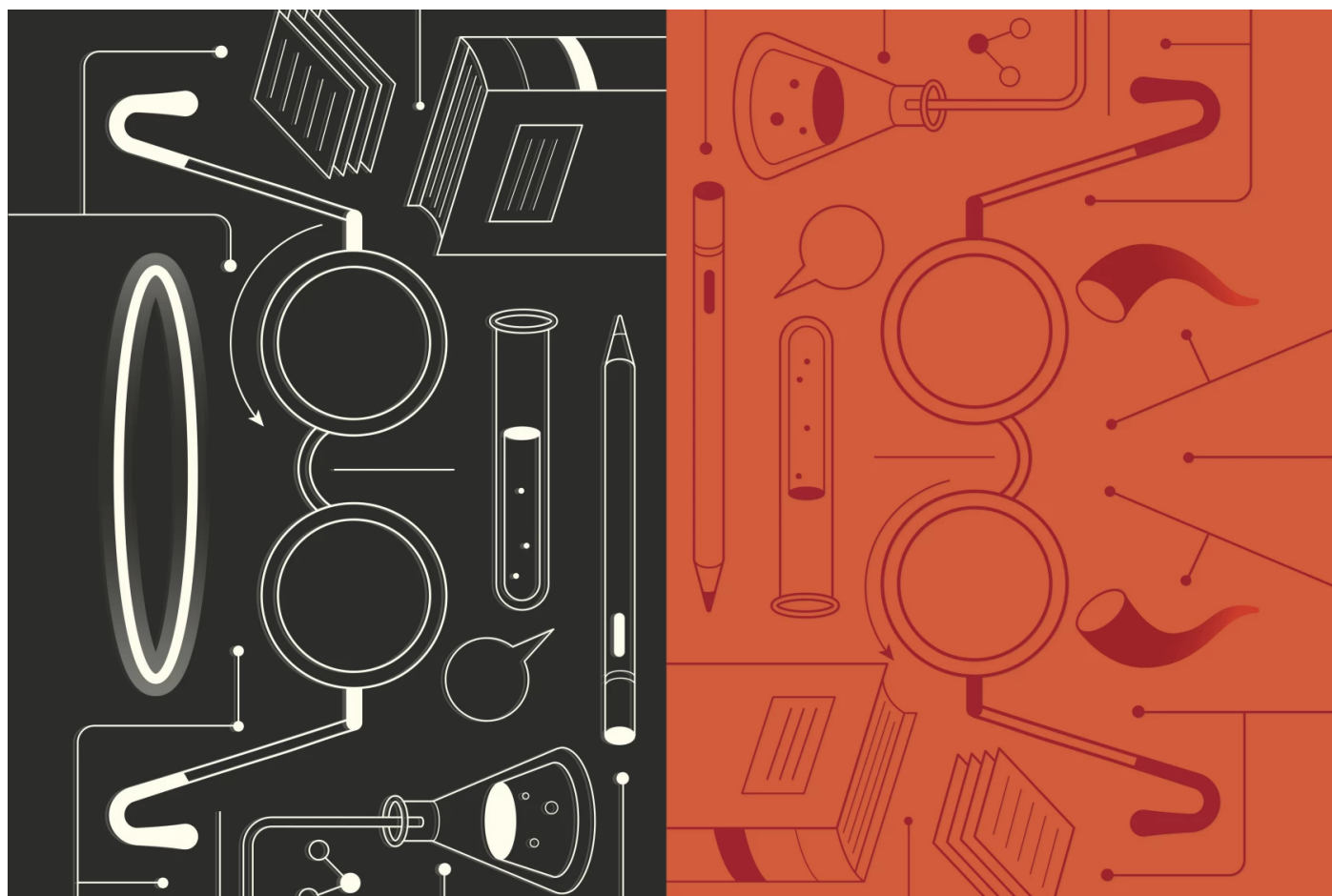


...DIVERSITY AND PSYCHOLOGY

‘I Am the Victim’: A Journal Editor Is Under Fire After a Diversity Debate Is Derailed

By *Tom Bartlett*

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HARRY CAMPBELL FOR THE CHRONICLE

An [open letter](#) signed by more than 1,000 academics calls for the resignation of Klaus Fiedler, editor in chief of the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, accusing him of incompetence and racism. The controversy centers on the handling of a set of forthcoming articles that address diversity in the field and whether journals should, for example, require authors to explain how their racial identities affect their research.

The furor was set in motion last week when one of the contributors, Steven O. Roberts, an associate professor of psychology at Stanford University, [published his paper](#) on PsyArXiv, a psychology preprint

service. Publishing a preprint isn't itself unusual, but Roberts included an appendix containing email exchanges with Fiedler and other authors discussing the editorial process. Roberts had become convinced that the debate was stacked against him and that criticisms of his work in the other papers were "collectively unsound, unscientific, ad hominem, and racist."

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Roberts's decision to publish his paper, and to include the emails, came after months of frustration with Fiedler's responses to his concerns and a growing sense that the debate was, as he puts it, "definitely rigged." Here's how he explains his thinking: "Why wait and sit here in anxiety and stress, constantly refreshing the journal page to see when this thing comes out?" he told me. "I've had nightmares about this situation. I just need to let this go."

As Roberts tells it, he was invited to take part in a debate about diversity in psychology by Fiedler, who [took over as editor](#) of the journal in January. The [paper](#) that prompted the debate was by Bernhard Hommel, a cognitive psychologist who is affiliated with Dresden University of Technology, in Germany, and Shandong Normal University, in China. In his paper, Hommel argues that "uncritically accepting and introducing political-activist arguments into science is likely to damage scientific freedom and independence." He takes particular aim at [a 2020 paper](#) by Roberts and four co-authors, which contends that systemic inequality has hampered psychological research for decades and offers a series of recommendations to help diversify the field.

Hommel points to what he believes are an array of methodological problems in Roberts's paper, along with errors in interpretation. More generally, he objects to the emphasis on race when there are, he writes, "more than 100 possible personal features of already-demonstrated psychological relevance," ticking off body size, intelligence, and economic background, among other factors. In his response, Roberts pushes back on several specific criticisms and makes the case that Hommel's paper demonstrates "an inadequate grasp of the scientific literature on race and racism."

The argument has all the makings of a lively, and possibly enlightening, discussion on a topic that's received no shortage of attention in psychology and other disciplines in recent years. What concerned Roberts was, in part, the format of the debate: Hommel's paper was slated to be the lead essay, while Roberts's paper would be one of four responses. He also objected to Hommel being given a chance to offer comments on his paper before it was published — serving as a "consultant for quality control," as

Fiedler put it in an email. What's more, Hommel was asked to write a follow-up to the four responses, giving him, for the purposes of the debate, the last word.

All of that struck Roberts as unfair, and he told Fiedler as much, suggesting other ways that the debate might be carried out. In an email to Roberts, Fiedler responded that "party satisfaction is not my criterion. I believe we should be justice [sic] to the rules of good science." And so Roberts decided to make his paper, and excerpts from the emails, public. "In the wake of our replication crisis in psychology, this is what we've been all about, openness and transparency," Roberts says. "So here I am being open and transparent."

Publishing the emails was "unprofessional and impolite, to say the least," Hommel told me. Hommel doesn't usually deal with issues like race and representation in his research — "I do basic, boring, cognitive stuff," he says — but he had become concerned lately with what he sees as a troubling ideological movement that he believes threatens the quality of science. For Hommel, Roberts's 2020 paper, which was published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* before Fiedler became editor, falls into that category. "There is nothing wrong with politics," he says. "It's just not science." The idea of including his own race — Hommel is white — in his papers seems to him irrelevant and "particularly appalling." As for the editorial process, Hommel says he thought Fiedler, as an incoming editor, "tried to create something interesting, and I think that's a good intention." He didn't believe there was "anything improper or anything strange in the process."

Lee Jussim was also among the invited contributors. Unlike Hommel, Jussim, a professor of psychology at Rutgers University, is no stranger to such debates. In his *Psychology Today* column, Jussim [once offered a guide](#) for how to defend yourself against a "cancellation attack," and he lists his title as "Rabble Rouser." In his paper responding to Hommel and Roberts, Jussim employs an analogy, drawn from a quote in *Fiddler on the Roof*, about a horse and a mule. He writes that mixing science and ideology is like selling someone a mule when what you promised was a horse. Because Roberts's paper is both scientific and ideological, according to Jussim, it is a rhetorical hybrid — i.e., a mule.

Roberts, who identifies as Black and multiracial, writes in his paper that comparing people of color to mules is a "well-documented racist trope," though he gives Jussim the "benefit of the doubt" and doesn't directly assert that Jussim is advancing that view. I spoke with Jussim, who told me he was unaware of that history, and he points out that his paper begins by quoting the well-known musical. "It's absurd because obviously the origin is *Fiddler on the Roof*," Jussim says. "It refers to an idea. It doesn't refer to people."

In an email, Fiedler wrote that he had received lots of messages since Roberts's paper was published, "some of which are very offensive and assaulting." He defended his handling of the debate, writing that it was "completely fair, respectful, and in line with all journal standards," and called the allegations of racism made against him "almost surreal" and without evidence. "I could continue to

provide many more reasons to explain why I am the victim of this uncontrolled social-media reaction, rather than the perpetrator,” he wrote. “However, I refrain from writing more because I feel obliged to confidentiality — unlike Roberts who does not seem to be constrained by any rules of data protection.”

Roberts told me that he agrees with the open letter’s call for Fiedler to resign as editor. “He’s made it very clear that he’s unable to edit the journal without bias,” he says. “I think the journal, if they want to do the right thing, should put together an actual diversity forum where people who actually do research on this stuff can speak to the issues in the field.” In [a statement](#), the Association for Psychological Science, which publishes *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, said it was aware of the “significant concerns” raised by Roberts and that the association would address those concerns and “make appropriate changes to our policies and practices.”

Update (Dec. 6, 2022, 4:30 p.m.): Klaus Fiedler has resigned as editor in chief of Perspectives on Psychological Science, according to [a news release](#) from the Association for Psychological Science. The release says he resigned at the request of the association’s Board of Directors.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

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