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 (Gigerenzer & 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 “imbalanced” 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.