

## **SCHEDULES OF CULTURAL SELECTION: COMMENTS ON “EMERGENCE AND METACONTINGENCY”**

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper by Houmanfar, Rodrigues, & Ward (2010) puts behavioral contingencies in the realm of psychology and metacontingencies (recurrent interlocked behavioral contingencies which result in aggregate products) in the field of sociology. The present work sees the metacontingency as a new behavior analytic concept, not as a matter belonging to a different discipline. It opens a completely new area of research and application not explored by the social sciences. Some examples are presented to exemplify a new area, the schedules of cultural selection.

**KEYWORDS:** metacontingencies, schedules of cultural selection

The concept of metacontingency (Glenn, 1986, 1988, 2003, 2004) is not a sociological one. Sociology deals with groups, organizations, institutions (Giddens, 2009; Giddens, Duneir, Appelbaum, & Carr, 2007). It does not deal with interlocked behavioral contingencies. The fact that inflation is explained at the level of economic theories does not keep me from explaining what happens at the level of each person's behavior (Skinner, 1953, 1981). A citizen doesn't have to know economic theory to know that when we had high inflation in Brazil he should keep dollars and expend reais. Gene selection happens at the physiological level, but that is only possible through the conjoint behavior of a couple. Maybe to better explain gene selection we should study what attracts males and females of a given species. Here is the power of behavior analysis; it studies behavior-environment interactions wherever behavior occurs (Harzem & Miles, 1978; Todorov, 1989).

Sociology studies families, for instance (Bidwell & Mey, 1999). A traditional family is composed of mother, father and children. A family is not a metacontingency, but studying a family it is possible to observe several metacontingencies, interlocked behavioral contingencies that result in aggregate

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products occurring in different settings and occasions, like meals, play, homework, etc. (Naves & Vasconcelos, 2008).

The metacontingency is a new concept, a new tool (Todorov, 2006). It makes it possible to treat group behavior in terms of behavioral contingencies, without the traditional conflict between individual and society (e.g., Giddens, 1995). This makes it possible to talk about cultural affairs without the need to recur to a different level of language (Marr, 2006; Sandaker, 2006). We may refer to social issues in terms that relate directly to behavioral contingencies. The concept of metacontingency is a new tool that may enlarge our understanding of cultural practices. It has been refined since 1986 (Glenn, 2004; Glenn & Malott, 2004; Martone & Todorov, 2007). The experimental work suggested by Marr (2006) is under way (e.g., Vichi, Andery, & Glenn, 2009).

In the paper by Houmanfar, Rodrigues & Ward (2010) the few examples come from organizational behavior management. It would be valuable to present real data from research on organizations to support the examples. It will be stimulating for the field if the authors can go further and discuss more complex schedules of cultural selection within organizations.

So far metacontingencies defined and/or exemplified in the literature have been of the simplest kind, as was the case with the operant in the beginning. As schedules of reinforcement (Ferster & Skinner, 1957) are almost infinite ways of changing or maintaining operants, the study of metacontingencies will develop into the field of schedules of cultural selection. Here are some examples of well known everyday life situations where we may identify schedules of cultural selection:

### **Gangs Specializing in Bank Robberies**

There are clearly two metacontingencies in development during the action. A positive one, to get the money: interlocked behavioral contingencies result in an aggregate product, money from the vault and/or the cashiers. That aggregate product will be appraised later by the members of the gang, who act also as the selecting cultural consequence (similar to what happens with garage rock and roll bands, the same players judge the sound they produce).

The second metacontingency involves avoidance of negative consequences. Its aggregate product is something that does not happen—getting caught by the police. That aggregate product (going back home safe) results from interlocked behavioral contingencies, like precise timing of every action.

### **Concurrent Metacontingencies**

Consumers provide one of the easiest ways to exemplify metacontingencies. In flea markets competition among businessmen is high, contrariwise to what happens in shopping centers, which are established from the beginning to avoid competition among its shops. In flea markets each shop runs as a metacontingency having as aggregate product items to be sold and the service, the way to sell them to the consumer. Usually the consumer can choose among several similar shops. In closed shopping centers business is planned to offer great variety of kinds of shops with as little competition as possible among them. The competition is among shopping centers in the vicinity and the metacontingencies are usually huge, with promotions following the themes of every holiday, etc. In all cases the consumers are the selecting cultural environment.

#### **Signaled Fixed-Interval Metacontingencies: Concurrent *Escolas de Samba***

One example of metacontingency in the natural social environment that involves more than 100,000 persons is the *Carnaval* in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Once a year (a one-year signaled fixed interval) each *Escola* puts on the street-wide *passarela* around 5,000 dancers, organized in different groups, all under the theme chosen for that year. It's a fantastic reunion of interlocked behavioral contingencies, each group offering an aggregate product, the set of aggregate products being judged by a panel of experts (the selecting cultural environment).

### **Chained Metacontingencies**

Let us consider a small pizzeria, with one waiter, two cooks and a cashier. The waiter is a discriminative stimulus (SD) for the consumer to place an order. Given the order, that is an SD for the waiter to take it to cook #1, who prepares the pizza and gives it to cook #2, who takes care of the oven. A cooked pizza is a SD for cook #2 to call the waiter, who then serves the dish (aggregate product) to the customer (selecting cultural environment).

Gangs, flea markets, shopping centers and *Escolas de Samba* are all subjects of study for sociologists. However, there is nothing in sociology that can be used to study interlocked behavioral contingencies which results in aggregate products like those observed in gangs, flea markets, shopping centers and *Escolas de Samba*.

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