In Defense of Basic Research on Social Cognition

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On Sample Diversity

- Trend is most clearly visible in the near-universal demand for increased external validity of samples

- This stance against convenience samples comes from good intentions but is profoundly anti-basic science

- The point isn’t that diverse samples are bad
  - The point is that they matter for some purposes but not others
  - The problem is expecting that all research have the same goals and purposes
What is the Goal of Your Research?


- Are you doing applied work? Testing an intervention to be applied?
- Are you trying to test a theory?

- Intervention?
  - Then, yes, you absolutely need to know if the intervention works for all populations you hope to treat, which should be broad and diverse
  - Buju’s work!
  - Same with a new drug, etc.
What is the Goal of Your Research?

- Building and testing theory?
  - Not so much
    - If the theory is correct, this is what should happen right here, right now, with THIS sample
    - Makes no claims about generalizability
    - Biomedical research and lab rats
What is the Goal of Your Research?

- We often have a problem with how we talk about our work
  - “These data show that people use stereotypes as shortcuts to ease processing demands”
  - NO

- There’s this one weird trick:
  - “These data are consistent with the theory that people use stereotypes as shortcuts to ease processing demands”
  - YES
    - It is about the idea, not the sample
    - No claim of generalizability is appropriate or implied
    - Generalizability is an empirical question that one may (or may not) pursue
What is the Goal of Your Research?

- Do we change our work to fit our sloppy language? Or change our language to fit our work?
Complications with Insistence on Diverse Samples: External Validity Complication

- **External validity is much broader than race/culture**
  - Also refers to generalization across different contexts and populations
    - E.g., presence vs. absence of other people
    - People with varying motives, abilities, personalities (P X S)

- **External validity also encompasses generalizability of IVs and DVs**
  - Do specific operationalizations generalize to other operationalizations?
    - Builds construct validity
    - Often more important for building theory/understanding mechanisms

- Address generalizability in your article...
Generalization Complication

- Begs the questions:
  - How far should it generalize? Which groups count?
  - In practice, it has almost entirely been only been 2: West, East
  - Is 4 enough? 15? 20? Which groups can you skip?
  - How can you be sure there aren’t other differences?
  - Are we explaining or just cataloging?
  - What do you do if you find a difference?
Generalization Complication

- You could spend your whole research career replicating a single effect in each and every distinct culture on the planet
  - Resources, including time, are limited
  - Might have different goals: Construct validity; theory extension
  - Given limited resources, impedes basic research if elevated to top priority
In the end, we are talking about potential moderators

I’m more interested in other moderators
  - Different motivations, cognitive states, social contexts, personalities, etc.
  - You think there are important cultural moderators? Test them!

  - Again, limited resources! Can’t do it all
  - It’s good division of labor when different researchers care about different things
Mediator Complication: What are the Mechanisms?

- Identifying group differences tells us very little about the mechanisms.

- Culture/Ethnicity/Race is not an explanation!

- Presumably, there are important psychological processes that produce those group differences.
  - We are psychologists! Social cognition researchers! Our job is to identify those mechanisms not simply catalog group differences.
  - Understanding them may help to understand race/culture/ethnicity.
Example from Sears on WEIRD (1986):

- Limited age sample is a problem: College students different from older adults
- Less crystallized attitudes and self-concepts
  - Surely affects behavior
  - Domains of persuasion and self-perception

- How does Sears know those differences are important? Lab research!
  - Chaiken & Baldwin (1981)

- If group differences have been carefully linked to specific mechanisms, you understand those differences
- Otherwise, you are simply describing outcomes
Access Complication

- IMO, researcher diversity more important equity issue than sample diversity
  - May have very different ideas about social psychology

- Finding and testing broad samples can be difficult and expensive
- Are we going to expect researchers without those resources do the same?
  - Global South researchers?
  - Researchers at small colleges with fewer resources?

- You can say, sure, we’ll make exceptions, but if you’ve made it a general point that convenience samples are bad...
  - If that work is devalued, it is devalued
  - It is an equity issue
Summary

- Research goals determine appropriate research design
  - Diverse samples are a strength!
  - Just shouldn’t be expected in all cases

- Diverse samples are critical if:
  - You are testing an intervention aimed at multiple populations
    - Specific samples if your intervention is meant to apply only to specific groups
  - You care about culture/race as a moderator, esp if you have a theory!
Summary

- Convenience samples are fine if:
  - You’re doing basic science focused on theory and mechanism
  - You care more about other moderators
  - Broader access to our publishing world

- Convenience ≠ White!
- Convenience ≠ North American/Western European
- Convenience = convenience
  - Asking for a N. American/European comparison group is totally inappropriate
- If your convenient sample is diverse, lucky you!

- Use appropriate language to describe your theoretical work!