

Commentary
**Alternative to Cognition. A New Look at Explaining
Human Social Behavior**

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Alternative to Cognition. A New Look At Explaining Human Social Behavior arises from the need to criticize the cognitive dominance and centrality of cognitive explanation for human behavior. Lee argues that after the “cognitive revolution” psychology appeared to be the only efficient explanation for understanding the complexity of human behavior. However, the focus of psychology on individual thought leads to ignore other important realities for human beings, such as the biological, the social, and the economic realities. Therefore, if psychology wants to become a really scientific explanation, a more critical and flexible approach to our subjectivity is essential. The author does not suggest only a single alternative to the dominance of the cognitive view, but proposes the development of a more flexible and open-minded approach to human social behavior considering the interactions between people and their environment.

In the first chapter, the author investigates why there is a primacy of cognition in the explanation of human experience, and whether the only alternative to behaviorism is the *cognitive* explanation. The primacy of cognitivism is showed by a survey of the long history of consciousness studies from Descartes’ dualism to the contemporary cognitive models, which are also dualistic (for example when they use the metaphor of the *mind as a computer*). For what concerns explanation in psychology, Lee notes that all contemporary psychological theories are based on the assumption that conscious thought is a direct cause of behavior, which is the only cause that psychology ought to study. Instead, economic as well as social and environmental influences on choice are completely ignored by contemporary cognitive theories.

According to Lee, all cognitive theories of psychology suffer from a big flaw, namely, they rely on undefined and unobservable variables to explain behavior. However, they are not able to explain how those variables arise from external experiences and events. Moreover, it is unclear how these cognitive variables interact to produce composite cognitions.

In the second chapter, Lee makes her argument more specific by analyzing the theory of self-efficacy and the social-cognitive models introduced by Albert Bandura (1977). Bandura has defined self-efficacy as one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations. One's sense of self-efficacy can play a major role in how one approaches goals, tasks, and challenges. Against Bandura, Lees argues that at the level of theoretical explanation the statement that people behave in certain ways because of their expectations cannot be tested, and that at the level of practical techniques this hypothesis is not useful. In fact, the most important weakness of self-efficacy and similar theories is their inability to make precise predictions. For example,

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there have been many demonstrations that correlations between self-efficacy and behavior (tasks, goals) can be high if self-efficacy is measured specifically and immediately prior to a straightforward, unambiguous task performed in a restricted environment. However, other researches have failed to find any relation between self-efficacy and behavior. Indeed, over the longer term and in less controlled settings, the predictive accuracy of self-efficacy is generally very low. A further problem with the self-efficacy theory and similar models is that data consistent with one's chosen theory are often assumed to support it, although they could equally support alternative models. Lee concludes that Bandura's self-efficacy theory, like other similar models, is a vague descriptive model, and cannot be considered an explanatory theory.

In the third chapter, the author argues that cognitive theories are less than optimal because the theoretical basis of the work is poorly articulated. According to Lee, if the theories that relate cognitive processes and overt behaviors were refined in order to make accurate predictions, it might be possible to identify the circumstances in which particular cognitive variables are useful predictors of behavior and those in which they are not. Finally, it might be possible to find a limited, but useful, role for these theories. For example, cognitive processes are considered to be influenced by the environment and also by stable or temporary biological variables, such as the state of health, hunger and thirst. Furthermore, vicarious experiences affect levels of self-efficacy in a new situation or habit. However, without any clue about how these influences should be measured, we do not have any information that allows predictions beyond those suggested by commonsense.

Lee proposes that cognitive models should be able to define their limits. Indeed, if cognitive-behavioral models only apply to circumscribed situations, within a limited range of behaviors, then one might provide empirical support for them by stating in advance the limits of their applicability. On the other hand, if it is impossible, even within quite narrow constraints, to develop an accurate cognitively based model for predicting behavior, the definition according to which cognitive processes underlie our actions may be less central for understanding behavior than we believe.

In the fourth chapter, the author examines evidence that challenges the assumption that all human behavior is caused by some underlying cognitive processes. Indeed, evidence from a number of areas of psychology shows that cognition is not central for understanding human behavior. According to Lee, one of the major problems with the cognition-centered models of human action is that they are based on confusion between the way human beings appear from the inside and the way in which they actually work.

With this assumption Lee examines critically the view that conscious cognition controls human emotional experience. Although contemporary clinical psychological theories have emphasized the role of cognition in the development or maintenance of negative emotions, evidence from other research areas suggests that this is by no means the only legitimate view. For example, the James-Lange model, according to which emotions arise from a generalized arousal, is no longer tenable. Instead, theories of emotions as grounded in different physiological processes have gained widespread consensus within physiological psychology. In this framework, the understanding of the underlying neural basis must constrain and inform models of emotion. Therefore, Lee concludes that a cognition-centered view of dysfunctional emotion is not a very explanatory model, and that perhaps cognitive models that focus exclusively on understanding emotions are missing something important.

Lee suggests that the use of physiological techniques is useful in order to explore the relationships between emotion and cognition. Recent developments in the measurement and recording of both physiological processes and microbehaviors are now allowing objective



measurements in areas that were previously not available for empirical observation. Therefore, psychophysiology may allow us to understand emotional events. It may also be that future developments in behavioral theory and technique will require a stronger focus on the assessment of physiological events. For example, there are studies conducted by Chabrol, Barrere, Guell, and Moron (1986) showing that the blood flow in the prefrontal cerebral region is lower in clinically depressed than in no-depressed subjects.

In the fifth chapter, Lee examines the concept of unconscious cognition, referring to which one might expect to resolve some problems of the general assumption that all human behavior is the result of conscious or reportable thought. For example, researchers in the fields of memory and perception have made an extensive use of the notion of unconscious thought to explain those behaviors that have been learned without the subject being aware of it. Concepts that fall into this category include procedural knowledge and implicit memory. The author thinks that unconscious thought provides only an illusory explanation. In fact, most psychological theories of human behavior assume that any behavior not determined by an immediate conscious thought is necessarily determined by unconscious cognitive processes. However, Lee argues that, even though it is not possible to assume that people act without an underlying cause (e.g., as a response to an environmental stimulus), some habitual behavior does not involve any cognitive activity.

In the sixth chapter, the author presents the argument for the possibility that at least some human behavior occurs in the absence of anything that can be referred to as cognition. Her main assumption is that we do not «behave in the way we do because of the way we think but [...] we think the way we do because of the way we see ourselves behave» (p. 69).

The idea that our cognitive processes arise as a direct result of the observation of our own behavior has a long history in social psychology. For example, the theory of cognitive dissonance strongly supports this hypothesis. Self-perception theories have also provided extensive evidence that individuals do not have privileged access to internal information about themselves. Thus, reports of cognitive variables, such as attributions and attitudes, can be seen as *post hoc* explanations of observed behaviors, instead of the causes of those actions.

There are experimental findings supporting the idea that a development of preferences without cognitive involvement is possible. Kunst-Wilson and Zajonc (1980) demonstrated that affective reactions to neutral stimuli become more positive with repeated exposure to those stimuli. Moreover, subjects were unable to state with any degree of accuracy whether they had seen the stimuli before. This suggests that the exposure had an effect on preference without any conscious awareness. Moreover, Lee reports increasing evidence suggesting that complex and dynamic behaviors involved in social interactions may also be explained without involving cognitive processes. For example, the ability to coordinate verbal interactions and non-verbal gestures during conversation is a complex activity that occurs without conscious effort or control. Finally, models that emphasize cognition support the idea that human beings are different from the other animals. Despite this, detailed works on primates, as well as on humans, showed that vicarious learning occurs in animals and may be explained in classical conditioning terms.

The seventh chapter deals with the position of rational thought in contemporary social and clinical psychology. The author examines some current approaches to rationality and the difficulties that arise from the mutual incompatibility of these approaches. The assumption that the capacity of rational thought is critical in healthy human behavior is also discussed.

The concept of rationality is central to many contemporary psychological theories. For example, the cognitive-behavioral approaches to therapy are based on the assumption that dysfunctional emotional states necessarily arise from irrational thought processes. However the cognitive models of depression and optimism show that a healthy thought and a rational



thought are not necessarily the same thing. Furthermore, other researches suggest that our ability to think rationally may actually be diminished by positive emotion.

There is an agreement about criticizing rational thought. Indeed, Argyle (1991) criticized the hard-line version of cognitive social psychology that assumes social behavior and judgments as a kind of rational problem-solving, performed by computer-like processes in the head. He argued that social behavior in particular could not be understood without considering emotional and contextual variables. Lee notes that arguments like this are largely ignored, because psychologists have a culturally acquired tendency to find mentalistic explanations of human behavior.

In the eighth chapter, Lee argues that there are many reasons why an individualistic and mentalistic approach persists in psychology despite the availability of contrasting arguments and evidence. As Hickey (1994) claimed, a pervasive social hostility to behaviorism has arisen because behaviorism argues against the folk intuition that human action is determined by soul, spirit, or mind, so that the mechanism of human agency lies outside the natural world. Lee argues that another reason why psychology is focused only on the cognitive view is that this represents an unprecedented unity of purposes within academic psychology. However, the author argues that unity has no intrinsic value, but it is the adequacy of a united approach to be important.

Lee adds that a professional and scientific culture that places more importance on cognitive events than on objective reality is likely to encourage psychologists to focus interventions on changing cognition rather than altering objective circumstances. According to Braginsky (1985), by ignoring culture and politics, psychologists have failed to recognize the ideological assumptions underlying their work. Therefore, they have upheld these ideologies rather than examined their impact on the lives of others. That is, the role of clinical, educational, organizational or experimental psychologists has become that of helping individuals adjust to existing social order, rather than of empowering them to make changes to their environment. Lee's point is not that social and cognitive psychology is part of a deliberate conspiracy to maintain social inequalities, but that psychology is often unaware of the cultural basis and the cultural implications of its focus.

In the last chapter, Lee argues that the identification of cognitivism as a unified theory produces a false and premature excitement, and that psychology needs to explore many other alternative explanatory models. Lee points out that she is not advocating a style of eclectic psychology in which all theories are equally right, but that she is distinguishing eclecticism from a relativistic approach that encourages different theoretical developments and supports the idea that each theory identifies its own boundaries and justifies itself in its own terms.

The author claims that the cognitive bias in modern psychology has obscured the progresses that characterize the behavioral theory. Indeed, behavioral models explain a range of human behaviors generally regarded as cognitive, from specific instances such as Eisenberger's (1992) learned industriousness concept, which provides a learning theory explanation for the work ethic, to general models that try to explain essential human characteristics such as language in behavioral terms. The alternative that Lee proposes to cognition is the contextualist behaviorist approach, «a development that aims to combine a non-cognitive approach to human behavior with an increased emphasis on the influences of physical, social, and cultural context on that behavior» (p. 117).

Contextualism is not only a conception of behaviorism because, for example, social psychophysiology is based on the premise that physiological events can only be fully understood within their specific social and physical context. Contextualist behaviorism is a perspective that has arisen, at least in part, as a response to a frustration with an individual-



focused psychology. Lee's conclusions concern the fact that there is a considerable social hostility to a behaviorist and scientific understanding of human behavior. It arises from a discomfort with models that run counter to our dominant dualistic philosophy, from an uneasiness concerning the implications of such models for potentially radical social changes, and from the desire to maintain a comfortable view of psychological distress as something different from ordinary behavior.

This book is not an introductory work. Instead, it is for researchers already involved in the debate, because the author does not characterize cognitivism and behaviorism in a precise way, and she does not explain many topics that she mentions (e.g., self-efficacy theory, theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behavior, protection motivation theory, the model of behavioral choice, attribution theory, and dissonance theory).

The aim of the book is to propose alternative models to the primacy of cognitive theories in order to understand human behavior, but the most part of the book is dedicated only to criticize psychological theory focused on cognition instead of proposing alternative models. Only in the last pages of the last chapter, does Lee propose contextualist behaviorism as a possible alternative.

Therefore, even though I agree with her criticism about psychological theories – especially when she claims that cognitive models are vague and inaccurate, and consequently not able to predict human behavior –, I do not think that contextualist behaviorism is the best model for understanding human action. I believe that in some arguments the book lacks in continuity, for example, in the fourth chapter, when talking about the causes of depression, the author advocates the importance of physiological data coming from neurosciences, but then these are not considered in contextualist behavioral models.

It is clear that Lee's aim is to propose a different perspective on psychology, in particular by giving importance to context and environment as causes of psychological problems, and by criticizing the individual centered models. However, even though the book is useful to focus on environmental conditions, I do not agree with contextualist behaviorism, which is centered only on external factors, because a good model for understanding human behavior has to consider both components, cognitive and behavioral.

We can appreciate Lee's efforts to change a very well established psychological model centered on individual, conscious and rational thought, and arise a critical view among psychologists, who sometimes are too much focused on the subject.

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