

# WHAT MAKES HUMAN SOCIAL BEHAVIOR LOOK SO SPECIAL? Integrating psychology with the social sciences

*¿POR QUÉ LA CONDUCTA SOCIAL HUMANA SE VE TAN ESPECIAL?  
Integrando a la Psicología con las Ciencias Sociales*

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## ABSTRACT

Psychology has never integrated well with the other social sciences, despite covering much of the same material. In attempting to integrate these materials, I have found several problems and complexities with both psychological and behavioral analyses, and have suggested ways to overcome these problems. I first state nine complexities of analyzing social behavior, and why these problems exist. I then analyze two cases in more detail—the role of generalized social exchange in everyday social behavior and the problems with theories of catharsis and uncertainty reduction. In both these cases it is shown how more detailed analyses can be made by utilizing social anthropology and sociology, which also allows for a better integration of psychology with the social sciences. The more general conclusions point to psychology making longer and more detailed analyses of social behavior, and replacing theories with contextual descriptions. The other social sciences have been doing both these for some time and we can learn from them.

**Key words:** social psychology, social behavior, uncertainty reduction, social science, generalized exchange, rituals, religion, social analysis, social representations, cognitive dissonance, prototypes, social constructionism

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## RESUMEN

La psicología nunca se integró de manera satisfactoria con otras ciencias sociales, a pesar de cubrir mucho del mismo material. Al intentar integrar estos materiales, he encontrado varios problemas y complejidades, tanto con los análisis psicológicos como con los conductuales, aquí sugiero algunas maneras de superar dichos problemas. Empiezo por presentar nueve fuentes de complejidad en el análisis de la conducta social, y explico porque estos problemas existen. Después analizo dos casos con más detalles—el papel del intercambio social generalizado en la conducta social de la vida ordinaria, y los problemas con las teorías de la catarsis y de reducción de la incertidumbre. En ambos casos se demuestra que análisis más detallados pueden llevarse a cabo usando la antropología social y la sociología, lo que permite una mejor integración de la psicología con las ciencias sociales. Mis conclusiones más generales apelan a análisis más largos y detallados de la conducta social por parte de la psicología, y a la sustitución de teorías por descripciones contextuales. Las otras ciencias sociales han trabajado así durante bastante tiempo y podemos aprender de ellas.

Palabras claves: psicología social, conducta social, reducción de la incertidumbre, ciencia social, intercambio generalizado, rituales, religión, social análisis, social representaciones, disonancia cognitiva, prototipos, construccionismo social.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, there have been many voices saying that psychology is thinking about its subject matter all wrong. Not necessarily that its data is wrong, although wrong thinking can lead to the collection of useless data, but that the theories and explanations accepted by psychologists (“acquiesced,” I think, is a better word) are wrong. There were voices from Dewey and Bentley, from Kantor and Skinner, and from Mead. More recently have appeared the voices of Marxist psychologies, critical psychology, social constructionism, discourse analysis, and postmodernism. What these all have in common is that they do not just argue that psychology needs to be tweaked a bit and corrected, but they argue that there are major flaws both in the thinking about people and in what flows from that thinking.

There is also a political wing to this, and even conspiracy theories. Sociologists have traced the political formation of psychology, and how those psychologists who separated from philosophy set about protecting their interests (Ben-David & Collins, 1966). Following Foucault and others, Rose (1996; Miller & Rose, 1994) has shown the links between the rise of psychology and the changing arena of government control and surveillance. Psychology has also had to protect itself by appealing to common notions of what causes people to behave the way they do, and radical changes, such as those of Freud and Skinner, have come in for

(uninformed) public ridicule and long-standing misinterpretations, although both have also suffered from their own popularizations.

There has also been an arrogance within psychology and psychiatry, both in proclaiming both that there are human events that cannot be opened up to anyone but trained psychologists and psychiatrists, and in ignoring the large collection of social science writings about the causes of individual behavior. The classic sociologists, anthropologists and geographers did not just write about societal level events, but had much of importance to say about individual behavior once the arrogance of a protected arena of "the mental" is removed.

As a result of all this, psychology has always stood apart from the other social sciences—geography, sociology, economics, political science, demography, and anthropology. Links have been attempted, but they have ultimately failed for the very same reasons that the earlier mentioned writers have argued to make radical changes to the thinking of psychology. For example, there are a number of books, especially from the 1950s and early 1960s, that survey all the social sciences and include psychology as a chapter (e.g., Lerner, 1959). Upon close reading, however, there is very little overlap in either the events talked about or the types of thinking, and the psychology chapters stick out like sore thumbs from the rest. Certainly there is nothing like the way that the social anthropology and sociology chapters overlap. Recent social science overviews have left psychology out completely (Gulbenkian Commission, 1996, p. 27).

### **PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN ANALYZING HUMAN SOCIAL BEHAVIOR**

In this article I wish to comment on some problems as I see them in analyzing the social behavior of humans. I also wish to suggest some answers, or at least ways that we can go to get around these problems. Most of them arise because psychology has developed apart from the other social sciences, for historical and political reasons, and the answers can be found already in the other social sciences if psychology only looked in more detail.

I will state nine problems in raw form first, and then give more details about two of them in the space remaining. One of my problems in presentation is that these issues are all interrelated and need to be seen as a whole.

1. Human social behavior involves many avoidance and escape contingencies. People do things that stop something else occurring or prevent something else from occurring. People cross the streets in order that they do not have to talk with a neighbor. The problem with this, a problem for the analysis of human behavior, is that once there are effective avoidance and escape contingencies in place, they are very difficult to observe. Effective contingencies of this nature do not show their origins. We will see a person cross the street and, without lengthy

and intensive observation, it will be difficult to pinpoint the analysis to avoidance of neighbors.

Moreover, another problem is that the behaviors that replace to ones escaped or avoided, will look "unmotivated." There will be nothing obvious attracting a person to the opposite side of the street. In this way, many complex human social behaviors will look "unmotivated" without extensive observations, and this allows all sorts of fictitious and spurious explanations to be devised. We might commonly remark that the person "just enjoys" walking on the opposite side of the street.

2. Almost all human behavior involves social contingencies (Guerin, 2001a,b). If nothing else, people are constantly asked to comment on and give reasons to others about what they do, making almost all our behavior social. Unfortunately for research, most of these social contingencies are very difficult to observe, because they work in systems and because they are based on historical events in a person's life or in the life of a community. For this reason I concentrate on trying to analyze how the whole systems work rather than individual contingencies such as studied in the *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior (JEAB)* and related journals.

The real problem here, I believe, is that if the social contingencies were not hidden they would not work the way they do. For example, if I ask someone for the time they will almost certainly tell me, depending upon how I ask. But we would be hard pressed to spell out precisely the contingencies involved, and appealing to "conformity" or "norms" does not explain anything further. On the other hand, if it was clear that there was an obvious contingency, for example, that I will receive \$10,000 if you tell me the time, my asking you would probably not work at all because you would want to negotiate your cut of the pie. The whole system works because the major social contingencies holding us together are hidden.

3. Following from this, there are almost no simple contingencies for everyday human behavior, in the sense of contingencies studied in *JEAB* as schedules of reinforcement. This does not mean that these simple schedules of contingencies do not exist or are wrong, rather, I think of them in relation to social behavior in the sense that quantum physics is in relation to biochemistry or carpentry—quantum physics obviously forms the foundations of biochemistry and even carpentry, but it deals with events too detailed to be of everyday use. The foundations of human social behavior are certainly built upon learned schedules of consequences, but we are hard pressed to find any of the simple ones in real life. Even Skinner's (1953) examples of simple schedules of reinforcement in everyday life I believe are wrong; getting mail in the postbox is not a simple fixed interval schedule and relies on all other sorts of events. In this way, Kantor's notion of a field is closer to the truth. This has led those behavior analysts studying social behavior to focus on situations that "resemble" simple contingencies, and ignore the more complex patterns.

4. The major human social behaviors are built around generalized social contingencies, which means that for any behavior there can be several typical

consequences but none in particular that always occur. I will spend time later outlining some of the unique properties of such systems because most of the problems of analysis arise from these properties, and data addressing these systems are already available from the other social sciences.

5. Another problem is that there are several ways that human behaviors can look “irrational” and therefore special, and these arise from the forms of social contingencies I have already mentioned. Whether a behavior “looks” rational or not depends upon comparisons to salient or immediate consequences—it looks irrational if I am not doing what is in my best interest with respect to the immediate and obvious surroundings. As social anthropologists discovered years ago (Evans-Pritchard, 1937), when more detailed analyses of the historical and social context are made, the irrationality disappears.

Behaviors that look irrational can arise in several ways: as strategies shaped because they help to win Chicken or bluff games, from the properties of generalized social contingencies, or from ritual behaviors that have as their consequences no immediate effect but the consequence of being allowed to remain a member of a group that gives access to many other consequences totally unrelated to the ritual behavior and its immediate outcomes. Behaviors that seem “irrational” usually mean that the person is acting quite rationally with respect to some other contingencies, usually social ones, not observable in the immediate context.

6. There is a great reliance on theories of “catharsis” throughout psychology, by which I mean theories that in reaction to some environmental event, some substance or state is reduced “within” people (Guerin, 2001c). There are many versions of this: the idea that religion works through reducing peoples’ anxiety about the universe and life, the idea that the world is a chaotic confusing mess and to reduce the anxiety-provoking uncertainty of all this we evolve cognitive systems that simplify the world, and the idea that holding contradictory beliefs leads to a noxious state of “dissonance” and that this motivates people to do something to reduce that dissonance. Instead, I will argue in more detail later that all these cases rely upon social contingencies that are difficult to observe, and indeed, work better if they are difficult to see.

7. Many contingencies form systems that are stable, that is, the same functions seem to keep occurring. We call these “structures” but too often the functional base is forgotten and they are treated as if they always and forever occur in this way. This allows the use of short-hand words in psychology but we forget that the whole system can be changed if the environment changes. While such words as “personality,” “reinforcer,” and “norm” can be predictive in the short-term, they can be very misleading in the long-term. Apart from the whole system being changed if the environment changes, in times of war, for example, the other problem is that we ignore the properties of the environment that allow the system to be stable in the first place. These properties have an impact on the social

contingencies even when they are stable and their description is required to fully understand what is going on.

Some examples will be given briefly. Our systems of money keep on working and we can usually talk as if people will always, and obviously, be motivated to get money, but with the fall of the Soviet Union bartering has replaced monetary transactions to a large extent. Further, the social contingencies that allow money to be stable in the first place as a system are forgotten, and so, for example, people commonly develop the idea that if the government would only print more money then everyone could become richer. As a second example, behavior analysts assume that participants in experiments will be motivated to get money, but other generalized social contingencies can easily over-ride this, if, for example, I was to let the participants secretly overhear that the experiment was really about testing for greed. Whatever the circumstances, this is an aspect that is not under any experimental control in such experiments but is taken for granted. As a final example, the unexamined assumptions of stable structures also allows cognitive psychology to talk as if people possess an information “processing” unit that is unchanged by its transactions with the environment—the information we pick up gets changed and processed but the processing “architecture” is not affected by all this.

8. The system of using language works so well in this way that we are all fooled into acting as if words interact with the environment, but we forget that saying or writing words only interact with people, in that words can only have effects on people and that is the full extent of their power (Guerin, 1997a, b; 2001b). The word “cat” cannot do anything to a cat, it can only affect a person. But the problem again is that the language system works better if we all act as if words are the environment or a substitute for the environment, and psychology has all too easily taken this on board as facts to be explained. Words do not do anything by themselves, only social relationships involving consequences do anything, but this means that words work best when I can just say a word and you do something without me having to actually drag out the consequences and actually apply them to you. Again, language works best if the consequences maintaining its functioning are kept hidden. As soon as I suspect you have a specific or Machiavellian reason for chatting with me, the social conversation becomes ruined.

In particular, psychology still takes on board a whole range of “mental” and abstract “dispositional” terms as if they referred to something. I have argued that these sorts of words are extremely functional in everyday life because of their special functional properties. Mental and dispositional words are difficult to challenge because they cannot be observed, and research shows that when listeners hear mental or dispositional words they report that the state referred to is more permanent, has existed for longer, and will be more difficult to change (Guerin, 1997b, 2001b). For example, if someone hears the words “John is forgetful” they report that John has been like this for longer and will be more difficult to change,

than if they heard the words "John forgot." These are very useful properties for talking if you wish to win an argument or change someone's behavior, which is probably why psychology keeps using them in its own explanations.

9. Human social contingencies can be even more confusing to analyze because any strong contingencies can be utilized by someone else and made contingent upon low-probability behaviors to form new contingencies in a sort of a Premack's principle. This means that most activities occur in several social contingencies simultaneously. For example, if a teenager likes going to the movies for whatever reason, then with the right social conditions the parents can make going to the movies contingent upon tidying up the bedroom. If that teenager knows that his sister is scared of spiders for whatever reason, then he can make her tidying up his room contingent upon not bringing spiders into the house. If a person is dependent upon working for a boss then the boss can make that relationship contingent upon laughing at jokes that are otherwise distasteful or not funny to the person.

Most of these examples are shaped to bring about exploitative activities, but the principle covers many good activities as well. Churches make remaining in a community that provides many other benefits for members contingent upon all sorts of arbitrary and low-probability behaviors that are functional for the community but that the individuals would not otherwise do. Our society provides us with many ways of accessing resources but to remain a member of that society we are required to act in certain ways. For example, we would lose friends and access to their resources if we started refusing to tell them the time when they asked.

All of this makes analysis difficult because any contingency can be utilized as part of another contingency and it might have little or nothing to do with that second contingency otherwise. Handshakes have almost no effect in life except that they allow us to remain in relationships with people in certain societies, and we would be ostracized if we refused to shake hands. Once the handshake is established as a stable way of interacting, however, I can then use that to form new, but otherwise completely unrelated, contingencies. For example, I can make membership in my club or Masonic Lodge contingent upon not shaking hands or upon making a new type of handshake. I can snub you by refusing to shake hands with you, and I can embarrass you in front of a crowd also by not shaking hands with you. The point is that any stable contingency can be utilized in other contingencies that are otherwise unrelated, and this makes analysis difficult, especially without longitudinal and historical research.

To give another example, swear words are typically punished, but this actually gives them a form of power because they can then be utilized in other contingencies. The more a parent punishes a swear word the more their children can use those words with other audiences to gain control, by looking tough or by making the other audience do something in order to stop the word being said.

These, then, are nine of the problems and complexities I have found in analysing human social behavior in a way that integrates the social sciences. Let

me repeat that nothing I have said relies on new principles of behavior. The problem is that when we look at the details of analysis, the foundational principles just do not help us very much; social behavior is complex and relies on properties arising from that very complexity. As I have said, this is analogous to quantum physics as a foundation for carpentry; in principle, quantum physics is the very foundation for carpentry but it does not help the carpenter much except in some very special cases.

What I have also found, however, is that ways of dealing with these complex systems of interconnected social consequences already exist in the other social sciences, particularly sociology and social anthropology, and we ignore them at our own risk. Just as cognitive psychology tries to build complex human behavior from simple, basic processes, so has behavior analysis tried to analyze complex human social behavior from simple scheduling of consequences. My argument is not that such foundations do not exist or that the complex behaviors are not built from them, but just that in practice this is not a useful procedure for analysis. Let me say it again, both wood and aspirin molecules are certainly built up from the units described by quantum physics, but knowing this is not much help for carpentry and only of minor help for the biochemistry of aspirin tablets.

### GENERALIZED EXCHANGE OF SOCIAL RESOURCES

I will start by spelling out some of the properties I see arising from the ubiquitous use of generalized social exchange in everyday life, and how these properties can explain otherwise strange behaviors. Perhaps the most common situation in social life is of being in a friendship or social group that deals with more than one activity or resource. Friends usually go places together, eat together, lend each other money or material objects, listen to each other talk—even if prattle or gossip and even if boring—and do favors for each other. There is no one activity that is exclusive. Interacting with a person in a bank, however, is reduced to a smaller number of activities, and we would be considered weird if we asked a bank teller to our house for dinner to repay them for exchanging our check into money.

This situation of having different types of exchanges with a regular group of people has some important properties, and each of the social sciences have discussed these in different ways. They are extremely important points to understand. All complex social behaviors come from these, and most of the paradoxes and contradictions in the social sciences arise from not understanding these points. Think of them as like a network or web of interconnected contingencies such that changing one always affects the others. In fact, social networks are one way of researching such generalized social contingencies.

Table 1 gives the four forms of relationships with multiple resource exchanges, generalized resource exchanges, or multiplex ties—as they are also sometimes called. One person (P1) can give resources to P2 at time T1 but only



Table 1. Four Forms of Generalized Exchange

• Over Time			
T1	T2	T3	T4
P1 → P2	P2 → P1	P1 → P2	P2 → P1
• Over Situations			
Situation 1	Situation 2	Situation 3	Situation 4
P1 → P2	P2 → P1	P1 → P2	P2 → P1
• Over Social Behaviours			
P1 does SBx for P2 P2 does SBy for P1 P1 does SBz for P2 P2 does SBw for P1			
• Over Persons			
P1 → P2	P2 → P3	P3 → P4	P4 → P1

at time T2 does P2 exchange resources back. At T3 we might find P1 giving to P2 and the reciprocity coming back only at T4. That is, the sharing or reciprocity of consequences might be over a long time rather than immediately. This produces interesting properties.

Another way in which exchanges can be generalized is over situations. P1 can give to P2 in Situation 1 but only receive any reciprocal exchange in Situation 2, and so on. Another form of generalized exchange is over behaviors: P1 does one sort of thing or event for P2 and P2 reciprocates with a very different sort of social behavior, and so on.

Finally, and possibly the most interesting generalized exchange of all, is that over persons. P1 exchanges or gives something to P2, who in turn gives something to P3 who gives something to P4 who gives something to P1. Therefore, P1 is reciprocated for what they gave or did for P2 but it is reciprocated by a totally

Table 2. Properties of Generalized Social Exchanges

1. One action can appear suboptimal or irrational because the actions-in-exchange are not currently visible
2. Allows the control of action to go beyond the immediate environmental resources
3. Actions do not become satiated as quickly
4. Provides the delay of resource exchange required for monetary and language systems to operate
5. The control over such actions are difficult to observe and have given rise to fictitious and usually abstract entities in both everyday and social science explanations
6. Produces the conditions for the social control strategies of compliance and conformity
7. Once these hidden forms of control are given a name ("identity" or "customs," for example), that name can be used as a token threat because people will not want to lose such a wide variety of resource outcomes, even though in practice it would be difficult to carry out any such threat because of (6) above. But a name makes it usable as a social control.

different person. I help my auntie with something and her husband's friend arranges a summer job for me in his business. Nothing much might be reciprocated from the auntie herself, maybe just a thank-you, but her husband's friend reciprocates later on.

These four forms of generalized exchanges are very common amongst close friends and family, or perhaps to put it better, carrying out these exchanges produces close friends. And as mentioned several times now, they produce the interesting properties of social behavior. Some of these are shown in Table 2. Many of the strangest looking and most inexplicable social behaviors of humans need to be analyzed as resulting directly from these properties.

First, one exchange can appear to be suboptimal, irrational or deviant because it is offset by another exchange not currently visible. For example, we observe Person A let Person B have most of a cake, even though we know Person A is very hungry, and this seems irrational. However, because of this exchange, Person B returns another favour at a different time totally unrelated to eating cake which we cannot observe. In this way, some irrational-looking behaviors need to be analyzed over longer historical time periods and over broader social contexts to understand what is happening.

Second, generalized exchange systems allow humans to do things not otherwise likely if the only controlling forces were the immediate consequences of the environment. For example, Person A is hungry for chocolate and there is some present, but Person B remarks that they should respect the starving children of the world and resist eating it. It is the other exchanges between Person A and Person B not currently visible that make this delay of gratification possible—there is no magic involved; there is no will-power or self-control, both those are controlled by the properties of generalized social exchange. Prisoners have starved themselves to death rather than given in to authorities. If Person A were to ignore Person B and get stuck into the chocolate, this would have repercussions for all those many other contingencies in life involving Person B and even the close friends of Person B.

Third, even if satiated with some resource, having many intersecting exchange contingencies with another person can lead to the behavior continuing. For example, Person A might have had enough alcohol to drink but the other generalized ties with Person B lead them to continue drinking. Experiments with rats have found they would continue eating after satiation if trained on generalized reinforcers (Nevin, 1966; Wenrich, 1963).

Fourth, such a system allows the delays and extensions that are prerequisite to language and being able to refer to abstract objects and objects not present. While I will not go into this here, note that the whole language system is made possible by this system of generalized social exchanges. Skinner (1957) made this part of his analysis of verbal behavior but did not give any details at all about how these systems of generalized social consequences work.

A problem for social science research is that these four types of generalized relationships are very difficult to observe. If people were to receive obvious and direct consequences after every little interaction, it would be easier to research the social sciences. So questions like, "Why are you reading that book?", "Why did you tell that stranger the time?" and "Why do your parents feed you when you visit home?" are very difficult to answer, because there is no one, obvious resource allocation to observe. Or, as a statesman from 16th Century Florence wrote:

From your relatives and friends you receive many favors of which neither you nor they are aware; indeed, these far outnumber the favors that are known to come from them. For rarely do things happen that require your requesting their aid, whereas, in the course of daily life, you will profit just from the fact that it is believed you can use them whenever you need. (Guicciardini, 1965, p. 63.)

Usually, the social sciences have invented fanciful explanations at this point because the generalized social exchanges maintaining the interactions are very difficult to see (Bentley, 1908). Parents feed their children because they must love

them, because there is a norm that they feed them, because they enjoy feeding them, etc. These contingencies are very important but difficult to observe.

Systems of generalized social exchanges also allow the sorts of generalized compliance that are commonly referred to in the social sciences. People are seen to conform to the "norms" or rules of their larger and smaller communities. But people do not just follow these rules and norms, the rules and norms are maintained by the generalized exchanges. Of course, these are not always followed, and so societies and communities have ways of getting around the free-riders. I have already pointed out that having the generalized exchanges hidden helps them to function successfully.

Finally, an interesting property is that people can use abstract words and names to refer to these generalized relationships even if they cannot observe and analyze them exactly. Once there is a name for this, the name assumes an importance that can be strategically utilized to control social relationships. A family can rhetorically ask their children, "So you would steal and bring shame to this family?" What is happening here is that the whole name of "this family" is referring to the entire system of generalized social exchanges and becomes very powerful as a consequence. This is very powerful because it is not a simple exchange that they are threatening to cut off, but the entire system, and this is "felt" but difficult to observe concretely or even name. Most bluff games in life are both verbal and rely upon making the entire social exchange relationship contingent upon backing down (a low-probability behavior, à la Premack's principle). Examples are: "Please stop doing that or I'm going to get upset with you," and "If you do that you're not my friend anymore."

The same idea can be applied to positive outcomes as well as threatened punishments. Imagine that you are in a position to save the life of a small child through your heroism, putting your own life at some risk. Afterwards, it turns out that the young child is the daughter or son of the country's leader. You are a national hero! The power of this is that there is a huge potential source of exchanges now available, from almost all parts of the country. There is nothing specific that always happens, just a million things that potentially can now happen because of the numerous generalized social exchanges throughout the country once people recognize you. Likewise, athletes who win games for their country are in a similar position. It is a very powerful resource allocation—to have potential access to all the generalized exchanges of the whole country.

There are many different ways that these forms of social exchange systems and their properties have been written about in social psychology, sociology, and anthropology. These include trust, generalized exchange, obligations, norms, conformity, social capital, a sense of community, social identity, social networks, facework, multiplex ties, group cohesiveness, status, and reference groups (Bearman, 1997; Cook, 1991; du Boulay, 1976; Haas & Deseran, 1981; Hardin, 1993; Kollock, 1994; O'Malley, 1981; Portes, 1998; Raub & Weesie, 1990; Wood & Kroger, 1994; Yamagishi & Cook, 1993). Table 3 gives a sample of these.

Table 3. Some Common Terms for Generalized Exchange Relationships and Resources

*Some Terms for Generalized Exchange Relationships*

Generalized Reciprocity  
 Generalized Exchange  
 Social Identity Groups  
 Reference Groups  
 Multiplex Ties  
 Close Social Networks  
 Group Cohesiveness  
 Sanctioning Systems  
 Symbolic Exchange

*Some Terms for Generalized Exchange "Resources"*

Reputation  
 Social Identity  
 Prestige  
 Trust  
 Kudos  
 Mana  
 Facework  
 Impression Formation  
 Social or Cultural Resources  
 Social or Cultural Capital  
 Status

Sociology has typically used exchange or norms; social psychology has used conformity. Both now use "social identity" as a catch-all for these sorts of relations (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Politics, social anthropology and history typically refer to reputation, honor, respect and trust.

Another important class of behaviors maintained in these ways are those called ritual or "symbolic" behaviors. Through the long histories of societies, behaviors have been found that may have no function *other than* to keep the group members in some sort of exchange, and those behaviors might be highly arbitrary. Sometimes these behaviors are even life-threatening to the people doing them, but the overall (that is, generalized) value of belonging to the group makes them worthwhile. People go to war and risk sacrificing their life for friends or country because of the benefits of belonging to those groups. Or perhaps a better analysis is that if you do not go to war, then you risk losing all credibility with the group, and people consider this to be the worst thing. That would lead to a loss of all the generalized social exchange of consequences.

As an example, gangs of boys in the United States and elsewhere have a ritual initiation in which they are badly beaten up for 45 seconds or so (e. g., Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Vigil, 1996). The boys agree to undergo this. Why? Because the many and varied benefits of being in the group are so important for them. In many cases, the boys have no alternative but to join one gang or another, otherwise all the gangs in the area beat up on them. So while this looks an irrational thing to do, agreeing to be beaten up, the social logic makes it very rational. They can only get resources at all through belonging to a gang but there is no one outcome you are going to observe unless you study such groups over a long time period (e. g., Bourgois, 1995).

Social anthropologists have found a huge variety of ritual behaviors that have developed in isolated small groups, as opposed to larger urban groups where the rituals might be more similar across groups of relative strangers (such as shaking hands or wearing ties). Most of these rituals have the properties that they seem inexplicable and that if asked for reasons, people give a whole lot of unrelated and often contradictory reasons, as do psychologists!

A key for analyzing ritual behaviors is to recognize that you are puzzled about the immediate function of the behavior, but that everyone in the group goes along with the behavior. Even shaking hands and saying "hello!" when meeting someone are rituals because the immediate function (touching hands) seems not to be particularly important but people keep on doing it. It is usually helpful to ask the question, "What would happen if the people did *not* do they behavior in question?" Ostracism of some degree would be typically the answer, therefore the behavior is functioning to maintain the many generalized social exchanges between those persons which would be lost if they were ostracized. If the relationship became strained in some way, then the two people meeting might fold their arms and just say "Hello" in a monotone voice. Rituals are not static or fixed.

Generalized social contingencies also give rise to some properties that are not so pleasant or useful, as side-effects of the properties listed in Table 2. Here are three of those.

1. If one party is taking advantage of the other or exploiting them, then there is no particular, specific point at which they have clearly stepped over the line (because there are so many lines). The many little exchanges go on and on. This is why people find it difficult to break close relationships: because there is no clear point at which to stop. If using money, then it is easier to know when they have gone too far and therefore know when to stop. It is easier to calculate your losses and get out of a purely economic relationship.

2. When some doubt is placed on the relationship, all the many exchanges will begin losing their trust. Things that were taken for granted are now examined in more detail. So whereas normally one party would have said, "Oh yeah, you can have that," because there were other exchanges coming back to them, they now begin to examine every little exchange to see the total value of exchanges made. So it can be very traumatic coming out of such close relationships because all

Table 4. Some Areas of Psychology Utilizing Cathartic Principles

Grief Therapy
Psychoanalysis
Cognitive Dissonance
Theories of Ritual Behavior
Psychology of Religion Theories
Hydraulic Models in Ethology
Theories of Anxiety
Theories of Emotion
Almost all Psychotherapies
Theories of Rumor
Theories of Communicative Expression
Theories of Creativity and Artistic Expression
Social Representations
Cognitive Theories of Uncertainty Reduction

those little things that have been exchanged and taken for granted are now gone or put in doubt.

3. A third problem with typical generalized exchange relationships is that because the overall exchange rate and the outcomes are hidden, free-riding becomes more likely to occur (Yamagishi & Cook, 1993). Exploitation of relationships is more possible and difficult to detect. It takes careful research to establish that one party has been getting much more than the other, and it is easy to assume that one is exploiting the other. This is why such accusations are common in close relationships.

This, then, is a brief summary of some of the properties of generalized social contingencies. I suggest that these are the typical social behaviors we find in everyday life, and that if you are looking for simple schedules of reinforcement you will not find them. We need to find ways of analyzing such events, and the other social sciences provide many new and interesting ways of doing this. We also need to change our methods to include longer and more intensive study of our participants' lives.

### CATHARSIS AND ITS PROBLEMS

The second of the problems I want to address in more detail is that of theories of catharsis (Guerin, 2001c). When I began looking into these and how to analyze

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Table 5. Two Groupings of the Theories of Catharsis

## Function to Release Things From Inside the Body or Mind

*Emotion:* We build it up inside, and talking or something "releases" it. We have to talk through things, or work through things. Must release our anger and grief. Express our love or else we burst.

*Psychoanalysis:* If something nasty becomes unconscious to protect the individual then the unconscious builds up libido if it stays repressed and catharsis is required. This often happens in odd ways or is expressed as wishes in dreams.

*Language Expression and Communication:* We must express things and release the words that build up inside us. Likewise for music and other creativities like poetry. Composers have a need to express.

*Religion:* Religious behaviours are escape from anxiety about life, death, and the universe. Religious conversion takes place frequently when there is a personal crisis, and this releases the person from their crisis.

*Ritual & Symbolic Behaviours:* There is a build up of "it" and it is released through rituals.

## Function to Motivate and Organize Knowledge

*Cognitive Dissonance:* If cognitions are contradictory this produces dissonance which is reduced when one of the cognition changes (for example).

*Social Representations:* function is to reduce uncertainty by making familiar that which is unfamiliar. So social knowledge is about health, personhood, identity, life.

*Information Processing:* Is driven by a need to reduce uncertainty, to make or find sense in the world. Need for cognition and consistency. People make things simple, through categories, to help reduce the uncertainty and complexity.

*Social Comparison:* A drive to know how we are doing. Said to be aversive if we do not know how we are doing.

*Rumors:* Rumors are about uncertain or anxious knowledge, and telling rumors or hearing explanations for them reduces this anxiety.

them properly, I had no idea that they were so widespread in the social sciences, in fact, so fundamental to the explanations used. Psychology is replete with them, from Freud to cognitive psychology, to anxiety and uncertainty reduction theories. We are told that people need to "work through" their grief and that "talking something through" helps relieve the problem. Table 4 shows some of these.

My analyses, as you might begin to suspect, suggest that these theories are invoked when there are hidden social contingencies occurring, and especially when there are generalized social contingencies. I will give some examples with



sketches of how to analyze what is really going on, and Table 5 divides them into two categories. There is a clue in something I have already said. I mentioned that if there is already some motivated behavior then this can be used socially as part of other contingencies, for better or for worse. The way to apply this to catharsis theories is to turn them around completely on their head. It is said that people do Behavior X in order to reduce anxiety or uncertainty, but I say that anxiety or uncertainty are increased *in order to get members of a social group to do Behavior X*. If there is some anxiety or uncertainty then this is being used by someone else as part of another contingency and it is in that person's best interest to keep you anxious or uncertain.

### *Religion*

One of the most common areas for theories of catharsis is with religious behaviors. Religious behaviors are explained as people escaping from their anxiety about life, death, and the universe. Religious conversion is said to take place when there is a personal crisis, and this conversion releases the person from the anxiety surrounding the crisis.

If these theories were true then it needs to be explained why Churches and Holy Books typically remind people about their anxieties and uncertainties. If the function of religion was to remove peoples' anxiety then why is it emphasized? I have suggested elsewhere that these form part of other contingencies to keep people as a community for all manner of useful functions that are normally low-probability (Guerin, 1998). A very common strategy is to raise some anxiety and allow people to reduce it contingent upon them remaining a member of that community and conforming to its rules. It can also function to keep peoples' attention so they attend to other messages about maintaining the community. Fears about the new millennium were artificially heightened by all members of society last year in order that friends or customers would do behaviors that are normally low-probability. These could be marketing for a new product or just getting friends to pay attention and be impressed because they can be scared about what might happen after January the 1st.

Another clue is to look at the social context surrounding these events. It is typically said that people are worried about life after death, the meaning of life, and what it all means. But under what circumstances do people actually worry about these things? Have any of you been worried or troubled by the universe this morning or over lunch? What are the conditions under which people are anxious, if at all? I suggest that they are social conditions and verbal ones. Most of us do not think about such things unless someone else raises them or something bad happens. This also gives a clue that we are talking about social events that have a long history of training, not some spontaneous and innate propensity to worry about the meaning of life.

*Social representations*

There are some areas in sociology and social psychology that rely on catharsis theories to explain social knowledge—that knowledges seem to be shared within groups. Moscovici's (1984) theory of social representation is a good example of this, and makes quite explicit the cathartic assumption. It is said that when people confront something that is unfamiliar to them, something they do not know about, that they find this state noxious and work to get rid of it. One way to do this is to agree with the knowledge of one's group and, at least within that group, that topic will no longer be unfamiliar and anxiety-provoking. The function of social representations is to reduce uncertainty by making familiar that which is unfamiliar, and this is said to explain why knowledges are common within social groups but different between social groups.

My argument again is to consider the social contexts under which unfamiliar knowledges might be a problem for people. I do not know at the present moment how many chairs are in this building but this is not really a problem for me. Have you been worrying about it? Under what conditions would something unfamiliar or unknown be a problem? I have suggested that it is only under social conditions that this will occur, when you are likely to be challenged or criticized for what you do and do not know. If anything, the noxious state is about social anxiety and ridicule rather than a "state of mind" of not knowing. It is only when there are social consequences contingent upon being questioned that your lack of knowledge becomes a problem, and that is likely to occur under social, conversational contexts.

*Cognitive dissonance*

Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory stated that if two cognitions, or cognitions and behavior, are contradictory then this produces a dissonance which is reduced when one of the cognitions or behaviors are change. Again, we must consider the conditions under which this will be a problem, and again I have suggested that contradictory actions are only a problem when other people question you or ask you to explain. Inconsistency is typically punished by people. I will not go into the analysis of the original Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) experiment, but briefly, the experimenters actually created the "dissonance" by surreptitiously convincing participants to agree to tell a lie to another participant. How they did this was never reported in the *Methods* section of their paper, but the dissonance was really out there in the social world, a conflict between two significant others, not within the participants' heads. It was a social dissonance not a cognitive dissonance.

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*Information processing*

Finally, the foundation of cognitive psychology theory is that information processing is driven by a need to reduce uncertainty, to make sense or meaning out of the world. The world is a booming buzzing confusion and we cannot make sense and meaning out of it so we strive to reduce the uncertainty by processing information.

The same arguments apply, and I hope you can anticipate this by now. The world is not a booming buzzing confusion, no matter how much William James said so. My observations of both of our babies were that they had no problems with the world when they were born. And we can quite easily deal with complexities in life, and take our time to work out the details and intricacies if necessary.

So when is the complexity and uncertainty a problem? Once again, complexity is only a problem when talking to other people or when challenged by other people. If I talk to people about the detailed booms and buzzes I soon lose my audiences and communities. Like we saw for social representation theory, I am shaped to use the simplified or common social knowledges provided to me by my community and to leave the details out. It is not a result of removing a noxious internal state of uncertainty or chaos but social shaping and punishment for talking too long and abstract if I do not simplify.

To give a more detailed example, cognitive psychology explains that in order to reduce uncertainty people simplify the world store knowledge as schema of the form called a prototype—which consist of a good exemplar and variation around that exemplar. So I “store” or “represent” the concept “dog” as a labrador-type dog plus knowledge about the variations around those dogs.

Looked at from a social perspective, there are other functions to talking in the form of a prototype, reasons that are very functional in conversation. Prototypes are an excellent form of hedging, that is, a safe way to present or tell someone about some topic that prevents or reduces social punishment. If you are challenged or ridiculed about what you have presented, you can easily hedge on prototypes because the “concept” or idea is flexible and ambiguous. You can take back what you have said and avoid the punishing consequences. If concepts were only ever presented in the form of a strict list of features making up that concept—a dog must have this feature and that feature and this feature and so on—rather than a prototype form, then you could be more easily challenged and criticized and you could not hedge as easily and escape the consequences of being challenged.

So even down to the details of cognitive psychology constructs, you can turn cognitive concepts into (potentially) observable social events in the world if we treat “cognitions” as social transactions between people rather than things-in-the-head. This is an example of my first point that almost all human behavior is social, even something currently described in psychology as a cognitive form of memory

stored in the brain. This way of thinking about the subject matter also shows how psychology can be fully integrated into the social sciences.

Once you start looking you can find theories of catharsis everywhere. All these theories are trying to get something inside the person to drive their behavior by a sort of internal push-pull model, but in each case it is the hidden social contingencies out there in the world that are driving the behaviors. Psychology tries to hang the behaviors on something inside the person and unobservable; I try to hang them on potentially observable social events. To finish, here is a typical and common example: "In much the same way that religion and magic may be functional for tension management, ideology may offer to individuals a psychological release from the anxieties of fear and uncertainty" (Bredemeier & Stephenson, 1962, p. 310).

### CONCLUSION

There are some common themes coming out of reviewing these points. First, it is strongly recommended that longitudinal and more detailed research methods are required if we are to progress. Sociology and social anthropology have been developing these for some time and we would be wise to study them and use them.

Second, there is too much focus on trying to find foundational building blocks with which to construct complex human social behaviors rather than diving in the middle. This can be seen in behavior analysts' search for social situations that "resemble" the situations of basic animal research on simple schedules. Most research in the experimental analysis of social behavior is like this (Guerin, 1994); social behavior is studied by finding situations that look like animal cages and *JEAB* research. This has greatly reduced the number of social situations studied, however. It is also the problem with social psychology trying to base everything artificially upon cognitive "foundations" in an ad hoc manner as stored representations.

Rather than search for simple social situations that probably do not occur very often in real life, such as zero-sum or pure competition situations, I try instead to convince my animal research friends to spend more of their time researching animals in generalized contingencies; there is very little research on this but it would tell us a whole lot more about normal human behaviors if it were done. For example, the properties shown in Table 2 could be used as a basis for interesting animal research.

Finally, we need to be careful about the words we use and the way we acquiesce to words that our colleagues use. We should not accept explanations blindly because everyone goes along with your reasoning if you say it in that particular way. If you come up with an argument that everyone agrees with, then

be worried that you have hidden the complexities and difficulties too well, and get to work challenging what you have written.

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