From disorder to coherence in social psychology

Todd K. Shackelford[a] and Robin R. Vallacher[b]

[a]*Department of Psychology, Florida Atlantic University, Davie, FL 33314;* [b]*Department of Psychology, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL 33433.* **tshackel@fau.edu** **vallacher@fau.edu**
http://www.psy.fau.edu/tshackelford
http://www.psy.fau.edu/rvallacher

Abstract: Krueger & Funder (K&F) presuppose that the base rate for social cognition is more rational than is indicated by research, and that a focus on cognitive errors and behavioral shortcomings is responsible for the fragmented nature of social psychology. Insight concerning both issues is forthcoming from advances in evolutionary psychology and the adaptation of dynamical systems theory to social psychology.

Preparing a commentary on Krueger & Funder's (K&F) article represents something of an irony. Their thesis is that social psychologists emphasize people's shortcomings (mental errors and biases, behavioral weaknesses) to the relative exclusion of people's impressive (fair, insightful) cognitive abilities and proclivity for doing wonderful (moral, purposeful, self-directed) things. Our task as commentators is to identify shortcomings in this thesis, focusing on the questionable aspects of a cogent and well-documented argument. To compound the irony, our basic argument is that the negativity bias in social psychology highlights the adaptive nature of human functioning and provides the basis for coherent theory construction.

Humans clearly represent a successful species. The accomplishments characterizing our comparatively brief tenure in the animal kingdom are testament to our enormous cognitive skills and capacity for acting in a fashion that enhances both personal and group survival. Against this backdrop, it's not surprising that laypeople and scientists alike are fascinated (and often chagrined) by what appear to be lapses in reasoning and weaknesses in conduct. Apart from their figure–ground appeal, perceived shortcomings in people's cognitive and behavioral tendencies draw attention for two reasons, both of which are of value to science and society.

The first reason is practical: By exposing error-prone and undesirable aspects of human functioning, science and society are in a position to minimize their frequency of occurrence or their consequences. The situation is analogous to the disproportionate concern with illness in medical research. Most people don't get cancer, but if we were to let the relatively low base rate dictate research activities, we would not discover means for preventing or curing this affliction. In like manner, social psychologists are professionally concerned with apparent human foibles, such as irrationality and susceptibility to social influence, because these tendencies are associated with personal and social ills (e.g., poor decision-making, racism, social violence).

As K&F note, focusing on problems to the exclusion of normal operation provides a skewed image of people. This brings up the second rationale for emphasizing people's shortcomings: By looking at the ways in which people err mentally and display weakness behaviorally, we can gain insight into the mechanisms that produce apparent lapses in thought and action. The analogy to medicine is telling here, as well. Research spawned by the AIDS epidemic, for instance, has yielded insights into the immune system that might not have been appreciated otherwise. With respect to social psychology, were it not for research into such phenomena as cognitive heuristics, dissonance reduction, groupthink, and deindividuation, theories of mental and behavioral processes might not appreciate basic mechanisms that operate in different ways under specified circumstances. Thus, research on cognitive heuristics and cognitive dissonance has underscored the press for efficiency and evaluative consistency in cognitive processes – tendencies that are responsible for effective decision-making and judgment much of the time. The work on groupthink and deindividuation, meanwhile, illustrates people's penchant for social coordination – a feature of human nature selected for in our ancestral environment and crucial to social harmony and efficiency in contemporary society.

K&F express concern that a focus on the ways in which people can go wrong promotes fragmentation in social psychology, with independent mini-theories devoted to separate, narrowly defined shortcomings. A concern with the lack of theoretical synthesis in the field has been voiced in various quarters in recent years (e.g., Buss 1995; Kenrick et al. 2003; Vallacher & Nowak 1994). This very fragmentation, however, has fueled efforts to achieve theoretical synthesis and has resulted in several promising meta-theories. Two purported syntheses in particular – evolutionary psychology and dynamical social psychology – are noteworthy. Both perspectives confirm the functional nature of human thought and action by focusing on apparent exceptions (i.e., nonrational or undesirable manifestations).

Evolutionary psychology (cf. Buss 2004) is explicitly concerned with people's success in meeting adaptive challenges, both interpersonal and environmental. But insights into evolved mechanisms have stemmed in part from research exposing aspects of human nature that seem dysfunctional. For example, the tendency to favor in-group members and to derogate out-group members, revealed in research on social stereotyping and conflict, is a manifestation of a proclivity for forming social bonds and alliances in one's local group that has beneficial (or at least benign) consequences most of the time. In similar fashion, although some unsavory consequences of sexual jealousy, such as spousal homicide, may have received disproportionate attention relative to their base rate occurrence, this research has highlighted the evolved design of human psychology.

The dynamical perspective emphasizes the tendency for systems of interacting elements to achieve higher-order coherence as well as the expression of this self-organization tendency in specific personal and interpersonal contexts (cf. Vallacher et al.). The juxtaposition of specific thoughts and memories promotes the emergence of coherent global judgments on the part of individuals, for example, whereas social interactions in a group promote the emergence of group-level beliefs and values. The failure to achieve personal and interpersonal coherence is distressful and is associated with a host of problems (e.g., ambivalence, in-group conflict). But, although a press for higher-order coherence is functional, it also may qualify as a fundamental principle underlying a wide range of cognitive and behavioral shortcomings. In the attempt to achieve and maintain coherence, people distort or suppress information, show irrational susceptibility to influence, and ostracize or derogate others with different notions of social and physical reality.

The emergence of higher-order coherence is a fundamental (and hence, unifying) feature of complex systems in all areas of science (cf. Strogatz 2003), and there is reason to think that this feature underlies the adaptive and apparently maladaptive aspects of human nature. Laypeople strive for mental coherence, groups of interacting individuals strive for social coherence, and scientists strive for theoretical coherence. In each case, the press for coherence is fueled by disorder and complexity in the system's components. From this perspective, the laundry list of human foibles that K&F decry may provide the elements for a unified view of social thought and behavior – a view that emphasizes our strengths and capabilities as well as our weaknesses and limitations.