

JOIBS: August 2023. ISSN 2992-9253

JOIBS © 2023 Ferguson

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

The Dangers of Bad History as a Source of Liberal Bias: Comment on Winegard et al. (2023)

Christopher J. Ferguson, Stetson University, United States. E-mail: CJFerguson1111@aol.com

Funding: The author received no specific funding for this work.

Competing interests: The author has declared that he has no competing interests.

Citation: Ferguson, C.J. (2023). The dangers of bad history as a source of liberal bias: Comment on Winegard et al. (2023). *Journal of Open Inquiry in the Behavioral Sciences*.
<https://doi.org/10.58408/issn.2992-9253.2023.01.01.00000010>

Abstract

Many social science researchers are liberals and progressives. Many published research studies also happen to support liberal and progressive narratives. This is even true for published research articles which might be fairly interpreted as insulting of conservatives such as referring to them as racist or unintelligent. Is this a coincidence? In a series of impressive studies, Winegard et al. (2023) demonstrate that political bias influences liberals' perceptions and that, in the quest for finding equality, liberals assign greater moral worth to minority groups than majority. These findings have important implications for recent revisionist history approaches within education, and potential misinformation spread among youth in schools.

Keywords: Bias, Education, Ideology

For decades liberal scholars have been on something of a crusade against conservatives, employing what is ostensibly objective research to besmear conservatives as bigoted and less intelligent. Many of these find their way into news headlines, becoming catnip to liberals while contributing to the inflammatory rhetoric of our polarized discourse (for review see Stanovich, 2020). That much of academia, and certainly the social sciences, is heavily populated by liberals and progressives with scant contributions from conservatives has been understood for some time (Redding, 2001). Yet, why academics would involve themselves in prejudicial writings under the guise of objective science remains something of a mystery. In a new and impressive series of studies Winegard et al. (2023) seek to provide some answers. As is ever the case, doing bad things is motivated by the sense one is doing good things.

To understand how so many research articles are little better than trolling efforts, it can help to examine one prominent example. Schaffner and colleagues (2018) examined voting patterns and motivations after the 2016 election which appalled progressives by resulting in the election of Donald Trump, a man with a checkered history with treatment of women, and willing to espouse racially tinged xenophobia. Could his election be understood as voter frustration with the economy or with creeping language policing and political correctness on the right? Not according to Schaffner and colleagues who concluded that racism and sexism, not economics, motivated voter behavior. Not surprisingly, their conclusions gained national attention. Unfortunately, the soundness of their methods don't match the surety of their conclusions. A typical question on explicit racism might ask something such as "I think people of other races are inferior to my own" or "this country should be for white people only." This isn't what this study did, however. Instead, what Schaffer et al. did was to ask questions like "White people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin" and "Racial problems in the U.S. are rare, isolated situations." That's not explicit racism, but rather asks about adherence to progressive ideologies on racism, not disdain for non-white racial groups. What they found was not that Trump voters were motivated by racism, but rather that Trump voters tended to be conservatives.

This kind of deck-stacking appears to be shockingly common among academic studies that purport to find differences between progressives and conservatives (almost always flattering to progressives, whereby happy coincidence, scholars tend to be progressives themselves). On issues of "intelligence" progressive scholars tend to use items where progressives align better with science (climate change, say), but not on issues where progressives tend to reject science (the biology of sex, nuances of race and criminal justice, for instance).

Winegard et al. (2023) provide us with a number of studies that help us understand this prejudicial process among progressives. Overall, I found their analyses not only to be an impressive amount of work, but to be thorough and convincing. But generally, their data suggests that progressives are more accepting of information which portrays minority groups in a more favorable light compared to the majority, but is skeptical of evidence suggesting the opposite. In other words, progressives are willing to entertain prejudicial views so long as these benefit minority individuals.

This seems to confirm a general perception that victimhood is associated with moral desirability in the eyes of many progressives. In other words, progressives may not tend to view group conflict (say between Europeans and Native Americans) as a clash between two civilizations of equal moral value (which is to say, historically speaking, that both groups were morally ambiguous and capable of atrocities), one of which won and one of which lost the clash. But rather, a

revisionist history is necessary to recast the losing side as more morally virtuous. We can see this in various “noble savage” myths, where indigenous people are often recast as ecologically balanced, pacifist, egalitarian, matriarchically, etc., despite historical evidence suggesting none of this is true and such societies were, in fact, just as prone to misogyny, ethnocentrism, war, genocide, slavery, etc., as the cultures that ultimately defeated them (e.g., Haley, 2015).

Much of this, I suspect, results from revisionist history which has become more popular in educational settings in recent years. Examples of which include the 1619 Project and Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* though I suspect much of the influence is indirect through training in educational schools. Though such approaches, which cast the United States as the “bad guy” and non-white minorities as inherently good is certainly well-intentioned, it is historically inaccurate and likely contributing to what might fairly be referred to as anti-Americanism on the left. To be sure, jingoistic history, all too common in previous decades, is just as bad.

I hope future researchers will build upon Winegard et al., to examine whether revisionist history is associated with equalitarianism and how common exposure to bad history is in US schools. In his sense, I believe Winegard and colleagues are onto something important, and it would be excellent to see if further, preregistered, open science data connects further dots.

Of course, it is worth considering academia’s own involvement in this situation. Increasingly devoted to social justice advocacy rather than “the truth” it is plausible that academia is often contributing to new forms of prejudice rather than truly “dismantling” it. There are steps we could conceivably take to reduce equalitarian biases in academia, including fostering ideological heterodoxy, though more data is certainly welcome to give us a fuller picture, building on the first strokes provided by Winegard and colleagues.

References

- Gwynn, S. (2011). *Empire of the Summer Moon*. Scribner.
- Haley, J. (2015). *Captive Paradise: A History of Hawaii*. St. Martin's.
- Redding, R. (2001). Sociopolitical diversity in psychology: The case for pluralism. *American Psychologist*, 56, 205-215.
- Schaffner, B., Macwilliams, M., Nteta, T. (2018). Understanding white polarization in the 2016 vote for president: The sobering role of racism and sexism. *Political Science Quarterly*, 133, 9-34.
- Stanovich, K. (2020). *The Bias that Divides Us*. MIT Press.
- Winegard, B.M., Clark C.J., Hasty, C.R., & Baumeister, R.F. (2023). Equalitarianism: A source of liberal bias. *Journal of Open Inquiry in the Behavioral Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.58408/issn.2992-9253.2023.01.01.00000008>