

## THE METACONTINGENCY AS A CONCEPTUAL TOOL

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**ABSTRACT:** A new concept is justifiable when it enlarges our understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Sigrid Glenn's definition and refinements of the concept opened the field of investigation on the third level of selection: the cultural level. It is a new road for behavior analysis, with new and unknown difficulties. Objections to the concept as unnecessary usually are advanced by researchers who have specialized in the experimental investigation of individual behavior, either basic or applied. More general objections come from those who consider individual behavior as irrelevant for the theories of the social sciences.

**KEYWORDS:** Metacontingency, cultural analysis, transdisciplinary work

Sigrid Glenn's (1986, 1988, 1991, 2004) definition and refinements of the concept of metacontingency opened the field of investigation on the third level of selection (Skinner, 1981; Glenn, 2003) the cultural level. It is a new road for behavior analysis, with new and unknown difficulties. One major contribution of Glenn's approach to cultural practices is in the innovation of treating group behavior outside of the traditional conflict—"individual" versus "society"—of the social sciences (*e.g.*, Giddens, 1995). Now we deal with behavior and contingencies only, advancing in the Skinnerian way of thinking. This makes it possible to talk about cultural affairs without the need to recur to a different level of language. We may refer to social issues in terms that relate directly to behavioral contingencies. The concept of metacontingency is a new tool, a new concept that may enlarge our understanding of cultural practices.

The objections to the behavior analysis of cultural practices should be expected. Behavior analysts often are so enthusiastic with the practical advances in the field that we tend to minimize the deleterious actions of the opposition. The fact is, as Sidman (2004) so well points out, that our view of man in the world is a threat to the typical western-hemisphere way of thinking. In a way, our position goes against centuries of glorification of man as the measure of all things; we are in a post-Renaissance position. There is no way to avoid the objections to behavior analysis posted by those who believe in man as different in essence from

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<sup>1</sup> This manuscript was prepared thanks to the support of CNPq (Brazil). Address: João Claudio Todorov, SHIN, QI 01, Conjunto 09, Casa 11, 71505-090, Brasília, DF, Brazil.

nature; the best one can do is to explain that we should not be put in the same category of those who defend the medical model in psychopathology, for instance. It may be a lost effort; in most cases the other side is advocating a holistic approach to the person and the word behavior is seen as anathema. Instead of entering in an endless discussion, I believe that the best we can do is to show new data, useful data for those concerned with social action, that only behavior analysis can produce. A better mousetrap always convinces more than logical argumentation.

In that sense, what we should be doing is to apply new concepts to practical problems and show that they can be useful to those interested in the analysis and modification of cultural practices. We need more works like those of Sigrid Glenn, Maria Malott, Joel Greenspoon, Richard Rakos, Mark Mattaini, just to mention some memorable work. We will be entering into the realm of Education, Political Science, Sociology, Anthropology, Economy, in some cases, but in other cases the work will be new, opening up new fields of investigation. On the other hand, we could recognize that in the past behavior analysts have already crossed borders as Jack Michael and Teodoro Ayllon working in a mental hospital (Ayllon & Michael, 1959), and Fred Keller trying to change education with behavior analytic methods (Keller, 1968). The untested supposition was that you can change the group by controlling the contingencies for individual behavior; maybe we could profit from a new look at similar attempts, examining especially those that failed.

By not worrying much with crossing borders we certainly will provoke some negative reactions from colleagues, psychologists or not, but that is not new for behavior analysis. Some positive reactions probably will come along. The displeasure with the compartmentalization of scientific disciplines is widespread. A recent effort of the Ministry of Education of France involved intellectuals concerned about the gap separating the natural sciences from the human sciences (Morin, 1999a). The work toward the reunion and reconciliation of knowledge is inspired by Plato, Pascal, and Marx, among others (Morin, 1999, Prologue). Morin argues that we should take into consideration Pascal's observation that knowledge of the whole needs knowledge of its component parts, which in turn depends upon knowledge of the whole; following Marx, Morin believes that in the 21st Century the natural sciences will include the human sciences, and the human sciences will include the natural sciences (Morin, 1999).

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