CHAPTER 6: BEHAVIORIST AND LEARNING ASPECTS OF PERSONALITY

This chapter attempts to bring to life the power and controversy surrounding behaviorist and learning approaches to personality. Skinner’s ideas—like those of Freud, Jung, Rogers, and the other giants of 20th-century psychology—have profoundly affected how we think about ourselves and our society. It is important for students to appreciate the intellectual origin of controversies over everything from token reward systems for schoolchildren and prisoners to the role and operation of government.

This chapter does not shy away from pointing out competing views of utopia and of human free will. This chapter is best combined with the following chapter on cognitive aspects of personality to achieve a broad understanding of the relevant issues of learning, thinking, social learning, and personality.

Possible Lecture Outline

1. Classical Conditioning of Personality
   1. Ivan Pavlov discovered the principle of classical conditioning.
      1. Unconditioned stimulus, conditioned stimulus, unconditioned response, conditioned response
      2. The principles of generalization, discrimination, and extinction are also important.
   2. These principles help us explain emotional aspects of personality (that is, these responses can be conditioned).
   3. A complex dimension like neuroticism is more difficult to explain, but may be the result of the environmental requirement of discriminations that are too difficult.
   4. Some organisms are more easily conditioned than others and to different stimuli. Pavlov’s original formulation of how classical conditioning is applied may have been a bit too simplistic.
2. Origins of a Behaviorist Approach
   1. Behaviorism was founded by Watson as a way of making personality psychology a testable science; his views were very deterministic (there is no “free will”).
   2. Watson applied Pavlov’s classical conditioning theory to “little Albert,” an 11-month-old boy in whom he conditioned a previously nonexistent fear.
      1. Watson believed most of personality was formed via classical conditioning, just as Albert’s fear was formed.
   3. Systematic desensitization (repeated introduction of CS without pairing of UCS) can be used to extinguish classically conditioned responses and is an often-used modern therapy technique.
   4. Other behaviors were changeable using these techniques: Bedwetting can be reduced using a loud bell to teach the child to wake up when he or she needs to urinate.
3. Radical Behaviorism of B. F. Skinner
   1. Believed that environmental consequences control all types of behavior—a radically deterministic view; based largely on the Law of Effect by Thorndike
      1. Developed the principle of “operant conditioning,” in which behavior is changed by its consequences; shaping could be used to train behaviors using reinforcement
         1. Positive vs. negative reinforcement
         2. Punishment vs. negative reinforcement
      2. Developed the “Skinner Box” (not his term) to mold behavior through operant conditioning
      3. Skinner’s novel *Walden Two* describes a utopian community in which behavior is controlled via operant conditioning techniques; his later nonfiction book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* formalized these ideas.
   2. Skinner believed biological factors determined an organism’s ability to learn behaviors in response to reinforcement.
   3. Skinner acknowledged human emotions, but believed them to be irrelevant to behavior.
   4. Skinner was a radical determinist who believed people do not have free choice in their behavior.
4. Other Learning Approaches to Personality: The Desire to Combine Behaviorism with an Understanding of the Internal Characteristics of the Organism
   1. Role of internal drives: Clark Hull
      1. Hull was particularly interested in “habits,” which he saw as simple associations between stimulus and response.
      2. Saw that responses that lead to goal acquisition could themselves be reinforcing
      3. Paid attention to the internal state of the organism while emphasizing the role of environmental reinforcers
         1. Primary drives: innate motivation, including hunger, thirst, etc.
   2. Social Learning Theory (SLT): Dollard and Miller
      1. SLT posits that our habits are built up in terms of a hierarchy of acquired secondary drives—this is termed a “habit hierarchy.”
         1. A habit hierarchy is a learned hierarchy of likelihoods that a person will produce particular responses in particular situations.
      2. The idea of secondary drives explains personality constructs (they are learned secondary drives, acquired through their association with primary drives).
         1. The idea of secondary drives in relation to attachment was examined by Harlow.
      3. Dollard and Miller agreed that Freud had isolated critical periods of child development, but their explanations involved the learning that occurred during those periods.
      4. How can mental illness be explained?
         1. Approach-avoidance conflict (being drawn both to and away from something)
         2. Approach-approach conflict (being drawn simultaneously to two equally attractive choices)
         3. Avoidance-avoidance conflict (being confronted with two equally unattractive choices)
      5. Frustration-aggression hypothesis argues that aggression always results when an organism’s progress toward a goal is blocked.
5. Evaluation
   1. Behaviorism has forced the field of personality to be much more rigorous and scientifically sound.
   2. Radical behaviorism has been limited by its refusal to take internal mental structures and functions into account.
   3. Behaviorists, as a whole, are unconcerned with phenomena that aren’t quantifiable; if it doesn’t fit into an experimental design, it is often ignored.

Classroom Activities, Discussion Topics, and Projects

* + - 1. Discuss different types of reinforcement schedules (continuous vs. partial or intermittent; fixed vs. variable; ratio vs. interval). What are the advantages of each? If we want to create a behavior that is resistant to extinction, which schedule of reinforcement would be best? Why?
      2. Take two minutes to write down the situations in your life in which you are reinforced. Share these with the class, and discuss whether each represents a continuous or partial schedule and a ratio or interval schedule. What are the strongest reinforcers on your list? What reinforcements are weak? Are there negative reinforcements?
      3. Show a photo of a Skinner box (or bring in a real box). Discuss how Skinner used this box for both animals and children. What are the ethical implications? Would this be approved by an IRB committee in this decade? How are our environments like big Skinner boxes? Discuss how a child’s pet, kept in a cage, might be living in a form of a Skinner box (e.g., a guinea pig or a hamster).
      4. Discuss specialized societies (some cults, religious groups, etc.) that try to approximate many of the ideals voiced in Skinner’s *Walden Two* and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Where does the idea of brainwashing fit into the picture? How have these societies turned out? What are the pros and cons of creating such a society? Does anyone really have free will? Is freedom important enough to sacrifice for? What are we willing to sacrifice?
      5. Define each of the following in terms of how the conditioning principles discussed in class might apply to the real world: hours of deprivation, Skinner box, reinforcement, pellet dispenser, secondary reinforcer, discriminative stimuli, and reinforcement schedules. For example, hours of deprivation for a rat in a Skinner box might be equivalent to our desires or aversions; the Skinner box itself might be equivalent to some of the situations in which we find ourselves; and the pellet dispenser might represent people or social institutions that have control over rewards.
      6. Have students identify one habit or behavior in themselves that they would like to change, along with a simple structure of rewards and punishments that they will use to operantly condition themselves. For example, a student may wish to eliminate a habit of snacking between meals and may decide to “punish” him- or herself with 10 pushups every time snacking occurs and reward him- or herself with a dollar each at each meal when snacking prior to the meal has not occurred. Have students keep a diary of their behaviors for two weeks (a diary in chart form works nicely for illustrative purposes). At the end of two weeks, discuss the observed patterns of behavior in class.
      7. Assign small groups of students to do research on an assigned cult, paying special attention to the “brainwashing” techniques the cult uses. Have them identify ways of “deprogramming” cult members. Discuss whether deprogramming is also brainwashing—what is the difference between conforming to societal norms and being controlled by society? What does this tell us about the social creation of personality? Is personality simply learned, as a radical behaviorist would have us believe?
      8. Arrange a debate between students who think it makes sense to analyze and shape humans through reward and punishment schedules and those who think there are serious problems with such an approach. Try to keep the arguments focused on testable issues (rather than vague assertions).
      9. Ask students to observe and record a personal behavior they regularly participate in. Behaviors may include: eating, studying, talking on the phone, exercising, sleeping, fighting, nail-biting, smoking, drinking, etc. Have students note the frequency of their chosen behavior over the course of a day or two. Also ask students to make note of the context in which they participate in this behavior (when, where, and who is with them). Be sure they record their behaviors as they participate in them, and not at the end of the day when they are likely to forget exactly how many times, when, and where they participated in the behavior. Ask students to share patterns in their behaviors that they have observed. Do certain people, places, or times encourage certain behaviors? Are certain behaviors reinforced while others are punished?
      10. Have students read all or part of Skinner’s *Walden Two*. Have a discussion about Skinner’s ideas and the feasibility of implementing them. Share information you have about societies modeled after *Walden Two*. Ask students if they would want to live in a *Walden Two* society. Why or why not?
      11. Have the class form two teams to debate whether aggressive behaviors are learned. Be sure students rely on information from behaviorist and learning theories to defend their views. Bringing in information about the most recent developments in research addressing children’s TV viewing, videogame playing, and aggression may enhance this activity.
      12. Use the “Sharpen Your Thinking” box in this chapter, with its focus on whether the government should encourage gambling by exploiting learning theory, to start a discussion of a larger question: Should democratic governments use principles of conditioning and shaping to alter the behavior of the citizens? Is this an abuse of science and taking unfair advantage of people who are not aware of how they are being influenced? Or is it an appropriate way for the government to enforce the will of the people about how society should function?

Recommended Outside Readings

Bjork, D. W. (1993). *B. F. Skinner: A life*. New York: Basic Books.

Catania, C., & Harnad, S. (Eds.). (1988). *The selection of behavior: The operant behaviorism of B. F. Skinner: Comments and consequences*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Pavlov, I. P. (1927). *Conditioned reflexes*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Skinner, B. F. (1974). *About behaviorism*. New York: Knopf.

Skinner, B. F. (1971). *Beyond freedom and dignity*. New York: Knopf.

Skinner, B. F. (1938). *The behavior of organisms*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Skinner, B. F. (1948). *Walden two*. New York: Macmillan.

Skinner, B. F., & Vaughan, M. E. (1983). *Enjoy old age: A program of self-management*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Films / Videos

*B. F. Skinner: A Fresh Appraisal*. (1999). 30 minutes. Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com/). A presentation from a contemporary viewpoint, looking at the development and impact of Skinner’s behavioral research.

*B. F. Skinner Foundation Pigeon Turn*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtfQlkGwE2U>. A brief video demonstrating the shaping of behavior through operant conditioning. The footage shows Skinner conditioning a pigeon to turn in a circle within about half a minute.

*Baby Albert Experiments*. Brief versions at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3r3NJw2otw> (and many other youtube.com locations). Also at <http://www.openculture.com/2015/01/the-little-albert-experiment.html>. A longer video is available at <http://mediasales.psu.edu/Details.aspx?itemNo=01024> with the title “Studies Upon the Behavior of the Human Infant: Experimental Investigation of Ba…” Original footage of the experiments done by Watson and Rayner, conditioning fear of a rat into a baby by pairing the rat with a fear-inducing noise.

*Conversation with B. F. Skinner*. (1972). 20 minutes. <https://www.tubeid.net/watch/download-video/yTfZsANz8gx/a-conversation-with-b-f-skinner-1972.html>. Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/3267039>. An interview with Skinner in which he talks about the need for a behaviorist-designed culture. Touches on important concepts in Skinnerian theory.

*Discovering Psychology: Learning*. (1990). 30 minutes. <http://www.learner.org/series/discoveringpsychology/08/e08expand.html> . Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/173818363> .Describes the principles of classical and operant conditioning (Pavlov, Thorndike, Skinner). It is part eight in a series.

*His Own Best Subject: A Visit to B. F. Skinner’s Basement*. (2000). 20 minutes. Davidson Films: 888-437-4200; [www.davidsonfilms.com](http://www.davidsonfilms.com). Skinner’s daughter narrates a film showing his workspace in the basement of the family home, and the ways in which Skinner applied his theories to his own daily life.

*Learning: Classical and Operant Conditioning*. (1990). 30 minutes. [www.insight-media.com/](http://www.insight-media.com/).Presenting Pavlov’s and Skinner’s experiments on conditioning, this DVD explores learning. It explains the processes of generalization and considers the role of positive and negative reinforcement.

*Token Economy: Behaviorism Applied*. (1972). 20 minutes. <https://archive.org/details/tokeneconomybehaviorismapplied> . Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/20816173>. Looks at the use of tokens in environments structured to provide systematic reinforcement of desired behaviors. Includes a demonstration with children at a mental health facility in Illinois.