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On the Connection Between Bias and Censorship in Academia

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Notes: The ideas in this paper draw heavily on three sources:

Honeycutt and Jussim (2020), Jussim (2020), and Stevens, Jussim, and Honeycutt (2020). Some of the text may be highly similar.

1 Order of authorship is alphabetical, both authors contributed equally.

Abstract

This paper explores the connection between bias and academic censorship. After defining terms, we review recent scholarship on varieties of censorship, and varieties of bias. These are then applied to academic processes of peer review, drawing heavily on recent work identifying the ways in which such biases often manifest in academia. We then propose a series of psychological and social processes by which biases can lead to censorship. We conclude the paper with several concrete examples of academic censorship that seem to reflect the processes we have identified.

Bias and censorship are often treated as entirely different phenomena, and there are good reasons for doing so. The term “bias,” alone, has so many different meanings that each, by itself, can and has constituted entire subfields of research (consider bias as “prejudice” and bias as “heuristics”). Censorship, too, has many different aspects, including legal issues, moral issues, political issues and self-censorship. Further, censorship requires power over others, which means the ability to reward, withhold reward, or punish.

Nonetheless, in this chapter, we will draw on concepts and findings from across the social sciences that converge on the conclusion that bias and censorship intersect in socially, politically, and psychologically important and mutually reinforcing ways. To this end, we will first define terms and then review varieties of censorship in academia. We then briefly review the psychological research on bias, with specific application to biases in academia. We then argue that academia is a social-reputational system thereby rendering academics particularly vulnerable to social pressures, and this provides the means by which censorship can operate. When fields in the academy have become ideological (or theoretically) homogenous, the risk of suppressing contrarian or dissident views rises, and our chapter ends with several examples of such suppression. Because our focus is on academia, this chapter puts aside the variety of other contexts in which these issues may arise, including but not restricted to governments and corporations.

**Definitions**

**Censorship.** The Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science (Reitz, n.d.) provides the definition of censorship we use in this paper: “Prohibition of the production, distribution, circulation, or display of a [work](https://products.abc-clio.com/ODLIS/odlis_w.aspx#work) by a governing authority on grounds that it contains objectionable or dangerous material.” In this context, it is perhaps worth quoting from the AAUP (1940/1970) statement on academic freedom: “Controversy is at the heart of the free academic inquiry which the entire statement is designed to foster.” This is nicely captured by Rutgers University’s (both authors’ home institution; 1951/2015, p. 1-2) policy governing academic freedom:

Since the very nature of a university and its value to society depend upon the free pursuit and dissemination of knowledge…all members of the faculty are expected, whenever and wherever they engage in teaching, research, service, professional practice or clinical practice, as well as in their research and professional publication, freely to discuss subjects with which they are competent to deal, to pursue inquiry therein, and to present and endeavor to maintain their opinions and conclusions relevant thereto. In expressing those ideas which seem to them justified by the facts, they are expected to maintain standards of sound scholarship and competent teaching.

Professors, guided by a deep conviction of the worth and dignity of the advancement of knowledge, recognize the special responsibilities placed upon them. Their primary responsibility to their subject is to seek and to state the truth as they see it.

Our point is not that others share the principles described in Rutgers’ policy; it is, instead, that it clearly articulates the principle of academic freedom. Censorship, then, is work that is blocked from dissemination by some governing authority. It is important in this context to understand that something can be both censored and available. If a book is banned in Kansas, it may be available in Nebraska. If an article is retracted because it is “objectionable or dangerous” it is censored by the authorities (usually the editor or editorial board) of a journal, even if it gets published somewhere else.

**Rejection is not inherently censorship.** Importantly, though, here is a difference between censorship and rejection. In science, rejection occurs when an idea *has been explored* and the available evidence has been found wanting. The history of science is replete with rejected ideas, such as a geocentric solar system, young Earth, spontaneous generation of life, and the phlogiston theory of air. These ideas were thoroughly explored and rejected because the evidence available overwhelmingly disconfirmed them.

In normal academic processes, scholars draft papers, submit them for publication (to either books or journals), that work is reviewed by peers in one’s fields (“peer review”), and sometimes it is accepted for publication and other times it is rejected. For example, scientific papers that are rejected for failing to meet the conventional standards in a field -- the methods are weak, the statistics are inappropriate, the findings are not viewed as particularly interesting or important -- are not censored. This is not censorship because the paper is not published because it is deemed of insufficient quality, not because (as per our working definition of censorship) it is deemed objectionable or dangerous.

**Bias.**In the context of deciding which papers to publish or retract, which grants to fund, which speakers to invite or deplatform, or who to hire and/or promote, bias refers to favoring some claims or conclusions over others. By “favoring” we do not mean simply “liking”--people can like or prefer certain types of studies, papers, or findings without being biased. Instead, bias means showing favoritism; all things equal (especially the quality of the methods and analyses), if certain findings are deemed more publication-worthy than others, or more deserving of funding, or of being cited, this is bias (for examples, see, e.g., de Vries et al., 2018; Honeycutt & Jussim, 2020). Before discussing how biases can manifest as censorship, we review three issues: 1. Varieties of censorship, 2. Motivated reasoning as a source of bias in general; 3. Manifestations of motivated reasoning in academia.

**Varieties of Censorship**

Scholarship is censored when it is blocked from academic discourse (publications, conferences, colloquia, teaching, etc.) for reasons other than its quality. Although what makes for a quality article is beyond the scope of this chapter:

1. What constitutes “quality” varies from field to field and can itself be disputed and contested;
2. It typically involves aspects such as logic, originality, insightfulness;
3. For empirical sciences, it also typically involves the quality of the methods and importance of the findings.

In scientific fields, then, how can one determine if some work or idea has been censored? Work that is blocked from publication, or retracted, without being shown to be wrong, produced by flawed methods, or of trivial value will usually be strong contenders for having been censored.

For example, over the last several years, there has been a disturbing trend in which published scientific papers have been retracted, not because they have been shown to be fraudulent or even riddled with errors, but because academic outrage mobs have accused them of being offensive in some way or causing unspecified “harms” (Jussim, 2020). The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE; n.d.) identifies grounds for retraction as including plagiarism, repeat publication of the same data and: “clear evidence that the findings are unreliable, either as a result of major error (eg, miscalculation or experimental error), or as a result of fabrication (eg, of data) or falsification (eg, image manipulation).” Note that “offensiveness,” “someone accuses it of bigotry” and “undocumented allegations of harm” do not appear. Thus, the COPE guidelines for retraction constitute a good set of a priori criteria against which to evaluate whether something has been censored versus rejected: If a retraction occurs for reasons outside the COPE guidelines, it is probably censorship, not rejection.

We recently distinguished between three different sources of suppression of academic scholarship: external, internal, and hybrid (Stevens, Jussim, & Honeycutt, 2020). External refers to suppression from outside of academia; internal refers to suppression from within academia; and hybrid is a mixture of both. In that paper we also argued that internal suppression is the most severe and toxic form, at least in academia in the United States, which was the focus of that paper. Academic success hinges on the views of other academics, whereas external efforts to suppress are unusual events and can thus be considered outliers. Scholarship in the U.S. literally hinges to no extent whatsoever on the opinions of Fox News viewers or Tea Party activists; it hinges a great deal on what other academics think. Therefore, academics have far more power to censor one another than do outsiders.

Now that we have distinguished between bias, rejection, and censorship, we can turn our attention to an analysis of how biases can lead to censorship. We begin by providing an overview of psychological research on the types of biases than can influence evaluations of the quality of scholarship.

**Common Psychological Biases**

In this section, we discuss a slew of psychological biases, including those associated with ideological extremism, confirmation bias, misanthropic bias, myside and preference biases, and motivated reasoning. Across these biases, research that conflicts with preexisting beliefs, or that is conducted by ideological opponents, may face more resistance and obstacles in the review and publication process, be harder to obtain funding for, or simply be ignored and overlooked if published.

**Ideological extremism.** Ideological extremists routinely view their opponents as holding more extreme views than they really do (Wilson, Parker, & Feinberg, 2020; Westfall, Van Boven, Chambers, & Judd, 2015), and grossly overestimate the levels of prejudice and dehumanization exhibited by ideological opponents (Moore-Berg, Ankori-Karlinsky, Hameiri, & Bruneau, 2020). When fields become ideologically homogeneous, it becomes far easier to sneer at one’s ideological opponents, and to express shared values that are only shared by one’s comrades-in-arms.

**Confirmation bias.** Confirmation bias refers to our tendency to seek, interpret, and create information that verifies our preexisting beliefs (e.g., Nickerson, 1998). Information that is consistent with our beliefs get attention, information that is inconsistent gets ignored. This bias, then, can lead information that verifies existing beliefs to be preferred over information that contests those beliefs, potentially creating obstacles to the acceptance and dissemination of information with which one disagrees.

**Misanthropic bias.** A more nefarious bias, misanthropic bias refers to our tendency to see another person in a negative light. Negative acts that can be blamed on the other person are emphasized; and people give them less credit for positive acts (Ybarra, Stephan, & Schaberg, 2000). Misanthropic bias can lead people to see their opponents as evil and immoral--as agents with wrongheaded views and motives that must be stopped or shut out.

**Myside and preference bias.** Myside or preference bias (sometimes referred to as desirability bias) occurs when a person evaluates information in ways that are biased toward validating their own attitudes (Stanovich, West, & Toplak, 2013; Tappin, van der Leer, & McKay, 2017). This bias can lead people to hold essentially trabilistic views (Clark and Winegard, 2020), where claims from your side are acceptable, but if the same claim is made by someone of the opposing viewpoint, it is met with opposition.

**Motivated reasoning.** Similar, but distinct from confirmation bias, motivated reasoning refers to our tendency to seek out, interpret, and *evaluate* information in ways that verify our preexisting beliefs (Kunda, 1990). It is easier to find ways to defend your views and criticize the views of the opposition, and the incentives to do so justify the effort.

**Academic Biases**

There is no reason to believe that academics are any less subject to the common psychological biases described above than are anyone else (see, e.g., Duarte et al, 2015; Honeycutt & Jussim, 2020 for reviews). Nonetheless, the specific ways in which such biases manifest in academia can be quite unique. Some of these are discussed next.

**Theoretical.** Sometimes, a theory or perspective gains such dominance that it becomes difficult for alternative views or findings inconsistent with the theory to gain a foothold in an academic area. In scientific psychology, this has been true with respect to behaviorism in the early 20th century, and with claims emphasizing the power of stereotypes, implicit and explicit biases, situations, expectancy effects, and self-fulfilling prophecies in the latter part of the 20th century (see reviews by Jussim, 2012; Stevens, Jussim, and Honeycutt, 2020). In medicine, a classic recent example involves the cause of ulcers--which was erroneously yet so confidently believed to be stress that the discovery that it took decades to convince the medical establishment that it was actually bacteria (Stevens, Jussim, & Honeycutt, 2020). In astronomy, Loeb (2014) provides a slew of cases in which astronomers were wrong yet certain so that progress in the field was often set back for many years when they refused to accept or publish findings providing contrary evidence. For example, at the beginning of the 20th century, there was a consensus among astronomers that the sun was composed of the same materials as the earth, and it took many years to publish the evidence that, in fact, it is made mostly of hydrogen and helium. Such dominance of certain theories or perspectives can lead to substantial gaps in the scientific literature in the form of unasked and unanswered questions (e.g., related to stereotype accuracy, see Jussim, Stevens, and Honeycutt, 2018).

**Political.** Certain fields in academia can and have become ideological echo chambers. In these echo chambers the political identities of academics have become heavily skewed, ideological homogeneity enabling the easy inhibition of the work of those who are ideological outsiders. When the political identities of those making up particular fields become heavily skewed, there is little to prevent or limit punishment (e.g., censorship) of those one sees as enemies. In fact, such hostility may become normalized (Prentice, 2012). Even if academia may generally espouse high levels of tolerance (e.g., Gross & Fosse, 2012), they generally have no issue expressing political or ideological intolerance (Honeycutt & Freberg, 2017).

Data collected in the last 15 years has definitively pointed to a consistent state of ideological homogeneity in the academy, composed of growing majorities of left-leaning faculty, particularly within the social sciences (Adekoya, Kaufmann, & Simpson, 2020; Cardiff & Klein, 2005; Carl, 2017; Gross & Simmons, 2007; Honeycutt & Freberg, 2017; Inbar & Lammers, 2012, Rothman, Lichter, & Nevitte, 2005). It should not be surprising, then, that both conservative students and faculty report greater experiences of hostility and discrimination then their liberal and moderate peers (Adekova et al., 2020; Honeycutt & Freberg, 2017; Honeycutt, Jussim, & Freberg, 2019; Peters, Honeycutt, De Block, & Jussim, 2020). Further, notable percentages of faculty indicate an explicit willingness to discriminate against those in ideological out-groups (Adekova et al., 2020; Honeycutt & Freberg, 2017; Peters et al., 2020). In turn, at least among conservative students, many generally try to hide their political beliefs (Honeycutt, Jussim, & Freberg, 2019).

For any who might not share the values of the ideological majority, they may be the recipients of a hostile environment, and may have substantial obstacles (or disincentives) to their entering or continuing in their field (for examples of lived experiences in social psychology, see Stevens et al., 2017). Those reaching different conclusions, even when those conclusions are based on high quality evidence, may have a very difficult time getting those conclusions into the published literature.

Lest there be any confusion, it doesn’t require active participation of the ideological majority to engage these dynamics. Often, the negative evaluation of even just one individual is sufficient to torpedo a job application, academic journal submission, or grant application. For example, grants are highly competitive, which means that one usually needs to receive favorable ratings from almost every reviewer of a grant in order to get funded (and even then, that might not be sufficient). If one’s ability to receive favorable reviews is hindered because even a minority of one’s colleagues object to the nature of the work or ideas being proposed, the probability that work gets funded diminishes rapidly.

Discrimination and hostility to perpetuate homogeneity and the advancement of “friendly ideas,” though, might just be a distraction and waste of effort. According to some scholars, left-leaning norms are so entrenched that discrimination against non-liberals isn’t even needed to sustain them (Prentice, 2012). And the implications are far reaching. Just by sheer numbers, the ideas and theorizing of left-leaning individuals leads to scientific knowledge disproportionally informed by topics and explanations that are interesting and appealing to those who are left-leaning (Jussim, Crawford, Stevens, & Anglin, 2016). So in essence, the weight of the cannon, without active targeted effort against ideological outsiders, may be sufficient to perpetuate censorship. As articulated by Prentice (2012, p. 516-517):

Ideological homogeneity alone is enough to produce strong liberal norms, which in turn give[s] rise to … pressures to conform to liberal views (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950); a reluctance to express nonliberal views (Miller & Morrison, 2009); … an inclination to derogate and punish PSPs [personality and social psychologists] who express conservative views (Schachter, 1951).

Thus, scientific conclusions may seem to validate left-leaning perspectives, not because they always provide the best account, but because these narratives are readily accessible, entrenched, and defended, and because alternative explanations face considerable resistance (Jussim, Crawford, Anglin, & Stevens, 2015).

This, in some cases, even moves beyond the research enterprise and might involve blatant activism, such that in fields that have embraced social or political activism, there is a risk of activist goals trumping science. For example, some intellectuals may view climate change as such an important and pressing issue that anyone presenting any evidence that contests any aspect of climate arguments may be denounced and ostracized–even when they have strong data on their side (e.g., in this case, that extreme weather had not actually be increasing; Pielke, 2016).

**Equalitarian.** Related, but separate and distinct from political biases, academics may also be subject to equalitarian biases, which some argue are even more sacred than political biases (Clark and Winegard, 2020). Equalitarianism is generally considered to consist of ideas or beliefs that argue there that society is morally obligated to pursue equality of outcome on outcomes that are socially valuable, and that if groups differences exist, they only exist because of prejudice and discrimination. Consider, for example, Amy Wax who argued that differences in the adoption of “bourgeois values” explains many of the differences in outcomes between whites and blacks in the United States (Wax & Alexander, 2017). Outrage in response to her argument was immediate and forceful (Haidt, 2017). Our point is not whether Wax’s argument was correct, but that work inconsistent with equalitarian views was swiftly and almost uniformly condemned by academics.

**How Biases Become Censorious**

**Academia as a Social-Reputational System**

Academia is a social-reputational system and this is the central insight necessary for understanding how bias evolves into censorship. That is, one’s success as an academic is determined most directly by the subjective evaluations of colleagues, and only indirectly by objective individual performance. Admission to graduate school, peer review of academic publications, obtaining grants, obtaining your first job, tenure/promotion: in each of these areas, other’s evaluations constitute at least a large part of the basis for receiving (or not receiving) a sought-after reward (or punishment to be avoided). As a consequence, academics are rendered highly vulnerable to social approval because these evaluations are so critical to success.

Such vulnerabilities are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, this reputational system can mete out punishment, so that academics may self-censor in order to avoid the risk of being punished for expressing ideas of which their colleagues disapprove. On the other, and possibly even more important, the reputational system also offers rewards for expressing ideas of which others approve, so that if academics seek the rewards that come with social approval, they may only or primarily express those ideas.

**The Pyramid of Censoriousness**

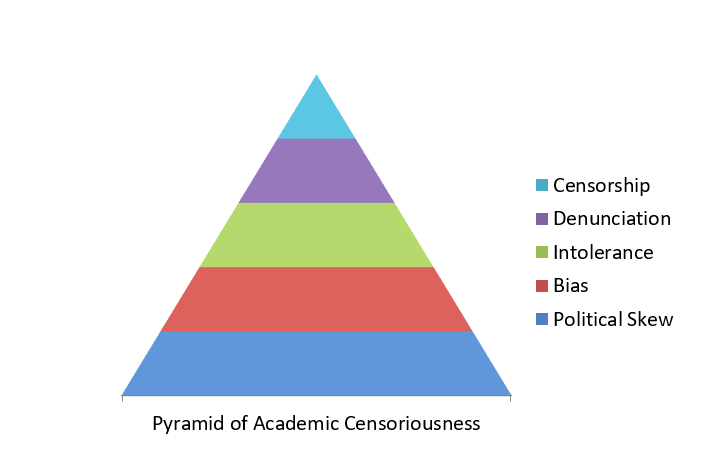
Figure 1: The Pyramid of Academic Censoriousness

Figure 1 presents the Pyramid of Academic Censorship, a way to understand the processes by which censorship emerges in academia. Censorship as we have described here is still relatively rare, but it is built on phenomena that become more common as one goes down the pyramid. Censorship by authorities usually occur in response to denunciations; not all denunciations are successful (there are more denunciations than, for example, article retractions). Denunciation is a behavioral manifestation of intolerance, but not all intolerance manifests as denunciation. Biases can (but do not necessarily) produce intolerance because they lead to distorted views about the claims and harms caused by views one opposes. And biases are more likely to emerge in fields that are ideologically or theoretically homogenous because there are fewer people willing and able to skeptically or critically evaluate common claims.

Biases can become censorious in direct and indirect ways (Stevens, Jussim, & Honeycutt, 2020). Direct censorship and suppression may be brought about in this system of reward and punishment via gatekeepers. Eminent, prestigious, or even just more advanced colleagues operating in high-status positions as editors, society officers, department chairs, or administrative officials yield outsized influence over which ideas are encouraged, promoted, ignored, or outright blocked—as gatekeepers over what gets through and what doesn’t. Biases can:

* lead to illusions of bad science
* lead to selective calls for rigor
* stem from claims of harm and danger (often unidentified)
* lead to self-censorship
* stem from outrage mobs

**Illusions of bad science.** Bias tints the way we see the world; it is both possible and plausible for a person to be honest and sincere in their criticism while still reaching unjustified conclusions. Extreme partisans misconstrue and exaggerate positions held by the other side (Westfall, Van Boven, Chambers, & Judd, 2015). There is no reason to believe that academics are immune to this. Most work in the social sciences suffers *some* level of imperfection or limitation, and those can always be jumped on or exaggerated into *fatal flaws* that “justify” rejecting the work. We discuss several examples of this sort of thing at the end of this chapter (see Jussim, 2020, for a list).

**Selective calls for rigor.**  Selective calls for rigor involve rejecting work one does not like on ostensibly scientific grounds that one does not apply to work one likes. One of our favorites was an article that extolled the rigor of a study finding gender biases favoring men over another showing gender biases favoring women -- even though by most conventional criteria for rigor (replication, sample size, use of multiple methods) the study accused of lacking rigor was more rigorous (see Jussim, 2019).

**Unidentified harms and dangers.** Whether it is evolution, profanity, pornography, or bigotry, one of the go-to moves in seeking to censor something is that it is “dangerous” or, in modern parlance, “causes harm.” Typically, not a shred of evidence of such harms is actually presented, and one needs to ascribe to the values or worldview of the person leveling the accusation of “harm!” in order to know what they are.

Now, in fairness to this view, we suspect that most people would agree that if there really was a sufficiently extreme bona fide “harm” that could be produced by an article, book, or idea, censoring it could be justified. Consider this purely hypothetical and unrealistic thought experiment. If some article is published, life on Earth will be wiped out. We suspect most would agree that censoring that article is probably a good idea. If one agrees that the idea should be censored, one has to acknowledge that we are now negotiating terms: how much bona fide “harm” must an idea create before it is censored?

Of course, in the real world, ideas do not *directly* cause any harm whatsoever. Nonetheless, they may indirectly cause harm by influencing people’s behavior. Consider another thought experiment: A powerful political leader declares the Covid pandemic a hoax. Followers abandon all precautions, and a massive spike in infections and deaths occur. The declaration caused harm. Whether such an utterance should be *censored* (say, by media outlets refusing to publish it) is debatable and we take no position on it here. Our only point is that the “harm” claim is not necessarily completely wrong.

Nonetheless, our view is that allegations of “harm” need to meet a high standard to be taken seriously. Clear, direct lines to actual harms need to be identified with evidence, not merely declared. In the absence of such evidence, allegations of harm may or may not be true, but are not credible and need not be taken seriously. In practice, those alleging harm almost never provide a shred of evidence (Jussim, 2020). In such cases, the inherent harms caused by censorship (producing a distorted informational ecosystem by permitting some but not other ideas; erosion of academic freedom and free inquiry; limiting the ability of people to access information to make their own decisions) exceed any “harms” whose existence cannot be empirically verified.

**Self-censorship.** Fear of social sanctions and anticipation of others’ biases provides fertile ground for self-censorship. Researchers may avoid exploring or publishing certain ideas or topics because of fear of social sanctions. Notably, these ideas might not necessarily be factually or scientifically incorrect, but still be anathema to one’s colleagues. Self-censorship may also be motivated or driven by the lopsided ideological nature of academia. For example, conservative or non-leftist academics are often advised that they should hide their true beliefs, or avoid studying certain topics, till after attaining tenure (e.g., Stevens et al., 2017; Wood, 2016).

Self-censorship, and the internal conflict it may create for individual academics, was captured well in a podcast by social psychologists Michael Inzlicht and Yoel Inbar (2018). Inzlicht, at about 25 minutes in, stated:

What if I felt that overemphasis on oppression is a terrible idea, hurts alleged victims of oppression, and is bad for everyone? What if I was outspoken about this? I suspect I would face a lot more opposition. Even though not much could happen to my job security, I’d have a lot of people screaming at me, making my life uncomfortable. And, truly, I wouldn’t do it, because I’d be scared. I wouldn’t do it because I’m a coward.

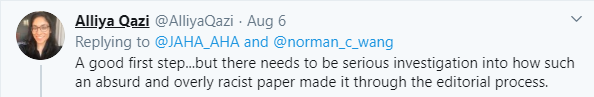
**Outrage mobs.** So far, we have mostly discussed the psychological connections of bias to censorship for individuals. However, academic censorship often can have a major social component. Bias can also manifest in outrage mobs, particularly in the form of a social media mob uniting and piling on in denouncing papers or ideas without critical or constructive review. In these situations, editors are pressured to retract articles, funding agencies are pressured to pull funding or support, and/or department heads or university administrators are pressured to terminate faculty contracts, remove faculty from teaching courses, or coerce resignations. In these cases, the mob itself does not directly hold the power to censor, but instead seeks to pressure authorities to do so.

**Examples of Academic Censorship**

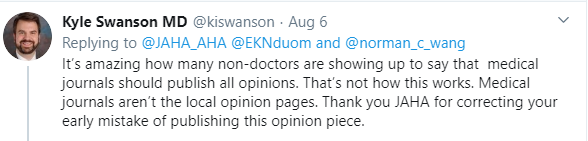
In the final section, we summarize several real world examples in which it is easy to see the direct connection of bias to censorship. Each of these cases are clear-cut because they culminated in an article being retracted not because it manifested errors, but because it was denounced as offensive or causing harm. Additional examples can be found in Jussim (2020), though some involved failed attempts at censorship or forms of censorship other than retraction (including deplatforming, firings, etc.). Even failed attempts, however, reveal the connection between bias and censorship because *attempts* to censor ideas invariably result from allegations of some sort of moral transgression (see Jussim, 2020 for details).

**Affirmative Action Cannot be Critically Evaluated**

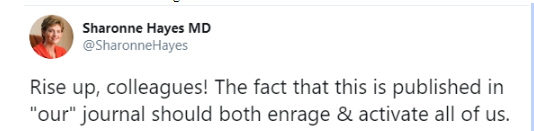
**The case of JAHA.** Dr. Norman Wang published an article in the Journal of the American Heart Association (hence JAHA is the journal; AHA is the association) critical of AHA’s affirmative action programs and policies. The paper compiled a wealth of data (including four figures, four tables, and over 100 references) to support the author’s conclusion (p. 14) that “Recent affirmative action efforts through diversity, inclusion, and equity programs recognize neither changes in legal limitations, nor data indicating harm to underrepresented minorities. Long-term academic solutions and excellence should not be sacrificed for short-term demographic optics.”

Figure 2. Examples of the social media dogpile. 

Dr. Qazi is an MD at Stanford University.



Dr. Swanson is a neurosurgeon in Milwaukee.



Dr. Hayes is Director of Diversity and Inclusion at the Mayo Clinic.

Although the denunciations were far more extensive than shown, Figure 2 presents instructive examples from the outrage mob displaying the censorious mindset. Dr. Qazi accuses the paper of being “absurd” without refuting anything, and then labels it “racist.” Such an accusation expresses moral outrage, but academic freedom protects expression of outrageous ideas. Dr. Swanson commits an ironic logical error of an “argument from authority”--the educational status of critics of the retraction cannot possibly constitute a basis for believing or disbelieving their criticisms (which, instead, need to be evaluated on their merits). It is ironic because the article was on *the ineffectiveness of affirmative action problems*, and if we are going to play the authority card, then it is social scientists, not MDs, who have the relevant expertise here. Dr. Hayes’s comment is little more than “I’m mad and you should be too.” This is quintessential moral grandstanding (Tosi & Warmke, 2016).

The editor of JAHA issued several statements surrounding and attempting to justify the retraction. At least one manifests exactly the processes we have described in this paper: Bias produces censoriousness: “Much more needs to be done to increase diversity, equity and inclusiveness in medicine and cardiology. In my opinion, the article by Dr. Wang does nothing to get us towards that goal.” “In fact, its central purpose was to argue against affirmative action, noting that Black and Hispanic trainees in medicine are less qualified than White and Asian trainees. These opinions do not reflect in any way my views, the views of the JAHA Editorial Board, or the views of the American Heart Association. We condemn discrimination and racism in all forms” (London, 2020). Presented as justification for retraction, this is logically equivalent to: 1. All papers we accept must support affirmative action (the topic of Wang’s paper) because affirmative action inherently supports diversity, equity, and inclusion, and reviewing published articles that so otherwise is unacceptable (bias); 2. Wang’s article was critical of affirmative action; 3. Therefore, it is racist and should never have been accepted and is now retracted (censorship).

**The case of Angewandte Chemie.** Hudlicky (2020) published an article in Angewandte Chemie (that is the name of a German chemistry journal that was mostly in honor of one of his colleague’s work on organic synthesis. However, he made the mistake of including a single paragraph critical of diversity initiatives that led off with this sentence (p. 4), “In the last two decades many groups and/or individuals have been designated with “preferential status”. An outrage mob ensued, and the paper was retracted.

The German Chemical Society, which publishes Angewandte Chemie, issued a statement (Herrmann, 2020) explaining and “justifying” their retraction that leads of with this:

On 4 June, an opinion piece was published in *Angewandte Chemie* that contained offensive and inflammatory language aimed toward people of different genders, races, and nationalities.

We apologize that this offensive and misguided essay was published in our journal, and we are deeply sorry for failing the community that puts their trust in us. The views expressed in the essay do not reflect the values of the journal in any way. That this article was published at all has demonstrated a breakdown in editorial decision-making.

Again, the connection of bias to censorship is on full display. Apparently, this editorial board has a consensus on “values” other than getting at truth, and if one does not conform to them, one cannot publish there. And, if, somehow one does publish there, and they discover a “values violation” your paper can be retracted.

**Censorship of Research on Transgender Issues**

The neuroscience journal *Eneuro* published a paper describing a “new theory of gender dysphoria” (Gliske, 2019) that speculatively linked brain structures to the psychology of experiences of gender dysphoria (strong, persistent feelings of identifying with a different gender and discomfort with one’s gender assigned at birth). Once again, the “justifications” for retraction include some manifestly bizarre statements (Society for Neuroscience, 2020). It leads off with this (p. 1):

Flaws regarding the construction of the theory

A theory is proposed that chronic distress, gender nonconformity and incongruence, and body ownership networks would be related. In order to build the theory, the following logic is used:

1. The author hypothesizes that chronic distress, gender nonconformity and incongruence, and body ownership networks would be related.
2. The author looks for information in the literature about the implication of brain regions and networks in relation to the hypothesis to obtain evidence.
3. Thinking to have obtained evidence, the author confirms the hypothesis and then jumps to propose a theory.

This is not the formal way to build up a theory or to verify hypotheses.

The final statement is silly. The paper never claimed to provide empirical *tests* of the theory. Theoretical papers routinely appear in psychology and other disciplines that are based on existing literatures. This is not just our opinion. Retraction Watch (Marcus, 2020) posted a scathing criticism of ENeuro’s decision, that, among other things, says this: “… the journal appears to have badly botched this case” and “…it can’t fairly hide behind the claim—which it now seems to be making—that it had inadvertently accepted a poorly-done study.” This justification for retraction—treating Gliske’s paper as an empirical rather than theoretical one—beggars belief because it is so transparently absurd to evaluate a theoretical paper as if it reports new studies. Retraction Watch also made this simple statement, which probably captures the core reasons the paper ran afoul an academic outrage mob: “A journal has retracted a controversial paper that questioned what it called the ‘existing dogma’ about gender.”

**Colonialism Can Only be Condemned**

A political scientist published a paper titled The Case for Colonialism (Gilley, 2018), which argued that several countries plausibly described as failed states or close would benefit from a return of colonial practices. The paper was promptly denounced in a petition led by a professor of English that garnered more than 16,000 signatures (Heijun Wills, 2017). Gilley and the journal’s editorial board were subject to what they described as credible death threats, and, as a result, the article was retracted.

In classic style, the retraction petition starts off with its version of “we are offended” combined with a manifestly false claim:

The sentiments expressed in this article reek of colonial disdain for Indigenous peoples and ignore ongoing colonialism in white settler nations. The author ponders "what would likely have happened in a given place absent colonial rule?" (2) with the predictably racist conclusion that peoples and cultures would have remained "primitive," relying upon an obscene, reductive colonial epithet.

The term “primitive,” in the petition as if it quoted the article, appears nowhere in the article. Although it is fair to interpret the article as implying that life might have been better in some areas because of colonialism (an argument which we do not evaluate here), there is nothing in it to even imply a view of other peoples as “primitive.” The reference to the article as “obscene” highlights the censorious nature of the denunciation. First Amendment protections do not apply to obscenity (Hudson, 2009), but something is not legally obscene just because a mob declares it to be. To be legally subject to censorship, work has to meet three standards set by the U.S. Supreme Court to be judged obscene. One is that it must lack serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value. This is obviously not the case for this article. Because of this standard, serious academic articles with profanity in their titles cannot be censored (Healey, 2017; Petrocelli, 2018).

**Conclusion**

The main contribution of this chapter has been to identify connections between bias and academic censorship. Although biases have received considerable attention in the burgeoning literature on reforming practices to improve scientific validity and credibility (e.g., de Vries et al., 2018), and although censorship has a long and venerable history of scholarship (e.g., Coetzee, 1996), we know of no prior scholarship drawing a straight line connecting the two. There are many reasons for censorship outside of academia that were beyond the scope of the present chapter. Our review, however, indicated that within academia, censoriousness often reflects the political or moral biases of those seeking to censor.

The fundamental argument here is not that biases *inevitably* lead to censoriousness. However, when academic fields become as heavily politically skewed as are the social sciences and humanities, two things happen: 1. There are a far higher proportion of extremists than in the population, so that extreme views are normalized; and 2. There are few, if any, scholars with countervailing biases to constitute a check on the type of runaway biases that can and do lead extremists to very distorted views of the world. In this paper, we argued that one manifestation of such distortions is to seek to preclude ideas and even data that offends such a worldview.

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