Project Proposal for the Research Traineeships Program 2016-2017

1. Project title

Why Can't We Just Get Along? Three interventions to promote intellectual humility

2. Coordinators

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3. Project Summary

Speaking about intolerance, former President Clinton argued: "We only have one remaining bigotry. We don't want to be around anybody who disagrees with us." This intolerance towards people with different attitudes is one barrier that prevents open-minded, intellectually humble dialogue over socially and culturally divisive issues (e.g., Byrne 1969; Chambers & Melnyk 2006; Wynn 2016). The relationship between perceived dissimilarity and intolerance is so robust it has been characterized as a psychological "law" (Byrne & Nelson 1965). Even people with traits and values that are thought to index open-mindedness and protect against intolerance – such as openness to experience, open-minded cognition, agreeableness, cognitive ability, universalist values, and political liberalism – show this association (see e.g. Brandt et al 2014, 2015). That is, people with traits and values thought to contribute to intellectual humility (Davis et al 2016; Spiegel 2012) are intolerant of people with dissimilar attitudes and beliefs. This indicates that there is a clear psychological barrier to intellectual humility in contentious social debates.

The **goals** of this project are to test and compare the long and short term effects of interventions aimed at the reduction of the strong link between dissimilarity and intolerance. In pursuing these goals, we will address the **research question**: How should intellectually humble dialogue be promoted? Answering this question will advance both psychological and philosophical understanding of what intellectual humility is, if it is possible in contentious debates between diverse parties, and how it can be promoted.

Our research team will collaborate to conduct a study of three interpersonal and intrapersonal intervention approaches we believe will reduce the dissimilarity-intolerance association (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Three intervention approaches*
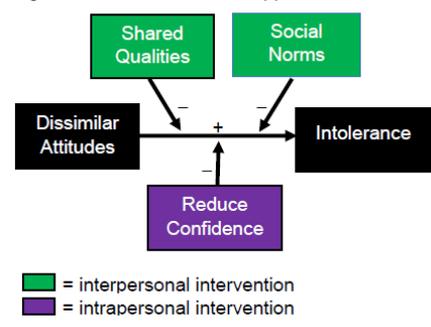
Approach 1: Shared Qualities. The most effective intolerance-reduction strategies emphasize shared qualities of the target groups, such as shared goals (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006) or identities (Gaertner & Dovidio 2014). Can these strategies reduce the link between attitudinal dissimilarity and intolerance without also reducing attitudinal dissimilarity? When there are socially and culturally divisive issues, we typically see our opponents in debate as having different attitudes. So, emphasizing shared attitudes is unlikely to reduce barriers to intellectual humility related to divisive issues. However, highlighting similarities outside of the attitudinal domain, such as the shared goal of improving society or shared national and regional identities, may be effective at reducing barriers to intellectual humility. Consistent with this idea, we recently found that the link between attitudinal dissimilarity and intolerance is weaker for people who score high on a measure of identification with all humanity than for people who score low (Brandt & Crawford unpublished).

Approach 2: Social Norms for Humility. Social norms may also foster open-minded, intellectually humble dialogue. Social norms are bundles of expectations about what others do and what others think we should do within some group. They are maintained by social approval and disapproval that guide people's social behavior (Bicchieri 2006). Several social norms across groups and situations prescribe intolerant or antisocial behavior (Elster 1990; Bicchieri & Fukui 1999). If intolerant practices are governed by social norms, then interventions that concentrate on individual education or character traits will be ineffective to foster intellectually humble dialogue. Strategies that intervene on social expectations concerning typical behavior in a reference group, and approved behavior in the group will be more effective (Cialdini et al 1991; Bicchieri & Xiao 2009; Lisciandra et al 2013).

Approach 3: Reduce Attitude Confidence. People who are confident in their attitudes are often selectively sensitive to new information. For example, we found that people who are confident about a scientific hypothesis are less sensitive to information refuting it (Colombo et al 2015). One reason people express confident opinions is that they assume they know more about how complex policies and social issues work than they actually do (e.g., Fernbach et al 2013). Puncturing this illusion of explanatory depth by asking people to explain in detail how a particular policy works causes people to have more moderate attitudes and express less support for extreme organizations. Similarly, puncturing this illusion could have the downstream effect of reducing intolerance towards people with different attitudes. After all, if we realize we don't understand our own attitudes very well, it should be salient that intolerance is unwarranted.

In order to examine these three approaches to reducing the dissimilarity-intolerance association and promoting intellectual humility, **we will combine psychological and philosophical methods**. In particular, we will carry out two experimental studies informed by philosophical explication and analysis of target notions like *tolerance*, *social norms*, and *intellectual humility*. The fruitful interplay between conceptual and experimental work makes the project empirically calibrated and philosophically sensitive, and avoids the problems of relying on a single approach. Moreover, the connection to experimental psychology and moral philosophy ensures that the research is not stuck in a narrow disciplinary perspective, but yields results that matter more widely.

Because the combination of different empirical and conceptual methods and of different bodies of knowledge is essential to the project, we expect a close **collaboration** between coordinators and trainees. A purely empirical approach, for example, might increase our understanding of the psychology of people's judgement and reasoning, but it will not help us to evaluate their bearing on normative questions about tolerance and humility in public debate. Purely conceptual or philosophical approaches, on the other hand, may be sterile, as they are often dominated by a priori reasoning and involve little (if any) empirical input.

Therefore, our collaboration will ensure an adequate combination of philosophical and psychological methods to carry out this project.

The trainees will engage in a philosophical analysis of the target concepts. These concepts will be mapped onto measures of dissimilarity and intolerance, as well as manipulations of shared norms, reduced confidence, and shared qualities. These measures and manipulations will be used to conduct the first study, where we pit the three manipulations against each other and against a control condition to see if they can reduce the association between dissimilarity and prejudice. After learning from our initial results, we will conduct a second study that aims to replicate the results of the first study, but adjusted for any shortcomings we observed in the first study. This will give trainees experience in both applying philosophical concepts and doing empirical research.

With the help of the research trainees, our project will result in four **expected achievements**. (A1) The study's results will be published in an empirical journal. (A2) The philosophical implications of the results as to what intellectual humility is, how it can be promoted, and how it relates to tolerance will be published in a philosophy journal. (A3) The results will be presented at talks at psychology and philosophy conferences. (A4) Data will be publically available to facilitate additional scientific discoveries by other scholars.

4. Project timeline

Months 1 & 2: Literature review and precise mapping between philosophical concepts and possible psychological measures and manipulations.
Months 3 & 4: Design empirical study, writing ethics application, and conduct pre-testing.
Months 5 & 6: Collect and analyse data of Study 1
Months 7 & 8: Collect and analyse data of Study 2
Months 9 & 10: Write empirical paper
Months 11 & 12: Write philosophical paper

5. Research Trainee Profile

We are looking for two Masters students (MA, MSc, or ReMA). One trainee will ideally have a background in philosophical concepts and methods, including epistemology, ethics and moral psychology. The other trainee will ideally have experience with data analysis. The successful candidates will work with the coordinators on the design of two experimental studies. They will be responsible for data collection, and will contribute to data analysis. They will write, along with the two coordinators, one research paper reporting on the results of the experimental study. And they will be responsible for dissemination of the research results.

Candidates should submit, ideally as a single PDF document:
- a letter of motivation (two pages max);
- a Curriculum Vitae (CV);
- a list of grades;
- any further relevant documentation.

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