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COMMENTARY

The Beyond Must Also be Useful: The Burden of Alternative Approaches

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Abstract Advocates of many different approaches have, for years, attempted to usurp cognitive psychology's dominance in the field of psychology. Unfortunately, none of these approaches have yet made a convincing case that they could take cognitive psychology's place. Because of its explicit use of the mind-as-computer model, cognitivism gains a false sense of concreteness, and becomes pragmatically useful. Because their models are implicit, alternatives, such as phenomenology, gain a false sense of ambiguity and lose their pragmatic potential. In addition, alternative theories often alienate potential sympathizers through unnecessarily harsh criticism. This leads to a professional attitude in which one must take sides, rather than an attitude that appreciates the benefits of diversity, and may lead to the emergence of other beneficial models. If alternative approaches, such as Dr. Flores-González's (Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Sciences, 2008), could push through to the point of immediate usefulness, and present themselves in a less adversarial way, they would be much better placed make meaningful contributions.

The biggest problem with cognitivism is that it is very useful. Cognitivism offers a clear framework, and that framework is flexible, in that it allows many different theoretical constructs to be plugged into the same holes; it is utilitarian, in that almost no matter what you put in the holes you can then do something with the product; and it is conformist, in that it is a logical continuation of the Western thought that preceded it. Further (or perhaps as a result), though cognitive terms are used in hopelessly ambiguous ways, they provide a firm illusion of concreteness. The combination of flexibility, usefulness, intuitiveness, and seeming concreteness make it is easy for aspiring psychologists to accept the cognitive approach, and once they do so they can easily go about having a career—performing experiments, publishing papers, getting funding, presenting their work to the public, and interacting with colleagues.

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For example, if you were interested in "how memory affects perceived meaning", how would you go about investigating it? "Memory" could be operationalized in a wide variety of ways; memory could refer to what people remember in the present, any change in behavior following an event you (the investigator) are sure happened, the effects of bodily (neuronal?) alterations on future behavior, the retention of a conditioned response, etc. "Perception" and "meaning" are similarly, if not more, ambiguous. Perhaps you will ask people to recall certain events in their lives, then have them interpret ink-blots; perhaps you will flash lists of words for 50 ms at a time, then see if they feel positively towards words you repeated several times; perhaps you will ask people the perspective from which they view specific memories, then test them for their accuracy in recalling important aspects of the event; the variety is almost infinite. Despite this incredible lack of specificity of the question, it is easily transformed into a concrete empirical endeavor. Whatever the form of the study, the results could be reported in the local newspaper and the average high school student reading it will nod their head as if they are learning something important about human nature. Further, if you also give the task to chimps or dolphins it can make national headlines—"Chimps perception of meaning less affected by memory manipulations than teenagers"—despite the headline saying nothing concrete, it is perceived as understandable and straightforward.

Alas, the situation is almost the complete opposite for most attempts to get "beyond cognitivism": They are not, or at least do not seem, useful in the above sense. They are not flexible, in that they are picky about which theoretical constructs are plugged into a given hole; they are not utilitarian, in that it is often unclear how to implement a program of research based on the theories, even if you agree with them completely; and they are non-conformist, in that they involve rejecting the way lay westerners think of the world. Further (or perhaps as a result), though the terms used might be quite concrete, they provide a firm illusion of being hopelessly ambiguous. The combination of little flexibility, little usefulness, unintuitiveness and seeming ambiguity, make it difficult for aspiring psychologists to understand, and further, once the neophytes become convinced, it will be difficult for them to go about standard professional activities.

For example, if one were interested in "whether affirming 'I am in the world' is indeed an action that configures us" (Flores-González 2008), how would one go about investigating it? No, seriously, how? What function does the term 'affirmation' serve, and how can we operationalize it? Surely just getting people to say "I am in the world" is insufficient (for example, when my infant says it, or a non-English speaking adult). What if we get native English speakers to say it, but they do not believe it? Whatever criterion is decided for identifying an 'affirmation', how will we tell if it has 'configured us'? Surely, most lay westerners have believed they are in the world for as long as they have believed anything, so getting them to affirm it will not alter them further. How do we characterize a before state and an after state, and what types of changes count as a "configuration" as opposed to a mere alteration?[1] Finally, even if these limitations are overcome, what specific studies can

[1] Note, as discussed above: These terms *seem* hopelessly ambiguous. However, because we can easily start to tell what criterion will *not* work, they are likely much more concrete than the terms in the cognitive example.

be performed? Who will participate in the studies? What major newspaper or popular magazine will be interested in writing a story about the results?

Starting Point

Despite this discrepancy, we are convinced that these alternatives could be useful, and that at least some of them have the potential to be much more useful than the cognitive alternative. We believe the cause of the problem is largely due to the fact that cognitive psychology uses an *explicit* model while phenomenological psychology (at least of the variety in question here) uses an *implicit* model. Cognitive psychology was explicitly founded by setting the computer as a model for the mind (Nesser 1967). Memory input, storage and retrieval, information processing, etc. all flow logically from that model, and anything that seems to reasonably fit the model can be considered sensical within that system. By not making their model clear, phenomenologists are at a disadvantage.

That a model is being used is clear from the vocabulary: "movement", "point of view", "relation", "configure", etc. It is obvious that these words are being used metaphorically, that they cannot have their straightforward meaning, and hence that some model is being employed.

We are told, for example, that:

> The phenomenological task does not simply consist of the construction of a theory of knowledge, but rather, above all, a new point of view about the relations that bind us to the things in themselves. (Flores-González 2008)

As we understand this passage, it claims that the activities of a phenomenologist do not fit well into the model of "construction"—that is, they are not trying to build something. Instead, they are trying to find "a point of view". We choose the word "find", because we cannot make sense of the notion of "constructing a point of view", which would be the more natural reading of the quote. A "point of view" refers to the fact that objects and events appear differently to us depending upon the location we are observing from; that is, standing in one place I will see some things whereas standing in another place I will see different things, or the same things in a different way. One can construct a device that allows someone to stand in a location in which they could not stand before (for example a hot air balloon), and it would not be absurd to say that one thus constructed the ability "to take" a given point of view, but nothing about the view itself is being constructed.[2] Instead it is more natural to talk of moving around an object until one sees it in the desired way, thus "finding" or "identifying" the desired point of view. In particular, the phenomenologist is trying to find a point from which we appear to be in a particular type of relation to other objects—a relation understood using the additional model of "binding".

[2] The only condition under which "constructing a point of view" seems appropriate is in the case of artistic design, in which the world is altered so that it appears differently. For example, one can make a model of a situation, and frame the model such that it can only be seen from a given angle, in which it appears a particular way. However, using such a situation as a model is clearly not compatible with the phenomenologist's more general goals of revealing what is already there.

Being "bound" is a type of relationship in which one thing is connected to another in a way in which it is difficult for either thing to become disconnected. For example, a string may bind together several pieces of wood; the hands of a criminal may be bound by handcuffs; etc. Because we are concerned with points of view, we are still in the world of appearances, so a good model might be that of a magic levitation trick—the magician has what appears to be a ball floating magically between his hands, but really there are very thin strings connects from each hand to the ball. From the point of view of the audience, far away, the ball appears disconnected from the magician's hands, but if they were to get closer, they would be at a point of view from which the ball was obviously bound to the magician's hands. The phenomenologist claims that the cognitivist is like the far-away audience member; from their point of view we appear disconnected from the objects of the world. The phenomenologist claims that this point of view is misleading, and believing *a priori* that we are connected to the objects of the world: He hopes to find a different point of view and then lead others to stand in that new location.

Hence, the meat of the above claim, which initially seemed so ambiguous, can be rephrased into the rather concrete:

> If you look at the world in a particular way, it will appear that we are connected to the objects of our experiences, not divorced from them.

This claim is immediately testable, at least in so much as (1) it is possible to test whether there is variation in how people see the world along this particular dimension, (2) it is possible to test means of changing people who see the world from the undesired position into people who see the world from the desired position, (3) it can be tested if people who see the world from the desired position naturally fall in line with other phenomenological tenants, etc.

This is just one example, with one phrase, but it should be sufficient to demonstrate the point: Once the model is made explicit, and the language simplified in accordance with the model, not only does the phenomenologist's claim become useful, it becomes far more concrete than the cognitivist's claims. Unlike in the cognitive case in which anything was possible, it will be relatively easy to tell whether or not a given study actually examined the phenomenologist's claim.

Conflict and Resolution

In addition to the problem of not pushing their theory through to the point of utility, we feel that alternative approaches generally, and the phenomenologist as presented by Flores-González in particular (2008), try to argue too harshly against cognitivism. They do this as the consequence of a strong *a priori* belief about the subject matter; it is defined from the start that "subjectivity and the embodied consciousness correspond to complex, and thus irreducible, dimensions." (Flores-González 2008). In this, the phenomenologist echoes the claim that has been brought forward before in criticism of cognitivism (and before that behaviorism): Phenomenologists argue that cognitivism reduces its subject matter to the point that it cannot account for the huge complexity we call human life. From this perspective it clearly seems necessary to find a better model to explain the problem at hand. To its adherents,

phenomenology, with its claim of going back to the things themselves (Husserl 1913), seems to offer a more genuine way for psychologists to address their subject matter. By addressing the full complexity of human life, they seek to re-humanize present science, which has been de-humanized through inappropriate reduction.

Certainly, to an extent, the anti-reductionist criticism is correct. No cognitive scientist to date has explained everything about human nature in its full complexity. On the other hand, the criticism cannot be as devastating as the anti-cognitivists often propose, in light of cognitivism's usefulness. That is, if cognitivism does not capture *anything*, why is it so useful, and how does it work so well? The most likely answer is that people are using two different models, cognitivists and phenomenologist are simply interested in accounting for different phenomena. Models, by definition, share some aspects in common with what they are said to model, but not all aspects. Models are proposed by people concerned with specific aspects of the target situation. Assuming the model is not wholly inappropriate, the way in which it maps onto the target situation will depend on the priorities of the person proposing the model.

If we understand cognitivism and phenomenology as offering different models, the cause of the conflict between them quickly becomes obvious. The cognitivists offer the explicit metaphor of "the computer", claiming that it is a good model, the phenomenologist offers "the things themselves". Each approach then develops a set of possible descriptions/explanations that frame what can be said within it's system, which govern what can be considered coherent from that point of view. Every descriptive framework makes new directions of thinking and acting possible, by creating its own vocabulary combined with its own set of coherences, i.e. its own internal logic. Hence, a description made in the vocabulary of cognitivism need not be understandable in the vocabulary of phenomenology: Given its obvious lack of humanity, the usefulness of the computer metaphor does not seem much of a virtue within a vocabulary framework that explicitly seeks to avoid dehumanizing metaphor. Similarly, a description made in the vocabulary of phenomenology need not be understandable in the vocabulary of cognitivism: Given its unwillingness to operationalize theoretical constructs into easily measurable units, the potentially heightened truth value of the "things themselves" approach does not seem much of a virtue within a vocabulary framework that wants to break human function down into manipulate-able variables.

Given the obvious difference in their domains of concern, why do phenomenologists attack cognitivism and vise versa? The problem is that both the cognitivists and the phenomenologists want not just the agreement of their fellow practitioners, but also the Truth (with a capital "T"). Further, and this is the cause of the conflict, they want everyone, including those operating in incommensurate systems, to acknowledge that they found the Truth. That is, they are trying to find answers within their framework that cannot be denied under any other framework—and when their findings are inevitably denied, or worse ignored, they take it as a sign of ignorance and feel the need to hurl insults. This fighting unfortunately forces those in and around the struggle to make a commitment to one or the other descriptive system, thus undermining the possibility of a plurality of approaches. That is, it leads to a professional intolerance.

The harsh criticisms that fly between different approaches lead to these problems. What could be a possible solution, a possible way out? If, instead of starting out thinking of different approaches as possible ways of finding Truth, we think of them

as models that highlight certain aspects of the phenomena of interest, we can accept incommensurability within and between systems. This is because we can then examine these descriptive systems in terms of their independent coherence. Further, there are potential benefits gained by taking such a pluralistic approach. Sensitivity to the inconsistencies between systems makes obvious the need for new models, which will in turn provide a greater range of possibilities for future ways of thinking about and acting in the world. Hence, instead of fighting the multiplicity by struggling about the right approach, we might be better served by encouraging a diversity of new descriptive systems that help enrich our perspectives.

Conclusion

Those advocating so-called alternatives to cognitivism bear a heavy burden. First, they must be able to present their approach in a way that allows others to understand the new system and to use it in ways necessary for empirical examination, professional development, and public presentation. This goal is achievable; the initial step towards achieving it is to make the models underlying the vocabulary explicit, rather than leaving it implicit. Second, to prove they have a true "alternative" they must argue that their system can be accepted fully, and cognitivism can be rejected fully. This is almost certainly not achievable; the reason is that the domains of interest presented by the alternatives are different than the domain of interest of cognitivism. Instead, the alternatives should encourage diversity, and emphasize the situations in which their approaches can lead to benefits that the cognitive approach would not allow. If they followed this suggestion fully, they would encourage a variety of approaches and foster the production of new ideas. If in many years it is found that their approach has exerted its influence, it will not be because they brow beat outsiders, but because people could achieve their goals within the system or it's yet unthought of derivatives.

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