

Both/And Instead of Either/Or

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Abstract On both questions about the political makeup of academia and conservative activism on educational issues, Gross makes definitive causal claims. He postulates a variation of self-selection that relies on political typing of occupations. On conservative activism he argues that moral entrepreneurs utilize animosity towards progressives in higher education to express a populist ideology uniting distinct elements within the conservative movement. As it concerns potential political bias, I argue that self-selection and barriers of discrimination and bias both play important roles in producing progressive academic institutions. On issues of conservative activists' attention to educational issues, I contend that concern about progressive academics is both a unifying populist message and a realistic assessment of a political threat. I largely agree with the content of Gross's finding but disagree with the degree the processes he outlines answers these two research questions. I have a both/and approach whereby other factors must be taken into consideration. Ideally future research will assess not only the different factors within these answers, but also which factors have the most explanatory power relative to other factors.

Keywords Self-selection · Academic discrimination · Educational issues

Neil Gross's book *Why are Professors Liberal and Why do Conservatives Care?* (Gross 2013) investigates the important issue of the political makeup of academia within our current political economy. The disproportionate politically progressive nature of academia is well established (Rothman et al. 2011, Ladd and Lipset 1975, Klein and Stern 2005). What is

still debated is the reason why academics are so likely to be politically progressive. A related, but less debated, question is why conservative political activists are concerned about the progressive nature of academia. On the surface it is easy to argue that basic conflict theory predicts that conservatives will be anxious about progressives controlling any social institution, especially one as important as higher education. But Gross asserts that there are unique elements in the culture war, and he has crafted a theory to explore those elements.

On both questions about the political makeup of academia and conservative activism on educational issues, Gross makes definitive causal claims. He postulates a variation of self-selection that relies on political typing of occupations. On conservative activism he argues that moral entrepreneurs utilize animosity towards progressives in higher education to express a populist ideology uniting distinct elements within the conservative movement. However, I am unconvinced that he has found the best, much less the only, explanation for these research questions. Rather than looking at explanations as either reason a or reason b, looking at these explanations as both reason a and reason b as the sources of these phenomenon is a more effective way to approach these issues. I will provide here the possible "reason b" necessary to gain more insight into these questions.

There are two general explanations scholars use to explain the political makeup of academia – self-selection and political bias. Gross advances the explanation of self-selection (Giroux, Henry 2006, Lee, John 2006). He differentiates himself from previous claims of self-selection based upon the ratio of culture to economic capital (Bourdieu 1988), cognitive/personality styles (Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2009), and value differences (Sidanius et al. 1996, Ames et al. 2005). He provides empirical evidence that these arguments are insufficient explanations of the political makeup in higher education. He argues that academia has been "politically typed" in a way that allows progressives to feel more

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comfortable than conservatives in making a commitment to academic study. His work is at its strongest with his critique of previous expressions of self-selection and assertion of his interpretation of this theory. The question is not whether self-selection matters but how much it matters.

The alternative explanation for the political makeup in academia is based on bias or barriers that political conservatives face. Political conservatives do not simply choose to avoid academia, but rather they face barriers to entry that dissuade them from becoming scholars. Those barriers come from the dominance of political progressives within institutions of higher education. It is not necessary for progressives to have sinister intentions of discrimination. The simple fact that progressives maintain academic positions in such high numbers relative to conservatives can lead to the creation of a social culture discouraging the inclusion of political conservatives. The natural impulse of individuals to interact with others with similar social and political beliefs can lead to progressive academics finding subtle and overt ways to weed out political out-group members. I argue that self-selection, in particular Gross's version of self-selection, is more convincing than other variations of this argument, and that barriers of discrimination and bias both play important roles in producing progressive academic institutions.

There is an emerging literature exploring the possibility that academic bias influences opportunities for political conservatives. To this literature, Gross adds his audit study with directors of graduate studies (DGS). Given the results of his study he argues that while there may be isolated cases of discrimination, such bias is not a major factor determining the political makeup in academia. However, his study is only part of our knowledge about potential academia bias. Putting this study in the context of the other research provides a more holistic picture of this academic question.

Previous research has confirmed that academics state a relative unwillingness to hire political conservatives (Yancey 2011, Inbar and Lammers 2012). Empirical work has also documented that social conservatives wind up in lower status positions than warranted by their professional accomplishments (Rothman and Robert Lichter 2009). Other experimental studies confirm that conservative Christians are at a disadvantage at certain phases of obtaining an advance degree (Gartner 1986, Arnold 2006, Ressler and Hodge 2003).¹ On the other hand, a survey of academics indicates that even conservative professors do not perceive political bias as a major problem (Rothman et al. 2011). Gross's study has to be understood in the context of other findings that support or refute his assertion of non-bias.

¹ While this work does not speak directly to political discrimination, there is a general assumption in our society that religious conservatism is identical with political conservatism. Work (Yancey and Williamson 2012) I have done with highly educated cultural progressive activists suggests that educational attainment does not diminish this stereotype.

To understand the position of Gross's work in light of these other studies I look to his DGS respondents. Having been the DGS at my own school I understand the position. It is a place in academia where there are powerful institutional interests that work against personal and social prejudices. It is in the interest of DGSs to maximize the number of students applying for the program they oversee to help insure that they maximize their chances of bringing in highly qualified students.² To this extent DGSs are more likely to overlook potential political, religious and social incompatibilities with incoming student candidates than other academics. There are several important steps in the process of becoming an established professor. One must obtain an undergraduate degree, contact graduate programs, be accepted into a graduate program, complete the requirements of the doctorate, find an academic job, publish research, obtain tenure and finally gain full professorship. Gross's work examines academics in the stage of the student making contact with graduate programs. Theoretically this is a stage where there are institutional pressures for accepting individuals regardless of political ideology. His work informs us on the issue of potential discrimination at the point when it is least likely to take place rather than provide us with a comprehensive understanding of how political bias may be a barrier to conservatives.

My former DGS position also provides me insight into other aspects of Gross's audit study methodology. I admit that I often skim emails from prospective students. Nevertheless, the more students applying to our program the better chance we have of obtaining a superior group of incoming graduate students, and so it is in my interest to persuade them to apply for the program, unless it is abundantly clear that they are not a good fit for us. So when I skim the emails I often look for information that will help me to construct a response encouraging them to apply to the program. I wonder how much I would pay attention to the political activities of the emailing student. I also wonder if I would have even notice such an activity. Audit studies can be useful by supplying subtle cues that respondents may react to, but there is the danger of the cues being too subtle to activate the potential prejudice of the respondent. I am not certain that the cues are too subtle with this particular study, but my experience as a graduate advisor suggests this possibility.

The problem of subtlety brings up another issue. Although he does not state so in the book, Gross mentions in his paper containing this research (Fosse et al. 2011) that he chose to use Senator John McCain as the representative of conservatives instead of Governor Sarah Palin because he wanted the email

² It was also pointed out to me that some schools have an incentive to increase the number of applicants to raise their potential rejection rate. This rejection rate would be valuable in building the prestige of the departments. This is not a factor in my own department, but it is a reasonable argument for understanding the interest of DGSs at the most elite graduate schools.

to be believable. But McCain may be the subtle cue not caught by DGSs whereas Palin can be a more explicit indicator which potentially produces significant results. I note Gross's statement that a graduate student working on the campaign of Palin is unbelievable to DGSs. This statement, if true, by itself indicates an atmosphere of political discrimination. If supporting Palin potentially disqualifies an otherwise qualified graduate student from a program then political discrimination is at play. McCain has a reputation, whether deserved or not, as a rebel or maverick to his own Republican party. While most academics are not supportive of Republicans, a Republican who often goes against the policies of that party, as McCain is reportedly willing to do, can make him more acceptable than Republicans envisioned as very conservative such as Palin or President George Bush. If a more conservative Republican was used, the audit study would still have weaknesses that I outlined above, but it would have been a stronger finding if DGSs showed little or no prejudice even when a candidate worked for a Palin election team.

Given these potential weaknesses we should consider what Gross's findings mean. At best his study indicates that at a key point of the process – when the prospective student contacts a graduate program – that it is fairly likely that a politically conservative student will not run into a great deal of discrimination. However, discrimination is more likely at other points of the process. As I have argued elsewhere (Yancey 2012) academic bias is not equally likely to show up at every stage of the process or for every type of conservative. Research suggests that social and religious conservatism is more likely to be stigmatized than economic or foreign policy conservatism (Rothman and Robert Lichter 2009). The weakness of choosing McCain, who is not known for social conservatism, instead of Palin or Bush, adds more questions about the accuracy of Gross's conclusions that there is a lack of political academic discrimination.³

This is not to say that discrimination is the only factor in the political makeup of academia. I argue that discrimination is an important factor, but I further argue that it is neither discrimination nor self-selection, but it is both discrimination and self-selection. Is discrimination more important than self-selection in determining this political makeup? To date we have not come up with the proper methodological techniques that

adequately compare these two potential effects. My inclination is to say that instead of arguing whether discrimination matters, that we should concede that it matters and focus on whether discrimination matters more or less than self-selection. Future research should explore such a question.

This leads to the second half of Gross's book where he examines why conservatives care about the progressive influence in academia. I am not as familiar with the literature on political economy as I am on academic bias so I must engage in more speculation to analyze this question. Gross points out that it would be a surprise if conservatives had absolutely no concern about the political makeup of academia. The very fact that conservatives envision progressives as an out-group is enough for them to worry about the control progressives have of a powerful social institution. In a similar manner I conducted research indicating that cultural progressive activists have strong concerns about the social power of religious institutions which is to be expected since it is well known that religious institutions tend to support conservative ideals (Yancey and Williamson 2012). It would be quite strange for cultural progressives to be totally unconcerned about conservatives in religious institutions and for political conservatives to be totally unconcerned about political progressives in academia.

But Gross articulates that this attention is disproportionate to the basic group interests conservatives naturally have about the control political progressives have in higher education. It is hard to quantify the level of attention that would be appropriate but I tend to agree with Gross. His argument is that the attention conservative leaders draw to the progressive nature of academia serve to both unify different factions in the conservative movement and provide a populist message that paints progressives as elitist. Once again I think he is basically right. However, I also believe that the explanation is incomplete. I take a both/and approach to look more deeply into the complicated question of the interest of conservatives in the progressive academic atmosphere.

Gross makes a good case that railing against a liberal professorate allows factions in the conservative movement to unify with a message emphasizing progressive elitism. Yet, I assert that these conservative activists are also reacting to a real power dynamic serving political progressives in their fight against political conservatives. In other words, political conservatives are concerned about the progressive nature of academia since that nature creates real political advantages for progressive activists against whom they fight. The politically progressive nature of academic inquiry means that only certain questions can be asked and only certain answers to research questions are allowable. It positions scientific research to be a weapon to use against conservative activists.

To illustrate how this may take place we can look at an issue where academic research has potentially been used as a weapon used against conservative activists. One of the best issues to look at this propensity is same-sex marriage.

³ While political discrimination is likely a feature within academia, it should be noted that such discrimination may not be the most relevant dimension of bias. My research (Yancey 2011) suggests that academics are more willing to erect barriers based on religious identity than political ideology. Other research indicates that social conservatives tend to find themselves underemployed in academic positions (Rothman and Robert Lichter 2009). Social conservatives can be conceptualized as connected to religious conservatism. I suspect that if Gross had focused his audit study on an examination of religious bias that he would have obtained a different result. Indeed, future research on bias in academia needs to be focused less on the potential of political discrimination and more on religious barriers.

Progressive activists argue that scholarly work has been used to establish the innate nature of homosexuality, the relative health of homosexuals, and the fitness of homosexuals as parents. That last argument may be especially telling on the issue of same-sex marriage since child-rearing has been argued to be an important reason for marriage. If research indicates no difference in the child-rearing ability of homosexuals relative to heterosexuals then same-sex marriage advocates have an important tool in their political struggle. In fact, one such group of advocates, the Southern Poverty Law Center, has labeled groups who argue that homosexuals are innately inferior parents as hate groups. They base their labeling on scientific assertions on the fitness of parents in same-sex relationships.

However, Regnerus (2012) recently published a study indicating that adults who grew up in homes with individuals with experience with same-sex partners have a disproportionately high level of dysfunctions. He utilized a national probability sample, something that had not been used before to investigate same-sex parenting. Needless to say this went against the general literature concerning potential same-sex parenting. But rather than conduct research to dispute his findings, his detractors condemned his research in public forums and attacked his character. His university conducted an inquiry into the research⁴ and an audit was made about the peer review process by which his article was accepted. Even a petition was forwarded to have his article removed from the journal that published it. His detractors argued that his research was abnormally bad and motivated by his Catholic faith.⁵ But clearly what attracted so much attention to his research was that his findings dramatically challenged the progressive political paradigm accepted for this particular sociological question.⁶

Like all research, the Regnerus study has weaknesses. However, previous publications dealing with this subject in peer review journals were of inferior quality to his research. My assessment has been shared by other academics (Wood 2013, Schumm 2012). The extreme reaction to his finding also camouflage his literature review where he points out that previous work on this topic has relied on small convenient

⁴ The accusations that motivated the inquiry were ultimately found to be baseless.

⁵ This was quite obvious in some of the responses of a blog I wrote on this topic titled "The Left's War on Science" (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/blackwhiteandgray/2012/07/the-lefts-war-on-science/>). Some of the comments did go to the methodological aspects of the study but criticism based on Regnerus religious faith is obviously an ad hominem attack not directed at the merits of the study. But such attacks have value in substantiating that the anti-conservative bias in academics can lead to bias irrational actions, such as dismissing research that does not fulfill progressive political goals.

⁶ An argument that the desire to maintain this political paradigm shapes research into same-sex parenting could be made when we realized that researchers on the topic of the raising of children by homosexuals tend themselves to be self-identified homosexuals (Abbott 2012).

samples to make powerful generalizable claims. Work on the question about same-sex parenting is deeply flawed and if Regnerus work does nothing else, it illustrates the shoddy nature of previous work on this topic.⁷ Yet this previous research was used by advocates for same-sex parenting and marriage to justify charges of hate towards those who do not accept the results of inferior research. This is a classic example of how the work of politically progressive academics can be utilized by political progressive activists to promote their political agenda. Regnerus's findings threaten this potential tool for progressive activists and this threat helps explain the vicious reaction against him.

Just as Gross argues that conservative activists have a disproportionate level of interest in the political makeup of academia, I contend that progressive academics and activists have a disproportionate level of interest in Regnerus's study. There are valuable parallels between the reaction of conservative activists to the political makeup in academia and the reaction of progressive activists and academics towards Regnerus. Those progressives feared the use of his study against their own political agenda. Likewise, conservative activists fear how academic research is used against their causes. Their reaction to the work of progressive academics was seen by those progressive academics when they confronted work that could be used against their political desires. The only real difference between conservative activists and progressive academics is that conservatives are underrepresented in academia and are less well situated to utilize the educational institutional tool progressive activists used against Regnerus. Thus conservative activists are more likely to attack academia from the outside, rather than from within academia.

Same-sex marriage is likely not the only issue where political progressive activists possibly use politically tainted research. However, it may be a superior issue given the lack of quality research that has been conducted on this subject.⁸ It is easy to see how issues of sexism, government spending, religious freedom, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, racial conflict, educational reform etc., can be issues where the social and economic sciences can become progressive weapons. Even in the natural and biological sciences there is a possible interaction of politics and science on issues of environmental

⁷ In addition to the inadequate sample size such work also tends to be flawed by poor assessment measures, lack of accounting of suppressor variables, and inappropriate reference groups (Allen and Douglas 2012, Lerner and Nagai 2001, Marks 2012).

⁸ To be fair there is one study by Rosenfeld (2010) that overcomes a lot of the previous weaknesses of other work, and it indicates no difference between same-sex parenting and different-sex parenting. However, Allen has argued that his sample was needlessly reduced and in a full sample he did find that children in same-sex households were significantly likely to have negative educational outcomes. Allen (2013) replicated his finding with a Canadian sample strengthening his argument that same-sex parenting is not identical to different-sex parenting.

regulations and global warming. To the degree conservative activists recognize the way science is used to promote the causes of their political adversaries, it is understandable why they worry about the political makeup of academia.

It is neither exclusively a concern about progressive academics as a unifying populist message nor a realistic assessment of a political threat. Concern about progressive academics is both a unifying populist message and a realistic assessment of a political threat. These explanations are complementary. Conservative activists can perceive a need to resist academic advantages of progressive influence which motivates them to unify the distinct factions in the conservative movement with stereotypes of progressive academics. Whether the needs of unification or the addressing progressive academic advantages is more important than resistance of conservative activists to academics remain to be seen but both explanations are important.

In summary, I largely agree with the content of Gross's finding but disagree with the degree the processes he outlines answers these two research questions. I have a both/and approach whereby other factors must be taken into consideration. Gross explores questions of the political makeup of academia and the concern of conservatives, which I believe have sophisticated, multifaceted answers. Ideally future research will assess not only the different factors within these answers, but also which factors have the most explanatory power relative to other factors. That is a question that Gross has provided some possible clues for but one that needs future empirical assessment.

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