Concept creep:

Psychology's expanding notions of harm and their moral basis

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Abstract

In recent years many of psychology's concepts have quietly undergone semantic shifts. I argue that these shifts reveal a consistent trend: many concepts that refer to the negative aspects of human experience and behavior have expanded their meanings. These concepts increasingly extend outward to capture qualitatively new phenomena ('horizontal' expansion) and downward to capture quantitatively less extreme phenomena ('vertical' expansion). I illustrate these forms of semantic creep by reviewing changes in the concepts of abuse, bullying, trauma, mental disorder, and prejudice over recent decades. In each case, the concept's boundary has stretched and its meaning has dilated. I argue that this pattern of 'concept creep' reflects a dominant moral agenda within social, developmental, and clinical psychology, involving an escalating sensitivity to harm. The mixed implications of this spreading definition of harm and being harmed are discussed.

Concepts in the social and behavioral sciences will not sit still. Their meanings shift in response to new research findings, new theories, new forms of measurement, and changing intellectual fashions. The fields in which they operate traffic in what the philosopher Ian Hacking (1991) calls 'human kinds': "kinds of people, their behaviour, their condition, kinds of action, kinds of temperament or tendency, kinds of emotion, and kinds of experience" (pp. 351-352). Unlike 'natural kinds', objectively existing categories that carve nature at its joints and whose meanings are fixed, human kinds are fundamentally fluid.

Human kinds matter because their fluidity can have real social effects. Rather than merely mirroring changes in society, alterations in how we conceptualize human kinds can influence social reality. Hacking (1995) referred to these social consequences of social concepts as 'looping effects'. Our understandings of human kinds forms the basis for social judgments and policies, and the ways in which we define and label people and their experiences shapes how they understand themselves. Hacking's historical analyses of 'child abuse,' 'autism,' and 'multiple personality disorder' show how these evolving concepts, which emanated from the social and behavioral sciences, came to mould the behavior and identity of people who recognized themselves in ideas.

Hacking's work shows that we should not be surprised to find that psychology's concepts are moving targets, and that their movements influence how people make sense of themselves and others. In this chapter I argue that many psychological concepts have moved in a consistent direction in recent decades. These movements represent alterations in the range of phenomena to which concepts apply, or their semantic 'extension'. I propose that these alterations take two forms. The first, 'vertical expansion,' occurs when a concept's meaning becomes less stringently defined, so that it encompasses quantitatively milder variants of the phenomenon to which it originally referred. For example, the concept of obesity would have undergone vertical expansion if the critical body mass index threshold

was lowered, thereby swelling the number of people defined as obese. The second form, which I call 'horizontal expansion', occurs when a concept extends to a qualitatively new class of phenomena, including application to a new semantic context. For example, the concept of 'refugee' has expanded to include people displaced by environmental catastrophe, whereas it originally referred only to those displaced by conflict.

My main contention in this chapter is that some of psychology's key concepts have changed in a systematic way, involving particular kinds of concept moving in a particular direction. Baldly stated, it is the field's negative concepts – those referring to undesirable, harmful, or pathological forms of experience and behavior – whose meanings have changed, and those changes have involved a systematic semantic expansion, both horizontal and vertical. The concepts in question continue to encompass their original meanings – their semantic core remains unchanged – but they now refer to a substantially wider and deeper range of phenomena.

This pattern of semantic inflation is not widely appreciated by psychologists. Changes in particular concepts have been noted in a piecemeal fashion but the general tendency has been missed, along with any discussion of its causes and consequences. In the following pages I illustrate my 'concept creep' hypothesis by reviewing changes in five concepts drawn from developmental, clinical, and social psychology: abuse, bullying, trauma, mental disorder, and prejudice. My approach throughout is to describe the semantic evolution of the concepts neutrally rather than to evaluate the merits of the changes. I then speculate on what has driven this dilation in the meaning of these concepts and what its implications might be, drawing on moral psychology.

Case study 1: Abuse

The concept of abuse has become more salient in recent decades through our growing awareness of the prevalence and damaging psychological effects of maltreatment. In addition to gaining currency, the concept has also gained semantic territory. Hacking (1991) presented a historical analysis of shifting meanings of abuse from the 19th century to the 1970s, but my focus here is on spreading shifts that have taken place since the end of that period.

Early psychological investigations of abuse recognized two forms, physical and sexual, exposure to which increases vulnerability to psychopathology and other forms of ill-being. Physical abuse involved the intentional infliction of bodily harm, whereas sexual abuse involved inappropriate sexual contact. In the past three decades three changes to the conceptualization of abuse have expanded it horizontally to that it encompasses qualitatively new phenomena. First, 'emotional abuse' (Thompson & Kaplan, 1996) – sometimes labeled 'psychological abuse' – was introduced as a new abuse subtype that need not involve bodily contact, but includes verbal aggression and other behavior that is domineering, threatening, rejecting, degrading, possessive, inconsistent, or emotionally unresponsive. Second, this form of abuse was commonly studied within the context of adult domestic relationships, whereas abuse had been traditionally referred to the behavior of adults towards children. Third, the concept of abuse came to incorporate neglect, the lack of provision of adequate care and concern. In the early literature on child maltreatment, neglect and abuse were considered separately, but increasingly neglect has been understood as a form of abuse. Cicchetti and Barnett's (1991) taxonomy of child abuse, for example, considers physical neglect as one of its subtypes. Similarly, Goldsmith and Freyd (2005) consider emotional neglect, or 'emotional unavailability,' to be a form of emotional abuse.

Emotional abuse expands the concept of abuse into the realm of non-physical harm and neglect-as-abuse expands it into acts of omission: failure to commit desirable acts of care. The broadened understanding of abuse that results also vertically expands the concept, so that 'abuse' comes to incorporate less severe phenomena than it did previously. Emotional abuse encompasses forms of interpersonal maltreatment that are more diffuse and ambiguous than those that fall within the realms of physical and sexual abuse. Deciding whether a particular interaction represents humiliation or teasing, possessiveness or protectiveness, and aggressiveness or assertiveness is inevitably subjective and dependent on perspective. What counts as emotional abuse from the standpoint of a self-identified victim might seem innocuous from the standpoint of the supposed perpetrator, or even from an independent observer's standpoint, but it is typically the victim's perception that is privileged in contemporary psychological assessments of whether emotional abuse or neglect have taken place. A similar vertical expansion of the concept of abuse can result from the incorporation of neglect. Criteria for judging omissions are less concrete that those for judging commissions, resulting in an indistinct boundary between neglect and its absence. This indistinctness allows the concept of neglect to become over-inclusive, identifying behavior as negligent that is substantially milder or more subtle than other forms of abuse.

This abbreviated examination of the abuse concept reveals that it has undergone significant horizontal and vertical creep. As Frank Furedi (2006) pungently observed, there has been a "continuous expansion of the range of human experiences which can be labelled as abusive," such that "neglect and unintended insult become equated with physical violence and incorporated into an all-purpose generic category " (p.86).

Case study 2: Bullying

Whereas abuse originally referred to damaging behavior directed towards children by adults, bullying originally referred to a form of damaging behavior with whose victims and perpetrators were both children. Dan Olweus, who originated the concept in the 1970s, proposed three defining elements. Bullying involves aggressive or otherwise negative actions that are directed towards a child by one or more other people, where that behavior is 1) intentional, 2) repetitive, and 3) carried out in the context of a power imbalance (i.e., the victim has less power – whether in numbers, size, strength, age, status, or authority – than the bully). Bullying, which prototypically involves physical or verbal harassment or indirect relational behaviors such as rumor-spreading and isolation, is therefore conceptually distinct from peer aggression, where the aggression may not be repeated and the parties may have equal power.

The concept of bullying has undergone several forms of horizontal expansion since Olweus' original formulation. It has spread to include new forms of technologically mediated behavior collectively referred to as 'cyberbullying,' which involves not only a new medium but also some distinctive behaviors that have no direct equivalent in traditional bullying. It has also expanded to refer to behavior occurring in adult workplaces rather than schoolyards (e.g., Salin, 2003), becoming a focus of study in occupational and organizational psychology just as much as in developmental and educational psychology. Although there are clear resemblances or analogies between the sorts of behavior that qualify as bullying in school and work settings, applying the concept in the workplace amounts to an expansion of the concept into new semantic territory, both with regard to setting and to the age of participants. A third form of horizontal creep of the bullying concept involves types of behavior rather than medium or setting. Increasingly definitions of bullying include acts of omission and behaviors that manipulate relationships with people other than the victim of

bullying, such as excluding, shunning, and ignoring, whereas early definitions emphasized direct physical and verbal attacks. As Mishna (2012) notes, "It is only fairly recently that indirect and social exclusionary forms of peer victimization were labelled as bullying" (p.41). The same expansion can be seen in the workplace bullying literature, which now defines giving a co-worker the silent treatment as bullying (Fox & Stallworth, 2005)

The concept of bullying has also crept vertically to include milder, less extreme phenomena through the progressive relaxation of each of Olweus' three criteria. First, the repetitiveness criterion has been relaxed by allowing the posting of a single offensive image or message to qualify as cyberbullying and by revisions of bullying assessment tools that loosen the requirement. The most widely used instrument (the Olweus Bullying Questionnaure), for example, originally specified that "when we talk about bullying, these things happen repeatedly", but a later revision stated that "these things *may* happen repeatedly" or "are *usually* repeated" (emphasis added).

A second kind of vertical expansion has occurred through the relaxation of the power imbalance criterion. The originally recognized forms of power differential – bullies' greater age, size or number relative to victims – have been supplemented by new kinds of difference – differential peer-group status, popularity, and even self-confidence (Olweus, 2013) – which expand the number of ways in which a power imbalance can be said to exist. Similarly, in the cyberbullying context, where the bully may be anonymous and the power differential relative to the victim is uncertain, bullying scholarship now considers differences in "technological know-how between perpetrator and victim, relative anonymity, social status, number of friends, or marginalized group position" (Smith, del Barrio, & Tokunaga, 2012, p.36) to constitute power imbalances. Another relaxation of the power imbalance can be found in the workplace bullying literature, where interactions between same-rank co-workers can be counted as bullying, and where there is the added complexity that power

imbalances within organizations are often legitimate and intrinsic to the relationship between co-workers.

A third form of vertical creep can be seen in the relaxation of the intentionality criterion. As Salin (2003) observes, in the context of workplace bullying, "intent is typically not part of the definition, but instead the subjective perception of the victim is stressed" (pp.1215-1216). Thus bullying can be said to occur even if the behavior is inadvertent. This opening of the definition of bullying to the subjectivity of victims arguably represents a fourth form of vertical creep. Olweus (2013), for example, proposes that "the ultimate 'power of definition' must reside with the targeted student" (p. 757) as to when a power imbalance occurs. Similarly, Mishna (2013) argues that victims' judgments of whether they have been bullied should take precedence over those of perpetrators and adult observers, such as parents and teachers. Thus, if a child perceives social exclusion to have been deliberate, repeated, and hurtful, or "jokes" to have been said with malice rather than jest, then bullying has occurred. Giving power of definition to victims is likely to vertically expand the concept because many of the behaviors that may be taken to constitute bullying are ambiguous and intrinsically perspectival: one listing of potential workplace bullying includes occasions when person "limited your ability to express an opinion", "gave excessively harsh criticism of your performance", "made unreasonable work demands", and "applied rules and punishments inconsistently" (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). People who see themselves as victims of these acts are likely to have a lower threshold for identifying them than neutral observers.

Like 'abuse,' the concept of bullying has spread far beyond its original meaning. It has crept horizontally into online behavior, into adult workplaces, and into forms of social exclusion that target victims with hurtful omissions rather than actions. It has also expanded vertically to include behavior that is less extreme that prototypical bullying by loosening

requirements that the behavior repeated, intentional, or occurring in the context of a traditionally conceived power imbalance, and by privileging the victim's perspective in defining the phenomenon. As Cascardi, Brown, Iannarone, and Cardona (2014) have argued, this definitional inflation has significant practical consequences. It erodes distinctions between bullying, harassment, and peer aggression, which require different therapeutic and legal remedies; it has potentially troubling implications for free speech rights; and it can imposes excessive regulatory burdens on institutions, potentially requiring schools "to report and investigate every aggressive transgression, from playground teasing and roughhousing to aggravated assault" (p.255).

Case study 3: Trauma

'Trauma', from the Greek for 'wound', originally referred to a morbid condition of the body produced by a physical insult. Its cause was an external event and its effect was an organic disturbance. This meaning was operative in mid-20th century psychiatry, the first edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-I; APA, 1952), describing a class of "brain disorders" caused by gross force, electricity, infection, poison, or congenital factors. Trauma now refers to a much broader set of phenomena, although the earlier meaning persists, as in "traumatic brain injury." DSM-III (APA, 1980) was a turning point, recognizing "post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD) as a mental disorder for the first time. Contrary to the DSM-I understanding of trauma, PSTD symptoms were understood to spring not from an organic injury to the brain but from a psychological injury to the mind. This broadening of the meaning of 'trauma' is a classic case of horizontal creep.

'Trauma' can now refer to psychological effects of troubling experiences as well as to the experiences or events themselves, but I will focus on the latter meaning. Defining what counts as a traumatic event has been an enduring source of controversy (Long & Elhai,

2009) because "there is a continuum of stressor severity and there are no crisp boundaries demarcating ordinary stressors from traumatic stressors" (Weathers & Keane, 2007, p.108). The working definition of 'traumatic event' is embodied in 'Criterion A' of the DSM's diagnostic rules for PTSD. In DSM-III (1980), this criterion required that a traumatic event "would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone" and be "outside the range of usual human experience": rape, assault, military combat, natural disasters, car accidents, and torture were listed as events that would typically meet the criterion, and bereavement, chronic illness, business losses, or marital conflict as events that would not. DSM-III-R (1987) expanded the definition of trauma to include indirect experiences, such as witnessing serious injury or death in another person, threats posed to one's kin or friends rather than oneself, or merely learning about an event that had afflicted them. DSM-IV (APA, 1994) further stretched this elastic concept by listing developmentally inappropriate sexual experiences as potential traumatic events – a break with the earlier understanding that traumas must involve threats of serious injury or death – and by increasing the emphasis on the person's subjective response to the event over its objective properties.

These revisions of Criterion A significantly enlarge the definition of trauma and have been labelled "conceptual bracket creep" by one critic (McNally, 2004). By encompassing less extreme stressors they substantially increase the range of experiences that count as traumas and the number of people who count as traumatized. Breslau and Kessler (2001) found that only 14 of 19 experiences that would qualify as potentially traumatic by DSM-IV's Criterion A1 would have met Criterion A in DSM-III-R, resulting in a 22% increase in the number of traumatic events to which their sample had been exposed.

The inclusion of indirect and non-catastrophic events within a widened definition of trauma exemplifies vertical expansion. The changes enlarge the range of events seen as possible triggers of PTSD by lowering the threshold of severity. In recent years, trauma

scholars have proposed that childbirth, sexual harassment, infidelity, and abandonment by a spouse exceed that threshold. Some recent definitions of trauma go even further. According to the US Government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration:

> Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

By this definition a traumatic event need not be a discrete event, involve serious threats to life or limb, fall outside normal experience, be likely to create marked distress in almost everyone, or even produce marked distress in the traumatized person, who must merely experience it as harmful.

Case study 4: Mental disorder

It is well known that mental disorders have proliferated over successive editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), from around 100 in 1952's DSM-I to well over 300 in 2000's DSM-IV-TR. The rapidly growing population of mental disorders has led critics to accuse DSM of disease-mongering, but it need not entail an expansion of the concept of 'mental disorder' itself. Later editions may merely subdivide the same psychopathological territory into smaller plots. However, systematic comparison of DSM's editions reveals that later iterations have expanded into new territory.

The full history of this expanding frontier has not been written, but a few examples should suffice. DSM-I (APA, 1952) contained seven groupings of mental disorders: acute and chronic brain disorders, mental deficiency, psychotic disorders, psychophysiologic disorders, psychoneurotic disorders, personality disorders (which included addiction), and transient situational personality disorders. DSM-II (APA, 1968) expanded the range of psychiatric

conditions in three ways. First, it introduced a new "special symptoms" grouping that included problems with sleep and eating, domains that were not covered in DSM-1. Second, it extended the range of conditions afflicting young people beyond DSM-I's "mental deficiency" category, recognizing a new grouping of behavior disorders of childhood and adolescence. Third, it added sexual deviations to DSM-I's list of personality disorders.

DSM-III (APA, 1980) split up and re-organized several of DSM-II's disorder groupings, but it also crept horizontally by recognizing several new kinds of disorder. New classes of factitious, impulse-control, and dissociative disorders were instituted, none of their conditions corresponding to those described in previous DSM editions. DSM-III also added new disorders within existing groupings: disorders involving cognitive difficulties were added to the class of disorders first diagnosed in childhood and adolescence, sexual disorders were expanded to include gender identity disorder (a condition of gender, not sexuality), anxiety disorders incorporated social fears and extreme shyness for the first time, and substance-related disorders expanded to include problematic usage ('substance abuse') that fell short of addiction.

DSM-IV (APA, 1994) and DSM-5 (APA, 2013) have introduced further horizontal creep, which will not be reviewed here. The key point is that although a core of organic brain disorders and psychotic and neurotic conditions have persisted through every edition of DSM, an assortment of new conditions and domains of psychopathology has spread outward from it. Phenomena that might previously have been understood as moral failings (e.g., substance abuse, impulse control, and eating problems), personal weaknesses (e.g., sexual dysfunctions, shyness), medical problems (e.g., sleep disturbances), or ordinary vicissitudes of childhood now find shelter under the umbrella concept of mental disorder.

The expanding register of mental disorders indicates horizontal creep, but the concept of mental disorder has also undergone vertical creep. Recent editions of DSM

commonly loosen the criteria for determining where normality ends and mental disorder begins, allowing milder, less disabling psychological phenomena to qualify as disordered. Sometimes this relaxation of criteria takes the form of recognizing new "spectrum" conditions, as with cyclothymia, binge eating disorder, and Asperger's syndrome, which represent less severe variants of bipolar disorder, bulimia nervosa, and autism, respectively. Sometimes the relaxation occurs in the definition of existing conditions. Horowitz and Wakefield (2007, 2012), for example, present historical evidence that DSM criteria for depression conflate contextually justified sadness with pathological melancholy, and adaptive fear with phobia, resulting in systematic over-diagnosis and over-medication.

Much of the recent controversy surrounding DSM-5 (APA, 2013) hinges on vertical creep of this sort, the target of a campaign by Allen Frances, the architect of DSM-IV, to "save normality" from the new edition (Frances, 2013). His critique targets the relaxation of diagnostic rules, such as the removal of the bereavement exclusion (allowing recently bereaved people to receive depression diagnosis) (Wakefield, Schmitz, First, & Horwitz, 2007), loosened criteria for diagnosing attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) among adults, and the invention of a new "somatic symptom disorder" for people with worries about physical symptoms that fall well short of earlier definitions of hypochondriasis.

Conceptual creep exists not only within formal psychiatric classifications such as DSM, but also in the clinical psychology literature. The concept of addiction, for example, does not occur within DSM, but has crept horizontally to incorporate new 'behavioral' or 'process' addictions, characterized not by a physiological dependence on an ingested substance but by a psychological dependence on a compulsive activity. Addictions to sex, gambling, pornography, shopping, online gaming, food, chocolate, exercise, social media, TV, work, and tanning have been proposed, among others (Potenza, 2006). The concept of

addiction has also underdone a vertical expansion, best illustrated by the concept of 'soft' addictions (Wright, 2006). Persistent activities that have some self-defeating aspects, these behavior patterns lack the sense of powerlessness, dependency, and compulsion that is typical of standard addictions and the harm they cause is relatively innocuous.

Once again, we see evidence that a concept's meaning has stretched elastically to include an increasingly broad variety of phenomena. In the past half century, the concept of mental disorder has expanded sideways into new forms of psychopathology and downward into milder forms. The proportion of humanity warranting a mental disorder diagnosis has correspondingly swelled.

Case study 5: Prejudice

Abuse, bullying, trauma, and mental disorder fall within the domains of developmental and clinical psychology. By examining concept creep in the domain of prejudice we move into the realm of social psychology. Since the publication of Gordon Allport's (1954) *The nature of prejudice,* this has been one of the field's most well-researched topics. As Dixon, Levine, Reicher, and Durrheim (2012) document, Allport understood prejudice to involve intergroup antipathy: the prejudiced person holds hostile attitudes towards members of an outgroup. This understanding has broadened substantially in the last three decades.

First, new conceptualizations of 'modern' and 'symbolic' prejudice incorporated attitudes that were not directly hostile to outgroups. McConahay (1984) drew a distinction between 'old-fashioned' racism, exemplified by explicit Allportian bigotry, and a subtler and more prevalent 'modern' racism. Modern racists, like 'symbolic' racists (Sears, Henry, & Kosterman, 2000), do not endorse blatant hostility toward traditional targets of prejudice but instead deny the continuing existence of racism and oppose affirmative action. These

attitudes were taken to indicate prejudice because they were associated with discriminatory behavior and understood to reveal tacit negative evaluations, suppressed because they were socially undesirable.

Second, the concept of 'aversive prejudice' (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004) was coined to account for aversions to other-race people, often unconscious, held by liberally minded people who deny personal prejudice. These aversions were understood to reflect fear, unease, or discomfort rather than hostile antipathy. The related concept of implicit prejudice (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002) captured people who unconsciously associate outgroups with negative concepts, as demonstrated by tasks such as the Implicit Association Test. The idea of modern or symbolic prejudice allow that prejudiced people may not directly admit to holding hostile attitudes to outgroups, although they are aware of doing so, but the concepts of implicit and aversive prejudice imply that prejudiced people may not be aware of holding negative intergroup attitudes and these attitudes may be grounded in sentiments other than hostility.

A third expansion of the concept of prejudice comes from research on sexism. Modern, symbolic, aversive, and implicit prejudices are less blatant and hostile than the old-fashioned variant that dominated early prejudice research, but they retain the view that prejudice involves negative group evaluations. The concept of benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), which refers to the view that women are too delicate and morally superior to inhabit the hurly-burly public world of men, relaxes this requirement, counting group evaluations that are at least superficially positive as prejudiced.

A final expansion of the concept of prejudice can be seen in the concept of microaggression (Sue et al., 2007), which refers to subtle demonstrations of prejudice such as slights and oversights that are ambiguous and that the supposed perpetrator denies. As with concepts of implicit and aversive prejudice, the theory of microaggressions proposes

that prejudice may be unconscious and prejudiced acts may be driven by anxiety rather than hostility, as with the faltering speech of White therapists discussing racial issues with minority clients (Sue et al., 2007). However, the concept of microaggression goes further in expanding the concept of prejudice by suggesting that it exists at least partly in the eyes of the target, whose perspective is privileged in determining whether a microaggression has taken place. The target's subjective perception of prejudice decides whether it exists.

These recent understandings of prejudice reflect a vertical creep of the concept to encompass milder and subtler phenomena than those captured by Allport's view of prejudice-as-antipathy. Prejudice is no longer exclusively blatant, but can be subtle, inferred, and disguised in political principle. It is not necessarily available to awareness, but can be unconscious. It may not be hostile or even derogatory, but can be anxiously avoidant or patronisingly positive. It may not even be inherent in the acts or attitudes of a prejudiced person, existing instead in another person's perception.

Horizontal creep can also be seen in the psychology of prejudice. Early social psychologists who studied prejudice primarily examined varieties of racism, including anti-Semitism, whereas researchers now also study prejudices based on sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, physical appearance and stature, marital status, and even species. (Some of these newer prejudices – homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia – also illustrate the horizontal creep of the concept of phobia from irrational fear to attitudinal aversion.) The concept of prejudice today is thus vastly wider and more inclusive than it was in 1954.

Overview of the case studies

These conceptual case studies reveal a consistent pattern of semantic inflation that involves a few basic similarities. First, most of the concepts have stretched to include milder, subtler, or less extreme phenomena than those to which they referred in previous decades.

This stretching is evident in definitions of abuse that can count angry arguments as instances of emotional abuse, definitions of bullying that include once-off office tyranny, definitions of trauma that include vicarious experiences, relaxed diagnostic criteria for mental disorders such as depression, and the recognition of nonconscious forms of prejudice.

Second, some of the concepts that initially referred to the commission of undesirable acts have stretched to include acts of omission and avoidance. This pattern is illustrated by the inclusion of neglect within the concept of abuse, the growing recognition of exclusionary forms of bullying, and the concept of aversive prejudice.

Finally, several concepts have acquired a more subjective aspect. Emotional abuse may be claimed if one party feels abused, bullying if a person perceives that their work has been criticized too harshly, trauma if a victim experiences significant distress even if the triggering event would not otherwise quality as traumatic, and prejudice if its target perceives it despite the sincere protestations of the supposed perpetrator. In short, creep has occurred across many diverse concepts, commonly involving an increased sensitivity to negative experience and behavior, an increased focus on harmful forms of inaction, and an increased acceptance of subjective criteria for deciding when the concepts apply.

Explaining concept creep

If we are to make sense of concept creep we must explain what drives it. A satisfactory explanation should answer three key questions. First, why does creep specifically affect negative concepts? All five concepts refer to undesirable experiences or events and evidence that these concepts have enlarged is rife, but it is difficult indeed to find comparable examples of inflatable positive concepts. Arguably the concept of intelligence has seen some horizontal expansion, but other instances are hard to find. Second, why do these concepts expand rather than contract? If human kinds are intrinsically fluid, as Hacking

maintained, why have their meanings spread rather than receded? Any adequate account of concept creep must explain why negative concepts creep outward rather than back into the shadows. Third, why does the expansion take both vertical and horizontal forms? A good explanation of creep should encompass its two varieties, the quantitative and the qualitative.

In addition to answering these three questions, a good explanation of concept creep should also be parsimonious, accounting for why the pattern occurs across disparate concepts rather than explaining each concept's changes in its own terms. For example, although the expansion of mental disorder could be attributed to medicalization (Frances, 2013), the expansion of abuse and trauma to an emerging culture of fear or victimhood (Dineen, 1999; Furedi, 2006), and the expansion of prejudice to 'political correctness,' the fact that similar semantic enlargements replicate across the concepts argues for a more generalized explanation.

One superficially appealing but entirely deficient explanation for creep is that human kind concepts are always in flux because they are dependent on social practices and conventions and because everything social falls on a seamless continuum. This may all be true – for example there is strong evidence that most mental disorders are not discrete categories (Haslam, Holland & Kuppens, 2012) – but if fails to answer our three questions. The malleability and continuity of social concepts is consistent with conceptual change taking vertical and horizontal forms, but it does not explain why concepts should move outward not inward or why negative concepts should be especially prone to expansion. Nor does this explanation offer any specific account of what the general pattern of change represents.

A second possible explanation invokes processes internal to academic scholarship. Concepts that attract extensive scholarly attention may tend to expand their meanings as theorists and researchers attempt to find new ways to formulate and apply them. Successful concepts, by this account, like memes, expand their semantic territories just as successful

species expand their environmental niches. The five concepts presented above are each highly successful in this sense. This explanation can in principle explain why expansion rather than contraction occurs and why expansion should take vertical and horizontal forms. However it cannot explain why this expansion should be specific to negative concepts, as there is no shortage of successful positive psychological concepts that should show the same pattern but do not. In addition, the "Darwinian concepts" explanation offers no parsimonious general account of why the disparate negative concepts enlarge aside from their academic popularity.

A third explanation implicates psychology as a cultural force. Writers have pointed to the growing "psychologization" of experience in postwar society (De Vos, 2010). The discipline has grown steeply in public influence and visibility, and as Horwitz and Wakefield (2007) observe, "all professions strive to broaden the realm of phenomena subject to their control" (p.213). The psychologization account can explain why psychological concepts would expand their meanings and why expansion could take horizontal and vertical forms. However again it cannot explain why expansion should be relatively specific to psychology's negative concepts or account for what the negative concepts have in common that accounts parsimoniously for that expansion.

A fourth explanation invokes social and technological change outside of psychology. Some expansion of psychology's concepts may simply reflect new social or technical realities. Bullying cannot extend to cyberbullying without the advent of the internet and mobile devices, and prejudice would not extend to new outgroups if social and cultural change did bring them into existence or make them salient. By this account psychological concepts accrue new meanings as side-effects of large-scale societal changes. This form of explanation can explain why concepts expand rather than contract but it is otherwise unpersuasive. It can explain horizontal expansion to new kinds of phenomena much more

readily than vertical expansion to milder variants of them and it cannot explain why expansion should be limited to negative concepts. It also offers only piecemeal accounts of why specific concepts undergo alterations rather than a general account that can encompass parallel changes in the concepts of abuse and prejudice, bullying and mental disorder.

Much more promising is a fifth explanation that invokes a broad cultural shift rather than general societal change or factors intrinsic to psychology or academic scholarship. In *The better angels of our nature*, Steve Pinker (2011) documents the relentless decline in violence over several time-scales. In the recent decades that are the focus of my analysis, Pinker identifies the "rights revolutions" as the driver of this reduction. Movements for the rights of women and minorities have led a "civilizing offensive" that targeted previously accepted forms of aggression, "propelled by an escalating sensitivity to new forms of harm" (p.460). Pinker's analysis, resting on this increasing sensitivity to harm, can explain why concept creep should involve expansion rather than contraction and why it should apply asymmetrically to negative (i.e., harm-related) concepts. Its claim that the relevant changes involve enhanced sensitivity to "new forms of harm" and to "the slightest trace of a mindset that might lead to it" (p.469) indicates that it can explain both horizontal and vertical creep.

The only limitation of Pinker's analysis as an account of concept creep is that it specifically addresses violence rather than the more general pattern of expanding negative concepts that I have proposed. The idea that the rights revolutions were based on "a rising abhorrence to violence" (p.469) may help to explain the expansion of concepts directly related to violence, such as abuse and bullying, but would have to be significantly stretched to explain the enlargement of concepts such as prejudice and trauma that need not implicate violence. However a violence-based analysis cannot account for the expansion of completely unrelated concepts such as mental disorder.

I would argue that concept creep is best explained by a modified version of Pinker's account, involving a gradual sensitization to harm in general rather than to violence in particular. The five concepts examined earlier each represent ways of harming (abuse, bullying, prejudice) or being harmed (trauma, mental disorder), and their vertical and horizontal expansions are manifestations within the discourse of academic psychology of this increased sensitivity to harm. This harm-based account offers a unifying account of why psychology's concepts have stretched to encompass potentially damaging acts, ideas, and events that their earlier versions of these concepts would had overlooked. From this standpoint, expanded concepts of bullying and abuse define a wider variety of forms of maltreatment as unacceptable and expanded concepts of prejudice define a wider variety of attitudes as inappropriate. In addition, expanded concepts of trauma and mental disorder define a wider variety of people as needful of protection and care.

The moral basis of concept creep

If psychology's concept creep reflects an increased sensitivity to harm, harming, and being harmed, what does that pattern say about the field? This question can be approached from the standpoint of moral psychology, whose concepts clarify several fundamental aspects of the phenomenon.

Most basically, concept creep can be understood as an expansion of the 'moral circle' (Laham, 2009; Singer, 1981), the domain of entities taken to be deserving of moral treatment and concern. Just as the moral circle has tended to expand over the course of human history, expanding concepts of abuse, bullying, trauma and the like extend the range of people that the discipline of psychology identifies as deserving of professional concern. Horizontal creep stretches the boundary of concern to include people experiencing new kinds of difficulty, such as the victim of cyberbullying, the insomniac, or the emotionally

abused spouse, and ratifies them as suitable targets for protective or therapeutic intervention. Vertical creep has the same effect by stretching conceptual boundaries to include people whose difficulties were not previously adjudged severe enough to warrant intervention: the office-worker intimidated by a colleague, the vicariously traumatized, the binge-eater. This understanding of concept creep as a form of circle expansion comports with Pinker's (2011) analysis of the widening sensitivity to harm that characterized the rights revolutions, each of which has been a movement with an agenda of moral expansion. It also recognizes that the psychological concepts that are subject to creep do not identify phenomena or kinds of person merely as objects of academic study, but also as objects of professional concern.

Moral psychology also clarifies the basis of this concern. According to moral foundations theory (Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, Koleva, & Ditto, 2011), moral reasoning can be based on five distinct kinds of moral consideration: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. My contention is that psychology's concept creep is driven by a rising moral sensitivity to harm, the common element in the five case studies I presented, implying that one moral foundation – harm and its linked value of care – is paramount in it. The concept creep phenomenon broadens moral concern by defining new sorts of behavior and events as harming and new classes of people as harmed, and it identifies these people as needful of professional care and protection. The harm/care foundation is significant because it is strongly associated with political liberalism (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), as well as with empathy, compassion, and being female (Graham et al., 2011). Arguably concept creep reflects the way in which 'soft' (developmental, social, and clinical) psychology has aligned with a liberal social agenda of enhanced sensitivity to harm and care for the harmed.

To this point the moral implications of concept creep would appear to be overwhelmingly positive. It expands the moral circle, defines previously tolerated forms of abusive, domineering, and discriminatory behavior as problematic, and extends professional care to people who experience adversity and suffering that would once have been quietly endured. However a third concept from moral psychology suggests that concept creep may have a downside. Research on 'moral typecasting' (Gray & Wegner, 2009) shows that people who are ascribed moral patiency – the capacity to be acted on in moral or immoral ways, which depends on the perceived capacity to be sensitive to harm and to suffer – tend not to be ascribed moral agency – the capacity to engage in moral or immoral action. In the context of immoral actions, people tend to be morally typecast either as victims who suffer harm but lack responsibility and the capacity to act intentionally, or as perpetrators who are blameworthy but lack the capacity to suffer.

Concept creep represents an increased sensitivity to forms of harm and being harmed. It therefore amounts to an expansion of moral patiency, representing more and more people as hurt and vulnerable. According to moral typecasting theory, this expansion is likely to reduce the perceived agency of these people, in effect defining them as helpless, acted-upon victims. The expanding reach of harm brought on by concept creep also risks creating a growing class of typecast moral villains: abusers, bigots, bullies, and traumatizers who are seen as deserving of blame but are denied their own moral patiency. If the moral typecasting account is correct, concept creep may therefore extend moral concern to the vulnerable while also cultivating a sense of victimhood and polarized images of innocent sufferers and guilty evil-doers.

Moral typecasting suggests that concept creep may have mixed blessings. It may have other unwanted effects as well. First, by extending the meaning of harm-related concepts to cover milder variants through vertical expansion it may dilute and even trivialize those

meanings. If everyday sadness becomes 'depression' and everyday stressors become 'traumas' then those ideas lose their semantic punch. This concern is magnified by the likelihood that academic psychology's definitions will be further diluted and vulgarized by laypeople. Second, and conversely, remedies that are geared to narrower definitions of harm-related concepts may become inappropriate when they are extended to the less severe phenomena captured by broader definitions. Medication that may be appropriate for more severe variants of a condition may be inappropriate for its milder variants, and legal interventions that are suitable for severe bullying or abuse may be unduly harsh and counter-productive when applied to less extreme forms. Finally, concept creep can generate terminological confusion as previously distinct ideas come to overlap. The expansion of trauma to include relatively mild maltreatments, of bullying to encompass single incidents, and of abuse to include events causing emotional harm, creates redundancy among their meanings. One person using an ethnic slur towards another can now count as abuse, bullying, trauma, and prejudice by some definitions. This redundancy breeds conceptual confusion and parallel literatures.

Conclusions

This is not the place to attempt a balanced appraisal of the pros and cons of concept creep. The key point is to recognize that it exists and to understand its implications. Creep represents a previously unacknowledged tendency for concepts associated with harm to undergo semantic inflation, so that more and more experiences and actions are viewed as damaging and more and more people as damaged. My contention is that concept creep represents a real trend within psychology that aligns with changes in the culture at large. It is also likely to have real effects on that culture as psychological concepts filter into everyday life and discourse. A moral psychology framework can help us understand what concept

creep means, what propels it, and what its consequences – sure to be ambivalent – might be.

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