

Approaches to political science



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

During the post- World War II period the predominant impetus that gave augmentation to behaviouralism as an approach to political science was the end of colonialism, and the subsequent birth of many new nation states. There was a general consensus that “ political science had to get into the game and offer assistance for national development if it was to be relevant to the contemporary world” (Pye: 2006, p. 799). Kavanagh (1983, p. 196) believes that “ this was driven partly by impatience, growing during the inter-war years, with a perceived preoccupation with formal structures and institutions”. Many histories of political science agree that the multi-dimensional and contradictory nature of politics has resulted in relative difficulty in establishing a clear definition of behaviouralism. As Waldo (1975, p. 58) specified whilst writing about the emergence of behaviouralism, “ what happened was...complicated - and somewhat obscure”. Almost all those who endeavour to define behaviouralism acknowledge that “ every man puts his own emphasis and thereby becomes his own behaviouralist” (Easton: 1962 p. 9) and “ attempts at coming to any complete definition of behaviouralism are probably futile given the diversity of those who followed its banner” (Seidelman and Harpham: 1985 p. 151). However, for the purpose of this essay the behaviouralist approach will be defined as an attempt to “ improve our understanding of politics by seeking to explain the empirical aspects of political life by means of methods, theories, and criteria of proof that are acceptable according to the canons conventions and assumptions of modern empirical science” (Dahl: 1961 p. 767). The behaviouralistic revolution has had a substantial involvement in the evolution of political science, in which its “ scientific methodology and value

centred approach” (Sharma and Sharma: 2003, p. 377) has influenced the subject matter and form of political science.

Behaviouralism incorporates four foundational assumptions. Firstly, that there are discoverable uniformities in political behaviour commonly referred to as the ‘regularity principle’. “Attempts to develop generalizations about political behaviour, i. e. to advance hypothesis about the relationships to discover uniformities or regularities or laws” (Van Dyke: 1960, p. 159). Secondly, behaviouralism dictates that the use empirical data is imperative for the means of maintaining a scientific approach to the study of politics (Brown: 2011). Thirdly, that there is a clear distinction between values and facts. “A clear delineation between values and facts as well as, perhaps most importantly, the belief that facts remain neutral between various theories” (Brown: 2011, p. 2). Lastly, theories should be capable of being tested against observations. “Crucially, genuinely explanatory theories must be capable of generating empirical predictions that can be tested against observation” (Saunders: 2010, p. 52). Theoretically at best behavioural research can produce a substantial “theoretical and empirical contribution to the understanding and explanation of social behaviour” (Sharma and Sharma: 2003, p. 380). However, as I will discuss the full application of these assumption is rarely applied. For its advocates, behaviouralism has a number of advantages over other approaches to the study of political science. Possibly the least controversial assertion made on the approach’s behalf was that it broadened the scope of political science, loosening previous constraints. Behaviouralism diverted attention away from conventionally

legalistic study of constitutions and political institutions towards the political activities of real individuals in all stages of political science

perhaps the least controversial claim made on the approach's behalf was that it widened the scope of political science. Behaviouralism, argue its champion, focused attention away from traditionally legalistic study of political institutions and constitutions towards the political actions of real people in all levels of political science

developments in computer hardware and software has enabled the collection and processing of enormous quantities of data

a behavioural emphasis is central to the study of elections and voting, perhaps the best known and most publicised manifestation of the study of politics

This essay will be split up into 3 parts, critically assessing why behaviouralism is an inadequate approach to the study of political science. Firstly, the essay will argue that an attachment to positivism is an inherent weakness in behaviouralism. Secondly, the essay will argue that both 'methodological potholes' and maintaining subjectivity, challenge the impartiality of data collection, inclusion, and interpretation. Thirdly, the essay will explain why politics is not a natural science, focusing on variations in governance and human behaviour throughout the world.

Positivism as a feature of Behaviouralism

Positivism is a paradigm which states that "all true knowledge is scientific in which all things are ultimately measurable" (Brown: 2011, p. 3). It is a notion

intrinsically related to reductionism, in that both encompass the opinion that “ entities of one kind (...) are reducible to entities of another” (Kim: 1965, p. 318). As positivism is value free it contrasts with normative theory by providing descriptive rather than prescriptive statements. The first major critique of the behaviouralist approach is the opinion that it is inextricably linked to positivism, where it is reasoned that there is little to no room for normative discourse. “ The cost of the scientific identity to the discipline has been the marginalization of normative political theory” (Duvall: 1998, p. 1). In fact, positivism calls for an end to normative theory since it did not assist an empirical approach to the study of political science.

However, countless scholars regard positivism with disdain, believing it to be adequate reason for the rejection of behaviouralism as a study of political science. Mises (1951) believes that positivism bares three major flaws, which collectively undermine its credibility within any concept, particularly behaviouralism. “ Behaviouralism complicated link with positivism has meant the political school of thought remains vulnerable to positivist criticisms” (Sharma and Sharma: 2003, p. 380). Firstly, normative discourse is largely discounted in the behaviouralist approach due to the fact that it cannot be defined by empirical or definitional statements. Similarly, under stringent positivist conditions there is no role for aesthetic and moral arguments, as these are not limited to empirical and definitional statements. Furthermore, there can be no role for the sort of hermeneutic analysis that attempts to understand “ understand social behaviour through deep reflection about the nature of human perceptions, thought processes and motivations” (Sanders: 2010, p. 51). If positivism seeks to reject these methods of reflection, the

argument runs, it must be at fault. Whilst empiricism results in exactness it also has the additional value of instigating empirically falsifiable hypothesis, therefore it is contended that this dismissal of normative discourse is perilous. Sanders (2010, p. 51) explained that “ the large class of statements that positivism labels as meaningless in fact contain many ideas that can add very significantly to our understanding of social behaviour and the human condition”. Although I accept that the rejection of normative theory is paramount to maintaining a neutral inquiry. I believe that the failure to use deductive inquiry discredits the productiveness of behaviouralism in understanding the more subtle workings of the political world. Therefore it is argued that positivists underestimate the intricate relationships between theory and observation, particularly in “ separating the effects of phenomena that are interrelated” (Sharma and Sharma: 2003, p. 379). Secondly, positivism is attacked on the basis of its exclusivity, and the assumption that the study of politics can be emulated by the study of natural science in order to successfully explain social phenomena. For example, one is unable to empirically research the relevant processes that lead to women often failing to ascertain top jobs within business. A positivist would only stick with what can be empirically established, rather than engage in more abstract theoretical reflection. As a direct result positivism fails to acknowledge the spatial trends, processes and intricacies which are involved in socioeconomic and political workings of life (Cloke, Philio and Sadler: 1992 p. 15). Kavanagh (1983, p. 192) agrees with this stating, “ normative theory always contains an element of the potential, and its validity is not in any way vitiated by people behaving differently from the pattern laid down in the theory”. Thirdly, positivists are criticised for their autonomy, they argue that science

should be neutral, value free and objective. Critics of positivism believe that this “ creates a false sense of objectivity by artificially separating the observer from the observed, denying the existence of strong correspondence links” (ibid, p. 14). It is therefore argued that “ any weakness inherent in positivism must also therefore be inherent in behaviouralism” (Sanders: 2010 p. 51) and ultimately this acts as a fundamental anchor in the paradigm.

Can the study of politics be value free?

One of the initial assertions of the early behaviouralists was that hypothetical understanding could only be attained through a “ process of enquiry that began with theory-free observation of ‘ all the facts up to now’ and which then derived law-like generalizations inductively from the empirical regularities that were observed” (Sanders: 2010, p. 50). According to behaviouralists researchers take great troubles in order to assert the value free nature of their approach to the study of political science (Bay: 1965) and as result the “ political analyst is concerned with a scientific study of politics in its functional aspects. As such he has nothing to do with values or morals” (Jayapalan: 2002, p. 82). Theoretically the scientific methodological approach used in behaviouralism should produce theories and observations which remain unbiased, with a neutral point of view. However, in reality both ‘ methodological potholes’ and ‘ pseudo-ethical neutrality’ compromise the impartiality of empiricism, challenging the quality of research and observation. As a result, many critics of behaviouralism have identified numerous problems surrounding the collection, inclusion and interpretation of data, believing them to act as a critical shortcoming of the behaviouralistic

approach. Huron (2000, p. 3) believes that these “ fallacies, problems, biases, and effects that scholars have, over the centuries, recognized as confounding the conduct of good research”. Although I acknowledge that these problems are not unique to behavioralism, as they affect every study of political science. I believe it is imperative to discuss them as they cause the behaviourists claim of objectivity to be problematic. Ultimately, this weakens the validity of behaviouralism as an approach to the study of political science.

Methodological potholes

Firstly, a lack of researcher neutrality and objectivity during ‘ data collection’ undermines the consistency and strength of empiricism. “ Proponents of a perspective may provide asymmetrical (one-sided) information, offering evidence that supports their conclusions while ignoring or suppressing other information” (Litman: 2012, p. 3). Cloke, Philio and Sadler (1992, p. 18) refer to this concept as “ selective empiricism”, in which researchers are able to cherry-pick data in order to obtain ‘ favourable’ outcomes. “ Questions can be defined, statistics selected and analysis structured to reach a desired outcome” (Litman, 2012 p. 12). For example, as researchers endeavour to remain ‘ policy relevant’, this can lead to “ the production of research that conforms to the priorities of power” (Wearing: 2010). Furthermore, the choice of research topics will undoubtedly bare some reflection on the researcher’s moral and political priorities. “ Research is framed and conducted is bound to reflect assumptions which – whether held consciously, semi-consciously or unconsciously – remain of a moral and political nature” (Wearing: 2010). This ‘ selective or crude empiricism’ negates objectivity and

neutrality and results in a lack of uniformity. Therefore, this lack of consistency entirely repudiates the legitimacy of behaviouralism as an adequate approach to the study of political science.

Secondly, Sanders (2010) and Easton (1962) have argued that both “ a tendency towards mindless empiricism” (Sanders, 2010, p. 52) and a lack of ‘ quality’ empirical data have both undermined the legitimacy of empiricism. Sanders (2010 p. 52) has argued that the indiscriminate inclusion of data has caused a situation in which behaviouralist “ emphasise what can be easily measured rather than what might be theoretically important” tending to “ observe readily observed phenomena (...) rather than the more subtle, and perhaps deeper, structural forces that promote stability and change in social and political systems” (Sanders: 2010, p. 52-53). Many aspects of political life are subtle and are therefore unquantifiable. For example, the quality of interpersonal relationships between political leaders is not something that one statistically appraise, but yet the extent to which these leaders relate to one another could end up being important as to whether they cooperate. Similarly, Easton (1962) supports this contention and believes that these more subtle workings of politics coupled with a lack of ‘ quality’ data has resulted in difficulty when using empirically falsifiable methods, and thus it has been suggested that behaviouralists chose their studies based on what is simple to test empirically, and not on the basis of academic worth. “ Not in light of theoretical or ethical relevance, but largely on grounds of accidental availability of technically adequate means of research” (ibid, p. 19). Sanders (2010) further supports this contention, asserting that in order to preserve the integrity of behaviouralism, behaviouralists have a tendency to

circumvent or reject explanations that cannot be tested empirically. To rectify these issues would necessitate “ the abandonment of strict empiricism” (Easton: 1962, p. 19), which in quintessence is the pillar of behaviouralism. Whilst it would undeniable expand the credibility and relevance of the paradigm, abandoning such a fundamental facet would act to challenge and circumvent the other criteria that the paradigm necessitates. Ultimately, a deficiency of data combined with gratuitous empiricism suggests that behaviouralism is an incomplete notion; consequently this undermines its credibility as an adequate approach to the study of political science.

Different understandings lead to different explanations

The initial behaviouralists declared their approach to social enquiry to be both value-free and scientific. They claimed not be “ seeking to justify any particular ethical or political stance” (Sanders: 2010, p. 51) but rather sought to uncover “ the facts through impartial observation and to offer politically-neutral theories that would explain them in the most parsimonious way” (ibid). However, as Nietzsche (1880) famously said “ there are no facts, only interpretations”, no more so does this apply than to the interpretation of empirical data. Many critics of behaviouralism believe that different scholars studying the same problem are able to come to different conclusions, this initiated the argument that different understanding leads to different explanations. Be it subconsciously or intentional researchers are able to manipulate observations and theory, this undermines the objectivity of the test. “ Above all, the researcher himself is influenced to a certain extent, by his value preferences” (Jayapalan: 2002, p. 83). Many critics adamantly dispute the possibility of researcher neutrality, believing researcher bias to be inevitable. It is contended that objective theory and observation is always impossible, as some level of initial theoretical understanding is needed prior to the researcher deciding what will, and what should be observed. Sibley (1967) concurs with this criticism, and cites that “ the political investigator, no less than others, must have some notion of his own order of priorities before he proceeds to use the behavioural or any other approach” (ibid, p. 53). Hollis & Smith (1991) support both these statements, explaining that there is no way of relating experience freely of its interpretation “ There are no ‘ brute’ facts-no facts prior to interpretation” (ibid, p. 52) Ultimately, it is suggested that researcher impartiality is

idealistic and naïve, and even subconsciously researchers are able to influence theory and observation. Marsh and Furlong (2002) supports this contention, going further to suggest that this is caused by “ any knowledge we derive (...) is mediated by the concepts we use to analyse it, so there is no way of classifying, or even describing, experience without interpreting it” (ibid, p. 23). Ultimately, I believe that a researcher’s individual experiences and values are inescapable, and thus are inseparable from their research. It this lack of uniformity and neutrality which causes the behaviouralists claims that theory can be objective to be a largely irresolvable weakness.

Politics does not emulate the natural sciences

In order to theorise the behaviouralist assume generalisations or tendency statements to help study the observed and observable. They believe there to be an expectable pattern in political phenomenon in which the regularity principle can be applied to political behaviour (Jayapalan: 2002). Political scientists operated under the pretence that humankind was perfectible and therefore a dependence on scientific political information would help to solve societal and political troubles indefinitely (Merriam: 1934). To some extent this is true, society and mankind can be predicable. “ There are many regularities in social life, such as getting out of bed, going to work, or reading a morning paper” (Kavanagh: 1983, p. 194).

However, this is not always the case; both politics and humankind can be highly unpredictable in their nature, encompassing countless unforeseen circumstances and irregularities. Therefore, it is contended that there are no uniformities and laws on human behaviour and political science. . “ There are no regularities in political reality” as it “ consists largely of unique elements” (ibid, p. 82).

Therefore, it is argued that these unobservable factors and variations in politics throughout the world undermine behaviourism as a study of politics. Behaviouralists “ exclude the norms of human teleology” (Johari: 2006, p. 611). Traditionalists believe that as politics and human nature is diverse and complicated, it therefore cannot be generalised by certain pattern and regularities within human behaviour. Thus it is argued “ that social phenomena are [sic] quite different from natural phenomena and require different strategies of explanation.” (Kavanagh: 1983, p. 195)

Human behaviour is shaped through culture, environment and experiences. It forms unique principles, inspirations and motives which vary from person to person. Thus, I believe that as individualism flourishes, behaviour cannot be categorised and uniformed together as mutuality. “ It is too easy to speak of a group’s or nation’s behaviour as if it were identical with that of the individual person” (Eulau: 1962, p. 15). Hindmoor (2006) provides a good example of the unpredictability of human behaviour, finding that large numbers of the electorate, for example, do not vote for parties with policies and strategies that would leave them better off. “ One explanation for this finding is that voters rationally pursue interests other than their own material wellbeing” (ibid, p. 52). Yet these ulterior motives are impossible to gauge

and quantify, providing yet another shortcoming of behaviouralism. “ Human ingenuity was always capable of evading them, in which they would lose their validity” (Varma: 1979, p. 29). In addition, some aspects of politics are far too complicated and diverse for the use of empiricism. An area where a morally laden approach such as foreign aid is needed causes the behavioural approach to appear inadequate. “ The behavioural approach is able to deliver reliable knowledge only with regard to political commonplaces or trivia” (Easton: 1962 p. 19). Johari (2006) goes further, believing that too many inconsistencies and historic contingencies exist within human nature to allow anything but a very general kind of statement of uniformities. Ultimately, modern day politics operates on a global basis encompassing many cultures and forms and styles of government. Therefore, I believe that a major flaw of behaviouralism is that it is too narrow in its approach, ignoring global variations in human behaviour and styles of governance. “ Behaviouralists are charged with committing crimes of vulgar reductionism” (Johari: 2006, p. 611), and ultimately this acts as a fundamental anchor in the paradigm.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although it is contended by certain scholars that there are some undoubted benefits of a behaviourist approach to the study of political science, the weaknesses contained within the theory are insurmountable. This essay accepts the three key epistemological criticisms of positivism. Firstly, that it marginalises normative and metaphysical discourse; this prevents one from fully understanding the subtle intricacies of politics. Secondly, positivism is challenged on the basis of its exclusivity, which thus

fails to recognise the spatial trends, processes and intricacies which are involved in socioeconomic and political workings of life. Thirdly, I reject positivism based upon its autonomy of knowledge, which artificially detaches the observer from the observed. This intrinsic relationship between behaviouralism and positivism has meant that behaviouralism remains susceptible to the criticism of positivism. Therefore on this basis it undermines behaviouralism as an adequate approach to the study of political science. Furthermore, I reject the regularities principle as a credible feature of behaviouralism. Although I have acknowledged that some regularity exists in society, the nature of mankind and politics is largely unpredictable, and cannot be associated with the natural sciences because of this. In addition, although I have accepted that methodological potholes and researcher bias are not unique to just behaviouralism, I believe that they undermine behaviouralism's fundamental aim to remain objective. Ultimately, because of these three reasons I believe behaviouralism lacks any real validity as an adequate approach to the study of political science.