Pluralistic Ignorance and Political Correctness: The Case of Affirmative Action

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The pressure to appear politically correct can have important consequences for social life. In particular, the desire to appear politically correct, and to avoid being seen as racist, sexist, or culturally insensitive, can lead people to espouse publicly support for politically correct issues, such as support for affirmative action, despite privately held doubts. Such discrepancies between public behavior and private attitudes, when accompanied by divergent attributions for one’s own behavior and the identical behavior of others, can lead to pluralistic ignorance. Two studies investigated pluralistic ignorance with respect to affirmative action among undergraduates. Their survey responses indicate that people overestimate their peers’ support for affirmative action and underestimate their peers’ opposition to affirmative action, that people’s ratings of the political correctness of supporting affirmative action are correlated with their overestimation of support for affirmative action, and that people view their own attitudes toward affirmative action as unique.

KEY WORDS: pluralistic ignorance, political correctness, affirmative action.

The topics of race and to a lesser extent gender have been taboo in our society, particularly in the universities. What people say in public is not the same as what they believe in private.

Dinesh D’Souza (in D’Souza & MacNeil, 1992)

Professors and students who remain outside the [politically correct] movement have to walk on eggshells, ever reminding themselves to say “high school women” instead of “high school girls” or a hundred other politically incorrect phrases.

Paul Berman (1992, p. 2)
In recent years, political correctness has become a central battlefield of the American culture wars. The term "politically correct" was coined by Leninists in the early 1900s to describe an individual who steadfastly toed the party line. Since then, the concept—often denoted by its initials "PC"—has evolved into an ironic, good-humored phrase among liberally oriented people to describe activists whose line-toeing fervor is a bit too much to bear (Feldstein, 1997). For many, especially political moderates and conservatives, PC has taken on a harsher tone and has come to describe a social movement they view as seeking to censor free speech and open dialogue (Duigan & Gann, 1995). It is this extreme sensitivity that is often lampooned, say, by labeling a short person as "vertically challenged."

The social pressures created by the desire to appear politically correct can have important implications for social life, particularly in institutions of higher education (see, e.g., the D'Souza and Berman quotations). In particular, people's desire to appear politically correct may lead them to present a front to others that is less than sincere. Few of us wish our friends and colleagues to misperceive us as racist, sexist, or culturally insensitive, so we may espouse PC rhetoric simply out of a desire to "fit in" and may refrain from voicing our doubts about politically charged issues. This discrepancy between privately held attitudes and public expression can produce pluralistic ignorance with respect to issues perceived to be PC, such as support for affirmative action.

Pluralistic ignorance occurs when people overestimate a group’s endorsement of an attitude or norm when, in fact, the attitude or norm enjoys little support among group members (Miller & McFarland, 1987, 1991; O’Gorman, 1986; Prentice & Miller, 1996). Originally documented by Floyd Allport and his students (Katz & Allport, 1931; Katz & Schanck, 1938), pluralistic ignorance has proved to be a widespread phenomenon. In the 1970s, for example, American whites tended to overestimate their peers’ support for strict racial segregation (O’Gorman, 1979). Although whites were, on average, in favor of integration, they believed other whites staunchly opposed integration.

Because few wish to "stick their necks out" and challenge what they take to be the prevailing dogma, pluralistic ignorance can lead to the perpetuation of unpopular social norms (Miller & McFarland, 1991). Social psychologists Prentice and Miller (1993), for example, found that Princeton University students rated themselves to be significantly less comfortable with campus drinking practices than they believed the average student to be. Although a majority of students endorsed more moderate drinking practices, they believed most other students favored excessive drinking.

There are a number of potential causes for pluralistic ignorance, but Miller and colleagues have emphasized one in particular (Miller & McFarland, 1987, 1991; Prentice & Miller, 1993). Their explanation for the pluralistic ignorance with respect to campus drinking practices and in other instances hinges on people’s beliefs about the role that fear of embarrassment and social inhibition plays in their own behavior versus the behavior of others. Because information associated with
social inhibition stems from internal cues (Funder, 1980), people have an abundance of evidence supporting their own social inhibition, but they have very little (if any) evidence supporting others' social inhibition. The (erroneous) conclusion, then, is that people on average believe they possess a greater amount of social inhibition and fear of embarrassment than their peers (Miller & McFarland, 1987, study 1). This perceived self-other difference in social inhibition can lead people to make divergent attributions for their own and others' identical public behavior. In the case of students' attitudes toward drinking norms, students may attribute their own voluminous consumption of alcohol to a fear of being seen as uptight, boring, and glum if they challenge prevailing norms, whereas they may attribute others' wild intoxication to a genuine affinity for alcohol and approval of drinking norms (Prentice & Miller, 1993).

The same psychological processes are likely at work with politically correct attitudes. In particular, people's desire to avoid public ridicule and to avoid being seen as racist or sexist may lead them to publicly espouse PC attitudes—supporting affirmative action, for example—even though they may question those attitudes in private. At the same time, people may take others' public support for affirmative action at face value, inferring private endorsement of such policies. Although they know that their own public behavior stems from concerns about appearing racist, sexist, or culturally insensitive, people may mistakenly infer that others' identical public behavior is a veridical representation of their true, underlying support for affirmative action.

Two studies examined the relationship between political correctness and pluralistic ignorance in the case of affirmative action. Study 1 investigated whether students' estimates of their peers' support for affirmative action constitutes an instance of pluralistic ignorance. Study 2 investigated the association between students' perceptions of the political correctness of supporting affirmative action and their estimates of their peers' support for affirmative action. In addition, study 2 examined the relationship between students' own attitudes and their estimates of support for affirmative action.

**Base Rates**

The studies reported here required the determination of a base rate of support for affirmative action as a standard for comparison. Early in the 1996 academic term, I gathered base rate data through a questionnaire administered to 292 Cornell undergraduates enrolled in introductory social science courses. Completion of this questionnaire qualified students to earn course credit by participating in experiments not reported here. The questionnaires were given to students in class, and they were asked to return them the following week. Students were informed that their responses were strictly confidential.

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1 Sample selection in all studies reported here was blind to demographics.
One of the questions pertained to students’ attitudes toward affirmative action. In particular, they were asked to indicate whether they supported, opposed, or were uncertain about affirmative action by placing an X next to one of the three options. Slightly more than one-quarter of the students (27%) supported affirmative action, and nearly half (46%) opposed affirmative action. Thus, opposition to affirmative action was the predominately held attitude.

**Study 1: Pluralistic Ignorance**

Study 1 investigated whether students’ estimates of their peers’ support for affirmative action constituted pluralistic ignorance. This would be the case if students overestimated the percentage of their peers who support affirmative action and underestimated the percentage of their peers who oppose affirmative action.

Seventy-one Cornell undergraduates enrolled in the same courses used to measure base rate support for affirmative action completed an anonymous questionnaire that asked students to estimate the proportion of their classmates who supported, opposed, or were uncertain about affirmative action by writing a percentage next to each of the three options. As shown in Table I, students overestimated the proportion of their peers who supported affirmative action by 13% and underestimated the proportion of their peers who opposed affirmative action by 9% \( r(70) = 6.64 \) and \(-4.62\), respectively; \( p < .001\). These findings indicate that students’ estimates of their peers’ support for affirmative action are indeed a case of pluralistic ignorance.

**Study 2: Political Correctness and Pluralistic Ignorance**

One potential cause of the pluralistic ignorance documented in study 1 is Miller and colleagues’ observation that people believe they experience more social inhibition and are more reluctant to stick their necks out than their peers, which leads them to make divergent attributions for their own and others’ identical public behavior (Miller & McFarland, 1987, 1991; Prentice & Miller, 1993). In particular, people may attribute their own public support for affirmative action to their

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<th>Percentage who support affirmative action</th>
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<td>Base rates ( (N = 292) )</td>
<td>27%</td>
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<td>Estimated percentage</td>
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<td>Study 1 ( (N = 71) )</td>
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<td>Study 2 ( (N = 42) )</td>
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*Estimated percentage is reliably different from corresponding base rate \( (p < .001)\).
concerns about appearing politically incorrect and being misperceived as racist, whereas they may view others’ support for affirmative action as an accurate expression of their privately held attitudes. Imagine a student who has private doubts about affirmative action, but who publicly espouses pro–affirmative action policies (or, at least, refrains from voicing doubts about such policies) because he or she is afraid of being misperceived as racist. That same student may erroneously infer that others’ public support for affirmative action is indicative of their true attitudes toward affirmative action—even though they have similar doubts—causing the student to overestimate his or her peers’ support for affirmative action. Of course, these divergent attributions are possible only to the degree that the student views supporting affirmative action as politically correct.

Study 2 explored this possibility by asking participants to estimate the proportion of their peers who supported and opposed affirmative action, and also to rate how politically correct they thought it was to support and oppose affirmative action. The reasoning outlined above implies a positive correlation between participants’ overestimation of support for affirmative action and their ratings of the political correctness of supporting affirmative action. Study 2 also investigated the relationship between participants’ own attitudes toward affirmative action and their estimates of their peers’ support for affirmative action.

Method. Forty-two Cornell undergraduates enrolled in the same courses used to measure base rate support for affirmative action completed an anonymous questionnaire packet in exchange for course credit. One item identical to the one used in study 1 asked participants to estimate the proportion of their peers who supported, opposed, or were uncertain about affirmative action by writing a percentage next to each of the three categories. A second item asked participants to rate the political correctness of supporting and opposing affirmative action on two 13-point scales ranging from not at all PC (1) to very PC (13). Finally, participants indicated whether they themselves supported, opposed, or were uncertain about affirmative action by placing an X next to one of the three options. The order of these questions was counterbalanced, and there was no effect of order.

Results. Students’ estimates of their peers’ support for affirmative action again constituted an instance of pluralistic ignorance (Table 1). Students overestimated the proportion of their peers who supported affirmative action by 20% and underestimated the proportion of their peers who opposed affirmative action by 16% ($t(41) = 6.92$ and $-5.72$, respectively; $p < .001$).

To examine whether students’ ratings of the political correctness of supporting rather than opposing affirmative action were correlated with their overestimation of their peers’ support for affirmative action, I first computed the difference between each student’s ratings of the political correctness of supporting and opposing affirmative action ($M$ difference = 5.78) [$t(41) = 8.32$, $p < .0001$]. I then

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2 Students estimated that a greater proportion of their peers supported rather than opposed affirmative action [$t(41) = 3.32$, $p < .01$].
correlated this difference with participants’ overestimation of the percentage of their peers who support affirmative action. As expected, the resulting correlation was substantial and significant \( r(41) = .46, p < .005 \), and the residual overestimation was, in fact, slightly negative \( M = -.41\% \) and nonsignificant. These findings indicate that the degree to which students view supporting affirmative action as more PC than opposing affirmative action is positively associated with their overestimation of their peers’ support for affirmative action.

How were the students’ own attitudes toward affirmative action related to their estimates of support for affirmative action? The students appeared to believe that their own attitudes were unique among their peers. The 40% of students who supported affirmative action estimated that significantly fewer of their peers supported affirmative action \( M = 42\% \) than did the 29% of students who opposed affirmative action \( M = 58\% \) \( t(27) = 2.31, p < .05 \). These perceptions of uniqueness may stem from participants’ belief that their own attitudes are morally superior to, and thus less common than, the attitudes of their peers (Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991; Marks, 1984). Whether this is the case remains to be resolved.

Discussion. The findings of study 2 replicated those of study 1: Participants again overestimated their peers’ support for affirmative action and underestimated their peers’ opposition to affirmative action. Moreover, participants’ overestimation of support for affirmative action was positively correlated with their ratings of the political correctness of supporting affirmative action, lending credence to the divergent attribution account of the present findings. Needless to say, these data are correlational and cannot rule out the possibility that the correlation was produced by a “third variable,” or that causality may run in the opposite direction; that is, people may think that supporting affirmative action is politically correct precisely because they think most people support affirmative action.

In the instances of pluralistic ignorance described by Miller and colleagues, however, the causal direction runs in the direction I have suggested (Miller & McFarland, 1987, 1991; Prentice & Miller, 1993). People believe that they have more evaluative concerns than do others; this belief leads them to make divergent attributions for their own and others’ identical behavior, which in turn leads them to overestimate support for social norms that (in actuality) enjoy little support. If a similar phenomenon is at work with attitudes toward affirmative action, people should rate themselves as more worried than their peers about being misperceived as racist. This possibility was explored with two additional items presented to 15 Cornell undergraduates from the same classes as in studies 1 and 2. The items asked students to rate how concerned they would be that something they said in a group discussion on racial issues would be misperceived as racist, and how concerned they thought the average Cornell student would be that something he or she said would be misperceived as racist. Students rated each item on a 9-point scale.

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3 Both of these estimates are significantly greater than actual support for affirmative action (both \( ps < .005 \)).
ranging from *not at all concerned* (1) to *extremely concerned* (9). As expected, students rated themselves as more concerned about being misperceived as racist (*M* = 6.47) than they thought the average Cornell student would be (*M* = 5.47) [*t*(14) = 3.24, *p* < .01].

### General Discussion

The present studies document pluralistic ignorance with respect to people’s attitudes toward affirmative action: Cornell students overestimated their peers’ support for affirmative action and underestimated their peers’ opposition to affirmative action. The psychological processes that give rise to pluralistic ignorance in the case of affirmative action are likely similar to those cited by Miller and colleagues (Miller & McFarland, 1987, 1991; Prentice & Miller, 1993) as giving rise to pluralistic ignorance in the case of unpopular social norms: People who view supporting affirmative action as politically correct are likely to publicly espouse support for affirmative action, despite harboring privately held doubts, because they are afraid of being misperceived as racist. At the same time, those same people interpret others’ identical public behavior as a veridical reflection of their private beliefs. In support of this analysis, study 2 found a positive correlation between the first and final steps in this process; that is, the degree to which students believe that supporting affirmative action is politically correct is positively correlated with their overestimation of their peers’ support for affirmative action. Study 2 also provided support for the divergent attribution mechanism by showing that people think they are more apprehensive about being misperceived as racist than their peers.

The chain of inference proposed to produce pluralistic ignorance in the case of affirmative action includes several steps that raise important questions, not all of which were addressed here. First, do people tend to “edit” their public behavior to be politically correct because they are worried about being misperceived as racist? Numerous studies have shown that people alter their behavior to fit the situation and the people with whom they interact (Jones, 1990; Schlenker, 1980), but it remains to be shown that the same occurs with respect to affirmative action.

Second, do people explain their public support for affirmative action as stemming from concerns about how they will be judged by others, but explain others’ support for affirmative action as stemming from their privately held attitudes? Research on the actor-observer difference, or the tendency for people to explain their own behavior as stemming from situational factors but to explain others’ behavior as stemming from their underlying dispositions (Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecek, 1973), suggests this would be the case. In particular, people may explain their own public support for affirmative action as a response to social pressures to say the right thing, but may explain others’ public support as a reflection of their privately held beliefs.

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4 The order of the two questions was counterbalanced with no effect of order.
Finally, the concepts examined in these studies—perceptions of political correctness and attitudes toward affirmative action—are complex constructs, and the single-item “holistic” measures used here may not do them justice. Different dimensions of affirmative action may be viewed as more politically correct than others; for example, it may be more PC to support “equal pay for equal work” than to support the admission of “unqualified” students to highly selective universities. Likewise, people’s desire to appear politically correct may wax and wane from one context to another; such concerns may be felt more deeply during discussions on the plight of the inner cities, for example, than during debate team practice. Pluralistic ignorance may therefore vary in different contexts and with respect to different aspects of affirmative action. The present studies offer a preliminary, “broad-brush” exploration of the relationship between affirmative action, political correctness, and pluralistic ignorance. Elucidation of the complexities of these constructs and the relation among their subcomponents should be a primary aim of future work.

The present studies also raise a number of interesting questions about what factors might moderate the pluralistic ignorance documented here. For example, how might people’s race and gender affect their public behavior regarding affirmative action? On the one hand, women and blacks, as potential benefactors of affirmative action, might feel more justified than white males in voicing their privately held doubts about affirmative action policies. On the other hand, women and blacks might experience a particularly strong fear of appearing politically incorrect: They may fear being seen as “Betty homemakers” or “Uncle Toms,” and may worry about being ostracized by their peers for failing to support “the common cause.”

Additionally, one might expect that fear of appearing politically incorrect could lead to pluralistic ignorance for any number of politically correct issues, such as people’s attitudes toward gay and lesbian marriage or adoption, their views about the appropriate labels for the romantically involved (are they “boyfriends and girlfriends” or “partners”?), their attitudes toward gender equality, or their beliefs about the role of the Western canon in a liberal arts education (Duigan & Gann, 1995; Gates, 1989; Howe, 1991). To the extent that concerns about appearing racist, sexist, or otherwise culturally insensitive squelch public expression of private doubts about such issues, pluralistic ignorance can be expected to emerge.

Political correctness has been hotly debated in the popular press (Berman, 1992), among academics in the humanities (Duigan & Gann, 1995; Feldstein, 1997; Friedman & Narveson, 1995), and in the political arena. Yet despite the issue’s growing importance in social life, it has received little empirical attention from psychologists. This is an unfortunate oversight, as the effects of political correctness are likely manifest in many domains. This paper is a preliminary effort to explore one such manifestation—pluralistic ignorance in the case of affirmative action—and my hope is that it will help to foster discussion of the powerful psychological effects of the political correctness movement. I trust that researchers
will not shy away from open dialogue about these issues; doing so would surely be politically incorrect!

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REFERENCES


