The Danger of Partisan Psychology

Loretta Breuning, PhD*
Inner Mammal Institute
Loretta@InnerMammalInstitute.org

If you enroll in a psychology class, you are likely to be taught that conservatives are mentally flawed. Scientific evidence will be invoked to "prove" this. For example: Fear and Anxiety Drive Conservatives' Political Attitudes. A student cannot easily challenge such authoritative assertions. As a result, anyone who has studied psychology has been trained to think that conservatives are defective.

A good example of psychology's partisan bias is the 2013 study using brain scans to suggest that Republicans are more fearful than Democrats. This study was widely reported in science channels such as Science Daily, Smithsonian, Current Biology and Live Science, as well as more popular channels like Mother Jones and HuffingtonPost. Of particular interest to me were PsychologyToday.com posts, such as Conservatives Big on Fear, Brain Study Finds and Red, Fright and Blue, because I have a blog on PsychologyToday.com.

When I was a student, I was not skilled at questioning such research. When I was a professor, I failed to question it as much as I should have, despite living in the sausage factory and seeing how the sausage is made. Now I'm retired, and I want to help others question the encroachment of ideological conformity into science. Here is what I would ask:

1. Who is doing the research?

Almost all academic scientists hold the left-wing world view. (I don't use the word "liberal" because my faculty colleagues hated conservatives, and in my opinion such hatred is not liberal.) The exact percentages are quibbled over, and it is easy to make the numbers look less extreme by counting faculty at religious universities and retirees. The partisan skew is even more extreme in the social sciences— you almost never meet anyone who is openly conservative. Professors insist that their politics don't matter because they bend over backward to accommodate "diverse perspectives," but when they speak privately, their hatred of conservatives is clear.

2. How much evidence is there?

The headlines cited above were all based on a single study with fewer than a hundred subjects. The study scanned participants' brains while they made decisions about risk in a laboratory game. Such experiments are typically run in many variations and only "significant" findings are reported. What is significant? Everyone knows which findings will define you as a hero and which will ruin your career. It's easy to design a study that "proves" one's preconceived beliefs. And it's easy to do that without conscious awareness, because findings that fit the left-wing consensus feel true, get media attention, and bring grant funding and promotions. Findings that reflect poorly on the leftist agenda feel wrong. A researcher can easily alter their experimental design until it produces "good data."

3. What subjective interpretations are made?

The brain-scan study is widely interpreted in a way that makes Republicans look bad. The study found that Republicans and Democrats made the same decisions but used different brain regions. Scans of active regions were different enough to make successful predictions of a person's party registration. The regions allegedly favored by Republicans were allegedly fear centers, while the regions allegedly favored by Democrats were alleged to be empathy and curiosity regions. This reinforces the widely-held view that Democrats are open-minded, curious, and tolerant, while Republicans are rigid and fearful. Here are some other possible interpretations:

- Republicans feared losing resources during the game because losing resources is a natural healthy fear unless you're always spending other people's money.

- Democrats made decisions with social centers rather than fear centers because looking good to others is more important to them than making responsible decisions.

- Democrats are fearful too. You don't see headlines about fearful Democrats because their fears are deemed valid while Republican fears are deemed neurotic. Democrat fears are often social in nature. Democrats believe they are hated by the people who pay for their free stuff. And they fear being shunned by other Democrats if they question the latest victim theory. When Democrats' social fears drive their decisions, researchers call it "building community" and "pro-social" behavior.

My assertions are subjective, of course, but that's the point: we notice subjectivity when it's unflattering to Democrats. When it's unflattering to Republicans, it's just considered true.

The Harm Done by Partisan Psychology

I do not want to inflame the partisan divide. I only raise this issue because of the unhealthy core message of left-wing psychology: that we are not responsible for what happens to us.

An addict learns in counseling that it's not their fault they're addicted. A violent teenager learns in counseling that it's not their fault they're violent. A person with an eating disorder learns that their eating habits are not their fault. The blame mindset is easy to hear in a person who has had counseling.

Left-wing psychology trains people to blame the system for their distress. We are invited to blame our bad choices on society, corporations, and our genes. When genes are deemed relevant, we are encouraged to blame the healthcare system for lacking treatment appropriate for our genes.

You may object to these generalizations. You may know counselors who are nice people with good intentions. You may know conservatives who indeed seem fearful. You may think science is fact. But if you look at the teachings of the psychology establishment with fresh eyes, you will see the problem. **Managing your brain is a skill, and you don't build the skill when you expect the system to make you happy.**

We are taught that addiction is "self-medicating." This implies that someone else should be medicating us. If medication is our only tool for managing the frustrations of life, we will all need medicating. Yet medication frequently triggers an unfortunate cycle of escalating prescriptions and escalating side effects. We ignore this problem because we don't see alternatives.

Holding one's self accountable is not regarded as an alternative. If you expect people to hold themselves accountable, you are accused of traumatizing and stigmatizing them. Now *you* are to blame for their bad choices. More important, you are hating them, and thus guilty of a hate crime. Your career is at risk if you suggest that people are responsible for their actions. We cannot expect psychology professionals to commit career suicide.

The public spends huge sums on counseling, and a big increase is in the works. The money ends up teaching our fellow citizens that they are not responsible for their actions. The psychology establishment tells us how to raise children, manage employees, and address mental health challenges. It tells us how to understand our own emotions. We keep giving them more power because we don't see an alternative.

Understanding your power over your brain is an alternative.

A Post-Partisan Psychology

We humans have two brains— a limbic system inherited from earlier animals (the amygdala, hippocampus, pituitary, etc) and a uniquely human cortex. The limbic system controls the brain chemicals that make us feel good and bad. If you want to be happy, you have to get it from your limbic system.

Our limbic system cannot process language. When you talk to yourself, it's all in your cortex. Your limbic system cannot tell you in words why it has turned on the chemicals because our two brains are literally not on speaking terms.

Your cortex lacks insider information so it's always trying to make sense of the chemistry you're experiencing. It confuses feelings with external facts. **When you understand your brain, you can distinguish between reality and a momentary chemical release.** You can train your two brains to work together. If you don't build this skill, you act like an animal and then come up with words to justify it.

You have power over your brain when you know how it works. It is not designed to make you happy all the time. It is designed to promote survival. It releases a chemical that feels good (dopamine, serotonin, and/or oxytocin) when you do something good for your survival. It releases the stress chemical, cortisol, when you see a threat or obstacle to your survival. But your brain defines survival in a quirky way. It cares about the survival of your genes, and it relies on neural pathways built in youth.

Neural pathways build when our chemicals flow. When our ancestors found food, a happy-chemical surge built a pathways that wired them to find food in the future. When they got hurt, an unhappy surge built a pathways that wired them to avoid harm in the future. We are always trying to repeat behaviors that felt good before

and avoid behaviors that felt bad before. Each brain promotes survival with pathways built from its unique life experience.

The uniquely human cortex can anticipate future consequences. It can trigger bad feelings about something that feels good right now. And it can spark good feelings about something that feels bad right now. **We have two brains because we need both. You can feel good in the long run by training your two brains to work together.** This is easier to do when you understand your brain. Otherwise, you just take bad feelings as facts about the world.

Good and bad feelings come from chemicals inherited from earlier animals. In the state of nature, there were no refrigerators so our ancestors had to seek food constantly to survive. Dopamine made the quest feel good. Our brain releases dopamine when you find something that meets your needs. Each step closer stimulates more dopamine. But once you reach a reward, the dopamine stops. because it has done its job. Now you have to do more to get more. Dopamine feels great, which motivates you to keep seeking.

A wild animal triggers a steady stream of dopamine with its steady efforts to meet its needs. A pet or a zoo animal is not stimulating dopamine all day the way nature intended because their needs are met by others. **Our brain saves good feelings for steps that meet needs.**

Serotonin and oxytocin are likewise stimulated by behaviors that promote survival. Specific social behaviors trigger them because mammals are social animals. **The happy chemicals are quickly metabolized, so we have to keep repeating these behaviors to keep stimulating the good feelings.**

We are not born knowing how to do this. We are born with billions of neurons but very few connections between them. Our connections build from lived experience. Whatever triggered your chemicals in youth built the pathways that help you turn them on today. **Fortunately, you can build new pathways if you faithfully repeat a new behavior.**

I am not suggesting that the health care system can rebuild your pathways for you. This is not a realistic expectation. No amount of funding and programs can rewire us. Our thoughts and actions rewire us.

Rewiring your brain takes tremendous effort. You will not invest that effort if you believe you are not responsible for your brain. You don’t invest effort if

you expect happy chemicals from an external source, be it legal or illegal. You don't invest it if you believe something is wrong with you.

Yet modern psychology has spread the belief that we are broken. It presume that effortless happiness is the default state of nature, so unhappiness is evidence that something is wrong. Maybe it's you. Maybe it's society. This thought pattern is useful if your aim is to create social discontent. But if your aim is to feel good in ways that are healthy in the long run, these false beliefs are harmful.

You can learn to believe in your power over your brain instead of expecting it to be fixed by an expert like a car.

Happy chemicals are not designed to flow effortlessly

Your brain saves the happy chemicals to reward you for steps that meet your needs. It defines your needs with old pathways, so each of us is challenged to refine our pathways. Each of us struggles for ways to feel good in the short run that are also healthy in the long run.

This is hard for everyone. Do not believe that others got a good brain and you got left out. Every brain is difficult to manage because our brain evolved to promote survival, not to make you feel good all the time.

Instead of teaching people to abdicate responsibility for their brain, psychology can teach people to find their power over their brain. I wrote many books about how to do this after my retirement from academia. See, for example, Habits of a Happy Brain: Retrain your brain to boost your serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin and endorphin levels. Many free resources on how to rewire your brain are offered by the Inner Mammal Institute.

*Loretta Breuning, PhD
is Founder of the Inner Mammal Institute and Professor Emerita of Management at California State University, East Bay. Her books include Habits of a Happy Brain, Tame Your Anxiety, and the Science of Positivity. As a teacher and a parent, Loretta was not convinced by prevailing theories of human motivation. Then she learned about the brain chemistry we share with earlier mammals and everything made sense. She began creating resources that have helped thousands of people make peace with their inner mammal. Her many books have translated into Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Arabic, French, Turkish, and German. Details at Inner Mammal Institute.