Social Psychology and the Great Recession: Comment on Bridging the Gap

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Despite appreciating the importance of bridging—or perhaps because of it—we must also appreciate the challenges of any micro-macro interplay. Many psychological scientists work on social issues precisely because we are frustrated by the untested and often untenable psychological assumptions made by more macro social and economic sciences. At the psychological level of analysis, the array of approaches here to the social psychology of the Great Recession suggests a full agenda. The articles use quite a varied set of methods and forms of inequality, but these do not exhaust the possibilities for future work.

Many social psychologists, especially SPSSI members, go into the field to bridge the gap between social issues and psychological dynamics. I know I was one, when I joined SPSSI as a graduate student. The motivating question of this ASAP issue is bridging the gap between the public issue of the Great Recession and the personal, interpersonal, group, and intergroup experiences of people on the ground.

Make no mistake: This is an important enterprise, for several reasons. First, psychologists care about individual and collective well-being, as Lott (2013) notes, so the effects of the macro-economic collapse interests us for its effects on individuals’ and groups’ well-being. Second, understanding the psychology informs effective interventions, as Reese, Proch and Cohrs (2013) point out. Third, it's interesting to relate the individual to the situation—that's what social psychologists signed up to do. Finally, this provides policymakers and the public with the human side of social catastrophe; we make it real. Indeed, the importance of bridging this gap also informed a SPSSI-EASP-Princeton conference, “The Great Recession

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and Social Class Divides,” organized by Miguel Moya and myself for September 2014 (see also Fiske & Markus, 2012).

Despite appreciating the importance of bridging—or perhaps because of it—we must also appreciate the challenges of any micro-macro interplay. Teaching in a public policy school, I regularly listen to students and faculty from more macro levels of analysis, who frequently fail to understand why we study such apparently reductionist processes. But many of us behavioral scientists have taken on social issues precisely because we are frustrated by the untested and often untenable psychological assumptions made by more macro social and economic sciences.

At the psychological level of analysis, the array of approaches here to the social psychology of the Great Recession suggests a full agenda. The articles use quite a varied set of methods: Lott argues from history and principle, proposing research. Thórisdóttir and Karólínudóttir (2014) argue from history and various social and decision theories, exploring their explanatory power. Abrams and Vasiljevic (2014) argue from social identity theory (itself supported by decades of research). Reese et al. (2013) argue from theory-guided path analysis of student questionnaire data. Norton et al. (2014) argue from representative survey data, guided by cultural comparison. Marchiondo and Cortina (2013) argue from open-ended survey data of one state’s working women. In all these approaches, perhaps given the nature of the issues, causal inference is limited, but external validity is high.

The articles also tackle quite a variety of inequality. Reese et al. examine global identity in terms of German students’ responses to inequality in developed and developing nations. Abrams and Vasiljevic analyze consumers’ responses, mostly given their national changes over time in inequality. Thórisdóttir and Karólínudóttir (2014) also examine within-nation changes in inequality over time, both Iceland’s own inequality and its global position. Norton et al. investigate Australians’ estimates of and preferences for inequality in their own country, compared with Americans’ preferences. Marchiondo and Cortina examine working women’s experiences of gender inequality, unchanged over time. Lott also argues for relative stability of social class inequality over time. We will not run out of inequalities any time soon.

One lesson from our fellow social scientists is perspective. My assumption, perhaps not infrequent among SPSSI members, is that inequality means someone is being unfairly disadvantaged, so I saw my brief as explaining the psychology of prejudice and discrimination as contributing to inequality. Other more macro social scientists have a different reaction: “Aha, here’s a persistent gap. I wonder why.” Although conspiracy (conscious or not) is my own first impulse, we have to admit there may be other explanations for inequality.

Commenters have to comment. These articles that challenge us to bridge the gap would please more than one idealistic graduate student who joined SPSSI to make the world a better place.
References


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