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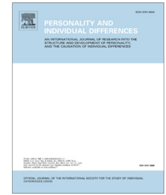

That's not funny: Instrument validation of the concern for political correctness scale

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of common language toward inclusion of all people is the mechanism by which many aim to alter attitudes and beliefs that stand in the way of more meaningful social change. The term for this motivated concern for language is "political correctness" or "PC." The current project seeks to introduce a new tool for investigations into this phenomenon, the *concern for political correctness* (CPC) scale. CPC assesses individual differences in concern for politically correct speech. Exploratory and confirmatory structural equation modeling showed consistent factor structure of the two subscales; an *emotion subscale* measuring negative emotional response to hearing politically incorrect language, and an *activism subscale* measuring a willingness to correct others who use politically incorrect language. Correlational analyses suggested that concern for political correctness is associated with more liberal beliefs and ideologies and less right-wing authoritarianism. The emotion subscale was also found to be associated with lower emotional well-being and the activism subscale with more frequent arguments. Laboratory-based criterion validation studies indicated that the two subscales predicted negative reactions to politically incorrect humor.

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> "*If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.*"
>
> – Karl Popper (1966, p. 265, n. 4).

The contradiction that Popper was grappling with in this quote – now commonly termed the "paradox of tolerance" (O'Hear, 1995) – is critical to an argument central to the "culture wars" of American politics.[1] The term "politically correct" or "PC" has been introduced by political conservatives as a means of conveying ways in which some political liberals might promote tolerance of minorities and members of other historically disadvantaged groups to the point of that their own actions could be construed as another form of intolerance. Political correctness, they argue, can have the effect of limiting freedom of expression and stifling debate on important social problems in a manner that might actually promote further stereotyping of disadvantaged individuals as victims (Choi & Murphy, 1992; D'Souza, 1991; Lalonde, Doan, & Patterson, 2000; Loury, 1994).

Liberal scholars often reject such critiques, instead embracing the key assumption underlying the promotion of political correctness; that transformation of common language can serve an important role in altering attitudes and beliefs that stand in the way of more meaningful social change (Cameron, 1997; Miller & Swift, 1976; Rix, 2006). Those who take this view might point to research suggesting that language can influence the thought and behavior of others (Hardin, 1993), including research suggesting that politically incorrect language can affect inferences individuals make about members of different groups (Hastings & Remington, 1993; Milington & Leierer, 1996; Prentice, 1994; cf., Ehrlich & King, 1994). The obvious criticism of this response is that, if language reform is sufficient to promote more tolerant attitudes and beliefs, then the backlash against such reform might just as easily promote less tolerant attitudes and beliefs.

Perhaps neither perspective on this concept is fully correct, as the full social and societal consequences of politically correct versus incorrect speech are likely complex and dependent on the social context. It is out of appreciation of this fact that the current project seeks to introduce a new tool that might help uncover as yet hidden phenomena; a measure that assesses individual

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[1] On the other side, John Rawls (1971) argues that a just society, by definition, must tolerate intolerance.

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differences in concern for politically correct speech. Prior efforts have not addressed this specific question, focusing instead on constructs that are conceptually related but nonetheless distinct (e.g., attitudes toward censorship, Suedfeld, Steel, & Schmidt, 1994, and concern for socially desirable responding, Walker & Jussim, 2002). Here we present a measure designed to provide direct assessment of individual differences in concern for political correctness.

1. Construct definition

Political correctness is defined by Loury (1994) as "an implicit social convention of restraint on public expression, operating within a given community" (p. 430). The restraint imposed is specific: speakers have a choice of words to use when referring to a given social group, and proponents of political correctness argue that speakers should avoid words or phrases that might promote negative views or associations of the group's identity or its members (Lalonde et al., 2000). Critical to the definition of this construct is that proponents of political correctness typically oppose potentially offensive uses of words or phrases, even when a speaker did not intend to express disapproval or promote negative associations through their statements. The act of engaging in politically incorrect language is perceived as an action that can spread harmful views to others, even when it is expressed by an individual who neither endorses such views at a conscious level nor intends for these views to be promoted (Choi & Murphy, 1992).

This definition of political correctness provides a backdrop for understanding the measure we develop but, rather than presenting respondents with such a definition and asking them to evaluate their endorsement of it, our approach to measurement is one that simply reminds respondents of the concern that some individuals feel for politically correct speech. In the instructions for the concern for political correctness (CPC) scale that we developed (see Fig. 1), we begin by noting that, "To some, 'politically incorrect' speech is seen as harmful to society because it perpetuates stereotypes and prejudices, such as sexism and racism." Our pilot testing revealed that this simple prompt was sufficient to get individuals thinking about speech that would meet consensual definitions of political correctness. Respondents were then asked to rate their own personal level of concern with this issue.

Concern for politically correct speech was assessed along two different dimensions. The first dimension measures *political correctness emotion* (PC-E). High scores on this subscale indicate that an individual tends to become upset by the use of language that violates norms of political correctness. For instance, a respondent scoring high would likely agree that "I feel angry when a person says something politically incorrect." This subscale is meant to measure the negative emotional reaction to hearing politically incorrect words. Such an emotional response may generate from an ideological view of politically incorrect words as harmful to society. It could also stem from a view that politically incorrect speech reveals harmful beliefs within the speaker, or views that such speech reveals negative views are present in society and that must be extinguished through conversational neglect.

The second subscale was designed to measure *political correctness activism* (PC-A). High scores on this subscale indicate that an individual engages in actions to correct individuals who engage in the offending language. A respondent scoring high on PC-A would likely agree that "Even if no harm was intended, I correct people if they say something that is politically incorrect." The PC-A subscale goes beyond a simple emotional response to politically incorrect language and considers behavioral responses. It means to capture the degree to which individuals intend to act on their politically correct ideology by "correcting" language that violates politically correct norms. People high in PC-A believe that a speaker should be instructed not to use the politically incorrect words and further educated on why such words are harmful – and they act accordingly. The studies that follow orient around these two ways concern for political correctness might manifest.

2. Construct validation

2.1. Pilot study

As a first step in development of a CPC scale, a large set of items was developed to represent the two theorized components of political correctness. Content validity of this original list was first assessed using a convenience sample of college students that was asked to categorize items according to the two hypothesized factors.[2] A substantive agreement index was calculated for each item (Anderson & Gerbing, 1991), and items correctly categorized by less than 60% of raters were deleted from the instrument. This resulted in a set of 11 items, each of which asked respondents to indicate a degree of agreement or disagreement with statements on a scale ranging from "disagree extremely" to "agree extremely," with additional anchors of "slightly," "quite a bit," and "neutral" (see Pelham & Blanton, 2012). The instructions noted that some people disapprove of political incorrectness, whereas others approve, as a way of minimizing social desirable endorsement of one view or the other (Bishop, Oldendick, & Tuchfarber, 1982). These items were then utilized in more formal validity assessments conducted in the studies that followed.

2.2. Study 1

2.2.1. Overview

This study provided an exploratory test of the factor structure of the CPC scale to determine if the hypothesized two-factor structure was supported.

2.2.2. Participants

This study sample consisted of two subsamples that differed in terms of their method of recruitment. Recruitment variability was introduced as a means of ensuring sampling diversity and to allow for empirical tests of measurement invariance across recruitment methods. One subscale consisted of community members, recruited through the Amazon.com website Mechanical Turk – an internet crowd-sourcing site that can be used to connect interested participants with psychology researchers for pay (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). A total of 357 participants received 50 cents for completing the survey, although 22 of these were dropped from all analyses for failing at least one of two attention checks or for completing the survey from outside of the United States. In addition, a college subsample of 811 participants was recruited via introductory psychology classes in exchange for course credit. Both subsamples completed the survey online. Across the two subsamples, participants ranged in age from 17 to 75 years old ($M = 23.85$, $SD = 10.46$) and were 55.9% female, 75.9% White, 8.7% Hispanic American, 7.9% Asian American, 6.8% African American, and 7.6% other (with multiple responses allowed for race and ethnicity).

2.2.3. Results

The exploratory method applied in this study followed the Exploratory Structural Equation Modeling (ESEM) guidelines recommended by Asparouhov and Muthén (2009; see Marsh, Liem,

[2] The convenience sample consisted of 10 Americans including liberals and conservatives, ages from about 25 to 70 years, and was 80% Caucasian and 20% ethnic minority.

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