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## Author's Response Humble Research and the Inescapability of Limited Knowledge

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**> Abstract** • After clarifying some misunderstandings, I discuss the inescapability of bias in research in more practical terms, followed by an exemplification of why epigenetics does not shatter a materialist ontology. After that I explore gender-related questions in Tamil Nadu, the role of emotions, and what we can expect from being aware of the positionality of a researcher.

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« 1 » All commentators seem to agree with me, that an attitude of honesty and humility among researchers is desired and that the openness to the possibility of having been mistaken about some core assumptions should be a standard for sound research. I am grateful for all the commentators that nudge me, and hopefully others, to deepen my understanding in certain areas; provide valuable sources; and made clear where I should be more precise in order to prevent misunderstandings as far as possible.

« 2 » **Theo Hug's** (§2) warning against my over-generalizing statement that political psychology basically rests on ontological materialism is an important issue. I certainly cannot claim to know the entire field, simply because it is enormous. From my experience, the examples I will give in §6 below are quite typical, but I admit that my claim was probably a result of my bias to overemphasize particular subfields of political psychology. I am grateful for **Hug's** clarification (§§3–6) and his support of a discipline that is still dear to my heart, as well as for his enhanced perspectives beyond (§§7f), which I recommend reading. I would like to say the same about **Krzysztof Matuszek's** (§§8f) quite differentiated explications on second-order constructivism and **Audie Klotz's** (§10) hints at feminist research and literature, which

offer perspectives that are not epistemologically lopsided.

« 3 » I also appreciate that **Philip Baron's Q2** sheds light on the limits of critical and reflexive research due to its economic and political implications and conditions (§6). The lack of critical and honest research goes hand in hand with the imposition of capitalist mechanisms on research. This itself is not a new insight but an experience for anyone who has been in academia for quite some time. Only very few researchers will deny the deteriorating effects of the competition for high quantities of publications at the expense of their quality. I also agree with **Baron** (§5) that some biases have to remain invisible just because they are invisible for an individual due to her social, economic, and I would like to add cultural, health and other conditions. Experimental tests for unknown biases exist but I have no practical answer to **Baron's Q1** of how to overcome entirely unknown bias in research practice.

### Probable misunderstandings

« 4 » Let me start with some misunderstandings my target article may have created. **Gerard de Zeeuw** (§5) sees a contradiction between my own claim that researchers are influencing parts of a research process and my quantitative approach, which, by definition, does not include the researcher. Unfortunately, this logically flawless conclusion is based on a misunderstanding. One of my research tools, the Right-Wing-Authoritarianism scale, the psychometric test mentioned in the article (§12), was designed as a quantitative tool. Nevertheless, during my own research I violated the quantitative procedure on purpose. I was asking the questions personally and took notes on the participants' vocal and body-language response to the, sometimes uncomfortable, questions of the test. That was part of the method. I admit that the target article does not contain all the details of my research methods necessary to avoid this misunderstanding. However, I would like to point out that at the time of my empirical research, my understanding of the researcher's involvement in her own research was strongly influenced by the Frankfurt School's critical theory. In this line of thinking, neither qualitative nor quantitative approaches can escape the historical moment when they are

conducted. In this broadened understanding of the involvement problem, the way that a researcher has been socialized under certain socio-historic conditions determines her ability to make sense of her experiences and accordingly ask certain questions, use certain methods and interpret the research data in a certain way typical for the time and place she lives in.

« 5 » I would also like to note that I do not see why my wish for honesty and humility in research and my critique of ontological assumptions in political psychology are contradicting each other in any way (de Zeeuw §6). All I claim is that ontological materialism in its contemporary radical expression of physicalism is an underlying axiom-like assumption of much of political psychology. This, according to my current understanding, biases research in political psychology towards particular interpretations of political opinion making and behavior. If, for example, we did not assume that the human brain generates perception and ideas from nervous signals triggered by an alleged outside world, but instead took the perspective of an analytical idealist, who sees the brain's activity as a mere third-person perspective of consciousness, we would not be inclined to quickly draw absolute conclusions. Let me illustrate the perspective of a materialist political psychologist with a simplified example: The set of experiences that in a particular social environment are summarized as "Westernization" are processed by two different brains, a strong authoritarian brain A and a low authoritarian brain B. Brain A will react with fear and its "owner" will be open to anti-"Western" opinions and sentiments. Brain B will not react with fear and its "owner" will probably engage in balancing a couple of things that might be related to the phenomenon of "Westernization," opportunities, risks and many unknowns. The materialist bias now makes a researcher prone to simplifying causalities, even though she is aware of a whole range of other influencing factors. Now, taking the opposite position, an idealist would focus on a person's experience and reject materialist interpretations of correlations between a subject's experience and brain activities. She would deny a causality where brain activity produces experiences. A materialist would assume that the material brains A and B

are objectively "out there" and influence the subjective experiences of "Westernization" and its responses in predictable ways. An idealist, on the contrary, would be more sensitive, right from the beginning. She is not prone to drawing assumedly self-evident conclusions that people's behavior is determined by their brains. She would just notice that some people experiencing "Westernization" as a threat, while others do not, correlates with a researcher's experience of two different brain types. Her idealist bias would tame those premature conclusions someone is prone to draw who habitually tends to rely on materialist beliefs. To be clear, many theories in political psychology do not refer to brain scans, neurology and genetics. Authoritarianism research, especially, is not very deeply involved in hard sciences, but this does not change anything about the dominance of ontologically materialist thought in political psychology. A materialist who is open to the idea that the material hard-wiredness of the human brain has causal explanatory power for political decision making is most probably less sensitive to other, possibly very fine-tuned influences on political opinions than an idealist for whom the experience of the functioning of the brain (for example when seeing a brain scan) is not much more than a byproduct of universal consciousness at work, or for a constructivist for whom brain processes are a construction like anything else. I claim that the materialist position amounts to being comparatively insensitive to any alternative data interpretation. The limits of what is possible are set axiomatically, right from the beginning.

« 6 » I also do not agree with de Zeeuw (§10) that a physicalist (i.e., somebody with materialist beliefs) ignores learning experiences. On the contrary, due to the undoubted existence of neuroplasticity for a physicalist, all incoming experience has an impact on the brain structure, which slightly changes the way things are perceived and interpreted. I appreciate, though, his suggestions for more appropriate research designs (§§9–11). They are good examples of how our research depends on pre-existing beliefs about ontology and human nature. My beliefs were based on the hot cognition hypothesis (Lodge & Taber 2005, 2007), the affective intelligence approach (Marcus, Neu-

man & MacKuen 2000), authoritarianism research, and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1986). None of them gives free will much leeway, which makes subjects "limited to respond mechanistically" (de Zeeuw §8), a perspective that I have since abandoned.

« 7 » For 13 years, I have regularly been teaching political philosophy and international relations classes with a focus on the mutually exclusive construction of an East/West divide within these disciplines. Therefore, I was glad to see that Klotz is also eager to raise awareness about the constructed character of political macro-regions like "East," "West," the "global South," and the political purposes they serve (§§20f). I completely agree with her on this point. At the same time, however, I regret having caused a misunderstanding: The target article was *not* the place to discuss the imagined communities "East" and "West" and their contradictory and often absurd attempts to (re-)construct themselves by a large range of actors. The original study the target article is reflecting on (Goldstein 2018) is a contribution to this discussion and another attempt to dismantle the belief in the binary entities called "East" and "West," and so were other publications of mine (Goldstein 2015, 2021). Rather, I had a different point to make, i.e., the profound criticism of ontological materialism as a major paradigm that I as an individual have been brought up with, just like probably many or most academics in the so-called "West." Furthermore, I want to give an intimate example of how this paradigm influences research and theorizing in political psychology.

### What to do with unavoidable bias?

« 8 » I argue for a more thorough clarification of at least those assumptions one's research is based on, up to the ontological level and, depending on the research topic, also the ethical perspective. It should be done as thoroughly and honestly as possible. Any fellow researcher will benefit from clarity in these respects. While I also concur with Baron that the reach and ability of being aware of one's biases is already framed by unconscious biases, I hope that mentioning what someone is aware of is better than not mentioning it at all. For the interpretation of data, it makes a difference whether someone is a physicalist or an analytical

idealist, it makes a difference whether someone believes in psychological universals or in psychological particularism, and it makes a difference whether someone has strong political commitments or not. The research ethics I propose entails the more serious risk that these (potentially quite personal) clarifications of a researcher may trigger a whole new cascade of conscious and unconscious biases in the recipient of a research presentation, and this would drive a reader's perception away from what the writer intended to say, further than it already does. Bias is unavoidable, and just, as **Baron** states in §2, ticking the box of having done one's duty of satisfying the socially desired critical attitude in social sciences cannot be enough. So, what can and should researchers do?

- a Researchers should spend more time on researching the biased foundations of their approaches, theories and methods. From my understanding, a sound knowledge of state-of-the-art discussions on the ontologies of materialism and idealism is a precondition for any (self-)critical research. In all likelihood, ontological materialism is the predominant worldview among academics beyond political psychology and has an (at least subliminal) influence on their work, as pointed out above (§5).
- b A culture of transparency and honesty within humanities, social sciences and psychology should be established for a less biased research. Fear of one's weaknesses, as **Baron** (§6) put it in reference to Hugo Letiche, is a symptom of this problematic academic culture of today. Discussing the partisanship in research projects someone is aware of could be a start for this cultural transformation. Fear of ridicule and loss of reputation drives people into doing bad science. It needs a little bit of courage, but compared to other situations where less privileged people than scholars need courage, not too much. Maybe we need more role models of social scientists who prefer taking the risk of making statements that are considered ludicrous or ill-advised by a majority. Thomas Kuhn, a trained physicist who dared to rewrite history of science (Kuhn 1962) was such a risk-taking scholar. Clearly, such deviations from the mainstream

are easier for those who are already celebrated experts in their field than for research assistants at the beginning of their academic career.

« 9 » I would like to add that at the same time we also deal with the problem of implicit bias in a very habitual manner. Many of us make assumptions, and among ourselves, we discuss these assumptions about the unpublished, only assumed, personal, political and financial parameters of many publications. In multiple ways, we take them into account for our assessments of the research. Very often we silently draw conclusions from the educational and professional background and other circumstances. In this sense, we are Jonathan Gottschall's (2012) "storytelling animals," who narrate their social experiences into being or, to adopt a materialist view, who are evolutionarily hard-wired for gossiping (Lieberman 2013).

« 10 » **Baron's** (§7) and **Matuszek** (§7) advice to discuss one's research with others is good and very often a common practice. Nevertheless, the quality of these discussions among colleagues depends on their commitment to the way they understand the rules of the academic "game" themselves. From my own experience, I can tell that in these discussions scientific rigor is only one of many other things put on the table. Too often, strategic publications by almost all means necessarily trump self-reflexivity and critical content.

« 11 » What can authors do who seriously try to be honest, transparent about known bias and ontological assumptions in a self-reflective manner and with an attitude of humility (**Baron Q4**)? Maybe the check-box ticking that **Baron** criticized at the beginning of his commentary is not entirely bad. Researchers could very briefly introduce their own perspective. In *Constructivist Foundations*, for example, authors state the constructivist content of their article in the structured abstract. Why should authors not also in other journals be clear about whether their theories and methods pertain to physicalism/materialism, (analytical) idealism or constructivism? It might be a double-edged sword, again, though, because readers differ in their likes and dislikes of different ontologies. Indicating a philosophical point of view at the beginning of a publication may trigger

new biases that influence how the text is understood (Lodge & Taber 2005, 2007).

« 12 » **Baron's** proposal of multi-paradigmatic research designs should have already become the standard in cross-disciplinary research projects. Usually, the focus in such projects is on answering a couple of related research questions from different perspectives. It would be good to use the opportunity for an intense reflection on the blind spots of each of these perspectives. This would be attractive for constructivists and a challenge for their opponents, who still hope to be able to get a glimpse of the thing-in-itself.

### The viability of epigenetics and culture

« 13 » **James Davis** seems to regard the human brain to be a substantial reality in the terminology of **Hug** (§5). Radical constructivism rejects the possibility of accessing such a reality. As **Matuszek** points out in his §9, from a radical constructivist perspective, even the world of natural sciences is a cognitively constructed reality. Since, for **Davis**, the brain is a physical reality independent of any observer, we must conclude that his arguments are not written from the constructivist perspective.

« 14 » Before I go on to address **Davis's** commentary in more detail, I would like to point out that, for me, radical constructivism is an agnostic position between, or even beyond, a materialism/idealism divide, which I consider two distinctively clear ontological opposites. This is also my answer to **Davis's Q2**. Materialism essentializes matter, because for materialists the world is made of matter and consciousness is only a coincidental product produced by physical brains. For idealists nothing exists outside and independently of consciousness. This is not to be confused with the subjective consciousnesses of separate individuals. For idealists a universal consciousness is understood as the essential reality in which everything exists. Radical constructivists deny any possibility of discovering such an essential reality, and they claim that its non-existence cannot be proved either. Even though I personally sympathize with idealism, the choice for a perspective to discuss the topics at hand has been radical constructivism, especially in order to meet my own attempt at being honest about my limitations in knowledge.

«15» I completely agree with Davis (§§ 3, 8, 9, 10) in that epigenetics helps to cross the gap in the old nature-versus-nurture debate. However, there are also aspects I disagree with him about. The claim that experiences activate or inhibit activation of gene expressions, and that some of these are inheritable, does not yet contradict materialist ontology. From a materialist perspective, it just tells us that assumed abstract data (whatever that may be) from outside the individual mind causes subjective experiences in line with, and limited by, the functioning of the brain. These brain-based experiences then trigger the physical alteration that we observe as gene activation or inhibition. Then the physical structure of the brain has changed and this causes changes in how perception, cognition, and emotional responses work. For a materialist it is still the materiality of the brain that matters. The heritability of genetical change triggered by experiences is a particularly strong support for materialistic interpretations. If we follow materialistic reasoning, culture, understood as a relatively exclusive shared social environment of norms, becomes somehow hardwired for particular exclusive groups. Materialists had no problems including neuroplasticity in their paradigm and without doubt, they will not have any problems with epigenetics either. They will always adhere to the belief that brains generate conscious experiences and that matter independent of consciousness is a “proven fact.” If constructivism were the opposite of materialism, and not idealism, as Davis suggests (§§2, 4), my doubts about epigenetics being a way to bridge both approaches would be weaker. If we agreed on labeling the nurture side of the nature–nurture debate “constructivism,” I would agree with him.

### Identitarian positionality in post-colonial settings

«16» In this concluding section, I would like to address Klotz’s questions about overlooking gender practices, racialized identities, religious beliefs (Q1) and implementing her suggestions into future research (Q2). Let me start with providing more information about my past research project in Tamil Nadu. My interviewees were exclusively men and I admit that I effectively gender-neutralized them (Klotz §9). Let me point

out the reasons for that. I addressed several relevant political parties in Tamil Nadu to put me into contact with some of their high-ranking officials. Those introduced to me happened to be only men, which I recognized, but did also not surprise me. The majority of party personnel in Tamil Nadu are male. Even though the problem of gender bias crossed my mind more than once, and I wondered if women might have had offered different opinions, at the same time I was simply content that the comparability of the interviewees was easier to justify with an all-male sample. The situation that a white male political scientist from Europe, who was able to afford to do research in India, was asking Indian-Tamil politicians, who all had profound knowledge about colonialism and contemporary global inequality, was already prone to provide data influenced by much circumstantial and cognitive bias, on both sides, the interviewees’ and mine. My impression was that, depending on the particular community (caste and religion) an interviewee came from, a foreign man interviewing a Tamil women might have even produced more noise than signal because of particular Indian, Tamil and community gender norms. I would not have been able to sufficiently disentangle them. Interestingly, Klotz’s reference to “focus groups” instead of individuals (§13) is important in some contexts and is not limited to a gender or region, even though, admittedly, certain contexts might de-individualize opinions more according to gender than others. Data generated from interviews with politicians anywhere is always a mix of factors such as party attitudes, learned stereotypes and biases, including gender biases, personality traits, their position in the party hierarchy, their socio-economic and educational background, and the constituency they represent. Their utterances are never independent of their social and political environment and setting.

«17» Societies differ in their expressions of gendered norms. Every researcher has to be aware of it as much as possible. However, it is not at all an easy task. Even though patriarchal societies differ a lot in their peculiarities, I will nevertheless try to make some generalizations for the purpose of intelligibility. Most obviously in patriarchal societies, generally speaking, a man

might be able to utter opinions more freely than a woman who has to keep in mind what the other women of the neighborhood might think and what her male family members think and do before she utters an opinion. Nevertheless, making statements about the motivations and behavior of a woman rely always on a biased understanding of a researcher, on her beliefs, about the constructed reality of the individual women of a focus group. Especially in cross-cultural contexts, we should not assume to know too much after we have gathered data with our social scientific or psychological tools. In a sense, “Western” academics still cannot speak for “the subaltern” (Spivak 1988). A greater sensitivity informed by feminist literature definitively is recommendable, but we will never reach the point where we can presume to cross the gap between differently constructed realities. This is not to be understood as a defense of cultural relativism but as a defense of the constructed realities of individuals.

«18» Let me illustrate this with two friends of German origin who are married to Tamil men and who have spent most of their lives in Tamil Nadu. One of them worked for a women’s empowerment project in Tamil villages. She became very frustrated when she discovered that many young women had no higher requirements for their personal futures than to hope that their parents would choose a husband for them who did not drink and beat them. The other friend is an expert on Tamil culture and language. For decades she has been completely immersed in a Tamil way of life. Contrary to the first woman, she always highlights the freedom women have in Tamil Nadu with its tradition of Dravidian self-respect. According to her, because of the powerful rationalist and anti-Brahmin Dravidian Movement, which started in 1916 and which is still represented in the dominating political parties of Tamil Nadu as well as in some ancient egalitarian Tamil traditions, women in Tamil Nadu enjoy much more freedom than in other parts of India.

«19» Both friends have practical and social scientific knowledge and experience and yet they report completely opposing stories. Thinking about utterances of Tamil friends of different genders and communities, I still cannot reach a final assessment



about the role of women and their well-being in Tamil Nadu. While statistics about the gender gap in employment, education, domestic violence, life expectancy, etc. provide a picture that is different from, say, the Netherlands or Germany, the range of opinions on gender norms is very similar in these three countries. My conclusion from this is three-fold:

- c another person's constructed reality is a mystery;
- a much of cross-cultural research is biased by stereotypes; and
- b ignoring individual perception would not at all improve qualitative social research.

« 20 » This conclusion is also my attempt at finding an answer to **Baron's Q3**. Keeping these three points in mind is a question of a respectful engagement with our research participants with whom, together, we construct published realities. **Davis's Q1** about how *I* and *we* differ in our feelings (§5) can also be discussed in this context. From a radical constructivist perspective, we cannot claim to have access to the emotions of others and have to remain agnostic. However, in psychology, the study of emotions is part of the whole debate between universalist cross-cultural psychologists and particularistic cultural-psychologists. Most researchers in the field seem to agree on the capacity for experiencing the same emotions across all cultures in the same way. The triggers of emotions are also very similar and emotions are similarly manipulatable by narratives. Insofar as emotions are a psychological universal, differences can occur in the cultural ways to express emotions in public or family contexts, or how the expressions of different emotions are valued. From this may follow the ethical imperative, that we should apply the universal "golden rule" when dealing with others in research. We do not experience the other persons' emotions, but we all do want to be treated respectfully, and this includes respecting individual idiosyncrasies that are not explainable by cultural socialization.

« 21 » Clearly, positionality goes far beyond gender and nationality. Stopping at racialized identities or religious affiliations or beliefs would also not suffice at all to get an idea of the exact position of a

researcher. This applies in particular to the South Asian perspective, where the limited range of identitarian beliefs mentioned by **Klotz** (§17) can be understood only as an imposition of categories that first turned out to be of highest importance in the so-called "West." The categories of nationality, race, and radically exclusive religions, in particular, do not have a very long history in India. They have been introduced as a result of colonialism and its subsequent anti-colonial struggle. My positioning with only a few of those constructed aspects, nationality and gender (**Klotz**, §17) and educational background, which many people understand as if belonging intrinsically to a person, was in order to make understandable the position I most likely must have had in the perception of my interviewees.

« 22 » Is white supremacy only an ideological term (**Klotz** §18)? The answer depends on how ideology is understood. Ideology in its most simple meaning is a set of ideas and beliefs before it is put into practice. Furthermore, following Louis Althusser, ideology is thought condensed into social practices of inclusion and exclusion. Following this we can call white supremacy an ideology. Structural racism is impossible without subjective beliefs in (a) the existence of human races; and (b) a hierarchy among these constructs. The habitualized practice of people socialized in groups where racialized narratives and subsequent norms prevail is secondary, but still is ideology.

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