

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 problems¹ 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

focus too much on what people do wrong, rather than on what they do right. Although one could point out, that in making their charge, K&F *themselves* focus too much on what is wrong with the field rather than what is right with it – a paradox one could presumably “savor . . . like a fine Merlot” (sect. 3.1.3.1, para. 4) – the fact remains that the authors are onto something. However, their accusations are overstated, and their conclusions, incorrect.

A biased critique of bias research. The field is far less “problem-seeking” than the authors suggest. A quick glance at any contemporary social psychology textbook or journal will reveal that there is a substantial amount of research with a decidedly positive (or, at the very least, neutral) spin. True, literature searches for the terms “error” and “bias” yield more hits than the terms “strength” and “virtue” (target article, Note 7), but the term “accuracy” yields more hits than any of those words.¹

Even work within the heuristics-and-biases tradition is considerably less negative in its conclusions than the authors claim. Rather than succumbing to the habit, common among pre-1896 vision researchers, of interpreting illusions as products of “flawed psychological processes that need to be fixed” (sect. 1, para. 5), researchers in this tradition have instead argued that judgmental shortcomings stem from generally valid and adaptive tools (Nisbett & Ross 1980; Tversky & Kahneman 1974). In fact, the very optical illusion metaphor advocated by the authors has been proposed before – by precisely the researchers the authors accuse of failing to grasp it: “Just as we are subject to perceptual illusions in spite of, and largely because of, our extraordinary perceptual capacities, so too are many of our cognitive shortcomings closely related to, or even an unavoidable cost of, our greatest strengths” (Gilovich 1991, p. 2; see also Nisbett & Ross 1980, p. 14).

Real versus imagined consequences. Even if the field were every bit as problem-focused as the authors suggest, note that social psychology is not only a descriptive, theoretical discipline, but an applied one, as well. As such, the goal is not merely to advance understanding of people, but to help them. And it is what people get wrong, not what they get right, that has the greatest potential practical use for society. In short, K&F are correct to draw an analogy between social psychology and biomedical research (sect. 1, para. 6), because in both fields it is the understanding of when and why problems occur – and thus, how to avoid them – that is of paramount importance.

Why, then, do the authors object to problem-focused research? First, they object on the grounds that it “yields a cynical outlook on human nature” (sect. 1, para. 3). Whether true or not, we wish to point out that whether a finding is flattering or unflattering is hardly a criterion of science.

Second, the authors argue that by focusing on human shortcomings, social psychologists stunt the development of theory. We are curious about the data on which the authors base their claim. Surely, it is not the actual amount of research and theory development engendered by problem-focused research, which is considerable. True, if it were the case that “the typical article shows that people can be induced to do something objectionable or think in a way they should not” and “stops there, short of asking *why* such a behavioral or cognitive tendency exists, or what general purpose it might serve” (sect. 1, para. 4), then we might share the authors’ concern. But this is hardly the case. Indeed, the theoretical paper cited in the pages of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (JPSP)*, more than any other (according to a recent meta-analysis by Vidal et al. 2003), asks precisely this question (Taylor & Brown 1988), a fact of which the authors are presumably aware, given that one of them is a well-known critic of this work (Colvin et al. 1995). It is paradoxical, given the authors’ thesis, that, whereas Taylor and Brown emphasized the positive implications of judgmental errors, Funder and colleagues emphasized the negative implications.

Finally, the authors criticize problem-focused research for toutting “contradictory biases,” as if doing so is a logical fallacy (such as Kruger & Dunning’s [1999] argument that the unskilled overestimate themselves, whereas the highly skilled underestimate them-

selves). This is perhaps the most suspect charge of all. Most coins, after all, have two sides. Some people work too much, others too little. Some people are optimists, whereas others are pessimists. And, yes, some people overestimate themselves, whereas others underestimate themselves. The existence of one tendency does not, as the authors suggest, imply the lack of existence of the other. What is particularly curious about the charge is the fact that so-called contradictory biases typically lead to the investigation of moderating variable(s) and underlying processes that explain them (e.g., Blanton et al. 2001; Epley et al. 2002; Klar & Giladi 1997; Kruger 1999) – precisely the sort of theory development the authors claim is lacking.

Final thoughts. Although we have been critical of the target article, we wish to emphasize that we agree with the authors on several points. There probably is a negative research emphasis in social psychology, and we agree that merely cataloging errors with little consideration of how they fit within a broader context would be problematic. That said, we cannot help but wonder what the field would look like if social psychologists actually took the authors’ advice. No longer would the field focus on norm violations or counterintuitive findings. No longer would we fear “bubba psychology” and “golden fleece” awards - instead, we would embrace them. We are reminded of the frequent charge that the news media focuses too much on what’s wrong with the world instead of what’s right with it, which begs the question, would you really want to read a report titled “*This just in . . . everything’s super!*”? We invite readers to ask the same question of social psychology.

NOTE

1. According to a PsycINFO abstract field search, July 3, 2003.

Accuracy and error: Constraints on process models in social psychology

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Abstract: In light of an historical obsession with human error, Krueger & Funder (K&F) suggest that social psychologists should emphasize the strengths of social perception. In our view, however, absolute levels of accuracy (or error) in any given experiment are less important than underlying processes. We discuss the use of the process-dissociation procedure for gaining insight into the mechanisms underlying accuracy and error.

In February of 1999, four New York police officers ordered West African immigrant Amidou Diallo to freeze in a darkened alcove. Shortly thereafter, the police officers shot and killed Diallo, believing that he had waved a gun at them. They were mistaken. The object that Diallo held up was not a gun at all, but rather, his wallet. Most people, including Krueger & Funder (K&F), would certainly agree that human beings are capable of making egregious errors – such as those that occurred in the Diallo case – and that it is important for psychologists to study them when they occur. Nevertheless, K&F believe that social psychologists have overemphasized the degree to which people are inaccurate. Should we support their plea to develop research paradigms that are better able to permit the investigation of accuracy?

On the importance of studying accuracy and error. We do not believe that one should be forced to choose between investigating errors or investigating accurate judgments. Rather, we are interested in the processes underlying the two types of judgment, which requires that one should study errors in combination with correct responses. Consider an example that is much more mundane than the Diallo case. Two students take a multiple-choice test with instructions to not respond to a question unless they are sure that they know the correct answer. One student produces more