

Commentary

Confronting the New Particularism in Academe

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Modern science views dispassionate reason as the surest route to knowledge. Objectivity and impartiality are thus its guiding ideals and their violation a major concern. These violations are often discussed as the application of particularistic rather than strictly universalistic criteria in evaluating evidence.

Arthur Bedeian (1996 [this issue]) suggests that particularism is on the rise in the discipline of management. Indeed, he describes how the Academy of Management seems to have made it official practice by slating officers and appointing editorial board members of its journals to achieve representation rather than solely according to discipline-related merit. Seeking to stimulate concern and dialogue, Bedeian also lists the many harms that such partiality can visit on individuals (unfairness), institutions (lower quality), and science itself (lost credibility).

Demonstrations that norms are being violated stir active concern, however, only when allegiance to the norms is strong and secure. It is unclear whether this remains true for universalism in most disciplines today, particularly in the social sciences. To be sure, academics still stand ready to condemn deviations from universalism that are motivated by self-gain, whether they be to profit oneself, relatives, or associates. For instance, scientists and other scholars swiftly

and surely punish fraud in securing grants, publications, or honors, and they remain vigilant for and continually lament any suspected favoritism in the awarding of academic recognition. Some are cynical or hypocritical about reducing such transgressions, but virtually all would agree publicly that they must be condemned—and certainly never endorsed.

THE NEW PARTICULARISM

Although Bedeian speaks of this obviously selfish form of particularism, it is not what troubles him most. Bedeian's concern focuses instead on the rise of what I would call pseudo-altruistic particularism—a consistent ideological bias or “thumb on the scale” in the name of a supposed higher good. In this case, the systematic bias is the widespread use of race and gender preferences to assure balanced representation across academic and economic life.

The difference between selfish and pseudo-altruistic particularism can be illustrated as follows. White males can expect to be uniformly condemned in academe for discriminating in favor of their own race and gender, but they often expect praise for favoring women and minorities. The key difference between the two forms of discrimination is that White men can

claim to be acting in the greater good, indeed sacrificing their own self-interests, when they discriminate in favor of "the other." Similarly, women and minorities can now often advocate preferences for their own gender or race with relative impunity if they disclaim any self-interest and present themselves as pursuing the common good (e.g., by claiming that cultural diversity benefits everyone). Purporting to eschew personal gain, practitioners of this new pseudo-altruistic particularism claim the moral high ground, all the while reaping personal advantage, including recognition, promotions, new academic programs, and other academic perquisites, for their ostensible social consciousness.

In fact, in today's academic climate, it is their open critics, especially those who explicitly defend universalism and nondiscrimination, who face a rising risk of being rebuked as self-serving and hypocritical. For instance, according to leading multicultural educator James A. Banks (1994, p. 22), "many of the ['traditionalists'] arguments . . . are smoke screens for a conservative political agenda designed not to promote the common good of the nation but to reinforce the status quo, dominant group hegemony, and to promote the interests of a small elite." Their appeals to universalism are but a "clever tactic" to define their own narrow interests as universal. In short, criticizing efforts to achieve cultural diversity can be tantamount to convicting oneself of racism and sexism, which are the most odious forms of particularism.

MULTICULTURALISM: PARTICULARISM'S NEW RATIONALE

Bedeian correctly notes that race and gender preferences seem to violate Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which explicitly states that nothing in it should be construed as mandating racial balance. And yet many colleges and universities employ rather open and obvious group preferences and apparently with more self-congratulation than fear.

Part of the explanation for widespread race and gender preferences, both inside and outside academe, is that three decades of civil rights law and regulation have effectively required the very group preferences in employment (to avoid unequal results or disparate impact) that Title VII expressly forbids (as intentional discrimination or disparate treatment). Such contradictory pressures have been analyzed at length (e.g.,

Gottfredson & Sharf, 1988), and they explain why many institutions use surreptitious quotas (quotas to avoid disparate impact, but surreptitious to avoid being sued for reverse discrimination). However, these legal cross-pressures do not explain the increasingly open and vigorous advocacy of what, to many onlookers like Bedeian, seem to be obviously illegal group preferences.

Multiculturalism is the answer. It speaks the language of universalism—merit and nondiscrimination—to repudiate those very principles. It is like a Phoenix rising from the ashes of the affirmative action controversy to provide an innocuous new rationale for its contested practices: business and educational necessity. Its rise has been greatly facilitated by the management discipline, in which it is championed as essential for gaining the competitive edge and assuring business survival. See, for example, R. Roosevelt Thomas's (1991) *Beyond Race and Gender: Unleashing the Power of Your Total Work Force by Managing Diversity*, which was published by the American Management Association. The management discipline therefore has special reason for examining multiculturalism's origins and role in the new particularism.

Western Origins of Universalism

Modern science originated in the West. It is the example par excellence of Western civilization's millennia-old emphasis on reason as the means to truth. The capacity for reasoned thought allows individuals to see beyond the peculiarities of their condition and culture to glimpse a common reality and universal truths about human nature and the human condition. In Western philosophy, reason—not tradition, not faith, not authority or lineage—should be the guide to ordering men's affairs.

Modern science also embodies the Western Enlightenment's emphasis on the primacy of the individual, namely, its conception that all individuals stand in equal relation to nature and the state, all with the right to think for themselves and to question the established order. Each possesses inalienable, natural rights by virtue of being human, regardless of the arbitrary conditions of their birth. These human rights are universal because they rest on man's universal nature.

Universalism, as Bedeian suggests, is a general norm for behavior grounded in these Western precepts. By this view, equality (equal rights) requires equal (universalistic) treatment. Therefore, objectively

determined rules and standards must be developed and applied impartially to all individuals, qua individuals. American democracy has long celebrated its commitment to universalism (in theory if not always in practice), and sought to fulfill it via the principles of individual merit and nondiscrimination—that is, by ensuring that all individuals are allowed to benefit from the exercise of their own abilities and efforts, regardless of race or social circumstance. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s exemplifies that quest—specifically, to replace the corrosive and degrading particularism of race by the universalism of a shared humanity.

Multiculturalism's Repudiation of Universalism

By sharp contrast, multiculturalists tend to repudiate universalism and its assumption of a shared humanity. They do so often precisely on the grounds that universalism is Western. It is, for them, *merely* Western. That is, because Western civilization is for them only one among others, its principles should be viewed as particularistic, as no more than narrow self-interest or cultural prejudice. Schools and workplaces should represent Western thought but not let it dominate. Multiculturalists then cast Western principles even more narrowly by equating Western with White European male culture, which allows them to dismiss universalism as merely Eurocentric and male. Because modern science is distinctively Western, it is similarly damned. Thus does multiculturalism transform the universal into the particular and the objective into the subjective.

A closer look at two popular but radical forms of multiculturalism—what I term relativism and racialism—shows how this rhetorical jujitsu is accomplished (see Gottfredson, 1994b, in press-a, for longer discussions). Ironically perhaps, both forms are quintessentially Western in origin and argument. Their description also reveals why many universalists prefer not to contest them, thus acquiescing in their advance.

In practice, multicultural argument often represents some unclear and self-contradictory amalgam of relativism and racialism. It is seldom as explicit or coherent as described below. These two forms are modal types or templates, however, against which to compare different multicultural rationales for race and gender preferences. Some leaders in the cultural diversity movement (e.g., Banks, 1994; Thomas, 1991) are fairly racist in approach, whereas others

seem more distinctly relativist (Loden & Rosener, 1991).

Multicultural relativism. Moral and cultural relativism grew in the West during the 19th century as the Enlightenment—the Age of Reason—succeeded in dethroning religion and tradition, in favor of reason alone, as guides to human action. With individuals now freed to question all established moral systems, none retained the authority to endorse or enforce common precepts. Relativism departs from Enlightenment thought by arguing that, although reason might still be a guide to knowing what is true, it is no guide to determining what is good. What is good depends on, according to relativism, one's personal needs and values.

Multiculturalists adapt relativism in several ways. First, they conceive of individuals essentially as creatures of their birth groups or cultures, and so apply relativist thinking to groups rather than to individuals. When they argue that there is no universal yardstick by which to judge one morality superior to another, they refer to the presumed moralities of groups, not of individuals. Multicultural relativism thus stresses that no culture (rather than individual) can properly apply its own particular yardstick to another. Cultures are different, but none is deficient. By this reasoning, Western principles of universalism reflect a morality constructed to meet the needs and values of a particular group. They are merely a cultural preference, inherently no better than any others, and consequently nothing but prejudices when applied to other cultures. Universalism is reduced to monoculturalism.

Second, multiculturalists adapt relativism by declaring that all major demographic groups in American politics (races, genders, ethnicities, and the like) are different cultures. As Bernstein (1994, chap. 5) has described, multiculturalists show little actual interest in or knowledge about different world cultures, often collapsing highly distinct ones (Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Thai, and Samoan as "Asian") but treating members of the same family (brothers and husbands vs. sisters and wives) as inhabiting fundamentally different cultures. Nonetheless, this equation of demography with culture enables them to assert that all groups are equally good.

Multiculturalists tend to adapt relativism in yet a third way, by stretching it to apply to competence as well as character. Their argument is specifically that

competence is just another cultural preference or value. It is said to be contingent on culture because different cultures develop and value different abilities. There can be no common standards for competence across demographic groups because there are no common values across cultures.

By this view, it is discriminatory to apply one culture's standards of merit to individuals from another. It is to treat "otherness as deficiency" (Loden & Rosener, 1991, pp. 29-30). Relativists dismiss traditional American definitions of academic and occupational competence and qualification as discriminatory precisely because they are traditional, which they equate with White European male. If women or minorities perform less well on objective assessments of ability or knowledge, even ones known to measure those capabilities equally well in all groups (as do most standardized tests of academic and vocational skill), it is because those standards represent cultural attributes favored by Whites or males and so are more often possessed by them (linear thinking, competitiveness, and the like). In the words of one leading diversity consultant (Thomas, 1991, p. 22), "'Qualified' translates to those individuals who are most likely to mesh with the corporation's current culture." Any deficiency is not in the populations falling short on a standard, but in the standard itself.

For example, multiculturalists often (mistakenly) dismiss general intelligence as important only to the extent that a society chooses to value it, much as it might prefer the taste of one kind of cheese over another. They dismiss it as only a "white style of thinking" (Helms, 1992) because proportionately fewer Blacks and Hispanics score above average on mental tests. Rejecting the overwhelming evidence that general intelligence is the single best (not the only) predictor of performance in school and on the job, multiculturalists instead tend to turn to unsubstantiated theories of multiple intelligences to claim that cultures determine the particular intelligences that people develop and display. To select for general intelligence in a color- and gender-blind manner therefore is not universalistic at all. Rather, for relativists, it constitutes discrimination, because it reflects a bias toward White male forms of competence. In other words, multicultural relativists denigrate even (perhaps especially) the most demonstrably valid merit standards as only arbitrary cultural (White male) preferences to transform apparent nondiscrimination into covert discrimination.

The next step in the argument completes their inversion of the principles of merit and discrimination: They usually assert, as indicated above, that cultures have different but equally valuable competencies. Women and minorities, because they are women and minorities, are said (but not demonstrated) to possess special competencies, which are usually described only vaguely as unique perspectives, experiences, or ways of thinking and doing. As one oft-cited text (Loden & Rosener, 1991, p. xviii) enthuses, they represent "a dynamic resource that is virtually inexhaustible in its variety and potential for creative new solutions." In other words, race and gender diversity is required in the name of merit selection and organizational efficiency. Why it is best achieved by exactly proportionate representation of all demographic groups is never really clarified.

The inversion of universalism via the redefinition of merit is thus complete. Traditional merit having been denigrated as presumptive cultural bias, race and gender themselves are now made components of merit. Race- and gender-blindness having been denigrated as probable discrimination, race- and gender-consciousness now become essential for nondiscrimination. Note, too, that relativists use the culture-as-competence presumption not only to redefine merit and nondiscrimination to require race and gender preferences. They also redefine merit to change the ostensible goal of those preferences to exclude race and gender concerns (cultural diversity enhances organizational productivity). Diversity is "primarily for the manager's benefit and not that of minorities and women" (cf. Loden & Rosener, 1991, p. 26; Thomas, 1991, p. 83). Thus to the pretense of universalism they add the appearance of disinterested altruism.

Multiculturalists provide no evidence for the many presumed benefits of representation (see Gottfredson, *in press-a*, for the relevant research). Their argument that it increases productivity and profitability is based largely on faith (Morrison, 1992, p. 237). Universities and large employers, however, have eagerly and uncritically seized on the celebrating diversity rationale in their efforts to satisfy the contradictory dictates of federal civil rights enforcement policy (Lynch, 1994). For example, the University of California justifies its disproportionate use of nonacademic standards in admitting non-Asian minority students in the name of promoting a healthy cultural diversity on campus (e.g., Wilson, 1996). There is a similar trend in the

workplace to reduce the cognitive content of employment tests to achieve racial parity in hiring despite racial disparities in qualification (e.g., see Zelnick, 1996, pp. 109-111, on changes in tests for hiring police officers). Such pragmatism helps institutions reduce their risk of expensive litigation and bad publicity, but it has the side-effects of reducing the validity of the selection process (because cognitive abilities are important in college and on the job) and of endorsing the new particularism's egalitarian fiction.

Racism. The racist form of multiculturalism reflects another and more extreme current in modern Western thought, and a more fundamental challenge to universalism. Like relativism, this new current (often going by the name of postmodernism) rejects reason as a guide to what is right and good. Going further, however, it rejects reason even as a means to the truth. It maintains that there is, and can be, no objectivity. The truth, like the good, is merely subjective. It is socially constructed and determined by one's place in time, place, and society. Not just morality and competence, but truth itself is contingent on culture. There is no common reality, only competing wills.

In multicultural racist thought, power relations are the dominant fact about cultural groups. Races, ethnicities, and genders represent different collective wills that compete from different power positions. Those in power (presumed to be White European males) intentionally dominate and victimize those who are not (women and minorities). Individuals are products of their birth groups and dependent on them. Thus, for multicultural racists, individual rights depend on group rights, because the fates of individuals rest with those of their groups. As already suggested, a group's fate is seen, in turn, to rest on its relative power. Modern Western science is viewed as but an exercise in will by the dominant culture. Racists dismiss its claims to universalism and objectivity as a pretext by which White European males seek to maintain hegemony and ill-begotten privilege.

Racists presume, conversely, that race and gender inequalities necessarily reflect and result from systematic oppression by White European males. By this logic, all traditional social norms, behavioral standards, political traditions, and organizational procedures are suspect as covert tools of Eurocentric male domination. Those that fail to produce equal outcomes are damned as institutionalized racism and sexism and structural exclusion. And just as material advantage

and disadvantage supposedly accrue to individuals by virtue of their group membership, so do guilt and innocence. Under racism, no White male can claim innocence. Under racism, none retains the moral standing by which to criticize the new particularism.

Although racists seek equal socioeconomic outcomes for all groups, they are not content with such equality. Nor are they content with the equal regard and public tribute that relativists demand for all groups. Instead, they seek liberation and an equal voice for oppressed groups (Banks, 1994). Although voice may connote open, reasoned debate to universalists, what racists mean by it is power. Women and minorities can be assured of equality only if they are able to exercise their collective wills equally effectively. Whereas relativists argue that different cultures succeed via exercising different but equal forms of talent, racists imply that they succeed only via exercising equal power. As Thomas (1991) put it, women and minorities must be put into the driver's seat.

Racists seek parity in power in the name of racial democracy (e.g., Banks, 1994). They mean by this that all groups must be proportionately represented by authentic representatives in all settings and seats of power, whether it be in the United States Congress or the Academy of Management. In this way, racist multiculturalism succeeds in mobilizing universalist sentiments on behalf of freedom and democracy for individuals in the service of liberation and racial democracy for groups. Once again, particularism marches under the banner of universalism to destroy universalism.

UNIVERSALISM'S RESPONSE TO THE NEW PARTICULARISM

In rhetorically turning universalism against itself, the new race and gender particularists confuse or coopt many potential critics. They also shake the confidence of others who would normally defend objectivity and impartiality. Having lost its tongue, universalism tacitly acquiesces to the advance of the new particularism. It need not.

Universalism's Tacit Capitulation to Particularism

The latter gets the upper hand rhetorically by arguing from a false premise, which many of its potential

critics fear to dispute, namely that all groups are (in effect) equally talented in all meaningful respects. Where relativists believe that talents differ across cultures, racialists seem to believe that there is no such thing as talent. For the latter, talent is merely an epiphenomenon of culture and of no inherent functional value.

Neither belief is correct. Decades of research in education and various branches of psychology prove otherwise (e.g., see the four volumes of the latest edition of the *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*). For reasons that are not yet fully understood, a higher proportion of individuals in some groups than others fails to develop certain key skills, abilities, knowledge, and interests.

To take just one particularly stark example, the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data from 1978-1992 show that Black and Hispanic 17-year-olds (excluding dropouts) perform, on the average, like White 13-year-olds in math and reading and like White 9-year-olds in science (Smith et al., 1995). Multicultural particularists rightly deplore these enormous (and stubborn) group disparities in functional skills. They suddenly seem to become blind to them, however, when they demand equal representation in higher education and the workplace, where precisely such skills are so often critical to good performance.

The new particularism is vulnerable at the core and could collapse if deprived of its central fiction, namely that all groups are equal with regard to competency. Its critics can be fully confident in disputing this fiction not only because it is false but also harmful. To contend that there are no differences in human competence, whether within or between groups, is to turn a blind eye to their very real consequences. Competence is advantage. Greater competence confers greater advantage in myriad ways. Moreover, some skills and abilities are more useful than others in modern life. Superior intellectual and academic skills, for instance, happen to provide numerous practical advantages over a lifetime, both at work and at home, especially in a postindustrial economy (Gottfredson, in press-b). To deny such facts does nothing to moot their operation. Universalism is not the cause of such disproportions in advantage, but is part of the solution.

Nonetheless, multicultural particularists are seldom called to account for their egalitarian fiction because relatively few academics seem willing to dispute it today. Some fear that it seems (or may be) racist and sexist to deny the claim. Many in academe fall silent

simply "to avoid needless trouble." Some even knowingly collude in the fiction for personal advantage (Gottfredson, 1994a).

If one tacitly accedes to the egalitarian fiction, however, one thereby also commits oneself to the multiculturalists' second false premise, which is that all social inequality results from unfair discrimination, whether inadvertent (as the relativists seem to argue) or intentional (as the racialists maintain). If all groups are equally qualified, on the average, then what other explanation can there be for average race and gender differences in education, employment, and income? Appealing to the principles of merit and nondiscrimination in the presence of such social inequality can only mean, by this perspective, that one is either indifferent to or has a taste for discrimination itself. In short, acceding to the egalitarian fiction provides insufficient protection against charges of racism, sexism, and elitism—unless one also at least tacitly repudiates universalism as well. Held hostage by their devotion to universalism, many universalists have done just that—tacitly repudiated it. The new particularism advances less by the strength of its own arms than by the willingness of potential opponents to lay down theirs (cf., Bernstein, 1994, chap. 9).

Reaffirming Science's Allegiance to Universalism

Pseudo-altruistic particularism is based on conceptions of man and society that, if implemented, would transform this nation in ways that would horrify many of its unwitting advocates. Although claiming to seek justice, many of them undermine the very notion of justice by disputing the possibility that men can discern it. Although claiming to empower, they subordinate individuals to their birth groups. Although claiming to dignify, they treat individuals as passive creatures of their circumstances.

Race and gender particularism will not be turned back in science unless we reaffirm our allegiance to universalism—individually, publicly, confidently, and repeatedly in many ways, small and large. As Bedeian points out, norms are upheld by precept and example. We must not cede the moral high ground to the new particularism and its destructive falsehoods. There are more constructive forms of multiculturalism to which we can commit ourselves—ones grounded in universalistic principles and which respect the dignity and freedom of individuals (see Gottfredson, in press-a, on Western pluralism).

These alternative futures merit the dialogue that Bedeian seeks. It is precisely our abhorrence of discrimination, not any proclivity for it, that makes Americans reticent to discuss group differences more forthrightly and constructively. It would be a shame if that well-intended reticence allowed a harmful new race and gender particularism to take root in science and society. Bedeian is to be commended for stimulating debate about its appearance in our own backyard.

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