

# B.f. skinner's contribution to psychology

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As I began to study the history and beginning of psychology there was one man who stood out to me clearly as a powerful force of influence and contributor to the direction psychology has taken in its still very young life. What does it mean to be a major influential contributor to the science of psychology? This man shows us with his groundbreaking theories, inventions and experiments as well as his over 200 books and articles on the field of psychology.

He is Burrhus Frederic Skinner and he is one of the reasons psychology is the profound and crucial science that it is today. (New World Encyclopedia contributors, 2008) B. F. Skinner was born in 1904 in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania. His early life consisted of his efforts to become a fictional writer. He attended Hamilton College where he received a B. A. in English literature in 1926. Afterward he spent some time living with his parents attempting to write fictional books. (Cherry, 2013) It was during this time that he began to wonder about how an author was supposed to understand the behaviors of the characters he portrayed without knowing what psychological processes and thoughts lie beneath. His research led him to discover the work of John Broadus Watson who proposed behaviorism for the first time. (Shacter, Gilbert & Wegner, 2011) This seemed to interest him much more than fictional writing did so he applied for the psychology graduate program at Harvard University where he received a doctorate in experimental psychology in 1931.

In 1936 he began his teaching career at Michigan University and was married in the same year. He finished his first book, "Behavior of Organisms" two years later. (Browse Biography, 2011) Throughout the rest of his life Skinner

made breakthrough after breakthrough in the field of psychology and behaviorism. In 1945 he became the Psychology Department Chair at the University of Indiana and in 1948 joined the psychology department at Harvard where he remained for the rest of his life. (Cherry, 2013) Throughout his impressive career he received many more outstanding honors and awards such as the

National Medal of Science, the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation Award and the Albert Einstein School of Medicine award for excellence in psychiatry as well as many more books and a few inventions. He eventually passed away in 1990 after contributing countless knowledge to the science of psychology.

B. F. Skinner is perhaps best recognized for his study and contribution to a particular type of psychology called behaviorism. Behaviorism was first proposed by John Watson who believed that studying the private experience a person has in their mind was too hard of a thing to observe and speculate.

He believed psychology had to be studied more as something an organism does that is physically observable by anyone watching. Watson, as well as Skinner, was influenced greatly by the experiments done by Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov. Pavlov observed that the dogs he had were becoming accustomed to salivating at the sound of a bell he rang each time he fed them. Eventually he didn't even have to have food to observe the dogs salivating every time he rang the bell because they had learned to respond a certain way to stimulus.

The studies done by Pavlov as well as the work of Watson built the foundation upon which Skinner based the rest of his career in the field of psychology. Skinner observed that in the wild, animals have learned ways to

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find shelter, food and mates all because they have been conditioned by stimuli to do so. He famously tested this theory by inventing something called an "operant conditioning chamber". In this chamber he placed a rat and fixed a lever so that when the rat pressed on the lever it received a pellet of food.

He found that after a short time in the chamber, the rat learned that he was given food each time he pressed the lever so he began pressing it over and over until he was no longer hungry. This experiment furthered his approach towards behaviorism and also added to what Watson had proposed. (Shacter, Gilbert & Wegner, 2011) Also slightly contrary to what Watson and Pavlov believed, he proposed that the behavior of an organism did not depend upon the preceding stimulus but on the reward that occurred after the behavior took place. (Cherry, 2013) This led Skinner to state in his book, "The Behavior of Organisms", what he called the principle of reinforcement. Reinforcement basically stated that when an organism does something that causes it to benefit in some way, it is likely to repeat the action in order to receive the benefit again. This allows organisms to adapt to their environments and the conditions they live in, in order to survive. (Shacter, Gilbert & Wegner, 2011) Skinner went on to use his ability to invent and his interest in behaviorism to try and benefit society in many different ways.

He invented such things as the "Air crib" which was an enclosed chamber to put a baby inside that would allow you to closely monitor and modify the temperature and humidity of the environment. Unfortunately this didn't quite catch on after people started to compare it to his earlier invention, the operant conditioning chamber, and wonder whether or not it was too cruel

for a child. Another quite interesting invention that he proposed was a pigeon guided missile. During world war two, before the U. S. Navy had a practical way to guide a missile, Skinner found an interesting, almost unbelievable method to guide the missiles.

He proposed they incased pigeons within parts of the missile. The pigeons would have a screen in front of them showing the view in front of the missile and they would be able to peck towards the target, therefore guiding the missile in that direction. Amazingly this idea proved to be successful in testing, however, the military found it too eccentric and impractical to be used and never took the idea seriously. (New World Encyclopedia contributors, 2008) Not only was Skinner known for his strange, ingenious inventions but he was also known for proposing an idea which gained him much criticism.

In his books " Beyond Freedom and Dignity" and " Walden II" Skinner talked about a society completely controlled via behaviorism principles such as reinforcement. Theoretically this society would be made perfect using scientific planning to reinforce all the individuals do behave in the correct ways. In these books he claimed that free will is subjective and only an illusion because we are all accustomed to behaving in the ways we do because we have been reinforced by society over the years to behave that way.

This was not a popular statement among critics who said he was giving away humanities free will and thought his goal was to use his science to manipulate people. These claims seemed to be taken to the extreme however; Skinner merely meant to emphasize the importance reinforcement

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could have on society. (Shacter, Gilbert & Wegner, 2011) Although behaviorism is no longer looked at as the most important way to view psychology, Skinner had a great impact on society and what we know as psychology today.

His work with the conditioning chamber is still considered vital information to psychology today. Professionals in the field of mental health still use his operant techniques today on their clients. (Cherry, 2013) The information in his book " Verbal Behavior" is still a topic of interest in experimental and applied settings currently. (New World Encyclopedia contributors, 2008) Even teachers and animal trainers use his concept of reinforcement and punishment every day to shape the way kids in their classroom or the animals they train behave. (Cherry, 2013)

In a 2002 survey, Skinner was voted to be the number one most influential psychologist of the 20th century by psychologists. His honors, awards, positions, titles and honorary degrees are almost too numerous to even count. I think the evidence as well as the opinions of other psychologists show just how much of an impact this man made on the psychological science. There is no doubt psychology is the science that intro to psych students such as myself are learning about today because of the numerous contributions and influence of B. F. Skinner. (Shacter, Gilbert & Wegner, 2011)

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