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.

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