

## On the Social and Political Implications of Cognitive Psychology

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Psychological theories and practices inform the analysis and problem-solving of human and social predicaments. As such, they often have significant sociopolitical implications. The place of prominence enjoyed by cognitivism in psychology requires that we examine its ideological, social and political repercussions. It is argued that the primacy ascribed to the *mind* and the *individual agent* in cognitive psychology, in the best *Cartesian* tradition, tends to reinforce the need to adjust intrapsychic, as opposed to societal structures in the remediation of personal and social problems. Examples to support this argument are drawn from the areas of cognitive theory, research, education and therapy.

Psychological theories and practices have sometimes profound ideological and sociopolitical implications (for overviews see Jacoby, 1975; Larsen, 1986; Prilleltensky, 1989; Sullivan, 1984). Cognitive psychology, as it will be argued throughout this article, is not the exception to the rule. As the importance of cognitivism in the family of psychological theories continues to grow, so does the need to carefully examine its social and political repercussions.

Various currents of research and thought may be incorporated under the comprehensive umbrella of cognitive psychology. Theories referred to as cognitive are prevalent, *inter alia*, in the areas of personality (Hjelle and Ziegler, 1981; Kelly, 1971); clinical (Beck, 1976, 1982; Freeman and Greenwood, 1987; Mahoney, 1977; Mahoney and Freeman, 1985); developmental (Buck-Morss, 1979; Gholson and Rosenthal, 1984; Sampson, 1981); social psychology (Furby, 1979; Israel, 1979); learning (Anderson and Travis, 1983); information processing, perception, and artificial intelligence (Baars, 1986, Costall and Still, 1987; Gardner, 1985). Cognitive psychology's objects of study are the internal processes according to which the individual filters and manipulates physical and/or psychological stimulation. Its purpose is to unravel the mystery of the mind and how it affects

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behavior. Following Sampson (1981), I shall refer to cognitive psychology as "that broad and diverse range of psychological approaches which emphasize the structures and processes within the individual's mind that are said to play the major role in behavior" (p. 730). At the same time that these approaches emphasize cognition, I concur with Gardner (1985) in that they de-emphasize affect, context, culture and history (pp. 41–42.).

With these defining characteristics, the modern cognitive paradigm may be in fact considered the vivid legacy of Cartesianism. As Gardner (1985) observed, "René Descartes is perhaps the prototypical philosophical antecedent of cognitive science" (p. 50). Descartes has largely set the parameters not only of cognitive psychology but of psychology as a whole. Capra (1982) has stated rather categorically that "the science of psychology has been shaped by the Cartesian paradigm. Psychologists, following Descartes, adopted the strict division between the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*" (p. 164). And while behaviorism attempted to do away with mind altogether and restrict psychology to the science of the observable, we witness today in psychology a resurgence of dualism in favor of *res cogitans*. Skinner (1987) has recently admitted, with some disdain, that psychology has remained "primarily a search for internal determiners" (p. 780). "The 'new' cognitive sciences are to some extent retracings of an older 'mentalism' that the behaviorists had attempted to bury" (Robinson, 1985, pp. 18–19). Although this trend has not gone unchallenged, and some psychologists try to promote *anti-dualism* and *mutualism* (Still and Costall, 1987), opposition has done little to undermine its supremacy (Costall and Still, 1987; Sampson, 1981).

The Cartesian dualism created difficulties not only for understanding how mind and body interact but also how mind and social context interact. Reconstituting the mind as an autonomous entity relegated both organic and environmental variables to a second place. To the extent that cognitive psychology has adopted the Cartesian "mind," it has propounded and affirmed an abstracted person (Sampson, 1983, chapter 9; Still and Costall, 1987), a person conceptualized primarily as a self-generated being:

In this Cartesian viewpoint, the individual was presumed to be a substance or *entity* (a thinking entity as distinct from a material body) rather than a *relation*. . . . Insofar as our psychology insistently extirpates the actor from the scene, we become incapable of learning that the scene is as important in shaping the actor's performance as the actor is in shaping the scene. (Sampson, 1983, pp. 96–97)

This epistemological position of cognitivism has sociopolitical repercussions that, given the place of prominence enjoyed by cognitive theories in psychology today (Baars, 1986; Skinner, 1987), must be subjected to scrutiny. Two important works have dealt with the sociopolitical implications of cognitive theory: Sampson's "Cognitive Psychology as Ideology" (1981), which focuses mainly on its research and theory construction, and Anderson and Travis's *Psychology and the Liberal Consensus* (1983), which centers on the educational applications of cognitive

theory. Neither has addressed the growing specialty of cognitive therapy. The present analysis will attempt to fill that void.

### Cognitive Theory and Research

Central to understanding the social and political implications of cognitive theory and research is the concept of reification. Reification refers to

The act of regarding an abstraction as a material thing. An analysis of any relationship in a complex world involves a process of simplification through a set of abstractions in which certain aspects of a given phenomenon are selected and stressed. . . . If they are taken as a complete description of the real phenomenon and the resulting abstractions endowed with a material existence of their own, the process exemplifies . . . a special case of the fallacy of reification. (Labeledz, 1988, p. 735)

In other words, reification is the treatment of one particular instance of a phenomenon as a discrete entity accounting for the phenomenon itself. In the case of human behavior, certain cognitions that may be involved in the overall phenomenon of behaving are regarded not only as distinct events, standing on their own, but also as causative forces of the behavior under examination. Two intimately related cognitive tendencies, obvious derivatives of Cartesianism, may be said to be conducive to reification in cognitive psychology: (a) personal cognitive causation, and (b) de-emphasis on context. These practices, as I shall point out, have significant implications for the social and political realm.

#### *Personal Cognitive Causation*

Personal cognitive causation refers, in the explanation of human behavior, to the primacy given to individual thought processes that have been conceptually disconnected from the sociohistorical context. In the study of personality this is a common practice, for "most researchers of personality use measures (and concepts) that are taken out of context" (Gergen, Comer Fisher, and Hepburn, 1986, p. 1261).

A popular analogy (attributed to Kelly) is that of the "person as scientist" (Hjelle and Zigler, 1981). A person acts as a scientist in that s/he selects the information available to him/her, interprets, and functions accordingly. This process entails the elaboration of hypotheses, their confirmation or rejection, and the building of personal theories that assist the individual in her/his daily decision-making and performance. Much like scientists, lay people differ in their interpretations of the world. A number of these cognitive moments involved in decision-making and acting become reified when they are "abstracted from the particular sociohistorical conditions of (their) constitution" (Sampson, 1981, p. 737). As a result, cognitive abstractions are granted a "timeless, objective standing" (Sampson, 1981, p. 737).

An illustrative case of the personal cognitive causation tendency is the construct *locus of control*. Locus of control "refers to the individual's perception of where the causal agent of an observed environmental change is located" (Furby, 1979, p. 170). That individuals who attribute change to internal or personal causes behave, under certain circumstances, quite differently from external attributors (e.g., Mikulincer, 1988) is not disputed here. What is debatable is the privileging of "internalizers" in the literature.

Several authors have documented the explicit preference of psychologists for those with internal, as opposed to external locus of control (Anderson and Travis, 1983; Furby, 1979; Gergen, Comer Fisher, and Hepburn, 1986; Gurin, Gurin and Morrison, 1978; Sampson, 1981). Following the desirability of the former, great efforts have been directed at finding ways to both reduce external and increase internal locus of control (Fubry, 1979). Why, it may be asked, have psychologists idealized those with internal locus of control? The answer does not lie in correlates of psychological well-being, for under certain conditions "externalizers" have been found to cope with adversity better than "internalizers" (e.g., Mikulincer, 1988); but rather in the belief that "events in any individual's environment are generally contingent on that individual's behavior" (Furby, 1979, p. 173). Psychologists' long standing love affair with this version of self-contained individualism has been eloquently presented by Sampson (1977) in his "Psychology and the American Ideal." This is the belief referred to as the supreme self—an omnipotent individual empowered to cope with misfortune. It is quite amazing that, in spite of the fact that countless events in one's environment are not controlled by one's actions, psychologists continue to foster the (illusory?) concept of internal locus of control.

At this point the sociopolitical implications of the nurturance of internal locus of control become quite clear. By praising those who attribute success and failure to internal causes, supporters of the internal model reinforce the existing Protestant ethic, a constitutive element of American society. Hard work and determination, in spite of societal obstacles, will lead to prosperity (Bellah et al., 1985). Furby (1979) summarized the political effects of the promotion of internal locus of control as follows:

Those in positions of power and affluence have much to gain from increasing the *internality* of beliefs about locus of control, and much to lose from increasing *externality*. If one perceives the inability to find a job as the result of one's own actions, then the response is likely to be either apathy or "self-improvement." In contrast if one perceives unemployment to be the inevitable result of an economic system incapable of supporting full employment, then one's response might be much less pleasant for those in power. (p. 176)

Locus of control was presented as one instance of personal cognitive causation. In reinforcing the internal type, psychologists may be preventing the advent of social changes by fortifying the belief in the individual's potential to change

him/herself to cope with misfortune, rendering social structures more or less intact. Other examples of personal cognitive causation, such as motivation, may be found in Anderson and Travis (1983, chapter 4), Israel (1979) and Sampson (1981).

### *De-Emphasis on Context, Culture, and History*

Gardner (1985) contends that a constitutive element of cognitive science is the demotion of context, culture, and history. By definition, "cognitivism is the attempt to explain human . . . cognition in terms of internal representations and rules" (Costall and Still, 1987, p. 15). The search for internal operations and avoidance of environmental "contamination" has led cognitive psychologists to rely heavily on the computer. Not only has the human being been compared to the "bright machine" (Robinson, 1985), but there are mounting projects attempting to reveal something fundamental about human thought through Artificial Intelligence [AI] (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1987). Although this is not the place to examine the merits of AI, I shall only say, as did Robinson (1985), that the psychological aspects of AI remain entirely with the programmer and not with the machine. At any rate, it is quite obvious that cognitive psychology has gone to great length to sterilize its subject matter from material pollution.

By focusing almost exclusively on internal processes the cognitive psychologist is exposed to the risk of losing sight of sociohistorical variables that may influence our way of thinking and operating in society. Behavior is not the sole product of thinking but also of external conditions.

What are the possible sociopolitical repercussions of this asocial position? Inasmuch as cognitive psychology may be considered the psychology of the day, and its acontextual theories and postulates extend to applied fields such as psychotherapy, education, social problem-solving and conflict resolution, it would not be unreasonable to expect that the latter would stress the need to adjust the mind, and not society, in order to promote well-being (Sampson, 1981). Conceptual changes would take precedence over social changes (Anderson and Travis, 1983).

### **Cognitive Psychology and Education**

The social impact of the applications of cognitive psychology in education has been discussed at length by Anderson and Travis (1983). Therefore, I shall delimit this section to their main arguments and more recent developments.

According to Anderson and Travis (1983) the technocratic philosophy regnant in North America helped develop the notion that social problems will be solved by the social sciences—through education in particular. Although this belief gained credence at the beginning of the century with people like Dewey, it was only after the Second World War that this approach flourished. This formula for

social improvement proved to be particularly appealing for those in positions of power as the basic social structures would not be threatened, or even questioned. "The social change envisaged was not institutional but conceptual" (Anderson and Travis, 1983, p. 10.)

If poverty could not be eradicated before, proponents of the liberal consensus argued, it was mainly because there were not educational methods, endowed with cognitive theories, to successfully teach slum children. Although no one within the "liberal consensus" would deny the detrimental effects of growing up in a ghetto, a set of priorities was established that placed educational change in front of environmental change. In the sixties and seventies cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner was highly instrumental in supporting a national agenda in the United States that stressed the improvement of minds over settings (Anderson and Travis, 1983, chapter 3). This was based on a vacuous promise that educational "know-how" would enable children to rise above deleterious living conditions and attain upward social mobility. "The problem of the poor environment is dodged by arguing that what counts is training the child to get as much as possible out of his environment by way of acquiring problem solving skills" (Anderson and Travis, 1983, p. 27).

Though Anderson's and Travis' analysis pertains primarily to the sixties and the seventies, there is evidence to suggest that cognitive psychology's drive and actual impact on numerous areas of daily life, including of course education, has not diminished. Witness for instance the recent establishment of the academic journal *Applied Cognitive Psychology*. In one of its latest issues Sternberg (1988), a leading psychologist in the area of intelligence, concludes that "cognitive psychology has given the study of intelligence a 'new lease on life,' and that the testing and teaching of intelligence can and should be viewed as a primary focus of application for the principles of cognitive psychology" (p. 231). He further makes the point that "in education, the time is truly at hand for the application of cognitive theory to testing and training" (p. 250). Undoubtedly, many benefits could be derived from a refined cognitive psychology, and Sternberg (1988) does an excellent job of showing its potential. These advances, however, are undermined by the primacy attributed to the improvement of the mind by mind-techniques exclusively. While certain affluent sectors of the population may derive great enjoyment in perfecting their cognitive skills by intellectual exercise, others less fortunate worry about more fundamental needs.

When combating social ills governments usually focus on a limited range of variables. Very rarely do governments approach a systemic problem from a systemic point of view. They are more likely to concentrate their efforts on a well-defined and narrow piece of the puzzle. It is because of this mode of functioning that explanatory preferences and *priorities* established by social scientists are of crucial importance. When theorizing about social mobility, a social scientist speculates about the percentage of variability accounted for by cognitive and environmental factors. Should his/her theories give more weight

to the cognitive part of the equation, governments will be more than happy to quote that scientist and focus their attention on reshaping the mind and not the environment. Anderson and Travis (1983) cogently argue that this was precisely what happened with the work of Bruner, and if history has something to teach us, it is not unlikely that Sternberg's contributions would be used in a similar manner.

### Cognitive Therapy

In the last fifteen years the prominence of the cognitive modality in the therapeutic community has become almost indisputable. Cognitive therapy, largely shaped by the initial work of Beck with depressed patients (Beck, 1976), has by now expanded significantly and is being applied in numerous settings to a variety of populations, including children, the elderly, chronic patients, alcoholics, etc. (Emery, Hollon, and Bedrosian, 1981; Freeman and Greenwood, 1987).

The primary objective of cognitive therapy is to modulate and eventually eradicate irrational thoughts that are said to be conducive to emotional disorders (Beck, 1976; Ellis, 1985; Ellis and Harper, 1961; for an updated overview see Freeman, 1987). "The therapist helps a patient to unravel his distortions in thinking and to learn alternative, more *realistic* [italics added] ways to formulate his experience" (Beck, 1976, p. 3). Beck (1976) further argues that "psychological problems can be mastered by sharpening discrimination, correcting misconceptions, and learning more *adaptive* [italics added] attitudes" (p. 20). Notice the similar emphasis on "reality" and "adapting" by Freeman (1987): "The goal of therapy is to help patients uncover their dysfunctional and irrational thinking, *reality-test* [italics added] their thinking and behavior, and build more *adaptive* [italics added] and functional techniques for responding both inter- and intrapersonally" (pp. 19–20). The "reality" alluded to both by Beck and Freeman is never questioned.

To be sure, therapists are not expected to be leaders in social change. But, also to be sure, their activities may inadvertently generate not an insignificant degree of conformity in their clientele and, furthermore, promote individualistic—as opposed to institutional—changes (cf. Beit-Hallahmi, 1974; Halleck, 1971). Cognitive therapists, by virtue of their focal attention on thought processes, are particularly prone to foster both of the above. A few examples will illustrate this claim.

Ellis (1985; Ellis and Harper, 1961), founder of Rational Emotive Therapy, and one of cognitive therapy's pioneers, has compiled a list of irrational thoughts said to interfere with healthy psychological functioning. Irrational idea No. 9 deals with accepting reality (Ellis and Harper, 1961, chapter 18). Basically, it contends that you should not feel terrible if things are not the way you would like them to be. And if you do, you engage in irrational thinking. Ellis and Harper (1961) explain: "When people and events are the way you would like

them not to be, there is actually relatively little pernicious effect they can have on you unless you *think* they can" (p. 163). The immediate implication is that if you change your *thinking* about people and events they will obviously stop annoying you. Once again, the implication here is modify your mind, not the material circumstances. Irrational thought No. 9 may be in fact renamed prescription for conformity No. 1. In another source, Ellis (1982) details how one of his patients was not pleased with his working conditions and some of the demands placed on him by his employer. While there certainly might have been room for negotiation for improvement in working conditions, Ellis chooses to guide his client to a quiet, peaceful, and "rational" acceptance and resignation in the work place. These were but two examples of the numerous conforming messages implicit in Ellis' Rational Emotive Therapy.

Other instances where cognitive therapy may inadvertently strengthen the status quo, even when environmental changes are required for immediate therapeutic purposes, come from the fields of School and Child-Clinical Psychology. Cognitive therapies for school-age children have become very popular in the last decade. An array of cognitive therapies have been suggested to treat learning as well as social and behavioral problems (Braswell and Kendall, 1988; Di Giuseppe, 1981; Gholson and Rosenthal, 1984; Kendall and Braswell, 1984). The many virtues of these mechanisms can frequently be questioned because of their lack of emphasis on environmental changes required to suit the particular needs of the youngster. In the same way that governments prefer a "mind-fix" over a "setting-fix," many school administrators, teachers, and parents favor "mind" therapies that focus on the child and leave the adults, the classroom, and the social order of the school unaltered.

A final and recent example of the way cognitive therapy may serve the status quo has been furnished by Stoppard (1989). Her review of the literature on the cognitive-behavioral treatment of depressed women led to the conclusion that these theories fail to address the external factors conducive to that psychological state. Instead, there is a marked emphasis on internal deficits. This type of theorizing is likely to promote victim-blaming and to exculpate social norms and conditions that may in fact be pathogenic. Stoppard (1989) observed that

because these therapies are based on deficit models of depression, the message likely to be given to clients is that they have become depressed because they are deficient in some way. Therapists risk falling into the trap of victim-blaming when they interpret the depressed person's negative cognitions as solely the product of distorted cognitive processes or dysfunctional attitudes, rather than exploring the possibility that negative cognitions may reflect a negative reality. . . . Areas of presumed vulnerability are emphasized as targets for change, whereas the potential clinical importance of changing the person's situation receives little attention in therapy goals. (p. 46)

### Conclusion

Though the preoccupation of cognitive psychology with individual thought

processes lends itself to solving social problems by individualistic—thus conservative—means, this particular branch of psychology may play an important role in resisting indoctrination by guardians of the status quo. It is within the realm of cognitive psychology to develop techniques to help people discern whether the present social system is indeed “rational.” Once cognitive psychologists start questioning the sacredness of the external world, their formula to solving human problems will likely incorporate sociopolitical elements and not only intellectual ones.

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