Political Correctness, Emotion Regulation Strategies and Tolerance for Disagreement: Is There a Missing Link?

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Abstract

The connection between concern for politically correct speech, tolerance for disagreement and two emotion regulation strategies was explored using a correlational study, with mixed methods. Participants were drawn from the general population and completed an online survey with the Concern for Politically Correct speech scale, the Emotion Regulation questionnaire, the Tolerance for Disagreement scale, and two qualitative questions. Results showed significant variations in terms of sex, age and religiosity. Individual differences on concern for politically correct speech were related to distinct emotion regulation strategies and to subjects' relational abilities to disagree. Willingness to engage in conflict by correcting others' politically incorrect statements and behaviour was related to lower degrees of emotional suppression, and higher levels of tolerance for disagreement were connected with a lower emotional impact of PC, suggesting that the emotional costs of concern for politically correct speech may be decreased by fostering a higher tolerance for disagreement.

Aims

Political Correctness (PC) is a ubiquitous construct that has not been extensively researched within Psychology, with the exception of a handful of studies (Van Boven, 2000; Lalonde et al., 2000; Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Norton et al., 2006; Goncalo et al., 2015). Although Strauts and Blanton (2015) investigated the relation between perceived stress and the concern for politically correct speech (CPC) in its emotional (PC-E) and behavioural (PC-A) dimensions, the connection between PC and other processes that might be at play at an individual level had not yet been explored. Therefore, this study aimed to add to the relatively small body of knowledge in the area, by investigating the relationship between PC and two emotion regulation strategies –suppression (ER-S) and reappraisal (ER-R; Gross & John, 2003)-, as well as with tolerance for disagreement (TFD, Teven et al., 1998). In addition, the present research aimed to explore participants' definitions of PC , as well as their report of its prevalence in their daily lives.

Hypotheses

H1: There will be a significant relationship between scores on PC-E and ER.

H2: High scores on PC-E will correlate with high scores on ER-Suppression

H3: High scorers on PC-A will have lower scores on ER-R

H4: There will be a significant relationship between CPC and TFD, especially among high scorers on PC-A.

Methodology

The sample was composed of 66 females and 41 males, aged between 18 and 40+. The majority was European (82.4%) and had completed third level education (70.1%). 83% of the subjects rated themselves as non-religious, while 37.4% stated that they were Atheists.
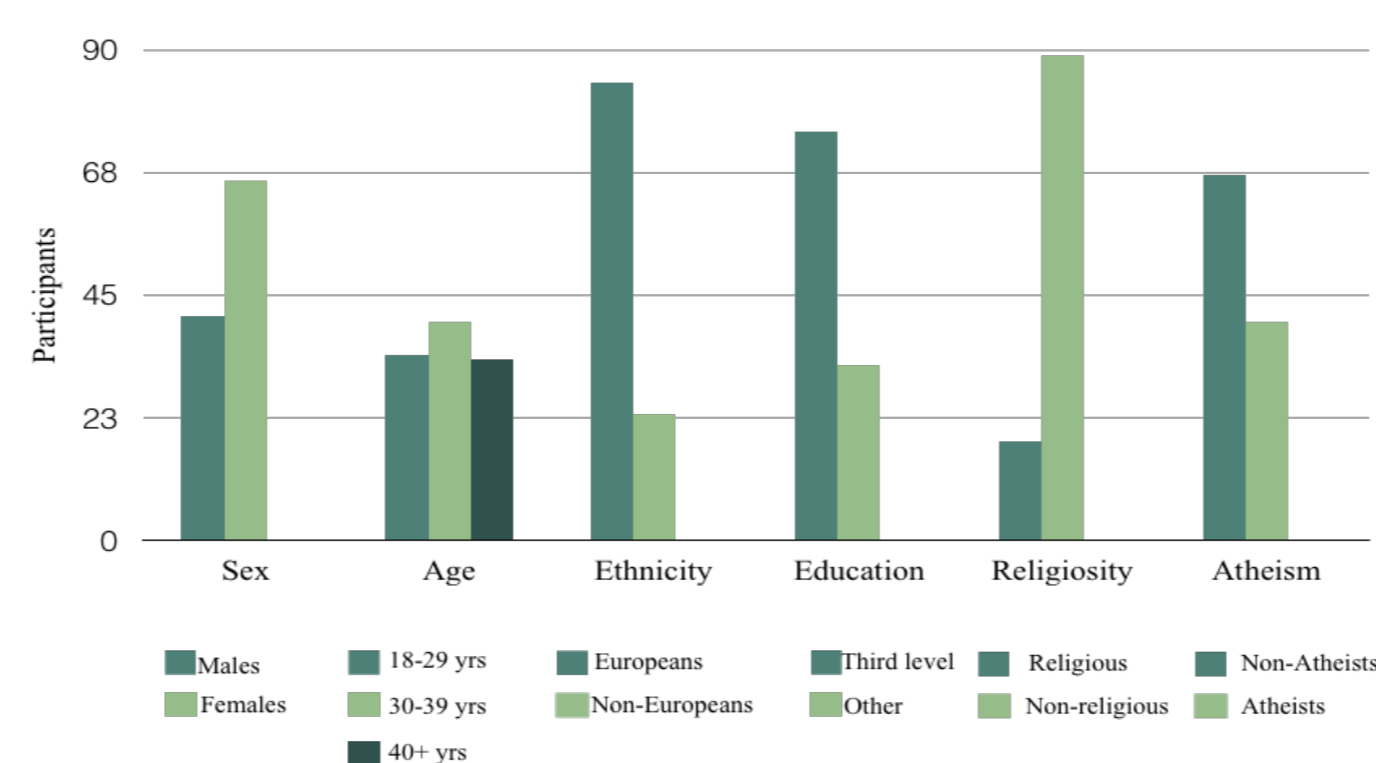
Design: Correlational, with mixed methods
PVs: Tolerance for Disagreement, Emotion Regulation (ER-Suppression, ER- Reappraisal)
CV: CPC, in its emotional (PC-E) and behavioural (PC-A) dimensions
Materials: ERQ (Gross & John, 2003), TFD scale (Teven et al., 1998), and two qualitative questions aimed to determine how participants defined PC, and if it was a prevalent phenomenon in their daily lives.

Results

The CPC scale and its subscales returned negative average scores, suggesting that the general tendency of the sample was to be slightly unconcerned with regards to politically correct speech. In addition, and in terms of ER, reappraisal was preferred to suppression as a strategy, and the average scores on TFD were rather high, indicating high levels of TFD across the sample. The definitions of PC were coded into five themes, and the second question was coded into "yes" (29.24%) and "no"(49.05%). The reasons behind each yes and each no were grouped into a total of seven themes.

PC-A and ER-S, as well as PC-E and TFD were negatively correlated, while a positive correlation appeared between CPC and ER-R. In addition, significant differences were observed in terms of age, sex, and religiosity:
Sex: No significant relations were found for females, but positive correlations appeared for males between PC-A and ER-R, and ER-R and CPC. Negative correlations were found between males' scores on ER-S and PC-A, and ER-S and TFD. An Independent Samples T-test showed significant differences between males and females on PC-E, ER-S, and TFD.
Age: participants 40+ years scored significantly higher in ER-R than subjects between 18 and 29 years, and significantly lower than them in ER-S.
Religiosity and Atheism: Negative relations were observed within the non-religious group, between PC-E and ER-R, PC-E and TFD, ER-S and PC-A, and ER-S and CPC. In addition, significant relationships appeared in the scores of Atheists between PC-E and TFD, PC-A and ER-S, and CPC and TFD.

Discussion

The null could not be rejected for any of the four hypotheses made. However, the present study found that the higher the TFD of the subject, the less the emotional impact of politically incorrect speech and behaviour. This finding has significant implications, as it suggests that by fostering increased levels of TFD, the emotional costs of political incorrectness could be attenuated.

In addition, females scored significantly higher than males on PC-E, which suggests that the emotional impact of politically incorrect speech and behaviour was higher for women than for men. Interestingly, males scored higher than females in ER-S, but a positive correlation appeared between their scores on PC-A and ER-R. One possible explanation for these results could be that although males preferred suppression to reappraisal, they did employ the latter to deal with potential conflicts arisen over PC.

Finally, this study found that there were differences between religious and non-religious people in terms of CPC, a result that adds a novel component to the literature, as it highlights that religious beliefs and attitudes towards spirituality may predict specific behaviours and emotional responses toward PC.

Conclusion

Individual differences on CPC were found to be related to distinct emotion regulation strategies, as well as to subjects' relational abilities to disagree and to tolerate conflict with others. This study showed that the willingness to engage in interpersonal conflict by actively correcting politically incorrect statements is paired with lower degrees of emotional suppression. In addition, the results analysed above suggest that fostering enhanced levels of tolerance for disagreement could attenuate the emotional impact of politically incorrect speech and behaviour.

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