

## Not just a passion for negativity

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**Abstract:** The Krueger & Funder (K&F) article would gain in constructive value if the authors spelled out what role the heuristics-and-biases approach could play in balancing the field of social cognition, lowering the burden of blame on it, cautioning overly enthusiastic readers from championing the “enough-with-the-biases” movement, and acknowledging that not all biases are caused by minorities.

We agree with Krueger & Funder’s (K&F’s) main suggestion that cognitive social psychologists should pay greater attention to the full range of cognitive performance, including both achievements and failures, rather than concentrating on the negative side alone. We think that the article would gain in constructive value if the issues presented next were discussed in greater depth.

**Where does the balance lie?** The “heuristics and biases” (H&B) approach, the main subject of the target article, has rarely received a balanced treatment. On the one hand, it is praised by many as “psychology’s leading intellectual export to the wider academic world” (Tetlock & Mellers 2002). On the other hand, it is accused of propagating fictitious “bleak implications for human rationality” (Cohen 1981, p. 317). It has also been described as a conceptual dead end, an empirical cul-de-sac and a surrogate for theory (Gigerenzer 1991; 1998). The target article argues that the H&B tradition has (a) produced a procession of cognitive errors, including the use of erroneous or misapplied norms, (b) is logically, theoretically, and empirically incoherent, (c) has led the social judgment field to theoretical isolation and incompleteness, and (d) has only limited implications. Given this critical view, one may wonder whether the authors see any positive role at all for the H&B approach in the emerging “balanced social psychology”? Can anything be salvaged from the old negative paradigm? At some point, when describing the Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM; Funder 1999), the authors suggest that: “it implies that accuracy is a difficult and remarkable achievement” (sect. 4.3.3.2, para. 4). Some readers sympathetic to the H&B approach might construe this sentence as a compassionate (or, positive) way to pass along a major (negative) insight from the H&B paradigm. After all, it is impossible to recognize how remarkable an achievement occasional accuracy is, without first appreciating to what extent human judgment is prone to error. In any case, an explicit discussion of this point would greatly reinforce their argument.

**Burden of blame.** K&F attribute the perennial problems of current social cognition research to a passion for the negative. The problems they list are: (1) creation of countless experimental effects (i.e., biases and errors), which are (2) theoretically fragmented and often contradictory, and (3) appeal to the counterintuitive. Clearly, these problems exist in current social psychology, but should the blame fall squarely and entirely on the passion for the negative? (See Kahneman 1991.) In attempting to understand the sometimes uninspiring image of current social psychology, Kruglanski (2001) recently presented a very similar list of perennial problems<sup>1</sup> for the entire field of social psychology (including areas of research which are unaffected by the negativity paradigm), but attributes these problems to structural weaknesses in the field, such as the diminishing role of theoretical statements and the retreat from bold theorizing.

**Passion for negativity?** Does the passion for negativity (or the desire to add new exhibits to the overcrowded “Museum of Incompetence”) drive current social cognition research? We still believe (in the methodological spirit of Kahneman & Tversky 1982) that non-normative responses are an excellent tool to shed light on basic cognitive processes that would have gone unnoticed otherwise (although, clearly, this is not the *only* way). We believe that K&F’s praiseworthy intent is to encourage researchers to study cognitive achievements rather than deter them from further exploration of

non-normative responses (as almost everybody seems to agree nowadays, non-normativeness does not necessarily mean unadaptiveness). However, we are somewhat apprehensive that this artfully written article could be (mis)read as a plug for an “enough-with-the-biases” movement. We fear that a cognitive social psychology that would classify new experimental results into a two file-cabinet system, one labeled: “findings that (apparently) show that we are smart” and the other as “findings that (apparently) show that we are stupid,” would not only be intolerant, but also shallow.

**A small minority?** Finally, a major methodological point in the article is that the use of NHST (null-hypothesis significance-testing) allows for non-normative responses, that is, responses that only a small minority of subjects identify as such, to be declared general biases: “In some cases, this allows biases to reach significance level even when the modal response is identical with the demands of the normative model” (sect. 2.4.2, para. 2). Admittedly, we take this somewhat personally, because the specific example is taken from our own lab: “See, for example, Klar and Giladi’s (1997) report on the ‘Everyone-is-better-than-average effect.’ Although most participants recognized the definitional truth that on average, people are average, the significant minority that erred, erred in the same direction, thereby yielding a difference between the average judgment and the modal judgment” (target article, Note 10)

In fact, Klar and Giladi (1997) asked students from Tel-Aviv University to compare a totally anonymous student to the average student of their university on a number of desirable traits (e.g., friendliness). To demonstrate the scope of the bias, the authors reported, in addition to conventional *p* values, the frequencies of responses. In the female sample, a small majority (53%) indeed responded in accordance with the “definitional truth,” but a sizable minority (42%) thought that this anonymous student would be above the group’s average (an additional 5% thought that she would be below it). In a follow-up male sample, 61% gave the non-normative response. Hence, the non-normativeness in these studies cannot be dismissed as having been caused by a small minority. Rather, what is even more telling is the fact that 90% of the participants in small intact groups, highly familiar with everyone else in the group and in highly favorable judgment conditions, provided a non-normative overall response when asked to compare their peers one-by-one to the average peer in their small group (Klar & Levi 2003). Thus, we are afraid that K&F chose the wrong example to prove their case (although they might be right in other instances).

### NOTE

1. These problems are: (1) “Inventing new (or distinct) names for old (or same) concepts” (p. 873); (2) fragmentation (p. 873); and (3) attraction for “empirical stuff, in particular of the ‘cute’ variety” (p. 871).

## The “reign of error” in social psychology: On the real versus imagined consequences of problem-focused research

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**Abstract:** Krueger & Funder (K&F) make the familiar accusation that social psychologists focus too much on what people do wrong, rather than on what they do right. Although there is some truth to their charge, their accusations are overstated and their conclusions are incorrect. The field is far less problem-focused than they suggest, and the proposed consequences of this approach are more imagined than real.

Krueger & Funder (K&F) make the reasonable, albeit familiar (cf. Funder 1987; Krueger 1998c) accusation that social psychologists