

Skinner and the behavioral revolution in the field of psychology

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



Burrhus F. Skinner, a graduate of Harvard, earned a prominent reputation for his revolutionary practices of “ radical behaviorism” in the field of psychology. Skinner’s research, theories and worldview concerning behaviorism continue to contribute to the science and study of psychology well into modern times. One important contribution revolves around the type of research that Skinner performed, including his well known experiments with the “ Skinner Box. ” Like Pavlov, Skinner’s research experiments created empirical techniques for psychologists to visibly observe behavioral changes in a subject that originate from environmental factors.

These observations, along with others, led Skinner to develop the influential theory known as “ operant conditioning. ” Unlike previous psychological theories, operant conditioning emphasizes the process by which environmental situations effect a subject’s behavior (Friedman & Schustack, 2003). Also through his experiments and observations, Skinner developed the idea of “ shaping” behavior; or in other words creating a series of intricate behaviors in the subject that would otherwise not naturally occur.

The proposal of operant conditioning and behavior shaping would eventually lead to the development of behavior modification often used by the cognitive-behavioral therapy of today. Skinner’s worldview, which denounced the importance of the psychological traits of the id, ego, and superego proposed by Freud, led to a revolution in the field of psychology which began turning studies away from invisible characteristics within a subject. His theories and worldview instead turned attention towards the more observable responses a subject develops towards their environment.

A summary of the impact that Skinner's work has had on the field of psychology concludes that it encourages those in the field of psychology today to pursue a more scientific outlook, as well as appreciate the environmental impacts on subject's psychological development. B. F. Skinner and The Behavioral Revolution in the Field of Psychology Behavioral Psychology, as well as the general field of psychology, owes much of its progress to the research, influence and works of B. F. Skinner.

Previous to Skinner's appearance in the realm of psychology in 1931, most theories had strong ties to psychoanalytic schools of thought and very little, if any, empirical research to support their claims. Skinner, however, would not accept that such intangible things as "consciousness," or "archetypes" existed. These things Freud, along with other psychoanalysts, adamantly spoke about but could not prove. Instead, Skinner believed that the so called "personality" included nothing more than a compilation of learned responses (i. e. behaviors) encouraged by the environment (Friedman & Schustack, 2003).

Inspired by Pavlov and Thorndike, Skinner set out to discover his own theories of behavior and the popular philosophy of "operant conditioning" which permeates the field of psychology today. Hence, the following information further explores how the works of this influential man, including his research methods, theories and personal worldview contributed to the growing field of psychology today. Through his sometimes controversial, but rigorously scientific research methods, Skinner has encouraged the field of psychology to operate more empirically.

As an advocate of the behavioral movement, he believed that seeable and testable conditions provided more valuable explanations than the supposed “ inner traits” of psychoanalytic theories. No one knew that theses traits ever truly existed. Skinner created a vast number of experiments that utilized animals such as pigeons and rats to demonstrate that behavior can indeed result from controlled or “ operant” conditioning. Through positive and negative reinforcement and control over the environment he produced behaviors in his subjects that would otherwise serve no purpose in the natural world.

His intended goal, and an important psychological revelation, of this behavior modification was to explain behavior as a response to the environment, not as a personal instinct or due to some internal physiological undertaking (Friedman & Schustack, 2003). Skinner successfully reached his goal and developed an important concept that added onto Pavlov’s discoveries of behavior. He proposed that the behavioral responses of each individual has an influence on the environment, and if the environment produces a reward for those particular responses, then they are more likely to reoccur (Friedman & Schustack, 2003).

Skinner believed that applying the theory of operant conditioning to such personality traits as “ extroversion” would prove that extroverts were not naturally prone to act as such, but instead learned their behavior because they were rewarded by the environment for their outgoing social actions. Consequently, the success of his experiments including those done with the “ Skinner box” challenged the popular theories put forth by Freud that

explained why humans behave in certain ways. Freud had no means in which to scientifically prove that people are driven to act by their id, ego, and superego.

Skinner, on the other hand, had ample evidence to support that behaviors can be learned, altered, and even go extinct without adequate reinforcement from the environment. The resulting disparity between the two schools of thought initiated a strong motive for psychology as a whole to seek scientific evidence to prove proposed theories. As an example of this, Friedman and Schustack (2003) explain in their book, *Personality: Classic Theories and Modern Research*, “ Behaviorist and learning approaches have forced the field of personality to be much more experimental in its research and rigorous in its concepts than it otherwise would have been.

” Personality was not the only branch of psychology affected, experimental psychology contributes much of the data it has available to Skinner’s scientific methods. Kantowitz, Roediger and Elmes (2001) state that, “ The operant conditioning research designs are representative of the powerful research techniques developed by Skinner and his followers. Careful control has provided an enormously valuable database for psychology. “ These are just two of dozens of examples that conclude Skinner’s research methods contributed to the empirical outlook and progress of psychology.

Similarly, Skinner’s theories have furnished the field of psychology with many valuable tools to help explain, understand and to some extent, manage behavior. Operant conditioning, the process by which an experimenter can apply positive or negative reinforcers to obtain a desired

behavior, spurred vast developments in the field of cognitive-behavioral therapy. This is because, “ the theory places its emphasis on the function of the behavior (what it does), rather than on the structure of personality” (Friedman & Schustack 2003).

Skinner’s method of “ shaping” has also created systematic techniques to encourage desired behavior. Each of these theories created a foundation for researchers to observe and understand that behaviors arise from, and are encouraged by, certain environmental causes. In addition, by understanding the behavioral response process, therapists and researchers in the field of psychology can use the theories beneficially as tools to help adjust various unwanted responses in their clients and subjects.

For example, in specific instances of abnormal behavior, operant conditioning and shaping may help an individual overcome their perceived obstacles. To behaviorists such as Skinner, abnormal behaviors arise when individuals have not learned a correct response to their environment, or were reinforced for their improper behaviors. The behavioral treatment of such established abnormalities employs a combination of Skinner’s methods (of shaping and conditioning) that will help the client to “ unlearn” maladaptive behaviors and reinforce correct responses (Halgin and Whitbourne, 2003).

In addition, Skinner’s worldview contributed to the field of psychology by revealing the complex interaction between the environment and the perceptions of an individual. This revelation broadened psychological understanding of our control over such things as emotions, behaviors and

personal perception. Unlike psychoanalysts, who believed that our thoughts and actions were predestined by our subconscious instincts and drives, Skinner proved that what drives us most often comes from reinforcements from our environment.

Friedman and Schustack (2003) tell readers that, " although Freud believed that horrible human problems could be traced to id forces and the death instinct, and although many biological psychologists believe there is an evolved aggressive drive, Skinner believed that most such problems - including war and crime- are just human behaviors that can be shaped through learning. " The authors go on to clarify that Skinner believed trying to explain internal causes simply confounded any study and obscured important information about the realmotivationof behavior, the perceived reinforcement from the environment.

Finally, the information provided hopefully allows one to conclude that B. F. Skinner's, research methods, theories and worldview have created a lasting impact that affects and contributes to the current field of psychology. Many useful developments have come forth as a result of Skinner's work including some of the techniques in modern day cognitive-behavioral therapy. Also due to Skinner's methods, the of psychology as a whole now leans towards empirical research to prove the integrity of theory. This important contribution allows psychology to scientifically test and strengthen its explorations into the human psyche.

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