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The Relationship between Student Identity Development and the Perception of Political Bias in the College Classroom

William F. Buckley published *God and Man at Yale* in 1951 and began a lasting debate regarding the role ideology plays in the university. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2004) found that more than half a sample of 1000 United States citizens polled felt that colleges and universities improperly introduce a liberal bias into the classroom. Students are also voicing their opinions on the subject. Websites such as *noindoctrination.org* solicit students to post personal accounts of their experiences with ideological bias on colleges campuses. Student groups such as Students for Academic Freedom (SAF) and its parent foundation, The Horowitz Freedom Center, have argued that academia is politically one sided and that students have the “academic freedom” to be exposed to a wide spectrum of scholarly viewpoints. Central to this group’s mission is their proposed Academic Bill of Rights (Students for Academic Freedom 2009). This document advocates for the purposeful promotion of intellectual pluralism on college campuses. It calls for changes to university curriculum and the funding given to invited-speaker programs and student organizations. The Academic Bill of Rights also calls for the hiring and promotion of faculty to be done in an ideologically neutral manner.

A number of states have proposed legislation aimed at increasing ideological diversity in state-supported institutions of higher education. Such legislation is based, to varying degrees, on SAF’s Academic Bill of Rights. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP 2009) reports that nearly two dozen state bills have been proposed since 2004. While no legislation has passed, these bills illustrate the concern many have over the issue of ideological bias in higher education.

There is obvious value in presenting students with a broad range of viewpoints and ideas. The AAUP's 1967 Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students outlines a faculty member's responsibility to foster unhindered discussion, inquiry and expression in the classroom (Joint Statement 2007). This statement also reinforces the importance for students to feel free to take reasoned exception to any views offered in a course. Some feel, however, that the Academic Bill of Rights would ultimately have negative consequences for free expression in the classroom and that academic decision-making should be left solely to education professionals. Minnich (2006), for instance, writes that the risk to higher education from legislation modeled on the Academic Bill of Rights is that intellectual judgments may be "discredited wholesale as 'bias' and rendered irrelevant in favor of a mindless 'impartiality'" (20). Given the seriousness of this debate and its implications for academic freedom, fully understanding students' perceptions of ideological bias in the university environment, why these perceptions exist and the impact of such perceptions on the student experience is essential. This understanding will inform academia how best to address the perception of ideological bias on college campuses.

Ideological Bias Research

Peer-reviewed research has explored some concepts relevant to the issue of ideological bias in colleges and universities. One piece of evidence used by groups such as Students for Academic Freedom to support their position is that the professoriate is ideologically left leaning. While non-peer-reviewed research has suggested a much more disproportionate ratio (Horowitz and Lehrer 2003), peer-reviewed studies estimate approximately three liberal college faculty members for every one conservative (Zipp and Fenwick 2006; Gross and Simmons 2007). Such research does not illustrate, however, that ideology plays an inappropriate role on campus or in the classroom or has a significant effect on students' grades, beliefs or learning outcomes. The

question of ideology's effect on these issues has also begun to be explored in the academic literature.

Mariani and Hewitt (2008) utilized Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) data to perform a longitudinal study exploring changes in students' political ideology during their college years. HERI data consisted of survey responses from 6,807 students at 38 colleges at the start of their freshman year in 1999 and then again at the end of their senior year in 2003. Results showed that participants tended to become more liberal during their college experience, but at rates similar to the United States' population of the same age range not attending college. Additionally, there was no evidence found indicating that faculty ideology at the institutional level had an impact on student ideology. Mariani and Hewitt explain this finding by arguing that other factors seem to affect changes in student ideology, such as socio-economic status and gender. Mariani and Hewitt recognize as a limitation to their study the fact that their research does not explain students' individual experiences. They acknowledge that faculty in their study may simply be failing in efforts to indoctrinate students.

Kemmelmeier, Danielson and Basten (2005) explored student success as a function of conservatism. Utilizing person-environment fit literature, Kemmelmeier, et al. hypothesized that conservative students would do better in a classroom environment that matched their ideological beliefs. The research utilized data from a four-year longitudinal study comprised of a cohort of 5,534 students at a major public university. Kemmelmeier, et al. had two significant and related findings. First, in disciplines that tend to attract liberal students (sociology, American studies, African-American studies, cultural anthropology, education, nursing and women's studies) there was no relationship between students' political views and the grades they received. Second, in disciplines that tend to attract conservative students (economics and business), conservative

students made somewhat higher grades than liberal students, by a factor of 0.25 on a four-point grading scale.

While no support has been found for liberal ideology affecting students' grades or ideology, Kelly-Woessner and Woessner (2008) have shown that ideology does affect the student experience and may impact learning outcomes. Kelly-Woessner and Woessner explored the relationship between students' perceptions of their political science professors' ideological views and how those students rated their professors on class evaluations. The dataset consisted of 1385 student surveys sampled from 69 courses taught by 30 separate instructors at 29 different institutions. This research found that student subjects reported putting more effort into a class when the instructor was politically similar to that subject. Subjects also reported higher levels of learning from politically similar instructors and reported less enthusiasm for classes taught by instructors politically dissimilar to themselves. Kelly-Woessner and Woessner have given compelling evidence that the perception of ideological bias on college campuses is affecting the student experience. Their implication that instructor ideology affects learning cannot be wholly relied upon as it is based on student self-report rather than learning outcomes; however, it does suggest that student perceptions of ideological bias are in need of further research.

Fisler and Foubert (2006) argue that a student's cognitive development may play a crucial role in the perception of such ideological bias. Fisler and Foubert state that facilitating cognitive growth is a basic function of higher education, but that such growth is often "accompanied by some degree of disequilibrium, especially if students are stretched too far beyond where their minds are ready to go" (4). Fisler and Foubert suggest that the disequilibrium caused by having their beliefs challenged may influence students' perceptions education professionals having an ideological bias. Extending this argument, student identity

development may also play a crucial role in how students perceive and experience ideological bias in a university environment. To begin to address this hypothesis, the current study explored the role that students' identity development plays in the perception of faculty political bias in the classroom.

Identity Development Theory

Marcia's (1966) identity development construct was employed in this study to help explain the relationship between student identity development and perceptions of ideological bias. Ericson (1950), basing his work on Freud, was the first clinical psychologist to introduce identity development as the primary psychosocial task of adolescence. Although Ericson's work was groundbreaking, it only "provided a rich theoretical narrative about ego identity; he did not produce an explicit set of empirical operations that could be used to define identity in unambiguous, publicly replicable terms" (Berzonsky and Adams 1999, 559). Marcia (1966) was the first to produce an empirically testable construct of identity development.

Marcia's (1966) purpose was to establish the "psychosocial criteria for determining degree of ego identity" so that researchers could test "hypotheses regarding direct behavioral consequences of ego identity" (551). Marcia's research resulted in four experimentally derived profiles of identity status: *achievement*, *foreclosure*, *moratorium* and *diffusion*. Marcia assigned an individual to one of these four statuses on the basis of the evidence of exploration and commitment in the domains of occupation, religion and politics, employing a semi-structured interview process. In later work, Marcia (1980) reframed the domain of "occupation" as "vocation," in order to "provide as broad a term as possible for one's 'work in the world'" (110).

According to Marcia (1980), identity construction is an ongoing process and does not happen neatly. Elements of identity that one rejects are known. Elements that are chosen

contain the unknown. Identity development can be difficult as some young people “cannot risk saying ‘no’ to elements of their past of which they are certain and make the affirmative leap into an uncertain future” (Marcia, 1980, 110). Identity *achievement* represents a consolidated sense of self. These individuals had evidence of high degrees of both exploration and commitment. *Foreclosure* represents an endorsement of authoritarian values, “an apt description for one who is becoming his parents’ alter ego” (Marcia 1966, 558). While these individuals also had high evidence of commitment, their evidence of exploration was low. Individuals in *moratorium* and *diffusion* stages both had low evidence of commitment. *Moratorium* represents active exploration for a sense of self and had correspondingly high evidence of exploration. Finally, *diffusion* represents a pattern of apathy and lack of direction, and has low evidence of both commitment and exploration.

Marcia’s construct has been employed in a wide variety of contexts. It has been utilized as a lens through which to explore the relationship between physical attractiveness and identity development (Shea, Crossman, and Adams 1978), the effect of university environments on identity status (Adams and Fitch 1983) and the relationship between development and adolescent attitudes about sexuality (Chapman and Werner-Wilson 2008). Marcia’s construct has maintained its heuristic value due in large part to its “elegance and simplicity” (Schwartz 2002). While Marcia’s work has received some criticism for its representation of Ericson’s original concepts, Berzonsky and Adams (1999) believe it still has utility, “especially as a model of differences in how individuals negotiate demands and expectations within institutionalized moratoria like university contexts” (584).

Marcia’s (1966) construct suggest that subjects who are in identity *foreclosure* status, with high evidence of commitment and low evidence of exploration, may perceive ideological

bias with greater frequency than subjects in alternate statuses. Marcia describes an identity *foreclosure* subject as “becoming what others have prepared or intended him to become . . . College experiences serve only as a confirmation of childhood beliefs” (552). Of particular interest to the current study is Marcia’s description of a foreclosure subject’s behavior: “A certain rigidity characterizes his personality; one feels that if he were faced with a situation in which parental values were nonfunctional, he would feel extremely threatened” (552). It is possible this rigidity may cause identity *foreclosure* subjects to perceive ideological bias while their peers in alternate identity statuses do not perceive a similar bias.

Method

Survey data was collected for the current study through convenience sampling. Participants (N=271) were current undergraduate students in three Introduction to Human Communication (N=173) classes and five Introduction to Public Speaking (N=98) classes in the spring 2009 semester. These classes were general education courses at the study institution. The study institution was a mid-sized, land grant institution in the Southeastern United States.

The current study compared the results of two separate surveys to explore the relationship between students’ identity development statuses and perceptions of ideological bias. To gauge students’ identity development statuses, this study employed Balistreri, Busch-Rossnagel and Geisinger’s (1995) Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (EIPQ). The EIPQ is a 32-item self-report identity inventory that measures Marcia’s dimensions of exploration and commitment in two scales. These dimensions are addressed through Likert-scale responses to questions covering eight domains: occupation, religion, politics, values, family, friendship, dating and sex roles. Balistreri et al. obtained Alpha coefficients of .75 for the commitment scale and .76 for the exploration scale. The EIPQ was chosen for the purposes of this study based on construct

validity testing performed by Schwartz (2002), in which the EIPQ was compared to Bennion and Adam's (1986) Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status-II (EOM-EIS-II), an alternate inventory of Marcia's identity development dimensions. Schwartz (2002) found that the "EIPQ is preferable to the EOM-EIS-II when the objective is to differentially associate personality characteristics or other traits with identity status categories" (482).

To gauge students' perceptions of ideological bias, this study employed a modified version of Linvill and Havice's (in print) Political Bias in the Classroom Survey (PBCS). The PBCS is an 11-question self-report survey that explores student experiences with instructor political bias in the college classroom. Eliciting Likert-type responses, the PBCS addresses student experiences with classroom political bias along two dimensions: the degree to which the student perceives instructor political bias and the degree to which the student reacts to this bias. The *perceptions* scale focuses on what the students' experience in the classroom and is based on observations of their instructors. This scale addresses elements of political bias such as instructors limiting of class content and discussion to conform to their own beliefs and dismissing views and ideas from students who disagree with the instructor. The *reactions* scale focuses on how political bias is experienced by students, addressing the students' perceived need to conform to the beliefs of their instructor. Linvill and Havice obtained a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .803 for the *reactions* scale and .802 for the *perceptions* scale. Prior to the PBCS's inclusion in the current study, one question, "In my experience, professors encourage students to express their opinion on political issues, even when the professors' and students' beliefs differ," was added to the *perceptions* scale to replace an item eliminated from the original scale for reasons of internal consistency. This item brought the total number of questions in the modified PBCS to 12.

Results

The sample consisted of 148 female (54.6%) and 123 male (45.4%) participants. The sample's mean age was 19.7. Two hundred and thirty-nine participants self-identified white (88.2%), 17 African-American (6.3%), 9 Asian or Pacific Islander (3.3%), 2 Hispanic (.7%) and 4 self-identified as other (1.4%). Participants' ideology was self-identified on a seven-point Likert-type scale, with one being "very liberal" and seven being "very conservative." The mean reported ideology was 4.5.

Each participant responded first to the EIPQ and then to the PBCS concurrently. Results were evaluated using SPSS™ statistical analysis software. Reliability testing performed on the EIPQ's *commitment* scale for the current study showed a Cronbach's alpha of .80, while the *exploration* scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .72. Reliability testing performed on the modified PBCS showed the *perceptions* scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .77, while the *reactions* scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .78. No item, if deleted, improved these alpha scores.

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression modeling was performed to explore the relationship between responses to the two scales comprising the EIPQ and the two scales comprising the PBCS. The regression model illustrated in Table 1 employs the PBCS's *perceptions* scale as a dependent variable. Consistent with LINVILL and HAVICE'S (in print) findings, the demographic dummy variables *male* (Beta = .125, $p = .039$) and *African-American* (Beta = -.124, $p = .047$) are significant indicators of this scale at the $p < .05$ level. Inconsistent with LINVILL and HAVICE'S findings is that *ideology* is not a significant indicator in this model. It seems likely that this is due to the inclusion of the EIPQ's *commitment* and *exploration* scales. It should be noted that the *commitment* scale (Beta = .176, $p = .008$) is the strongest single

indicator when employing the *perception* scale as a dependent variable. Adding the EIPQ's *commitment* scale to the model raised the model adjusted r-square from .034 to .056.

(insert Table 1 about here)

The OLS regression model illustrated in Table 2 employs the PBCS's *reactions* scale as a dependent variable. This model is more consistent with Linvill and Havice's (in print) findings: *male* (Beta = $-.184$, $p = .002$), *African-American* (Beta = $-.136$, $p = .026$) and *ideology* (Beta = $.157$, $p = .013$) all appear as significant indicators at the $p < .05$ level when employing the *reactions* scale as a dependent variable. In this model, the EIPQ scales addressing identity development are not significant indicators at the $p < .05$ level. Adding the EIPQ's *commitment* and *exploration* scales to the model raised the model adjusted r-square from .092 to .094

(insert Table 2 about here)

Exploring the data fully shows an additional OLS regression model worth noting. The model illustrated in Table 3 employs the demographic variable *ideology* as the dependent variable. The variable *African-American* (Beta = $.246$, $p = .000$) is the only demographic variable that is a significant indicator of *ideology* at the $p < .05$ level. Both EIPQ scales, *commitment* (Beta = $.202$, $p = .001$) and *exploration* (Beta = $-.146$, $p = .018$), however, are shown to be significant indicators of the dependent variable *ideology* at the $p < .05$ level. Adding the EIPQ's *commitment* and *exploration* scales to the model raised the model adjusted r-square from .060 to .138.

(insert Table 3 about here)

Discussion

This study's finding that the EIPQ *commitment* scale is a significant positive indicator of the PBCS *perception* scale, as illustrated in Table 1, is consistent with Marcia's identity development construct (1966). As discussed, a rigidity of beliefs consistent with identity *foreclosure* subjects helps to explain these findings. Berzonsky (1988, 1989, 1992) gives further explanation for the connection between identity *foreclosure* status and increased perception of ideological bias. Berzonsky (1988, 1989) proposed that individuals of differing identity styles vary in the social-cognitive processes they use to form and maintain their sense of self. Berzonsky (1992) found that identity *foreclosure* was highly correlated with a *normative* orientation, that is, an orientation found to use defensive and emotion-centered coping strategies and to be closed off to alternative values and actions. Berzonsky suggests that these strategies are used to preserve their current set of beliefs, a finding consistent with Marcia's (1966) construct. It is possible that subjects' perception of instructor behavior as ideological bias may be just such a defensive coping mechanism.

Berzonsky's (1992) finding also helps to explain why the EIPQ *commitment* scale is not a significant indicator of the PBCS *reactions* scale. The reactions gauged by the PBCS focus on the subjects' degree of conformity to the instructors expressed ideologies—either to preserve a grade or simply not to stand out from the class—and their willingness to express their beliefs to the instructor. It seems unlikely that a subject employing a *normative* orientation, and thus using defensive and emotional coping strategies, would be likely to conform to his or her instructor's

beliefs or keep his or her own views in check. This finding is also supported by Toder and Marcia's (1973) finding that subjects in a "stable" identity status, i.e. *achievement* or *foreclosure*, were less susceptible to conformity pressure than were subjects in *moratorium* or *diffusion*.

Berzonsky's (1992) findings further suggest that subjects ranking high on the *exploration* scale, and thus classified by Marcia's (1966) construct as in either identity *moratorium* or identity *achieved*, would employ an *information* orientation. This orientation was found to employ active, problem focused coping strategies rather than the defensive and emotional coping strategies of the *normative* orientation. This would suggest that the *exploration* scale should be a negative indicator for the PBCS *perception* scale, but this is not the case. This finding will require further research to address fully.

The results illustrated in Table 3, that both the EIPQ *commitment* (Beta = .202, p = .001) and *exploration* (Beta = -.146, p = .018) scales are significant indicators of self-identified ideology, are consistent with previous research. These results suggest that subjects in *foreclosure* status are more likely to self-identify as conservative. Clancy and Dollinger's (1993) exploration of the relationship between identity status and personality traits found that there was a significant negative relationship between *foreclosed* status and openness. For the purposes of their study, Clancy and Dollinger defined "open" persons as those with "more cultured tastes, *liberal values* and intellectual curiosity" (230, italics added). The reasons for this finding, however, remain in need of additional research.

Conclusions

The results of the current study suggest that students who are more committed to their values and beliefs are more likely to perceive ideological bias in their instructors, showing a possible relationship between student identity development and student perceptions of

ideological bias in a university setting. While this finding suggests that some perceptions of ideological bias may be in the eye of the beholder, it is still reasonable to assume that educators will occasionally express an inappropriate ideological bias. Steps should be taken to address the issue of ideological bias in the university context—whether this bias is real or only perceived—not only because of the possible impact on the student classroom experience (Kelly-Woessner and Woessner, 2008), but also because of public perceptions of higher education (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2004). As funding for higher education is tightened in many states, retaining public credibility becomes more important.

As Fisler and Foubert (2006) point out in their discussion of how to address the perception of ideological bias on campus, “Students’ perspectives of professors and administrators may hinge, at least in part, on how well educators help them become more intellectually mature and on how well educators communicate with their students in the process” (3-4). Fisler and Foubert advocate several means of improving this communication, including educators conducting personal self reflection to address their own biases, both faculty and institutions making a commitment for transparency of professed beliefs, and the purposeful creation of a civil environment on campus where debate and discussion of issues can take place without judgment. King (2000) argues that educators who feel their only responsibility is to sharpen their students’ intellect, and that the responsibility to foster alternate forms of development lies in others’ hands, are doing their students a disservice, as poorly developed skills in one area can inhibit the development of another. The current study supports this assertion by suggesting aspects of identity development may have an effect on the classroom experience, as well as on how instructors are perceived by their students. King argues that

educators should help to foster all kinds of development by actively supporting students in learning to make reflective judgments.

Future research will need to explore to what degree changes in teaching style may influence students' perceptions of ideological bias in the classroom by fostering student development. Linvill and Havice (in print) have shown that students perceive and react to the experience of political bias in different ways based on a range of personal and demographic factors. Many students feel the need to conform to their instructor's beliefs or, alternately, hide their own beliefs when they perceive their instructor to have an ideological bias. It may not be possible to eliminate such reactions from the classroom entirely, but mitigating them to any extent possible is an important goal.

According to King, educators who want to help students understand their own beliefs and make effective knowledge claims must give up the "I pitch you catch" (24) view of education. Freire (2002) refers to the "pitch/catch" style of education as *banking* education. In *banking* education, instead of communicating, "the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat" (Freire, 72). To educators practicing *banking* education, knowledge becomes a gift bestowed on those they consider to know nothing. According to Freire, *banking* education limits a student's creativity and the process of free inquiry. An alternative teaching method Freire (2002) suggests is the concept of *problem-posing* education. In *problem-posing* education, both the student and the teacher are simultaneously students and teachers. *Problem-posing* education encourages an educational process in which students are no longer docile listeners, but rather "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (Freire, 81). *Problem-posing* educators ideally re-evaluate their own beliefs as the students express their own. Freire explains the role of the *problem-posing* educator is to create,

together with the student, an environment where true knowledge can be found. *Problem-posing* education is “education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination” (Freire, 81). It seems likely that *problem-posing* education, if practiced successfully, could allow more students to express their own authentic views while also exploring new perspectives.

The debate over the prevalence of actual ideological bias on university campuses may be moot, because biases should be addressed, whether they are real or merely perceived. It may be possible to address both the real and perceived biases by changing teaching practices to take student development into account, as in the ways discussed. In this manner, ideological diversity can be fostered from the ground up, not mandated through legislation or other external means. Education professionals should instill in students the importance of open discussion and open minds, both to the students and to society as a whole. Too often in society today, and particularly in the media, students are presented with black-and-white arguments and partisan bickering. The university experience should give students something more than narrow partisanship; college should teach them to evaluate ideas for their own merits through open-minded inquiry. In this way, students can grow both intellectually and developmentally.

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Table 1. Dependent variable *perception*

	B	S.E.	Beta	t	P value
Male	1.174	.566	.125	2.072	.039*
African American	-2.379	1.192	-.124	-1.995	.047*
Ideology	.205	.189	.070	1.085	.279
Exploration	-.005	.034	-.010	-.153	.878
Commitment	.078	.029	.176	2.687	.008**

Adjusted R-square = .056

*p<.05

**p<.01

Table 2. Dependent variable *reaction*

	B	S.E.	Beta	t	P value
Male	-2.008	.645	-.184	-3.111	.002**
African American	-3.034	1.359	-.136	-2.233	.026*
Ideology	.536	.215	.157	2.494	.013*
Exploration	-.059	.039	-.097	-1.519	.130
Commitment	.001	.033	.002	.034	.973

Adjusted R-square = .094

*p<.05

**p<.01

Table 3. Dependent variable *ideology*

	B	S.E.	Beta	t	P value
Male	.003	.185	.001	.016	.988
African American	-1.611	.376	-.246	-4.284	.000**
Exploration	-.026	.011	-.146	-2.371	.018*
Commitment	.031	.009	.202	3.299	.001**

Adjusted R-square = .138

*p<.05

**p<.01