

JOIBS: July 2023. ISSN 2992-9253

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Review of “The Value Gap: How gender, generation, personality, and politics shape the values of American university students”

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Funding: None.

Competing interests: None.

Citation: Maranto, R. (2023). Review of “The Value Gap: How gender, generation, personality, and politics shape the values of American university students”. *Journal of Open Inquiry in the Behavioral Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.58408/issn.2992-9253.2023.01.01.00000015>

To me this seems a very valuable exploratory paper finding evidence of what many of us suspected and some prior work cited by Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) has indicated: lessened support for academic rigor and advancing knowledge and increased support for social justice and “emotional well-being.” This occurs even though widely recommended practices to enhance social justice and emotional well-being seem to foster neither. I found it interesting that agreeableness is negatively related to prioritizing advancing knowledge; positively to prioritizing emotional well-being. These relationships indicate that those agreeable people more in accord with higher education values are more anti-intellectual. Since higher education tends to pioneer values innovations, this may portend the sort of future predicted by Mike Judge’s hilariously farcical Idiocracy. It highlights the need for higher education reform, and for more higher education options such as the new University of Austin.

The manuscript also highlights gender as an independent variable. There is a cottage industry regarding how more feminized leadership may hold certain advantages (regarding k-12 schools, see Maranto, Carroll, Cheng & Teodoro, 2018). Yet this paper points out that, at least as regards academic rigor and the knowledge generating roles of educational institutions, more feminized organizations may hold certain disadvantages. This is an important and highly controversial finding we should replicate and grapple with rather than ignore or denounce. I would love to see future multivariate analyses testing for interactions between gender and personality traits, particularly openness, in explaining views toward academic values such as advancing knowledge and academic rigor. The relationship between conservatism and support for academic rigor is also intriguing, perhaps reflecting conservative beliefs in personal responsibility. Just two generations ago, both political parties supported this quintessentially American value, but views regarding personal responsibility have polarized over the past half-century, among elites and to some degree more broadly (Brewer & Stonecash, 2015).

Finally, I find interesting the relatively weak relationships between other variables and support for Academic Freedom. Could this mean that subjects are not even familiar with the concept of academic freedom, as Whittington (2018) and Kronman (2019) fear?

All this said, I request a few modifications in the manuscript.

First, since in part this work replicates Planke et al. (2018), we need more on the earlier study.

Second, the hypotheses are undertheorized. We could use more citations and discussions of prior work to justify the hypotheses. For example, regarding the hypothesis that conservatism will be associated with support for academic freedom, will this reflect the tendency of all minorities (including conservatives) to favor freedom from coercion by majorities, or a broader anchoring in Western values (Zimmerman, 2021)?

Third, we need a frequencies table to get a better sense of, for example, how mean values of support for social justice compared to those for advancing knowledge. Relatedly, we need a short discussion regarding the representativeness of the sample. Does it reflect the population of college students regarding basic ideological and demographic variables? In short, do we have any sense of the external validity?

Fourth, I found the discussion of personality traits fascinating. You could do an additional paper just on that.

Fifth, I would be interested in seeing the R-squares of a general OLS model for all the independent variables. I gather the explained R-squares are rather low.

Sixth, I am curious as to whether you have measures of social class or ethnicity. I would predict that less privileged students are less likely to privilege emotional well-being and social justice, a theme of al-Gharbi (2018), among others.

I have one minor point. Where in the introduction you say “students are living in an age of unprecedented political polarization,” please modify the language. After all, one might recall the mass disorder of the 1960s and 1970s, the racial pogroms in places like Tulsa in the 1920s, and of course, the U.S. Civil War.

Generally, however, this is a fascinating paper. I will certainly cite it.

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