

Materialism and Selection Bias: Political Psychology from a Radical Constructivist Perspective

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> Context • Political psychology rests on the assumption of the existence of a world outside and independent of consciousness. This ontological materialism is hardly spoken of within the field, as it is an unchallenged assumption among most psychologists and social scientists, including political scientists. However, the materialist paradigm frames research designs, the interpretation of data and theory building. Also, there is a bias towards psychological universals – the claim that all individual and group psychologies are equal (as compared to cultural psychology, which is critical about universalist claims), which can be understood as a consequence of the discipline's hidden ontological core assumption. **> Problem** • The purpose of this article is to show how the choice of a certain approach to answer a research question rests on the deeply ingrained beliefs of researchers. These beliefs are usually not part of research presentations even though they have tremendous influence on the results of the whole research process. Recipients use these necessarily biased research results as building blocks for the construction of their own realities. **> Method** • The article is an ex-post interpretative summary of my considerations during the designing period of an earlier study in which I researched, from the perspective of political psychology, on what grounds South Indian politicians have positive, negative and ambiguous attitudes towards the “West.” Using this research project as an example, this article is a critical discussion and analysis of the ideological backdrop of political psychology, in particular the belief in a materialist ontology. **> Results** • I argue that, instead of coming closer to any kind of an “objective” understanding of political attitudes, in political psychology we cannot help but invent new stories about the (political) world as long as our beliefs consciously or unconsciously influence our decision making in theorizing and research practice. **> Implications** • The discussion shows exemplarily how in political psychology a researcher's basic assumption that a physical world outside of consciousness exists determines methodology and justifies a particular set of interpretations. The unproblematic physicalist paradigm makes a researcher in political psychology necessarily a biased researcher. **> Constructivist content** • The article is a description of how a researcher's subjective perception and construction of the (social) world has consequences for the complete research process. Political psychology is based on the highly problematic assumption of an ontic world that exists independently of a subjective observer. It can serve as a telling example of how the preoccupation with a physicalist world explanation can lead to methodological and interpretative biases. **> Key words** • Cultural psychology, emotional beliefs, identity, metaphysical idealism, ontological materialism, political psychology, psychological universals, research biases, social constructivism.

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Introduction

« 1 » The objective of this target article is the critical assessment of how ontological beliefs about “reality” bias research methods and correspondingly their findings, in political psychology. This assessment is carried out on the backdrop of my research into the psychological factors leading to more positive or negative attitudes towards the “West” in South India (Tamil Nadu) (Goldstein 2018). This self-critical attempt illustrates how a perspective that is tainted by a researcher's identification with stories about a fundamentally material world – including its interpretations

of physicalism expressed in biology and the Marxian remnants in critical theory – actively takes part in creating a peculiar narrative about the social world and its alleged facts. The basic idea of this article is to share, from a subjective perspective, an empirical example of how research can be biased by the underlying assumptions about the world as such. More precisely, I show how my belief in ontological materialism limited the decisions I had to make in the course of the research. In this respect, the article may also be of educational value for future research.

« 2 » First, I discuss the limits and potential scope of political psychology from

a social philosophical perspective. For the purpose of this article, political psychology shall be understood in very general terms as any attempt to explain and understand political phenomena from a psychological perspective. Second, I retrace my thought process regarding the research project and will report on my subjective experiences with my own research biases. This example also portrays the political implications of researchers' decisions for or against the assumptions of psychological universals.

« 3 » My main conclusion is that political psychology, just as any other approach in social research, is necessarily biased and de-

pendent on favorable decisions made by a researcher. While this insight is far from being a surprise, what I can offer in addition is that I, as the conductor of the research project, will present an account of my private reflections when designing the research. Immediately after finishing my research project, I developed a keen interest in constructivism, metaphysical idealism and non-dualism that led me to this public re-evaluation and dismantling of my original approach. I suggest that as long as we are openly addressing our emotional beliefs (i.e., beliefs that are the joint product of cognition and emotions) and the limitations of our research, we have some leeway in constructing our realities as we wish to, also when doing research.

Partisanship in research

« 4 » Deciding on a research perspective is a critical task. First of all, it delimits the scope of what a researcher can do and determines the blind spots that necessarily have to remain in the analysis of a problem. This problem of the limitations of any perspective and also any method is not sufficiently described if it is understood merely as the rational consideration of a researcher who analytically decides on a perspective and method that best fits a particular topic. This is, at least, the case if we understand rationality in the traditional sense, ignoring recent findings on the role of emotions in being rational. That conventional understanding of rationality might better be called hyper-rationality. Over the last few decades, evidence has been collected that analytical skills uninformed by emotions do not generate the most rational conclusions (Damasio 1994, 1999; Phelps 2006). Jonathan Mercer (2010) called beliefs that are coproduced by cognition and emotion “emotional beliefs” and argued that they influence all decisions – especially on policies. Therefore, emotional beliefs strongly influence any decision on the (subjective) proper perspective and methodology, the selection and interpretation of evidence, and confidence in a certain research perspective or theory. Emotional beliefs appear as individual convictions (Mercer 2010). Of course, “convictions are more dangerous enemies to truth than lies” (Nietzsche 1977: 693), because they blind us

without our noticing it and they definitively influence political decision making and political attitudes, like it or not.

« 5 » For example, my own conviction in the power of emotional beliefs and the desire to be understood properly, already biases my reasoning and understanding. And this, of course, is just one of the few convictions I can be aware of. Those convictions and biased categories, not to mention the emotionally charged terms I use without giving it a thought at all, limit my perception and give my arguments a tendency in a certain direction. Trying to explain the bias of which one is aware is the least that can be done in the attempt to conform to the conventional scientific standard of objectivity. Would it be better to relinquish any claim of objectivity and just acknowledge the subjectivity of research right from the beginning? Although for most researchers this might be an awkward question to ask, I will suggest an answer in this article (see below in §§54f).

The limits of social research

« 6 » Gerhard Stapelfeldt (2004: 11–13) argues that “real social facts,” in the sense of Émile Durkheim, or “social physics,” in the sense of Auguste Comte, do not exist. A researcher into society is necessarily part of the research object, which is obviously a methodological problem. Individuals and society can be conceptualized as dialectical parts of an entity that cannot be without one of its constituting parts. The researcher cannot escape from this position, cannot become an objective observer looking from a meta-perspective, completely unaffected by the society she permanently constitutes and that constitutes her (ibid). What we commonly consider “facts” in the social sciences are only temporarily fixed assumptions about observations that may be shared within a larger discourse at a certain historical time and place. However, stressing the importance that no essentiality of any observation exists¹ does not mean that social research

1 | Essentiality is understood as the assumption of an objective reality lying at the core of a phenomenon that cannot further be deconstructed, as poststructuralists do with some justification.

becomes impossible. In the critical theory of the Frankfurt School tradition, the inescapability of the contemporary individual from her social context is described as a coercive adaption within the totality of modern capitalism (e.g., Horkheimer 1988; Horkheimer & Adorno 2003; Marcuse 1991).

« 7 » Nevertheless, its proponents stress that in order to generate a theory of society, it is necessary for researchers to look at those aspects of a society that the researcher is in a certain way less influenced by: the historical process that made a certain society come into existence and the utopian – but also dystopian – potential of a society (e.g., Marcuse 1991; Adorno 2005). This approach is also useful when we want to understand the opinions of political actors and elites, but to what extent and how? In order to make research results understandable, it is still indispensable for sound social research to always keep in mind the history and future of the data collected. In the interpretation of the collected data, especially, we have to take into account the past and potential future of the situation whence the data has been gathered, because this sheds light on the way we interpret the data itself. Without at least a gross idea about the dominant narratives at a particular moment in history about the past and possible future developments, the understanding of that very period remains largely incomplete.

« 8 » Two approaches to social research that respect this wariness are particularly important. The first approach involves awareness that our understanding and interpretation of data is not the data itself, but what we “make of it” (Wendt 1992: 391). This is more than just the adoption of Alexander Wendt’s (1992) social-constructivist statement about the political units called states in the international system for shedding light on the fundamentals of social research. The persuasiveness of social constructivism and its success in the social sciences and International Relations is based on the ever-present experience of the human psychological condition. As a member of different kinds of social groups, any researcher is only capable of interpreting data in a certain frame of understanding: a constructed frame of thought or of meaning shared by a hypothetical average member of a society within the limits of the human psychological condition. The

last point is important for understanding the limited scope of including social-constructivist considerations into the theorizing of political psychology. So, this limit makes psychology interesting for any social science researcher who bemoans the logical consequences of radical deconstruction of the social. In a sense, it is a coping strategy for the empirically working social scientist, in enabling her to retain a sense of meaning in her work. From the psychological perspective that I chose for my research project, the anti-essentialism of post-structuralism has its limits when it comes to the range of interpreting and understanding data collected from a world that is assumed to be outside and independent of subjective consciousness.

« 9 » The second approach to social research of particular importance is being aware of and making use of the insight that our interpretation and understanding of data is influenced by

- a normative undercurrent that results from our inescapable embeddedness in a certain society (or societies); and
- our own decisions that, if brought about in a critical manner, are strongly evaluating the history and the utopian content of “social facts” observed.

Self-reflexivity and an open naming of normative assumptions and goals are the preconditions for social research that tries not to be affirmative, i.e., for any research that raises the claim of being critical. Interpreting and understanding data in social research is a partisan endeavor, as is theory. This applies also to political psychology.

« 10 » According to Peter Burnham and colleagues, to make sense of data, a conceptualization, or theory, is required

“as an ordering framework or set of background assumptions; as conceptualization, in which ‘to theorize’ means to prescribe a particular way of thinking about the world; and as a hypothesis, explanation or testable proposition.” (Burnham et al. 2004: 3)

They further quote Karl Mannheim’s “relativism” to denote that knowledge must always be knowledge from a certain position, and say that, for Robert Cox, “theory is always for someone, always for some purpose” (ibid). Taking this into consideration, in the

next paragraphs using the example of my own research (Goldstein 2018), I will outline how the data according to a “particular way of thinking about the world” (ibid) is best ordered for the purpose of organizing a research topic.

The research project under investigation: Attitudes towards the “West” in South India

« 11 » Let me first briefly summarize what my research project was about. The research question was why some politicians in Tamil Nadu do have a predominantly positive attitude towards what is stereotypically known as the “West” and others predominantly negative attitudes towards it. Not content with just looking at subjectively uttered (ideological) belief systems of these politicians, I wanted to know the “deeper” reasons for these attitudes and know if a more general pattern of attitudes towards the “West” existed. In order to find that out, I focused on two variables: first, the expression of the psychological trait of authoritarianism and, second, the socioeconomic section that the politicians under investigation represented.

« 12 » The data was collected by means of in-depth interviews with political representatives of parties representing distinct socioeconomic groups and by applying an established psychometric test for measuring authoritarianism, the Right-Wing-Authoritarianism scale. I found that the personality trait of authoritarianism and an individual’s experiences of social rejection on the basis of their socioeconomic status almost fully determine whether politicians in the South Indian state, Tamil Nadu, have positive or negative attitudes towards what can stereotypically be identified as the “West.”

« 13 » The empirical data revealed a simple logic: scoring high on authoritarianism made people more likely to have aversive attitudes regarding the “West” and scoring low on authoritarianism made them tend to be more sympathetic towards the “West.” Additionally, a weaker “correlation” was suggested, that politicians

representing high-ranking socioeconomic groups tend to have considerably more negative attitudes towards the “West” than politicians representing the lower socioeconomic strata of Tamil Nadu’s society. Taking both variables together, the prediction of the attitude towards the “West” of a politician from Tamil Nadu is pretty accurate.

Choosing a perspective within the materialist paradigm

« 14 » What follows from the claim that authoritarianism and socioeconomic status define attitudes towards the “West” in the above-mentioned pattern? A possible interpretation of the research results is that an individual’s expression of the authoritarianism trait and her socioeconomic status almost determine her attitudes towards the “West,” especially in a post-colonial country. For many political psychologists, this would be a very comfortable finding because it could serve as another example of how factors that most people are not aware of define political attitudes. What I want to show in this article is that I can still claim this to be a logical interpretation of the data but have to be aware that this is only possible within today’s dominant physicalist narrative.

« 15 » Political psychology rests on the assumption of a facticity of commonly observable concepts about the psychology of humans, like emotions, motivation, cognition, behavior, traits, etc. This assumption, in turn, rests on another assumption, i.e., that an “observer-independent reality” exists. In the case of psychology, this “reality” is very much the materiality of the human brain (see below in §20). This is even though, in both cases, psychological authoritarianism research as well as research on experiences of rejection according to an individual’s socioeconomic status, it would not be accurate to state that these research fields have a direct brain-research underpinning. Both fields are doing very well without this. Nevertheless, they assume *psychological universals*. This claim rests on the assumption of a basically common psychology of all *Homo sapiens* caused by the equal brain struc-

ture of all members of our species. The alternative narrative within psychology that claims inequality and a multitude of psychologies among humans comes from cultural psychology. Two reasons made me decide against this alternative attempt to sensemaking within psychology for my research. First, an ethical one, because of a tendency within cultural psychology to stereotype individuals based on narratives about certain cultures, I did not want to support it; and second, a practical one, because I was using theories and methods for my research that had been generated in the so-called “West” and I wanted to apply them to individuals socialized in the so-called “Non-West.” The last would not have been possible if I had trusted in cultural psychology. Therefore, I implicitly retold the universalist narrative that at its base is a belief in physicalism and ontological materialism.²

«16» This article is not meant to dissolve the value of my previous research. It is still valid if we believe in the paradigmatic narrative of physicalism. What I am aiming to do is to offer an example from political psychology to reflect on how much the validity of research results is based on a dominant narrative. After personally being exposed to something I cannot describe other than as an epiphany that put this dominant physicalist world understanding radically into question, I simply want to raise awareness of the limits of *any* political psychology. Among established theoretical attempts, constructivism and metaphysical idealism are the most useful for contemplating the question: “What can political psychology still tell us if ontological materialism turns out to be an illusionary sense-making of our human experience?” Even though the general value of subjective “peaks beyond” (Kastrup 2015) might be a more interesting topic, in this article, I only want to formulate a critique of my own research from a radical constructivist perspective.

2| In this article I use the terms physicalism or ontological materialism interchangeably to label the idea, or belief, according to which all mental experiences result from an irreducible material universe.

Psychology in political science and its limits

«17» Considering the previously mentioned limits of informative value and explanatory power, and the self-awareness required for conducting social research, it is clear that not only is theory partisan in itself, but also the methods derived from it are materialized ideology (Althusser 1995). The research method – in-depth face-to-face interviews combined with psychometric testing – itself was a materialized part of the researcher’s belief that hard-wired human brains are an “objective fact” that do only allow for a limited range of subjectively constructed realities. The research method becomes an expression of and at the same time a constitutive element of this particular belief about the world.

«18» In attempting to investigate the impact of that vague object called “Westernization” on a selected group of politicians from Tamil Nadu, and determining how they view its relationship to their traditions, values and life in general by means of a theory based on assumptions from psychology, is already a statement and ideology in practice. To limit the risk of taking the results of such a research project to problematic ends, we have to look at psychology as a method in political science.

«19» Through human practice, and this includes scientific practice, ideology becomes material. Ideology is not an imagination of a “real world,” but the representation of an “imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 1995: 123).³ To choose the perspective of political psychology and use its research methods is already ideology in Althusser’s sense. Being aware that it is an ideological “distortion,” – as is any other approach – it is also necessary to discuss partisanship, as mentioned above.

«20» Being aware that ideology cannot be escaped, a psychological approach should always be applied critically. Critically applying an approach means, in particular, remaining cautious about the ideological impact of popular interpreta-

3| For Louis Althusser, the phrase, “real conditions of existence,” refers to his own Marxist belief in an objective social reality.

tions of contemporary neuroscience. They seem to have become a dominant narrative for the explanation of human behavior. This “neuro-narrative” allows psychological explanations of human behavior to be benevolently received by a larger audience, at least, outside the social sciences and humanities. Without being judgmental, one could say that political psychology informed by neuro-research is part of ideology in the classic critical-theory understanding of the term “ideology.” Here, critical research would mean research that is aware of contemporary psychology’s roots in biology, neurology and the theory of evolution. The emotional belief that human psychology has hard-wired limitations that are explicable by a brain adapted to requirements during human evolution lurks behind any psychological construction of the social world. Taking these (limiting) assumptions into consideration and naming them as such would serve a much humbler and honest dealing with the results of one’s research. The perspective of political psychology is limited and its methods are ideological, but provide “true” results for arguments for mainstream psychological assumptions. It especially emphasizes a universal human condition, with respect to the human psychological constitution. So far, the beliefs behind this kind of research can be summarized thus: a typically human physical brain exists objectively, and all humans share a reality independent of subjective consciousness. The brain evolved during human evolution to serve the needs of the species and its individuals. Its capacity to make individuals process information from outside the brain, including information from other parts of the body, is limited to the particular brain structure that evolved. These assumptions have two implications:

- human psychology applies to all humans everywhere in the same way; and
- mental representations of an assumed ontic world are limited to the capacity of these brains.

According to this, the idealist claim of a mental universe is as much nonsense as any postmodern claim that everything we perceive can potentially be constructed. The physical constitution of the human brain

defines clear limits for the constructability of experienced realities. In short, the belief in an ontic world leads to the belief in what is known as psychological universals.

« 21 » My research in Tamil Nadu was based on these assumptions. While being aware that assuming psychological universals was highly contested, I was not so much concerned with criticism from constructivists or metaphysical idealists but from psychologists raising the criticism that general human psychology is derived from experiments with the WEIRDest subjects in the world. Joseph Henrich, Steven Heine and Ara Norenzayan (2010), who coined this acronym (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic), argued that these subjects do not represent average humans on this planet but, to the contrary, are usually comprised of an extraordinary, small group of people, i.e., university students from North America. Instead of joining cultural psychologists who reject the normatively charged assumption of the universal human psychological condition, I decided to continue with it, mainly because it met the methodological requirement for a research perspective that allowed the interpretation of data collected among individuals socialized and living in a socio-cultural context different from mine. A male researcher from Germany testing authoritarianism in South India with a scale and theoretical assumptions derived from studies in North America and Europe would have been impermissible, based on cultural psychology. In addition, the chosen support for psychological universals matched my emotional belief in the equality of all humans.

Political psychology and the individual

« 22 » Applying psychological assumptions to political research, or social research, in general, starts from the assumption that psychology is a basis for human experience and a strong determinant of social and political action by individuals and groups alike. The perspective of political psychology starts from the idea that all information or data – that according to the common materialist paradigm exists objectively and

independent of any consciousness – first has to be perceived and pass through an individual's brain, before the individual behaves in a political way (Krosnick, Chiang & Stark 2017: 1). It is an interesting side note that psychological authoritarianism research was first conducted by members of the Frankfurt School between the two world wars. The puzzle that this group of intellectuals tried to understand was why the promise of Karl Marx's historical materialism that a revolution towards a humanity unrestrictedly unified by free individuals had not been fulfilled. Even more theoretically inexplicable for them was why large parts of the proletariat were instead turning to fascism and Nazism and, in so doing, acting in opposition to the working class's own concerns. This puzzle led these scholars to apply Freudian psychoanalysis to the Marxian critique of political economy. For them, to take into account what was going on inside the individual's black box of psychological processes was a promising new research perspective. Sigmund Freud's model, which emphasized the shaping function of society for the individual person, was obviously very appealing for these scholars in these times. On that base, modern authoritarianism research was born.

« 23 » Today, psychoanalysis is largely outdated in psychology, but the core assumption of individuals as "resistors" of information that is coming from an assumed outside world remains crucial in understanding the perspective and scope of political psychology. The specialty of political psychology compared to other research perspectives in political science and International Relations is that the individual is at the center of research: not necessarily by virtue of individuality as such, but as the core unit of group behavior, whatever the (politically behaving) group may be. Freud's psychodynamic of conflicting drives made room for an empirical psychology and for the interdisciplinary and multi-methodological study of emotions and thinking.

« 24 » To avoid confusion, let me summarize the basic underlying understanding of the relationship between groups and individuals in much of social and political psychology. It has long been well established that groups have their own dynamics, and belonging to a group limits and

alters individual psychological states and abilities for autonomous behavior (e.g., Asch 1955; Sherif et al. 1961; Tajfel et al. 1971; Milgram 1974; Tajfel & Turner 1986). Even though the importance of different roles and statuses for individuals within a group is stressed most of the time, an emphasis is usually put on the defining boundaries of the group and on what its members have in common in contrast to imagined outsiders. However, it is quite problematic to ascribe general characteristics to groups, because dealing with groups tends to neglect the diversity of in-group factions and individual interpretations and motives. Moreover, implicit and explicit assumptions about the imagined characteristics of a group obscure the historicity and temporality of the group, and all too often end up in beliefs about ahistorical essential characteristics of the group.

« 25 » This tendency becomes obvious when we consider the lack of explication of the term "culture" in cultural psychology (Gjerde & Onishi 2000). The discussion of notions such as "culture," "nation," "society," and "community" are among the most prominent examples for characterizing groups regularly dealt with in social research. Per Gjerde sees this tendency in the wake of Durkheim's focus on collective and coercive structures, but adds: "In cultural psychology, this tendency has often taken the form of holistic dichotomization" (Gjerde 2004: 142). As a consequence, in most of cultural psychology, the binary divide between "East" and "West" – a central topic of my research on attitudes towards the "West" in India – is an unquestioned assumption.

« 26 » It is obvious that the results this kind of research is able to bring about must be biased. However, just by not wanting to contribute to the shortcomings of cultural psychology, I deliberately decided to take the opposite stance. By doing this, I imposed another kind of limitation on the range of optional research results. My own theoretical approach took the shortcomings of cultural psychology into account and underlined the importance of inequality and power for the understanding of the dynamics of anti-Westism in South India. I decided that when applying psychology to political science, especially on a cross-cultural topic,

one must be scrupulously cautious to avoid the regressive snares of much of cultural psychology.⁴

« 27 » Studying aversion to or sympathy for the imagined cultural entity called the “West” should start with the participants’ explanations of their understanding of it and their feelings and thoughts connected to it. I decided that interviews complemented by a psychometric test would be an accurate method. The subjective view expressed in the interviews and the more “objective results” – an objectivity promised by quantitative methodology – of scores on a psychometric scale, together with my interpretation of the socioeconomic circumstances and the political function of the interviewees, would generate a very accurate picture, I hoped.

« 28 » Taking the individual as a starting point for investigation does not mean that individual psychology prohibits systemic approaches. The methodological individualism often associated with political psychology – which in its beginnings was rather one-directional, from individual psychological processes to political behavior – has not been the decisive factor for choosing this research perspective. On the contrary, a cyclic understanding of the relationship between individual and (large) groups built the base for all further elaborations in my specific framing of political psychology: an individual’s perceptions, beliefs, ideas, motivations, opinions, values, interests, defense-mechanisms, manners and experiences affect the larger group she is part of, the society, for example, with its political culture, political system, mechanisms of political socialization, political movements and parties and the international system, while these, again, affect the individual with her psychological characteristics, and so forth. This social psychol-

ogy bias is predominant in contemporary political psychology, and the very basis for critical approaches deriving from the Frankfurt School. In the same way, the conviction that Karl Marx’s (1976: 4) analysis that “the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations” can coexist with the idea of a comparatively stable psychological disposition in the individual psyche once it emerges as a subject, lay at the bottom of my research.

« 29 » However, the goal of my research was not to understand the dynamics of late capitalism. Therefore, I could not limit myself to understanding subjectivation as being a result of the necessity of capitalist production and bourgeois law. Modern psychology urges us to deviate from many post-structuralist offshoots of early attempts to bring together Marx and Freud insofar as it is skeptical of an unlimited malleability of the human psyche.

« 30 » From the perspective of materialist psychology, *Homo sapiens (sapiens)* has evolved only one type of brain, which has a unique capacity for bringing forth the characteristics of the human psyche. This is very accommodating for an approach that requires claiming

- the existence of psychological universals in the areas of fear and anxiety processing,
- the impact of emotions and affects on decision making, and
- the concept of the authoritarian personality.

As mentioned in §15, the claim for universality is problematic because, over the past two decades, cultural psychologists have produced copious studies challenging these claims in most subfields of psychology, as well as its central theories (Norenzayan & Heine 2005: 765). However, in cognitive anthropology and developmental psychology, the most recent research supports the claim for universality (ibid: 764). To generally doubt the existence of universals would invalidate most approaches in political psychology in “Non-Western” contexts. Therefore, again, choosing this method is a partisan approach with no pretension to “universal truth.”

When research becomes political

« 31 » For the purpose of studying the psychological mechanisms and subjective choices of people, i.e., why and when they develop pro- or anti-“Western” sentiments, it is necessary to study the mechanisms in individual subjects first. Individual experiences, living conditions, social statuses, group affiliations, modes of bounded rationalities, and the desire to live free from fear are assumed, here, to be among the most important variables that contribute to an assessment of the “West.”

« 32 » The clear advantage of choosing a person-centered psychological perspective for the analysis of the relationship between “Westernization” and attitudes towards the “West” is that it is less prone to being theoretically dismantled by culturalist or culture-relativist criticism, be it from the viewpoints of cultural psychology, conservatism or post-structuralism. I chose psychology as a research perspective precisely because of my bias to understand it as a discipline supportive of universalist conclusions about the human psyche and mind. This was a methodologically required assumption for the research and at the same time a normative belief of mine.

« 33 » Approaches that rely strongly on concepts and analytical tools developed within “Western” philosophy and social sciences are the enemies of culturalists’ so-called critique. Very often, cultural anthropology is the institutionalized arena where these disputes are carried out. Since the rise of constructivism in social sciences, practitioners have felt forced to qualify their universalistic concepts and have started to become aware of Eurocentristic views. After the *cultural turn*, an insistence on one’s “scientifically derived methodology,” universally applicable to all human society, might make a scholar seem obstinate. Moreover, if such a researcher is from the place commonly called the “West,” she runs the risk of being tainted with the reek of colonialism or even “white” supremacism.⁵ This has led to

5] It has happened that a “black” writer has been labeled “white,” because his writing argued from a “Western” perspective. Interestingly, Molefi Kete Asante, who suggested the use of the label

4] Gjerde makes a strong case for a person-centered cultural psychology to avoid the flaws typically associated with the discipline, and suggests that investigations in cultural psychology begin with a look into “personal cultures” and the narratives of individuals (Gjerde 2004: 151f). In the process of figuring out a research perspective and method matching the research question, Gjerde’s suggestion was an important consideration.

a paradoxical situation: On the one hand, as a result of the critique of Eurocentrism and the desire to avoid it for normative reasons, and in order to become more scientific and less mythological, the scope of research has broadened immensely, and many social scientists have developed a much more cautious style. In this respect, Gayatri Spivak's well-known 1988 article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" was groundbreaking and very important for subsequent social research. The self-righteous attitude towards the former colonial subjects by "Western" leftist (largely Leninist) intellectuals slowly ceased to a perceptible degree – political rightists with an inclination to racist beliefs were naturally less affected by Spivak's criticism because they did not have a tremendously big issue with being perceived as openly or covertly racist.

«34» Still, the tendency to ignore immanent Eurocentrism and also racism remains prevalent in social research,⁶ while the missionary fervor of "Western" developmentalists has been curbed. However, the emancipatory concern that abetted postcolonial theory and subaltern studies may be scrapped when the criticism of "Western" modernity, "Western" progress, and "Western" normativity lead to an attitude that the scientific integrity of "Western" researchers requires a ban on judgments of the "non-Western" other. An extreme contextualism can blind "Western" researchers from being aware of the non-hegemonic discourses in the "Non-West" that resemble "Western" thought. This kind of research ethics and practice does not enrich scientific knowledge, but engages in the affirmation of a dominant ideology (Goldstein 2015).

«35» In short, the topic of the "Westernization" of the "Non-West" and its consequences is very likely to be subject to a kind

⁶ "white" for Kwame Anthony Appiah, claimed that Appiah decided to use his African name, Kwame, more often than his British name, Anthony, in order to be perceived as being more objective, see <http://www.asante.net/articles/11/a-quick-reading-of-rhetorical-jingoism-anthony-appiah-and-his-fallacies>

⁶ International Relations theories are among those areas of research where Eurocentrism has most largely been ignored or tolerated (Hobson 2012).

of criticism that puts an emphasis on the culturalist assumption, that the "Non-West" is not understandable, and even less explainable from the perspective of a "Westerner," i.e., someone sharing a "Western" socialization and education, using "Western" concepts and "Western" rationality.

«36» The wish to "play fair" in cross-cultural research should not lead one to neglect the insight into human behavior that we have as social scientists and psychologists, privileged because we analyze members of our own species, and not dolphins or bacteria. This personal insight into human behavior is an outstanding expertise, even though, of course, it entails its own risks, especially that of generalizing one's subjective experiences and cognitive biases. I told myself that this risk could be minimized to a maximum by statistically based psychological research and a good knowledge and awareness of cognitive biases and heuristics. Again, I decided on this, even though I was aware of the G. I. Joe fallacy, which tells us that knowing about a cognitive bias or fallacy does not prevent us from becoming its victim.

«37» In order to study the so-called "other" – a "Westerner" studying a part of the "Non-West" – a method was required that, at least, provided some good reasons to claim universality in as many areas as possible. Human psychology is a perspective that claims to be beyond all manners of social divisions of society and humanity's differences: it focuses on the human individual and the groups she belongs to. Of course, psychologists are aware that culture (culture understood as all group-specific learned actions and beliefs about this group) has an impact on individuals, but the way culture influences people is determined by a universal functioning of human psychology. For example, concerning the Tamil language, which was highly relevant for the present case as compared to West-European languages, Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1992) argued that there is hardly any difference between native speakers of Tamil, on the one hand, and native speakers of West-European languages, on the other hand, in the metaphorical language used to express feelings and to describe social relations. Therefore, the idea of a propensity to misunderstanding between these cultures has

been strongly overemphasized (she also argued that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was entirely misleading). Matching my own belief system, I added Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi's to the scale for universalism. Still, I knew that to transfer psychological concepts from one region of the world to another might be problematic, if one is not aware:

- of specific codes and symbolisms that are sometimes diverse and not universal; and
- of aspects that are not yet known, because either they have not yet been studied, or we lack the knowledge of how to research them.⁷

«38» I kept on convincing myself that I was able to practice political psychology – to study authoritarianism in particular – in Tamil Nadu by referring to the mainstream. Traditionally, I said to myself, ignoring the interventions of cultural psychology, any psychological approach is implicitly universalistic in the sense that the basis for the functioning of the human psyche is taken as a human universal. In other words, human psychological universals are core mental attributes that are shared at some conceptual level by all non-brain-damaged adult human beings across cultures.

«39» Norenzayan and Heine (2005) have explained the biological basis for the assumption of a psychic unity of humanity. Even though the essentialism they reproduce is not concealed at all (Norenzayan & Heine 2005: 764), I welcomed their argument because it matched my chosen narrative. The logic is simple and from a materialist ontology perspective undeniable: The human brain and nervous system have evolved under conditions that were shared by the ancestors of all living humans of today. This shared DNA determines the range of options for the development of the human psyche; all human beings belong to the species *Homo sapiens (sapiens)*, and share the same "neuro-hardware." Even though, in controversial studies, genetic differences have been taken as independent variables

⁷ For the case studied, the application of Bob Altemeyer's (2006) Right-Wing-Authoritarianism (RWA) Scale to the South-Indian context presented such a problematic transfer, see <http://members.shaw.ca/jeanaltemeyer/drbbob/TheAuthoritarians.pdf>

with respect to political decision making (e.g., Alford, Funk & Hibbing 2005), the variations between humans all over the world are very limited and do not lead to different basic psychological mechanisms being hardwired in the human brain. Nevertheless, the exploration of neuroplasticity (Pascual-Leone et al. 2005) shows that the relationship between inherited “hardware” and individual experiences (“software”) is not – adopting Marxian terms – a relationship between a material base and an immaterial superstructure. It is more reminiscent of Althusser’s (1995) advancement to the base/superstructure debate, outlining that the ideological becomes material practice. Every experience modulates neural connections and becomes a physical event that can even be rendered visible by medical imaging techniques. Still, this is what happens within an individual’s life and does not affect the genotype of the next generations, or more precisely, the genotype at large.

«40» Recent studies, however, have challenged the Darwinist assumptions commonly shared to some extent among biologists, and have brought back into scientific debate a more Lamarckian way of thinking about biological evolution. The discovery of epigenetics supports the assumption that at least some slight inheritability of experiences of ancestors affects the genetic expression of close descendants (Pembrey 2002; Harper 2005). Nonetheless, during 99.5% of the evolution of the genus *Homo*, which lasted for almost two million years, our ancestors were hunter-gatherers (Gat 2008: 4). In this period, the major part of the modern human physical constitution evolved. It was only about ten thousand years ago that, in some areas, modern humans started to live on the basis of agriculture and animal husbandry. Since this event, often referred to as the Neolithic revolution, no significant changes in human biology have taken place (ibid). Since then the cultural⁸ evolution has gathered momentum, and in the Upper Palaeolithic period it accelerated exponentially. In many respects, it has had more influence on human social life than biological evolution. However, I wanted to be careful

8 | Here, “culture” is understood in its broadest sense as the opposite term to “nature”: not biological but human-made.

about discussing the nature–nurture question in a way that simply reflects different beliefs about “human nature,” given that this may often have a religious or ideological connotation. Having taught and studied international security, I found Azar Gat, a military historian, a helpful advisor in this respect, because from his extensive study on *War in Human Civilization* (Gat 2008), he derived universalist assumptions about humans’ propensities to war and peace. His arguments equal psychology’s justification for universalism. According to Gat:

“Biological and cultural evolutions are however, related by more than analogy. They represent a continuum, not just a break, in human evolution – indeed, in evolution in general. In the first place, the one originated from the other. Underlying the take-off of cultural evolution was the perfection of one of the latest tricks of *biological* evolution: a greatly enhanced ability to teach and learn. [...] In response to outside stimuli, our genetically constructed ‘hardware’ is capable of considerable restructuring through life (especially at early ages) and of taking on an unprecedented diversity of ‘software.’ It can consequently generate a yet more staggering range of ‘applications.’” (Gat 2008: 150f)

«41» Gat criticizes nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers who claim by reference to humanity’s cultural diversity that there is no such thing as “human nature” and that “humans were capable of embracing practically *any* behavior.” He writes:

“Cultural evolution has not worked on a clean slate, however. Not only did it originate, as a capacity, from biological evolution; it has been working on a human physiological and psychological ‘landscape’ deeply grooved by long-evolved inborn predispositions” (Gat 2008: 151).

«42» To support his point of view, he illustrates it with Noam Chomsky’s *language acquisition device* (LAD), which, according to Chomsky, serves in all human beings as an inherited precondition to learn languages, but only according to the rules of the LAD that are shared by all humans (Gat 2008: 151). Consequently, only a certain range of human languages can possibly exist, and these are only those that function

according to the regulations of the LAD (Chomsky 2002). Although Chomsky’s theory remains for some linguists a useful model (e.g., Gassmann & Behr 2005), until now no structure within the human brain has been identified as a location for Chomsky’s LAD. Even though I was aware of the latter, I did not care too much. I was glad to have two well-known scientists, whom I liked, to serve as reference for what I wanted to build my argument on: another case where emotional beliefs were jeopardizing impartiality.

The materialist paradigm and other hidden agendas

«43» Looking back, it is much more obvious that I was already suffering from a kind of selection bias. At the time I was working on it, the one-brain-one-psychology hypothesis just made perfect sense, and I assumed that a kind of selection bias due to an underlying unspoken belief in materialist ontology was very often the case with researchers. I am not talking about bad research, where pseudo-scientists make the data match their assumption and theories. I am talking about all those unconscious beliefs about the world that make us theorize and select and apply tools when doing research. This is even more dramatic, considering that at the time of working out the theories, methods and the whole research program, I was convinced that I was among the most honest and self-reflective researchers.

«44» Now, I see that one of the major assumptions on which everything else rested was my axiomatic conviction that the materialist ontology at the bottom of biology was “true” in an absolute sense. No doubt regarding this belief ever crossed my mind. Here is not the place to start a philosophical discussion on this topic. What is important, though, is that I was not aware of this limiting bias while being involved in the project. From my social and educational background, as well as my research in Marxist philosophy, I had great confidence, or even faith, in materialist ontology. Even though I was aware of an ongoing debate about the mind–body problem and the “hard problem of consciousness,” I did not feel the urge to

go deeper into this kind of research in order to have a better understanding of the problem of psychological universals and cultural psychology. I was just utterly content with my worldview because at some point it made perfect sense to me that from a materialist perspective, sensations, feelings, thoughts and consciousness are the product of the highest order of matter, the human brain (Lenin 1975: 80f). Confirmation from the reading of Gat also gave me confidence as to why the topic of my research project required a universalist psychological approach. As Gat points out:

“There is indeed a staggering diversity of cultural forms and great cultural ‘elasticity,’ but not quite *any* form goes. Instead the rich diversity of cultural forms has been built on and around a fairly recognizable deep core of evolution-shaped, innate propensities, needs, and desires – ultimate ends, proximate mechanisms, and derivative by-products – sometimes, to be sure [...] in rebellion against them or as an expression of conflicts between them, but nevertheless in constant interaction with them. With cultural evolution all biological bets are not off; they are hedged. Biology and culture constitute an amalgamated compound that co-evolves in mutual interaction.” (Gat 2008: 152)

“45” Some of my beliefs were drawn from the long debate within materialist philosophy on the role of (class) consciousness. I was well aware that a neglect of what people feel, think and are aware of is rather problematic. The ongoing nature–nurture debate, aroused by the explosion of new discoveries in brain research and its popular reverberation in media were for me redolent of the old “Marxist” debate.

“46” To find the non-Marxist Gat (2008) summarizing in a convincing manner what can be taken from both sides, and also the conclusion that human psychology is generally equal for all human beings, and that “cultural” variations might exist, but are located within a limited framework, was a pleasure to me. This confirmed to me that the basic worldview I had – materialism or physicalism – could not be suspected of a political bias.

“47” Of course, as a prudent political scientist, I was aware of a risk with political implications. The hype of neuroscience

within the last decade and the many attempts to misuse it for popular biologism, has, in many respects, not contributed to big advancements in the understanding of the relationship between the individual and society, not to mention a new paradigm. Still, as it was in Freud’s time, individuals are molded into norms of a society’s particular situation, which in most countries is almost exclusively via the medium of the (patriarchal) family. However, even if a member of a society has been fit into this model, the results are not necessarily immutable. This suggests that

- for an average healthy individual, it is always possible to change opinions and behavior (the physical representation of this ability is the neuroplasticity of the brain); and
- that different stages in an individual’s psychogenesis are observable for large groups.

From this can also be concluded that ontogenetic processes are universal rather than particular phenomena.

“48” The debate as to what exactly can be called universal in psychology remains largely contested, mainly because most of the data in psychology comes from North American and European laboratories. It is much too early to come to final conclusions in many areas of psychological research, and cross-cultural applications of the results found in the “West” may be helpful. I want to emphasize that I was aware of all this and even intended to include a chapter with this discussion in my book (Goldstein 2018). However, it was feedback from colleagues that made me decide not to publicly express doubts about the research design I chose.

What does remain from the research project?

“49” The undertaking in my research was questionable because I started with the assumption that universal coping strategies of individuals experiencing fear and rejection differ according to value expressions on authoritarianism. However, I hoped that, as a side effect, this research could contribute to answering the very question of psychological universals. At least, in terms of educated individuals who are deeply engaged

in politics in the South Indian context, the chosen perspective outlined above allows the formulation of the following hypothesis: Cultural identity is not a cause of anti-“Western” sentiments, but a justification or a post hoc rationalization of anti-“Western” attitudes. If my weak claim that we can rely on psychological universals holds, then the following conclusion might be admitted: The underlying reasons for negative attitudes towards the “West” in Tamil Nadu stem first and foremost from authoritarianism, but also from a privileged socioeconomic status plus experiences of rejection by the “West.” With minor limitations, the theory applied matches the Tamil Nadu context, even though it is informed almost exclusively by “Western” psychology.

“50” After this critical review of the research project, what follows from the claim that the expression of psychological authoritarianism and an individual politician’s socioeconomic status condition attitudes towards the “West”? In §12, I already answered this question but now the most important outcome of my reassessment of the research project can be added: The results can still convince those who believe in physicalism. Those who do not share this worldview will not be able to claim any proof or disproof of the hypothesis.

“51” Regarding the contested claim of psychological universals, I acknowledge that I can only assume that these universals exist as a practical hypothesis in order to facilitate political psychology research in Tamil Nadu, but I cannot produce a sufficiently convincing argument for psychological universals.

Conclusion

“52” Due to its implicit dependency on assumptions from (evolutionary) biology, practicing political psychology implies a confirmation of ontological materialism. This is not surprising in a scientific context. On the contrary, most people, laypersons as well as scientists, probably expect this from proper science. Having acknowledged that contemporary science takes place within the frame of a materialist paradigm, it is obvious that political psychology has the typical character of positivism to be affirmative of what is commonly referred to as “reality.”

«53» The conflict between mainstream universalists and the particularists in cultural psychology requires a researcher to take sides when doing cross-cultural research. The topic is highly politicized and a researcher in this field is never detached from this conflict. The decision limits and frames the whole research from the beginning to the end.

«54» Still, political psychology remains a beautiful discipline. We just have to acknowledge that we are only able to look at a specific object of research from a specific perspective, and also that many of our decisions in our academic practices are unconsciously informed by emotional beliefs, heuristics, and the like. That is what psychologists knew much earlier than those social scientists who ignored psychological insights. Therefore, I suggest that sound research requires that we problematize our biases as thoroughly as possible. As for the question posed in §5, as to whether researchers should mention how far they are aware of how their subjective beliefs had an influence on their research I would undoubtedly answer it with “yes.”

«55» A radical constructivist interpretation of data empirically gathered in the course of a research project is, just like any other research perspective, a partisan approach. At the outset of a research project, a researcher must decide on how deeply she wants to make transparent her basic assumptions and beliefs about the world. Of course, talking to an audience that shares similar beliefs makes it easier to be understood. Regarding the predominance of a science resting on physicalist beliefs, researchers can spare their recipients from philosophical treatise about the “nature of reality” to make their point. To work like that makes practical sense but is problematic with respect to scientific rigor and honesty. To put it into a simple recommendation: political psychologists should be humbler and acknowledge that they do not sufficiently know whether their basic assumptions, on which their methods and interpretations rest, are rigorously plausible.

«56» From my point of view, it would be presumptuous to give a final answer to the question of whether a constructivist political psychology is better than a realist political psychology. A researcher can only decide on which approach she would like to sup-

port according to her values. It is a matter of an ethical choice: If a researcher wants to make transparent that she cannot claim any facticity or “truth” to her research results, a constructivist approach is more suitable. If she does not mind that her research rests on a fragile ontological paradigm, or if she is a fervent believer in physicalism, she will present her research as if it were a representation of objective facts.⁹ We should be aware of the self-contradiction this implies without being afraid of it. If we claim that we cannot be sure about an ontological reality, we do contradict ourselves if we claim, at the same time, that constructivism is a preferable approach. Logically speaking, and following Ernst von Glasersfeld’s reasoning that radical constructivists can never claim to defend an “ultimate picture of the world” (Glaserfeld 1995: 19), it makes no sense to describe some interpretations as “distorted” realities and others not.

«57» So why am I still doing it when I, for example, express my discontent with cultural psychology’s tendency to stereotyping and its avoidance of criticizing power relations? The reason is simple. We decide what we consider right and wrong. It is an ethical decision that falls into the category of what Heinz von Foerster called an “undecidable question” (Foerster 1991: 64). According to him, questions belonging to this type are the only ones that allow us to decide. Decidable questions have to follow certain necessities to be answered and are consequently already answered, undecidable ones are not. We deal with an undecidable question when we try to answer the ethical question: “What kind of reality do we want to construct, what kind of reality do we want to create, with our research?” Being honest about our limited perspectives could either make us reclusive and silent or creative. If we choose to be creative, we have to make ethical decisions before we

9| Looked at in more detail, there are more reasons as to why people cling to a mind-independent reality, in general. Alexander Riegler (2001: 9) collected four reasons that are worth considering, definitively also for a better understanding of why many scientists work as they do: (R1) It is used to claim authority to make one’s own view irrefutable; (R2) revealing it justifies research expenses; (R3) it forces others “to do what they would not otherwise do themselves”; (R4) it is needed to fight irrationality.

tell others what we found “out there.” The fundamental undecidability of the question allows us to be free in our decision on the framework within which we answer our question. Let us be honest, let us be free.

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Open Peer Commentaries

on Björn Goldstein's "Materialism and Selection Bias"

Towards Enhanced Perspectives of Critical Research Assessment

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> Abstract • Goldstein critically assesses assumptions of an ontic world in political psychology research and the role of beliefs in the context of efforts to achieve an "objective" understanding of political attitudes. While I can agree on the importance of radical constructivism and self-reflection in his assessment, I want to argue for further differentiation and clarification with respect to arguments from within radical constructivism and enhanced perspectives beyond.

Handling Editor • Alexander Riegler

« 1 » In his target article on "Materialism and Selection Bias," Björn Goldstein

sets out to critically reflect on basic beliefs about "reality" and corresponding biases of research methods and results in the field of political psychology. In doing so, he refers to his own empirical research on "psychological factors leading to more positive or negative attitudes towards the 'West' in South India (Tamil Nadu)" (§1). This mode of critical self-reflection on one's own basic methodological assumptions, using the example of a self-conducted research project, goes far beyond routine considerations of limitations, which are common in empirical social research. It also concerns widespread methodological basic assumptions and it deserves respect insofar as it shows a possibility of dealing responsibly with unavoidable research biases. In my comment, I am going to argue for further differentiation and clarification with respect to arguments from within radical constructivism and enhanced perspectives beyond.

« 2 » Before I elaborate on my comment, I want to say one thing in advance. The thoughtful style of argumentation in

the target article is confounded by an unreliable generalization regarding a psychoanalytical "core assumption of individuals as 'resistors' of information that is coming from an assumed outside world" (§23) that "remains crucial in understanding the perspective and scope of political psychology" (ibid.). Even if, with regard to many research concepts and their application in research practice, the description may often apply, it cannot be agreed on at this level of generality. As in the social sciences in general, there is a plurality of paradigms also in political psychology that, while represented to varying degrees in academic research institutions, certainly play a role in professional discussions. Among the most well-known approaches, in addition to the various empirical and experimental approaches, are, for example, psychoanalytic (Frosh 2014), dialogical (Scuzzarello 2014) and discourse-analytic (Hammack & Pilecki 2014) approaches. Even if explicit references to radical constructivism and the work of Ernst von Glasersfeld are often missing in these