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Leor Zmigrod, PhD

Psychology

University of Cambridge

from September 2022 to March 2023

Born in 1995 in Trenton, NJ, USA

Studied Psychological and Behavioural Sciences and Psychology at the University of Cambridge

FELLOWSHIP

College for Life Sciences

PROJECT

The Developmental and Computational Origins of Authoritarianism

Why is the human brain so easily seduced and magnetized by ideologies? My research programme seeks to fuse theories and methodologies from cognitive science, social neuroscience, political science, and behavioural genetics to unpack the developmental origins and computational components of ideological dogmatism and extremism. After all, not all individuals are equal in the vigour, speed, and intensity with which they embrace rigid and intolerant doctrines. What makes one brain vulnerable and another resilient in the face of authoritarian ideologies?

As a Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, my research will examine the central question: what developmental and computational mechanisms govern the emergence of authoritarian ideological attitudes? The project consists of two strands. The first strand will investigate the developmental origins of authoritarianism by analysing a 10-year longitudinal study tracing the neural, psychological, and environmental determinants of authoritarianism and xenophobia in a sample of European citizens. This will be the first longitudinal study demonstrating how psychological functioning in adolescence predicts political attitudes and dogmatism in adulthood. The second strand will develop a computational framework incorporating Bayesian models of belief in order to explain political phenomena. This computational account will reveal how, why, and when dogmatic ideologues may be unexpectedly adhering to principles of Bayesian rationality in contexts where the informational structures are skewed.

The two strands of the project will complement and inform each other to produce a holistic and mechanistic elucidation of the psychological roots of modern authoritarianism. In contrast to explanations that invoke "mindlessness" or "thoughtlessness" as the drivers of political intolerance, this project will illuminate the developmental-environmental interactions and complex mental computations that shape susceptibility to ideological dogmatism and prejudice.

Recommended Reading

Zmigrod, Leor, Peter J. Rentfrow, and Trevor W. Robbins (2018). "Cognitive Underpinnings of Nationalistic Ideology in the Context of Brexit." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 19: E4532–E4540. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1708960115>.

Zmigrod, Leor, Ian W. Eisenberg, Patrick G. Bissett, Trevor W. Robbins, and Russell A. Poldrack (2021). "The Cognitive and Perceptual Correlates of Ideological Attitudes: A Data-Driven Approach." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 376: 20200424. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2020.0424>.

Zmigrod, Leor (2022). "A Psychology of Ideology: Unpacking the Psychological Structure of Ideological Thinking." *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916211044140>.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Zmigrod, Leor (Amsterdam [u.a.],2024)

The interplay between subcortical and prefrontal brain structures in shaping ideological belief formation and updating
<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1888600519>

Zmigrod, Leor (Amsterdam [u.a.],2023)

Thinking outside the ballot box
<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1885964072>

Zmigrod, Leor (London,2022)

A psychology of ideology : unpacking the psychological structure of ideological thinking
<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1812492944>

Zmigrod, Leor (London,2021)

The political brain : neurocognitive and computational mechanisms
<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1839152001>
Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London / B ; 376
<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1839152001>

Zmigrod, Leor (London,2021)

The cognitive and perceptual correlates of ideological attitudes : a data-driven approach
<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1812491719>

Zmigrod, Leor (Washington, DC,2018)

Cognitive underpinnings of nationalistic ideology in the context of Brexit
<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1812489897>