Cognitive Psychology as Ideology

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ABSTRACT: A critical analysis of some of the major work in cognitive social, personality, and developmental psychology is offered. The author argues that cognitivism, by virtue of the primacy it gives to the individual knower, to subjective determinants of behavior, and to formal cognitive operations, represents a set of values and interests that reproduce and reaffirm the existing nature of the social order. But the joining of cognitive psychology with ideology is not simply intended to unmask the values carried by the cognitivist approach. The issue of values also raises serious questions about the nature of psychological science. Four case examples are critically examined as the basis for the claims made in this article: (1) the deficiencies of interactionism, (2) cognitivism's denial of reality, (3) psychological reification, and (4) cognitive-developmental theory and the technical interest in knowledge. A concluding comment calls for a new and transformative psychology, not of what is, but of what may yet be.

In this article I argue that the cognitive perspective in psychology, by virtue of the primacy it gives to the individual knower and to subjective determinants of behavior, and though appearing to reveal something fundamental and invariant about the human mind, represents a set of values and interests that reproduce the existing nature of the social order. By focusing attention on values, I intend to accomplish more than a simple unmasking of the values and interests that a cognitivist perspective represents. The issue of values also raises serious questions about the nature of our psychological science itself.

The cognitive perspective invites a critical examination for two major reasons. First, cognitivism represents a dominant point of view in contemporary social, personality, and developmental psychology. In one manner or another, structures and processes within the individual's mind have become the central focus of our major theories and empirical investigations. Second, several investigators (e.g., Kruglanski, 1979; Weisz & Zigler, 1979) have suggested that cognitive forms represent psychology's long-sought candidate for universal standing, the essential building blocks of the human mind. Any claim this substantial clearly warrants our attention and critical scrutiny.

Cognitivism

By cognitive psychology, I refer to 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: a psychology of the subject rather than of the object. The cognitivist tradition is usually contrasted with the objectivist tradition of British empiricism, which has also influenced the contemporary forms of psychology but which emphasizes the properties of the object more than those of the subject (see Gibbs, 1979; Taylor, 1979; Cegren, Note 1). Cognitive psychology recognizes a disparity between what is "out there" and its internal representation and argues that behavior is a function of the subjective world as transformed and represented internally. People respond to how they define stimulus situations, not to the objective properties of those stimulus situations.

The cognitive perspective has had a long and distinguished history in psychology; its philosophical roots can be traced through the tradition of Descartes and Kant up to the many modern offshoots of this subject-dominated point of view (see Russell, 1945). This tradition of Western thought contains two significant and related reductions. The first involves a subjectivist reduction, which grants primacy to the structures and processes of the knowing subject. The second involves an individualistic reduction, which grants primacy to the thinking and reasoning of the individual knower, for example, Descartes's heritage of the "I think." The most fundamental challenge to these reductions does not derive either from the British empiricist tradition or from the apparent nonrationality of the Romanticist alternative, but from the materialist analysis of ideology itself (see Horkheimer, 1972; Marcuse, 1968).

The preceding reductions should be familiar to...
Neisser argues that the revolution in computer technology and simulation spurred psychology onward to its present cognitivist emphasis. Like Cartwright and others, Neisser (1976) expresses his own misgivings about this dominance, urging a more real-worldly turn: "We may have been lavishing too much effort on hypothetic models of the mind and not enough on analyzing the environment that the mind has been shaped to meet" (pp. 7–8).

Neisser's call for a less mentalistic and more ecologically relevant psychology has also been heard from others. Bronfenbrenner (1977), for example, is explicit in his insistence on including the nested systems within which human behavior takes place and that participate in its determination. While a close reading of his arguments suggests to me that he continues the subjectivist primary (see p. 516), the overall thrust of Bronfenbrenner's position nevertheless grants greater substance to the objective and collective social and historical settings within which human behavior occurs.

A recent article by Gibbs echoes this call for an ecologically oriented inquiry. It is Gibbs's (1979) contention that what is now needed is a transactional approach involving "the mutual play... between the subject's anticipations and the external properties of the object" (p. 134). Though Gibbs takes us toward the kind of critical perspective that I suggest is needed, he stops short of going beyond the individualistic threshold of Western epistemology since Descartes and Kant.

PARADIGM SHIFT AND VALUE SHIFT

These recent critiques share the view that a purely cognitivist psychology is an inadequate psychology. Likewise, I believe that all of the authors would agree with the assertion that the truncation of cognitivism cannot be answered with the often heard specialist's rejoinder that "we are only interested in studying mental processes within the individual." Insofar as cognition is part of a larger whole that affects its character, to study the part extrapolated from its context is entirely to misunderstand the nature of that part.

Yet, each of these critics and, for the most part, the majority of other critics of contemporary psychology, with few exceptions (e.g., see Gergen, 1978; Gergen & Morawski, Note 3), have failed to go beyond the threshold that their critique suggests. I believe that the step beyond has eluded them because it would demand a radical break not only with the existing tradition in psychology but also with psychology's relation to society: This step beyond challenges some of the major value assumptions that have governed Western thought and that continue to serve particular interests and particular social arrangements and practices.

My comments to this point must seem rather harsh. I do not make them lightly or without substantial foundation. The cognitivist emphasis that marks much of contemporary psychology participates in presenting a portrait of humanity in which mental events, mental activities, mental operations, mental organization, and mental transformations are of greater importance than events, activities, operations, organization, or transformation of the external world. Furthermore, not only are these mental operations cut off from their objective roots in social and historical practice, but also, in being located within the mind of the individual, they cut off people from effective action to change their circumstances rather than their subjective understanding of these circumstances.

In the pages that follow, I attempt to develop and to substantiate these assertions by selecting several major cognitivist approaches found today in psychology. I rest my case, for now, on a critical analysis of these cases. Four cases are to be examined—each reveals a further aspect or implication of the cognitivist ideology within contemporary psychology.

Case 1: How Interactionist
Is Interactionism?

The recent spate of interactionist theories and approaches in psychology (e.g., Bowers, 1973; Ekhart, 1974) might at first appear to offer a solution to the truncation of the purely cognitivist position. The thrust of the interactionist viewpoint is to return "reality" to its proper place in our understanding; thus, in most interactionist accounts, what interacts is the subject and reality. If interactionism had truly solved the problems of cognitivism, then the questions I have raised would surely be moot. However, this could be achieved only if the interactionist view were both nonsubjective and nonindividualist.

An examination of two assertions about interactionism leads me to conclude that it has not advanced beyond the value biases contained within the purely cognitivist perspective itself: (1) A subjectivist reduction still remains primary in most interactionist views; the subject is the active element, the object, a more passive and unchanging...
thing "out there." (2) Inquiry is rarely if ever addressed to the manner by which objects or situations are themselves constituted or cast and so appear as elements in the life world of the subject; in most accounts, reality remains an individualistic construction—its social and historical constitution is ignored.

THE ACTIVE SUBJECT IN A PASSIVE WORLD

The typical interactionist perspective argues that at least two terms must be considered, one pertaining to the subject, the other to the object. Behavior is said to be jointly determined by subject and object. As one examines this formulation more closely, however, one observes that the object exists only by virtue of the subject's definition of it. Epstein (1979), for example, while arguing that understanding and prediction require us to have a good system whereby situations can be classified, notes what is most important: "to know how individuals interpret different kinds of situations" (p. 1102). In this, there is a reduction of everything to the world view of the individual subject, which eliminates any independent, active status for the object. It also eliminates the possibility for subjects systematically to have a distorted or false understanding of the object, in that the object is defined entirely in subjective terms. In eliminating the possibility for a false consciousness, a false consciousness is thereby permitted to enter unnoticed.

Behavioristic accounts give us the person as a passive receptacle upon which an active world writes its messages; cognitivism has reversed this view by giving us a passive reality upon which the cognitively active person writes. Interactionism has for the most part not altered the latter point of view. The subject is still treated as the active agent, the object as the passive, unchanging element. Influences thereby become more of a one-way street (subject on object) than reciprocal (see Bandura, 1978, on a similar point).

This interactionist version is revealed in Piaget's approach (see Flavell, 1963; Piaget, 1971a, 1971b). The internal schemata of the subject assimilate the object, while the schemata, in turn, are transformed by accommodating themselves to the properties of the object. Although this may appear to be an advance over more simplistic accounts, in that the properties of the object have a chance to affect the subject, it has several important deficiencies.

First, the reality of the object is basically unchanged by the subject's actions on it. What is changed is the subject's apprehension of the object. Mental events are modified, but the object remains relatively unscathed. Indeed, as cognitive development moves from concrete to formal operations, mentation substitutes entirely for real-world action: People manipulate within their heads, thereby leaving objects and reality untouched other than by their conceptions of it (see Riegel, 1979, chap. 2, for an additional discussion of this point).

In this, Piaget's system clearly builds on a Kantian epistemology in which we apprehend the world of our understanding, of phenomena but not noumena, which are not objects in themselves. Thus, we cannot expect real objects to be changed in their objective reality, only in their subjective apprehension. A more materialist epistemology, however, one that the study of ideology has emphasized, argues that the objective world of social practices exists in itself and can be altered in itself and not merely in terms of the subject's apprehension of it. Piaget's interactionism, however, emphasizes the mentalistic even as he speaks otherwise.

In commenting critically on Piaget's analysis, Riegel (1976) notes that it "is restricted to the interaction between active organisms and passive objects" (p. 366). The image is of a world that waits to be assimilated by the transforming schemata of the active subject. Social reality and its social products are not given a dynamic of their own; the object terms are not treated as active agents, and the only activity comes from the subject. In this sense, therefore, Piaget's interactionism encourages a subjectivism even while its terminology speaks of interactions between subject and object.

An examination of the content areas primarily studied by Piaget and his associates indicates that they tend to be nonsocial—for example, concepts of space, time, number, conservation, transitivity, mathematical operations, and so forth. By selecting as the primary reality for study one that seems to suffer less than social reality from social and historical activity, Piaget has been successful in producing support for an active subject in a relatively less active world. Yet, if social reality has a dynamic governed by historical processes, then to treat its creation (i.e., its situations and objects) as passive elements to be acted upon by the subject while remaining themselves relatively passive and unchanging in this encounter is to affirm the primacy of mental over material events. It is to reify the subject, to freeze the object, and thus to miss their truly interactionist or dialectical meeting.

734 • JULY 1981 • AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGIST
THE CASTING OF STIMULUS OBJECTS AND SITUATIONS

With rare exception, even the most ecologically sensitive interactionists within psychology lack a social and historical understanding of the objects and situations that enter their formulations. It is as though objects and situations simply wait "out there" to be encountered by the perceiving subject, who deals with them in some manner and then moves on. Even the more reciprocally minded interactionists (e.g., Bandura, 1978) tend to emphasize the role that the subject or the subject's behavior plays in constituting environments and objects, rather than to view those environments and objects as socially and historically constituted.

A certain ideological blindness thereby results.

We speak of a person confronting a choice, for example, between taking Path A or Path B. To be interactionist about this matter, we introduce certain qualities for the person (e.g., cognitive style) and certain properties, valences, or incentive values regarding the two choices, A and B. We are now able to make statements concerning the probability that this particular person (or persons like this one) will choose A or B. And we appear to be doing this interactively, in terms of properties of both person and situation.

What the preceding fails entirely to consider, however, is how A and B entered the life world of the person in the first place. We deflect attention and understanding away from the social world that casts situations and objects; instead we emphasize the subjectivist and individualist actions taken once casting has been accomplished.

The critical theorist Max Horkheimer (1974) and the psychologist-educator Chris Argyris (1975, 1976) have addressed this issue of what I have termed the casting of stimulus objects and situations. Horkheimer speaks of instrumental reason, Argyris, of single-loop learning. Reasoning is said to be instrumental when it is directed toward fitting actions to the attainment of pregiven goals. Instrumental reason eliminates from its purview questions about how those became the goals in the first place or if they are the goals that serve us best. When we define the rationality of thinking and decision making in instrumental terms, we speak of people behaving rationally given the choices they confront; we fail to consider the possible non-rationality (for those people) of the set of alternatives that a given social form has made available for their seemingly rational selection (Gintis, 1972).

For Argyris, single-loop learning involves a kind of blindness akin to that governing a thermostat’s control of the temperature in a room: It operates instrumentally to retain the heating mechanism on a path to a pregiven temperature setting; it fails to probe beyond the pregiven and judge whether that goal is of value and serves its best interests.

When we fail to examine how the objects and situations that the subject confronts get there in the first place, our interactionism uncritically takes the existing object world as given. Our psychology implicitly affirms the values represented by the existing objects and situations. To achieve a different kind of sensitivity and understanding, we would need to see the objects, situations, and environments that enter our interactionist formulations as social and historical products and not as simple derivatives of individual consciousness, or individual behavior, or occurrences that just somehow happen to be present.

Case 2: The Denial of Reality

In one manner or another, each of the following exemplifies the cognitivist emphasis on the primacy of inner events and transformations over external events and transformations: (a) consistency theories, especially dissonance, (b) decentering, and (c) conflict resolution. My intention is not simply to show how the mental is granted superiority over the material, but just as important, briefly to examine the ideological consequences that derive from this emphasis.

It is my contention that the cognitivist perspective offers a portrait of people who are free to engage in internal mental activity—to plan, decide, wish, think, organize, reconcile, and transform conflicts and contradictions within their heads—and yet who remain relatively impotent or apparently unconcerned (in psychology’s world view) about producing actual changes in their objective social world. In substituting thought for action, mental transformations for real-world transformations, cognitivism veils the objective sources and bases of social life and relegates individual potency to the inner world of mental gymnastics.

Existing arrangements of power and domination within a society are served when people accept a change in their subjective experience as a substitute for changes in their objective reality (see Beil-Hallahmi, 1974; Buss, 1979). Cognitivism's denial of
reality serves the interests of the very reality that has been denied. Obviously, I am not saying that a cognitive psychology creates these conditions. What I am saying is that in the primacy it grants to subjectivism, cognitive psychology contributes to the very denial of which I speak and thus to the values and interests of the presently constituted reality.

THE DRIVE TOWARD CONSONANCE

Social psychology has lived for many years under the rule of one or another form of cognitive consistency theory, whether it be cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), symmetry (Newcomb, 1953), balance (Heider, 1958), congruity (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955), or whatever. Of these, the much used and often maligned theory of cognitive dissonance has had a major impact on the field. In its view, both contradictions and their reconciliation are primarily inner events; we do not hear much about objective contradictions, nor much about transforming social reality.

The mind is said to abhor dissonance and so tries to reduce it via mental gymnastics. Reality as such remains relatively untouched. Dissonance theory tells us, for example, that because we cannot change or take back what we have already done or been induced to do, the only recourse is to change our cognitions so as to produce inner harmony in the face of a dissonant reality. The hero in this story is the person who manages a self-change rather than a reality change—for example, believing that what is objectively dull and boring is actually fun and exciting. And the psychological villain or misfit is the person who declines to conceal an objective contradiction with a subjective fig leaf.

Dissonance theory describes people for whom harmony is achieved by abandoning the hope of affecting material reality and learning rather to change themselves. When seen in this light, the psychological process of dissonance reduction involves denying the reality in which we live and work in exchange for the hollow pleasure that cognitive nonstrain brings. What is objectively boring is lost in the name of a so-called psychological principle.

In what kind of social world, with what arrangements, institutions, and practices, does such a psychology make sense? Insofar as a psychological theory teaches us that we can solve material strain by mental manipulation, I believe dissonance theory takes its place alongside a growing list of comparable theses that affirm the existing social order by valuing its mental but not its material transformation.

It is important to note that I am not saying that dissonance theory is incorrect in its portrayal of the way today's consciousness functions. I am suggesting, rather, that we look at its ideological side and thus at the sense in which dissonance theory is also potentially a false consciousness. We spend much of our time and research ingenuity discovering how today's mind works, not so that we can offer critical insights into the meaning that such workings convey, but merely to affirm that this is the way it is supposed to be.

DECENTERING

The concept of decentering is taken from Piaget and refers to the ability to think abstractly. With decentering, people are able to separate self and their own perspective from the reality they observe and to project themselves imaginatively into other standpoints. The cognitivist resolution for egocentrism is thereby decenterism or abstract thinking. The concept has parallels with other views that extol the virtues of abstracted mental functioning (e.g., Witzkin, Goodenough, & Olmton, 1979).

I later examine other ideological elements carried in this Piagetian analysis of formal mental operations. For now, however, I would simply like to raise a question that derives from Piaget's idealist, nonmaterialist epistemology. In Piaget's account, decentering involves a purely mental process: the ability to get out of one's own shoes, to take on multiple standpoints and see the world through another's eyes. This analysis informs us that reality as such is less significant to our understanding than the mental operations that represent it to us. I can mentally place myself into your world view once I have developed the formal operations requisite to decentering. Our different realities can thereby become the same once I gain your stance through these mental operations. Material practices that might be requisite to gaining another's view are never even considered.

To phrase this differently, perhaps for me to see the world beyond the scope of my own perspective, I need actually to walk in your shoes and not merely to put them on mentally. To walk in your shoes, in turn, may require that I change my real-world practices, take on a different form of living, and alter my own ways of doing and existing—
that I become a member of your social community in deed and not simply in mind.

If the world views we each have are not simply egocentric in the sense in which Piaget and others use the term, but also sociocentric and historically-centric, that is, linked intimately to certain social forms and practices, then I may lose my egocentrism within the same social form through mental operations, but cannot as readily step outside my sociohistorical centrisms by a purely mental act (see Taylor, 1979).

In commenting on the concept of decentering, Turner (1973), who otherwise praises Piaget's contributions, views its overly intellectualist and logical emphasis to be inadequate for dealing with what he terms figurative symbolism, for example, art, religion, and generally nonscientific forms of social life. Turner (1973) writes of recentered thinking, in which the relationship to the specific, knowing individual must be reestablished, a relationship that is “centered upon the particular position of the subject and capable of condensing affective with cognitive associations” (p. 354). Recentered thinking, in which concrete particularity is implicated, cannot be transposed from person to person without those persons sharing the same reality as such (see also Sullivan, Note 4).

If psychology saw thinking to be intimately linked with collective social practices and social life, then the purely mental operations of decentering would not be adequate vehicles for removing ourselves from our various centrisms, that is, anywhere other than perhaps in the sphere of formal logic and mathematics. However, given the main thrust of the cognitivist thesis clearly in evidence in Piaget's works, we fail adequately to deal with anything beyond these merely mental operations. I believe this state of affairs exists because the concept of a “material decentering” is foreign to the subjectivist and individualist reductions that are so prevalent in our discipline today and that grant overwhelming primacy to the mental over the material.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

This major topic is given only brief treatment in this article not because it is unimportant as a case example of the ideological roots and implications of cognitivism, but because an excellent book by Billig (1976) has more than adequately summarized and documented the case.

Billig directed his critical analysis to the conflict theories of psychologists such as Deutsch (1969a, 1969b, 1973) and Katz (1965), among others. It is Billig's thesis, as it is mine, that the tendency for psychologists to reduce conflicts to subjective misunderstandings, to misperceptions, and to psychological factors within individuals, and thus to reduce their resolution to reestablishing understanding, serves primarily ideological functions by eliminating from our analysis the contradictions that exist among groups in the real world. For example, Billig contrasts Duetsch's with Chomsky's account of the United States in Vietnam. He suggests that whereas Deutsch emphasized “errors of judgment made by decision-makers” (Billig, 1976, p. 229) as key factors in the conflict, Chomsky saw these psychological errors to be derivatives of certain national practices involving the “needs of capitalist production” (Billig, 1976, p. 231). By reducing conflicts to individual subjective processes, we overlook those questions of social structure that are necessary to ground both our understanding and our recommendations for resolution. When we psychologize conflicts and their resolution, we fail to test or challenge the structures and practices of the larger society within which the various subjectivities have developed and whose interests they often both veil and serve.

In reducing conflicts to misperceptions and misunderstandings, the idea is fostered that merely by changing the ways things appear to the participants, the conflicts can be resolved. These views not only deny reality its moment but also place a significant instrument of power in the hands of those most adept in shaping and modifying subjective perceptions; and these are usually people already in positions of power.

Case 3: Psychological Reification

The concept of reification appeared as a central feature of Lukacs's (1971) work, History and Class Consciousness. It refers to a process whereby objects that are the products of social and historical practice are abstracted from that context and treated as realities independent of their social origins. Reified cognition and reified psychological processes take what is empirically observed, abstract it from the particular sociohistorical conditions of its constitution, and grant it a timeless, objective standing (see Adorno, 1967, 1976a). This idea is captured in Gergen's earlier and several more recent critiques of psychology (Gergen, 1973, 1978; Gergen, Note 1; Gergen & Morawski, Note
3). It is also a theme to which several of my own previous writings have been addressed (Sampson, 1977, 1978; Sampson, Note 5).

It is clear from the treatment that Lukacs gives to reification, and from the subsequent critical analyses which Gergen and I have offered, that psychological reification tends to serve primarily ideological functions. Reifications are simultaneously an accurate portrait of existing social reality and a false consciousness, serving the existing framework of values and interests. Psychological reifications clothe existing social arrangements in terms of basic and inevitable characteristics of individual psychological functioning; this inadvertently authenticates the status quo, but now in a disguised psychological costume. What has been mediated by a sociohistorical process—the forms and contents of human consciousness and of individual psychological experience—is treated as though it were an “in-itself,” a reality independent of these very origins.

As noted, I have examined this theme in several previous publications. In the present article, I apply the concept of psychological reification to a sample cognitivist account offered recently in Mischel’s (1979) analysis of the delay of gratification.

Mischel has been concerned with the way children learn to delay gratification, in particular with how “ideation” facilitates or hinders this accomplishment. He distinguishes between two types of ideation—hot and cool. Hot ideation involves focusing concretely on the object at hand that cannot be had; cool ideation involves employing more advanced, abstract mentation to substitute for the unavailable concrete realities. His work suggests that cool ideation facilitates delay, whereas hot ideation frustrates this delay.

Mischel has discovered that over time people learn to engage in cool rather than hot ideation and that cool ideation involves the ability to abstract and take distance from the immediate situation. He says, for example, that preschoolers “make waiting more difficult for themselves by focusing on what they want but cannot have” (Mischel, 1979, pp. 750–751); but by the sixth grade, “most of these youngsters seem clearly to recognize the advantages for delay of cool . . . ideation” (p. 751). As I understand it, Mischel means that once one develops the ability to abstract, one has learned how to transform an object of interest into an object of disinterest. Cool ideation substitutes thinking for having.

Mischel then takes a further and, I believe, especially significant step. He places this developmental cognitive skill into a framework that speaks about overcoming stimulus control with self-control. Being governed externally by the concrete stimulus object that one cannot have (hot ideation) is displaced by self-control; the substitution of cognitions that permit one to suffer in silence or to deny what one wants but cannot have.

In a manner reminiscent of the value roots of Rotter’s (1966) internal/external locus of control concept, Mischel treats us once again to the Protestant ethic, clothed however in yet another costume (see Gurin, Gurin, & Morrison, 1978, for comments on Rotter). There is little doubt that even as Rotter’s psychological hero is the internally controlled person who learns to deny the reality of social structure in the name of “self-control,” so too is Mischel’s hero the person who denies reality in the name of a cognitive dream.

We feel pity for the preschoolers and applaud those who have advanced far enough to have learned the lessons of their world: Think abstractly and without interest so that you can better adapt to things as they are; you will be less disturbed than those who insist on frustrating themselves by wanting what they cannot or should not have. We learn how cognitive operations function to satisfy needs “inside our heads” in place of the real-world satisfactions denied to us—a promise of pleasure within, its denial in actuality (Jay, 1973).

The parallels between Mischel’s and Rotter’s lessons demand our attention. In both, success involves a denial of objective reality. Can this be a portrait of fundamental human nature? Or, is this portrait better seen within the context of a particular social and historical framework? If the latter, then insofar as we attribute the portrait to something fundamental about people, we affirm the very social system within which its truth exists, without however recognizing this feature of our understanding.

What has occurred is a psychological reification: A social and historical process has been translated into a fundamental psychological process. This reification loses the connection between the sociohistorical and the psychological; it raises the psychological to the status of a fundamental property of the human mind.

I am not questioning the accuracy of Mischel’s empirical findings, nor am I even doubting that those older children who have learned cool ideation are more comfortable and adapt better than those who insist on “staying hot.” Rather, I am questioning whether he has discovered something
basic and universal about how people function; and I am questioning the values and interests that his reified psychology affirms.

In speaking of self-control, Mischel tells us something that we surely value. In this case, self-control involves learning to delay gratification. Is this a reasoned position made by an autonomous and mature thinker, as I would suppose the concept of self-control entails? Or is this more a case of being controlled unreflectively by external factors, that is, the requirements of a particular social form, a work-governed and scheduled world that requires the appearance but not the reality of self-control? The social practices of work and a particular economic system develop delay and denial of gratification as necessary for successful adaptation. The ability to delay and to experience possessing imaginatively what one cannot yet (or perhaps ever) have in reality is deemed central. F 3m describing a social form in which successful adults have learned to transform objects of interest into objects of disinterest and to find pleasure in thinking and imagining what will be rather than in having what they cannot have (see Habermas, 1970).

The kinds of psychological reification introduced by Mischel, Rotter, and others offer us some important insights into the consciousness or psychological character that emerges within our contemporary society and that helps reproduce the major forms of that society. In this sense, therefore, we have learned something about society and history and thus about ideology, rather than something fundamental about human psychology. However, if psychology insistently turns its back on its reifying tendencies, it will continue uncritically to affirm existing social arrangements even while it purports simply to be discovering and describing the nature of human realities. The dual reductions of subjectivism and individualism carry the seeds of the psychological reifications that permit ideology to reign because of our ignorance of and blindness to its very presence.

Case 4: Cognitive Psychology and the Technical Interest of Knowledge

To aid understanding of this last case, I call upon the valuable insights provided by a contemporary representative of the Frankfurt tradition, Jürgen Habermas (1971, 1973), and his analysis of the connection between knowledge and human interests. Habermas uses the term interests to introduce the transcendental frameworks within which human knowledge and experience are organized. Interests describe the underlying conditions that direct our knowledge. They “are not regulators of cognition which have to be eliminated for the sake of objectivity of knowledge; instead, they themselves determine the aspect under which reality is objectified, and can thus be made accessible to experience to begin with” (Habermas, 1973, p. 9).

Although Habermas defines three knowledge-constitutive interests, only the first—the technical—is of direct relevance to the present analysis. Knowledge constituted within the purview of the technical interest is founded on social practices involving work, in particular the achievement of a technical mastery and control over nature and people. This is the kind of knowledge that characterizes the empirical-analytic sciences. Reality is disclosed “from the viewpoint of possible technical control over objectified processes of nature” (Habermas, 1971, p. 191). The language forms are “either formalized or at least formalizable” (p. 191); they have been “separated out of [their] embeddedness in interactions” (p. 193) and refer to an abstracted, generalized, and repeatable kind of experience. The reality that is disclosed is technically controllable “under specified conditions . . . everywhere and at all times” (p. 195).

What is more important to the present concern with cognitivist psychologies is the manner by which some of the most prominent representatives of this genre (e.g., Piaget) have adopted one particular interest, the technical, as their model for all human knowledge and objectivity. In so doing, they have granted minimal standing to any other forms of possible knowledge and their frames for apprehending reality. Certain aspects of this position have been developed in two previous articles (Sampson, 1977, 1978) and in several public presentations (e.g., Sampson, Note 6) and need not be recapitulated here. Instead, I examine another related aspect of the implicit merger between cognitivism and the technical interest.

A growing number of cognitive psychologists have either implied or directly stated that they have uncovered the basic building blocks of the human mind, the very forms of the understanding of which Kant wrote, the transhistorical, transsituational forms of knowledge. If it can be shown that these forms are rooted in a particular kind of social practice, specifically the technical knowledge-constitutive interest, then their universality is put into question, as are the values that they convey. My critique is not designed, however, to disprove the formulations or findings of these
building-block cognitivists. Rather, it is intended to locate their work in its proper context and to introduce a critical understanding of both the truncated science that their work offers and the distortions of human values that a dominance of the technical interest brings.

PIAGET AND THE TECHNICAL INTEREST

Piaget’s view of cognitive development portrays a relentless march toward the stage of formal operations involving logical and mathematical transformations (Piaget, 1971a, 1971b). Formal operations represent the highest stage presently known to exist for human cognitive activity; they provide the standard of excellence against which all other forms of thinking are judged. As people develop cognitively, they transform and represent concrete objects by a highly abstract and formal symbol system that permits mental operations to be performed on the symbol as an abstract representation of what the real object is. Different concrete objects, treated abstractly, are handled under the same symbol system, become equivalent and may be substituted, exchanged, and so forth.

Logico-mathematical abstractions make objects that are contextual or indexical social products appear to be literal, transsituational, transsocial, and transhistorical entities (see Bar-Hillel, 1954; Fish, 1979; Garfinkel, 1967; Harre, 1977; Mishler, 1979; Ricoeur, 1970, on this point). A fundamental but veiled distortion thereby enters the analysis. In usual psychological practice, this distortion is repaired by implicitly assuming the very social and historical context that is necessary to render the object’s meaning intelligible, although this context remains invisible to our study (see Taylor, 1979). The implicit (assumed) context within which Piaget’s perspective is rendered intelligible involves the technical interest of knowledge that Habermas describes. Piaget’s studies of conservation are instructive in this regard.

A child is shown two rows of chips, one containing six red chips and the other, six blue chips. They are lined up, however, so that the blue chips extend longer in space than do the red chips. Only at around age 6 or 7 do children understand that the six red chips are equivalent to the six blue chips; that is, the child conserves quantity even when the chips’ spatial separation varies. This accomplishment requires specific mental operations involving number and reversibility. From Piaget’s perspective, this is not only more advanced thinking but also more accurate thinking than a nonconserved world view that would report more blues than reds because the former extend longer in space.

The foundation for deeming the conserved world view (and the formal operations that constitute it) more advanced and more accurate than the nonconserved, however, is never fully examined or explicated by Piaget or any of the other cognitivists. This foundation or context is taken for granted and thereby remains invisible to study even as its assumption is required for the intelligibility of the work. We all know that six equals six, whatever the particular elements involved and whatever their particular spatial arrangement. It seems legitimate, however, to inquire about the knowledge-constitutive framework within which we all understand what is better and more accurate.

Once we subject the taken for granted to our scrutiny, we clearly see that the framework within which formal operations and conservation are better and more accurate is the framework of the technical cognitive interest. Insofar as our knowledge and its objectivity are constituted with the transcendental view of their being technically exploitable and in the form of natural scientific knowledge, then it is obvious that nonconserved conceptions are “more primitive” while conserved conceptions involving formal operations are “more advanced.” The very transsituational and transhistorical quality of the abstract, formal symbol system provided by logico-mathematical operations is required by the demands for technically exploitable, predictable, and controllable knowledge within whose aspect the technical interest constitutes reality.

Let us suppose, however, that someone were to emphasize something other than number in the red and blue chips example. Is this person incorrect for ignoring number and favoring spatial separation? What is “incorrect” about arguing that 6 blue chips are the same as 12 red chips because the blue and the red spread out spatially in the same way? This view is incorrect only when we adopt a number system and abstract manipulations of formal and logical operations, as Piaget does, as our implicit framework. Surely this judgment is not incorrect in any necessarily universal or absolute way. Its incorrectness exists because it is flawed within the context of a particular knowledge-constitutive interest.

JUDGMENTAL HEURISTICS

Let me briefly introduce another exemplar of the same point of view, the judgmental heuristics and
biases of which Tversky and Kahneman (1974; Kahneman & Tversky, 1973) write. They clearly adopt the forms of statistical and scientific analysis as the correct standard of judgment against which they measure the judgmental principles followed by lay people and even by professional clinicians and counselors. Tversky and Kahneman view most adults' intuitive predictions to be in error when compared with the true standard of excellence, statistical and scientific thought itself. They refer to these error-ridden everyday forms as "illusions" and express surprise that after a lifetime of experience most people still fail to "experience such fundamental statistical rules as regression toward the mean, or the effect of sample size on sampling variability" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974, p. 1130), and so continue to make error-filled predictions.

Tversky and Kahneman have adopted the same knowledge-constitutive interest as Piaget for the framework within which they make their claims. Empirical-analytic thought, and its formal operations, is their standard; the technical interest in knowledge is granted primacy. In both cases, however, this framework remains invisible in the background, part of our common agreements concerning what is "best" and "most accurate." Tversky and Kahneman recommend the technically exploitable knowledge that marks this interest, a form that is sufficiently precise as to provide predictive accuracy given a few clearly formulated and invariant rules; they consider everything else to be illusion and error.

This view is not unreasonable for many situations in which we find ourselves nor for many kinds of human relationships in our contemporary society; but it is by no means a necessary formulation regarding knowledge and judgment. Who other than someone in the business of making accurate one-shot predictions would need to be as exact as the statistical and scientific standard requires? What is erroneous and imprecise requires a context within which such judgments can be considered errors. This context involves the technical interest in knowledge.

As long as this framework remains invisible and in the background, we come to believe that we have learned something basic and fundamental about the way the human mind works, rather than something about the way the human mind, under the purview of the technical interest, can and does work. Our error is to equate all knowledge with the kinds of knowledge that Piaget, Tversky and Kahneman, and other similar cognitivists describe.

To be fair, Piaget hopes to understand the development of scientific knowledge; Tversky and Kahneman indicate that the context for their work is decision making under uncertainty when there is some demand for precision. In one sense, therefore, neither lays claim to the kind of universalism of which I am critical. In a much broader and I believe more important sense, however, both these originators and their numerous followers uncritically treat their discoveries as more universal and basic than is warranted. For example, see the recent claim of Weisz and Zigler (1979) concerning Piaget.

Conclusions

My aim in this article has been to offer a critical perspective on some of the major ongoing work in social, personality, and developmental psychology, in particular the now dominant cognitivist perspective. Some might argue that I have not offered anything positive, any solutions, but only a critique. Unlike the pessimism of an Adorno who came finally to believe that only critique was possible, I remain hopeful that change is possible. I believe that I have opened several points of entry and introduced directions for that change.

Specifically, if the problems I have noted lie in the dual reductions of individualism and subjectivism, the remedy, in part, would require our adopting a more nonreductionist kind of psychology. Further, we err by routinely assuming the forms of empirical-analytic science (the technical interest) as our implicit framework for understanding human life and behavior. Another remedy, then, would require, first, our gaining awareness of this background and its implications and, second, our proceeding to expend as much time and energy in the study and creation of the other knowledge-constitutive interests and their implications as we have thus far poured into our work affirming the technical interest of knowledge. The latter, however, is more easily said than done. To be consistent with myself, I must recall for us that psychology has not emphasized the technical interest simply because it is the only game in town: rather, its affirmation sustains the existing arrangements and practices of our society.

I stand ready for psychology to take on a different relationship to society from that which it has thus far predominately adopted. The critical study of psychology and society, a study that is self-conscious about its context, its values, and its relationship to human freedom, seems a worthy role for the field. In this, we would no longer spend
our time describing what is, thereby participating in its reproduction; our aims would be more transformative, designed to increase human welfare and freedom. Of necessity, this would require a transformation of society.

In concluding his discussion of the "ecology of human development," Bronfenbrenner (1977) notes what Professor Leontiev of the Soviet Union suggested to him:

It seems to me that American researchers are constantly seeking to explain how the child came to be what he is; we in the USSR are striving to discover not how the child came to be what he is, but how he can become what he is not yet is. (p. 528)

If we can delete the nagging questions about whether or not this truly characterizes Soviet psychology and society (I do not think it characterizes the latter), the advice itself is well-taken: to strive toward a psychology not of what is, but of what may yet be.

REFERENCE NOTES


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