

## STUDENT'S BEHAVIOUR IN THE EVERYDAY CLASSROOM

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There is a disconnect today between what goes on in much of psychology and what goes on in our classrooms. Cognitive approaches dominate the psychology field and have for decades. But by and large our classrooms still mirror the influence of behaviorism in psychology. There are times and places where behaviorism has proven successful. For example, individuals have been helped through desensitization to deal with and overcome debilitating fears. But there are many times and situations when behavioral approaches do not work.

Early behaviorists sought to establish psychology as a hard science, arguing and attempting to realize in their methods that psychology had to be structured along the lines of physical sciences, with the examination of observable and measurable phenomena. Where philosophers like John Dewey saw psychology as the logical next step in understanding who we are as human beings, behaviorism was turning its back on philosophy and seeking to align itself with the “hard” sciences (Slater, 2004: 9), hence behaviorism’s emphasis on the observation and measurement of behaviors. Behavioral theories of learning, which explain learning in terms of environmental events, often dismiss mental phenomena when it comes to explaining how we learn (Schunk, 2004: 29). John Dewey argued that everything that exists for us exists in our consciousness, thus psychology must study consciousness to help us understand our existence (Martin, 2002: 102). Yet other proponents of behaviorism, like John Watson, dismissed consciousness as unreliable and therefore not worth studying, noting that “Psychology, as the behaviorist views it, is a purely objective, experimental branch of natural science which needs introspection as little as do the sciences of exact subjects.

Behavioral learning theory permeates our schools and the everyday classroom.

B.F. Skinner had high hopes for his behaviorist theory, operant conditioning. Skinner saw no reason why behavioral principles could not be applied to the creation of a utopian society (see his *Walden Two*, 1984). Skinner viewed operant conditioning as applicable in schools. He was against learning that involved students working on assignments to avoid negative consequences such as bad grades and teacher criticism. Instead, Skinner favored teachers presenting materials in small steps; with students actively responding to the activities of the classroom and not just listening passively; that teachers provide immediate feedback to students and their responses; and that students follow their own pace in learning. Sad then that much of the behaviorism we see modeled in our schools ignores the high hopes of one of its leading proponents. Yet, in other ways, ways Skinner may not have agreed with, our schools, and our everyday classrooms do mirror operant conditioning. Positive reinforcement involves adding something following a response that increases the likelihood of that response occurring again. Today through a behaviorist lens, we can

view a community's approbation and a student's advancing a grade as positive reinforcement for passing scores on standardized exams. High-stakes testing can be seen to impinging on primary reinforcers: students learn that their choice of future classes and colleges, that the range of jobs and incomes available to them, that their ability to live a good life and provide one for their families, that, in short, nothing short of their futures may be judged on scores on standardized exams today. The Premack Principle "says that the opportunity to engage in a more-valued activity reinforces engaging in a less-valued activity" (Schunk, 2004: 54). At one time in their lives, most students question what it is that goes on in school. They wonder why they choose to go along with it. Most of them, listening to the advice of the adults and society around them, often viewing as models of success men and women who made it through schooling, most of these students make a conscious decision to do as well in school as they can for what it will bring them in the immediate, near, and distant future. The emphasis on standardized testing and the reality of their consequences can be seen as a form of shaping. Schunk defines shaping as "the basic operant conditioning method of behavioral change, defined as differential reinforcement of successive approximations to the desired form or rate of behavior" (2004: 59). Students, parents' schools, and communities all learn that these tests, which are imposed upon them in the guise of helping them, can actually hurt them. Thus, students learn to want to do well on these exams, teachers teach their students how to succeed on them, schools devote more and more time to test prep, and parents and communities sanction it all. It is with not only high-stakes testing and the availability of future life opportunities where we see behaviorism at work in our schools. Indebted to positivism in its attempt to model itself after the physical sciences, behaviorism in schools views material to be taught as invariable and easily identified. Behaviorism views learning as the imposition of knowledge from outside a student lacking it. Behavioral approaches feel rewards, and punishments are necessary to guide human behavior. Behaviorism counsels learning content through small step increments in a linear fashion (Thomas in Steinberg and Kincheloe, 2006: 106). Behaviorism is guilty of a form of instrumental rationality, reducing complex psychological, social, and educational issues to technical questions (Kincheloe et al., 1999: 9). Behaviorist learning theory will be in for direct critique in the next chapter when we discuss Freire's notion of the banking concept of education. But everywhere around us in schools—from programmed instruction such as scripted reading and math programs, from contingency contracts between students and staff, to behavioral objectives that shape curriculums and guide IEPs—behaviorism is alive and well in our everyday classrooms.

## REFERENCES:

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