

Commentaries

Prejudice Reduction and Collective Action: A Conflict or Confluence of Interests?

Lucas B. Mazur^{*a}

[a] Frances L. Hiatt School of Psychology, Clark University, Worcester, MA, USA.

Abstract

There is a growing body of research findings suggesting that prejudice reduction strategies can have unintended negative consequences, particularly by helping to stabilize systems of inequality. In light of these findings, a handful of scholars have suggested that the field be guided less by the prejudice reduction tradition, so as to focus more on collective action. While agreeing with the recent critiques of prejudice reduction, I argue that in more robustly embracing a collective action approach we should be careful not to abandon the notion of perceptualism that colored original thinking on prejudice reduction, lest we artificially narrow the scope of social psychological research and unintentionally ignore communities that do not fit well within current thinking in the collective action tradition.

Keywords: social change, prejudice, ironic effects, sedative effects, collective action, perceptualism

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*Corresponding author at: Frances L. Hiatt School of Psychology, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA, USA. E-mail: LMazur@Clarku.edu



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There is a large and growing body of social psychological literature suggesting a number of very serious problems with the recommendations arising out of research falling under the umbrella category *prejudice reduction*. Rather than improving the lot of the disenfranchised, the positive intergroup perceptions encouraged by interventions based on this literature can at times support systemic inequalities. Such unintended outcomes of traditional prejudice reduction techniques have been called their *ironic* or *sedative effects* (Cakal, Hewstone, Schwär, & Heath, 2011; Wright, 2001). Recently, a number of prominent social psychologists have suggested that due to these shortcomings, social psychology should move away from prejudice reduction's traditional recommendations, while more fully embracing those of the collective action literature (e.g., Dixon, Levine, Reicher, & Durrheim, 2012a, 2012b; Wright & Lubensky, 2009). I argue that this general approach is, however, not without risks to "real-world" identities that for one reason or another don't meet its basic requirements. Some groups can be put at a disadvantage by environments in which collective action-like approaches are put into action. What is more, there are some identities that by definition are not well served by the collective action approach, and may even be harmed by it.

In addition to the “real-world” risks posed by the collective action approach, there is also a subtle risk underlying this increased attention to collective action (as currently discussed) for social psychological theorizing and research. In following the suggested conceptual shift from a prejudice reduction focused social psychology to one focused more on collective action, the field may further strengthen the tendency towards an implicit expectation of *essentialism*, that is, the expectation that categories have an underlying, singular, and “true” nature (Campbell, 1958; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Hirschfeld, 1996; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). When our research reflects such expectations, we run the risk of overlooking various communities that fall outside the radar of current thinking in the collective action tradition; those communities that are not easily essentialized, but that nonetheless deserve our attention in the name of social justice. This warning is important not only for social psychologists, but also for practitioners, activists, and those interested in social justice more broadly.

Historical Background of Current Discussions

Historically, stereotypes were understood as the “well-deserved reputations” (Zawadzki, 1948) of collectives. In other words, the targets of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination were taken to be the cause of those very stereotypes, prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory actions. Psychology as a field, especially psychological testing, flourished in this environment. For example, intelligence tests were designed to quantitatively measure assumed intergroup differences, and to give them a scientific seal of approval. As the scope of psychological research expanded within the area of psychological testing, psychologists were quick to recognize and capitalize on new avenues of growth. The field would no longer simply test psychological traits, states and abilities, but it would also begin to “teach to the tests.” It began exploring ways to improve scores on various measures, ranging from intelligence to the effects of what was called shellshock and now referred to as PTSD. Psychologists no longer simply measured psychological phenomena, but they began to develop ways to shape them; for example, shellshock was no longer simply a fixed category, but rather something that could be treated (Leahey, 2012).

Within this wider environment of psychological flexibility, research on intergroup prejudice also began to reflect a shift to *perceptualism*, the notion that categories and labels were the product of the perceiver rather than objective representations of the perceived. No longer was prejudice understood to be part of the fixed world “out there.” Rather, it was now believed to arise from the perceptions of the social subjects themselves, and because of this, prejudiced attitudes were subject to psychological intervention. Gordon Allport’s (1954) research on prejudice reduction, particularly the *contact hypothesis*, is a prime example of this new approach and it remains not only widely cited in the field, but it also continues to be a major driving force within contemporary social psychological research (Dovidio, Glick, & Rudman, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Crucially, perceptualism not only provides a basis on which prejudiced attitudes can change – as they are ultimately the product of the perceiver – but it also asserts that social identities more broadly are ultimately equally in the “eye of the beholder.” The power of perceptualism is that it highlights the created, and constantly recreated, nature of our social categories. However, it is important to point out that research in the prejudice reduction tradition often forgets this lesson, by (arguably unintentionally) treating categories as fixed entities. Most research on prejudice reduction has focused on changing attitudes between what are otherwise (implicitly) thought of as fixed social categories (e.g., hegemonic notions of race or gender); forgetting the broader, more powerful lesson of perceptualism. For example, in working to improve inter-racial attitudes, it is often forgotten that the racial categories under study are social creations.

Problems With Prejudice Reduction

In spite of its ongoing popularity, the general approach known as *prejudice reduction* has more recently been found to pose a number of serious problems for the advancement of social justice (for discussions of these issues see Dixon et al., 2012a; Wright & Lubensky, 2009). Broadly put, successfully reducing prejudice between communities (“getting them to like each other more”) may in fact help to sustain systems of inequality. When members of disadvantaged communities like the advantaged group more, they may perceive less discrimination (Dixon, Tropp, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2010; Saguy & Chernyak-Hai, 2012; Tropp, Hawi, van Laar, & Levin, 2012), be less willing to take steps to fight inequality on behalf of their ingroup (Cakal et al., 2011), exhibit less solidarity with other disadvantaged communities (Glasford & Calcagno, 2012), and show less support for corrective measures (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2007; Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009). When members of advantaged communities like the disadvantaged group more, they may be more willing to help members of that community, which can in effect justify and help stabilize the larger status quo of inequality (Nadler, 2002), and they may show less support for programs aimed at addressing systemic inequalities (Dovidio, Gaertner, Shnabel, Saguy, & Johnson, 2010; Sengupta & Sibley, 2013). As Oscar Wilde (1891/1989) wrote, good intentions often leave real problems unsolved, or can even hinder their resolution:

Just as the worst slave-owners were those who were kind to their slaves, and so prevented the horror of the system being realised by those who suffered from it [...] the people who do most harm are the people who try to do most good. [...] Charity creates a multitude of sins. (p. 1079)

The spirit of the current call for greater work in the collective action tradition is nicely captured by an article written by Max Carl Otto in 1943, entitled *On a Certain Blindness in William James*, that openly attacks William James and his well-known piece, *On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings* (James, 1901). James was an advocate of perceptualism. In his moving and honest piece, James confesses to his own frequent inability to see the value in lives lived differently from his own, and he argues, even pleads, that we ought to recognize our own prejudiced view of others on the way to a more just society filled with mutual understanding, respect and love.

Otto does not object to James’ call for greater compassion and understanding, but rather he believed James’ thinking to be “unaffected by the unjust functioning of institutionalized society and that it was not seriously disturbed by the disastrous impact of a niggardly environment upon the physical and moral energies of men and women” (p. 186). Otto believed that greater compassion can only go so far in advancing social justice in the face of systemic, social supported and institutionalized injustice. We have been reminded of this more recently by the various *sedative effects* of prejudice reduction.

While prejudice reduction is still a terribly important undertaking (e.g., Abrams, Vasiljevic, & Wardrop, 2012; Bilewicz, 2012), such issues are serious and warrant substantial attention from the social psychological community. As the growing body of literature on these topics indicates, social psychologists are listening and starting to act. For example, studies are starting to look at the boundary conditions for these sedative effects (e.g., Banfield & Dovidio, 2013; Becker, Wright, Lubensky, & Zhou, 2013).

The Suggested Shift in Focus to Collective Action

A number of researchers have voiced their support for a social psychology that better balances the recommendations of both the prejudice reduction and collective action literatures (e.g., [Abrams, Vasiljevic, & Wardrop, 2012](#); [Haslam, 2012](#)). Others, however, state that such a balancing act is not what is needed (on the “potential incompatibility” of these “opposing trajectories” see [Dixon, Durrheim, Kerr, & Thomae, 2013](#); [Dixon et al., 2012a](#)). For instance, [Dixon et al. \(2012a\)](#) write: “In our view, we cannot simply tack together a prejudice reduction with a collective action perspective whilst ignoring their incommensurable assumptions about the mechanisms through which change occurs (or is inhibited)” (p. 14). Rather, they lay out what they hope will be a more nuanced approach to the study of social change, one involving a more complex understanding of prejudice (as various “prejudices”), an increased emphasis on the relational nature of intergroup attitudes (including both advantaged and disadvantaged communities), and greater focus on the *what*, *for whom*, and *when* of social change. This new approach should not be confused with a balance between the prejudice reduction and collective action literatures, as the arguments are largely structured so as to place more weight on the collective active approach (“As readers will have gathered, we sympathize with the latter position,” p. 13; see later discussions on these points in [Dixon et al., 2013](#)).

While we ought to take the recent critiques of the prejudice reduction literature very seriously, there is a subtle, but dangerous, premise underlying the suggested shift of focus towards a more collective action oriented social psychology and in the resulting suggestion that only via overt intergroup struggle can systemic disadvantage be remedied. Social change can and does happen in a variety of ways. The collective action approach, as currently understood in the literature, represents but one such path. What is more, while this path can “work” for a number of identities, it can be counterproductive and even harmful for others. While it is important that the field come to better understand the paths that are followed in examples of successful (or even unsuccessful) collective action, it is important in this global shift that we not focus solely on those social identities that allow for research within this model. In shifting towards a greater focus on social change, it is important that we also search for identities that are not easily seen when looking at the world through a collective action lens. In the next section I examine how the phenomenon of collective action often overlooks and even hurts collectives “in the real world.” In the section to follow I then examine how social psychology, by focusing on collective action and the highly entitative groups that fit the model, often overlooks communities that are deserving of social psychological research in the name of social justice.

The “Real-World” Reification of Social Categories

Prejudice reduction generally “diminishes our tendency to view the world in ‘us’ versus ‘them’ terms” ([Dixon et al., 2012a](#), p. 9) and thus works to promote positive intergroup relations. On the other hand, the overarching goal of collective action “is not to reduce but to instigate intergroup conflict in order to challenge institutional inequality” (p. 9; for a related discussion of essentialism within the context of historical atrocities and intergroup relations see [Zagefka, Pehrson, Mole, & Chan, 2010](#)). There are a handful of mechanisms that tend to render people more willing to take up the banner of collective struggle, such as increased ingroup identification, increased perceptions of inequality, increased perceptions of ingroup and outgroup homogeneity, increased embeddedness, and increased negative affect towards outgroups (e.g., [Barlow, Sibley, & Hornsey, 2012](#); [Grant & Brown 1995](#); [Klandermans, 2002](#); [Leach et al., 2008](#); [van Stekelenburg, Anikina, Pouw, Petrovic, & Nederlof, 2013](#); [van Zomeren, Spears,](#)

Fischer, & Leach, 2004). Within the collective action model of social change, “an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality is generally construed as functional and strategic” (Dixon et al., 2012a, p. 9) with the goal of increasing action on behalf of the ingroup.

The power of “simplifying” the ingroup also finds expression in G. C. Spivak’s notion of *strategic essentialism* (Wolff, 2007), whereby leaders of collective movements simplify the ingroup’s image so as to strengthen the movement, while being aware of the utilitarian nature of this strategy. A related practice of “othering” is captured by the notion of *ethnification*, whereby minority identities are deemed important to point out and relevant (e.g., in media coverage), while majority identities are not (Eide, 2010). The othering found in *ethnification*, as in essentialism, can be used to justify social injustice, but it can also be used, because of its perceived “uniqueness,” to draw attention to voices that are otherwise ignored. While all communities are composed of a complex and heterogeneous set of individuals, collective action on behalf of the group can be stirred by feelings of singularity and unity (Greenwood, 2008). The leaders of collective movements, the *entrepreneurs of identity*, often work to reify the ingroup, to make the group identity appear natural (via *naturalization*) and eternal (via *eternalization*), and thus to hide the fact of category construction (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). These steps help to ensure that “their version is seen as the sole authentic rendering of identity – in other words, that it isn’t a ‘version’ at all” (p. 390; see also Subašić, Reynolds, Reicher, & Klandermans, 2012). Already in the 1920s F. H. Allport recognized this tendency to perceive human collectives, particularly nations, as having a unique essence that set them apart from others, calling this the *nationalistic fallacy* (Allport, as cited in Leyens et al., 2001). As the foundational assumption of the social identity tradition recognizes, there is tremendous power in human collectives and shared identities, a power that can be dangerous and restrictive, but also empowering and liberating, even leading to the creation of new identities (Drury & Reicher, 2000).

These various psychological processes that strengthen group identities and intergroup differences do not, however, always lead to collective action, let alone to successful collective action. In general, it seems that for some groups, in some situations, at some times, the retention of clear intergroup differences can be productive. At other times the blurring or even removal of those differences can lead to more desirable outcomes. For example, there is considerable evidence that shared superordinate identities can promote positive intergroup outcomes (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2009; González & Brown, 2003), while there is also evidence suggesting that superordinate categories, like common humanity, can reduce the willingness to engage in collective action (Greenaway, Quinn, & Louis, 2011). There is evidence that the retention of subordinate identities within such broader superordinate identities can be important, sometimes for minority groups (Crisp, Stone, & Hall, 2006; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009) and sometimes for majority groups (Guerra, Rebelo, Monteiro, & Gaertner, 2013; Guerra et al., 2010), and that the effects of such categorization processes can be differently influenced by historical and cultural factors (Esses, Wagner, Wolf, Preiser, & Wilbur, 2006). Within work on coalitions and other collaborative undertakings there is evidence suggesting that under various conditions both homogeneity and heterogeneity can be either beneficial or detrimental (Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004; Polzer, Minton, & Swann, 2002; Snow & McAdam, 2000; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986; Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998), and of course this literature includes evidence that this relationship is moderated by other factors such as the degree to which group members focus on and value ingroup similarities or differences (Greenwood, 2008). In some cases, intergroup injustices along one identity marker (such as race or gender) can blind us to those that appear along others (such as class; see Wilson, 1999; Wolf, 2013), and yet there is also evidence to suggest that heterogeneous coalitions of groups occupying different spaces within unjust systems can provide unique benefits and work more effectively than each constituent group (or identity) on its own (Greenwood, 2008; Ostrove, Cole, & Oliva, 2009; Wilson,

1999). Through this enormous body of literature we are gaining a better understanding of the situations in which shared identities and homogeneity can be beneficial and when unique identities and heterogeneity can be so.

What is important to underscore here is that the ease with which a given social identity can be reified and politicized within a given context does not necessarily reflect the level of disadvantage experienced by the actual flesh and blood members of that category. What is more, the very processes of category reification and politicization can not only sometimes fail to serve certain communities, but in certain contexts and at certain times, these processes can actually be harmful to some communities. I now explore a historical example to illustrate this point.

A Hidden Danger in Reifying Social Categories: A Historical Example

During the rise of modern European nationalism in the early 20th century, some groups dramatically improved their position, while others lost a great deal. What is more, some were even harmed along the way; not *in* the processes that gave rise to nationalism, but *by* the processes. The rise of modern nationalism was marked by increased differentiations between what were often deeply interwoven collectives (Gellner, 1983), and crucially by largely undercutting the perceived malleability and inclusivity of collective identities (e.g., the adjective “Polish” shifted from being a multi-ethnic, inclusive marker of political affiliation – like “British” – to one denoting primarily Polish language, ethnicity and Roman Catholicism; Zubrzycki, 2006).

Prior to this period, in the lands that were once the eastern part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, *Belarusian* language, religiosity, identity and culture flourished, while the term *Lithuanian* had largely become regarded as a geographic, romantic and political notion (Savchenko, 2009, p. 37; Snyder, 2003, p. 40). As a result of the national struggles that marked this period, struggles that can be thought of as generally following the current recommendations of the collective action literature, modern Lithuanian identity burst forth on the scene, while Belarusian identity would eventually fall into near obscurity (Ioffe, 2003). Although the reasons for these tremendously large social changes were numerous and complex, as an important factor one can point to the relative ease with which these two communities were able to increase the clear distinctions between themselves and the surrounding communities (Ioffe, 2003; Snyder, 2003). As Bilenky (2012) put it: “the making of one identity (for example, Ukrainian) inevitably resulted in the unmaking of others (Russian and Polish) [...] in other words, the idea of nationality defined the perceptions of the ‘other’” (pp. viii-ix). Lithuanian was able to distinguish itself from Russian by opting for the Latin alphabet, while simultaneously differentiating itself from Polish by the conscious adoption of the phonetic system of modern Czech, for example using *č*, *š*, and *v*, rather than *ć*, *ś* and *w* (transformations which were linked with earlier Czech attempts to differentiate the Czech language from German, and even earlier German attempts to differentiate the German language from French; Snyder, 2003). These reforms were facilitated by the fact that Lithuanian is not a Slavic language (as are Belarusian, Polish and Russian). So as to further differentiate Lithuanian identity from the surrounding Polish culture, the national narratives began to harken back to an era before the 1569 political and cultural union with Poland (Lieven, 1994; Snyder, 2003).

Belorussian identity and culture were not able to make such clear, categorical distinctions between her neighbors, and the “golden era” of Belarusian history was too intimately intertwined with that of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as to allow for the formation of a differentiating, but viable, national narrative (Ioffe, 2003). As a Slavic

language closely related to Polish and Russian, under Tsarist Russia Belarusian readily adopted the Cyrillic alphabet used by Russian speakers.

Prior to the rise of modern nationalism, Lithuanian identity, understood as a body of people with the potential to readily embody an independent collective movement, was exceedingly small (Snyder, 2003). People who could be identified as Belarusians, on the other hand, were widespread and numerous throughout the region. However, generally speaking, the masses of people in the region (including both “Lithuanians” and “Belarusians”) would most likely consider themselves simply “locals” (*tutejsi*) (Applebaum, 1995; Savchenko, 2009). Ironically (given the numerical superiority of Belarusianness over Lithuanianness), as a result of the differentiating and reifying processes of collective mobilization, Lithuanian would become a strong national movement, while Belarusian identity would be severely undercut and left, in an era of modern nation-states, with numerous identity problems, many of which it still faces today (e.g., surrounding such issues as the national language(s), national symbols, interpretations of history, etc.; see Ioffe, 2003).

Belarusian identity was repeatedly torn between the more clearly defined and differentiated Polishness, Russianness, and increasingly, Lithuanianness. Ioffe (2003) calls this inability to clearly differentiate oneself from the magnetic push and pull of surrounding communities while repeatedly attempting to do so the *pendulum effect*. Leaders of (“successful”) collective movements often work to ensure that ingroup members first identify as part of the ingroup who side with their cause (Ross, 2006), but then also that they subsequently remain part of the group, and that they not succumb to vertical or horizontal identity shifts into membership in other collectives (Ioffe, 2003). The point is that some communities fit nicely into the current collective action literature and stand to benefit by following its recommendations, while others do not fit the mold so well and, *ceteris paribus*, run the risk of being harmed by those same recommendations.

This is an important example, not only because of its historical interest, but because at that time Belarusians (but not Lithuanians), as frequently disenfranchised and impoverished peasants, generally constituted a systemically disadvantaged group (Savchenko, 2009), and would arguably have been worthy of social psychological research in the name of social justice. The rise of modern nationalism, which in many ways follows the suggestions of the current collective action literature, proved not to serve this community well. This is not an argument that Belarusian identity was not organized as well as other communities (and could therefore have benefited from more collective action), but rather, that it was qualitatively different from the kinds of identities that stand to benefit from collective action. As Ernest Gellner (1983) argued, “[i]t is nationalism that engenders nations, not the other way round” (p. 54). The argument here is that collective action functions in a similar way; it takes certain elements of identity, and only certain elements, and shapes them in its own likeness (as categorically differentiable from other communities).

It is also important to keep such examples in mind as similar processes are affecting other communities today. For example, analogous debates are currently taking place around Afro-Latino identities in the Americas (Haslip-Viera, 2010; Hernández, 2003; Hooker, 2005; Grillo, 2010). Members of these communities often feel pressured (e.g., due to bureaucratic or social demands) to identify as either African American or Latino American, two communities that have been able to categorically distinguish themselves from surrounding groups and to successfully galvanize a certain degree of collective action on behalf of the ingroup. Cape Verdean identity in the United States arguably faces similar challenges (Fisher & Model, 2012) and certain Asian American groups (e.g., Cambodians, Koreans) also feel different pressures to adopt, reject, or affirm various ethnic identities in response to perceived

advantages and disadvantages of doing so (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010). This is similar to the ways in which Belarusians, during the rise of modern nationalism, came to be identified, and/or to self-identify, as Poles, Lithuanians or Russians, groups that were very successful in mobilizing support for identities that contrasted with those of the surrounding communities (Zubrzycki, 2006).

In *perceptualism* social psychologists recognize that identities are malleable, contextualized, and dialogical processes, rather than fixed, categorical entities. In recognizing them as such, research in the social sciences can cast a wider net for identities of interest and can study a broader range of the social injustices that affect people's lives. What is more, this is not only an issue of present or past collective identities, but also reflects the creative construction of new identities not readily captured by more widely or frequently used categories.

Subtle Danger for Social Psychological Theorizing and Research

It is important to raise awareness to situations in which collective labels lead to social injustice. In this sense it is important to highlight shared experiences of injustice, especially as they often help to shed light on systemic injustice. However, such awareness raising, be it on grounds of ideology or of shared experiences of injustice, can at times inadvertently lead to the reification of these social categories that lock people in place; what Ireland (2002) calls *neoethnic tribalism*. This is to say that in attempting to highlight the historical and constructed nature of injustice (*look!* people are making *our/their* world like this) by pointing to a shared ideological fight or to common experiences of injustice (the kinds of injustice *we/they* are experiencing), we can inadvertently naturalize that which we intended to historicize and deconstruct. As a result, the reification of social categories that can result from highlighting group-based struggles can make it difficult not only to imagine other potential identities, but it can also make it difficult to see collective identities that already exist and that may even flourish in environments marked by a more interconnected, porous and shifting set of identity markers. Just such an environment was illustrated above by the example of historical Belorussian identity. This is similar to the way in which those struggling against racism can inadvertently strengthen the perception of intergroup differences by, for instance, couching their arguments within the very same categories they were intended to deconstruct (e.g., see the notion of “the empiricist problematization of hybridity” in Teo, 2004, p. 98). The use of certain essentialized labels can also reflect the projection of categories valued by the academic community onto the world of those communities scholars are attempting to support, thereby leading academics to see the peoples they study as a means of testing their models rather than as ends valuable in themselves (Kögler, 2005; Richardson & Slife, 2011; Teo, Gao, & Sheivari, 2014). The power of perceptualism is not only that the negative (or positive) associations with various categories is really the product of the perceiver, but also that the very existence of these social categories themselves are in the eye, and actions, of the beholder(s).

A similar challenge faces work on *intersectionality*, an approach that explicitly tries to address the frequently overlapping nature of social identities. Intersectionality grew out of the increased awareness of how research and activism around sexism and racism failed to capture the qualitatively difference experiences of people affected by both (Crenshaw, 1991). *Intersectional invisibility*, the marginalization of heterogeneous, non-prototypical experiences, appears to help facilitate the retention of simplistic, homogeneous group narratives (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Much like the calls for *mixed methods* (Tashakkori, Teddlie, & Sines, 2012) or *interdisciplinarity*

(Maton, Perkins, & Saegert, 2006), psychology as a whole has been relatively slow to thoroughly incorporate the findings of intersectionality (Cole, 2009). The field can do more to take into consideration multiple categories at once (e.g., both gender and race: Silverstein, 2006). What is more, in taking such fixed categories as the starting point, even those studies that treat membership in multiple categories at once tend to do so in order to simply “control” for identities beyond those of immediate interest. This is part of what McCall (2005) calls *intercategory complexity* and what Reid (1993) calls the “add X category and mix approach.”

There are, however, some less common approaches to intersectionality that work to challenge pre-assumed categories in social science research and to undercut the apparently “natural” and “inevitable” social categories on which such research is frequently based (particularly by taking into consideration *anticategorical complexity*; McCall, 2005). There have also been explicit suggestions that intentionally widen the scope of research beyond the social identity approach’s relatively narrow focus on intergroup relations, for instance, by considering intragroup relations and cross cultural differences in attachments to collectives (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Brown et al., 1992; Yuki, 2003). Researchers have also explored how individuals negotiate social pressures (e.g., in the media) to conform to simplistic, essentialized categories – often those very categories that social psychologists tend to study (Eide, 2010; Georgiou, 2006; Kim, 1994; Reicher, 2004).

Interestingly, essentialist thinking can also blind us to past struggles for greater social justice, even those of which the field was once acutely aware. A fascinating example of just such a shift that is close to home for social psychology is the once prominent juxtaposition of Protestant versus Catholic within the literature on prejudice (e.g., Allport, 1954). Particularly within the United States, this divide traditionally coincided with prejudice between groups of people who are today often lumped together under the heading of “White Americans.” While meaningful inequalities between the communities still exist – as illustrated by the fact that despite Catholicism being the largest single Christian denomination in the U.S. (Linder, 2012), to date there has been only one Catholic President (John F. Kennedy) – today this issue is rarely, if ever, examined by social scientists (Alba, 2006). Such “blurring” of these religious lines, much like the blurring of the once prominent lines between various ethnic European American communities, has occurred as part of larger, complex societal shifts, and not necessarily concerted collective action (as we are now talking about it) on the part of Catholics or of historically disadvantaged (now) White communities (Alba, 1992; Barrett & Roediger, 1997; McDermott & Samson, 2005).

Social psychological research continues to evolve, and this commentary is not intended to disregard important developments in the social psychology of social change and collective action, such as the simultaneous consideration of minority and majority groups (Subašić, Reynolds, & Turner, 2008), or the intersection of identity, emotions and efficacy perceptions (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008; van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004). The commentary is also not intended to disregard work on the various complexities of social identity, such as that on the role of context (Shweder et al., 2007), various identity-based needs (Brewer, 1991), identity change over time (Burke, 2006), cross-cutting and nested subgroup identities (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000), identity complexity (Miller, Brewer, & Arbuckle, 2009), and relational identities (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). This is also not to say that there is no significant research or theorizing in social psychology that does examine collective identities in non-essentializing ways.

Even with these growing nuances, however, it is very easy to unintentionally or even unknowingly slip down the slippery slope towards essentializing the categories that appear in the social worlds we are studying. For example, arguments surrounding the notion of the *engaged follower* entail nuanced discussions of how social identities are

actively and interactively enacted in practice (specifically between leaders and potential followers); however, the assumption of categorical intergroup differences continues to underlie how such processes are discussed (e.g., “every mobilisation of one type of social action is simultaneously the demobilisation of other types of social action;” Reicher & Haslam, 2013, p. 126). This thinking retains the functional antagonism between identities (as one identity becomes more salient the others become less so) of the social identity approach. A similar essentializing element of this approach that frequently appears in the literature is the determination of identity salience on the basis of normative and comparative fit (by which intracategory differences are minimized, while intercategory differences are emphasized) (Abrams & Hogg, 2004; Hornsey, 2008). Similarly, an important element of research in the social identity tradition is that the mechanisms it predicts often arise on the condition that participants actually perceive and value the social categories in question (thereby at times artificially stressing the importance of these categories in research findings). While this is a strength of the social identity approach in that it suggests ways in which people can work together to fight injustice precisely because of shared identities that differ from those identities held by others (Reicher & Haslam, 2013, p. 115), it is also a weakness in that it focuses on but one possible approach to social change (for a challenge to the social identity approach within the context of East Asia see Yuki, 2003).

Concluding Remarks

Lest the argument here expounded be misunderstood, this is not an argument against applied research, nor against the activism of social psychologists; quite the contrary. It also recognizes the need to address the very serious challenges posed by the *sedative effects* of prejudice reduction. It is difficult to imagine social psychologists not being concerned with them now that so much evidence has been gathered. The fact that more and more studies are examining these problems would seem to indicate some degree of movement towards new knowledge and hopefully towards more effective and positive ways to improve intergroup relations and to promote social justice.

Rather, this is an argument that, as psychologists, we should be wary of the essentialism that accompanies the collective action tradition. Instead, we should more fully explore the implications of perceptualism. By breaking through the limits of artificial category walls, social scientists are able to more fully challenge the very foundations of the inequalities against which they raise their voices. This is what Alfred Kinsey did in his research on human sexuality, by largely rejecting the categorical hetero-homosexual dichotomy: “The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are black nor all things white. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories” (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948, p. 639). This is also what G. Stanley Hall did in his work on adolescence, by challenging the division of people into adults and children alone (Hall, 1908), and what Martin Luther King Jr. did in seeing working-class poverty across racial lines (Honey, 2011). What made the messages of such figures so powerful and lasting was not so much that they worked to “balance the scales” as much as they showed that the very notion of the scale is problematic; as it forces both people and privilege into simplistic, counterbalanced baskets.

A revolution may perhaps bring about the fall of an autocratic despotism and of an avaricious or overbearing oppression, but it can never bring about the true reform of a way of thinking. Rather, new prejudices will serve, like the old, as the leading strings of the thoughtless masses. (Kant, 1784/1996)

What M. C. Otto missed in the 1940s was that the “blindness” about which William James wrote not only referred to the negative light into which we tend to cast others, but also to the artificial and ephemeral nature of the us/them divide in the first place. He was not only encouraging us to like each other more, but to see the psychologically constructed nature of the social categories that ostensibly divide us. Other scholars recognized the power of perceptualism and called for us to build on it. During James’ days, the likes of Charles Sanders Peirce advocated that we should not only move beyond the entitative view of human collectives whereby we believed them to possess defining, inalienable essences, but also that we move beyond the awareness that our minds shape our perceptions of the social world (perceptualism). Peirce and others advocated for a move “beyond binary perceptualism” (Ludwig, 2002, p. 37), beyond the dichotomy between subject and object, by encouraging the study of semiotics and the various meaning making processes by which people make sense of their social world, *precisely by engaging with it*. Neither the objects of our investigation, nor the subjects doing the investigating, can be isolated and defined apart from the processes in which they become meaningful.

In this spirit, it has recently been argued that, so as to avoid working solely within easily accessible, pre-existing social identities, the field of social psychology should focus more on *practice*, referring to the ways in which social categories are enacted and brought to life in the social realm (rather than treating them as though they were categorical and fixed) (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). This increased focus on *practice* builds on the earlier foundations of *perceptualism*, and is nicely illustrated in studies on crowd behavior and protester/police interactions (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Reicher, 1987). By consciously paying increased attention to how social categories become meaningful through practice, “the danger of taking categories for granted is all but removed” (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001, p. 401). There have also been recent calls for greater discussions around contextualized dynamic processes within the social identity and social representations approaches (e.g., Elcheroth, Doise, & Reicher, 2011; Spears & Klein, 2011). Similarly, a recent methodological suggestion in this regard is that psychology treat the production of collective distinctions in practice as conceptually meaningful *provisional pointers*, rather than fixed, internally homogeneous sets (Falmagne, Iselin, Todorova, & Welsh, 2013).

Social psychologists, and social psychology as a field, have a long history of fighting in the name of social justice (Kelman, 1968). The field has also long debated the balance it should strike between basic and applied research (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1989; Kipnis, 1994). It is important, however, that as *social psychologists* we not lose sight of the created and contextualized nature of social categories, irrespective of how practically effective essentialist thinking may be *for activists*. Such a distinction between psychologists and activists stands to work to the benefit of both. While social psychologists as individuals may work to further specific calls for social justice, thereby embracing and encouraging activism along the lines recommended by the collective action literature, it is important that we as a field not unintentionally limit our research to that tradition. Were we to do so, not only would we be doing a disservice to the field, but we would also be turning a blind eye to countless communities that don’t fit the mold of the current collective action literature. By retaining the malleability afforded the field by the historical shift to *perceptualism*, and by moving towards a greater focus on *practice*, social psychology can also help shed light on injustice that remains undetected or underappreciated, and can therefore work on behalf of social justice in a way that activism alone cannot.

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