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Integrating Social and Moral Psychology to Reduce Inequality

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Integrating Social and Moral Psychology to Reduce Inequality

Lewis (2021) poses an important question: Is it possible to achieve equality, and if so, how? This question is at the root of social psychology, which originated in scholars' desire to understand and prevent atrocities such as the Holocaust (e.g., Allport, 1954; Milgram, 1974). Since that time, the field has become increasingly concerned with questions about basic cognitive processes, with some scholars (e.g., Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007; Cialdini, 2009; Swencionis & Goff, 2017) noting that the field could benefit from greater engagement with the world beyond the lab. It is thus especially gladdening to see scholarship bringing together these different parts of the field by using advances in basic science to speak to some of humanity's most pernicious problems, as Lewis (2021) does.

It is also heartening to see the target article make explicit connections to moral psychology—for instance, by pointing out that to some people, pursuing equality could mean "giving good things to bad people." Moral psychology and social psychological work on intergroup relations are conceptually linked: if we perceive inequality to be immoral, then knowledge about increasing moral behavior should inform efforts toward equality, and knowledge about increasing equality should inform interventions designed to increase moral behavior. However, currently, the two literatures are quite distinct. We are therefore gratified that the target article draws on concepts from both areas. Here, we elaborate on what moral psychology can teach about inequality and highlight additional ways that work on moral psychology and intergroup bias can join together to inform equality-promoting interventions.

The Importance of Morality

The view that judgments regarding "bad people" stymie efforts toward equality is consistent with work on the power of moral evaluations. Morality plays a strong role in overall

impressions of another person (Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Heiphetz, 2020). Indeed, many view morality as a defining feature of identity, reporting that people would become entirely different if their moral characteristics changed (Strohming & Nichols, 2014). Thus, judgments of others' moral character can be especially powerful.

Some work in moral psychology suggests that people readily attribute good moral character to others (De Freitas, Cikara, Grossmann, & Schlegel, 2017). For instance, they report that actions they perceive as morally good reflect a person's "true self," whereas actions they perceive as morally bad do not (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014). Further, adults judge that people would change more when their characteristics worsen rather than improve (Heiphetz, Strohming, Gelman, & Young, 2018; Molouki & Bartels, 2017; Tobia, 2016), suggesting that participants may perceive improvements as relatively consistent with who a person was originally (in contrast to changes from good to bad characteristics, which may be perceived as causing people to move away from their "true selves").

Reading this literature can certainly provide a more optimistic impression of human nature than one obtains from the social psychological literature on intergroup relations, which indicates that people often view out-group members in morally negative terms (e.g., as bad, criminal, violent, etc.; Jarvis & Okonofua, 2019; Rattan, Levine, Dweck, & Eberhardt, 2012; Richardson & Goff, 2012). This negativity extends even to the spaces associated with members of marginalized groups (Massey & Denton, 1993; Powell, 2009). In one study, for instance, participants (who were predominantly White in this research) perceived Black areas as impoverished, crime-ridden, rundown, dangerous, and dirty (Bonam, Bergsieker, & Eberhardt, 2016).

In fact, people from some groups may not be viewed as people at all. Participants view Black men as ape-like (Kahn, Goff, & McMahon, 2015), attribute emotions that they perceive to be uniquely human to in-group members more than to out-group members (Leyens, Demoulin, Vaes, Gaunt, & Paladino, 2007), and view women as a collection of body parts (Bernard, Gervais, Allen, Campomizzi, & Klein, 2012) or imbue them with an inordinate significance, an act that can remove women from moral consideration and leave them vulnerable to harm and exploitation (Kiefer, Mosley, & Landau, 2017). Participants also explicitly rate members of some groups—including Arabs, Muslims, and people involved in the legal system—as less human than dominant groups such as "Americans" and "Whites" (Heiphetz & Craig, in press; Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill, 2015). This dehumanization may help explain the discrepancy between work on the "good true self" and work on intergroup bias. After all, the view that *human beings* are morally good need not extend to those perceivers view as less than fully human. Viewing outgroup members outside the scope of justice excludes them from a moral psychological boundary where concerns about fairness and equality govern their actions (Staub, 1990). If escalated, this moral exclusion can even justify human rights violations and reduce necessary interventions (Kelman, 1976; Opatow, 1990). Thus, dehumanization may underlie the view that some group members are not moral and do not deserve equal rights.

The failure to attribute moral goodness to members of marginalized groups provides an extreme example of the deficit-based frameworks Lewis (2021) references. As the target paper notes, people from the United States (and especially dominant group members according to some analyses, Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Hunt, 2007; Leahy, 1983) readily "assume there is something inherently wrong with" members of marginalized groups. In addition to the examples noted in the target paper (e.g., related to education), deficit-based explanations may

also apply to inferences about moral character. As in other domains (Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Devos & Banaji, 2005), dominant group members may view their in-group as prototypical and judge out-group members against that perceived default. In the context of morality, dominant group members may view their own group's behaviors and standards as morally good and find members of marginalized groups wanting when compared with this standard. Indeed, dominant group members sometimes view cultural objects (e.g., music, art, clothing) as deficient when associated with minoritized group members while viewing those same objects as valuable when in-group members take them for their own use (Mosley & Biernat, in press; Mosley, Biernat, & Adams, in preparation).

Such deficit-based inferences are themselves negative and also have damaging downstream consequences. Viewing other people as inherently bad deep down inside leads to negative attitudes (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2021), reduced generosity (Heiphetz, 2019), and increased punitiveness (Giles, 2003), among other outcomes. Changing the perception that some people are "bad" and unworthy of the good things in life may therefore reduce the harm people are willing to bring upon each other, including harms associated with maintaining inequality. How, then, do we change perceptions of "badness" and prevent their negative consequences from occurring?

Integrating Social and Moral Psychology to Inform Interventions

Because psychology is the study of the mind—literally, the psyche—its toolbox is particularly well designed for individual-level interventions. For example, work from social psychology has highlighted the importance of individuating information in reducing dehumanization, showing less dehumanization of marginalized groups when participants made individuating judgments (e.g., whether the target likes broccoli) and more dehumanization when

participants made categorical judgments (e.g., whether or not the target was middle aged; Harris & Fiske, 2007). Such interventions increase the perception that other human beings are in fact human and therefore capable of being moral (Kagan, 2004; Haslam, 2006). If perceptions regarding "bad" people underlie portions of the inequality currently present in society, then reducing dehumanization may increase equality.

Another example from individual-level interventions that can increase the perception that members of marginalized groups can be good people comes from the moral psychology literature on "moral circles," or the group of people that one views as worthy of moral consideration (Graham, Waytz, Meindl, Iyer, & Young, 2017). Individuals commonly place marginalized out-group members outside the moral circle, perceiving themselves not to have moral obligations toward these individuals (Kelman, 1976; Opatow, 1990). To the extent that people perceive equality as a moral obligation, placing someone beyond one's moral circle would allow people to engage in unequal treatment on the basis of group membership while still seeing themselves as morally good. Consequently, expanding dominant group members' moral circles could reduce their comfort with inequality. Several factors predict the size of individuals' moral circles, including individual differences (e.g., people who view morality as an important part of their self-concept have larger moral circles than people who do not; Reed & Aquino, 2003) and contextual variables (e.g., people's moral circles expand when they decide whom to *exclude* and shrink when they decide whom to *include*; Laham, 2009). People are also more likely to expand their moral circles and focus their attention to distant others when they feel that their own basic needs have been met and when they view resources as abundant, thus allowing for the prioritization of universal values of equality (Crimston, Bain, Hornsey & Bastian, 2016).

Intervening on these factors could shift the size of people's moral circles and potentially encourage them to extend moral concern to a larger and more diverse group of people.

As Lewis (2021) points out, individual-level solutions such as these must work in concert with structural-level solutions (see also Salter, Adams, & Perez, 2018, on the importance of "reconstruct[ing] worlds that promote antiracist tendencies," p. 153). Work on the normative power of law supports Lewis's (2021) argument that structural interventions can provide supportive environments for individual-level changes. This work describes the legal system as communicating information about both prescriptive norms (what people *should* do) and descriptive norms (what people *actually* do). Because most people usually follow the law (Tyler, 2006), knowing that a particular behavior is illegal can lead people to conclude that it is uncommon. Additionally, people often conflate descriptive and prescriptive norms, judging that common behaviors are moral whereas uncommon behaviors are not (Bear & Knobe, 2017; Goldring & Heiphetz, 2020; Roberts, Gelman, & Ho, 2017). Because laws can communicate information about both commonality and morality, laws curtailing inequality can both reduce the prevalence of and shape moral inferences about discrimination.

Recent empirical work supports this possibility. For instance, support for interracial marriage in the United States increased following the *Loving v. Virginia* court case that legalized these marriages (Newport, 2013). Similarly, explicit and implicit anti-gay bias decreased following legalization of same-sex marriage (Ofosu, Chambers, Chen, & Hehman, 2019). In cases like these, structural interventions at the government level (e.g., changing laws) appear to have shaped individual attitudes, perhaps by communicating that inequality that was once acceptable no longer is.

In addition to reducing prejudiced *attitudes* at the individual level, equality-promoting laws can also encourage people to perform egalitarian *behaviors*. Work on morality has long emphasized the distinction between obligatory acts, which people judge to be requirements of a moral life, and supererogatory acts, which people judge as good but not necessary (Cornwell & Higgins, 2015; Eisenberg-Berg, 1979; Kahn, 1992; Lovett, Jordan, & Wiltermuth, 2012). People commonly judge that it is obligatory to avoid harmful behaviors, such as causing another person bodily injury, and supererogatory to perform pro-social behaviors, such as helping another person (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009; Kahn, 1992; Killen & Turiel, 1998). Individual actions that promote equality (e.g., hiring someone from a marginalized group; moving to a particular neighborhood; sending one's child to the local public school) can often seem pro-social and therefore supererogatory. However, people often perceive an obligation to follow the law (Tyler, 2006). Therefore, legislation can shift equality from supererogatory to obligatory. In so doing, legislation can increase steps that people take in their own lives to treat people equally regardless of group membership.

Data regarding the association between societal laws as well as interpersonal attitudes and behaviors highlight another interplay between structural and individual interventions. Although structural interventions can provide support for individual-level change, they also make such change less necessary. Following *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the 2015 Supreme Court case that mandated marriage equality throughout the United States, same-sex couples' marriage rights no longer depended on the goodwill of neighbors who previously could have voted to deny this right and refused to sign marriage licenses with no legal repercussions. Of course, interpersonal bias is still responsible for numerous harms. Exposure to such bias harms marginalized group members in nearly every domain, including physical health (Onyeador et al., 2020; van Ryn et

al., 2011), emotional well-being (Brown et al., 2000), education (Lewis & Sekaquaptewa, 2016), and interpersonal relationships (Trail, Goff, Bradbury, & Karney, 2012). However, when laws sanction the extreme behavioral consequences of personal bias, the biases themselves become somewhat less consequential. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "It may be true that the law cannot change the heart but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me but it can keep him from lynching me and I think that is pretty important, also" (King, 1963).

Conclusions

Social psychology was founded on scholars' desire to grapple with the messy and complicated world outside the lab using scientific tools. Subsequently, some scholars (Baumeister et al., 2007; Cialdini, 2009; Swencionis & Goff, 2017) have called for a return to deep engagement with the world beyond the lab. Answering this call, the target article describes how rigorous science can address the problem of inequality. In so doing, the article demonstrates that social psychology integrates well with other fields, including the study of morality, to provide a fuller understanding of why inequality exists and how people can reduce it. This article provides a strong path forward for integrating across areas of study to bring science to bear on society's most pressing problems.

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