

Take their discussion of research on dispositional inferences. One of the most influential social cognition models of such inferences starts from and documents the assumption that people correct for situational influences (Trope 1986; Trope & Alfieri 1997; Trope & Gaunt 1999). However, the correction may not be easily detectable because of the nature of the processes involved. This model does not blame people for falling prey to cognitive errors. Instead, it specifies the exact conditions under which insufficient discounting could arise. But again, this work is not mentioned.

Toward the end of their article, K&F cite a report by one of us (Carlsmith et al. 2002) that they seem to feel demonstrates that “ordinary people’s moral judgments are . . . irrational.” In fact, the research demonstrates that people who are assigning punishments to wrong-doers generally do so from a just deserts perspective, rather than a deterrence perspective. Why this demonstration that people reason in ways advocated by Emmanuel Kant is a demonstration of irrationality escapes us. That study is encased within a project attempting to demonstrate that the citizens’ sense of justice is generally sensible and coherent, and legal code drafters would be wise to pay more attention to it than they do – hardly a message that expresses negativity for the moral reasoning of ordinary people.

In sum, social psychologists seek to find instances in which ordinary behavior deviates from conventional expectations for it, and to explore the reasons for these deviations. It is sometimes the case that these deviations could be labeled as “negative” ones, but in many cases the deviations from expected conduct are positive ones. Although we cannot say that no investigator has ever slipped and characterized participants’ behavior as negative, we can say that the tradition of phenomenological analysis has led the researchers to sympathetically understand the participants’ reasoning, and to describe it on those terms. By presenting a very narrow view of social psychology, K&F risk reifying the type of research that they are trying to abolish.

But what would a balanced approach look like?

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Abstract: Krueger & Funder (K&F) could have gone further to sketch out a more comprehensive vision of “balanced” psychology. The triumphs and travails of other sciences (e.g., economics) provide clues about the advantages and pitfalls of pursuing such an approach. Perhaps introducing more positivity into psychology may involve asking how people can do better, not how well they do already.

Krueger & Funder (K&F) are to be commended for their call for “balance” in social psychology. I just wish they had gone further. In complaining that social psychologists dwell unfairly on the negative, the authors provide what I assume some will describe as an unbalanced (and notably negative) discussion of the issues – selectively emphasizing some data while ignoring other data that contradict their assertions. Here is one example I know about: In Kruger and Dunning (1999), we asserted that incompetent people overestimate themselves because they cannot spot their own incompetence. K&F dismiss our analysis as a statistical artifact, yet fail to cite crucial data that directly rule this artifact out (Kruger & Dunning 1999, Studies 3 and 4; Kruger & Dunning 2002). I agree with the authors that researchers should strive for balance, but balance requires considering all the data that speak to an issue, not just a selective sampling that favors one broad argument over another.

But there is a more compelling way the authors could have gone further. The point that social psychology is (too) negative has been made in many guises before. Instead, the authors could have made

a “constructive” case and brought a more comprehensive vision of a balanced approach into sharper focus by describing in more detail and precision what such a psychology would look like, even if by example. How does one more specifically weave human strengths into psychological theorizing in a broad and integrated way, without simply creating an ad hoc laundry list of competencies to lean up against the miscellaneous list of errors that the authors claim the field obsesses about?

Examples of incorporating human strengths into theorizing about the human animal are out there, and I am surprised that the authors did not consider their potential relevance for social psychology. Many social, behavioral, informational, and biological sciences adjacent to psychology start from the positive premise that people act in adaptive, indeed optimal, ways. Economics has made a good deal of intellectual hay over the last century assuming that people act in their rational self-interest. Animal behaviorists have assumed that animals act to maximize rewards and minimize punishments. Rational choice theorists in sociology assume that people enforce norms and bargain with others to optimize their social fortune. Computer scientists study how computer networks evolve to achieve maximum efficiency. One can assume, given the success of these fields, that one could import the idea of a rational, optimal, positive creature into social psychology.

But these fields also show that thinking about humans in positive ways requires a lot of hard theoretical work to get it right. Economics, in one telling example, has much trouble with the core issue of what exactly people are pursuing when they are rational. It became clear early on that people did not seek to maximize objective outcomes, and so the field created the concept of *utility*. But this concept is a slippery one to grasp. Utility does not necessarily mean hedonic pleasure, for people at times make choices that cause them pain and discomfort. Perhaps utility is synonymous with choice, but if it is tantamount to choice, how can it explain choice without being a mere tautology? And good luck at coming up with an objective and quantifiable measure of utility that is suitable for interpersonal comparison (Homans 1958; Luce & Raiffa 1957). But beyond that, economics is coming to grips with the idea that people are not necessarily rational in fundamental ways, as Danny Kahneman’s recent Nobel Prize attests, and is beginning to work to incorporate error into its longstanding models.

I bring up this example not to disparage a psychology based on human strengths, but to show that getting it right will require some hard thought that will run up against some vexing and sometimes impossible issues. What are people maximizing when they get it right? Are they actually maximizing the right thing? Must people maximize, or does it suffice to satisfy? Talking about human strengths without first addressing these basic questions may lead to research that presents warm bottom lines, but will miss an opportunity to create a overarching framework for talking about strength and weakness.

In the meantime, I do not share the authors’ pessimism about the future worth of the “error” tradition. As Robert Heinlein once said, it is difficult to learn from anyone who agrees with you, and it would be likewise difficult for people to learn unless research at times contradicts the usual rosy view people hold of themselves. Indeed, if psychology is serious about contributing to human capital (i.e., the knowledge and skills a society possesses), it would do well to point out peoples’ imperfections so that they can correct them. There is a reason why hospitals regularly hold mortality conferences to examine patient deaths, rather than discussions about patients who lived long enough to pay the bill. Doctors, in the main, do a terrific job, but they are ever mindful that they can do better.

How do we best incorporate positive messages into psychological research? Serious research aimed at increasing human capital does not stop at characterizing whether people are good or bad at what they do naturally. Instead, such research focuses on how the situation can be changed to make people do *better*. I think all researchers, whether they be more comfortable with error or accu-

racy, would enhance our field greatly if they more quickly asked what policies or interventions would make people more accurate in their judgments and wiser in their actions. For myself, I am always struck by how quickly economists, computer scientists, and political scientists get to these issues in their talks, and how often such thinking is devoid in our own, with a few notable exceptions. Talking about how to create positivity, rather than congratulating whatever positivity is out there already, should be a task enjoyed equally by researchers, whatever their view of human competence. It would also make our field no less theoretical, but that much more interesting, sophisticated, and prestigious in the eyes of the world.

Balance where it really counts

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Abstract: A balanced approach that considers human strengths and weaknesses will lead to a more flattering set of empirical findings, but will distract researchers from focusing on the mental processes that produce such findings and will diminish the practical implications of their work. Psychologists ought to be doing research that is theoretically informative and practically relevant, exactly as they are doing.

If ideas come in and out of fashion, then those presented by Krueger & Funder (K&F) mark the return of the bell-bottom. Similar critiques of the errors-and-biases approach to social cognition have a history almost as long as the approach itself. Many of our reactions to K&F's criticisms have been well articulated before (Gilovich & Griffin 2002; Griffin et al. 2001; Kahneman & Tversky 1996). We will not repeat that history by pointing out recurring misconceptions, but will focus instead on K&F's prescription about what psychologists ought to study and what they ought not.

K&F suggest that social psychology is "badly out of balance" (sect. 4, para. 1), "that theoretical development of social psychology has become self-limiting" (sect. 4, para. 1), and that a solution to this theoretically limited imbalance is to slow the rate of error discovery. Although a more "balanced" approach contains all of the loaded connotations that imply an improvement over a thereby "unbalanced" approach, there are two reasons we doubt it will produce as much empirical yield as it does rhetorical flourish. First, because people in everyday life typically know what people do (Nisbett & Kunda 1985) better than why they do it (Nisbett & Wilson 1977), psychologists are of the most practical and theoretical value when they focus on mental processes (why and how), rather than simply on mental outcomes (what). The real value of science is its ability to make inferences about unobservable processes, a value that would be lost by simply accounting for what people do well and what they do poorly. Second, to the extent that psychologists wish to improve psychological well-being and human functioning, documenting human strengths may be less productive than documenting human shortcomings.

Redressing the right imbalance. K&F suggest that a balanced approach will lead, among other things, to "an improved understanding of the bases of good behavior and accurate judgment" (target article, Abstract). We agree that theoretical understanding of the bases of behavior and judgment is the most desirable goal of psychological research, but worry that "fixing" the imbalance between accuracy and error will not further this goal. Rather, it would create a more problematic imbalance between a focus on mental outcomes versus mental processes.

Tallying social cognitions that are "biased" or "unbiased," "right" or "wrong," or "good" or "bad," places judgmental outcomes at the focus of attention rather than the mental processes that produce them. Focusing primarily on outcomes of any kind – whether positive, negative, or neutral – inhibits theoretical development, because outcomes of complex mental processes are inevitably context-dependent and therefore superficially inconsistent. In a psychological science balanced between processes and outcomes, such apparent inconsistencies are part of healthy scientific progress, prompting theoretical and empirical reconciliations.

Focusing on mental outcomes is also problematic, because the way an outcome is framed often determines whether it is "good" or "bad." "Negative" research on conformity, for example, could just be positive research on "affiliation"; "disgust" can be reframed as "elevation" (Haidt 2003); and "stereotyping" as efficient "categorization." Even the widely influential research program on heuristics and biases pioneered by Kahneman and Tversky assumed that the heuristics people used to guide everyday judgments were generally beneficial – an assumption polemically confirmed by Gigerenzer and colleagues in their research on "fast and frugal" heuristics. In other words, the same mental processes can lead to mental outcomes that are sometimes "ludicrous" (Tversky & Kahneman 1971, p. 109), and at other times can be the very things that "make us smart" (Gigerenzer et al. 1999).

A focus on judgmental outcomes may create a rush to reframe previous research on human shortcomings as human strengths, or, worse, to "rediscover" mental processes that usually produce accurate judgments but occasionally lead to bias and error. Such a focus may lead some to believe that new insights have been gleaned when they have not, but this new gloss is unlikely to advance psychologists' understanding of the human condition.

Pursuing mental problems. Even a discipline balanced between mental processes and mental outcomes will gain more from an unbalanced focus on human shortcomings than on human strengths. K&F suggest, "everyday social behavior and cognition includes both appalling lapses and impressive accomplishments" (sect. 1, Introduction), but it is those appalling lapses that create the greatest psychological impact, and therefore are the more interesting to economists, lawyers, politicians, public policy makers, or anyone who matters beyond our experimental laboratories.

Humans are much more sensitive to shortcomings and mistakes than to strengths and accomplishments (Kahneman & Tversky 1979; Rozin & Royzman 2001; Taylor 1991). Failing hurts more than succeeding feels good. A few moments of self-reflection will make clear that a single colleague's slight, lover's insult, or negotiator's misstep can ruin a day, a relationship, or a reconciliation. It is harder to think of analogous compliments, sweet nothings, or creative compromises. Mental shortcomings, in this regard, seem somewhat analogous to physical pain; they serve as a clear signal that something is wrong or needs to be fixed. It is therefore no more erroneous for psychologists to focus on alleviating the mental shortcomings of their participants than for physicians to focus on alleviating the pain of their patients. Just as we would encourage our colleagues and students to attend to their broken leg rather than their unbroken arm, so too will we continue to encourage them to work in areas where their work can best improve the human condition.

Concluding thoughts. Waves of research come and go, and we doubt this clarion call for research on judgmental accuracy will create any more whiplash among researchers than any of its predecessors. K&F may be correct to hearken a regime change, but we hope the change will be to develop broader theoretical models, rather than simply add a new set of human strengths to the existing list of human shortcomings. Psychologists don't so much need redirection to the study of human strengths as they need to focus on the mental processes underlying mental outcomes, maintaining balance where it really counts.