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WHO'S AFRAID OF SOCIAL OBSERVATIONS? HOW PSYCHOLOGY, THE SOCIAL SCIENCES, AND BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS HAVE AVOIDED CONDUCTING SOCIAL OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSES

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that social environments underlie most of human behavior, but observing and analyzing these has been avoided by instead substituting abstract, and sometimes mentalistic, terms that pretend to be explanations. Some reasons for avoiding such social analyses are first given, followed by the example of trying to observe and analyze language use in humans and how this led to the divisions in psychology in the 1960s and the development of modern, mainstream cognitive psychology. Examples of common abstract words that side-step societal, group, and interpersonal social analyses of what is really going on are given. This includes several words used in 'cognitive' psychology to avoid social observations and analysis, and some words in behavior analysis that do a similar thing but without the imputation of the abstract concepts being mentalistic. Of most importance is that if the social environments are not observed and analyzed then the substituted abstract concepts will never lead to workable interventions and applications.

Key words: social observations, social analysis, social contexts, abstract concepts, mentalistic concepts, psychology, social sciences, behavior analysis, discursive contexts, cognitive biases, cognitive dissonance

> In analyzing the psychologies in Part I, we witnessed the frequent intrusion of this 'social,' and the disturbances it produced for psychological observation and construction. At one extreme we found efforts to exclude it altogether from attention, and at the other, indications that it might inundate the entire territory; elsewhere it was tacitly accepted or unwillingly tolerated. Whatever its treatment, as fact or aspect of fact it was never absent from the psychological problem. (Bentley, 1935, pp. 187-188)

It is often thought that the real difference between behavior analysis and mainstream psychologies is the latter's use of abstract internal terms as 'explanations.' The latter believe in cognitive, mental, mind, or other unobservable internal events that can determine behavior independently of any environments: to analyze behavior, one cannot directly observe these internal events, but they can be modelled, simulated or theorized as abstract terms, nonetheless. For behavior analysts, on the other hand, behavior is shaped by the external, potentially observable environments in which people and animals are embedded: to analyze behavior, one must analyze the environments.

It was argued recently that the abstract concepts of mainstream psychologies were built from the failure of early stimulus-response behaviorists to find external environments that could explain the more complex animal (Tolman) and human behaviors (Guerin, 2024a). The *lack* of such environments allowed the justification and development of cognitive and other mainstream psychologies. Perhaps the most complex and perplexing of human behaviors are those involved in what are variously called language use or cultural behaviors, and these were the focus of many of those disputes that led to the creation of modern mainstream psychologies and the internal approaches (e.g., Chomsky, 1980; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969/1966).

Unable to any observe material, concrete environments that shaped language use and cultural practices, many abstract concepts were substituted (Guerin, 2024a). However, it was also argued and shown by demonstration that the 'missing' environments were societal, group, and social environments which were there but had not been explored. Once these were included, the complex behaviors could be accounted for in terms of external environmental shaping, even for a 'phenomenon' like Gestalt 'perceptual closure' (Guerin, 2024a). The same applied to verbal and cultural behaviors.

In this paper I wish to extend these analyses more broadly. There is a case that even before these twists and turns occurred in the history of psychology during the 1930s to 1960s, there was a general pattern of either ignoring the social shapers of human behavior or failing to find them (interpreted here as "Not looking hard enough," Guerin, 2024a). This goes a long way back in western thinking to earlier philosophers who were quite happy to accept talking about 'minds' and 'mental states' as explanations of human behavior. There is a whole tradition, at least since the Enlightenment period, of believing that humans have a 'realm' of thinking and mental ideas untainted by social world events, and that these thoughts and ideas exist independently of the messy world around (Hesse, 1969).

More importantly for this paper, there is also a case that behavior analysis has fallen into the same trap at various points in its history: of not looking carefully for the shaping of behavior that arises from societal, group, and interpersonal environments, and moreover, of then inventing abstract concepts to fill in for this. This has usually also involved discussions of why these concepts are not really 'internal' like the rest of psychology but something else, to distance itself from the mainstream forms of internalized theorizing that includes mentalisms. But despite successful anti-materialism, relying on these abstract ideas and not linking behaviors to the social environments has meant that real world applications from these ideas have usually failed or been very limited. Most of the successes have only worked when in impoverished environments.

So, the broad aim of this paper is to show some of the patterns of abstract words that arise from not thoroughly analyzing the consequences on humans from their societal, group, and interpersonal environments, and the strategies used to actively avoid exploring the detailed contexts of how we are shaped by societal, group, and interpersonal social relationships. The plan is first to suggest a few reasons why the avoidance of analyzing the social is common, look at the example of analyzing verbal behavior, and then look briefly at other examples from disparate areas of psychology, the social sciences, and behavior analysis and the futile metaphorical debates about the 'reality' of these examples. It must be remembered that mentalisms are only one form of avoiding social observations through abstractions, and behavior analysis does not do this but has found other ways.

Why Avoid Observing and Analyzing the Social Environments?

While we cannot know the 'intentions' of those who avoid analyzing social relationships, I wish to suggest a few reasons why this might commonly happen. What we are exploring here is why, when observing and analyzing a human behavior, the roles of societal, group, and interpersonal social relationships are not actively or thoroughly pursued. For example, we might observe a person writing a letter by themselves. From a mainstream psychology and everyday explanation perspective, we usually 'explain' that the person wants to 'express' something from inside them, 'communicate' an internal message to someone, 'refer' in words to things and events in the world, or 'represent' the world in their writing. The 'drive' for these all come apparently from internal sources which are, however, conceptual and abstract. Behavior analysts would usually refer (also conceptual and abstract, note) to the past consequences from the potentially observable physical or loosely defined 'generalized social reinforcement' when the person has previously written letters (Guerin, 1994).

The first reason for avoidance is also implicit in most of the reasons to follow: it is just easier and less time-consuming. Finding the social contexts for behaviors requires long-term research and detailed observation and questioning, as has been known in social anthropology for a long while (Guerin, Thain, et al., 2024). When analyzing someone writing a letter, it is easier to 'explain' this by saying that they 'want' to express some inner thoughts than it is to check their life's social relationships and previous letter writing,

including, for example, even why they are writing a letter rather than talking to the recipient face to face. To embed this observation of letter-writing into the social fabric of the person's life takes some doing, and it is far easier to construct some verbal theories, concepts, and ideas that appear to explain when they do not, whether attributing these to mentalistic causes or not.

A second reason to avoid social observation and analysis is that they are complex. Just saying that we need to do such observations and analyses does not make them simple. We have contexts of behavior being shaped simultaneously by a range of societal forces, group, and cultural forces, as well as interpersonal social relationships, and each of these have their own histories and pathways (Guerin, 2024b). In terms of societal shaping, for example, letter writing is more permanent for a variety of people to read, compared to talking face to face which disappears afterwards, but it also means that legally there is a document that could be used against the letter writer, at least if it has been signed. How *societal* shaping is structured most often goes back to before we were born—for example, the opportunities and barriers of the laws of libel and slander existed long before we were born.

So, the aim of this paper to facilitate such social observations and analyses is not a simple thing to be taken lightly. We can take note of social anthropology's long attempts to understand the unusual and perplexing cultural practices of remote and usually isolated communities, and how their methodology adapted to understand these. This required looking at *all* the community practices, not just one section that looked most relevant, and over extended periods of time, participating in those communities. But the argument here is that without this, the abstract internalized 'explanations' are just hot air.

A third reason that social observations and analyses have not been incorporated into all understanding of human behavior is that most are not just harder and complex, but also difficult to observe. This includes their complexity as outlined above, but also that many are hidden from any easy observations. Following Bentley (1935), we can avoid a naïve empiricism here by noting that 'observation' refers to the following:

- observation is not done by individuals but built up by many people
- observation is not about the eye alone but uses the whole body and tools
- observation is not an 'innate power' or a given but requires training
- observation works within a bigger construction of 'scientific observability'
- observation is not of a thing but things and events over time (Guerin, 2025)

Taking patriarchy as an example, the behavior of both women and men is not shaped into these societal patterns at a specific time in life, by specific people, consistently, and with common outcomes. 'Observing' the shaping of patriarchal behaviors is difficult unless you spend time intensively with a few people over much time and sample all their societal, group, and interpersonal contexts (Guerin, 2024b). But following the ideas of observation above, we can observe patriarchy but not in a naïve empiricism way.

This difficulty involves two other reasons for avoidance. First, such observations and analyses need a lot of time to carry out, time that most researchers or therapists wanting to find out about their clients do not have. Second, shaping by societal, group, and interpersonal social contexts are specific and material but highly variable. The same behaviors are being shaped by multiple contexts and multiple outcomes. This has led researchers to readily construct generalities out of specifics, but which then lose their usefulness in application. Social anthropology has faced this dilemma through its history and carries out specific data collection with specific groups of people at specific times but does not then assume that their findings—the detailed contextual nuances of this particular group of people—will generalize to others. Psychology has taken almost the opposite approach, that anything specific is not worth much whereas generalities and 'universal principles' of human behaviors are the goal—even if they are fictions burying many social events.

The Case of Avoiding the Analysis of Social Environments when Analyzing Language Use

Before giving some of the common ways used to avoid social analyses from psychology, the social sciences, and behavior analysis, a more detailed case study will be given: that of analyzing people's use

of language. This will be done with a social contextual approach, which includes potentially all social environments, although in practice, as outlined earlier, this is difficult (Guerin, 2020a, b; Guerin, Thain, et al., 2024).

The case of language is an important one since debate over the analysis of language marked the earlier splits within psychology during the 1950s and 1960s (Chomsky, 1980; Guerin, 2024a; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969/1966) and has always been the home of many abstract, internally-attributed concepts, which attempt to explain human behavior—consciousness, thinking, awareness, mind, mental, cognitive, etc. As will be demonstrated, these are all types of language use for which no shaping from the external environment were found and so abstract words and theories were used as substitutes.

When observed as behaviors, language use is a series of behaviors with special properties. The behaviors include speaking, writing, and variants of these. A common assumption, probably arising from the common use of abstract 'causes,' is that other hidden or private behaviors also occur during 'language' that 'outsiders' cannot see. These turn out to be effects and events resulting from the language events and their audiences, not new behaviors.

The two key special properties when observing language uses are that:

- The language behaviors have no effects on the physical environment.
- The language behaviors only have effects on other people (who have spent time learning the language system)

[As mentioned, we will leave aside the question of people 'having effects on themselves' with language behaviors; that is, reacting as if an 'outsider' to your own language uses. There are contradictions in this formulation which can be resolved when the roles of other people in language are better analyzed.]

These mean that, unlike our more bodily and sensory behaviors, speaking or writing can never affect the physical world (except through another person responding to the language uses). Put plainly, saying "Tree" can never do anything to a tree, nor to anything else except a person (in the right contexts). Neither saying "Tree" nor saying "Trees require sunshine to thrive" nor even "This right here next to me is a tree" can affect a tree. It is worthwhile as a demonstration to try these sometime, especially the last.

While this point might appear obvious or trite, these are the sorts of statements that allow psychologists and others to avoid analyzing the 'social,' treating words as if they can have direct effects on what they appear to 'refer to' or 'represent.' The lack of observing any direct effects is then attributed to the internal workings of the humans. The search is then to link the language behaviors to the objects they represent inside the head somewhere as associations, whereas this should be directed toward how the words have effects on other people, which happen outside the head. The above ideas are certainly consistent with behavior analysis in principle (Skinner, 1957), but little has been done to explore the societal, group, and interpersonal disclosure and the environments that shape them within behavior analysis.

These two key properties also entail something a bit more suggestive, which leads us to the main topic of observing and analyzing all the social context thoroughly. Because language use only does things or has effects on other people, the whole existence of language behaviors is only about responding to people. We cannot sustain the language behavior of saying "Trees require sunshine to thrive" by the effect that saying this has on tree growth and maybe its fruition. So, language use is about doing our social relationships, and only that.

From this it follows, less intuitively perhaps, that understanding language as words, sentences, or grammar, is 'subordinate' to understanding the social contexts involved and which being played out. The argument is that we can always do or manage our social relationships without language, albeit slower and with more mistakes, so the most important analyses for language behaviors will be of the exigencies of the social relationship matters being managed by language, not the discursive elements of the language itself such as morphology, syntax, or phonology.

Put in simpler terms, *the main analysis for understanding language use is not about the words being used but about the social relationships involved and what is being done*. When trying to understand someone writing a letter, the first analysis should be of the social situations involved for there to be letter-

writing at all, not the words written. The latter must be included but can come later. And the social analysis will need to include societal, group or cultural, and interpersonal social relationships. Analyzing language use must be primarily about observing the social situations and exchanges. Psychology completely avoids this by its abstract metaphors, whereas behavior analysis conceptually recognizes all this but does not do the observations, since, as will be argued, it has arisen within a strong history of dealing only with impoverished environments.

Most observations and analysis of language use in psychology focus primarily or first on the words and often assume that these *can* be analyzed without knowing much of the social contexts. The cognitive architecture is treated as context-free. If no social analyses or observations are made, then abstract concepts can be brought in as 'causes' for the words—meaning, intention, thoughts, schemata, etc. What is being urged here instead, is that to analyze the uses of words, focus on understanding the people and their social contexts, what is going on and what the language uses do to these, and only then put the use of specific words into those contexts, like the wording of the sentence.

In principle, this is how sociolinguistics proceeds, although too often not enough social context is reported (Guerin, 1997; Hymes, 1964, 1967). Without observing and analyzing the social contexts, the analyses become abstract interpretations of varied sorts. Putting the social contexts back as *the* major focus of discourse analysis means that language uses (and even thinking) *can* be observed, but over time and requiring some effort (Guerin, Thain, et al., 2024).

The examples given elsewhere (Guerin, 2024a, p. 42) apply here. In their tests of 'perceptual closure,' Gestalt psychologists asked people "What do you see?" forgetting that the context was not just the lines shown to participants but also the very social context of asking that question. So, the answers change if participants are asked a different question such as, "Draw what you see."

Likewise, early cognitive psychology was founded on examples like the inscrutability of language uses in such examples as "They are flying airplanes" (Guerin, 2024a, p. 35), arguing that people's 'switching between two meanings' could only be explained by internal cognitive or decision processes, since the 'stimulus' itself did not change. However, again, the inscrutability only arose in the first place because of the decontextualization that had taken place and the questions asked (socially). In any normal social context, there would be no ambiguity on these types of sentences. So, the social context was removed and then people were seen to have ambiguities in finding 'meaning' in these sentences.

The most important point for this paper is that because it seemed that both sorts of demonstration (ambiguous sentences and closure figures) could find nothing in the environment to explain people's responses, the theorizing and conceptual explanations rested on unobservable, mentalistic, and abstract notions said to be 'inside' the person. For the Gestaltists these causes were named as "intrinsic, 'autochthonous' brain dynamics" and for the ambiguous sentences (with no context) this led to the whole fictional development of internal 'cognitive processes' and the 'cognitive revolution' (Guerin, 2024a).

These issues also led to the increase in dualistic ideas in modern psychology since "The subject is thus seen as basically *out of contact with the dynamics of the environment*" (Brunswik, 1952, p. 63, italics added). However, this is only because the real contexts here, the social contexts, were either removed or ignored. So, the very foundations of cognitivism and its dualism only arose from avoiding the analysis of social contexts.

Some Examples of How to Avoid the Analysis of Social Environments

Table 1 presents some of the common terms which are frequently substituted to avoid active social observations and analyses. They can be found in everyday talk, psychology, the social sciences, and a few in behavior analysis. These terms can have other functions so they always need to be analyzed 'in social context,' as all language analysis should be done.

Table 1. Some common terms or concepts used to avoid or side-step the analysis of social contexts and resort instead to abstract or internalized 'explanations.' Not all are mentalisms, especially those found in behavior analysis.

Rule
Cognition
Uncertainty reduction
Information
Thought
Catharsis
Logic
Relational frames
Cognitive dissonance
Message
Schema
Cognitive bias
Communication
Philosophy
Brain processes or functioning
Individual
Decision
Hard-wired
Signs
Symbols
'Private events'
Generalized social reinforcement and punishment
Meaning

What can be useful from Table 1 is to realize that most of the time when you find these terms being used, in everyday life or academic writing, they are probably acting as a cover for real social events that have not been observed for all the reasons given earlier. Whatever the events being dealt with, there are social events that are shaping what is being observed and their observation and analysis must be done if you truly wish to understand what is going on. If you wish to intervene or change life situations, then doing these become imperative.

I will briefly illustrate some of these, starting with the word 'rules,' which has a history of use across philosophy, sociology, social anthropology, psychology of many forms, and behavior analysis (Douglas, 1973; Miller, Galanter & Pribram, 1960; Skinner, 1969). While the language uses involved in episodes that

are described as the uses of rules can be fully contextualized, most often the academic usage is that the language rules themselves shape the behavior: rule-governed, rule-determined, rule-followed. The upshot seems to be that *if you can name the rule then you have explained the subsequent behavior*. This applies to societal 'rules' (laws, bureaucratic requirements, norms), group and cultural 'rules' (membership behaviors, appropriate actions), and interpersonal rules ("Never address your grandfather informally, always be formal").

While some who use 'rules' do seek out the social contexts in which those rules are embedded, and through which they really 'work,' most examples let the 'rule' itself have the agency and power: "He did X *because* he was following the rule." This might be acceptable as an everyday short hand but precludes us from making any interventions or changes to the behaviors. Even the 'rules' of 'witchcraft,' "If your hunting is unsuccessful then someone has used witchcraft," are embedded in extremely complex social relationships involving both communities and individuals and which take a long time to observe and analyze (Evans-Pritchard, 1937/1976).

So, most uses of 'rules' as an agent in shaping human behavior has all the properties described in this paper: it is dealing with complex and often hidden social events, the researcher cannot or will not take the time to observe these, and then instead uses the abstract term 'rule' to act as if it were an agentive cause. This gives the serviceable but misleading impression that once we have found all the rules, we have understood what is going on and can then simply change behavior by changing the rules. The latter, however, will not work if the embedded social relationship events are not also understood. We end up just trying to *impose* (our social influence) new rules (new and alien social events) upon the people involved: "Why don't you just try and follow this rule instead," and blaming the person when this fails. This applies to 'self-rules' as well: "Just say to yourself, 'I can resist eating this chocolate.'"

Behavior analysis is again ambiguous here. While the ideas of rule-governed behavior claim that the words themselves are not controlling the subsequent behaviors (Skinner, 1969, 1974), consistent with the analyses of this paper, and they do not substitute mentalisms for rule-following, there have not been attempts to *observe* what it is about the social contexts of rules that work sometimes. As will be clear in many of the things that have been said, while behavior analysis has been very successful in avoiding mentalisms, they have not pursued the social observations that are required instead even when language is acknowledged as an entirely social behavior, and this follows from the behavior analysis history of working almost solely with impoverished environments. This is a very different criticism to that of mainstream psychology and its wealth of mentalisms.

Many of the other language terms in Table 1 work in similar ways to 'rules' and can be extrapolated. The earlier development of cognitive psychology, once the break was made from even pretending to look for external contexts, fed off the newly introduced term "information," which promised to be the ultimate in context-free, requiring no social analysis at all (Miller, 1956; Shannon & Weaver, 1949; Soni, 2018). In terms of this paper, it had a very destructive effect upon psychology in the long-term, focusing on finding more and more context-free determinants of human behaviors. If we could just find out the pure *information* contained in language uses, then we could predict human behavior. This led instead to more and more proliferation of abstract terms for cognition. For example, 'executive function' can be analyzed and observed as the role of other people in shaping language which is not said out loud but 'thought' instead (Guerin, 2020b), not some context-free mental process.

Many of the other terms are used in similar ways in psychology and elsewhere, although I will not discuss all these separately: meaning, communication, message, cognition, decisions, thought, uncertainty reduction, catharsis, cognitive dissonance, cognitive bias, schema, brain processes or functioning, hard-wired, signs signifiers, symbols, structures, logic, and philosophy (Guerin, 2001a). For example, 'communication' is often used in a social context-free way but is complex with embedded social contexts (Guerin, 1997), as also is 'logic,' which appears as context-free but is not (Guerin, 2021). Even the use of the term 'individual' is not at all context-free but is used to indicate an abstract form of agency deemed sufficient to explain what happens only by ignoring the whole social context surrounding what is an 'individual' and what shapes their behavior (Guerin, 2001b).

Most of these terms in Table 1 have frequently been used to avoid social observations and analysis in the social sciences as well, which frequently fall back on the abstract 'psychological' terms despite their greater efforts at observing nuanced social contexts (cognitive sociology, cognitive anthropology, neuroanthropology, etc., e.g., Cicourel, 1973). Perhaps more obviously now, the arenas called 'mental health,' including psychopathology and diagnosis, with all of these terms once again indicative of the avoidance of real social analysis, have failed to make progress because the social lives in which people are embedded has been brushed aside with abstract diagnostic terms (Guerin, 2017, 2020c, 2022; Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). "He does that because he is schizophrenic" appears to explain within psychology and the social sciences but is just a tautological designation bereft of any social context for the behaviors observed (Guerin, Tait, et al., 2024). Once again, behavior analysis would not agree with that as any sort of explanation but does not have the social observations to say any more.

Within the domain of linguistics, terms such as 'structures,' signs, symbols, and signifiers are commonly used to side-step having to consider the role of real social relationships (Morris, 1946; Levi-Strauss, 1966; Saussure, 1983/1916). If you can work out the context-free 'structures' then that is all you need to know to understand or predict human behavior. But some linguists saw through this early on:

> Truth is not born nor it is found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction. (Bakhtin,1984, p. 110)

> As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293)

For behavior analysis, the main uses of social avoidance terms occur as 'rules,' 'relational frames,' 'emergent relations,' 'generalized social reinforcement and punishment,' and 'private events' (Skinner, 1969). These usually have accompanying strong discussions to differentiate them from referring to 'internal' or mentalistic ideas in the way cognitive psychology does, arguing for example that the abstract term 'private events' does not mean an internal cause or mental event but something else somehow more behavioral. But as before, the criticism of behavior analysis here is not of any mentalisms, but that the substance of 'private events' exists in the social relationships and exchanges of the relevant language use or other cultural practices, but this has not been explored at all. But, in spite of these discussions, the functioning of these words is clear, whether they are mentalisms or not—they are abstract terms pretending to analyze human behavior without, however, observing or analyzing the social events from which they are thoroughly constructed. In a similar way, laws of learning are generally treated as contexts-free in the way that cognitive mechanisms are treated as context-free (Guerin, 2025). Any contexts might be happening, but both the laws of learning and the cognitive processing mechanisms work with anything. To stop this, intense social observations are required. In the same way that the 'Laws of physics' now only work in some contexts and not in others, laws of learning must be considered as not applicable context-free (Guerin, 2025).

Given that 'cognition' is the term most likely in current mainstream psychology to be used to avoid analyzing the social contexts, it is worth giving some examples of how this term merely hides potentially observable social events (also Guerin, 2020a). Unlike behavior analysis, for cognitive psychology the introduced terms are usually mentalisms. 'Cognitive dissonance,' for example, is a term used to describe someone who 'believes' or 'has' two contradictory beliefs about the same thing. The theory is that having contradictory beliefs is aversive and produces an *internal* state of 'cognitive dissonance,' which the person tries to change by changing one or other belief (there are other ways also), with one of those beliefs often becoming more extreme. If looked at instead in the context of the real social events occurring, however,

there is no internal state of 'cognitive' dissonance but an external social context of '*social dissonance*' (Guerin, 2001a). Two audiences in the person's life are shaping two opposite views, so the person is in a real (not internal) *social conflict*, and that is what the observations and analysis needs to reflect, not theorizing about a fictitious internal state that is agentive. If those audiences do not come into contact simultaneously then there is no aversive state from merely 'holding' two contradictory beliefs (Guerin, 2001a). The social dissonance or conflict only occurs when the two audiences are brought together in some way.

This applies even to the experimental laboratory research which set the experimenters themselves in social conflict with the participants' normal life audiences, (Guerin, 2001a), thus producing social dissonance. In the classic cognitive dissonance experiments, participants were made to carry out a boring task but then the experimenters 'managed to convince them' to tell the next participant that it was not boring at all. This had the effect that those 'lying' participants later rated the task as higher in interest. But the conflict or dissonance here is not between two mentalistic 'cognitions.' The real effect here was *social dissonance* between two audiences: knowing the task was boring (for their usual audiences) and being secretly persuaded (surreptitiously, in fact) by the experimenters themselves to lie to new participants face to face about this.

Finally, cognitive biases are popular to 'explain' people making non-optimal decisions (compared to theoretical models). But in each case of 'cognitive bias,' discourse analysis can show (Guerin, 2016, 2020a) that a suboptimal verbal response has been shaped because of normal audiences in life and how they shape what we say. In terms of life's overall outcomes, it will usually be better to remain suboptimal but keep your social relationships intact than to be optimal in some decision but ruin your social relationships. In fact, doing the latter could be considered suboptimal in the long-term since we ultimately need our social relationships for all our resources. In these sorts of ways, even what seems to be our detached, independent 'cognitive' decision making is part and parcel of social relationships and these need to be analyzed in their full social context. An analysis without the social contexts will miss what is really going on here and will not work in applied work.

Conclusions

This paper has tried to make the case that when encountering abstract terms in psychology, the social sciences, and behavior analysis, those terms which give the appearance of explaining human behavior, it is worth the time and effort to explore the societal, group/cultural, and interpersonal social contexts in which those behaviors are embedded. This will reveal that the abstract words have been used precisely to avoid observing and analyzing such social contexts, even though the real explanations lie there. Reasons for this avoidance happening seem mainly due to the ease and rapidity of inventing abstract terms in contrast with diligently scouring the social contexts with research.

Most psychology and the social sciences do this by inserting mentalisms, while behavior analysis most often agrees, in principle, that the social environments are important but fails to analyze them. It has been suggested that this arose from behavior analysis being built historically from successes when applying this to impoverished environments, and then not using better methods and language when dealing with complex social environments. The very real successes of behavior analysis have been in impoverished animal environments and with people who only contact a limited number of social environments. These successes are real and good, but the methods and observations need to change if we are to go beyond this. This paper has not been about stopping what behavior analysis has thought and done, but to expand it so we can do more.

We have the model to help us, however, of social anthropology for over a century attempting to understand some very unique and exotic human behaviors of remote and isolated communities, and finding that long-term, intensive observational and participatory methods were needed to unravel what was going on (Guerin, Thain et al., 2024a). Psychology has avoided such intensive research methods only by pretending to explain through substituting abstract and unobservable mentalistic terms, and behavior analysis by staying with impoverished or limited environments.

The real problem, alluded to through this paper, is that when wanting to apply research that has been 'explained' using abstract terms, whether this is applying in clinical work, communities, everyday life, without knowledge of the societal, group, and interpersonal shapers of the behaviors—whose observation was avoided—any such applications will fail or be made up on-the-spot.

The conclusions from the arguments of this paper are probably not welcome but should be taken seriously if progress is to be made, especially in making applications even of 'cognitive' ideas. In trying to 'understand people' one should, perhaps paradoxically, not focus on the person much at all. Ironically, and even in line with behavioral principles, one should focus instead on those parts of the person's environment that are shaping what they do, and work with those to change the behavior. To change the behavior, change the environment. But if you have not observed the societal, group, and interpersonal social environments you will not be able to do this.

A helpful start is to learn to do a discursive analysis of 'agency,' and when reading about any explanations of human behavior, locate those agencies (cf. Bentley, 1935). In current neuropsychology, for example, parts of the brain or 'centers of activity' are given the agency to determine or shape human behavior. Given that social events are actually the main shapers, the brain research is trying to explain the wrong events ('cognitive events').

The final implication of this paper is that we crucially need to do better at observing and analyzing societal, group, and interpersonal social relationships and how they shape human behavior (Guerin, 2024b). A lot is already known from a century of sociology, social anthropology, and sociolinguistics, but this needs to be attuned to the areas studied by psychology and behavior analysis (Guerin, Thain et al., 2024). Until this is done, we might be proud of our stylish explanations and models of what humans do, but these will be explanations in appearance only and not be of much use in crucial applications to improve people's lives.

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