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Missing Perspective:

Marginalized Groups in the Social Psychological Study of Social Disparities

Jes L. Matsick^{1,2}, Flora Oswald^{1,2}, and Mary Kruk^{1,2}

Joseph Cesario [target article]

¹ Department of Psychology, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA

² Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, The Pennsylvania State University,
University Park, PA, USA

Author Note

Jes L. Matsick <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4368-3211>

Flora Oswald <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1491-1860>

Mary Kruk <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3537-0362>

FO and MK contributed equally to this article. Following the first author's position, authorship order is listed in reverse alphabetical order given equal contributions to this work. Correspondence should be addressed to Jes L. Matsick at the Department of Psychology, The Pennsylvania State University, 416 Moore Building, University Park, PA 16802. Email: jmatsick@psu.edu.

Abstract

Drawing on interdisciplinary, feminist insights, we encourage social psychologists to embrace the active participation of marginalized groups in social disparities research. We explain (1) how the absence of marginalized groups' perspectives in research presents a serious challenge to understanding intergroup dynamics and concomitant disparities, and (2) how their inclusion could assuage some of social psychology's "fatal flaws."

Cesario argued that three flaws permeate social psychology and undermine what psychologists know about social disparities, but Cesario has not thoroughly acknowledged a potential solution to draw upon: the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups (e.g., those disadvantaged by gender, race, sexual orientation). The relative absence of marginalized groups' perspectives in social psychological research presents a serious challenge to understanding intergroup dynamics and concomitant disparities, and their inclusion may offer an antidote to some of the "fatal flaws." We disagree with Cesario about the extent to which the flaws fabricate disparities, but that is not the central claim we take to task. Instead, we advocate for missing perspectives (i.e., marginalized groups' perspectives), which yield benefits for addressing Cesario's concerns and bolstering social psychologists' understanding of disparities.

Social psychological research often identifies what dominant groups do or don't do and touts those findings as evidence for or against social disparities. Given convenience sampling procedures overrepresent dominant groups (Rad et al., 2018), marginalized groups remain relatively neglected in psychological research despite intergroup relations being bidirectional (Roberts et al., 2020; Shelton, 2000). For example, only 5% of articles in one premier psychology journal predominately sampled U.S. ethnic minorities (Thalmayer et al., 2020), and less than 2% of psychological studies across three decades of research included sexual minorities as participants (Lee & Crawford, 2012). As in Cesario, researchers often position marginalized groups as experimental stimuli upon which to be acted; however, beyond their roles as targets, marginalized groups add value to the study of disparities as informants of intergroup relations (Shelton, 2000). Feminist standpoint theory offers a framework for appreciating the advantages of marginalized groups' perspectives in research; It stresses that knowledge is situated, marginalization privies low-status groups to knowledge that is unavailable to dominant groups, and research about power should prioritize those most marginalized (Crasnow, 2020; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2004; Rolin, 2009). By centering

marginalized groups, social psychologists will improve their science of social disparities and remedy extant limitations.

We first consider Cesario's *missing information flaw* (i.e., experiments remove information that is valuable in real-world scenarios). Research that begins by probing marginalized groups' experiences can identify relevant features of real-world situations to retain for lab-based studies. For example, sexual minorities indicate that their experiences of discrimination rely on gender expression (i.e., the extent to which they "pass" as heterosexual and as conventionally feminine/masculine); however, when social psychologists assess sexual stigma, rarely do they manipulate target gender expression despite sexual minorities reporting that people use information about their gender expression to enact bias (e.g., Anderson, 2020; Hoskin, 2019). Consistent with standpoint theory, marginalized groups may possess superior awareness of inequality and injustice. Whereas members of dominant groups may not discern which sources of information exacerbate bias, members of marginalized groups may more easily notice the circumstances under which bias occurs.

Second, the inclusion of marginalized groups as participants should address Cesario's concern over *missing forces*: the absence of marginalized groups' behaviors in experiments. Research on intergroup interactions provides exemplary support for marginalized groups' inclusion in research. Such an approach empowers marginalized groups as active agents in the research process beyond being passive targets of dominant groups' actions (Shelton, 2000). It also fosters a bidirectional account of intergroup dynamics, which answers Cesario's call for lab-based studies to account for the role of marginalized groups. We propose that their *real* presence in research may increase bias. For example, though intergroup anxiety emerges in intergroup interactions, stressors differ. Dominant groups worry about appearing likeable and non-prejudiced, whereas marginalized groups worry about stigma (Shelton, 2003). Given that

real intergroup interactions evoke stress, anxiety, and misunderstanding (MacInnis & Page-Gould, 2015; Richeson & Shelton, 2007; Schultz et al., 2015; Vorauer, 2006), intergroup exchanges can produce negative consequences (e.g., heightened ingroup favoritism, avoidance of future contact)—revealing biased processes not as easily captured by research using hypothetical, imagined outgroup members that induce relatively less anxiety.

Third, social psychologists often overlook marginalized groups' expert, first-hand knowledge of disparities, which could address some of Cesario's *missing contingencies*. By adopting person-centered, intersectional approaches, social psychologists could highlight within-group and intergroup variance in how people interpret bias (e.g., Carter & Murphy, 2015; Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006). This information would prove useful for addressing Cesario's assertion that biases are not uniformly experienced. Intersectional approaches also necessitate an understanding of multiple, interlocking social identities and social systems for addressing inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; hooks, 1984), including contingencies of people's other social positions. As one example, biases in STEM-based evaluation involve more complexity than a gender effect and thus should be considered multidimensionally (Eaton et al., 2020). Indeed, Black women experience sexism in ways inextricably linked to racism, whereas White women's experiences of sexism dovetail with White privilege (Bowleg, 2008). Taking intersectionality seriously (see McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019) would reintroduce some of Cesario's *missing contingencies* into the social psychological study of disparities.

We also encourage psychologists to travel beyond disciplinary boundaries to appreciate the sociopolitical and historical contexts surrounding disparities they aim to understand. Interdisciplinary consultation with non-psychologists (e.g., feminist scholars, critical race theorists, humanists) provides rich contextualization of psychological questions and findings (Bowleg, 2008; Grzanka, 2018; Held, 2020; Warner, 2008). For example, embracing humanistic

ideals of empathy and subjectivity could transform social psychological questions, such as not only asking “Are shooters biased?” but also “Do Black individuals detect bias when encountering police under differing conditions, and how are Black people psychologically affected by the threat that they anticipate?” Interdisciplinary insights would also help social psychologists connect contemporary research questions to the cultural, historical, and political origins that make such inquiries worthwhile (e.g., connections between slave patrols and modern-day policing; Reichel, 1988).

We remain optimistic that we can build upon social psychological approaches to strengthen the field’s scientific contributions, but it requires careful, deliberate attention to marginalized groups’ experiences. Increasing social psychologists’ attention to marginalized groups responds to Cesario’s flaws, enriches the study of social disparities, and diversifies sample representation within psychology. Moving beyond disciplinary lines, social psychologists would benefit from engaging feminist standpoint theory and respecting interdisciplinary knowledge.

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