



Psychology Today



“The essence of mindfulness practice is focusing on one thing in the moment.”

Will Baum, LCSW

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One Among Many

The self in social context
by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.



Joachim Krueger is a social psychologist at Brown University who believes that rational thinking and socially responsible behavior are attainable goals. [See full bio](#)

Henry Louis Gates and the limits of post-hoc psychology

Psychologists should suspend judgment in the Gates episode.
Published on July 22, 2009



Though I am not a news junkie, I could not avoid seeing and hearing some of the footage on Henry Louis Gates's arrest at his Cambridge Home. From what I saw I concluded that psychologists should not weigh in with opinions about what the event "really" meant. So far, I haven't seen any blog posts on Psychology Today, but I doubt that the silence will last much longer (ironically, I am breaking it right now).

What is clear to me is that many of those who are deeply concerned with the existence of [racism](#) and discrimination will interpret Gates's experience as another example of how ubiquitous racism is. They will point out that this case is particularly poignant because Professor Gates is a prominent person affiliated with an elite institution of higher learning. The inference is "If this happens to someone like him, it only proves how great the risk of a false arrest is for members of the greater minority community."

It is equally clear to me that many of those who worry that charges of racism, like any other accusation, may sometimes be overstated or misapplied will interpret the aftermath of the Gates episode as another example of unreflected propaganda.

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As a psychologist, I am sympathetic to both views. What little information the media have presented, the episode has more resemblance with a Rorschach test than with a detailed, disinterested account of "the facts." In other words, what we experience as our perception of the episode is highly projective. In social perception, it is notoriously difficult to separate the effects of prior belief from the effects of the stimulus.

Because of these difficulties, we do experiments. In an experiment, we understand the stimulus very well, and we can vary it over conditions. Most importantly, we recruit multiple observers because we know that each observer's perception is prone to error.

A single event, only witnessed by individuals with a vested interest in protecting their reputation and dignity, does not afford the kinds of conclusion that can be drawn from an experiment. The police and the law do not have the luxury of simulating individual events in an experiment. They must rely on the evidence at hand and the reports of fallible witnesses.

Given the uncertainties inherent in situations involving great [stress](#), it is [wise](#) to remember the principle of "in dubio pro reo." I am relieved that the charges of disorderly conduct were swiftly dropped. What I don't understand is why Mr. Gates's mugshot was allowed to be circulated on the web. That I find undignified.

Likewise, I don't think one should be hasty to accuse the police officers for misconduct. I assume that their report will be carefully scrutinized. Perhaps this is the most one can hope for. With its requirement of multiple persons in multiple situations, psychological research can show (and has shown) that in this country people of color are statistically more vulnerable to false accusations and arrests. This is important to know as part of the national conversation about race and justice. The poverty of psychological research lies in its inability to help us see much deeper into the nature of an

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individual case. Research is just not designed-and perhaps cannot be designed-to do that.

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