ACADEMIA

WELCOME

BRIEFLY SPEAKING

Dr. **Krystyna Skarżyńska** from the PAS Institute of Psychology talks about how Poles perceive their freedom.

ACADEMIA: **How is freedom described by cognitive psychological theories?**

KRYSTYNA SKARŻYŃSKA: Such theories treat humans as active explorers of the world, gathering and processing information, seeking the cause of what is happening. This approach sees a human being as an entity capable of constructing his or her own images of the world, having free will, and not acting in accordance with an externally determined system of punishment and reward. In one strand of cognitive psychology, which is in line with my approach to understanding and explaining the causes of my own and other people's behavior, having freedom of choice (behavior, attitudes, decisions) is treated as a precondition of ascribing someone responsibility. Research shows that the process of acknowledging the freedom of others and attributing it to oneself involves analyzing the numerous choices an individual faces, differences in how attractive they are and how costly they are to achieve, and recognizing the link between an individual's values and needs on the one hand, and his or her actions on the other.

We live in an uncertain and unstable world in which people have a serious problem with making decisions. What role do theories play in today's times?

A very large one, because they show that freedom of choice, based on comparing many possibilities, does not necessarily mean certainty of choice. On the contrary, it turns out that free choice, when achievable goals don't differ much from each other, is associated with uncertainty, hesitation, and certain mental discomfort. Perhaps this is why when faced with multiple choices some people feel uncomfortable, preferring to have someone else decide for them, and they flee from freedom. When it is difficult to estimate all

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PROF. KRYSTYNA SKARŻYŃSKA

TO THE JUNGLE
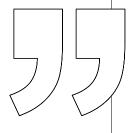
the consequences of your choices, it is more comfortable to give up choosing at all. However, when we make a choice fully based on our own values, and we do not analyze other available choices, there is no hesitation and we feel confident in our own decisions. And even if we do not, we can quite easily deal with this contradictory feeling by rationalizing our choice.

For almost three years (2014–2016) you headed a project at the PAS Institute of Psychology entitled "Acceptance of aggression in social and political life: The role of cognitive structures, individual aggressiveness and situational factors"(grant NCN: B/HS6/03071).

Its main objective was to find empirical explanations for the role of different psychological variables in the acceptance of aggression. We conducted three nationwide surveys on adult subjects using the Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) method, as well as several experiments. The surveys led to the development of a structural model for accepting aggression in politics, and showing correlations between such aggression, along with particular worldviews and percep-

> "Reflective Freedom" is the freedom to express one's own preferences, albeit while taking the rights and values of others into account while making one's choices and decisions.

tions of freedom, and one's attitudes towards democracy and an authoritarian political system. Generally speaking, in this part of the project we demonstrated that the relationship between individual aggressiveness and acceptance of aggression in the world of politics are mediated by pro-aggressive norms and the belief that the world is a social jungle, and that politics is merely a struggle for power and money. Experiments have shown that verbally aggressive "politicians" (actually actors pretending to attack their interviewers in mock radio broadcasts) are perceived more negatively, as being less efficient and less communal, than those who are the targets of their aggression. But greater similarity of the participants' own views to those of the aggressive politicians on the subject of the debate significantly weakened this negative evaluation of the aggressor. Especially when prior to listening to the mock broadcast, participants were subjected to a certain social-

-Darwinian priming: they read the story of a successful man who argued that he had attained success because he had exploited the weaknesses of others and effectively crushed his rivals. In other words, we showed that when certain assumptions about the world being antagonistic and ruthlessly competitive are cognitively salient, differences of opinion become a clear reason to favor "our kind of" people (i.e. those who are like-minded) people, even when they are behaving aggressively, and augment feelings of disliking for "others" (those who hold different views).

Other experiments considered the language of aggression. Here, a verbal attack against a political opponent was formulated either in terms of competences (he is unable to actually implement his plans, knows nothing about the subject at hand, he lacks intelligence and knowledge, etc.), or in terms of community (he is dishonest, non-patriotic, harmful to people, etc.). It turned out that the aggressor's ratings were more negative when he spoke in terms of community, on a subject approached in a rather pragmatic way (such as whether six-year-olds should be required to attend school), than when he spoke in terms of performance. Different results were obtained when examining various languages (codes) of aggression in a debate over whether religion should be taught in schools.

How did the experiment participants perceive freedom?

In studies measuring the perception of freedom, participants received a list of situations in which people may experience freedom, and/or perceive freedom in others. In addition to the items describing the multitude of choices and their similarity, the relationship between the choices and one's own values, the certainty or uncertainty, and hesitation accompanying freedom, the list also included variations in terms of whether the choices are made according to our own preferences, but taking into account the needs and values of others, or the freedom we feel when we are not considering how our choices will affect others. In other words, the list included such statements as: "I feel free when I act according to my values or needs, no matter what others think about it," "I feel free when I make choices according to my values, but while respecting the values and rights of others," "the more choices a person has the more free they are," "I know I have made a free choice when I have no hesitation or doubt," "a free person can say whatever he wants without suffering any consequences." Study participants were asked to rate each statement on the list (on a scale of 1 to 5), depending on the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with it. Two factors were identified, which point to different interpretations of freedom. The first included statements in which freedom is associated with expressing one's own preferences, but the rights and values of others are taken into account when making choices

and decisions; uncertainty and hesitation; number of options to choose from. We called this way of thinking "reflective freedom." The second factor, defined by us as "absolute freedom," included statements where freedom is perceived as not being restricted by the rights of others; lack of hesitation and uncertainty in making decisions; no restriction of freedom due to any particular role, situation or circumstance. Based on the results of factor analysis, two scales of perceiving freedom were created. In the nationwide sample of adults, "reflective freedom" (M = 4.09) was more acceptable than "absolute freedom" (M = 3.84).
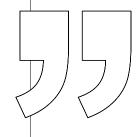
Is the perception of freedom influenced by any specific characteristics of the study participants?
The more decisively one declares that one experiences and recognizes reflexive freedom in others, the stronger one experiences absolute freedom. The two perceptions of freedom are therefore interrelated. Both are also more strongly declared by the older population, as opposed to the younger one, and more so by women than by men. But the similarities end there. Reflective freedom appears to be stronger in those with higher levels of education who live in bigger towns, but these correlations are relatively weak. Stronger differences are evidenced by psychological variables. Reflective freedom has strong negative correlations with the authoritarian mentality measured by the RWA (Right-Wing Authoritarianism) Scale, developed by Bob Altemeyer. Thus this perception of freedom is more characteristic of people who are less conventional, more critical of authority, and more strongly reject aggression towards the weak. Absolute freedom is also negatively associated with authoritarianism, but this correlation is much weaker. Another difference concerns economic and philosophical views, which can be described in terms of the left-right political systems. It turns out that reflective freedom is connected with leftist worldviews, such as lack of acceptance of national Catholic views, which advocate a greater role of the Church in Poland, less attachment to national traditions, and the rejection of restrictions on women's reproductive rights and freedoms. Absolute freedom, on the other hand, is not linked to left-wing worldview, but is strongly linked to left-wing views on economic issues, such as lack of acceptance for large inequalities and low taxes for the rich, and support for a greater role of the state in the economy. This way of perceiving freedom is also strongly linked to the so-called group narcissism. Persons more strongly convinced that their own group, that is, other people who share their political experiences and opinions, has exceptional merit, but is underappreciated and has many enemies, are more accepting of absolute freedom. At the same time, they are the ones who consider interpersonal aggression as a more acceptable way to function in politics, than those who perceive freedom as reflective.

How do the different ways of perceiving freedom affect attitudes towards democracy?
Although freedom is very often considered to be an indispensable attribute of democracy, the democratic order is based on both citizens and authorities being able to enjoy their individual freedoms, but within the limits of the law and constitution. It is then reasonable to assume that freedom perceived as entailing unlimited freedom of action, not restricted by law, or the needs and rights of other individuals or groups, stands in contradiction to the principles of liberal democracy. The data we have collected from several studies confirm this assumption. Acceptance of the principles of liberal democracy, such as the tripartite division of power, free elections, free media, majority rule respecting the rights of minorities, is very strongly correlated only with the reflective understanding of freedom. On the other hand, the different indicators of acceptance for the authoritarian system, such as the acceptance of using force in politics, destroying the opposition, blocking the freedom of speech, supporting a one-party system, are higher with stronger acceptance of absolute freedom.

> "Absolute Freedom," on the other hand, is freedom unrestricted by the rights of others, hesitations, uncertainties, or limitations due to any particular role, situation or circumstance.

What else affects the attitude of Poles towards liberal democracy?
The last study in this research project was conducted in April and September 2016. Both found a similar pattern of relation: greater acceptance of the rules of liberal democracy is found when the respondents' authoritarian mentality is weaker (i.e. lower RWA scores), when their support for right-wing National-Catholic traditions is lower (i.e. for a close relationship between state and church, restricting women's rights), when their acceptance of political aggression is lower, and when their reflective freedom is stronger. Social-demographic variables play a much weaker role, with only the level of education and the size of the town having any significance, albeit weakly so, in predicting the level of support for liberal democracy, even when the above-mentioned psychological variables are included in the analyses.

ACADEMIA | Briefly Speaking

Prof. Krystyna Skarżyńska

- MSc: 1968
- PhD: 1973
- HDSc (*habilitation*): 1981
- Professorship: 1993

Head of the Department of Political Psychology at the Institute of Psychology, Polish Academy of Sciences, and the Faculty of Social Psychology at the University of Warsaw. She is analyzes behavior and social and political attitudes, especially in the context of life satisfaction and the sociopolitical status quo. The author of numerous papers in scientific journals and numerous books, including *Spostrzeganie ludzi* [People's Perception], *Psychospołeczne aspekty decyzji alokacyjnych* [Psychosocial Aspects of Allocation Decisions], *Konformizm i samokierowanie – Struktura wartości i funkcje* [Conformism and Self-Guidance – Structure of Values and Functions], *Człowiek a polityka – Zarys psychologii politycznej* [Man and Politics – An Outline of Political Psychology]. She has also edited such collected volumes as *Orientacje społeczne jako element mentalności* [Social Orientations as an Element of Mentality], *Konflikty międzygrupowe* [Intergroup Conflicts], *Demokracja w Polsce – Doświadczanie zmian* [Democracy in Poland – Experiencing the Transformation], *Przekonania w życiu jednostek, grup, społeczności* [Convictions in the Lives of Individuals, Groups, and Communities], *Między przeszłością a przyszłością – Szkice z psychologii politycznej* [Between Past and Future – Sketches in Political Psychology], and most recently: *Między ludźmi... oczekiwania, interesy, emocje* [Between People... Expectations, Interests, and Emotions]."

Her current research focuses on the attitudes towards the social, economic and political status quo, public perceptions of politics, assessments of how fair the current social order is, and their psychosocial correlations and consequences. In addition, she leads a project studying the acceptance of aggression in social and political life, and the role of social-world schemas (NCN individual grant).

Based on a series of other studies I have conducted, I can say that the social assessment of the fairness of real democracy and the perception of the political elite are also very important in the acceptance of the democratic order. When many social groups have a sense of injustice and see politicians as cynical players who are not working for the good of the citizens, the democratic order loses moral legitimacy.

How then does the public assess the fairness of the social and political order in Poland?

I conducted my first study on how people assess the economic, social and political status quo in Poland in 2004. Later, combining the grants from the former Committee for Scientific Research (KBN), collaboration under an interdisciplinary project coordinated by IFiS PAS, using statutory funds as well as part of my last NCN grant, I repeatedly measured the so-called moral legitimacy of the system, usually on nationwide samples of adults. I conducted the last such survey in April 2016. The moral legitimacy of the sociopolitical order is understood as one aspect of having a pro-system attitude. It expresses the acceptance of the status quo, which is in line with the values of the assessors, and with the prescriptive beliefs of what a good economic and political system should look like. In a slightly different sense, it implies justification, the rationalization of the status quo, not necessarily prompted by having the same values as the assessors, but rather motivated by a fear of change and the associated uncertainty. Proponents of this second approach to legitimization believe that the motivation to justify the social order in which one lives is universal since it reduces anxiety and uncertainty. Here we can refer to the work of the American psychologist John Jost and his colleagues from 2003–2011. And indeed, to my knowledge, the research conducted in the United States confirms that the vast majority of Americans studied legitimize the status quo, regardless of their own place in that order. It would be interesting to know the results of this study in the final months before Trump became president of the United States. I have no such data, but I suppose, at least in some states, the legitimization myths did not work.

In Poland we used the same Social Justification Scale (Kay and Jost, 2003), but our results did not confirm the hypothesis of the American researchers that the motivation to moral justification of the system is universal. For the most part, between 2004 and 2016 most Poles morally delegitimized the status quo, rather than rationalizing it. The strongest anti-systemic attitudes were observed in December 2004. At that time, 90% of respondents in the nationwide representative sample believed that people in Poland were not receiving what they deserve, and that the chances of success were not equal. The belief that our society is not organized fairly was held by 87% of the respondents, while

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86% believed that politics is not serving the good of society. In the following years, the assessment of the system improved, but by the fall of 2014 (in our penultimate study of this matter), 81% of Poles believed that the disparities in income were too great and unjust, while 71% thought that the law was not equal for all, and that the whole social order in Poland is not fair. In addition, 68% of respondents felt that people care only about their own well-being, and 51% disagreed with the way politics is done in our country.

What were the reasons for these anti-system feelings? What prompted the moral justification of the order in force at that time, and what caused its rejection?
To a very small degree, and not in every study, it was related to one's position in the social structure. Taking into account other psychological variables, an important (though weak) predictor of the level of legitimation remained the level of education, and also the age of the respondents. Better educated and older people exhibited more accepting attitudes. Among psychological variables, the most common factor influencing the moral acceptance of status quo was the level of acceptance of liberal economic beliefs (market-oriented, emphasizing the negligible role of the state in the economy, and social profits resulting from a large income diversification), and the traditional world view. The personal feeling of control over reality and one's own destiny also played a significant role. Acceptance of negative beliefs about the social world contributed to the delegitimization of the system, such as believing that it is full of danger, and that social relationships are purely antagonistic, life is a zero-sum game, meaning one's own gain usually entails a loss for someone else. These latter results stand in conflict with the theory that combines the legitimization of the system with motivation by fear. In Poland, unlike in the United States, the sense of threat was not at all related to the justification of the economic and political status quo. On the contrary, it favored its moral delegitimization. I see this as evidence that the need for security is strongly present in Polish society. When the sociopolitical and economic order fails to support the weak and ensure the security of its citizens, there is no strong moral support for such a system.

What does the latest research tell us? Has anything changed in the attitudes to the political order since the change in the country's leadership?
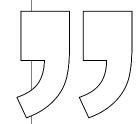When I compare responses to the same questions from the study in the fall of 2014, one year before the previous PO-PSL government gave up power, with those from the study conducted in the spring of 2016, six months after PiS won the elections, I see a shift of attitudes leaning towards delegitimization. Agreement with statements such as: "People in Poland receive

what they deserve based on their work, talent, and skills," and "Law-abiding citizens are better off in Poland than those who don't abide by the law," dropped by over 10 percent. The number of respondents who believed that "in general, public institutions serve the public well" dropped by about 8 percent, while 4 percent fewer respondents believed that the "social order in Poland is fair and just," and 4 percent more believed that "those in power are too often incompetent." Only the claim that "income diversification is too great and unjust" was rejected slightly more often than it had been in 2014.

Who were the people who morally legitimized the status quo in the spring of 2016?
Just as it was before, those with right-wing views assessed the sociopolitical order more positively. There are also two new predictors of legitimization levels, previously insignificant in our research: acceptance of authoritarian elements of governance (related to the use of force against political opponents) and verbal aggressiveness towards political opponents.

> When the sociopolitical and economic order fails to support the weak and ensure the security of its citizens, there is no strong moral support for such a system.

Survey results concerning the opinions of Poles about the prevailing economic and political order, collected for over a decade, are leading us to believe that most of the population harbors large amounts of negative feelings towards the system. Do you think this was an important motive behind the shift in Polish electoral preferences seen in 2015?
Yes, that played an important part in the belief that the elections would bring about change. But there were other reasons, such as general disappointment (and perhaps boredom for some, and for weariness others) with the former ruling party, fueled by the dark rhetoric of the opposition. Poland was not "in ruins" in 2015, just as the United States was not in ruins before President Trump's election. But the emotional, damaging social trust rhetoric of those striving for power, in the absence of an inspiring and hopeful liberal left-wing message, had left its mark.

INTERVIEW BY **ANNA ZAWADZKA**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JAKUB OSTAŁOWSKI**