REVIEW ARTICLE

Bringing critical social psychology to the study of political polarization

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Abstract

The study of political polarization, in both its ideological and its affective expressions, has garnered significantly more interest over the last years. But despite recent research on the conceptualization, measurement, causes, and consequences of this socio-political phenomenon, and some tentative interventions to mitigate it, relevant new avenues remain surprisingly underdeveloped. Indeed, scholarship in the field of political polarization, mainly in the case of affective polarization, frequently uses cognitivist approaches to make sense of the growing antipathy between different social and political groups. However, the bulk of this work seems to overlook valuable insights into the psychology of intergroup conflict, stereotyping, prejudice reduction, and discourse studies. The aim of this paper is to underline the main gaps in the political polarization literature, to subsequently argue how knowledge linked to the tradition of critical social psychology can help in filling them. Ultimately, the article aims to contribute to the psychosocial study of political polarization and to the design, if necessary, of interventions to counter its detrimental consequences.

KEYWORDS
affective polarization, critical social psychology, de-polarization interventions, intergroup relations, prejudice, political polarization

1 | INTRODUCTION

Political polarization is currently one of the main concerns in the field of social and behavioral sciences. Whipped up by certain members of their respective political elites (Somer et al., 2021), different societies worldwide seem to have undertaken a path of political conflict recrudescence, intergroup ideological distance, and growing intergroup animus. There is a fear on the part of pundits and scholars that the dynamics of polarization lead societies to legitimize politicians' illiberal tendencies, support autocratic leaders, and/or break down certain democratic norms, procedures, and checks and balances (Finkel et al., 2020; Kingzette et al., 2021). This fear is justified by recent events such as Brexit, the assault on the US Capitol, the growing support garnered by far-right parties worldwide, or the reaction of some citizens against immigration and the reception of refugees in the EU.

The growing literature on political polarization stems explicitly or implicitly from this preoccupation, as can be seen in recent contributions on "de-polarization interventions" (e.g., Levendusky, 2018). This means that ultimately, the *raison d'être* of studying political polarization today is the aspiration to counter the current trends of tribalism, high levels of distrust, loathing, and confrontation between sociopolitical groups.

Stating the potential applications of this scholarship on polarization helps us better grasp the strengths and weaknesses of the field. This paper proposes that insights from critical social psychology can help address different shortcomings in the literature and delineate a richer framework for the study of political polarization. The paper first argues that the limits of the extensive literature on polarization stem from its exclusive adherence to (orthodox) cognitive psychology. Second, although Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is widely used as a framework, some aspects of this integrative theory receive undue attention, whilst others are systematically overlooked. And third, the polarization literature has not considered further advances in the psychology of prejudice or made critical reflections on the contact hypothesis.

Throughout the article, it is shown that these three shortcomings work together, producing different consequences mainly related to the measurement, causes and consequences of polarization, and also to interventions that aim to foster social change. Moreover, mainstream approaches to political polarization, by trying to be neutral and value-free and by avoiding the study of meaning-making processes, might carry ideological implications such as the defense of the Ideological Symmetry Thesis,[1] on the one hand, and the legitimization of a highly unequal status quo, on the other.

1.1 | Measurement

Political polarization is an umbrella concept, which comprises growing ideological and policy-based differences between political groups and the affective distance between them (i.e., affective polarization, hereafter AP). Table 1 in the Appendix shows the different dimensions of polarization (see also Lees & Cikara, 2021). The possible causal relationships between them are part of an open debate that has generated mixed evidence (Lelkes, 2021; Mason, 2018; Wagner, 2021; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). What seems clearer is that the different dimensions are indeed related (Reiljan & Ryan, 2021) and that AP might potentially have detrimental consequences on intergroup relations and political tolerance (Martherus et al., 2019).

AP has been defined as the emotional gap between what individuals consider to be their in-party or parties and what they consider to be their out-party or parties (Iyengar et al., 2012). More recently, AP has also been conceptualized between different party supporters, social groups, and opinion-based groups (Harteveld, 2021; Hobolt et al., 2021; Simon et al., 2019). The most frequently used tools to measure it are like-dislike scales and feeling thermometers (see Appendix).

Measuring dislike between political groups and its evolution provides us with valuable information. Nevertheless, like and dislike constitute a broad-brush assessment of intergroup relations and conflict. In fact, doubts about the measures, on one hand, and the consequences of this "dislike", on the other, are increasingly frequent (Broockman et al., 2022; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). Because of this, refining the quantitative measures of AP to disentangle

TABLE 1 Conceptions of the drivers and necessary interventions to ameliorate affective polarization

Fernbach and Van Boven (2022)	"A major challenge is that several basic cognitive and affective processes push toward polarization, and people are unaware of how these unwanted processes shape their own views. Behavioral science has an important role to play in diagnosing and addressing the underlying mechanisms." (p. 1)
Ahler and Sood (2018)	"Republicans, Democrats, and independents, all overestimate the share of party-stereotypical groups in both the major parties. Partisan differences, although statistically significant, are relatively small compared to the overall magnitude of these misperceptions." (p. 979)
Iyengar et al. (2019)	"What, if anything, can be done to ameliorate affective polarization? While efforts here are at best nascent, several approaches have shown promise. All of them work to reduce the biases generated by partisanship's division of the world into an in group and an out group." (p. 139)
Lees and Cikara (2020)	"Our findings highlight a consistent, pernicious inaccuracy in social perception, along with how these inaccurate perceptions relate to negative attributions towards out-groups (…) This suggests that there may be many domains of intergroup interaction where inaccurate group meta-perceptions could potentially diminish the likelihood of cooperation and, instead, exacerbate the possibility of conflict. However, our findings also highlight a straightforward manner in which simply informing individuals of their inaccurate beliefs can reduce these negative attributions." (p. 285)

"like" and "dislike" from stronger emotions such as fear, disgust or hate would arguably be an important addition to the literature. But generally, treating dislike or negative emotions as synonyms of prejudice without interest in their meaning (what does it mean to feel dislike/fear a concrete group in a particular context?) constitutes a shortcoming of current approaches to polarization.

Along with these measurement issues, the causes posited for AP frequently stem from an adherence to orthodox cognitive psychology and a lack of importance attributed to the context and history of intergroup relations. The next section presents the causes of AP that are often mentioned when approaching the phenomenon from a cognitivist perspective.

1.2 | Causes

Table 1 offers different examples, from leading journals in both psychology and political science, which show that AP tends to be rooted in universal perceptual limitations and/or the perceptive biases coming from individuals' identification with a political party or group, leading citizens to motivated reasoning.

Within this view, group stereotypes are envisaged as "pictures in our heads" (Lippmann, 1922), and prejudice is envisaged as unjustified (that is, not grounded in evidence) negative pictures of a given social group or, in Allport's (1954) words, "thinking ill of others without sufficient warrant" (p.6). This tradition conceptualizes prejudice as a phenomenon that has to do with the way individuals process information that comes from the *real world*. People receive an overwhelming amount of daily information which is impossible to process in all its complexity, so they need to rely on heuristics and processes of information reduction such as categorization. In other words, humans are "cognitive missers" (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) who cannot deal with the complex nature of the social world, so we (over) simplify and distort information about the world and the different social groups that inhabit it.

In this way, individuals do not perceive the outside social world *as it really is* but filtered through these limitations, which might eventually lead them to misperceive the attributes of social categories. Thus, the gap between what the biased perceiver thinks about an outgroup and the outgroup's *real* characteristics would be the magnitude of the bias. Following this rationale, cognitivist approaches locate the causes of polarization in automatic, inherent, and

inescapable perceptive biases that are accentuated by a division of the political camp between political in-groups and out-groups. Parties, ideologies, or opinion groups can act as social groups which provide citizens with a lens through which they approach reality, triggering in-group favoritism and intergroup bias (Tajfel et al., 1971).

1.3 | Beyond biases and dislike: The social aspects of stereotypes and prejudice

A powerful critique of the conceptualization of prejudice made above has recently (re)gained relevance: this is the kernel-of-truth approach (Jussim et al., 2009). It states that far from (mis)perceiving other groups' attributes, people often hold stereotypes about them that correspond to how these groups *really* are. This research highlights the limitations of the theoretical apparatus of the previous tradition, using its own terminology. Nevertheless, this approach suffers from the same shortcomings: the epistemological issue of how we can objectively define what group members are like in reality, along with the ethical issue of assuming that there are group stereotypes that might be "true" (Stangor, 1995). Both approaches, in trying to see the level of correspondence between the stereotypes in people's minds and reality, overlook the social origins of stereotypes, their contextual and contested nature, as well as their situated consequences and their relationships to wider power structures (Dixon, 2017). As classic social psychological theories started to outline, stereotypes are much more than pictures in our heads.

Sherif et al. (1961) illustrated that the context of competition (or cooperation) between groups conditions how the groups perceive, feel, and think about each other, whereas Tajfel's added cognitive and motivational factors explained some blind spots in Sheriff's Realistic Conflict Theory. The SIT aimed at understanding why different groups in positions of clear subordination usually have positive attitudes towards the privileged out-group, tend to derogate their own group, and why they do not always opt for challenging group inequalities.

The polarization literature conceptualizes prejudice as negativity towards the out-group, which comes from biased stereotypic views of the opponents (fostered by party elites, the media, and informational bubbles) and which arises between "equal status groups"[2] (Moore-Berg et al., 2020). Consequently, polarization research tends to use the SIT framework, but stripped of its several caveats on social change and social mobility. Here we develop these points more thoroughly:

1. **Status and power relations:** SIT recognizes the existence of differences in power and status between social groups. The theory focuses closely on historically disadvantaged groups' search for a positive social identity, as well as the different strategies that individuals, as group members, can follow to challenge their social position with respect to privileged groups (Billig, 2002). In this sense, SIT explains different ways in which individuals that belong to (disadvantaged) social groups can accept living with differences in social status, as well as when the circumstances foster the desire of these groups to revert this unequal status through social competition. Indeed, in a context of an intergroup struggle for status, when part of a dominant group perceives its superiority as legitimate, its members will act in a discriminatory manner if the subordinate group makes attempts to change intergroup relations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Conversely, when the status differences are seen by both groups as legitimate, previous studies have found evidence of positive evaluations made by subordinate group members when they consider privileged groups and vice versa.[3]

2. **Prejudice does not necessarily stem from negativity:** Accepting status differences as legitimate is common in contexts characterized by long-term inequality and power differences between groups, where warm and paternalistic attitudes make relationships based on the transfer of resources from subordinate to dominant groups more acceptable and sustainable for the latter (Jackman, 1994). In these cases, the absence of conflict or group polarization might lead to social harmony, while maintaining an unequal society (Reicher, 2012). That is, positivity here would be hiding and sweetening relations of domination and undermining the willingness of subordinate groups to fight against group-based inequality (Wright & Lubensky, 2009), evincing that the relationship between

positivity/harmony and negativity/polarization is complex. This association between negativity and prejudice also falls apart when we observe the case of modern, more subtle forms of sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001) in which ambivalence or overall positivity operates to fuel and sustain group prejudice.

3. **Polarization/conflict with privileged out-groups is a means to subvert power relations:** The way we think of intergroup relations and like-dislike dynamics is inextricably linked to the history of intergroup relations, the actual context of competition, and the dynamics of power preservation on the part of historically privileged groups. Indeed, SIT establishes that one of the possible ways for subordinate groups to subvert status differences is through engaging in social competition; that is, confrontation with the high-status group, which might lead to conflict and antagonism between the dominant and the unprivileged groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 44). This aspect implies the need to avoid seeing polarization as necessarily pernicious in itself; literature on collective action actually underlines the role played by negative emotions such as anger in fostering disadvantaged groups' democratic struggles for equality and recognition (Simon, 2020; Van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Polarization research tends to consider that negative feelings are the result of irrational and biased perceptions, which consequently, must be alleviated to restore consensus, compromise, and ultimately, to end the conflicts. Congruent with this reification of harmony, de-polarization interventions tend to be based on de-biasing individuals' perceptions and meta-perceptions, providing citizens with *truthful* information about others, as well as fostering positive contact between group members. Building on these three points, the next section reviews the consequences of these systematic flaws.

1.4 | Consequences of current theoretical assumptions

Theorizing polarization as a phenomenon that takes place between equal-status groups favors adhering to perspectives that try to explain political conflict without reference to the history of intergroup relations. From this perspective, claims about the Ideological Symmetry Thesis become plausible, theoretically developed, and empirically tested. This thesis often arrives at (arduously difficult to defend) conclusions such as the following, as described by van Prooijen (2021, p. 7):

"Research (…) has revealed that the high levels of prejudice commonly observed at the political right towards a range of societal subgroups (e.g., Muslims; ethnic minorities; feminists) is associated with the belief that these groups largely vote left-wing. This line of research also has revealed high levels of prejudice at the political left, however, specifically towards societal groups commonly assumed to vote right-wing (e.g., Christians; business people; the military; for an overview, see Brandt et al., 2014)."

Badaan and Jost (2020) have contested this thesis. They offer data on hate crimes in the US, showing that the crimes perpetrated by members of privileged groups against disadvantaged groups are vastly greater in number than crimes perpetrated by the latter against the former. If hate crimes are envisaged as expressions of (extreme) prejudice, measures based purely on negativity are not capturing what is essential. Data based on like-dislike scales seem to lead us to overrate the symmetry of prejudice and depart from the real-world dynamics of conflict.

Secondly, equating prejudice with negativity also has conceptual and ideological consequences. On the one hand, we overlook that we can find manifestations of dislike or disapproval, which cannot be considered prejudice (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Similarly, we de-problematize relations of inequality and domination between groups if they are characterized by warm feelings. On the other, it is worth noting that the acritical search for social harmony, and the conceptualization of polarization as intrinsically negative, might play the role of sustaining and legitimizing the status quo. Conflict can indeed pave the way for pernicious dynamics, the tribalization of political identities, and even violence. But by exclusively underlining the destructive side of polarization, an unconditional search for social harmony may actually hamper positive social change towards more egalitarian and inclusive societies. Conflict can also fuel positive social change, along with the development of more just and—consequently—more stable societies

(Mouffe, 2005; Simon, 2020; Stavrakakis, 2018; Wright & Baray, 2012). New developments in critical social psychology open up promising avenues for addressing the different shortcomings that have been underlined so far.

2 | CRITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN GROUP STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICE: TOWARDS A BROADER CONCEPTUALIZATION OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION

Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) (Turner et al., 1987) states that stereotyping is not just a cognitive process, but also a sociopolitical one (Oakes et al., 1994). Stereotyping would be a context-sensitive collective and collaborative process that, at a particular time and place, informs us about the current state of a group's life within an evolving system of intergroup relations and that can be used either to (re)produce social inequality and legitimize it or to problematize it and contest it (Condor, 2006; Haslam et al., 2002).

Stereotypes are shared collective constructions embedded in a context, which carry a history of inter-group relations, and at the same time are collective tools used to mobilize particular versions of how a group is, and how its members ought to be treated (Tileagă, 2014). These insights remove stereotyping and prejudice from individuals' heads and locate these phenomena in the terrain of motivation, ideology, power, and language. Likewise, they spring directly towards conceptions of attitudes not as fixed mental identities, but as everyday descriptions of an attitudinal object (in which individuals elaborate questions of blame, accountability, fact construction, and agency) which can be examined through text and talk, as theorized by discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1993).

This conception leads us to reformulate some assumptions about the individual perceiver. As Billig has argued (1987), individuals are not just irrational beings that uncritically and thoughtlessly process all the information they receive, and always act as victims of their limitations, which are marked by processes of categorization and generalization. In Billig's view, individuals think and argue with ideology, and they are just as capable of particularizing as of generalizing, as well as being able to adapt their discourses to avoid being labeled as prejudiced and use common sense arguments to both legitimize and oppose relations of power and dominance.

Stereotypes take part in wider belief systems that update through time depending on sociopolitical conjunctures. The ways of legitimizing a group's low status have changed substantially. Nowadays, explanations based on biology, genes, or nature are socially unacceptable for most people in western societies; instead, the use of the liberal tenets of equality, freedom, or arguments based on hard work and meritocracy to sustain (prejudiced) beliefs hampering the designing of policies to redress inequality is common (Gibson & Booth, 2018). In fact, prejudiced accounts of racialized and impoverished people are often carefully crafted by people and policymakers as part of broader discourses of citizenship, and particular versions of place attachment (Di Masso, 2012; Di Masso et al., 2014) that might be used to legitimize some ideological and material practices, such as the spatial relocation and social exclusion of certain groups (Manzo, 2014).

This continuous updating points to the slippery nature of stereotypes, and to the public debate on the shifting boundaries differentiating the prejudiced from the unprejudiced (Durrheim, 2022; Goodman & Burke, 2010), and evinces that prejudice, far from being a clear and static concept within psychology, constitutes a political judgment (Drury, 2012). This partially explains the growing acceptability of far-right discourses, as they usually re-draw the boundary between what is prejudiced and what is not, even trying to depict themselves as victims of prejudice and of the tyranny of political correctness (Balinhas, 2020; Schröter, 2019).

Thus, it would be difficult to define polarization as merely a consequence of flawed perceptions, leading to biased mental representations of out-group members. Polarization, in fact, constitutes the very struggle for constructing and fixing a hegemonic version of how a concrete group really is, and how this group should be treated. Therefore, drawing a static red line between the prejudiced and the unprejudiced and between accurate and biased perceptions does not do justice either to the malleability of stereotypes or to the way individuals argue, contest, and discursively elaborate truth claims (Burke & Demasi, 2019) about what being prejudiced means. Rather than choosing to ignore this complexity, researchers should try to unravel it (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

3 | CONTRIBUTIONS OF A CRITICAL SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION

The proposal to broaden the scope of work on political polarization implies some core assumptions:

First, we should assume that the processes of stereotype formation are not just matters of perception but are also means for political action. Individuals do not perceive social reality as an object that is totally independent of the perceiver; instead, they interpret and actively construct this reality through rhetorical and dialogical processes, creating identity versions of "myself", "us" and "them" that favor some political narratives and undermine others.

This first assumption points to the importance of studying language and meaning-making processes. Trying to grasp "partisan prejudice", political polarization, and the implications of dislike and negative emotions between groups requires collecting people's opinions about political groups, in order to delve into what these affective evaluations mean for them. People's "descriptions" about certain controversial matters will bring to the fore questions of blame, accountability, and identity-construction processes (Wetherell & Potter, 1993). As people talk about political others, we can observe a picture of the ongoing dialogical process of stereotype formation and (re)production, as well as the ideological consequences of particular group descriptions and how they fit with wider patterns of beliefs and ideological traditions.

Finally, as the applied consequence of a critical turn in the way we approach polarization, researchers may find it useful to think beyond contact, de-biasing, and the promotion of superordinate identities, since these sorts of interventions, when applied indiscriminately to all kinds of intergroup conflicts, might actually have negative consequences (see Mckeown & Dixon, 2017) that will be depicted in the next section. Subsequently, to illustrate these three points, the reader is provided with a contextualized, real-world example.

3.1 | Thinking beyond contact as a de-polarization strategy

Promoting superordinate identities (Levendusky, 2018), providing citizens with "truthful" information about the out-groups (Druckman et al., 2022) or inter-party contact (Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020) have all proved to be successful ways of reducing levels of AP. These contributions expand the considerable evidence that supports contact as an effective means of reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Nevertheless, literature on de-polarization strategies has not addressed the potential negative effects of these sorts of interventions. In this sense, research has underlined the paradoxical effects that contact interventions can have on subordinate groups—sometimes actually weakening these groups' willingness to combat group-based inequalities—(Çakal et al., 2011). In addition, intergroup contact does not always turn out to be positive, as the prevalence of everyday negative contact experiences shows (Dixon & McKeown, 2021).

To tackle these concerns, polarization scholarship might benefit from considering insights from the literature that has examined under what circumstances, and through which mechanisms contact interventions do tend to work and succeed in increasing privileged groups' support for equality without decreasing unprivileged groups' desire to foster social change (Hässler et al., 2021). That is, the literature has reported benefits of intergroup contact in which participants talk about their status differences, rather than contact in which they talk about group similarities or differences in culture (Hasan-Ashli et al., 2019; Tropp et al., 2021).

As the Integrated Contact-Collective Action Model (ICCAM) (Hässler et al., 2021) has contended, different conditions might maximize or minimize the compatibility of contact with collective action. In a similar vein, previous research has found that, whilst promoting in-group identification and pride may be positive for unprivileged groups (Leach & Zeineddine, 2022), strong identification with a privileged in-group might lead people to act collectively to improve the status of the advantaged (Hasbún López et al., 2019). But generally, the positive effects of contact have systematically been clearer for privileged groups and have remained unclear for subaltern groups (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005), an aspect that should lead us to think beyond interventions based only on intergroup contact.

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In conflicts sustained by long-term inequalities, a collective action model of social change that tries to foster unprivileged groups' fights for equality can be effective. Different historical examples, such as the abolition of New World slavery, civil rights reforms in the US, and the end of apartheid in South Africa, have taught us the essential role played by the mobilization of subordinate groups to move toward more egalitarian societies (Dixon et al., 2012). Contact and de-biasing might also not be the most adequate way to deal with conflicts that involve groups with scarcely compatible moral values and worldviews (Verkuyten et al., 2019); at times, it might be more useful to attempt to foster acceptance of other people's way of life according to their worldviews and values, even if we do not like them, since dislike or disapproval cannot be equated with prejudice.

Researchers can examine general, structural measures in form of socioeconomic and integration policies which have been shown to reduce prejudice (Kende et al., 2022). Similarly, as economic inequality and unemployment might be causes of AP (Gidron et al., 2020), these sorts of interventions might well reduce it. Nonetheless, context-situated and tailor-made responses to the idiosyncratic aspects of each political conflict are necessary, since the context and the characteristics of the targets of each intervention play an essential role in how effective an intervention will be (Bar-Tal & Hameiri, 2020; Dixon & Levine, 2012).

3.2 | Example—Polarization between the feminist movement and Vox, the main far-right party in Spain

The following two extracts are taken from a Vox rally in Madrid, on 8 March 2020 (International Women's Day). They illustrate the conflict between the Spanish feminist movement and the party. The event (Vistalegre III) represented an attempt to offer an alternative to the yearly demonstrations led by feminist organizations.

1. Extract 1: "Spaniards: what used to be a right has today become an obligation (…) In the face of the social and national emergency that Spain is suffering, in the face of the attack on the family and on life, dissent from the policies that have dragged us here is the only alternative, it is the only option. Spaniards, the progre[4] consensus, would like us, 'the women of the alternative', not to be here. They would want us to be at their demonstration (…) That would be their great victory. Silencing the brave ones who stand up to their steamroller like… well… as they have managed to with all the other parties. (…) Because radical feminism wants us, yes, but it wants us to be submissive to their ideological agenda. It wants us, yes. But it wants us to support totalitarian laws that separate us from men and break the fundamental principle of constitutional equality. They want us, yes, but in silence. Silent in the face of sexist discrimination in other cultures, such as Islam! (…) Because what radical feminism wants, ultimately, is to take away our freedom to think, the freedom to act autonomously. Take away our freedom to be the women we want to be. With no impositions, no quotas, in total equality to men". (Rocío Monasterio-Vistalegre III)

2. Extract 2: "Men do not rape, that's what rapists do. Men do not kill, that's what murderers do. Men do not mistreat others, that's what abusers do. And men do not humiliate others, that's what cowards do! And today we are here, on March 8, alone, the only alternative, to say loud and clear: the rapist is not you because you are a man" (Macarena Olona-Vistalegre III)

Monasterio and Olona's arguments are constructed in rhetorical opposition to the discourses of both the feminist movement and some left-wing parties. The speaker, in the first extract, rhetorically constructs herself and her supporters as the only ones who resist, whilst all the other political parties have conformed to the "progre(ssive) consensus". In contrast, she depicts "radical feminism" as a totalitarian movement aimed at stealing women's freedom, forcing them to submit, silencing "us" and demanding support for totalitarian laws. Through this rhetorical move, the speaker locates the in-group as the underdogs, those fighting against the status quo, the victims of authoritarianist forces that impose a concrete way of thinking which stops the in-group from being "the women we want to be".

Monasterio's intervention constructs a particular understanding of the terms "equality" and "freedom". Freedom appears in the text as the absence of coercion (to think, to act autonomously, to be the women they want to be) exercised by institutions and law (without impositions, without quotas). This conception of freedom is akin to neoliberal formulations of this principle, by which freedom would mean the absence of state/institutional coercion in individuals' initiatives and thoughts, meaning that any legislation that tries to regulate aspects of social (or economic) life is often seen as tyrannical, caricatured as "political correctness", and aims to grant some form of advantage to the undeserving (Brown, 2019). Consequently, equality is a principle that is taken up and brandished against policies that are actually designed to redress inequality.

The second extract constitutes a rhetorical piece that individualizes and particularizes (Billig, 1991) violence against women, negating the sociohistorical, material, ideological, and institutionalized practices through which women have systematically been put in a subaltern position with respect to men. This element (re)produces the narratives of Hayekian and Thatcherian neoliberalism, according to which "the social"[5] does not even exist. The discursive eradication of the social allows the far right to neglect the influence of exploitation, colonialism, and patriarchy in producing inequalities that persist in the current arrangements of power, status, and access to material resources. Olona's words then situate the cause of gender-based violence in the individual predispositions of deviant individuals, and counter-argue feminist accounts that depict gender-based violence as a social problem with historical roots that extend to the present. Importantly, this interpretative repertoire might be applied to almost any emancipatory project which theorizes power beyond "coercion" and tries to grasp the different social powers producing inequality and subjugation. The extract ends with a statement that again individualizes the problem of gender-based violence, while closing the door to men questioning their position of privilege.

The extracts illustrate how political actors construct identities, social relations, group life, subjectivities, and other people (Wetherell, 2015, p. 316). These aspects have been exemplified in two pieces of elite discourse, but they can also be found in the mass media and in citizens' reasoning. In fact, everyday conflicts at university campuses or different places of social life revolve around similar issues.

The speakers' utterances hardly resemble the living image of a bigot, two irrational prejudiced minds whose biases lead them to misperceive feminists' *real* characteristics. On the contrary, they diffuse carefully crafted opinions about feminists and feminism within a rhetorical context characterized by two related phenomena: the Spanish institutions becoming increasingly more attuned to women's rights, and the consolidation of the Spanish feminist movement as one of the most vigorous in Europe, as the recent massive feminist mobilizations have shown. In this sense, Monasterio and Olona are not explicitly arguing for inequality. Quite the opposite: they portray themselves as the ones defending "real" equality. They elaborate on the idea that feminists' demands have gone too far, a common argument in "modern" forms of sexism (Swim et al., 1995).

These discourses constitute a form of social action, which justify Vox's opposition to supporting the yearly institutional acts on November 25th, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and question a law that has generated a consensus over the years (the Integrated Law Against Gender-Based Violence), to subsequently propose terms such as Intra-familiar violence, alienating gender-based violence as a specific social phenomenon to dilute it into another nonspecific form of violence. Besides, rhetorically constructing laws to prevent gender-based violence as being totalitarian, and to claim that feminism is a movement that is trying to curtail freedom and criminalize men allows Vox's representatives to put themselves in the subject position (Parker, 2002) of dissidents, as anti-status quo, and as the victims of prejudice.

It is worth noting that Vox's discursive actions play the role of reinforcing or even turning the subject position of victims into a reality. And here is where more blatantly prejudiced utterances, different from those in the extracts, play a key role, evincing that political actors tend to mix hostile and benevolent forms of prejudice (Glick & Fiske, 2001). That is, some of Vox's discursive practices are what often produce the material reality of Vox members being publicly reprimanded, and some citizens often trying to dynamite public events in which Vox representatives are participating. An example is when some people impeded the regional parliamentary member Alicia Rubio's participation in an event in Madrid, days after she said, among other things, that "feminism is cancer". Similarly, citizens from

Barcelona's "El Raval" neighborhood protested against the presence of two well-known figures of the party after one of them compared their neighborhood to a "multicultural dunghill". In these cases, Vox's discourse-as-action (namely offering highly prejudiced accounts of unprivileged social groups) is what leads political groups to organize material/spatialized collective responses (which are sometimes even violent), that are subsequently framed by the party as examples of lack of political tolerance and illegitimate limitations of free speech (Durrheim, 2020).

This very brief analysis offers a more nuanced picture of political polarization than cognitivist attempts, which tend to locate partisan polarization inside the heads of citizens and within their perceptive and meta-perceptive biases. Furthermore, the analysis warns us of the perils of taking debates on free speech or censorship as examples that confirm the Ideological Symmetry Thesis, since these debates are often raised by political actors whose aim is to deny group-based inequality. If scholars accept the "non-ideological" idea that intolerance is symmetrical, we would, in part, be accepting a conception of free speech, freedom, and prejudice stripped of a conceptualization of the social, partially aligning our views of these concepts with those of political actors firmly committed to the legitimation of inequality and exclusion. We would also be accepting a way of building a social psychology that separates the psychological from the social, which omits studying the social and ideological processes by which subjects, their positions, status, and identities are constituted (Hook, 2004).

Based on our example, different depolarization interventions beyond simple contact can be proposed, considering the characteristics of the conflict, the targets of the intervention, and the context and history of intergroup relations.[6] First, interventions that work with the concepts of hegemonic and new masculinities as a way to engage men in building gender equity (Jewkes et al., 2015) might be useful. A focus on the uneasy demands that gender roles also place on men might be useful for people who are particularly reluctant to talk about gender inequalities. This intervention could be a first step to take before initiating interventions based on contact to talk about group differences in power, or trying more confrontational models (Maoz, 2012). Among them, a softer version would be narrative-storytelling interventions aimed at visualizing the experiences of conflict, in this case, of men and women, as a means to favor empathy, but without ignoring power asymmetries. Less soft versions of the confrontational models would lead us to interventions that foster intergroup contact in order to discuss and challenge group inequality, as well as interventions with the unprivileged group aimed at group empowerment. Lastly, as a general approach for conceptualizing and challenging privilege around gender issues and beyond them, there are examples of Participatory Action Research that connect inequality to circles of dispossession and privilege, with the aim of engaging relatively privileged people to act against inequality (Stoudt et al., 2012).

4 | CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Critical psychology is concerned with uncovering the ways in which psychological knowledge can contribute to generating and extending existing power relations (Parker, 1990). This article has argued how knowledge generated on the topic of political polarization has been characterized by psychological reductionism, that conceptualizes prejudice as a matter of (mis)perceptions, and consequently, as an internal phenomenon stripped of the sociopolitical circumstances that gave rise to it. Besides, polarization is usually envisaged in a way that fosters understandings of conflict and harmony that might favor the maintenance of a highly unequal status quo. Building on this problematization of some of the underlying assumptions of mainstream approaches to polarization, some conceptual implications, as well as data-collection recommendations, can be drawn. To conclude, new avenues for future research can be outlined.

Firstly, trying to minimize group "biases", albeit an important task, should not be the priority of the polarization field. Research would do well to focus on promoting positive social change by understanding the functioning of systems of oppression in order to deconstruct and challenge them (Tileagă et al., 2022). At an applied level, researchers should consider interventions beyond simple contact, as contact interventions tend to underline the psychological and perceptive causes of the problem, at the expense of the cultural and historical legacies of discrimination that have crystalized in structural and institutional everyday practices of re-production of inequalities (Greenland, 2022).

The individualization of this problem facilitates members of privileged groups to construct discrimination as something from the past (Andreouli et al., 2016), whereas believing in the structural nature of discrimination makes people more likely to address group-based inequality (Rucker & Richeson, 2022). This points to the importance of avoiding methodological individualism and theorizing about structural causes fostering group inequality, confrontation, and polarization.

Regarding data collection, a critical-psychological approach might include an assessment of collective action intentions and policy change, along with the usual polarization measures. Moreover, including measures of identification with sociopolitical groups beyond parties would provide researchers with a more nuanced picture of mass polarization and would make it easier to identify status differences between groups and how they relate to support for different parties, as well as to partisan polarization.

To conclude, some future avenues to be explored can be sketched out. In general, there is a need for situated studies aimed at analyzing the meaning behind overall cognitive and affective evaluations, so we can grasp if a conflict might escalate into pernicious forms of polarization or, conversely, might be a part of a creative tension, which might lead us to more inclusive and egalitarian societies. Similarly, by adopting a meaning-focused approach, researchers can investigate if the growing "partisan prejudice" is just another updated version of classical prejudices, in which expressing dislike towards parties and supporters of egalitarian principles is a more socially acceptable way of expressing class/race/gender-based prejudice, or if it constitutes a different phenomenon.

Political polarization is becoming intensified at a time when a backlash is occurring against the progressive incorporation of different historically disadvantaged groups into public life (Lisnek et al., 2022; Mudde, 2019). Thus, future endeavors might find it useful to discern between political conflicts stemming from dynamics of polarization, and conflicts stemming from the resistance, on the part of unprivileged groups, to a conservative backlash, as the causes, consequences, and interventions that would arise from these different conceptualizations will be different. In fact, the lack of recognition of group inequalities or high levels of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and Right-wing Authoritarianism (RWA) on the part of dominant groups are factors that hamper the success of contact experiences (Hässler et al., 2021). Research on cognitive liberalization, which has reported that contact reduces RDA, SDO, and consequently, prejudice (Hodson et al., 2018), might be a promising area to explore for tackling these issues.

From a discursive perspective, analyzing the uses of the term "polarization"- on the part of experts, the media, and the people- is relevant. What identity-related, rhetorical, and ideological functions might the use of this term and the depiction of a political conflict as "polarized" have? Are there situations in which the use of a "rhetoric of polarization" and the subsequent creation of a sense of urgency to end some political conflicts might justify and legitimize a highly unequal status quo?

Lastly, since the social construction of some groups as a threat might have real-world consequences, future research should consider if and how trends in political polarization translate into the everyday, material, and spatialized experiences of citizens, as some recent research in historically divided societies has been doing (see Dixon et al., 2020). That is, are current trends of political polarization fostering narrower notions of citizenship, further segregation, the securitization of public spaces, and exclusionary dynamics in our communities? Critical Psychology has much to contribute to these questions and to the political polarization field.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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ENDNOTES

[1] This thesis posits, in a nutshell, that left and right-wing people are equally prejudiced, but towards different groups.

[2] Party supporters (e.g., supporters of the Democratic Party or the Republican Party) are conceptualized as equal-status groups. An objection to this is that supporters also have other social (those based on race, gender, class) and political identities (e.g., feminist/anti-feminist) that are characterized by asymmetries in power and status, and that are surely at play in political polarization dynamics.

[3] Durrheim et al. (2014), in South Africa, found that positive interactions between black domestic laborers and their white bosses served to reproduce power differences between them.

[4] This constitutes a mocking way in which Vox designates the consensus around some issues, such as gender issues, in which progressive policies tend to generate high levels of support throughout the political spectrum.

[5] In Wendy Brown's words (2019, p. 27) the social is "situated conceptually and practically between state and personal life" and is the space "where citizens of vastly unequal backgrounds and resources are potentially brought together and thought together. It is where we are politically enfranchised and gathered (not merely cared for) through provision of public goods and where historically produced inequalities are made manifest as differentiated political access, voice, and treatment, as well as where these inequalities may be partially redressed."

[6] The Appendix includes a rough example of how cognitivist approaches often frame depolarization interventions in a hypothetical situation, compared to the critical-psychological approach.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.