

Cognition Colloquium

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Postulating and studying mental processes: The case of volition

Most cognitive scientists agree that cognitive science studies mental processes. But how can they be studied, and what kinds of data inform us about those mental processes? One approach is to study behaviours, and infer the mental processes that cause those behaviours – but this kind of reverse engineering approach carries the risk that the relation between mental processes and behaviours is not one-to-one but many-to-many. A second approach is to study first-person experiences – but this carries the risk that experiences may be difficult to report, and may, like behaviours, mislead us as to the mental processes that cause them. A third approach, close to language and logic, involves studying the relations between entities and treating mental processes as latent rules that generate and govern those relations. Each approach has merits, but some mental processes still seem to elude investigation. Here I will take the example of volition, or will: the capacity to initiate actions. Studies of cognition have always struggled to provide coherent, non-homuncular, non-circular accounts of what this mental process is, and how it works. At the same time, the concept of volition is deeply embedded in our experience, and perhaps also in our culture. Should we then abandon the concept, or expand our inferential methods? What would either of these options mean for the scientific study of cognition?



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