COLD HEARTS VERSUS BLEEDING HEARTS: DISCIPLINARY DIFFERENCES IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS’ SOCIOPOLITICAL ORIENTATIONS

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B.A. (Hons)

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my account of my own research. To the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously written or published by any other persons, except where noted in the text. This research has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Brianne Hastie

2005
Abstract

The supposed liberalising effects of higher education have been documented since Newcomb’s landmark Bennington study in the 1930s. However, other research has suggested that the effect of education on beliefs and values may differ between academic disciplines. The main mechanisms by which differing beliefs are believed to develop include the self-selection hypothesis (where students chose disciplines which match their pre-existing belief systems) and the socialisation hypothesis (where students are socialised into the worldview of the discipline through continued exposure). Three correlational design questionnaire studies were conducted. Study 1 and 2 featured 223 and 531 students, respectively, and Study 3 included 143 recent graduates of Murdoch University, from different academic disciplines (primarily commerce, psychology and the social sciences). Study 4 involved interviews with nine students who had switched between the three main fields of study. The quantitative results generally supported the self-selection hypothesis, although some participant accounts suggested possible accentuation effects (where pre-existing values were strengthened by university study). Future research should consider a longitudinal study, tracking students in different academic disciplines over the full-length of their degree. A cross-sectional community study would also be valuable, in determining whether large scale difference exist between the those with tertiary, compared to those with lower levels of education, and whether discipline differences persist following graduation (and whether this is linked to occupation). These findings have important implications for the way universities view themselves, in terms of shaping the minds of the next generation of leaders, and for disciplines, in terms of the types of students they attract and how they can best retain them. In conclusion, there are significant differences in the belief systems of students in different academic disciplines, although not as large as may be expected, and that this seems primarily due to self-selection, rather than socialisation or accentuation.
I’ve heard many times that the process of doing a PhD is a lonely and isolating experience, however, I have not found that to be the case. From the very start I’ve felt like I was part of something larger, starting with my first office on campus (which admittedly contained 11 other people).

As such, the first group of people to thank, for their company, inspiration, chitchat and indulgence in listening to my ideas would be my fellow postgraduates, including, but not limited to, Lauren, Anna, Carolyn, Hayley, Tim, Mark, Morgan, Shiree, Sally, Jamie, Sue, Rachael, Vivien, Kara and Mel. Thanks particularly for always thinking that I would finish, and for saying so when I needed to hear it most (and for helping me battle Word).

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# Table of Contents

Abstract iii
Acknowledgements iv
List of Tables xi
List of Figures xii
List of Appendices xiii

**Chapter 1. Introduction**

1.1 Overview of the Thesis 2

**Chapter 2. The relationship between education and ideological orientation** 4

2.1 Early research on increased liberalism among the university educated 5
2.1.1 Evidence from student samples 5
   2.1.1.a *The Bennington studies* 5
   2.1.1.b Other early research 10
2.1.2 Evidence from community samples 13

2.2 Later research on increased liberalism among the university educated 15
2.2.1 Evidence from student samples 15
2.2.2 Evidence from community samples 18
2.2.3 Socialisation as responsible for greater liberalism among university students 22

2.3 Field specific effects 27
2.3.1 Self-selection 28
   2.3.1.a *The Academics* 28
   2.3.1.b *The Students* 32
2.3.2 Socialisation 33

2.4 Socialisation versus self-selection 39

2.5 Education and ideological sophistication 44
2.6 Conclusion 46

**Chapter 3. Attributions for social phenomena** 49

3.1 The beginning 50

3.2 Structure of attributions 55
Chapter 4. Political ideology and attitudes
4.1 The structure of political attitudes
4.1.1 Political ideologies: the problem of left-right versus liberal-conservative
4.1.1.a Definitions of left, right, liberal and conservative
4.1.1.b Evidence for an ideological distinction between social and economic beliefs
4.1.1.c Ideology as motivated social cognition
4.1.2 Relationships to other sociopolitical attitudes
4.1.2.a The Protestant Work Ethic
4.1.2.b Just World Beliefs
4.1.2.c Beliefs about justice
4.2 Constraint in belief systems
4.2.1 Concept of constraint
4.2.2 Later research on constraint
4.2.2.a Group-referents level of conceptualisation: Affect towards social groups as an alternative structure to ideology
4.2.3 Ideological sophistication and comparisons between the elite and mass publics
4.3 Party identification
4.3.1 The concept of party identification
4.3.2 Criticisms of party identification
4.3.3 Party identification versus political ideology
4.4 Conclusion

Chapter 5. The Australian political and tertiary education systems
5.1 The Australian political system
5.1.1 The structure
Chapter 7. Study 2

7.1 Introduction

7.1.1 Aims
7.1.2 Hypotheses

7.2 Method

7.3 Results

7.3.1 Background variable comparisons
7.3.2 Sociopolitical attitudes scales
   7.3.2.a Structure
   7.3.2.b Discipline and year of degree analysis
   7.3.2.c Party identification comparisons
   7.3.2.d Relationships with other variables
7.3.3 Open-ended response analysis
   7.3.3.a Differences between those choosing different reasons for attending university
   7.3.3.b Differences between those choosing different reasons for choosing degree

7.4 Discussion

7.4.1 Support for hypotheses
   7.4.1.a Discipline differences
   7.4.1.b Party identification
   7.4.1.c Relationships with other variables
   7.4.1.d Reasons for attending university and choosing discipline
7.4.2 Issues arising from results
7.4.3 Methodological issues

7.5 Conclusion

Chapter 8. Study 3

8.1 Introduction

8.1.1 Aims
8.1.2 Hypotheses

8.2 Method

8.3 Results

8.3.1 Background variable comparisons
8.3.2 Sociopolitical attitudes scales
   8.3.2.a Structure
   8.3.2.b Discipline and year of degree analysis
   8.3.2.c Party identification comparisons
Chapter 8

8.3.2 Relationships with other variables

8.3.3 Reasons for attending university and choosing degree

8.3.3.a Differences between those choosing different reasons for attending university

8.3.3.b Differences between those choosing different reasons for choosing degree

8.3.4 Changes as a result of university experience

8.4 Discussion

8.4.1 Support for hypotheses

8.4.1.a Sociopolitical attitudes differences

8.4.1.b Party identification

8.4.1.c Relationships with other variables

8.4.1.d Open-ended response differences

8.4.2 Issues arising from results

8.4.3 Methodological issues

8.5 Conclusion

Chapter 9. Study 4

9.1 Introduction

9.1.1 Aims

9.1.2 Hypotheses

9.2 Method

9.3 Analysis

9.3.1 Questionnaire results

9.3.2 Interview data

9.3.3 Why do people choose their discipline?

9.4 Conclusion
List of Tables

Table 6.1: Participants by discipline and year of degree 160
Table 6.2: Descriptive statistics for the sociopolitical attitudes scales 164
Table 6.3: Correlations between sociopolitical attitudes scales 165
Table 6.4: Mean scores on sociopolitical attitudes scales by discipline 166
Table 6.5: Pearson’s r correlation coefficients for subjective financial expectations and sociopolitical attitudes scales 170
Table 7.1: Participants by discipline and year of degree 183
Table 7.2: Descriptive statistics for the sociopolitical attitudes scales 188
Table 7.3: Correlations between sociopolitical attitudes scales 188
Table 7.4: Mean scores on sociopolitical attitudes scales by discipline 190
Table 7.5: Pearson’s r correlation coefficients for subjective variables and sociopolitical attitudes scales 194
Table 7.6: Overall support for university reason categories by discipline 197
Table 7.7: Overall support for degree reason categories by discipline 199
Table 8.1: Participants by discipline 212
Table 8.2: Descriptive statistics for the sociopolitical attitudes scales 216
Table 8.3: Correlations between sociopolitical attitudes scales 217
Table 8.4: Mean scores on sociopolitical attitudes scales by discipline 218
Table 8.5: Reliability coefficients for sociopolitical attitudes scales by discipline for undergraduate and alumni participants 219
Table 8.6: Pearson’s r correlation coefficients for subjective variables and sociopolitical attitudes scales 222
Table 8.7: Overall support for university reason categories by discipline 225
Table 8.8: Overall support for degree reason categories by discipline 225
Table 8.9: Overall support for categories of reported change due to university study by discipline 228
Table 9.1: Participant characteristics 241
Table 9.2: Mean scores on sociopolitical attitudes scales compared to Study 2 246
Table 9.3: Individual and mean sociopolitical attitudes scores by change of discipline 247
**List of Figures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Mean scores on sociopolitical attitudes scales for Labor, Liberal and Greens voters</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Mean scores on sociopolitical attitudes scales for those who have versus have never received social security benefits</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Mean scores on sociopolitical value scales by discipline for undergraduates and postgraduates</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Mean scores on sociopolitical attitudes scales for Labor, Liberal and Greens voters</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Mean scores on left and right scales for those who have versus have never received social security payments</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Mean scores on sociopolitical attitudes scales for Labor, Liberal and Greens voters</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Appendices

Appendix I: Study 1 questionnaire ................................................................. 314
Appendix II: Characteristics of Study 1 sample ................................................ 323
Appendix III: Test-retest reliability in Study 1 .................................................. 332
Appendix IV: Principal Components Analysis results for sociopolitical attitudes scales in Study 1 ................................................................. 335
Appendix V: Results of MANOVAs and MANCOVAs for sociopolitical attitudes scales in Study 1 ................................................................. 341
Appendix VI: Variance and internal reliability for each scale by discipline and year group in Study 1 ................................................................. 345
Appendix VII: Comparisons for those who changed disciplines in Study 1 .......... 348
Appendix VIII: Changes to the questionnaire for Study 2 .................................. 350
Appendix IX: Study 2 questionnaire ................................................................. 354
Appendix X: Characteristics of Study 2 sample ................................................ 363
Appendix XI: Test-retest reliability in Study 2 .................................................. 377
Appendix XII: Principal Components Analysis results for sociopolitical attitudes scales in Study 2 ................................................................. 380
Appendix XIII: Results of MANOVAs for sociopolitical attitudes scales in Study 3 ................................................................. 384
Appendix XIV: Variance and internal reliability for each scale by discipline and year group in Study 2 ................................................................. 391
Appendix XV: Description of qualitative analysis categories of reasons for attending university and choosing degree, and relationships between reasons in Study 2 ................................................................. 394
Appendix XVI: Demographic differences between those reporting different university and degree reasons in Study 2 ................................................................. 402
Appendix XVII: Study 3 questionnaire ............................................................. 406
Appendix XVIII: Response rate and characteristics of Study 3 sample ................. 412
Appendix XIX: Correlations between sociopolitical attitudes scales for those alumni aged under and over 30 years ................................................................. 421
Appendix XX: Results of MANOVAs and MANCOVAs for sociopolitical attitudes scales in Study 3 ................................................................. 422
Appendix XXI: Variance for sociopolitical attitudes scales in Study 3 .................... 427
Appendix XXII: Qualitative analysis of reasons for attending university and choosing degree, and demographic differences between those reporting different reasons, in Study 3  428

Appendix XXIII: Description of qualitative analyses categories of responses to university’s effect on beliefs and attitudes, and demographic differences in responses  433

Appendix XXIV: Mean sociopolitical scale scores by discipline for Study 1, 2 and 3  438

Appendix XXV: Interview transcripts for Study 4  440

Appendix XXVI: Descriptive statistics for sociopolitical attitudes scales in Study 4  461

Appendix XXVII: Participants’ scores on other variables in Study 4  462