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Behaviour Is Not Identity

Toward a Conditions-Based Framework for Interpreting
Human Behaviour

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Abstract

Human behaviour is commonly interpreted as evidence of personality, character, motivation, or intention. Observable actions are often assumed to reveal who a person is, even though behaviour is known to vary across changing biological, psychological, social, and environmental conditions. Research across neuroscience, developmental psychology, stress physiology, and cognitive science demonstrates that attention, emotional regulation, decision-making, executive functioning, and behavioural flexibility are influenced by factors such as physiological state, cognitive load, sleep, stress, development, and environmental context (Diamond, 2013; McEwen, 1998; Sapolsky, 2004; Barrett, 2017).

This paper proposes a simple but important distinction: **behaviour can be observed; identity must be interpreted.** While behaviour provides meaningful information, it cannot, on its own, determine who a person is or explain why that behaviour occurred. Confusing observable behaviour with enduring identity creates a recurring interpretive error that influences parenting, education, healthcare, leadership, justice, and everyday relationships.

Rather than treating behaviour as direct evidence of character, this paper argues for a conditions-based approach to behavioural interpretation. Such an approach does not diminish personal responsibility or excuse harmful actions. Instead, it improves interpretive accuracy by recognizing that behaviour emerges from interacting biological and environmental conditions rather than independently of them.

The framework presented here synthesizes established scientific knowledge into an organizing principle for interpreting human behaviour more accurately. Its contribution is not the introduction of a new biological mechanism, but a clearer distinction between what behaviour can legitimately tell us and the conclusions that are frequently drawn from it.

1. Introduction

Every day, people draw conclusions about one another from behaviour.

A child refuses to participate in class and is described as defiant. A teenager withdraws from family conversation and is labelled difficult or unmotivated. Someone who struggles to maintain eye contact is assumed to lack confidence, while another who speaks forcefully is described as aggressive.

In each case, observable behaviour quickly becomes evidence of identity.

This process feels both natural and efficient. Human beings are adept at recognizing patterns, anticipating future behaviour, and constructing explanations from limited information. These abilities are essential for navigating social life. Yet the same cognitive efficiency that allows rapid judgement also creates the possibility of systematic error. Behaviour is often interpreted as though it were a direct expression of enduring character, even when substantial evidence demonstrates that human behaviour varies across changing conditions.

Research from multiple scientific disciplines shows that behavioural expression is influenced by physiological state, stress exposure, cognitive load, emotional regulation, developmental stage, sleep, environmental safety, social context, and prior experience (Diamond, 2013; McEwen, 1998; Steinberg, 2008). The same individual may demonstrate patience under one set of conditions and irritability under another; clarity in one environment and confusion in the next; confidence one day and withdrawal the following day. These variations are neither unusual nor inconsistent with healthy human functioning. They reflect the responsiveness of biological systems to changing internal and external demands.

Despite this, behavioural interpretation often remains surprisingly fixed. Rather than asking what conditions may have influenced a particular behaviour, observers frequently conclude that the behaviour reveals something enduring about the person. Temporary behavioural expressions

become lasting descriptions. Repeated observations become assumed characteristics. Over time, behaviour is transformed into biography.

The central argument of this paper is that this transformation frequently exceeds what the evidence can support.

Behaviour can be observed. Identity must be interpreted.

Identity is constructed from behaviour through existing beliefs, previous experience, cultural expectations, and contextual assumptions. Behaviour therefore provides information, but it cannot, by itself, establish who a person is.