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If Behavioral Principles Are Generally Applicable, Why Is It Necessary to Understand Cultural Diversity?

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There is a certain tension in the analysis of group differences from within a behavioral perspective. On the one hand, behaviorally oriented psychologists both seek and believe that they have principles that will apply generally to the analysis of psychological activities in any given individual. On the other hand, behavior therapists and applied behavior analysts often insist that it is crucial to understand cultural diversity. It is argued that we need to know a given individual's group membership and to understand the characteristics of these various groups. Thus, behaviorists seem to believe both that general principles exist and also that they do not apply, or apply in different ways, to persons from different racial, sexual, or other groups.

This paper is about that tension. We will argue that understanding cultural diversity is important, despite the general applicability of behavioral principles, and will present a behavioral rationale for this view. We will also argue that this rationale shows how to be concerned about cultural diversity without falling into a new kind of prejudice.

Group Differences and Psychology

Psychology is about the analysis of individuals interacting in and with their environment in both a historical and situational sense. This level of analysis is relevant to, but distinct from, the analysis of the structure of the organism and its parts per se, as in biology. It is also relevant to, but distinct from, the analysis of groups and their cultural characteristics. The tension between general psychological principles and the applied relevance of cultural diversity is, in part, a tension between levels of analysis.

Psychologists sometimes wish to claim cultural practices as their own area of study by reducing cultural practices to purely psychological events. They may argue that cultural practices are just the behavior of individuals because, after all, "groups don't behave." Views of this kind confuse the relevant contextual features that the two levels of analysis examine.

Cultural practices are *behavioral events considered in terms of their prevalence in a population and analyzed in terms*

of contextual features that affect the social propagation and maintenance of these behaviors. The contextual features that make a strong cultural practice may be entirely different from those that increase the strength of a particular kind of psychological adjustment. For example, the prohibition of intermarriage by various religious groups may be a strong cultural practice because it restricts intimate access to other traditions and thus leads to greater maintenance and propagation of the specific religious views involved. Many individuals, however, must thereby be socially prohibited from marrying persons whom they love, an extremely aversive psychological consequence. The cultural practice is maintained by contextual features that only emerge at the level of the group.

The difference between cultural practices and psychological adjustments is not a material distinction but a functional analytic one. All cultural practices are also psychological events, but not vice versa, just as all psychological events are also biological events, but not vice versa. This is why reductionism is so easy; all cultural events can be analyzed culturally, or psychologically, or biologically. In each case it is not the material event that changes but the analytic unit.

Behavior therapists and applied behavior analysts work at the psychological level; we treat *this* person with precisely *these* characteristics in *this* setting and with *this* history. Even when we conduct therapy groups, we are rarely interested in treating the group *qua* group; rather, the group is our way of treating many people, each with their particular characteristics. No degree of knowledge about the characteristics of groups or cultures can *substitute* for the analysis of the actions of a given individual in their historical and situational context because no two members of any group are socialized in exactly the same way. Knowing what, say, African-Americans generally experience or believe does not mean that *this* African-American has exactly those experiences or beliefs.

In part this emerges because a culture is not the same as a cultural practice. A culture is a set of functionally interrelated cultural practices. Very often these sets are quite loose. A per-

son who is a member of cultural group X may be host to all, many, or only some of the cultural practices characteristic of that group. For example, if we find that Chinese culture encourages people to care more about the group than the individual we still do not know if this practice is dominant in a given Chinese individual.

Functional Analysis

In order to treat people successfully, from a behavioral point of view, we need to be interested in the evolution of certain behavioral functions. How did the person come to think, feel, or act in precisely this way? What effects do these patterns produce? Given that, how can we help them to think, feel, or act differently? These questions are questions about *functional analysis*. It has never been difficult to describe the topographical or structural properties of psychological events. Person X thinks he is a worm, or often feels what he calls angry, or yells at others at work. Descriptions of this kind require only careful questioning and observation. What is difficult is knowing what has established and is maintaining given activities, that is, knowing what is going on *functionally*, not merely topographically.

Behavioral principles are about such response functions. As an empirical matter applied behavioral work has benefited enormously by the attempt to categorize and interpret behavior functionally. A commitment to a functional approach is however, a philosophical and theoretical commitment, not simply an empirical one. People who believe that behavior evolves and develops in given contexts want to understand that evolution, even though our knowledge about how to do so is incomplete. A person philosophically or theoretically committed to this functional strategy faces this question: If we were able to do a complete functional analysis of a given individual's activities, *would there be any additional applied psychological need to understand the person's cultural background?*

Contemporary psychological perspectives usually argue that understanding cultural diversity is of central importance in the analysis of human action. They believe that one cannot assess human behavior without understanding culture-specific characteristics, as if psychological principles operate differently across cultural groups. If behavioral principles are generally applicable, however, as an applied psychological matter, a thoroughgoing functional analysis *obviates the need for understanding cultural diversity*.

Why, then, do so many applied psychological workers, including behavior therapists, argue for the importance of understanding diversity? Are they caught up in a contemporary wave of political correctness?

We believe that the answer is no. In the abstract, a thoroughgoing functional analysis does indeed obviate the need for understanding cultural diversity when working psychologically with a given individual. As a practical matter, however, understanding cultural diversity is a *means to a thoroughgoing functional analysis*. Let us explain.

The Act in Context

Functional analysis is a matter of determining the functional interrelationships between acts and their context. The problem for the functional analyst is that so many of the behavioral functions events are both historical and *arbitrary*.

Response functions are arbitrary in humans because so many response functions are, in part, verbal. The events in a nonverbal organism's world have functions either because of a direct history with such events, or because of indirect functions that are

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established through shared formal characteristics (e.g., stimulus generalization) or similar processes. Verbal events have functions because of derived stimulus relations, and thus, the presence of a conventional, socially established relation between event y and event x can establish or alter the functions of each event in terms of the functions of the other (for a more detailed discussion of the nature of such relations see Hayes & Hayes, 1992).

Verbal behavior greatly increases the importance of the cultural level of analysis because it enormously increases the capacity for cultural practices. A cultural practice can be transmitted through direct training, and this can involve verbal behavior or not. The famous case of a troop of Japanese monkeys that has evolved a practice of washing sweet potatoes in sea water before eating them (Kawai, 1965), shows that cultural practices exist in nonverbal organisms. The behavior of the first monkey to wash potatoes (a female named "Imo") was reinforced

by a series of natural contingencies: first the sensory stimulation provided by water play, then the increased effectiveness of river water as a means of removing sand, and finally salt water as a flavoring even for clean potatoes. The terminal behavior spread, quite slowly, to her playmates, then to their mothers, and, after over 15 years, to adult males in the troop. The primary operative process, environmental enhancement and accidental forms of reinforcement (Asano, 1994), appears to have been quite direct. When we are looking at the prevalence of this behavior within the troop, analyzed in terms of the sources of its social propagation, we are looking at potato washing as a cultural practice. Because such an analysis leads to coherent scientific statements, potato washing clearly is definable as a cultural practice in a nonverbal group.

Many human cultural practices may be acquired similarly. For example, in Korea children learn to bow to their elders as a form of greeting, while in the United States they shake hands. This particular behavior is transmitted through direct training such as modeling, instruction, prompting, and differential feedback; some of this training involves verbal behavior, while some does not.

While verbal behavior is not necessary to culture, the verbal propagation of cultural practices is dominant because verbal regulation is much less restricted by time and space as compared to nonverbal method of social propagation. For example, we can be told about what style of hair is popular in Paris and imitate the style without contacting the practice directly. We can read books written by Greek philosophers dead for millennia, and change how we think or speak about life issues. We can hear radio conversations between commentators thousands of miles away and change our verbal practices. Indeed, verbal behavior of any kind is necessarily also a cultural practice, since verbal behavior is the quintessential form of social behavior.

The acquisition of cultural practices is delimited from spatial or temporal proximity by verbal behavior and its technological accompaniments and, as a result, human psychological activity is increasingly dominated by verbal and other cultural influences. A huge percentage of our behavior is, in some sense, verbal.

This means that an adequate functional analysis of complex human behavior cannot rely on the direct functions of events. Many of the sources of control over a given behavior will be indirect, abstract, arbitrary, and

derived; that is, many of the sources will be cultural and verbal. How are we to know what an event "means" in a functional sense without knowledge of a person's heritage and acculturation? There are few nonarbitrary reasons that the same hand signal for "OK" means "good" in the United States but is a serious insult in Brazil. Largely by social whim, this hand signal is in an equivalence class with "OK" and thus with "good" in one group, while it is in an equivalence class with something more like a raised middle finger for the other group. The only way we would be likely to know what this signal means for a client is to know whether the person is a Brazilian or an American and to know the cultural practices that are dominant in both countries. This is the sense in which we argue that a thoroughgoing functional analysis obviates the need for understanding cultural diversity, but understanding cultural diversity is a means to a thoroughgoing functional analysis.

The New Prejudice

The psychological actions of individuals are, in large part, the product of acculturation. This does not mean that any degree of knowledge about group memberships and the characteristics of those groups, no matter how detailed, can substitute for functional analysis when working with a given individual. To miss this point is to engage in a new form of prejudice.

In the form that impacts upon individuals, prejudice is the process by which judgments are made about an individual in the absence of actual evidence about that individual. The essence of such prejudging is this: generalizations about a group apply to an individual.

When prejudice involves negative stereotypes, we are quick to detect it. It is obviously prejudice if someone assumes that an African-American stranger is lazy or a Jewish person is stingy. If the judgment is broadly negative but is data based at the level of the group, we are still likely to detect the prejudicial process involved, although less so than in the first instance. For example, it will probably be detected as prejudice if someone assumes that a teenaged African-American stranger is a likely criminal because "a greater percentage of black teenagers are in jail than nonblacks."

However, the same judgment should apply even when the generalization is contemporary, positive, or politically correct. In the absence of evidence about the individual we should not assume that *this* Hispanic believes in the importance of family;

or that *this* Native American has a deep connection with the land, or that *this* Japanese person is polite, or that *this* Chinese person reveres elders. The point behind understanding cultural diversity should not be to create a whole new set of more sophisticated forms of prejudice.

The reason this danger is so great is that the effect is inherent in language itself. Without language, prejudice is just a word for stimulus generalization. If I have been shocked in the presence of a given black cat, I may now react fearfully to another black cat, who might be quite friendly. This effect, while possibly troubling, is at least based greatly on direct experience. But language enormously increases the ease and arbitrariness of generalization processes. When an event is verbally related to another, the attributes and functions of each can alter the functions of the other. Suppose I learn that "Zuks are mean, sullen, and selfish." Furthermore, I learn that "Sam is a Zuk." Language itself will now enable me to suppose that "Sam is mean, sullen, and selfish" because the events related to "Zuks" are available with regard to Sam. This process is quite primitive, children under two years old show it clearly (e.g., Lipkens, Hayes, and Hayes, 1993; see Hayes and Hayes, 1992 for a more technical account of this process).

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The conclusion this leads to is troublesome. Instead of decreasing prejudice, making sure that therapists have more knowledge about cultural diversity can increase prejudice because it makes many more verbal attributes available to be inappropriately applied to individuals.

Working Together: Functional Analysis and Cultural Knowledge

The solution is not to learn less about given cultures. The solution is to keep functional analysis tightly linked to training in cultural diversity. The point behind therapists understanding cultural groups is so that they can better treat individuals. This is only likely if

cultural knowledge is used in therapy as a source of *hypotheses* about the history of individuals and the functions of their behaviors. These hypotheses, like any developed in the course of an adequate function analysis, must be tested systematically and examined critically as they apply to the individual in question.

As they apply to individuals, broad data-based generalizations about cultural groups are possibilities to be examined, not conclusions to be reached. They are judgmental aids, not substitutes for judgment.

This is not a new role for functional analysis. In its earliest development it was pitted against the dominance of syndromal classification. Any broad verbal category is an encouragement to prejudice if the category is delinked from methods of knowing more about individuals. It is as much a matter of prejudice to *conclude* that "Esther is a borderline and therefore she will both love and hate me as a therapist" as it is to conclude that "Esther is an Asian and therefore will do well in math" or "Esther is a female and therefore will have a fear of success." Generalizations from the group to the individual are not properly viewed as *conclusions* about the individual, they are instead possibilities that might be worth examining at the level of the individual in a given analytic context. In behavior therapy we have a powerful method for doing just that: functional analysis. Functional analysis is not just a nice adjunct to knowledge about cultural diversity; it is behavior therapists' prophylactic for prejudice.

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