Mind games

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The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st Century American Politics with an 18th Century Brain
George Lakoff
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Last November, a group of neuroscientists published an op-ed in The New York Times under the headline “This is your brain on politics”. To investigate the neuro-biological basis of political decision making, the authors had measured the brain activity of voters who were looking at pictures of the American presidential candidates. From those data, the neuro-pundits made some startling conclusions, such as “emotions about Hillary Clinton are mixed”, and “Mitt Romney shows potential”.

This “research” was produced by a marketing firm that sells neuro-imaging data to Fortune 500 companies. This work, which was not subject to any peer review or published in a scientific journal, was rife with fallacious inferences; the data hardly justified the conclusions. As the neuroscientist Martha Farah responded, the research was more akin to reading tea leaves than to doing science. But however misguided, this turn to neuroscience is not surprising: political science, like the other social sciences, is eager to ground itself in hard scientific data. When it comes to the mysteries of political decision making, the brain might seem a better source of deep truths than opinion polls.

Although he is not one of the aforementioned neuro-pundits, the famed linguist George Lakoff has now jumped on their bandwagon. Lakoff is rightly respected for his work explaining how human thought and language are structured by conceptual frames and metaphors. His earlier writing sought to overturn an Enlightenment model of language and rationality, one in which people are seen as unemotional actors who make conscious decisions based on facts and use language literally. Instead, Lakoff suggested that people reason using metaphors and emotions, often without conscious knowledge of doing so. Words are not understood literally but through their connection to particular “frames” – narratives that structure concepts. Metaphors allow us to link these frames together. For example, we might use road metaphors to argue about romantic love: “the relationship has hit a dead end; we’re going in different directions; we’ve come a long way.” Frames influence decisions, and can be subconsciously activated by the strategic use of language. In a series of recent books, Lakoff has applied these linguistic insights to highlight the role that metaphor and emotion play in political reasoning. But he now seems to be veering into his own brand of neuro-punditry.

Following the Republican victory in 2004, Lakoff became a hero to American Democrats when he applied his ideas about framing to explain the electoral success of the Republican party. His book, Don’t Think of an Elephant!, became a bible for American progressives, a possible road map for erasing the party’s past failures to connect with American voters. In it, Lakoff argued that voters understand the nation as a family. In Lakoff’s account, Republicans, with catch phrases like “homeland security” and “war on terror,” invoke a family defined by an authoritarian “strict father” frame, while Democratic rhetoric suggests a “nurturant parent” frame.

Republicans win, Lakoff said, because their strategists know how to use language consistently to reinforce the strict father frame. The language of fear in the wake of September 11 activated that frame’s emphasis on authoritarian protection. Voters had no choice; the frames were too powerful, and the language too insidious. Frames, Lakoff contends, force logic.

In his new book, The Political Mind: Why You Can’t Understand 21st Century American Politics with an 18th Century Brain, Lakoff adds a new twist to the old story. He repeats his argument that political reasoning depends on conceptual frames and metaphors, and that conservative and liberal ideologies depend on their two competing metaphors of the family. But here’s the kicker: it’s all happening in the brain.
The frames and metaphors that underlie political reasoning are not just floating in ethereal sociocultural space. Framing really works, Lakoff explains, because frames have their basis in the activity of neurons, which makes them powerful and difficult to dislodge: “the more that system [of frames and metaphors] is activated, the stronger its synapses become, and the more entrenched it is in your brain.”

Lakoff’s previous books focused on cataloguing our conceptual and metaphorical systems of thought, so any explanatory references to the brain were tangential to his arguments, and his failure to substantiate them forgivable. Now that the brain is at the forefront of the argument, however, it is time to show that this emperor has no clothes. Lakoff might be a skilled linguist, but like the neuro-pundits, his exploitation of the neuro-scientific literature is borderline pseudoscience.

Ironically, Lakoff’s misuse of neuroscience begins with another deep-seated “frame”: dualism. Originating with Descartes, dualism is the philosophical thesis that reason operates within a mind disconnected from the physical body and brain. Rejection of Cartesian dualism would seem central to Lakoff’s argument: reason, he writes, is based in the activity in our brains, part of our physical organism.

But having acknowledged that reason is intimately connected to the brain and the body, it should come as no surprise that concepts and metaphors, in all of their complicated detail, have their basis in the activity of the brain as well. Materialist neuroscientists know that all of behaviour and cognition is neurally based. What would the alternative be?

The mere fact that metaphors, frames and political ideologies are in the brain does not demonstrate that they have some special power that they would otherwise lack. It does not make them “more real”, nor more difficult to modify. Invoking the brain, Lakoff exploits the undeniable materiality of cognition for illegitimate rhetorical power.

Why does this trick work? Perhaps because people are natural-born dualists. As the psychologist Paul Bloom has demonstrated, beginning in infancy we incorrectly divide the world into physical things and mental things. Physical things obey the laws of physics, like gravity. Mental things obey a different set of laws, and exhibit different kinds of behaviours: emotion, reason, and communication. As Lakoff might put it, this dualism is a particularly powerful frame. It is so powerful that seeing images of neural activity that appear to influence and define our decision making can be surprising, even shocking. This is the great temptation of the turn to neuro-punditry: if we think that the mind is separate from the physical body, and we put more trust in physical things because they seem to follow more regular laws, then we will apparently believe even the most outlandish claims about behaviour if they appear to be located in the brain. When we see something in the brain, we mistakenly assign it more weight. Frank Keil calls this “the illusion of explanatory depth”.

Lakoff’s survey of the neuro-scientific literature is also problematic. Instead of presenting a well-researched overview of the current state of neuroscience on language and cognition, he marshals a deliberately limited subset of neuro-scientific results to support his claims. He cites less than 10 peer-reviewed neuroscience articles, and leans heavily on a handful of popular science books, one by Marco Iacoboni, who was the lead author of the aforementioned “This is your brain on politics”.

In a typical argument, Lakoff starts by describing a fairly well-established neuro-scientific theory and then generalises it to apply to a highly abstract and unstudied context. That simply does not work in neuroscience. One of the central challenges of studying the brain is that an understanding at a particular level of analysis does not always translate to others. A theory about learning at the level of individual neurons may or may not apply to the learning of complex metaphorical relationships. A theory about how the brain binds simple visual features into complex objects may or may not apply to the way it binds simple emotional experiences into complex narratives. In making these leaps, Lakoff reveals himself as someone distinctly out of touch with neuroscience.

Reading Lakoff’s arguments, it is hard not to wonder why he bothers with neuroscience in the first place, since it remains mostly irrelevant to his explanations of political behaviour. Consider the following paragraph about the recent political past:

“[Conservatives used] language, ideas, images, and symbols repeatedly to activate the conservative mode of thought and inhibit the progressive mode of thought in individuals who had both. This increased the synaptic strength of the neurons in the circuitry characterising conservative thought, and did the opposite to progressive thought.”

But there is little or no evidence that individual neural circuits encode specific concepts like conservatism and progressivism. You can remove any mention of the brain from the above paragraph, and the meaning remains intact: Conservative language and ideas repeatedly activate conservative modes of thought in individual people; progressives need to harness their own language and ideas to activate progressive modes of thought. Strip Lakoff’s new book of any mention of neurons and brains, and what remains is simply an amalgamation of three previous books – Don’t Think of an Elephant!, Whose Freedom?, and Moral Politics – which made many of the same points without attempting to justify them through connections to the brain.
Whereas science proceeds by developing hypotheses and using experiments to test them, Lakoff tells stories and then tests them by making them fit the way that people seem to use language. The logic is internally consistent, and the catalogues of metaphors are often quite compelling. But the armchair research programme is emphatically not science.

In the most cynical reading, Lakoff’s current goal is to respond to his critics by pointing to the brain and saying, “Look, I didn’t make this up, it’s really in here!” At some point in the future, careful experimentation may allow neuroscientists to unravel the complex interrelationship between neural activity, framing and political decision making. However, merely pointing to the brain as the site of particular behavioural factors – frames and metaphors – will never prove that they are any more important to political reasoning than social, economic, or historical issues.

Lakoff ought to realise that his project need not resort to such trickery. Here and elsewhere, he has already sharpened our awareness of the roles that metaphor and narrative play in the wielding of political influence. Instead of searching for neuroscientific validation, Lakoff might have used his considerable skills as a linguist to situate our political narratives better within their urgent economic and social contexts. In a political arena already dominated by divisiveness, searching for deep neural origins of our ideological differences only serves to divide us further.

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