

Is there a “People are Stupid” school in social psychology?

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Abstract: This commentary notes the emergence of a “People are Stupid” school of thought that describes social behavior as mindless, automatic, and unconscious. I trace the roots of this “school,” particularly in the link between situationism in social psychology and behaviorism in psychology at large, and suggest that social psychology should focus on the role of the mind in social interaction.

The history of psychology is sometimes presented as a contest between various schools, which provided frameworks for theory and research during its early years (Hilgard 1987; Thorne & Henley 1997). These include: the structuralism of Wundt and Titchener, the functionalism of James, Dewey, and Angell, the psychoanalysis of Freud, the behaviorism of Watson and Skinner, the Gestalt psychology of Wertheimer, Kohler, and Koffka, and the humanistic psychology of Maslow and Rogers. Although not so closely identified with particular charismatic leaders, the cognitive, affective, and neuroscientific paradigms that have emerged more recently within psychology at large, and social psychology in particular, may also have some of the qualities of schools. Krueger & Funder (K&F) do not come right out and say it directly, but their target article provides ample evidence of the emergence of yet another school in psychology – one which I have come to call the “People are Stupid” school of psychology (PASSP).

The school consists of a number of theorists who tend to embrace three distinct propositions about human experience, thought, and action. (1) *People are fundamentally irrational:* In the ordinary course of everyday living, we do not think very hard about anything, preferring heuristic shortcuts that lead us astray; and we let our feelings and motives get in the way of our thought processes (e.g., Gilovich 1991; Nisbett & Ross 1980; Ross 1977). (2) *We are on automatic pilot:* We do not pay much attention to what is going on around us, and to what we are doing; as a result, our thoughts and actions are inordinately swayed by first impressions and immediate responses; free will is an illusion (e.g., Bargh 1995; Gilbert 1991; Wegner 2002). (3) *We don't know what we're doing:* When all is said and done, our behavior is mostly unconscious; the reasons we give are little more than post-hoc rationalizations, and our forecasts are invalid; to make things worse, consciousness actually gets in the way of adaptive behavior (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson 1977; Wilson 2002).

As K&F's review suggests, PASSP is heavily populated by social psychologists; curiously, cognitive and developmental psychologists seem less inclined to embrace such a monolithic view of human experience, thought, and action. It is not completely clear why this might be so. K&F may well be right that social psychologists' emphasis on bias and error is to some extent a natural consequence of their emphasis on null hypothesis statistical testing, where rational, conscious, deliberate social behavior is the hypothesis to be confirmed, and lapses from prescriptive norms are valued as evidence of how things actually work. But because everybody engages in null hypothesis significance testing, this does not explain why social psychology fell head over heels for “people-are-stupid-ism.” Certainly, a focus on provocative and counterintuitive findings helps social psychologists maintain their course enrollments, and helps distinguish “scientific” social psychology from the common-sense social psychology of our grandmothers.

To some extent, PASSP seems to have arisen in reaction to the cognitive revolution within social psychology, which emphasized the role of conscious, deliberate thought in social interaction at the expense of feelings, drives, and impulses (Langer et al. 1978). As such, it shares its origins with the affective counterrevolution

(Zajonc 1980), which sought to replace cold cognition with hot cognition, if not to abandon cognition entirely in favor of affects and drives. PASSP acquired additional force from the resurgence of biology within psychology. Evolutionary psychology explains human thought and behavior in terms of instinctual tendencies carried in the genes (Buss 1999), whereas social neuroscience (Ochsner & Lieberman 2001) can slip easily into a reductionism that eliminates the mental in favor of the neural – which is one good reason to prefer the term social *neuropsychology* (Klein & Kihlstrom 1998; Klein et al. 1996). There is also something about conscious awareness, deliberation, and choice that seems to make some social psychologists especially nervous. They feel they need to get rid of it so they can have a completely deterministic account of their domain – just like a real science (Bargh & Ferguson 2000).

But there are even deeper roots of social psychology's preference for the thoughtless, the unconscious, and the automatic. Somehow, fairly early on, social psychology got defined as the study of the effect of the social situation on the individual's experience, thought, and action (Bowers 1973). Think, for example, of the classic work on the “Four A's” of social psychology: attitudes, attraction, aggression, and altruism; think, also, about the history of research on conformity and compliance, from Asch and before to Milgram and beyond. In each case, the experimenter manipulates some aspect of the environment, and observes its effect on subjects' behavior. Sometimes there were inferences about intervening mental states, but not very often – otherwise, the cognitive revolution in social psychology wouldn't have been a revolution. Almost inevitably, the emphasis on how people are pushed around by situational factors led to a kind of “Candid Camera” rhetorical stance in which social psychologists' lectures and textbooks focused inordinately on just how ridiculous – how *stupid* – people can be, *depending on the situation* – a situation that, in many cases, has been expressly contrived to make people look ridiculous and stupid.

In turn, the doctrine of situationism in social psychology found a natural affinity with the behaviorism that dominated elsewhere in academic psychology (Zimbardo 1999). Watson and Skinner actively rejected mentalism (Skinner 1990), while classical social psychology mostly just ignored it. Behaviorism, with its emphasis on stimulus and response, did not survive the cognitive revolution, but the “positivistic reserve” (Flanagan 1992) that was part and parcel of behaviorism is still with us. As a result, we grudgingly accept intervening mental states and processes as necessary to the explanation of behavior – but we want them to be as mechanical as possible. We've replaced both the black box and the ghost in the machine with a clockwork mechanism that is as close to reflex activity as we can get and still pay lip service to cognitivism (Ross & Nisbett 1991). In a theoretical environment in which social behaviors are automatically generated by mental states that may be preconscious, and which in turn are evoked automatically by cues in the social situation (Bargh 1990), interpersonal behavior may not be precisely mindless, but it might just as well be. We had a cognitive revolution for this – only to be told that Skinner had it right after all?

K&F suggest that we can solve the problem of social psychology by restoring balance between the positive and the negative, between accuracy and bias, and between accomplishment and error. They also call for an expansion of theory to encompass both positive and negative aspects of social relations. Both suggestions are well taken, but there is another one that might be considered, as well. That is to change the definition of social psychology itself, from the study of *social influence*, with its implication of unidirectional causality from situation to thought behavior, to the study of *mind in social interaction*, with an express focus on the reciprocal interactions between the person and the situation, and between the individual and the group (Bandura 1978; Bowers 1973). In this way, social psychology can link psychology with the other social sciences, just as biological psychology links it to the natural sciences.