be problematic (even dangerous) – and in this way provides support for the worries raised by the target article. At the same time, it offers several reasons to be concerned about the proposed initiative, the most important of which is that it could seriously backfire.

MAIN TEXT

For decades, meta-ethicists (see citations for list) have debated that status of people’s ordinary moral discourse. When someone states “Racial discrimination is unacceptable!” is she expressing negative feelings and/or other “con” attitudes towards discrimination, or an affective affiliation with community norms? Or is she conveying beliefs about objectively-determined (i.e., non-relative and/or mind-independent) matters of moral fact? Most involved in the debate (though not all – see Gill, 2009; Loeb, 2008) assume the answer to be one or the other. But our research suggests that it is *both*. On some occasions, for some issues, people take an objectivist stance, believing non-relative/mind-independent facts to underpin their moral beliefs/judgments/values/practices (hereafter “beliefs”). Other times, for other issues, the same people take a non-objectivist stance, treating their moral beliefs as reflections of a personal moral code and/or the social community to which they belong (Wright, in press; Wright, Grandjean, & McWhite, 2013; Wright, McWhite, & Grandjean, 2014; also, Goodwin & Darley, 2008, 2010, 2012).

Under the former circumstances, people express strong certainty about their beliefs and intolerance for divergent beliefs. They show little interest in interacting with/helping those who hold them and find social censorship/punishment acceptable. Under the latter circumstances, people express lower certainty and less intolerance for divergence. They show a greater

interest in interacting with/helping those who hold them and are uncomfortable with social censorship/punishment, believing that people should make their own choices and that open dialogue/debate is important (see above; also Wright, 2012; Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008). A paradigmatic example of this was provided by Jonathan Safran Foer, author of *Eating Animals* (2010), during a lecture delivered in 2012 when he stated – industrialized animal agriculture is the most serious moral crisis of our time *and yet* each person must decide for him/herself how to respond.

A strong predictor of people's meta-ethical stance on an issue is the *degree of consensus* expected from their relevant community. Where stronger consensus is expected, greater objectivity – and intolerance for divergent beliefs – is found (Goodwin & Darley, 2010, 2012; Wright, et al., 2014). This relationship appears complex and bi-directional: while we've found perceived consensus to fully mediate the relationship between meta-ethical stance and attitudes/behaviors towards divergence (Wright, et al., 2014), manipulations of perceived consensus have also resulted in shifts in meta-ethical stance (Goodwin & Darley, 2012). Regardless, the point is that people who belong to cohesive communities (i.e., those with strongly shared moral beliefs) are more likely to view those beliefs as objectively grounded and less likely to tolerate divergence. What in less cohesive communities may be viewed as reasonable (even celebrated) moral diversity becomes deviance to be censured/prohibited – even punished.

The relevance of this to the topic at hand should be (hopefully) clear. The more unified/cohesive a community we perceive ourselves to be, the more likely we are to feel suspicious of and inclined to reject divergence – especially when it is of moral significance, as are many of the issues discussed in the target article. This suggests that creating a less cohesive community – one that openly acknowledges a wider range of beliefs/judgments/values/practices – could shift meta-ethical stances and reduce expectations of consensus, increasing tolerance for disagreement and appreciation for respectful dialogue/debate. And an initiative that advocates for a stronger conservative voice in social psychology (and academia more generally) may indeed be a legitimate way to decrease the cohesiveness that the authors worry is undermining our scholarly activities.

That said, let me express three concerns that might warrant further consideration before investing serious time/money into this initiative:

First, the divide between liberals and conservatives nation-wide (if not globally) has become increasingly large and incendiary. According to a recent Pew report, there is greater ideological disagreement between, and uniformity within, liberal and conservative groups today than at any point in the previous two decades – generating stronger, more harmful, animosity (Pew, 2014). They have become separate, and increasingly cohesive, communities. It is therefore unlikely that bringing conservatives and liberals together under the same academic umbrella will turn them into a “community” (cohesive or otherwise). Yet this is critical, because while perceived disagreement *within* communities can have the positive effects mentioned above (and found by others – e.g., Crano, 2012), disagreement *between* cohesive communities often

has the opposite effect (examples of which are given in the article). People disapprove – often strongly – of divergence in other communities (Wright, 2012; Wright, et al., 2008, but see Sarkissian, et al., 2011), which can create a polarized “us against them” situation. And if we aren’t careful, this initiative could have a similar effect, resulting in the stagnation, bickering, and outright conflict often present when disagreeing cohesive communities come together to “work it out”. In other words – many of the problems identified in the target article could get *worse*, not better.

Second, this isn’t our first encounter with the distorting influence of bias – indeed, many important mechanisms/strategies have been developed to help protect against it. If we’ve become lazy in their application, this should be fixed. But, I’m not convinced that an initiative directed at one *particular* source of bias is warranted. And, if our objective is to be as “value-neutral” as possible, I’m not sure how bringing together such strongly divided groups accomplishes this – it’s not as if, contrary to what the authors seem to think, liberal and conservative beliefs, if placed in close enough proximity to one another, will somehow cancel (or balance) each other out!

Third, cautionary tale aside, community cohesiveness is not always a bad thing – it provides a solid foundation for both continuity/tradition *and* social change. Plus, I think we can generally agree that certain moral issues are (or *should be*) “closed” to dialogue/debate. I’m not saying that liberals have everything right – or that they should discount, ignore, and/or shut down all conservative viewpoints. But we need to get clear on where the mandate for increased diversity begins and ends. Which divergent beliefs count as legitimate counterpoints? Whose divergent voices should be included? Unless we’re simply seeking diversity for diversity’s sake (which I hope we’re not), these questions require serious thought.

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