

Review of: "Censorship on Campuses"

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I have now had the chance to closely read *Censorship on Campus*, and from that reading, I have grave interpretation, methodological, validity, and general quality concerns with the paper. I will attempt to articulate these concerns in this review.

Interpretation Concerns

My first concern is that the data are not able to answer the question/s that the authors set out to answer. For example, the paper is called "Censorship on Campus," and the abstract begins with "Modern Western societies conceive universities as places for open inquiry and the relentless pursuit of truth." A paper about this topic of truth seeking at the university, you would hope, would involve studying truth seeking on a university campus. As far as I can tell, study 1 involves MTurk participants, and study 2 involves "college-aged" people from the US, UK, and Hungary. Aside from the 100 or so people from a UK university in Study 2, it is statistically likely that many respondents across these studies were not on college campuses when answering these questions and/or may not have attended the universities that the authors start their paper describing. For reference, around 37% of people in the US, according to the Census, have college degrees or advanced degrees (<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/educational-attainment.html>).

As a frame of reference, I serve (or have served) as an editor of manuscripts at other journals, and this kind of interpretative slippage between data (i.e., non-college sample) and argument (i.e., censorship at college) is one of the primary grounds from which I will reject a paper without sending it for additional review. Put simply, when authors do not see how their argument is unrelated to their data, this is a lack of care and attention to the data and issues they are studying.

Also, as an aside, if we confine our analysis to just the UK university sample, the authors do not have the sample size to find the hypothesized effects.

Citation Concerns

Citations in this paper are inappropriate throughout the entirety of the manuscript, and the summaries often do not accurately represent the findings or the scholarly record. One example of incorrect citation is the first sentence in the abstract: "Modern Western societies conceive universities as places for open inquiry and the relentless pursuit of truth." This statement has no citation, and perhaps it should. Universities are big places, and it is not clear that they are about any one thing. If you would consult the literature on education and college, in particular, you would find a number of

interpretations of what modern Western societies think of universities. Certainly, the marketing is about truth, but some universities are for profit (Lower Ed by Tressie McMillan Cottom). Some universities are expressions of board politics (changes at New College in Florida are expressions of politics; see <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10755-018-9422-6>), and some are about training specific skills for certain jobs (a medical degree is about having skills to perform a particular job). You'll notice that truth isn't necessarily all that common in these conceptions of universities. I hope that authors, when they make strong claims about institutions that appear in abstracts, would actually have the citations to back up those claims.

Another example of improper citation, "We tested this across three different paired categories that prior work has shown are perceived to differ in their relative advantage in society (high-status: men, White people, Christians; low-status: women, Black people, Muslims) (Winegard et al., 2023)." This is a really odd sentence with an even stranger citation. I think the implication is that people perceive these groups to be high/low status but that they may not be? However, people have been looking at these kinds of status perceptions prior to 2023. The authors may, instead of engaging in self-citation, engage in the actual scholarly endeavor of connecting their research with the literature on stereotype content, for which there is at least two decades of research. And of course, some research suggests that there is actual relative advantage (not just perception) for these categories, which would also merit engaging. That work is more than 100 years old. One relevant citation is the research on experimental resume audit studies which shows consistent pro-white bias in hiring discrimination over the last few decades with some caveats (Lincoln Quillian's work).

Another example of improper citation, "Yet in recent years, there has been much discussion of the "free speech crisis on campus" and many scholars have lamented the increasing censoriousness among young people at universities (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019)." There certainly has been! But the idea that there is increasing censoriousness at universities is contested. For instance, the survey cited often by FIRE.org finds that 97% of students have never been punished for their speech. That's a lot of students saying what they want to say without consequences (<https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/almost-1-in-10-college-students-threatened-punishment-their-speech-study>). It is good citation practice to contend with the array of scholarly work on a topic, especially as it pertains to contested interpretations.

Methodology

I have several significant methodological critiques of the work. One has to do with the measurement of censorship. The authors measure this construct using four items, and the validation information is confined to one paragraph: "Following each passage, participants rated their agreement with four statements ("They should remove the book from the library.", "A professor should not be allowed to require the book for class.", "Students should not be allowed to cite the book.", and "It would not be good if students read the book.") on 7-point scales from 1=*Not at all* to 7=*Very much so*, which were combined into indices of support for censorship, $\alpha > .93$."

These four items could index censorship, but they could also index any number of related but distinct constructs. They could index agreement with the statement, they could index the quality of the argument they construct on their own to support the statement, they could index the normativity of the statement. We don't know because the scale has not gone through the process of validation of test-retest reliability, of convergent and discriminant validity. The scale even fails on

face validity—“it would not be good if students read the book.” I might agree for censorship reasons, I might equally agree if it was a shit book and I hope I can save a friend some time in having to read it. This is a place to start when considering measuring a new construct: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2515245920952393>

Another critical methodological challenge of the work is that the authors seem to entirely avoid the reality that liberalism/conservatism differs by country. To say one is liberal in the US, Hungary, or the UK can and does often mean different things. So, unfortunately, though it can be good to seek out cross-cultural comparisons, it is likely to be difficult to interpret in this specific case. Typically, scholars who study political ideology across cultures measure dimensions of politics that are more specific and overlapping with US conservatism-liberalism (authoritarianism is one). Without that kind of more granular approach (see <https://academic.oup.com/poq/article-abstract/71/2/175/1929938>), again, the authors have not collected data that can assess the claims they have made in the paper. This also goes for the fact that liberal-conservative ideology is a measured variable in an experiment, and thus includes a number of alternative explanations (third variables) that have not been considered in the present manuscript.

A final methodological concern I will mention here is that the prompts are odd and rely on no contextual supporting arguments—they are just meant to be factual/fantasy statements that people then censor or not. The problem with this choice for the manipulation is that people are not blank slates; they live in the world and have histories and are exposed to knowledge about groups. Because of this, each statement does not, in fact, contain “identical information,” as the authors have argued. For instance, I am very familiar with the argument “White people score higher than Black people on intelligence tests” because people have been making a version of this racist argument in social science journals/books for at least one hundred years (Hernstein & Murray, 1994), and you can find a version of this argument online fairly easily (<https://twitter.com/EPoe187/status/1740429571177185539>). I have never come across the reverse argument. Thus, these statements are not equivalent, and this additional unintended condition difference raises a number of alternative explanations for the results.

In summary, with these methods, we do not have equivalent conditions, we haven’t accounted for third variables, we aren’t sure liberalism means the same thing across countries, and we aren’t sure that we have measured censorship or something related.

On Censorship on Campus

I think the underlying argument of this article is that liberals are engaging in censorship, and that is bad for the pursuit of truth. This conclusion does not logically follow from the premise. For instance, some amount of censorship is necessary. I often engage in censorship by reviewing my own manuscripts before they are published. Sometimes whole passages that I have written are deleted in that process. Other times, reviewers will make comments about my work that change the way I interpret and write about my work. Censorship!

But these forms of censorship can be important; they can clarify that my thoughts aren’t logical or well articulated, or that they are missing critical connections to other scholars’ research. Censorship in this fashion pushes me to refine my ideas and arguments, and often helps me to better understand a phenomenon and its boundaries. Sometimes censorship is just

generous editing.

I think some generous editing prior to publication was warranted with this paper. An internal review or a private external review prior to publication would have allowed the authors to address these substantial concerns I have identified in private, versus out on the internet.