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Mentalization of Social Psychology Is a Sign of Its Maturity

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Abstract

Dariusz Doliński' (2018, this issue) analysis strongly suggests that social psychologists are no longer interested in studying real human behavior and have switched their attention to internal cognitive processing and its interplay with motivational and affective phenomena. I propose to call this phenomenon 'the mentalization shift'. In my commentary three issues are addressed: (i) Why has this phenomenon occurred? (ii) Is it really so that we have ceased to study behavior, or rather we still do that, albeit differently? (iii) And, finally, is the mentalization of present-day social psychology something that is uniformly bad, or just a sign of the field's maturing process? Nobody would oppose that modern social psychology offers more and more sophisticated instruments for explaining rather than for predicting and controlling human behavior. However, at an inevitable cost incurred by the advancement of our theoretical thinking, this is a sign of an increasing maturity of social psychology as a science rather than symptom of its deterioration.

Keywords

social psychology; mentalization shift; agentic self

Dariusz Doliński's (2018, this issue) target article raises an important issue regarding the extent to which present day social psychology is still a science of human behavior. Undoubtedly, from its very beginning, experimental social psychology has had strong behavioristic roots. In the 1960s, the majority of social psychologists believed that the proper task of our discipline was to understand, explain, and predict human social behavior in its natural context. So, we studied the dynamics of social interaction in the framework



of group-decision, aggressive behavior, prosocial behavior, social influence, psychological reactance, delay of gratification, and even horn-honking behavior, frequently done in natural surroundings (e.g., on the street, in the underground/metro, in the classroom or kindergarten). Simultaneously, researchers made an effort to develop new experimental procedures for investigating some behavioral phenomena in the laboratory, resulting in the emergence of famous behavioral paradigms for studying obedience to authority (created by Stanley Milgram, 1963), and human aggression (developed by Leon Berkowitz, see e.g. Berkowitz & LePage, 1967).

Of course, within this framework, researchers were also interested in formulating theoretical ideas about internal cognitive-motivational mechanisms of human behavior (as exemplified by cognitive dissonance and reactance studies, and research on diffusion of responsibility, see, e.g., Festinger, 1957; Brehm, 1966; Latane & Darley, 1970). Nevertheless, a clear objective of the field was to explain human behavior in its natural context. Moreover, laboratory experiments with behavioral measures were treated as initial steps in the explanation of human behavior: it was typically expected that some behavioral phenomenon, demonstrated in the laboratory, would be successfully replicated with “real people” (not psychology students) in real social settings. This was thought to provide the ultimate evidence in validating our theories and experiments.

Largely, due to an emergence of the social cognition perspective (Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Fiske & Taylor, 1984), social psychology underwent a fundamental change. As shown by Dariusz Doliński, based on the example of the recent volumes of JPSP, the most influential journal in our domain, social-psychological research has nowadays little to do with studying overt behavior, wherein nearly all studies addressed attitudes, beliefs, feelings, social information processing, and affective responses. The studies did not actually address how humans behave in real-life social surroundings. Laboratory behavior, if measured, has an extremely reduced form, typically consisting of tapping a computer keyboard or touching a computer or smartphone screen.

So, we are witnessing a revolutionary change both at the level of conceptualization and measurement. It looks like social psychologists are no longer interested in studying real human behavior and have switched their attention to internal cognitive processing and its interplay with motivational and affective phenomena. One may call it ‘the mentalization shift’. In my commentary, I would like to address three issues: (i) Why has this phenomenon occurred? (ii) Is it really so that we have ceased to study behavior, or do we still do that, albeit differently? (iii) And, finally, is the mentalization of present day social psychology something that is uniformly bad, or just a sign of the field’s maturing process?

Why Has This Phenomenon Occurred?

While trying to explain the described mentalization shift, in general, one may attribute this to a cognitive revolution in psychology, particularly in social psychology. The cognitive revolution, which originated in the sixties and seventies of the 20th century, essentially

meant that human behavior was no longer approached as a ‘thing in itself’, but as a way of expressing meaning and intention. According to this assumption, we cannot even identify what behavior is without taking into account its mental premises (thoughts, beliefs, expectations, ideas, intentions, personal values and norms). Thus, the notion of behavior has been broadened to include its internal psychological component as an indispensable element. This might be one of the reasons for the mentalization shift.

Within social psychology, an important ingredient of this mentalistic revolution was discovering the self as an implicit agent of human experience and behavior. Researchers took it for granted that, to understand human social behavior, we must postulate the existence of an agentic force within the human mind allowing the integration of individual experience and the generation of intentions. This internal mechanism – the self-structure – was in turn thought to account for stable, individualized, and personalized patterns of social behavior. Such notions like self-evaluation, self-concept, self-knowledge, self-identity, self-continuity, self-certainty, self-agency, self-presentation, social self, interpersonal self, collective self, independent vs. interdependent self, are nowadays commonly used in the social psychological language (see, e.g., Forgas & Williams, 2002; Sedekides & Brewer, 2001). With the focus on the critical role of the self, one can observe an increasing interest in human subjectivity, i.e., the way people experience themselves and the external world (see, e.g., Bless & Forgas, 2000). How we behave is traced to what is experienced, wherein objective behavior is nothing more than an expression of internal dynamics of the human mind.

As a consequence of the mentalization shift and discovering the self, present-day social psychology is predominantly focused on the way we give meaning to our experience (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012; van den Bos, 2009). Human efforts to understand and explain the world, people’s emotional lives, self-construals, beliefs and convictions have emerged as primary objectives of social psychological investigation. Consequently, studying overt behavior in the real-life context has lost its priority, and is no longer the major task for the social psychologist.

Is It Really so That We Have Ceased to Study Behavior?

Here I want to provide some arguments in support of a thesis that argues that an undisputable mentalization shift does not actually mean that researchers have stopped studying human behavior. First, in several areas of social psychology, particularly in inter-disciplinary research that includes social psychological constructs and variables, we see mounting interest in studying forms of behavior that have previously been ignored. Let me mention three examples.

In the studies on stereotype threat, social psychologists collaborate with cognitive psychologists and students of human abilities, using intensively objective measures of cognitive performance as important indices of the phenomenon. Within this context, they investigate problem-solving and performance on complex, cognitively demanding

tasks, and executive functions (see, e.g., Rydell, Van Loo, & Boucher, 2014). In behavioral economics, a research area strongly inspired by social psychological theorizing and methods, investigators study human economic behavior with several behavioral indices of strategies applied by participants as critical dependent variables (Diamond & Vartiainen, 2012). Finally, in experimental research on social power, we again see deep interest in measuring not only subjective assessments, but also objective behavioral changes attributable to power positions taken by research participants (see, e.g., Guinote, 2017).

An interesting new area of behavioral research has emerged in social psychophysiology. Students of power tried to link power relationships to activity in the human brain, and found interesting correlates (e.g., research on the relationship between power position and activity of the motor cortex, see Schmid, Kleiman, & Amodio, 2015). There were also attempts to link individual differences in left-right political preferences with reactivity of the amygdala to emotion-laden stimuli, (see Tritt, Inzlicht, & Peterson, 2014). Thus, social psychologists are extensively engaged in research projects, in which they study behavior of the human brain using new methodologies. Thus, even if it is valid that main-stream social psychology is becoming increasingly mentalistic, several new lines of interdisciplinary research, with a strong social psychological ingredient, have some form of human behavior as its main focus.

Within this context, I would extend my comment to the issue of ‘reduced behavior’ (that is to say, preference for social psychologists to measure responses on a keyboard instead of observing complex social reactions in natural surroundings). Obviously, it is much easier to measure such a “cliquing behavior” than full-scale human action in a natural social interaction!

However, we should understand that ‘clicking behavior’ is going to be a very frequent and natural form of social behavior, e.g., on the internet, or in one’s smartphone use. Moreover, this very simple way of responding might be used on the internet for a variety of purposes, including finding a romantic partner, attracting new friends, expressing political opinions, acquiring knowledge about a particular social/political reality, engaging in public activity (e.g., signing a petition), and so on. Also, in laboratory studies, simple motor responses might be used for a variety of purposes, including the measurement of social categories’ accessibility, studying working memory operations, attention management, dual task performance, decision making, memory encoding and retrieval, and so on. So, the simplicity of overt reactions might in actuality reflect complex human behavior. To link simple responses with complex psychological activity, we of course need a good theory allowing the establishment of reliable behavioral indices of internal processing.

Is the Mentalization of Present Day Social Psychology Bad?

The final question seems fundamental and asks whether the mentalization shift, a salient feature of present day social psychology, is something to complain about, or, rather, a sign

of its scientific maturity? I might agree that the current focus of social psychological research on internal mental states and structures may make it more difficult to provide direct implications for promoting and/or changing overt human social behavior. Undoubtedly, this kind of knowledge is much more difficult to apply in social practice. Nobody would oppose that modern social psychology offers more and more sophisticated instruments for explaining rather than for predicting and controlling human behavior. However, at an inevitable cost incurred by the advancement of our theoretical thinking, this is a sign of an increasing maturity of social psychology as a science.

General social psychological knowledge is thus not enough. To be able to predict and control human behavior in concrete cultural and institutional settings, we have to develop applied research focused directly on practical issues. Recent achievements in the psychology of intergroup relations are good illustrations of this point. To improve these relations, it is therefore not enough to only understand the complexity of social psychological mechanisms accounting for the development of conflict relationships between human groups (including categorization processes and mutual stereotyping, the role of group identification, intergroup competition and threat, system justification processes, and so on). It is a more practical matter, requiring direct testing of some theoretically grounded treatments, which promises to remove some obstacles and promote efficient means of conflict resolution. Sometimes, such attempts need years to finally find a relatively simple solution. A good example is the history of the contact hypothesis originally advanced by Gordon Allport (1954) in his seminal book on “The nature of prejudice”. After half a century of research, it appeared that the critical point to determine the effectiveness of contact in improving intergroup relations is to have at least one friend ‘on the other side’ (e.g., Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008). One close tie developed with a single outgroup member leads to the reduction of intergroup anxiety, thereby resulting in a relatively lasting improvement of intergroup relations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we do observe what I’m inclined to call the ‘mentalization shift’ in current social psychology. Researchers in this domain focus more and more on internal, unobservable mind states, processes, and structures, with increasing neglect for overt social behavior. In my comment I tried to show that this tendency, which is quite natural, is particularly strong in mainstream, basic social psychological research. However, in interdisciplinary research that includes a social psychological perspective, an interest in studying human behavior is still quite strong. I am also suggesting that to partly regain the original “behavioristic” flavor, social psychologists should engage more vigorously in the development of theory-driven applied research. It is possible that this could help restore the feeling that social psychology is not only a valuable source of understanding how humans behave, but also helps to effectively predict social behavior in real-life settings.

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Competing Interests

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